Cover art by Suzan Lovett
Distant Shores

by

April Valentine

AMAPOLA PRESS

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Title Page

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Amapola Press

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DEDICATION

to Lynna Bright and Rosemary

Their stories, "A Place to Hide" and "The Last Charade", which I first read in 1984, catapulted me into the realm of Starsky and Hutch. Without their influence, Distant Shores would never have been written.
Thank you, Lynna and Rosemary, for inspiration, and sustenance along the way.
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editing — Marian Kelly
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Marilyn H., Betsy R., Barbara P.

proofreading, typos, binding, good parts, mistakes —
April Valentine
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BOOK FIVE -- RENASCENCE, art, Chapters I-IV, Judy Jones,
Chapters V-VII, Suzan Lovett
EPILOGUE, art by Merle Decker

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April Valentine
Believe it or not, this is the first Starsky and Hutch story idea I ever had. I'd started watching the series again in '83 and even found a couple of zines, but I hadn't come up with something to write about these two beautiful characters. Then in 1984, I sat up in bed one Sunday morning and turned to my husband with a question. "How long does somebody have to be missing before they're declared legally dead?" The answer was seven years and that wouldn't work, I reasoned, because it had only been five years since the original airing of "Sweet Revenge" and I wanted to write about Starsky and Hutch as they were at that moment. The idea came from a simple thought -- what if Hutch disappeared right after Starsky got out of the hospital and it had been a long time and only Starsky believed he was still alive somewhere? That was the germination of the volume you now hold in your hands. At first, Hutch was missing five years, but as my medical plot evolved, it became obvious that I'd have to change the time span. In the intervening years (and believe me, I never thought it would take this long to finish) the idea went through many changes -- and grew and grew. For it, I did more research than I've done on any other writing project I've worked on. I went to medical libraries. I studied up on Australia. I've written all my life and I enjoyed the challenge of writing what was becoming a full-length novel. Still, despite the fact that I was reaching the conclusion of the story in January of 1990, I began to think I'd never get it completed. For the first time in my life, I uttered words I'd never thought I'd say, "I'm never writing anything again." Obviously, I've had to eat those words.

I finally finished the story and then began the task of getting it into zine form. Editing had to be done, artists had to be contacted. Yes, it's huge. Smaller print would have made the zine smaller, but the result would be far less readable. I opted to present the artwork un-backed, so that the illustrations could be enjoyed without print on the back of the pages showing through. I've tried to keep economics in mind, while still maintaining the highest quality for the reproduction. Six different printers worked on this, including myself. The final stages of production were fraught with the usual series of fannish disasters -- the Post Awful, having raised postage yet again, sank to new lows -- but just like Starsky and Hutch, the good guys triumphed in the end and the zine was finished and ready to mail.

This is a love story -- the love of friendship, of partnership, love that triumphs over time and distance. *Distant Shores* is a *relationship* story, one that includes both the themes of hurt/comfort and love in the physical, sexual sense. It's a story of disappointment and loss, disappearance and rescue, love regained and lives rebuilt.

I place it in your hands now. *Distant Shores* has been a constant part of my life for the last six years and it's going to seem kinda funny not to be working on it. But I wrote it to share, and I'm glad it's finally time for the readers to take it on. New projects await and my mail box is ready for your comments. Again, this is a love story -- one written to commemorate the love we all feel for two wonderful characters, Starsky and Hutch. I hope you enjoy it.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people, friends and acquaintances as well as professionals, helped in so many ways with Distant Shores that I hardly know where to begin to say thanks. I only know that without the encouragement and help from others, this story would not have turned out the way it did.

First, I must thank Marian Kelly for her editorial assistance in the preparation of the manuscript. Her thoughtful criticism aided me in tightening the final form of the story; her helpful praise assured me that it did turn out okay after all. Marian was a tireless worker on the above, despite the unsolicited 'help' of the Post Awful. I didn't think either she or I would get through one more foul up, loss or delay! Marian, I thank you "doubly" for the effort you put in on this for me.

Second, I want to thank all the wonderful artists who've contributed to this zine. Suzan Lovett, your cover and other art are as beautiful as always. So is the work of Judy Jones, Merle Decker, SVE, and Chris Soto. Chris shares in the frustration Marian and I feel with the P.O. -- thank you for doing "double duty" as well. And Judy came through in a pinch with more illos than she'd originally been asked to do. The work of all of you is very much appreciated.

I'd like to thank Alexis Rogers, who introduced me to Starsky and Hutch fandom and who was also the first to read part of Distant Shores. It didn't have a name yet, but she read the Prologue and called me in the middle of the day from California to ask, "Where in the world is Hutch?" and I knew I had a good story on my hands. Alexis also introduced me to the friends I've known longest in Starsky and Hutch.

Carol D., Merle Decker, Nancy G., SVE, and Lynna Bright, our SH group here in the Maryland/Virginia area have listened, read, given suggestions, and begged me to finish for as long as I've known most of them. Carol gave some invaluable tips, "Starsky wouldn't call Dobey 'Harold', ever," and though she swears she didn't suggest it, I remember getting the idea of using the name "Joey" at her house, if not directly from her. She also coined the term, "Rip Van Hutchinson." Mrs. Paca, one of Hutch's nurses, was named for the street where Carol lives.

Merle and I had many long talks, especially while walking the "Pony Trail" at Chincoteague Island, about Hutch's progress and the effect it would have on him and Starsky, and how Hutch would react to the world around him.

Nancy's help came in her own inimitable style -- whimpering and begging for more to read. She so enjoys Starsky suffering that I was inspired to write on and on. Plus, she's always got a shoulder to lean on when you feel down. What would I have done without her?

SVE is a wonderful friend and artist, who also provided insight and information on recovery from stroke through an experience in her own life. I know she finds it painful to see this happening to Hutch, but she's come through with comments, advice, and even artwork, and I thank her from the bottom of my heart.

Lynna's feedback was always inspirational, whether in commenting on how beautiful Hutch is or just how little of certain medical intrusions should be mentioned in the story. And her computer expertise came in handy during the last scramble on the way to the printer.

Tabby Davis has always, in her own quiet way, encouraged my writing and in particular the completion of Distant Shores.

Good friend Lorraine M. gave helpful suggestions and insights during the structuring of the novel. Jennifer H. provided info on Hawaii.
Jackie B., a friend from Trek days, gave medical consultation and offered some other good suggestions too, despite the fact that she wasn't quite sure which character was "Dave" and which was "Ken". Medical advice was also provided by Marilyn H. and Lucy.

Paula S., besides sending a couple of newspaper articles on the subject I was researching, gave me one particularly encouraging piece of advice. "If Hutch can survive being gut shot in Connie's 'Mojave Crossing,' and walk again after breaking his back in Valerie Dawson's 'The Thunder and the Rain,' he can recover from being in a coma..." Thanks, Paula.

Medical information was provided by the private (I hate to say 'mundane' in this case) sector as well. The professionals who helped me in this will never see the result, but I want to acknowledge them anyway. First and foremost is Ms. Jean E. of the John L. Deaton Hospital in Baltimore, who actually took time out for an interview when I was first developing the story. She gave me valuable insights and even allowed me to meet several of her patients. There were also the volunteer workers at the Maryland Head Trauma Foundation in Bethesda who permitted me to read through files for an entire afternoon. And I also wish to thank the friend who let me get into the NIH library on her pass. Thanks, to all these caring professionals.

Other friends in Starsky and Hutch provided emotional support along the way to the completion of the novel. They were the ones patiently waiting for the story to be finished, and were always there to listen in my moments of frustration or enthusiasm. Thanks to Susan B., Monica, Linda M., and Janna.

I received clippings in the mail, photos of places in Australia (thanks to Barbara F.) books on the subject of the Land Down Under and medical books from so many friends and acquaintances. My husband Rodney and my son Ian were always helpful. My circle of Trek friends in Baltimore advised, gave suggestions and support: thanks Bev, Nancy, Mary, Michelle, Sandy and Jan. Even my co-workers patiently listened to my trials and tribulations with the Post Office and printers. To every one of these and probably more, I extend my thanks.

______________________________________________
Distant Shores

Soft reflections hiding my eyes,
Fill my darkness with the warm harbor lights,
Oh, babe, you came and I was saved...
I lost you on a stormy night, understanding swept away...
From distant shores, you have brought me home again.

Across the water, you can follow the stars,
Look a lifetime, still not know who you are...
Oh, babe, I know I'm here to stay,
From distant shores, you have brought me home again.

Winds told me, that you would hold me again.
Ocean breezes would soon release me,
And all my searching would end..

There you go, inviting my eyes...

Oh, babe, you came and I was saved...
Just laying down in your loving arms, takes the emptiness away,
From distant shores you have brought me home again.

From distant shores you have brought me home... again....

-- by R. Patton,
recorded by David Soul

______________________________________________
PROLOGUE

MEMORIES... sometimes so much sweeter than reality... sometimes when the present gets too bad, it's better to live in the past.

David Starsky snuggled deeper under the blankets covering him, warm at last. After Huggy's lantern had caused the hospital room ceiling sprinkler to douse them all, the nursing staff had chased out the three latenight visitors and proceeded to scold their drenched and shivering patient. Starsky and Hutch had taken the worst of the deluge, aside from the ruined food, and though Starsky would not admit it, the cold water had chilled him through. Sitting up in a chair while his bed was changed had left him feeling shaky and tired. Hutch had hovered, dripping on him, trying to get him into dry pajamas while Captain Dobey attempted to salvage some of the antipasto. Huggy, however, had disappeared almost immediately and Dobey was sent off with his damp cold cuts soon after. Hutch had blushed furiously when the nurse smacked his hands away from the buttons on Starsky's blue pajama top and then ducked out after muttering goodnight. Starsky, grinning tiredly, had watched him go. It was lonely suddenly without Hutch.

Back in bed, fuzzy with fatigue and warmth, Starsky couldn't help smiling at the memory of Hutch, fuzzy with wine and friendship, jumping under the covers with him. Starsky had not seen Hutch act that way in a long time, had not felt so utterly close to him. Laughing together, feeling good, feeling alive, Starsky sensed finally that everything would be all right. He was going to live, and he knew he was loved. There would be time now to sort out the feelings growing between him and his partner. They had danced around the issue for too long, sometimes being drawn closer, other times pulling apart as if each of them wanted--yet feared--the same thing. As his aching body unwound, Starsky drifted easily into sleep.

Sometime later he awakened. His room was dark, only a faint glow from the small glass in the door lending any illumination. As his eyes adjusted and he tried to shift to a more comfortable position, he felt a weight covering his left hand.

A fair head was bowed over his hand, pillowed on crossed arms. Starsky could feel the tickle of Hutch's moustache on the back of his knuckles and the warmth of his relaxed mouth. His partner's still damp jacket was slung over the back of the chair on which he sat.

Starsky raised his free hand and lay it atop Hutch's hair, twining the bright strands through his fingers. The gentle gesture was enough to awaken his visitor. Hutch looked up, his eyes bleary, his grin crooked.

"Hi."

"Watcha doin' back here?" Starsky ruffled the fine hair. "What time is it, anyway?"

"I never left. I just went down the hall and waited in the men's room until the coast was clear." Hutch glanced at his watch. "It's only twenty after three."

Starsky grimaced. "Only."

Blue eyes focused on something far away. "I... didn't want to go home and be alone anymore." His gaze returned to Starsky. "Besides, I wanted to make sure you were okay after our little misadventure."

"I don't mind. Makes me feel kinda nice to have you here." He glanced toward the door. "As long as Nurse What's-her-face doesn't catch you and we don't set off any more waterworks."
They recaptured the giggles from earlier, feeling like two kids. Starsky slid to one side, pushing back the blanket.

"C'mere."

Hutch lay down beside him once more. As he shifted position, Starsky winced, a slight pain lancing through his chest.

"Starsk?" Hutch reached out, concern deepening worry lines around his eyes.

"M'okay." Starsky was quick to reassure him, suddenly aware of his partner's haggard appearance. Long hours spent at the hospital, waiting to hear if Starsky would live or die, the frustrating search for evidence against Gunther, the fear, the anger, the inability to comfort -- Starsky could see how much had been taken out of Hutch during the crisis. And now, in the middle of the night when he should be asleep in his own bed, here he was, trying to look after Starsky.

"Hey... I'm alright, really." Starsky put his arms around him, drawing him close as Hutch's hand stroked his hair. The hand trembled and Starsky pulled back a little, glancing up to look at the white bandage that circled Hutch's wrist. The cut hadn't been treated properly, and now the wound had become infected.

Needing to show how he felt, Starsky clasped Hutch's wrist lightly, pressing his lips against it, finding Hutch's eyes and trying to read the emotion smoldering there.

"My heart feels so much right now, I think it's gonna bust."

Hutch's smile was soft, loving. "Don't let that happen. We've got too much to look forward to."

They held each other, hearts pounding, eyes misted. Starsky spoke first, his voice rough.

"I want it all, Hutch. We've had so much up to now and came so close to losin' it all. I don't want to hold back anymore."

Hutch's cheek rubbed slowly against his. "No more pretending? We really both feel the same way?"

"It's love, babe. Can't say it's anything less."

They clung together and Starsky was suddenly breathless, beginning to tremble. It felt like he and Hutch were on a precipice together, poised on the edge of a discovery.

"Wish we were someplace else," Starsky murmured. "Someplace a little more... private."

Hutch's whisper touched his ear. "I locked the door."

Does it even have a lock? I don't care..." A nervous chuckle. "You tryin' to seduce me?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it?" Hutch's voice grew serious. "I... fell apart when the hit went down. You were so close to death and... I had to be ready to let you go. Seeing you in intensive care, I was afraid to touch you. Now I feel like I need you, need to touch you... so bad..."

"Need, partner?" Starsky was falling, drifting down under deep blue waters, floating on the desire reflected in Hutch's gaze. "I've had a lot of time to think, lying here. I want you, Hutch."
Hutch's eyes held surprise, then wonder. Starsky smiled, warmed by the new love he was only now beginning to recognize. He moved closer, and so did Hutch, until their lips touched, blending into a kiss that was neither tentative nor awkward, only soft and certain and sweet.

_Sweet... sweet..._ Not so long ago, Starsky might have found a negative connotation at such a word describing the touch of his lips against his partner's. But not now. Somehow the word was right, as were the feelings. Hutch's mouth was sweet, in taste, in texture, in tenderness, just like Hutch himself.

Lips opened, clinging. Tongues explored, touching wetly. Echoes of longing pulsed through Starsky and he pictured them starting where his lips joined Hutch's and traveling throughout awakening nerves of both their bodies.

Starsky became aware of Hutch's hand pursuing a path of discovery down his body. He trembled as the careful fingers passed over the narrow strip of gauze that banded his chest and back. Hutch stilled instantly, breaking the kiss to look a worried question into Starsky's eyes.

"I'm okay."

Hutch swallowed, his whole body tensing. "I shouldn't be here, shouldn't want you like this. You're still in the hospital..."

Starsky shook his head, stealing another kiss, stroking his back soothingly. "No, I want it too bad. You're healing me. Thought I'd die, thought there'd never be any more feeling, ever. I want life now. I want to feel it with you."

"Starsky..." The name was a sigh, aching with desire and emotion held too long in check. Hungry lips grazed Starsky's again, then moved to nuzzle his cheek, his throat. Skillful fingers opened buttons on the pajama top. When the shirt was open, Hutch brushed the fabric off Starsky's shoulders, his eyes on the chest that was still partially covered by bandages. He rested his face against the white covering and Starsky held his head close.

"When... when I first saw you like this... covered, shrouded, all those tubes..." Hutch's voice broke, but he went on in an intense murmur. "Even when you finally woke up, I couldn't come close. You... looked so fragile... I've hurt you..."

"It's getting better. You know it is. S'just a little bandage now, pretty soon it'll be gone altogether. Guess there'll be scars, though."

Hutch's sigh came from deep in his soul, rocking Starksy with his profound emotion. _So close... we came so close to losin' it all, babe..._ Starsky tugged at Hutch's t-shirt, sliding it up so he could fill his hands with the feel of naked skin, letting touch soothe where words could not.

Hutch shivered as Starsky's fingers teased his ribs, gasped as his lips found the willing mouth it seemed they had come to love. Starsky kissed him longingly, the feeling daring, bent his head to the smooth chest, tongue drawing a lazy line that circled first one nipple, then the other. Hutch shuddered, and Starsky knew his heart was pounding. He could feel it under his lips.

He wanted more. He felt the rush of life beating through his veins, need and desire spiking a different kind of fever. He'd never been one to hold back when his temperature rose that way. This was his second chance at life, at love, and he didn't intend to be hesitant or embarrassed about it. Still tonguing the silky chest, his fingers found the buckle of Hutch's belt. It came undone, and he eased the zipper downward. The sound of
metal unclasping and denim being pulled down inflamed his fledgling desire. Starsky's eyes sought Hutch's hardened penis, sensing his own reaction, wanting to be touched.

Strong fingers insinuated themselves under the waistband of his pajamas, unsnapped the single fastener, freed him. The hands eased down the loose fabric, then clasped his ass in gentle exploration.

Starsky groaned, and they both stilled a moment, holding each other, steadying suddenly raging nerves and pulses. Starsky gulped, feeling like a kid, like a lover. *Like a virgin? Why not? I am starting over..."* Hey, what're we gonna do about this, huh?"

Hutch swallowed hard. "I want you. But we better not get too strenuous." There was a smile in the voice. "I wouldn't want you to have a relapse or anything." He shifted toward Starsky, fitting their lower bodies together.

"Relapse," Starsky muttered as warm hands smoothed over his flanks and bottom. "More like a heart attack."

Hutch's hand slid between them, matching their erections inch for inch. Starsky felt a jolt of sensation and for a moment he held perfectly still. Then they both began to move.

The feel of it was dizzying, two hard columns sliding, bumping, nudging, beginning to thrust against each other. Starsky let the stimulation take him; centering in his groin, growing, pulsing; it warmed him inside and out. Hutch held both their cocks together in his large hand, massaging, pumping, in a giving masturbation that rocked them both. His other arm snaked under them, feeling Starsky's ass, urging the movement of his hips.

Starsky took Hutch's lips with his own, tasting, sucking on his tongue, imagining it to be Hutch's cock he sucked and savored. The image was new, strange, highly exciting. Starsky felt his body had been waiting to experience Hutch forever. His right hand fondled Hitch's chest, fingers teasing one hardened nipple, and he was moved to his core to sense Hutch responding to his touch. He could feel the pounding of his own heart in his battered body, but there was no pain, only the throbbing of life.

He was being lifted higher and higher, and Hutch rose with him, hands eager, mouth hot, wet, open to him. They had their own rhythm, like no other in the world. Their pulses matched, their heartbeats, each breath they took. They were climbing, finding themselves atop a mountain of their own discovery, their own creation. They held still, allowing the moment to crystallize around them, making reality out of dreams. At the summit, their hearts beat as one for a brief eternity.

Starsky had thought it might hurt his healing body, be too 'strenuous' as Hutch had feared -- though he'd been perfectly willing to risk it -- but it was easy, this completion, as if all their days and nights and joys and hardships had prepared them for it. One moment, they were beginning, then the tumultuous feelings swept through, and they were holding each other in heady afterglow. Starsky lay there thinking they had both been reborn, falling off that precipice he had imagined.

Harsh breathing reawakened him to reality. He gazed into Hutch's eyes, noting that they seemed brighter now. He kissed the furrow between the tawny brows, found the reward of a tender smile on the full lips.

"Ah, babe..."

"Are you okay? Sure?" Hutch was all solicitous concern. He released Starsky's cock caressingly, reluctantly.
Still sensitive, Starsky shuddered, had to take time to breathe. "I'm fine. I feel whole again. Knew I would." He kissed Hutch's lips. "How about you?"

"God…" Hutch marveled, sought words, found none adequate. His hand covered Starsky's heart, as if to assure himself of its steadiness. "Guess you'll be all right." Starsky watched as he sat up, looking around. There was a wet towel hanging over the back of a bedside chair, apparently forgotten by the nurses. Hutch took it, wiping Starsky's abdomen and his, dabbing at the dampness of the sheet beneath them. Gently he pulled Starsky's pajamas back into place, then lay there, awkwardly rearranging his own clothes.

"Going somewhere?" Starsky searched Hutch's face for signs of second thoughts. It seemed like this was ending too soon.

A radiantly beautiful smile dissolved his misgivings. Hutch reached for him, pulling him close to his warmth once again and heaved a sigh deep with contentment. His lips wandered a moist path down the side of Starsky's face. "Starsky... I wanted us together this way so bad... but I never dreamed it'd feel as good as this..." His voice trailed off. Starsky glanced at him and was charmed to see the man was actually blushing.

He hugged Hutch tight. "I love you, too."

A rumble of laughter tickled Starsky's ear. "Yeah. How 'bout that? We always trusted each other, always were so damn good together in everything else we ever tried…"

"Naturally we're good at doin' this together, too." Starsky was only too happy to complete the thought.
"I want more of this, Starsk, of us together." Hutch's voice was low, decisive, all traces of embarrassment gone. "If just the little we tried tonight is any indication of how good it can be, think of all the other things we can do."

His ardor was endearing. Starsky grinned at him. "You're beautiful, you know that? I never thought I'd get this excited thinking about you, partner." He found Hutch's mouth again, amazed that just that measure of contact could make him ache with wanting. The taste and feel of Hutch sent Starsky's head and heart spinning. He clung weakly to his partner, the kiss deepening, gratifying. He felt almost like he'd come again. When they broke apart for air, he sagged sleepily in Hutch's embrace.

They drifted, warm and safe in their own world for a time. Free of pain, of worry, Starsky slept until a small spasm in his healing body made him jerk slightly. The movement wakened Hutch, too.

"It's alright." Starsky held him closer. "I'm okay."

Hutch groaned, straining to see his watch. "Oh my God. I better get out of here."

"No. Hutch..."

"Starsky, come on. The nursing shift is gonna be changing. I oughta sneak out while I can. I wish I could stay all night. But I have to work tomorrow and you need your rest."

"Okay. We'll save sleepin' together for when I get home." Starsky grinned. "Think of all those nights..."

Hutch's eyes danced. "When you get out of here next week..."

"...we can try something more strenuous?" Starsky enjoyed the other man's wince of reaction. "God, Hutch. This has gotta be right... it feels so damn perfect."

They held on tight to each other, not wanting to lose the feeling, the love they shared, not wanting the night of their beginning to have to end. Hutch stroked the thick mass of Starsky's curls. "Love you, babe." One more soft, certain, sweet kiss, and he was gone.

Starsky slept very well.

********

Lieutenant David Starsky, LAPD, closed his eyes tightly, his reverie coming to an end. His breath caught as he suppressed a sigh. He ran his hand through his hair, opening his eyes to squint at the sunshine streaming through the open window. It was a beautiful spring morning, so bright even the air seemed golden, the world fresh with promise.

Damn. Starsky pounded the windowsill with his clenched fist. After all this time, it still hurts. Still hurts so bad...

He turned away from the window, lost in his own world of anguish, and bent to pull out the bottom drawer of his dresser. He reached, seeking the old, white, much-hugged teddy bear nestled inside.

When he held Ollie, he could almost hear Terri's voice again, the words she had said as he watched her fade from him. "I'll always be there when you need me..." So many times in the past years he had thought of her promise... but it had never come true. And he had needed someone; so many dark nights with his world falling apart, so many dark nights crowding him even on bright, sunny April mornings like this one.
The talisman he held helped a little to slow the hurtful pounding of his heart. Gently, he put Ollie back in his place in the drawer, reaching for another object inside. He took it in both hands, lovingly, hefting the weight of cold steel, caressing the worn handgrip. Solid, silent steel, unchanging, cold comfort. Repeating actions he had done many times over, Starsky pulled out the small box containing gun maintenance supplies and set about cleaning the Magnum.

He had barely started when the jangling, too-loud ring of the phone interrupted his ritual. The huge gun still in his hand, he stood and crossed the room, sitting down on his bed to answer the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Starsky, do you know what time it is?" Dobey's voice raised in an all too familiar harangue.

"Yeah, Cap. I know." Starsky's fingers played on the cannon-like barrel of the unused weapon.

"You were scheduled to meet with your detectives at 9 a.m. They've been cooling their heels now for an hour. Don't you realize the Gardener case isn't going to get very far without you briefing your men?"

*The Gardner case. Right.* Starsky's mind sluggishly clicked into gear. A cloud passed overhead, momentarily blocking the sunlight that had been streaming through his window. It didn't matter. Starsky hadn't actually felt the sun in far too long.

"Sorry Cap'n. Guess I got side-tracked this morning."

Dobey must have picked up the undercurrent in his statement. "What are you doing, Dave?" The tone was gruff, the feeling one of concern.

"Just..." He hesitated, then decided there was no reason not to tell him. Dobey knew, far too well, Starsky's state of mind. "Just takin' care of some of Hutch's things. Cleaning his gun."

"Starsky." There was resignation in the older man's voice, but no surprise.

There was a pause, and Starsky could hear muffled conversation in the background. "Yeah, I hear ya! All right." He winced as the Captain bellowed at some intruder in his office. Irritated now, he returned to the phone. "Starsky, this is 1981. When are you going to stop living two years in the past?"

The cloud passed on, returning the sun. Starsky squinted in the sudden brilliance, his eyes smarting. He realized his left hand was clenched on the Magnum, his finger teasing the trigger. When would he stop living in the past? "When I got no more reason to, Captain. When I find out..."

"I know, Starsky. I know." Apparently uncomfortable with Starsky's insistence on confronting his pain squarely, Dobey cut him off. "But that's not getting this Gardner business taken care of. Are you on your way?"

"Yeah, tell Smith and Griggs I'll be there in twenty minutes." As he had done so many times in the last two years, Starsky closed down his emotions. He would do what he had to do, no matter what the expense to his spirit.

"And I want to have a good, long talk with you some time today," Dobey finished meaningfully.

The call ended and Starsky sat for a moment, unmoved by Dobey's concern by his insistence they talk. His fingers still clasped the big gun.
He carried it over to the dresser and knelt once again by the open bottom drawer. There was no time now to finish cleaning it. Starsky merely wiped its surface with the chamois. As he did, a long ago whispered litany in Hitch’s rough, tender whisper seemed to echo in the stillness of the room, accompanied in Starsky’s mind by crashing thunder and pounding rain and the smells of garlic and wine and blood. "I'm right here. I'm right here. I'm right here..." But no one held David Starsky close now, no one calmed his fears nor felt for his wounds. No one eased his heartache.

Closing his eyes against the anguish that threatened, once again, to break him, Starsky replaced the Magnum, laying it down gently next to the battered toy bear. No one.

So how come I still hear you talkin' to me, Hutch? How come your voice just won't stop?

********
April, 1981

Starsky sat at his desk in his office, sorting papers, straightening files, trying to kill a little more time with busy work. It had been a long, busy day and he had accomplished a lot. Following the briefing with detectives Griggs and Smith on the Gardner case, he had finished up the paperwork on two cases concluded over the weekend, testified in court on a drug bust he had engineered two months ago and even managed to get in a little street investigation time on a new homicide that had come across his desk. Now, though, he knew Dobey was waiting for him, probably impatiently. It wouldn't do any good to put off the meeting. After all these years Harold Dobey felt he had a right to know what was going on in Starsky's head. Dobey was still his superior officer, but he was also his friend.

Stuffing some take-home work in his briefcase, Starsky stood. He retrieved his jacket and locked the desk, then the door to his office. Then he crossed the hall to find Dobey.

"You wanted to see me, Cap?" Starsky fell back into the easy, old patterns, adopting a look of innocence that he knew wouldn't fool Dobey one bit.

The heavyset man looked up and sighed. Starsky shifted uncomfortably as the brown eyes regarded him. The look of concern was damned hard to take.

"Sit down, Starsky." Dobey spent a few seconds shuffling memos while the younger man made himself comfortable. "Dave," the Captain said, finally meeting his eyes, "I thought everything was all right with you."

"You hear that? He called me Dave." Starsky swallowed. "Everything is all right, Captain. I don't know why you think it isn't." When Dobey did not answer but instead stared intently at him, his look almost a challenge, Starsky grew defensive. "Okay. So I get depressed. So it still happens, sometimes. I'm only human, just like you. As long as my job gets done, I don't see why you're worrying."

Dobey pulled himself up out of his chair, came close and sat on the desk facing Starsky.

"I am worried, son. Just because you're functioning doesn't mean you're happy."

Starsky examined his clenched knuckles intently. "So where is it written that I get to be happy?" The comment was muttered in a bitter tone.

"Dave." Dobey's large hand found Starsky's shoulder. "You're a good man. An honest man. A man with feelings. It just kills me to see you continuing to punish yourself over something you never had any control over."

"Is that what you think?" Starsky looked up, real contrition in his eyes. "That I'm on some kind of guilt trip? I know it wasn't my fault we lost Hutch. I know it's not my fault we couldn't find him. But… that doesn't make it any easier to live with. Damn it, Cap'n, can't you understand that I miss him?" Starsky ran a hand
through his tangled hair, feeling desperate, recognizing the feeling as familiar. "There were never enough answers." His voice dropped. "If only we had found some answers. Maybe then I could let go."

"Grieving takes a long time."

"That's just it! I can't grieve!" *It wouldn't be right. It would be a betrayal.* He squeezed his eyes shut. *No tears. Tears mean defeat. They mean death.* No one had ever seen him cry about Hutch, and they never would. Yet there had been many nights when he woke up with his pillow soaked and his throat raw from crying in his sleep.

Dobey shifted, looking embarrassed. "Starsky, you know as well as I do that just because we never found the body doesn't mean Hutch isn't dead. It's been two years, for God's sake! If he was alive, we would have found him, heard from him. But he disappeared without a trace. All the so-called clues added up to a big fat zero, a dead end."

"Finding his gun in an airport locker wasn't a zero! If Hutch got on a plane, he would have had to stash his gun, because the suspect he was tailing would have made him a cop." It was an old argument; Starsky felt he was listening to a tape unravel in his mind.

"Starsky, we don't know that he got on a plane. Anyone could have put that gun there; it could have been a red herring. His car was found ten miles from the damned airport!"

"There were too many things that didn't add up. Too many people who wanted him out of the way. I've never been convinced that Gunther wasn't at the bottom of it." He looked at Dobey, who was shaking his head.

"You know the case was sewed up by then. We had Gunther."

"His organization was so extensive he could get to Hutch and me from prison, from the grave, even, if necessary. And he'd want to!"

"But no one ever came after you, Starsky." Dobey's voice calmed, became maddeningly reasonable. "And Gunther wanted you both dead, not just hurt."

"I've died every day for the last two years." Starsky stood, bringing the conversation to an end. They had gone around and around on this subject endlessly and never resolved anything. If he stayed any longer, he knew he would begin the hopeless cycle of self-recrimination and blame. He managed to function, most of the time, but talking too much about the disappearance brought those hopeless feelings back.

"G'night, Captain."

"Get some rest, Starsky." The captain's kind words followed him out of the room, but Starsky knew it was going to be one of those nights when sleep would elude him.

********

Back at his apartment, Starsky spent the night drinking, letting the liquor bring back the memories. He didn't drink too often, just occasionally had some wine in the hopes it would dull his mind enough so that the events of the past could not haunt his dreams. Now he wanted to see it all again, and the glass of bourbon brought it back with glaring clarity.
He rubbed a hand across his chest as long-faded aches were recalled. The scars had become less noticeable over time, but on the day he was released from Memorial Hospital, they had been ugly reminders of how close he had come to losing his life. Hutch had touched him as if he were something fragile and precious, and Starsky had basked under his friend's solicitous attention. Even though his body was physically scarred, he had felt pristine, like life was just beginning for him... and for Hutch.

He had been tired and aching from the ride home, and Hutch had seemed to realize how much pain he'd been hiding. He'd helped Starsky into bed, then lay down next to him. They had so many plans to make, so much to look forward to. Now, nearly two years later, Starsky couldn't really remember exactly what they had talked about, he just retained the impression of promise, of eagerness. He remembered listening as Hutch poured out his heart to him. He'd talked about all the accumulated frustrations and fears of the last year, particularly the last weeks since Starsky had been shot. He'd grown drowsy as Hutch's voice wound down. They had held each other, shared a few sleepy kisses. Reluctantly, Hutch had climbed off the bed and got ready to go back to work. He promised he'd come home in time to cook dinner for Starsky.

But he hadn't come home. No call, no explanation ever came.

He didn't report in, didn't appear at Starsky's for dinner as they had planned. Calls to his apartment brought no answer hours after he was overdue, and an already worried Starsky had checked with Captain Dobey. He'd learned that Hutch's last report had come during the early afternoon when he had called in to say that he had stumbled onto something and was following it up. The suspect he'd been observing may have realized he was being tailed. He was leaving his car to follow the man on foot. After that, no one could determine Hutch's movements.

The same day he brought Starsky home from the hospital, while tailing an unnamed suspect, Kenneth Hutchinson simply dropped off the face of the earth.

Starsky shuddered as he drained the last bitter drops from his glass and moved to open a new bottle. *What were you working on, Hutch? Why'd you have to get into something crazy alone, without a back-up?*

******

_July, 1979_

They'd found Hutch's car easily enough, but it yielded no clues to where he had gone or what had happened to him. The detective had apparently sensed no danger; he had not requested help when he made his last call to dispatch. Whatever had happened to him had been swift, unexpected -- and quite possibly, deadly.

A day later, a routine emptying of lockers at the airport revealed only one other trace of the L.A. cop. His Magnum, in its holster, had been left there. But no airline manifest showed the name Ken Hutchinson or any of the undercover aliases he used when working. There had been no fingerprints, save his own on the gun. Dead end.

Starsky, stunned and worried, refused to accept that Hutch could not be found, that there were absolutely no clues at all. It was too frustrating staying at home waiting for the phone to ring, so after two days he put an end to his brief convalescence, got dressed and drove out to the airport himself.

Walking the long distance through the huge terminal to the office of the head of security was taxing. Starsky was tempted to rest a few moments on one of the benches provided for weary travelers, but he was driven to keep moving. By the time he stood before Captain Martin Hedgeway of the airport police, he was sweating and his breathing was labored. His side ached with a bad stitch and his chest hurt.
Hedgeway motioned him into a chair. "I wish I had more information for you, Sergeant. But all I can tell you is what we told your captain when we called him after finding your partner's weapon. The only thing we know is that it was discovered when the lockers were opened, as we do every twenty-four hours."

"And you're certain there's nothing in any trip manifest that would indicate he'd gone out of here on a plane?"

"No. Your department's men went over all passenger lists already. They found nothing."

"What about the flight plans filed on private planes?" Starsky was having trouble speaking past the tension winding tight in his chest. He let one hand rub surreptitiously at his throbbing wounds.

"All of those planes which took off from here in the last two days have been checked out and there was nothing to indicate anything illegal about any of them," Hedgeway answered. He looked closely at Starsk. "Of course, that doesn't prove anything at all. You know as well as I do that many private planes engaged in criminal activities can easily slip into and out of an airport."

Starsky ran a hand over his face. "I know. And there's been an APB out on Hutch since we first realized he was missing. It's been on the news too, and there haven't been any calls from citizens saying they saw anything out here." His gaze wandered, focusing on the sunny day outside the window. He could see a view of the private plane terminal. "How about the workers? Have all of them been questioned?"

Hedgeway nodded. "I don't know what more you could find out from them."

Starsky sighed. "Let me look around, talk to some people. One of them might have remembered something by now."

"That couldn't hurt, I suppose," Hedgeway returned. He cast Starsky an appraising look. "Are you sure you're up to this Officer? Captain Dobey mentioned you were just released from the hospital."

"I'm fine." Starsky stood, abruptly ending the conversation, ignoring the discomfort the quick movement caused him.

He left Hedgeway's office, walking slowly. Allowing for his weakened condition gave him time to think. He was convinced no one could have taken Hutch out of the airport against his will without being observed. Someone had to have seen something, and Starsky was determined to make them tell him everything they could remember.

He stayed at the airport for hours, talking to workers, stopping passengers to ask if they came and went from LAX on a regular basis, if they'd seen anything the day before yesterday. He knew he must seem slightly crazy to them as the day wore on; the lack of information made him frustrated and upset. He discovered he was practically shouting his questions to the women behind the Rent-A-Car desk and awkwardly apologized. Finally, he just sat, watching, waiting, trying to fathom any possibility he could have missed.

It was after midnight when he finally dragged himself home. He had overtaxed his not yet recovered body and he was mentally exhausted from trying to come up with clues where none existed.

He dropped his clothes on the floor and fell into his unmade bed, expecting to be asleep instantly. He stayed awake though, tormented by thoughts that wouldn't quit, an imagination that couldn't stop depicting horrors. The pain was bad, but he feared taking the prescribed medication, afraid it would put him too soundly asleep to hear the phone in case Hutch managed to call. He lay listening for it to ring, tossing and turning, very aware of his recent wounds. No position was comfortable, no matter how he tried shifting, some part of him
rebounced with pain. The bed was uncomfortable, empty. Lying in Hutch's arms for a few brief hours had given him joy. Now the memory mocked him. He and Hutch had held each other close, keeping each other warm and safe and full of hope. Now that he knew Hutch wasn't safe, warmth and hope seemed very far away.

At five a.m. Starsky gave up and got dressed. He let himself out of his apartment and went to his car. He started the Torino and sat listening to the engine's purr a few minutes. The car represented constancy in his life. To him, and to Hutch too, it had always been their good omen, their space together, like a home away from home where the two of them belonged. He put the car in drive and headed out of his parking space to cruise the city streets.

There was no Torino-generated magic now, though. There was no sign of Hutch, not a clue, not a word. None of the street snitches had anything that could help, even in the most remote way. Hutch had bought no information from them and none admitted having been asked about Sergeant Hutchinson by anyone else in the last week. Starsky tried to retrace his partner's movements, but the trail ended where his car had been abandoned.

Back home, Starsky turned off the Torino's engine, just sitting again. He couldn't even come up with anything to provide a clue or inspiration. Hutch had simply vanished.

That night, Starsky gave in to pain and fatigue, taking two of the Percodan his doctor had sent home with him. He slept but he did not rest. There could be no respite for him, not without learning what had happened to Hutch.

He awoke feeling groggy. When his bleary gaze registered on the bedside clock, the shock of seeing that it was ten-thirty rudely revived him. He felt guilty, as if he had slept away valuable searching time.

He pulled on the same clothes he'd worn the day before, his body protesting at every movement. His chest felt incredibly tight, the healing muscles were a constricting band that would not let him move normally; his lungs had to fight for air, which made him cough a lot. He dismissed the pain, going to the car and heading for Metro.

Starsky was pouring a cup of coffee when Dobey opened his office door. The big man's voice was gruff with concern.

"What are you doing here, Starsky?"

The detective took a sip of the strong, black brew before answering. "My partner's missing."

"Starsky, we have every cop in the city looking for Hutch. I just got off the phone with the regional director of the FBI. Everything that can be done is being done."

"I can't stay home doing nothing, Captain." Infinitely weary, Starsky felt explaining was a useless waste of energy. He pulled out his desk chair and sank down. His eyes came to rest on the empty seat across from him.

He tore his gaze away. He didn't have to look to know Hutch wasn't there. He didn't have to try very hard to imagine all the terrible things that could have happened to him by now. It had been four days. The hard work was in not visualizing all the details of every deadly scenario that clambered for his attention.
Four days... That was long enough for Forrest to addict him to heroin. Four days... If I'd taken that long to find him when his car went into the canyon, I'd have found a dead man. Four days... I only had forty-eight hours to find Calendar and save Hutch's life. Four days... Hutch...

He coughed again. Starsky closed his eyes, trying to force himself to relax. He had to hang on, because if he couldn't control the pain, he'd never be able to control the terror.

He spent hours on the phone. First, he called the airport with more questions, then neighboring police departments, everyone he could think of who owed him a favor. He had to tell his story over and over, explain that Hutch had disappeared, and that was hurtful, physically and emotionally draining. Just speaking the words seemed to require more strength than he had.

*Maybe another cup of coffee...* He had lost count of how many he'd drunk. Starsky pushed back his chair and stood. The blood seemed to drain from his skull quickly, making him dizzy. He staggered to the coffee urn, leaning against the wall, feeling hot and cold at the same time.

"Starsky... Starsky!" Dobey's voice came at him from a great distance.

He thought about answering. *Later, when I can stand up.* Right now the floor looked like a good place to lie down.

He came to in an ambulance. Panic swept over him at the sight of the IV tubing, the concerned paramedics' faces. He craned his neck and recognized Dobey sitting up front with the driver.

*No time for this. Gotta keep searching for Hutch.* He tried to push the oxygen mask off his face, but the trembling weakness of his hands made the simple action impossible.

His own doctor came to see him in the emergency room. Starsky put up with his examination, utterly disinterested in his words of concern.

"Are you through yet, Doc? I have to get back to work." Starsky pushed himself up and reached for his shirt.

The doctor removed the ends of the stethoscope from his ears. "You're not going anywhere. You've got pneumonia, David. I'm having you re-admitted."

"Come on, Doctor. I just came out of the hospital -- with your clean bill of health." Starsky tried to draw a breath, noting the fire that seemed to catch at his lungs as he did so.

"That was four days ago. Now you're running a fever of a hundred and three and your lungs are full of pneumonia. I don't know how you didn't notice the symptoms."

He was serious, Starsky could tell. Dread swept over him. "No, I can't... can't go back in the hospital. Hutch might call me at home. What if... I'm not there to answer?"

Dr. Webber looked to Captain Dobey for an explanation. Starsky went back to buttoning his shirt. As he slid off the examining table, both men turned to look at him. The doctor spoke first.

"Are you trying to kill yourself, young man?"

"Dave," Dobey intervened softly. "Hutch will want you to get well."

*That's not fair,* Starsky wanted to tell him. But he could see that it was also true. He wouldn't do Hutch any good if he couldn't hold himself together. *When we find him, I'll brain the guy for putting me through this...*
"Okay." He sat back down on the exam table, wheezing, rubbing a hand through his sweaty hair. "But I don't want to be hospitalized. Can't I stay at my own place?"

"Can you call someone to take care of you?"

*Hutch would.* The irony of that thought pricked at his soul. Starsky closed his eyes, too worn out to concentrate. Dobey's voice spoke up. "Edith would be glad to look in on you. And couldn't you call your Aunt -- what's her name?"

"Rosie."

"Aunt Rosie. She could maybe come stay with you at night. Doctor?"

The medical man sighed, but Starsky looked up in time to see him nod. "I suppose I could make a few house calls. All right. Let me write out a couple of prescriptions. But I want you to get to bed and stay there until I say you can get up."

There was no fight left in Starsky. He gave in and followed his doctor's orders, resting, taking the antibiotics, letting his aunt and Edith Dobey take turns nursing him. More bed rest was the last thing he wanted, but the medication kept him drowsing during the day. Late at night, on the other hand, he would lie awake, still listening for a phone call from Hutch that never came.

*I always found you before. You always found me. Did we think it was some kind of game? Guess we did, partner. Looks like the game is up this time. I'm not havin' any fun.* The feeling of terror, the notion that he had to rush, to beat some arbitrary deadline sank slowly. Starsky began to feel numb. He was living in a state of suspended anticipation, waiting, always waiting. His life had been cleaved in two as neatly as the bullets from the assassin's gun that had torn across his body. There was before and there was now. After wouldn't come until he found Hutch.

As soon as his doctor said his lungs were clear, Starsky went back on the streets. After three weeks, there still was no sign, no trace of Hutch. The detective stubbornly repeated his phone calls, re-questioned everyone with whom he had spoken. He made a nuisance of himself at every police department within miles. He even went to see James Gunther, and the loud questions and accusations he threw at the jailed man brought the guards on a run to throw Starsky out before he did the prisoner bodily harm. Starsky left, his unvented frustration settling in his gut. He was getting very used to the feeling.

He called the hospitals again, still learning nothing. He couldn't bring himself to phone the morgues. Someone in the department had done that portion of the job, and it had been the only one he'd been content to delegate. Hutch wouldn't be found in any of them, anyway. *I'd know, I'd feel it... wouldn't I? Always thought that was the way it would be. Now I'm not sure. Of that, or anything. No, I can't give up. Hutch -- where are you?*

He had not been found dead, but if he were alive, why hadn't Starsky heard from him? He knew Hutch would keep trying to escape, trying to call... if he could. The circular reasoning was driving him crazy. Starsky refused to think about why Hutch might not be able to reach him.

He wanted answers, and none of the police agencies seemed able to do anything to find them. He had been scared at first, then, lying in his sick bed, depressed. Now Starsky was driven by another emotion. He was angry at the ineffective police and FBI. They didn't care, one missing detective from Metro meant nothing to them. So much for the fabled brotherhood of law enforcement officials. He found himself arguing with everyone he talked to, complaining about what they'd done -- and especially what they hadn't done -- to find his missing partner. None of his anger did a bit of good though, not even the kind he directed at himself.
He felt aimless, without direction. There were days when he used two tanks of gas just driving up and down the L.A. streets. Some nights, he staked out Hutch's apartment, but he was the only visitor to Venice Place. He'd searched the place in the first days of the disappearance, but that act had been as fruitless as the rest. He went inside occasionally, watered plants, dusted the furniture, picked up and sorted the mail. Just once in those early days he even wandered into the bedroom. He couldn't stay, however. The brass bed looked as empty as his own. He couldn't let himself think about what he and Hutch might have done there.

Starsky had always figured that Hutch would be a part of his life -- even before he had considered they might love each other physically. To think of life without him was impossible. Thought the only way I'd never see you again was if they cut out my eyes. But being blind could never be as bad as this. If they'd ripped you out of my side I couldn't feel as empty as I do now.

Never seeing Hutch again was inconceivable. And yet Starsky did see him, kept seeing him. On the street, a tall man moving with a graceful stride. A beat-up Ford with a blond driver. A guy leaning laconically over the bar at Huggy's... Hutch was everywhere. And nowhere. Each time his eyes played the trick on him, a nerve in Starsky jumped. He lost count of the times he'd nearly grabbed a stranger only to realize belatedly that it wasn't Hutch. Everything reminded him of his missing friend. A joke on Johnny Carson that Hutch would have laughed at, a restaurant that catered to the food he liked, a song on the radio... Thinking of something he wanted to tell him, Starsky turned to the empty seat in the Torino a dozen times, reached for the phone a hundred. The reactions to those occurrences tied his stomach in knots, feelings winding tight as he tried to control them, to hang onto his sanity. He didn't rant and rave, didn't let anyone observe his intense feelings. Yet out on the freeway, in the privacy of his car, Starsky would think of Hutch and curse and pound the steering wheel in an agony of denial and loss. Goddamnit, why? Where are you?

He went to Dobey, begging for work to take his mind off the fruitless searching, the loneliness. The Captain refused, saying Starsky was not fit for duty, that the review board wouldn't even consider his case at this time. Starsky ignored him. Angry at the world, he went out on his own, answering radio calls, wading in to arrest anyone he saw breaking any law from armed robbery to jaywalking.

Starsky was cruising a street in a barrio neighborhood when he spotted a gang of kids fighting in a garbage-strewn playground. It could have been punks like these -- killing a cop and hiding the body for the fun of it. Some of them had bats; others had broken bottles and chains. He knew in a few minutes the knives would be coming out. Starsky pulled the Torino to the curb and got out.

"Come on, tough guys. Break it up." He pulled out his badge and held it up for them to see. Interfering alone in something like this was dangerous, but Starsky didn't think about it, didn't care at this point.

Both groups turned on him, taunting and making insults. Starsky moved closer, threatening to arrest the teenagers. Someone threw a bottle, it just missed his head. Starsky made a grab for one of them.

It was all over in a few minutes. Outnumbered by the stronger youths, Starsky was beaten badly. They left him bleeding from cuts on his head and arms, bruised and battered, lying on the ground. He had to crawl back to the car. Reaching for the mike and switching on the radio, he felt a tearing sensation in his chest. He barely had breath to call for assistance, and then blackness pulled him down to unconsciousness.

He woke up back in the hospital. He had a concussion and had torn some cartilage in a lung, the one more seriously damaged when he'd been shot.
"You may have seriously damaged your chances of recovering, Sergeant," Dr. Webber told him emphatically. "If you don't stay here and follow orders, you are likely to remain an invalid for the rest of your life."

Starsky turned away from the look of compassionate concern on the physician's face. Deep down, he knew Webber was right. Though he didn't care one way or another about his own condition, Starsky feared lying in bed for weeks or months -- how could he keep his mind off the loss of Hutch if he had nothing to do? Still, he wondered what possible use recovery would be with Hutch gone from his life.

********

August, 1979

Starsky pushed the untouched dinner tray aside and turned to stare out the window of his hospital room. It was sunset, and the whole world looked gold under the descending rays. Life was going on out there, the beauty of the world was undiminished. Except for here, in this room. Starsky lay back against his pillows, eyes squinting under the cold illumination of the overhead fluorescent light. He thought about how it would feel to be outside right now. Somehow, he knew the sun wouldn't warm him, and from his perspective, its light wouldn't look golden.

He reached for the telephone beside his bed. The last time he had used it, days ago, had been to call Captain Dobey, asking him to tell his aunt and Huggy and other friends that he didn't want to see them for a while. Starsky was sick of their concern, of their sympathy. Their soft voices and admonitions not to worry made him irritable; he had decided to ask Dobey to make them all stay away.

Now, he had made another decision. He waited impatiently for Dobey to answer, wanting to get on with what he had to say.

"Captain Dobey."

"Cap, it's Starsky."

"Dave, good to hear your voice!" The Captain sounded pleased, as if he supposed Starsky was calling to let him know he wanted to have visitors again. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. Listen, Captain. I thought I should call you as soon as I decided about this. I'm quitting the force."

"I'm okay. Listen, Captain. I thought I should call you as soon as I decided about this. I'm quitting the force." Starsky closed his eyes, drawing in a steadying breath. Saying the words hadn't hurt one bit. He didn't feel anything inside at all.

Dobey was talking, loud and excited, trying to persuade Starsky to change his mind. Starsky listened a few moments, feeling strangely removed. Finally, he just hung up the phone.

********

It was late afternoon the following day. Starsky was staring sightlessly out the window again, this time while he ignored his physical therapist, who was once again trying to persuade him to go to the therapy sessions he had been avoiding.

He heard her sigh in frustration and turn to go. Then came the sound of his door opening and another person coming into the room.
"I'll talk to him."

Starsky stiffened. *Mother? What -- who called her?* There was a note of anger in her familiar voice, but he recognized the expression as the one her speech took on only when she was very, very worried.

He turned in time to see the therapist leaving. His mother stood before him, her eyes wide with emotion, her look both reproofing and full of love.

"What are you doing here?" His own voice was ragged with the effort of hanging onto his feelings. He didn't know whether he wanted to lash out in annoyance or reach out for her in desperation.

"Your captain called me yesterday. He said you needed me." Her eyes held his gaze.

"I'm all right. You were just out here when I was shot; you didn't have to disrupt your whole life again just because I'm back in the hospital."

She came closer, sitting on the bed beside him. "Davey, what are you doing to yourself?" She reached for his hand.

"It's all right to talk about it, Davey."

His head pressed back against the pillows, his eyes squeezed shut in denial. "No..."

"Shut up!" He immediately regretted his sharp words, but there was no taking them back. "I'm sorry. It's just... he isn't dead. There's no proof of that. And I won't believe it without proof."

Her eyes had focused on some place far away; Starsky had seen her go there many times. *The place where her love died...*

"Okay. I understand. I shouldn't have said it like that. Hutch has disappeared. You've lost him, suddenly and without explanation. You're hurting. But you can't go on like this. Son, you've got your whole life ahead of you. Don't jeopardize your health this way."

"None of that matters. I don't care what's ahead of me."

"I know it's hard. Hutch was your partner, your best friend..."

"Mom, don't say anymore. You just don't understand." It killed him to hear people refer to Hutch in the past tense. But what was worse, he and Hutch had shared a love, and now not only might he never find it again, he had no way to explain it to anyone.
His mother reached to cradle the hand she held in both of hers. "I know, son. A man's partner is..." He sighed and she hesitated again, looking into him as if she could read his emotions as well as she had when he'd been a child. "Please. Talk to me and explain. I'm your mother and there isn't anything I won't understand."

He looked into the world-weary, worldly-wise eyes of his mother. He couldn't remember them ever looking at him in condemnation. When he was a kid at home, she'd always let him know he could tell her anything. Even when he'd come to live out here with Aunt Rosie, his mother had remained a loving confidant.

Lying in his hospital bed, alone and hurting, what had passed between him and Hutch had come to seem almost like something he had fantasized. No one else knew what they had really meant to each other. If all he was ever to have of their love was a memory, he wanted to know it had been real.

"A man's partner..." he began somewhat nervously. "Mom, you know what that is. It's more than a friendship. But Hutch and I... it goes further for us, deeper..."

His hand was held more firmly. Encouraged, Starsky went on, feelings slipping out with the words. "We've been through so much, especially this last year. Both of us have loved and lost, been hurt... guess we finally realized that the only thing either of us has is each other." Her expression showed no resistance to what he was saying, only a compassion born of true understanding.

"I... love him, Mom. And he loves me. We'd only just realized we meant that in every sense of the word." He swallowed, went on raggedly. "And he needs me -- and I'm afraid I'll never get him back. Never have another chance to show him..." He broke off, breathing hard, his voice trembling under the strain of his helpless need. "He's my whole life!"

He let go of her hand, folding his arms to clutch them tight around his chest, rocking back and forth. It hurt so bad.

A long silence stretched between them. Starsky's mother moved closer to him, placing her hands on his shoulders. The quiet space seemed warmer somehow, enclosing them, rather than keeping them apart.

"David, I know you'd like to think that even if people die, love never does. I've always believed that, and tried to teach it to you and your brother. If you and Hutch loved each other, it's all right to hang on to that. We need those memories. But hang on to something else, too. What do you think Hutch would say if he saw you like this? He wouldn't want to see you sick, weak, uncaring -- quitting your job, turning away everyone who tried to help you. Son, if you aren't willing to give up on Hutch, how can you give up on yourself?"

Her words reached directly into his pain. I can't give up on you, can I, babe? And I guess you wouldn't give up on me. You're out there somewhere. I have to get myself together or I'll be no good to you -- or to your memory. He looked into his mother's eyes, not wanting to let her down, yet uncertain he could do what she asked of him.

His mother stayed for a couple of weeks. She argued, cajoled, and nagged him to go to physical therapy, to eat, to follow doctor's orders. When he began trying, he found that working hard to get back into decent physical condition was easier than thinking about life without Hutch. Once on the road to recovery, though, he was faced with time to go over all those things that might have been and that he should have done. His mother had another suggestion that helped. College courses would be a way to occupy his mind. Statsky listened without much enthusiasm at first, but when he realized that a degree would make him eligible for promotion and that a promotion would get him off the streets and allow him to work alone without having to accept another partner, he decided to follow her advice.
May, 1981

Nearly two years. Next month, it'll be two whole years. Starsky knew his police work was as efficient as ever. Just four months ago, after many long hours at night school, he had earned his degree. A lieutenant's spot had opened up in Metro, and Dobey had pulled strings to help Starsky get it. He was in charge of twelve detectives and took pride in the work he did, the things he accomplished. Yet, busy as he was, he still maintained an interest in the one case he would never consider closed. The time had passed so slowly, yet its reality was the hardest thing Starsky had ever endured. But if time was real, so was love. And so was Starsky's hope.

Few people knew that he still took care of Hutch's apartment and possessions. Making changes, getting rid of anything, would mean Hutch was gone forever, and when Hutch came home, he would need to find things just as he'd left them. He knew Dobey assumed his obsession was the result of guilt, but his reasons went deeper than that. The Captain never knew about the dreams that haunted Starsky's sleep at night, where the days of futile searching still went on and on, and the loss seemed as fresh as a new-opened wound.

Starsky got up from the couch and paced across the living room. He hated the dreams; recalling them often destroyed his sleep for days before they stopped. He entered the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, trying to stop the downward spiral of depression.

Maybe I need to talk to someone. He went into the bedroom and flopped down on the bed, reaching for the phone.

"Starsky? That really you?" Huggy Bear's voice sounded pleasantly surprised.

"It's me, Hug. Are... you busy?" Starsky felt awkward calling his old friend. He'd virtually stopped socializing at all together. That left him lonely, but he no longer felt like forming or keeping up friendships.

"'Course I'm not busy. 'Specially since I don't hardly hear from you no more. What can I do for you, man?"

"I just felt like talking. I realize it's been a while..."

"Why don't I come over? You had dinner yet?"

"No..."

"I'll bring a pizza."

"Thanks, Huggy." Starsky felt warm with embarrassment; it was tough admitting he needed the company tonight.

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The last of the pizza had disappeared before Huggy brought up Hutch's name. Starsky winced, knowing Huggy must realize that having his missing partner on his mind had prompted his call. Then he realized it was all right. He didn't have to make up pretenses with Huggy. Starsky had all but forgotten what unconditional friendship felt like.

"So, you're thinkin' about Hutch?" The question was repeated, louder this time. "What happened, Starsky?"
"Nothing really, Hug. I guess I can put it out of my mind for just so long before it all starts comin' back. I start reliving the whole nightmare all over again. Damn! If I'd just been with him..."

"There was nothing you coulda done, my man." Huggy's voice was sympathetic.

"I know that. But do you realize how ironic it is? I manage to survive the hit, and Hutch turns around and..." He let the sentence go unfinished.

Huggy met his eyes. "I've never believed he's dead, either. Hutch was always one tough dude. Maybe somehow, some way..."

Starsky looked away, remembering that he had not finished cleaning Hutch's gun that morning. "Do you think it's crazy, me still believing he's alive?"

"The only thing I think is crazy is this world we live in."

"Really."

Huggy stayed a while longer, and for a time, Starsky felt somewhat cheered by his friend's presence. *I should see more of Huggy, get down to his new restaurant sometime.* His work routine was comfortable, acceptable. He couldn't see himself dropping in at Huggy's to spending an evening playing pool without Hutch. Yet Huggy wasn't difficult to be around; he never tried to break down the defenses Starsky had devised for himself.

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The dreams he had sought to banish came back to him anyway that night. Starsky fell into the dark, suffocating netherworld he had inhabited during those first, bleak months without Hutch...

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He was running down a long, dark tunnel, trying to keep going despite the terrible pains in his chest and back warning him of impending collapse.

"Hutch! Hutch!" He tried calling out, but his voice wasn't strong enough to carry.

There! What was that sound? He stopped, trying to still his ragged breathing enough to listen. It sounded like...

...someone crying. Sobs, torn from the heart of a grieving man. Starsky rubbed his chin, feeling the ache where Hutch had slugged him. He had to reach out, take away the pain, make him understand. Gillian was gone but he was still there. Starsky reached, but fell flat on the tunnel floor, his arms empty. The sobbing ceased.

He got to his knees, reaching blindly, all his senses searching through the dark and the silence. There... harsh, pain wracked gasps, lungs fighting for air. And he could do nothing, couldn't press his hands against Hutch's chest to help him fight the pain. Hutch was dying, alone, far from Starsky's comfort and love.

Starsky staggered to his feet, beginning to run again, but he tripped, falling as the ground gave way to drop him into an endless chasm.
He was floating, swimming through murky mists that strangled the voice inside him, made his arms and legs tremble with weakness. But there, down below, was Hutch, shaking and sweating in the horror of heroin withdrawal. An ugly man stood over him, readying the dirty needle that would end his pain but make his addiction certain.

"No!" Starsky cried out. "Let me help you, Hutch!"

The tears dried on Hutch's battered face as he sadly watched Starsky's useless struggle. Then, a vacant smile appeared on his lips, his gaze turned toward the man with the needle. He extended his arm...

"Huuuutch!" The name was uttered as half-scream, half-moan. Starsky found himself naked on a bed, watching Hutch lean over him. Weak with relief, he realized all that had happened had been only dreams. This was now, this was real. They were together. Eyes of crystal blue sparkled with desire as they devoured the sight of Starsky's arousal and both strong hands reached out to caress his writhing body.

Hutch's mouth touched him, swallowing him whole, sucking him in a form of slow, intimate torture that made him beg for completion. Hutch's fingers traced pathways on his trembling body, down his rib cage, across his belly, combing through the dark curls that led down his abdomen.

Starsky spread his legs, his hips thrusting, wanting to end, wanting never to end. His eyes closed, his body aware only of the stimulation, but his hands sought Hutch's head. He sank his fingers deep in the silky hair, and held his lover close, felt his throat muscles working as the exquisite suction continued. But his hands closed on emptiness and cold shock swept over him.

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Starsky opened his eyes. He was alone, his heart filled with confusion and hurt. How could Hutch leave him this way? Tears of frustration slid down his cheeks as he curled into a ball on the cold, empty bed.

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The idiotically cheerful chirping of birds told him it was finally morning. His body aching from the night spent on the couch, he dragged himself to a sitting position, rubbing a hand across his tear-stained face. No question what that dream had meant, he thought ruefully. *Unfinished business, the love we started but never fully consummated.* He hadn't kept up much of a social life; his sex life was the same. Having sex meant coming into close physical contact with another person, and Starsky knew he couldn't handle that. He took care of his occasional sexual frustration, evoked usually by dreams like the one he'd had last night, the way he took care of everything else in his life, by himself.

On the job, he had decent working relationships; other cops understood. But aside from Huggy, he didn't associate with friends who had known Hutch. Their sympathy and sincere offers of help were too much to bear. Starsky couldn't talk about his feelings. He was alone. Friendships had drifted. There was work, and there were memories.

Like last night, he called Huggy every once in a while. Occasionally, he had dinner with Captain Dobey and his wife. He called his mother regularly, but took no vacation time. He was grateful for her help and understanding, but opening himself up to her cost him, too. He hoped she understood why he hadn't come to see her. For a while, he had been in touch with Hutch's parents, but both Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson had been killed a few months ago in a car accident.
Their deaths had been something of a relief. From the beginning, they had blamed Starsky for not being able to find their son, adding to his guilt. *They certainly didn't hold out much hope of finding him.* Before even six months had elapsed, they had begun to discuss the possibility of having Hutch declared legally dead. Now that they had passed away, other Hutchinson relatives wanted the same thing. There were uncles and aunts, a few cousins, but Hutch had no brothers or sisters. The law was that a person had to be missing seven years before the courts officially declared him dead. Until then, Hutch's parents' wills would not be out of probate and the family fortune could not be distributed to the other family members.

Starsky had a lot of Hutch's things at his own apartment; it was comforting to have his possessions nearby. He'd kept Venice Place in Hutch's name, depositing the rentals from Chez Helene and the two other tenants in an account he had established for the purpose. There was quite a sizeable amount in the account now; Starsky hadn't touched a penny of it. If Hutch ever did come back, he'd probably need the money. And he'd want his home the way he'd left it, his plants, his guitar, his paintings. Starsky knew that he was rationalizing. To the world, Kenneth Hutchinson was a dead man. It was almost as if he'd never really existed at all, except in Starsky's mind. Yet there, and in his heart, Hutch was still very much alive. All he could do was bide his time. He refused to look toward the future, and the past only reminded him how lonely he was now.

*Damn it, Hutch, why didn't we even have time to make love again?* He got up and headed toward the shower, intending to wash off the effects of alcohol and nightmares. *If only we'd been allowed the time to love each other... maybe I could live with this sense of having lost what I never had.* Without answers, there could be no closure. Instead, Starsky lived always with the anguish of loss, of unfinished business. Until he learned what exactly had happened to his partner, Starsky knew he would never really be able to get on with his life.

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CHAPTER II

Starsky checked his watch, noting that it was nearly five o'clock. At least the paperwork on the Gardner case was finished. He was glad to have the ugly business finally taken care of. He was tired, and getting more tired of cases like this Gardner mess as time went on. He'd lost a man on this one. Smith had just been promoted to plainclothes -- another promising career had been cut short. Starsky rubbed his hand through his hair and began straightening the pile of papers on his desk.

A light knock sounded at the door. He looked up to find Captain Dobey standing there.

"G'night, Cap." Starsky didn't feel like talking.

"You getting ready to leave, Starsky? It's been a long day."

"Yeah, well..." Starsky thought again of the body of young Ted Smith sprawled in a pool of his own blood. "It was rough talking to Ted's wife."

Dobey entered the room to lean over the desk, meeting Starsky's eyes. "I know. Remember, I've lost men, too."
Starsky tensed, sensing another lecture was forthcoming. He'd managed to pull himself together during the past week. Nailing Gardner had helped; it was always good to have work to concentrate on. But the last thing he needed now was for Dobey to use Ted Smith's death to remind him.

He made his eyes cold, hard. It was almost a reflexive action now, one he had always made good use of, more necessary than ever in the past two years.

"I'm fine, Captain. You go on home now. I'm sure Mrs. Dobey is waiting for you."

Dobey sighed, noticeable hurt in his dark eyes. "Okay. But if you feel like talking..." His voice trailed off, sensing apparently that Starsky was not going to respond. "Good night, Starsky." He turned to leave.

Starsky watched the big man go, regretting his own inability to accept help even from the man who probably came closest to understanding what he and Hutch had had.

"Captain," he managed finally. "Thanks."

A huge hand lifted in acknowledgement. Starsky drew in a deep, shoulder-lifting sigh and reached for his briefcase. The phone on his desk rang.

_Damn_. It seemed he could never get out of the office without being delayed by two or three phone calls. Tonight, he was tempted to ignore the ringing. Then he thought about the evening stretching before him and picked up the receiver. "Starsky."

"Lieutenant, this is Chief Ingalls' secretary. I'm trying to locate Captain Dobey."

"You just missed him, Lorraine. He was here, but he's gone for the day."

"Oh, dear. The Chief was really hoping to catch him."

"Anything I can do?"

There was a slight pause from the other end of the line. "No. I don't think so. Thanks anyway, Lieutenant."

Starsky hung up. The call hadn't done much to delay his inevitable departure. He went around his desk and started toward the door. The phone jangled again.

He leaned over the scarred wood surface of the desk. "Yeah?"

"It's Lorraine again, Lieutenant Starsky."

"I was just on my way out the door."

"When I told Chief Ingalls that I'd spoken to you, he asked me to call you back. Could you come up to his office right away?"

Starsky shrugged. "Sure. Tell the Chief I'm on my way."

He put the phone down and locked his office, then headed for the stairs. The call to see the chief of detectives had piqued his curiosity. The matter must be of some importance if it wouldn't wait for Captain Dobey's return in the morning.

He opened the door to Ingalls' outer office. The secretary looked up.
"Hi, Lorraine."

Her smile was business-like but friendly. "He says to go right in."

Starsky tapped on the door, then opened it. Chief Ingalls was at his desk, behind a pile of clutter. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, revealing still-powerful forearms under a dusting of salt-and-pepper hair. The man had come to Los Angeles from New York to take over the position of chief of detectives a couple of years ago. Starsky had always sensed he still remembered what it was like to work plainclothes on the streets.

There was a shock of dark hair falling over the high forehead, also containing a slight amount of grey. Ingalls pushed it back with one hand, while he reached for a manila envelope with the other.

"Yes, Chief? What can I do for you?"

Ingalls began brusquely. "I received a call this afternoon from U.S. Customs. They were stripping a plane confiscated in a drug smuggling bust. They found something -- wedged down under one of the seats or something -- and sent it over to me by messenger. It just arrived."

"I don't understand."

"I was calling Captain Dobey because it's property belonging to one of his men. Since he's gone for the day, and this is important..." The Chief hesitated for the first time. "I knew you'd want to see this right away."

Ingalls held out the manila package and Starsky stepped forward to take it. He was curious, but couldn't think of any particular case that would have involved Customs.

He undid the clasp and tipped the opened envelope. A dark brown leather badge folder dropped into his palm.

It was flattened and creased, as though it had indeed been stuck in a tight space, and for a long time. Starsky replaced the envelope on Ingalls' cluttered desk and opened the leather folder.


Starsky stared, dumbfounded. His eyes registered the name, the shield number, even the photograph of Hutch, but he couldn't think. His hands began to shake. Hutch's I.D. After all this time... His heart was hammering hard, like it was trying to catch up after skipping a lot of beats.

He tried to speak, but his mouth had dried out so thoroughly he couldn't form the words. Finally, without taking his eyes from the object in his hands, he managed, "You say... this was found in a plane?"

"Just this afternoon, I believe. The official who called me said the plane was a small, private jet that had been used in a smuggling operation. They busted the pilot and have him in custody now. When they found the badge, they contacted my office. He read me the name and I told him Hutchinson had been missing for over a year."

"Two years," Starsky corrected him. "It's two years next month." His knees threatened to buckle under him. Ingalls cleared his throat. "Right. Two years."

Starsky finally raised his eyes from the badge to look at Ingalls. "Hutch's gun was found in an airport locker. He must have been forced to get on the plane by the man he was tailing." The idea had occurred to Starsky a
long time ago, but without proof or a lead of any kind, he'd had no idea where to start looking. A jet. How fast... and how far... could it have taken him?

"That plane's apparently been used for a number of years in smuggling drugs and other items in and out of the country."

Starsky's mind was in tumult, adrenaline began pumping through his body. The pilot's in custody...

"Chief, I want to get on this right away."

Ingalls smiled. "I'm not surprised to hear you say that, Starsky."

"Where're they holding the pilot?"

"Downtown in the Federal lock-up."

Starsky nodded, fingers tightening on the creased leather case. "I've got some questions for that guy."

"I'll bet you do. Let me know what you find out."

Starsky barely heard the Chief. His mind was on an airplane that had carried Hutch's badge within it for a long time. It might yield other clues, maybe tell the story of what had happened to Hutch when he'd been taken aboard. It was almost too much to take in all at once.

"Lieutenant? Lieutenant...?"

Starsky's unfocused gaze returned to the Chiefs face. "Yeah?"

"Let me know what you find out, I said."

"Right." The need to act threw Starsky back into reality. He turned and headed for the office door. Opening it, he glanced back. "Chief Ingalls? Thanks. Thank God I was around when this came in."

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Inspector Jim Clay stood as the police lieutenant was ushered into his office by his secretary. Actually, the man charged in, his manner indicating that he was in a hurry, and didn't want to waste time with formalities.

"Inspector, I'm glad you're here. I know it's after five o'clock."

"Chief Ingalls called to say you were coming, Lieutenant... Starsky?"

"That's right." Almost as an afterthought, the dark-haired cop extended his hand.

Clay grasped it, felt the tough palm and steady fingers wrap around his. The man's blue eyes flashed with intensity. I wouldn't want to get in his way, the Federal officer thought.

"What can we do for you today, Lieutenant?" he asked, matching his own brusqueness to Starsky's.

"I came to see you about the badge your men found today. It's my partner's. He's been missing for almost two years. This is the first new clue we've had since his disappearance."

Clay uttered a low whistle. No wonder the cop was excited.
"I'd appreciate it if you'd let me question the pilot you have in custody."

"Of course," Clay told him immediately. "I don't know how much Jenkins knows, but you're welcome to ask him anything you want. The guy's agreed to cooperate fully -- he's been admitting everything we have on him so far."

"Spilling his guts, huh? Good." Starsky grinned without much warmth. "Looks like my luck has finally turned around."

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Jenkins was a slight, sullen man who barely glanced up from the table where he sat as Clay and Starsky entered the interrogation room. His face was tanned and weathered, his jet-black hair combed straight back off his forehead. Clay couldn't read the man's mood, but he felt Starsky was equal to the task of questioning him.

Clay introduced the lieutenant. Jenkins looked up, studied indifference on his face.

"All right," Starsky began in a no-nonsense tone, seating himself opposite the man. "I have some questions to ask you about that plane of yours."

"Whatever." The comment was delivered in a laconic voice.

"You've been flying this plane for how long?"

Jenkins leveled a cautious look at Starsky, then shrugged. "'Bout... three years."

The detective pulled the creased badge folder from his jacket pocket. Clay saw the tense fingers relax as they stroked the leather briefly. "Three years. Then you should recognize this." He placed the object on the table between himself and Jenkins. "Go ahead. Open it."

Thin, gnarled fingers touched the case, gingerly flipping it open. Starsky kept his eyes on the man's face. Jenkins didn't betray anything by his bored reaction. "Some cop's ID, looks like."

"And what do you know about it?" Starsky kept his voice even but firm, telling Clay he had years of experience questioning suspects.

"What's to know?" Jenkins spoke just as evenly, though Clay could tell his calm was studied.

"It came from your plane. Have you ever seen it before?"

The prisoner's dark eyes dropped under Starsky's unblinking gaze; he studied the opened folder for a long moment. He seemed to debate answering and then said finally, "Yeah. I guess I've seen it."

"Tell me about it." Starsky's intensity increased.

Defensively, "I didn't get a good look at it. I almost forgot about that cop."

"My partner."

Jenkins' eyes flicked up to meet the detective's; Clay knew he could see the man questioning him was at the edge of his control. Still, he backed off from admitting anything. "I... I never touched him. It wasn't me."
"Tell me what happened!" Starsky was on his feet. Jenkins tried to pull back, but not before the cop got a hold of his shirt front.

"Lieutenant." Clay made his voice the soul of reason. He could see the almost imperceptible tremors in the dark man's frame, and knew what it meant. If this bastard tells him his partner was murdered, he'll break for sure. Clay wouldn't blame him if he did, but he knew his only choice right now was to ease the tension in the room. He put his hands around Starsky's wrists, trying to get him to let go of Jenkins. The prisoner's eyes were bulging with fear. Clay relished the way the inadvertent good cop-bad cop routine was working on him.

"I'd advise you to tell Lieutenant Starsky what you know," Clay said softly, his eyes informing Jenkins that he'd allow the hot-head cop to do anything he wanted otherwise.

Starsky let go of the man's shirt with deliberate care, but he didn't move back out of Jenkins personal space. His voice was calm, his eyes still demanding answers. "Tell me what happened."

"Not much." Jenkins took a moment to straighten his shirt and smooth his hair. "At least, I never knew much about it. Listen, I think I should have my lawyer present if I'm being questioned about anything other than the federal rap."

"You want to be charged with accessory to murder?" Starsky's words were controlled fury.

Jenkins sighed. "Okay. A couple of years ago, I was hired by a guy named Kurt Flavin. He knew I had a reputation for being able to get in and out of locations without the need to go through the local authorities. This guy Flavin paid me top dollar. I didn't ask questions." The admission made Jenkins cast a guarded look toward Inspector Clay.

"But did you see Officer Hutchinson?" Starsky's eyes never left Jenkins' face.

"Yeah." A sigh, then a shrug. "I was out on the tarmac, finishing the pre-flight. Flavin was ready; the plane was loaded. But one of his men was late. Flavin went into the terminal to look for him."

"Go on."

"About fifteen minutes went by. Then Flavin and the guy who was late -- Eddie something -- came around the outside of the building. They had somebody else between them -- a tall, blond guy. When they got close, I could see they were holding a gun on the man. Flavin gave me two thousand extra for taking him along, no questions asked."

Starsky's breathing was slow and deep; his face looked like he was going into a trance, pale and haggard. Clay wondered if the man was going to pass out. When he spoke, however, he sounded in control. "You do remember what happened next, don't you?"

"Sure. They all got aboard. I was up in the cockpit, but I could hear them -- talking, struggling with him some. I turned to look and saw Mr. Flavin shove him into a seat and pat him down. He came up with the badge and threw it down, like he was disgusted. I guess that's when it got wedged between a seat and the wall of the plane. He took the cop's handcuffs and cuffed him to a seat. When the cop kept talking, Eddie belted him a few times. I guess he was knocked out for a while, 'cause he shut up. Flavin told me to get underway, so I took off as soon as I could."

Starsky closed his eyes, just for a second, and Clay knew his next question was going to be the one the detective must have wanted to ask since he'd entered the room. "Where did you take them?"
Jenkins regarded him with a baleful look, as if deciding whether he should end the cop's suspense. Finally, with a shrug and in a bored tone, he named the place.

"Australia."

Clay thought the pilot might as well have said the moon. Australia was thousands of miles away, and he knew the land consisted of hundreds of acres of desert and inhospitable terrain, lots of places to have dumped the body of a kidnapped cop from L.A.

Starsky let the answer sink in for a full minute before he spoke again. He still sounded calm, but Clay knew Jenkins could tell how frantic for the information he was. "Wouldn't you have to stop to refuel the plane? What happened then?" Starsky's cold gaze kept the man pinned.

"Sure," Jenkins shrugged. "We stopped in Honolulu and Auckland, New Zealand. But Flavin made sure he wasn't seen. Nobody got off that plane until we were in Australia."

"Okay. You took them all to Australia. Where did you land? What was Flavin doing there?"

"Take it easy." Jenkins leaned back in his chair, enjoying Starsky's predicament. "We landed on a private strip in the outback. Didn't touch down at any of the international airports -- they knew I had experience in avoiding the authorities."

"So where did you put down?" Starsky asked through narrowed eyes.

Jenkins smiled. "Coober Pedy."

"Where?" Starsky was losing patience.

"That's the name of the nearest town," Jenkins said laconically. "It's in South Australia. But we landed miles from the town -- there's acres and acres of unpopulated land out there. I guess Flavin was involved in gold, or opals maybe. Drugs too, probably. As I said, I got paid not to ask too many questions."

"What about Detective Hutchinson?" Clay could see how taut the policeman was holding himself. *Waiting for the bad news...*

Jenkins sat forward. "I don't know what happened to him after we landed."

"No?" Starsky looked like murder incarnate, daring the man to lie.

"The last I saw of him was when Flavin and his men pulled him off the plane. They didn't hire me for any return trip back to the States, so I didn't know what they were going to do next. All I can tell you is that the cop was alive -- roughed up a little, but alive, when they took him off my plane."

Starsky exhaled in a hiss. His eyes closed briefly. When they reopened, Clay could see hope in them where there had been only desperation before. The inspector felt that Jenkins was telling the truth; his gaze hadn't wavered a bit when he'd answered Starsky. *I hope to God you were, Clay wanted to tell him, if you're not, your life won't be worth much.*

Starsky studied the man's face for a long interval, then pulled a notebook and pen out of his pocket. "Give me dates, names, and place," he directed Jenkins. Item by item, he requisitioned the pilot, this time taking down specifics. The man's story never varied. Clay could see the detective's growing exultation. Starsky finally had gleaned some concrete information that might lead him to his missing partner. The clues were two years old and led to a distant country, but it was a place to start.
An hour later, Clay walked Starsky to the front door of the Federal building. "Sounds like you've got some good leads, Lieutenant."

"Yeah," Starsky glanced down again at the badge folder he still held. "It's about time." He stopped at the door and turned to Clay. "Thanks a lot, Inspector. I'm going back to Metro and put this guy Flavin's name through our computer."

Clay nodded. "If there's anything more I can do, just let me know."

Starsky hesitated. "Maybe there will be. I..."

Clay saw the deep worry that shone through his anxious gaze. "I'll be hoping to hear you've found your partner soon." He put out his hand and Starsky took it. The grip was even firmer this time than the first. Clay watched the cop head down the steps, and found he couldn't share the man's determination. Inspector Clay was a logical man, and his logic was telling him that Flavin had probably killed the cop. He'd merely taken him to Australia to avoid leaving the body in Los Angeles. That seemed obvious to Clay. If it had occurred to Starsky, the man wasn't saying it out loud.

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"Starsky?" The gruff voice of Captain Dobey broke into his concentration. "Is that really you -- here at this hour?"

A glance at his watch told Starsky it was quarter to seven. He grinned amicably and beckoned Dobey inside his office.

The Captain entered and approached the desk, dark eyes appraising Starsky's condition. "You look like you've been here all night."

Another grin. "Yep, that's right. I had work to do. Had to use the computer."

"You worked all night? On what case?" Dobey eased his bulky form into a chair.

Starsky's mouth twitched; for the first time in forever he was eager to say the name out loud. "Hutch."

The older man's face fell. He closed his eyes and scratched a hand through his hair. "Starsky --"

"Look at this." He held out the badge folder for Dobey to see.

The flattened leather case was taken from his hand, opened. Dobey stared for a long moment. Finally, he looked up to meet Starsky's gaze. "Where did this come from?" His tone was incredulous.

"From the plane that took Hutch to Australia." Starsky leaned forward, beginning his story with the call from Chief Ingalls. He ended with what information his computer research had yielded. "Kurt Flavin has known connections to drug smuggling, as well as dealing in jewels. Looks like he may use the jewel business as a cover for the drug operation. He's apparently been out of this country for at least two years. His associates included Eddie Strouse and a guy named Victor Underwood, and some other assorted small-time hoods. But I know he has other connections, some of them in Australia." He reached for an atlas lying open amid the scattered paperwork on his desk. "Jenkins, the pilot, told me he flew them into the outback in South Australia, here. He said the nearest town is a place called Coober Pedy."

"Yeah?" Dobey leaned over to look at the location Starsky pointed out. "Interesting name."
"I'm going to start looking there."

"Starsky," Dobey began, "what do you expect to find?"

"Cap'n, for almost two years, I've had to deal with not knowing what happened to Hutch. I'm gonna go down there personally and see what I can find out."

"You don't really think you'll find Hutch... alive, do you?"

The question had not been unexpected, but Starsky didn't like hearing it anyway. "Hey, I finally get a real lead, one with enough information to begin retracing his steps. Don't try to take this away from me."

"I'm not. But... it's just... don't you think if Hutch were alive, he'd have been in touch with you?"

"That's not the point. I have to find out what happened to him. I'm his partner. I owe him, Captain." Starsky had no intention of thinking beyond that. Time enough later to involve his feelings in what might lie at the end of the trail. "Can I have the time off?"

Dobey obviously couldn't argue with his determination and need. "Of course. Take all the time you need. I'll authorize a leave of absence for you. You certainly have the time coming."

Starsky relaxed. He nodded, smiling. "Thanks, Cap."

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Despite his feelings of urgency, Starsky's departure had to wait. It took most of a week to take care of all the details and travel arrangements. Besides making plane reservations, he had to get both a passport and visa to enter Australia. He contacted the Australian police, who assured him he would be welcomed cordially and that they would do everything they could to assist him in his search.

Starsky chafed at the delays. He was in a hurry, now that he finally had something to do. It was almost as if the two intervening years had not happened. Starsky again felt the constant urge to act, to get to his partner and give him the help he needed. He became charged with a sense of excitement, adrenalin pumping through him as it hadn't in longer than he could remember.

He tried to schedule his trip to begin on a Monday, but the flight he'd made reservations for was cancelled. Telling Dobey about it that afternoon, Starsky paced the Captain's office.

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The older man watched the younger cop nervously cover the same four feet of space over and over again. Starsky was speaking in shorthand sentences, his tone clipped and irritated, as if he thought the airline had changed the schedule simply to inconvenience him. Dobey was glad to see Starsky so animated, but he was worried. In all probability, he would merely learn the circumstances of Hutchinson's death. And he could foresee that information plunging Starsky into a depression greater than the despair that had consumed him for two years.

Dobey rubbed a hand through hair that already needed combing. Starsky hadn't been the only one to feel the loss of Kenneth Hutchinson. Dobey had always had a special feeling for the blond detective. There had been a good friendship between them, despite night and day differences in their backgrounds. He had missed Hutch, too.
At the beginning, like everyone else, Dobey had thought that Hutch would be found. The man was a seasoned cop, too bright and too careful to let someone easily get the drop on him. But as days went by and no sign of him turned up, Dobey had begun to fear the worst. The city-wide search had progressed until it covered the state and extended outward to the east, and fanned out to Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. But Hutch had been swallowed up by a hostile world, never to be heard from again.

And Starsky had quietly gone crazy. To look at him now, Dobey thought, watching as he paced the office, no one would realize how close he had been to death a couple of years ago. But the mental and physical anguish Starsky had put himself through with Hutch gone was ten times worse. He wouldn't listen to anyone, continued trying to search for his partner himself until he collapsed with pneumonia.

In the intervening two years, Starsky had changed. He no longer pulled the pranks of a kid, no longer read mysteries or stayed up late with a good horror flick. By his own admission, he had become the typical early-to-bed-early-to-rise type. It was good for his health, although Dobey wasn't sure about the benefit to his attitude. It was true that Starsky still maintained Hutch's affairs as if he had just gone off on an extended vacation. But when he'd discussed it with the department psychologist she told him that as long as Starsky was functioning normally in every other way, keeping Hutch's apartment was probably harmless. The time would come, she'd said, when Starsky would be forced to accept that his partner was permanently gone from his life.

Perhaps that acceptance was what the result of the trip to Australia would be. Maybe Starsky needed to see the evidence for himself before he would believe it. Someone had kidnapped and killed Ken Hutchinson; they'd taken his body away where it wouldn't be found for a long time. Maybe Starsky will be able to bury the memories now, if he knows what became of Hutch.

"I said, I hear it's a beautiful place, Captain." Starsky's earnest voice broke into his reverie.

"Yeah."

"I was reading about it yesterday, and it's like the western frontier was. A man could get lost in that outback… maybe never find his way out."

That sounded dangerous. "Now, Dave..."

Starsky held up a hand. "Take it easy, Cap. You don't have to pile on the warnings. I can see 'em in your face." He sighed, looking the same as he had his first day back in the office without Hutch -- forlorn. "I'm not 'getting my hopes up' or whatever you want to call it. I have to do this, though. I have to do it for him."

Dobey understood that much. The feeling constituted the same reason he had wanted to personally put the cuffs on Stryker for the murder of his own partner twenty years ago. He cleared the gruffness out of his throat. "Maybe you'll find the bastards that..."

"Yeah." Starsky cut off the sentence before Dobey could complete it. "Maybe I will. I owe him that, too."

"So when do you get to leave? Have you briefed Lieutenant Thomas on all your cases yet?" Starsky was interested in his trip, but Dobey still had a department to run.

"'Course I have. I don't leave 'til Friday." Starsky checked his watch, as if the day might have gotten closer during his brief conversation with Dobey.

"Look at it this way," the older man suggested, "you'll have more time to plan the trip. You can pack -- isn't it fall or winter this time of year down there?"
"Yeah. How 'bout that?" Starsky chuckled, his eyes lit with excitement. The expression on his face seemed foreign, it had been so long since he'd worn any like it. "Their seasons are the reverse of ours. Autumn runs from March to May and winter is from June to August. Hutch'd love that -- he always talked about the Minnesota snows..." Starsky broke off. He brushed some imaginary lint off his jacket, adjusted the zipper and pulled it up higher. He stood straight and his eyes lost the look of anticipation they'd held. It was as if he were reining his feelings in.

Dobey had seen the reaction all too often and he wondered what would happen when too much got bottled up inside Starsky. He didn't think he'd want to be in the way if it did.

"I've been meaning to tell you," he said lightly. "I want you to keep in touch while you're there. Let me know how you are, and what you manage to find out. If you have any problems with the police down there - - let me talk to them, okay?"

Starsky smiled again, but just briefly. "Right. I appreciate hearing that. I hope I have... news before too long."

Dobey wished there were more he could do. "Listen, if you need me... I've always wanted to see Australia." He met Starsky's eyes.

The younger man seemed to understand what Dobey couldn't put into words. "I'll remember that, Cap."

"It's bound to be strange down there," Dobey went on. "Foreign country and all."

"They speak English, at least. I guess all I have to worry about are the boxing kangaroos."

"Yeah." The phone rang on Dobey's desk. "Scuse me, Dave." When he reached to pick it up, Starsky checked his watch again, waved hastily, and turned to leave. You'd better slow down, son. The fall always hurts worse when it happens while you're running.

riday morning finally arrived. It had been a hectic week and a half, but as Starsky closed his bulging suitcase, he felt satisfied that he was ready to undertake the journey. He drew in a very deep breath, trying to decide if he had forgotten anything. Plenty of clothes, that pair of long underwear Edith Dobey had given him -- must've had to buy 'em at some ski shop -- his newly arrived passport and visa, tickets, money, travel book. Photo of Hutch... He wanted to get a better one than the picture in the badge folder. That one showed a blond choirboy who looked ready to try to save the world. How come it never got updated? Starsky wondered idly. He picked up the silver frame on his nightstand and slipped off the back. Out came the color snapshot of Hutch, long blond hair windblown, mouth grinning under the untrimmed moustache, eyes soft yet underlined with the indefinable sadness that seemed always lurking in them. Starsky remembered the day he'd taken it.

They'd driven out to the beach and Hutch had mostly lazed in the sun while Starsky spent his time playing photographer. He'd tried his hand at elaborate nature studies, driftwood arrangements, footprints in wet sand, a trio of sandpipers, shell still-lifes. Finally tired of the sun and wind and out of ideas, he'd called to Hutch that he was ready to leave. While he watched, his long-legged partner had rolled first to a sitting position, then got to his feet. He wobbled a little, 'just tired' was the explanation. Starsky teased him about getting old, then brought up the camera.

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"Hey, you wanna break that thing?" Hutch tried to turn away from the pointing lens.

Starsky focused, unwilling to lose the opportunity to capture yet another of his partner's many moods. "Just stand there, willya? I want to finish this roll so I can get these developed, okay?"

Hutch sighed, shaking his head, laughing as he waited for Starsky to adjust the Nikon.

Starsky was ready, but he didn't press the shutter. For some strange reason, he felt he'd be seizing a part of Hutch's soul, and that this man's soul should have its freedom. Through the lens, he looked so goddamn beautiful... *Nothin' wrong with seein' the truth*, Starsky had told himself to rationalize the faintly odd thought. He should have his freedom, but he's entrusted the best part of himself to me. The idea made Starsky feel rich beyond his dreams. Wanting to capture and hold onto the precious realization, he snapped the photo.
Starsky smiled. For the first time in a long time, the memory felt good. It was one of the best pictures he'd ever taken of Hutch. He'd been so happy when he'd found it a month or two after the disappearance while cleaning out a dresser drawer. He'd decided to buy a special frame for it and it had remained on his nightstand ever since. Now it was coming with him, to help him in his search. He'd taken it in October, a hot, Indian summer day, and was probably the best, most recent photo he had of him.

Shoulda taken more, every time we went on vacation at least... If I ever get another chance, I'll...

The thought brought a raw aching to his throat. Starsky tucked the picture into his wallet, grabbed his jacket, and headed for the door.

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The airport seemed crowded. Dobey waited with Starsky while he checked his luggage and got his boarding pass, neither man saying much. Dobey offered to pick up some more magazines for him, and Starsky took a seat among the others waiting for the boarding call. Starsky was nervous. He'd never been overly fond of plane rides in the first place and he knew he was going to be up in the air far longer than he wanted to be on this one. The entire trip would take nearly twenty-four hours, though it would be broken by a fuel and rest stop in Honolulu. Noticing the gaily-colored clothing most of the other passengers were wearing, Starsky figured he was traveling with a bunch of vacationers.

Terrific. There were a bunch of kids in the group assembled at the gate, too, laughing and running off excess energy and excitement. Starsky hoped their parents had brought enough stuff along to keep them occupied. He turned, gazing over the rest of the crowd, and noticed a young couple, sitting very close on the bench seat near the broad window overlooking the runway. She was wearing a corsage, he looked as if he'd just had a haircut. Honeymooners. The look of love they were sharing was palpable. Starsky hoped he didn't end up sitting too close to them; he didn't think he could stand the happiness and promise radiating off them while he was on a mission designed out of years of pain and loneliness.

He sighed, craning his neck for some sign of the bulky shape of Captain Dobey returning with the magazines. He'd never liked waiting for transportation; that was the reason he'd usually preferred to drive his car rather than riding in Hutch's.

His eye caught two more travelers waiting to board his plane. Two young men sat side by side on a bench farthest from the gate. He looked to be in their late twenties, and though they did not touch, there was something in the way they gazed at each other; something... intimate. As he watched, Starsky saw the one lean closer to his companion. Both of them smiled, and then Starsky knew for sure. They were lovers. A lump seemed to form in his throat and he wanted to look away. He didn't, though. Heart aching, he couldn't help surreptitiously watching them. It was worse than seeing the newlyweds, though both sets of lovers seemed to underscore Starsky's own loss. He and Hutch could have been here like this, looking like best friends to the world, yet traveling through life together, taking a vacation in Australia. Maybe the two men were on a kind of honeymoon, too, he thought, wondering if he and Hutch would have the chance to do anything as simple, as complicated as this in the future.

Maybe it was hard for them, living in the straight world. Starsky felt an odd ache at having missed learning what that would be like. He figured that a life with Hutch would have made any problems worth it. They had never really even discussed what they would tell the rest of the world about their relationship. Missed out on so much...

Dobey's return cancelled the rest of the unhappy thought. "Here you go." The big man handed over a stack of magazines and groaned as he eased himself down on the bench beside Starsky.
"Thanks." He slipped them into his carry-on bag, realizing it had gotten pretty heavy already.

"Well, I guess you're all set."

"Yeah, looks like."

The two sat in silence for a time. Dobey checked his watch. Starsky looked at his own again. He was scheduled to board the plane in five minutes.

"Cap -- "

"Starsky -- "

"You go first, Captain."

Dobey rubbed a hand through his hair and shifted into a more comfortable position, then looked directly into Starsky's eyes. "I want you to be careful down there. You know what you're doing here in L.A., but that's a different country you're going to. I know you want to go charging in and find all the answers, get the bad guys, or whatever. But don't lose your head, Dave. Hear me?"

Starsky suppressed a smile, the Captain's advice had not been unexpected, but it unexpectedly made him feel good. "Okay. You won't have to worry about me taking dumb chances. I swear. I just have to do this. Understand?"

"Course I do." The look held between them a moment longer, then Dobey cleared his throat and adjusted his collar. "Edith sends her love. She says to write. Send us some postcards. Rosey's saving stamps."

"Okay. And if and when I find anything -- " Starsky wanted to say this, lay his cards on the table regarding his reason for the journey, "do you want me to let you know right away?"

Dobey looked at him the way a father would. "You let me know whatever you need to get off your chest."

Starsky was able to smile at him then, appreciating the fact that Dobey was there for him.

The call came to board the plane, and Dobey offered his hand when Starsky stood up. They shook and Starsky chuckled at his Captain's attempt at 'bon voyage' with the proper accent. Dobey stood watching as he moved toward the door through which the plane would be boarded, so Starsky gave a jaunty wave as he passed through.

At last, he was on his way. He entered the plane and found his seat. Belt tightened across his lap, he studiously read the instructions for using his seat as a flotation device should the plane crash, even though the very idea made him nervous. Then, they were speeding down the runway and lifting off.

*Here I go... taking off in a plane just the way you did, Hutch. Only I'm going of my own free will. What was it like for you, what went through your mind? You didn't know what was going to happen when you landed - - I don't either. Guess this journey's about the same for both of us...*

He tried not to worry or speculate. Yet it was difficult to keep his mind clear. All during the long flight, Starsky ran over different possible scenarios in his mind. Like his nightmares, most of them ended in horror and death. He didn't want to believe it had to be that way; tried stretching his imagination to come up with some possible explanation that would leave Hutch alive and well, yet provide a reason he hadn't been able to contact Starsky in all this time.
He might not even be in Australia anymore. They might have only stopped there for a little while. Jenkins said they were into drug smuggling; maybe they ended up someplace in the Far East. They could be forcing Hutch to work with them... maybe they got him hooked and he’s in Hong Kong stoned out of his mind and wondering who and where he is... Starsky didn't particularly like that idea, but he knew that if Hutch were capable of communicating and in his right mind, nothing would have stopped him from letting Starsky hear from him.

_Or would it?_ The thought had crossed his mind a few times before. Though Starsky did not really believe that Hutch would willingly fail to communicate with him, he wondered occasionally if that was what had happened.

_Maybe he's found a new life for himself. Maybe he couldn't really face the love we felt for each other, and when he got kidnapped, thought of it as a way to escape and start over... Why, Hutch? Is that how it went down? You made the first move, that night in my hospital bed -- did you really get scared and run away from me? I'd never have hurt you, man. Don’t you know that?_

Starsky tried to block those thoughts. He knew they were only products of desperation. _I don't want to find out he's dead -- learning he'd left me would mean at least he's alive. And I can't think of any other way he could be alive and not come home..._

He sat back in the seat, sighing heavily. The woman next to him gave him a startled look; Starsky turned to stare steadily out the window. It was going to be a long trip.

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The plane ride was very long and very dull. Once they landed, Starsky had no time for worrying or wondering about Hutch, because he was swept into the commotion of the international airport at Sydney. He was tired from the trip, but the activity revived him and he got through the procedures of Customs without any problems. During a lull, he wondered how many planes slipped past the authorities the way Jenkins had -- if it was anything like back home, probably a lot. Finally, the paperwork was completed and he free to go on. Lugging his bags, Starsky stepped out of the airport. Cool, fresh air hit him in the face and he looked up, smiling involuntarily into the sun. He was in Sydney and suddenly all the depression he had garnered during the trip fell away. Here it was bright, sunny, a crisp late-autumn morning and he felt at last that he had everything going for him.

A cab pulled up and he opened the door, climbed in. "Where to, mate?" the jaunty voice asked.

Starsky grinned at the accent, the open friendliness. "The police station -- the main precinct, or branch or whatever you call it."

He was answered by a chuckle and the cab took off. Starsky sat back to check out the view. Here he was in a foreign country -- aside from Mexico, the only one he'd ever been to. Yet he could read the signs here and the whole place seemed somehow familiar. This was a bustling city, perhaps cleaner and brighter than L.A. but every bit as cosmopolitan. _Probably has a lot lower crime rate than we do, though. Guess I'll be finding out about that pretty soon._ There were interesting buildings, attractive parks, places to shop, to dine. Starsky had caught a brief sight of the Opera House jutting out over the harbor and wondered what it would be like to attend a performance there. Still, he really didn't feel like a tourist. He was here on business and this was the first stop in a search that would possibly take him all over this land down under. Maybe on the return trip, on the way home, he'd have the time and inclination to see the sights. _Maybe Hutch and I, together..._

The cab pulled up at the Central Bureau of Police. Starsky paid his fare, collected his bags and took a deep breath. Then he went inside.
CHAPTER III

Starsky sat back in his chair and rubbed at his stinging eyes. He'd been reading at the computer terminal for hours, going through old police files. It was grisly reading. Unsolved suspicious deaths. Men who had died unnamed and unmourned. Every time Starsky determined that the body he was reading about wasn't Hutch, he gave a silent prayer of thanks. Some of these men had died horribly. It seemed urban crime wore the same face all over the globe.

There were other areas he planned to investigate, including the associates of Kurt Flavin and drug and jewel smuggling in the outback. Here in Sydney, he hadn't had much luck on those subjects, however; and he couldn't seem to help himself when it came to looking through files on dead John Does.

Starsky liked it in Australia. The friendly people didn't put on airs, try to sound like textbooks of grammar; they spoke the way they felt, using plenty of colorful slang, liberally employing cuss words and with voices that made him think of English accents with Southern twangs. Starsky seemed to fit in, to be accepted and respected. The feeling was pleasant for a man who hadn't tried to keep or make friendships. The police here had been very helpful. They had welcomed him by giving him full run of their records, and an occasional clerical worker to help him. The cops were as busy in Sydney as they were in L.A., though, and help to run down leads was not overwhelming. Every so often an officer with a little free time would discuss his findings and explain parts of the records Starsky didn't understand. The local color and customs sometimes made reading reports almost like trying to interpret Greek.

The officer he recognized as Jack Donahue ambled into the records room, smiling and nodding at Starsky. Jack had been helpful, discussing police procedure with him for several enjoyable hours and commiserating on the loss of a partner. Jack was just the sort of colorful character Starsky had heard inhabited this land. He'd introduced himself by saying he was named after "Bold Jack Donahue" himself. The American had asked who that was, and had been informed that Bold Jack was a "bushranger who used to bail up travelers on the Windsor Road," somewhere west of Sydney. After some extended conversation, Starsky finally determined that Bold Jack had been a stagecoach robber.

The policeman walked over to peer at the computer read-out. "How's it going today, mate?"

"Haven't found a damn thing, Jack." Starsky got up from his chair to stretch. "I'm beginning to think I'm looking for a needle in a haystack."

"What?" Confused, Jack looked at him sharply for a moment, then chuckled in a good-natured manner and went on. "You know, what you don't realize is that there is a lot more to this country than meets the eye, or that shows up in this bloody device. Didn't you tell me your partner was taken somewhere near Coober Pedy?" Starsky nodded. "Well, that's on the edge of the outback. Anything can happen out there. A man can die of dehydration in the dry, and drown to death in the wet. There are gold mines and opal mines and claim-jumpers and bushrangers who'll pinch a man's money and not care if he's dead when they're finished. And a lot of bodies that end up like that don't end up in computer files. You've got to get out there and talk to the people."

It made sense to Starsky, but in a country this size it sounded like an awesome task. "But this was two years ago, Jack. Who's going to remember...?"

"It'd be better than sitting around here, wouldn't it? I always find out more interviewing people than I do reading papers, and I'll wager you do, too."
"Yeah. There wasn't anybody Hutch and me couldn't find if we took to the streets long enough."

"There, see? Reading these files all day, it's a crook trip. Get out, get some air and your brain'll wake up and start working again."

"Sounds good to me, Jack. And thanks." Starsky determined that when he'd finished with the remaining files, he'd go to the American Express office and make plans to travel on from Sydney.

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Starsky learned that the best way to get to Coober Pedy would be to fly from Sydney to the city of Adelaide, which was located in the province of South Australia. From there, he would travel overland to Coober Pedy, the closest town to where the pilot had landed. He bid goodbye to Jack Donahue and the other acquaintances he'd made since arriving in Sydney, and set out, alone once again on his quest.

Jack had given him some advice about preparing for the journey. It was late May, so the wet season was nearly over. Jack had warned to expect some bad roads, full of hazards. Starsky soon realized that what the Aussies called well-paved roads did not equal his own idea of the same. He took the Princes Highway leading out of Adelaide, but that only took him 300 kilometers along his way. Hitting the Stuart Highway, the little car he'd rented took every bump and pothole with a creaking, shaking motion, jarring him at every mile. Starsky barely noticed his own physical comfort; he worried more about the car breaking down.

The towns with unfamiliar names rolled by, Snowtown, Hallet, Crystal Brook, Port Pirie, Port Augusta, which Starsky's guidebook told him was the most northerly port in South Australia. The road led him away from the seacoast and to the north. The highway cut a zigzag course through the maze of lakes and lagoons that dotted the region.

Starsky passed a tiny settlement called Pimba, noting an area called the Woomera Prohibited Area. It struck him as odd to find this was a rocket and research base. Located in country that reminded Starsky of the southwest prairie, he'd half expected to find a wagon train rather than a modern rocket facility. Nevertheless, visitors weren't allowed into the town except during the day, due to the level of secrecy of the research base. And, once inside, travelers had to keep to the road itself and not wander around.

Starsky stopped for lunch and perused his guidebook again. Apparently, Woomera was used for the tracking of satellites, but at one time, atomic testing had been conducted in the area as well, and investigations were underway to determine if radiation illnesses in some ex-servicemen had been the result. The area was restricted due to the investigations and because of its huge uranium deposits. The land there was rich in copper and gold as well, and Starsky realized that criminals could have a field day exploiting the land's natural resources, and in the more outlying areas, make drugs to sell in the cities at the same time. He supposed that was why Kurt Flavin had chosen this area for his activities.

Coober Pedy was marked as the first town beyond the northern perimeter of the restricted area. It was supposed to be the world's largest opal-producing centre. Starsky's little car was almost out of gas when he crossed into what was supposed to be the town. He slowed to a stop, looking around, wondering if he'd missed hearing that someone had dropped the bomb while he'd had his radio turned off. What he saw resembled nothing so much as a battlefield. There were no trees, nothing but mounds of upturned earth, and what looked like abandoned mine entrances. Starsky turned off his ignition and climbed out of the car, feeling the hair rise up at the back of his neck.

He wandered around a little, not seeing anyone for at least ten minutes. Finally, he heard voices, and looking around, saw several men climbing out of one of the old mines. He hurried up to them and they smiled in greeting.
"Is this Coober Pedy?" he asked, noting that the wind was picking up, carrying great gusts of dirt with it.

"That's right," one of the men said. "The town's underground. Keeps the dust out." He pulled an old hat on, tugging it low over his forehead. "You on walkabout?"

"Not exactly," Starsky began, setting out to explain what he was doing there. "Where can I find the local police?"

The men laughed outright at his question. It seemed there was no actual police station, but they suggested he ask at the hotel and bar to see if anyone knew of the people he was looking for.

Shown the proper entrance, Starsky descended to the hotel. It was much cooler underground, and he noted that beneath the surface, the building was quite modern. Unfortunately, no one there knew of a Kurt Flavin in the opal business, nor had seen anyone fitting Hutch's description during the previous two years. Starsky asked a lot of questions and showed his photographs of Hutch and the criminals, mentioning that they were probably drug dealers, but the townspeople had never heard of any activity like that going on nearby. Lots of private planes flew in, but they didn't recognize the description of Flavin's pilot or the man named Eddie Strouse, either. No one had heard of someone being kidnapped or held prisoner, or of an American detective being found. There had been no major reports of claim jumping or similar crimes. After two days, during which he interviewed nearly all the inhabitants of the town, Starsky had to admit defeat.

Starsky traveled extensively for the next two weeks, covering lots of ground, and ruining two complete sets of tires. He visited Anna Creek, Coward Springs, Oodnadatta, and went south again to check out Andamooka, Wirrainina, and Maree. Finally giving up on South Australia, he again hit the Stuart Highway and made for Alice Springs. People were friendly, suggesting touristy places he might want to visit, but he ignored the wild, natural beauty of the countryside and kept up the pace of his investigation, though growing sick and tired of driving over the rough roads.

Eventually, he came close to a spot everyone had told him he must see, Ayers Rock. It was like a mesa of the American southwest, only more slanted at the sides, curving up into a vast, nearly flat-topped hill. It was impressive, but from the way people had described it, Starsky had thought it would be more like Devil's Mountain that Richard Dreyfuss had molded out of mashed potatoes in "Close Encounters." The only thing he felt upon seeing it was a vast melancholy. He was one man alone, standing in the shadow of that great, silent rock. Perhaps his friend had sat in this very spot, looking up at the red-brown surface, wondering if Starsky would ever find him. But if Hutch had ever been there, the rock was the only one who knew, and it was keeping its secrets.

It was June, now, and Starsky was becoming tired. He didn't have any more ideas, and knew he couldn't cover every inch of outback by himself. He returned to Alice Springs and requested the help of the police there, but he found no clues to Hutch in that city's police files, either. The only thing he could think to do now was to return to Adelaide, look up the American Embassy, and demand an all-out search through the outback for the missing American citizen.

Starsky again set out on the Stuart Highway, this time heading south. Exhausted and hungry, he arrived at supper time in Coober Pedy and climbed out to find the hotel again. He wanted a hot meal and a bed for the night, deciding that only those items were likely to be the ones he'd find.

He made a meal of mutton stew, substantial and warm, and drank several mugs of Australian beer. He decided to get quietly drunk, and from the alcohol content of the local brew, realized it wouldn't take long. Before the night was out, he'd joined in the laughter of the men of the town who made the bar their hang-out, despite the fact that their accents were so strong he could barely follow the tall tales they told. He even stood at the piano and sang along on several verses of "Waltzing Matilda."
It was close to midnight and most of the men paid their tabs and headed for home. Starsky hated to see them go; with their noise and good humor, it had seemed less lonely to him. He was a stranger here, not even really a tourist. He didn't fit in. He was alone.

Yet, he hated to give up on the evening and go to bed. He ordered one last beer and sat drinking it at his table in the corner of the room. As he leaned back to drain the last of his mug he saw a new customer descending the stairs. It was a man dressed all in khaki, swiping at the dust covering his clothes as he walked. He went immediately to the bar and, removing his bush hat, ordered a beer.

"How've you been, mate?" the bartender asked him, summoning one more smile despite the lateness of the hour.

"This was a rocky one, George," the newcomer spoke up. "I almost lost the main propeller in that gust."

"Better be careful out there. If you crash, there'd be no finding you. The bush swallows men up."

The new customer nodded, leaning back to drain his beer. Ordering another, he turned to lean against the bar, and caught sight of Starsky sitting there.

"You don't look like you come from 'round here," he observed with a raised eyebrow.

"That's right." Starsky wondered if this man, obviously a pilot, might be able to give him at least a small clue about where Flavin might have set up camp. If he knew anything about Hutch, it would be a complete coincidence, his coming in here now. But I guess that's the only way I'm ever going to find anything out -- coincidence. He stood, smiling, and came over to the pilot, offering to buy him a beer. "I'm an American."

"Never been there," the pilot said amiably, as he accepted the second beer. "Traveling alone are you?"

"Yes. I'm actually a cop, a detective. I'm looking for someone."

"A walloper, eh?" The man grinned at Starsky. "The feller you're lookin' for -- does he live around here?"

Starsky shook his head. "I don't know for sure. Have you ever heard of a mine owned or worked by a guy named Kurt Flavin?"

The pilot shook his head. "No. And I know most of the places all along the way from Adelaide to Darwin. What kind of mine does he have?"

"Opal probably. But he's also into drugs -- cocaine, you know. Maybe heroin. He's from the States, and I think he moved here a couple of years ago to set up a new base of operations. I think he shipped out opals and other Australian gems and gold, and concealed his drugs in the cargo."

The pilot scratched his head. "Never heard of anything like that. But then, if a feller was doing something as illegal as that, I guess he wouldn't be telling everybody, now would he?"

Starsky managed a smile. "What's your name?"

"John Jarrett. Yours?"

The two shook hands. "Dave Starsky. Listen, I'd appreciate it if you could tell me some more places I should look. You're a pilot?"

"That's right. Bush pilot. I transport people, check on stations, things like that."
"I see." Starsky nodded to the bartender for a refill, thinking that over. "Would you be able to take me a few places? I could cover more ground from a plane than from my rental car. Besides, that old piece of tin is about shot."

John grinned knowingly. "I don't even own a car. It's useless out here. But who are you looking for so hard? This guy Flavin is a wanted man?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure what crime he's committed. And I'm actually looking for someone Flavin kidnapped."

"Who might that be?"

Starsky drew a breath. "My partner, my best friend. He was on a case, and I think Flavin brought him here."

"Recently?"

Starsky had to shake his head. Whenever he added this part of his information, usually the source dried up. "Two years ago. Almost exactly." He launched into his story about how Flavin had flown into the area near Coober Pedy with Hutch as his captive, ending with Flavin's pilot's story that they had taken Hutch off the plane. "They might have hurt him out there somewhere, left him alone in the outback or something. I don't know..." He sighed, handing some money across to the bartender. "Nice talking to you." He turned to head for his hotel room.

"Two years ago, you say?" There was an inquisitive edge to Jarrett's voice.

Starsky turned, nodding, wondering if the man were just idly curious.

"Let me understand you," Jarrett said slowly. "This larrikin, Flavin, kidnapped your partner two years ago. You think he... stranded him in the outback...?" The question was left dangling.

"Yeah. That's about it. At least, that's all I know. I've been here almost a month now, trying to find some more evidence. But there's nothing. My partner either got away or..." Looking into the astute grey eyes of this stranger, Starsky knew there was no need to voice the alternative.

John Jarrett scratched his head. "That reminds me of somethin'..." He looked thoughtful, pausing to consider carefully, counting on his fingers. "It was about this time o'year. Just finishin' the wet. And I found a man... way out in the back of beyond..."

"You found someone...?" Starsky dared not ask anything more.

"Yeah. I'd near forgot. I didn't know 'im. Nobody did. But he was hurt. So I flew him to Adelaide."

"Why to Adelaide?"

"The biggest hospital."

"I see. Tell me about him." Starsky's heart had started pounding so hard it hurt. "Wait." He pulled out his wallet and withdrew the photo of Hutch. "Is this what he looked like?"

Jarrett considered the photograph for only a few seconds, nodding. "Blond, was he? Kind of tall? Yes, that's the man."

Starsky leaned heavily on the bar; his knees wanted to give out. He shook his head, unable to believe the look of recognition on Jarrett's face. "You're... sure?"
"Yes. That's him. He was in bad shape -- unconscious, you know. And I couldn't really tell what had happened to him. I noticed him lying near some bushes as I flew over real low. I think it was his belt buckle reflecting the sunlight that caught my eye in the first place. I looked closer, realized it was somebody on the ground, and landed my plane. He needed a doctor, so I loaded him on board."

"But... he was alive? Breathing?"

"Absolutely."

Starsky didn't know what to say. He looked at Jarrett, then at the photo still clutched in his hand. Hutch's face looked back at him, eyes patient, as endearing as they always were. At last, I've found something! It was almost too much to believe. He'd stumbled across the man who had rescued Hutch. And not only had he seen him, he could state categorically that he had been alive at the time. He'd taken him to a hospital. There's still hope...! Starsky felt dizzy. Maybe it was all that beer, or maybe it wasn't.

"John," he said, grabbing the bush pilot's arm, "can you tell me where to find him?"

A shrug. "I can tell you where I took him, the name of the hospital and all that. I -- I don't know what happened to him after that."

Starsky swallowed, shutting off any further speculation. Instead, he thought of another request. "Could you... take me out to where you found him? Do you remember the place?"

"Sure. Shouldn't have changed too much. I'm my own boss, make my own schedule. Is tomorrow morning okay with you?"

Starsky nodded; he was his own boss, too. "That sounds great."

********

The next morning, Starsky met John Jarrett above ground at the hotel entrance and walked the short distance to the twin-engine plane. It didn't look much better constructed than the ancient VW Starsky had been driving around, but he climbed in anyway. The cabin was small, with seats for only four people. Starsky settled into place next to John, but craned his neck to look at the rear seats, realizing that once, two years ago, Hutch had lain back there, unconscious but still breathing, still alive. He closed his eyes as his new friend started the plane's engine, saying a little prayer that his search would end soon, that his answers would be good ones.

They didn't kill him outright. He was alive when John found him. He said he was in bad shape, but he wasn't dead. That means he could still be alive. Starsky watched out the window as the scrubby grass and bushes receded when the plane took on altitude. He hadn't allowed himself to think in such concrete terms before this. He was looking for Hutch, trying to find out what had happened to him; and he'd simply left it at that. But now, knowing that Hutch had been seen alive, he permitted himself to hope.

But that brings up all those questions Dobey and everybody else had. If Hutch is alive, why hasn't he tried to get in touch with me? There could be any number of reasons, Starsky tried to convince himself. He could have been hurt real badly and unable to tell anyone who he was and who to get in touch with... but when he was feeling better why didn't he...? Maybe he got hit on the head and it caused amnesia... He shuddered. No, amnesia was only for late night TV tearjerkers and practical jokes. Even if you were faking, I'd take you anyway, Hutch. He couldn't come up with any other answers. The strain of forcibly keeping thoughts of Hutch going quietly from unconsciousness to death made his temples throb. Where are you, Hutch? Damn it, man, when I get hold of you, there better be a damn good explanation why I haven't heard from you...
John's voice broke through the engine noise and Starsky looked sharply at the pilot, trying to understand what he'd been saying. He rubbed at his temple, wishing the headache would subside enough so he could concentrate.

"What'd you say, John?"

"I said, it's only about twenty kilometers from here that I saw him, mate." Jarrett pointed toward the east. "See that range of bushes over there, and the scrub beyond? We'll be over it in a few minutes."

Immediately, Starsky concentrated on the things he could see and hear. He followed the path of the plane, keeping his thoughts firmly in the present.

Finally, John seemed satisfied with their location, and he set the plane down. It bumped to a landing over the rocky, sand-strewn land, and Starsky had to fight his stomach's tendency to react to the motion. He was glad when Jarrett suggested they explore the area on foot.

Both men climbed out of the plane and stood peering around for a few minutes. Starsky stayed quiet, allowing the pilot to search his memory. After a short period, Jarrett nodded, then set off. Starsky followed him.

The land here was like a desert, though he'd been told in the wet season it was almost continually flooded. It was hard to imagine that now, seeing how dry it was, how the scrubby plants could barely hold on. It was rocky, sand-covered, but Starsky supposed that under the surface there were all kinds of riches; gold, uranium, opals...

*And just one clue... please, to help me find him.*

"There," Jarrett finally pointed, hurrying forward. "Right by that rock."

Starsky moved after him, eyes scanning the soil for any signs of the others who had been with Hutch here, despite his knowledge that after so long, no evidence of who they'd been or what they'd done would remain. He was a detective, however, and he possessed a limitless supply of hope.

Jarrett was standing in the shade of the large outcropping of rock, pointing. "He was laying here, mate, on his back. Remember I told you I caught sight of his belt buckle? It was a big one, with a palm tree on it or something. Does that sound familiar?"

"Sure does." It was a little difficult speaking past the lump in his throat, but Starsky managed. He came close to where the pilot was standing, looking down at the ground as though he expected the imprint of Hutch's body to still be there.

As if realizing what Starsky must be feeling, Jarrett lowered his voice. "He looked pretty daggy -- pretty bad, I mean. I think he'd been there overnight. It was early on in the day when I flew over. He was white as a snowcap -- I thought he was..." He didn't finish the sentence; just glanced at Starsky and then away. "There was some blood on his temple, and down over his shirt. The sleeve was torn." He closed his eyes, searching his memory.

"Was there any sign of anyone else having been here?" Starsky asked.

The pilot shook his head. "That was what was so odd about it. I couldn't figure out how he got here. There was no camp, no supplies. Not even the tracks of a horse or a car. They must've covered them over, I guess."
"Looks that way," Starsky nodded.

Jarrett concurred. "They sure didn't think anybody'd be finding him way out here. You think they dropped him from somewhere else?"

"Yeah. They drove him out here and left him, thinking no one would ever find a thing." His voice flat, unemotional, Starsky tried to believe they were speaking of someone he didn't really know. If I let myself imagine him out here, miles from nowhere, hurt like that, I'll go nuts.

Jarrett seemed to understand. He strolled a short distance away, allowing Starsky time to stand and ponder, to walk around the area and scan for non-existent clues. At length, Starsky wandered back to the place that John had pointed out as being exactly where Hutch's unconscious body had lain.

It was nearly noon. The shadow of the rock had receded and the spot was under the full glare of the sun. Starsky checked his watch and the date leaped out at him. It was the anniversary of Hutch's disappearance. Two years ago today, exactly. Maybe that's gonna be prophetic. Starsky sank down to his haunches, then to his knees on the rough ground. He reached out, laying his hand on the surface, combing through the dirt and sand, sifting and weighing it with his fingers.

You were here. Right on this very spot. They hurt you, and brought you out here where they thought no one would ever lay eyes on you again. They left you for dead. But you were always a lot tougher than you looked, weren't you? You were still alive. And someone did find you, and took you to a hospital. Oh, God... can it possibly mean you survived? I'll do anything... pay any amount of money, go anywhere... just let me know you made it. We were gonna be together, Hutch. You had so much to live for. Let me know you believed that as much as I do, babe... You have to be alive. Or I have to find out... how you ended up. I can't stand living in this limbo anymore.

He dropped the handful of gravel he'd been holding, returning it to that lonely ground where Hutch had lain. He didn't like to think about Hutch in pain, afraid for his life, worried about what Starsky was going through back home without him... "Shit." He stood, brusquely rubbing the dirt from his hands. Jarrett noticed his tone of disgust and came over to him.

"Pretty rough, mate?"

"I've come a long way, but at least I've learned something about what happened to him."

The pilot nodded sagely. "Two years is a long time."

"Really." There didn't seem to be much else to say.

Jarrett met his gaze. "I swear, mate, he was alive when I last saw him."

"Thanks, John. You can't know how much I appreciate all you've done. Besides paying you for bringing me out here, can I give you some money for taking him to the hospital in Adelaide?" The pilot shook his head, a crooked smile on his face. "But that's a pretty long trip..."

"I've had my payment. And you put the gas in the plane this morning. Anyway, I always wondered who he was, what he was doin' out here. Now I know."

Starsky noticed that Jarrett didn't ask him to get in touch when he went to the hospital where Hutch had been taken, but he didn't mention the oversight. John obviously believed he knew the answer the American would find.
"Okay." Starsky glanced back at the place on the ground where his partner had been found. "I guess I'm ready to leave. You can tell me just one more thing -- what hospital in Adelaide?"

John Jarrett smiled, settling the bush hat more securely on his head. "It's the Pulteney Hospital, right on Pulteney Street. Not hard to find at all."

The two men turned to head back to the twin-engine plane. They climbed inside and John started the motor. As he swung his Cessna into the air, his passenger didn't look back.

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CHAPTER IV

The guidebook had called Adelaide the "festival city," Starsky remembered as he arrived once again in the place from which he'd set off on his trip to Coober Pedy. Over breakfast at the airport, while waiting for his VW rental to be completed, he'd passed the time in reading about the city's tourist attractions. Now, driving through the central business district on King William Street -- what was purported to be the widest street in any city in Australia -- Starsky found himself overcome with the urge to see some of the sights. He didn't question his sudden desire, but knowing where it came from didn't make it any easier to ignore. He was putting off the inevitable. By going directly to the hospital, his long wait would be over that much sooner. But as he drove through Adelaide, seeing how the city teemed with life and brightness, Starsky just couldn't bring himself to have someone tell him that the man John Jarrett had brought in from the bush...

He cut off the thought. I'll just spend a couple of hours lookin' around, getting the feel of the place. And getting up my nerve...

It wasn't the houses of Parliament that Starsky felt like visiting, though. Instead, he took one of the dozens of roads leading up to the Adelaide Hills, finding himself reminded of the canyon roads of Los Angeles. He climbed to the heights of the city, noting how beautiful the place was. He found a nice restaurant, named Windy Point, where he had some lunch that came with a view of the entire city. His waiter told him that the hills, which were burned dry and brown in summer, became lush and green in the winter. Now they showed only traces of greenery. Still, it was a nice place. If Hutch were here, he'd enjoy it.

After lunch, Starsky took the Glenelg tram to the city beach. The ride on the tram took twenty minutes. Glenelg beach reminded him immediately of Venice -- like its American counterpart, this beach was a place that had once seen better times, but had now grown a little seedy. Hutch would like it here, too. Starsky stayed for an hour, then reboarded the tram, sampled the fish and chips you could buy on it, and washed them down with locally made champagne. He couldn't help imagining the smile Hutch would be wearing if he were along for the ride.

Finally, he couldn't put it off any longer. He asked a constable directions to Pulteney Street. I'm on my way, partner. Last leg of the journey. Or at least, the last clue I've got to follow. Will this be the end of the trail? Or will someone tell me to look in another place for you?

*******

Starsky stood staring up at the imposing hospital facade, his heart in his throat. He refused to speculate on what he would learn inside. The clues had led him here, and he knew this was probably where Hutch's trail
would end. The bush pilot had found an unconscious man, but Starsky didn't see any alternative outcome other than the most pessimistic scenario. The rigors of the trip had not only given him time to reason and rationalize, they had given him courage. Feeling as if he were playing out the final scene in a long tragic play, he resolved to accept whatever the facts turned out to be.

He shivered in the wind gusting across the hospital steps. For so long, he had refused himself permission to think of Hutch being dead. At least now, finally, I'll know. Resolutely, Starsky entered the building.

A young woman looked up at him from behind the information desk. Starsky came right to the point, bringing out his badge.

"My name is Lieutenant Starsky, Los Angeles Police. I'm looking for a missing person, an American. A bush pilot told me he found a man unconscious in the outback and that he brought him here."

"Oh." The young woman looked uncertain. She reached for a revolving patient roster. "What's the name?"

Starsky swallowed hard. "Hutchinson. But this was a long time ago. June of 1979."

"I see." The receptionist chewed at her bottom lip. "I just started working here. Perhaps Miss Waring can be of help."

"Okay." Starsky was getting used to waiting.

Miss Waring proved to be a woman in her fifties. She peered at Starsky without much interest. "May I help you?"

"I hope so, ma'am. I'm looking for a friend, my partner, who's been missing for a long time. I traced him to Australia and spoke with a bush pilot who told me he found an unconscious man that he brought here, to your hospital, back in '79. I... I just want to find out what... what happened next to my friend."

Miss Waring's lined face did not change expression and Starsky swallowed his emotions. His tension was building, anxiety shortening his patience. He just wanted an answer, an end to it all. He waited while the dour Miss Waring spoke into an intercom, paging a Doctor Samuels.

It did not take long for a response to the page. After a whispered conversation with Waring, a petite, dark-haired woman was introduced to Starsky as Dr. Melissa Samuels.

"Lieutenant... Starsky?" she inspected the name on the badge. "How may I help you?"

If I have to hear that question one more time... Starsky found his reserve of patience and good manners exhausted. "Lookit. How many times do I have to repeat myself here? Either you people can give me some information or you can't."

The doctor exchanged a look with Miss Waring; Starsky was at a loss to comprehend the meaning that passed between the two women, but it made him distinctly uncomfortable.

Dr. Samuels returned her attention to him, all business now. "You say this friend of yours has been missing two years?"

"That's right. Were you working here back then?"

"Yes, indeed, Lieutenant. I wonder -- would you have photograph of the gentleman?"
Starsky nodded and produced the worn snapshot he carried in his wallet. "That's him. It was taken maybe six months before we lost him."

It seemed to Starsky as if she stared at the photograph for an unusually long time. Waring peered over her shoulder at it, then the women's eyes met again.

_Do they recognize him? Oh, God..._ Starsky cleared his throat. He hurt inside, in his head, his heart, all over.

"Have you ever... seen the man before?"

"He's a very close friend?" Samuels was having trouble speaking, too. _Or is it my imagination?_

"My best friend." With difficulty, he met her patient brown eyes.

"Yes. This _is_ the man."

Starsky gulped, knowing there was more, afraid to ask the question that would bring the answer. "Well?_ Doctors never say the person died, they make you guess, blurt it out yourself so you'll believe it. No... please, no..."

"This man was brought in here, two years ago. Just as you said, a pilot found him -- unconscious, carrying no identification. We published his photograph, got in touch with the police. It never occurred to us he wasn't an Aussie." Samuels put a hand on Starsky's arm. "Perhaps you'd like to come to my office, Lt. Starsky? Sit down?"

"He's dead." He said the words himself; finally. Then his mind dropped into low gear, closing down. He suddenly didn't want to hear any more details. "No. I don't wanta sit down." He turned away, numb to everything save grief. "Goin' home..."

"Wait!" Urgently, her hand caught at him again and Samuels rounded the desk to halt his departure. "He's... he's not dead. He's here."

Starsky stared down at her uncomprehendingly.

"He's here." The words were soft, their sound comforting, but confusing. "Please. Come to my office and I'll explain."

*********

He let her fix him a cup of tea and took the chair she offered before he could trust his voice again. Finally, he swallowed the lump in his throat and asked his question. "You're sayin' Hutch is here? I don't understand. What...?"

"We believe he'd been drugged. He suffered an overdose of barbiturates. By the time he was brought here, he'd slipped into a deep coma, Lieutenant." Her eyes dropped under the intensity of his gaze. "He... has never regained consciousness."

Hot tea splashed over Starsky's hand and dripped onto his pants leg. He looked down, noting peripherally how badly his hands were shaking. Dr. Samuels rose from the seat behind her desk to take the cup from him, wordlessly using a tissue to blot the hot liquid that had spilled.

"His condition is stable. It hasn't changed much in all this time. Your friend has been well cared for."
He looked up into her sympathetic eyes, his vision blurring, his brain still in neutral. "Hutch is alive...?"

"He's in a coma." The words were gentle, damning. "Somewhere far away where no one can reach him."

He blinked, knew tears escaped, didn't care. Of all the possible answers, this one had never occurred to him. Hutch not dead -- but not alive either. Oh, God, still in limbo...

"How? I don't... he can't wake up? Is that it? Why can't you...?" He didn't even know what questions to ask.

Samuels leaned forward, her quiet voice speaking horrors. "We've done all we can. He had been beaten, rather severely, but the neurological studies showed no brain damage from that. A CAT scan revealed some slight scarring of brain tissue, indicating the possibility of a minor stroke. Then we found two puncture marks on his arm. Even with blood serum tests, it was impossible to tell for certain exactly what or how much he'd been given. We tried every known remedy of detoxification, even dialysis. The chemicals are out of his system... but he has not responded. When he was fully stable, he was transferred to the nursing home complex. It's just next door. Whoever hurt him must have been trying to kill him with the overdose. They left him for dead..."

Starsky closed his eyes, reliving the memory of seeing needle tracks on Hutch's skin. Not that... He must have been so scared...

"You don't know what they shot him up with?"

"Apparently some mixture of morphine and barbiturates. I've never seen anything quite like this. But there are all kinds of people using the outback as their private laboratory. It could be somebody was trying out a new combination before pushing it on the streets." She sighed. "At any rate, he's still the way he was when he was brought here. And I'm afraid I must tell you that the longer a person remains comatose, the less likely he will wake up and function."

"But he is alive." Alive... that meant there was hope.

"I've been on the case since the day he was brought in. He's alive. I... wouldn't let him go."

Her words conjured an unsettling vision for Starsky. "You mean he's hooked up to all kindsa stuff?"

"A few things. But it's not so bad. His condition is stable. We've taken good care of him. I knew... there must be someone, somewhere... even if they never found him..." She paused, looking deep into his eyes as if gauging his steadiness. "Do you think you could handle seeing him now?"

********

Starsky followed Dr. Samuels to the nursing home, which was housed in a building on the same property as the main hospital. Finally, they came to a closed door at the end of a long corridor. He was scared, couldn't imagine how it would be, how his partner would look. Starsky willed himself to face whatever he would find inside. It's Hutch. Just Hutch... No matter what, it's still Hutch...

The room was dim, shades pulled, one small light fixture casting strange shadows. Samuels went directly to the bed, pausing to turn up the light a bit. Starsky followed, his gaze still on the doctor, not looking past her to the occupant of the bed. Finally, close enough that he could not avoid it anymore, he closed his eyes a moment, then he looked down.
His eyes traveled over the figure, moving quickly, afraid to rest on any one area too long. *Long legs, narrow waist, strong shoulders.* "Hutch?" Starsky's voice was a whisper, a plea. *So still, so peaceful.* The covers draped over the body were sculpted to its contours, outlining. He shivered; the folds of cloth looked too much like a shroud. His eyes fastened on the chest, the motion of breathing giving reassurance to his dazed comprehension. His gaze darted over the body skittishly. *Thin, like he used to be, years ago...* Beneath short sleeves, bare arms were out from under the sheet. *Fair skin, gone so pale...*

Starsky wanted to reach out, but his hands were trembling too much. "Hutch..." He breathed the name again, willing his nerves to steady. His fingertips barely contacted the flesh, sliding down the bare forearm. It wasn't very warm, but wasn't as cold as he had feared. *Not cold with death, he's warm with life!* His fingers reached the hand, curling around it. There was no response to his questing touch.

His gaze moved up finally to rest on the face. The jolt of recognition was physically painful. *Patrician features, immaculate profile, perfect lips... Hutch's face.* Starsky clung to the quiescent hand as his eyes drank in the sight. It was hard to see; his vision wouldn't focus. The face looked like it had in his dreams, insubstantial, existing in a world where Starsky couldn't make contact with it. And the tubing taped at the nose seemed like a foreign intrusion.

Apparently sensing the direction of his look, Samuels spoke. "He's capable of breathing on his own. That's a feeding tube."

Starsky nodded wordlessly, still looking, his sight coming into sharp relief. The small amount of light in the room seemed to be shining most brightly here, reflected off the pale gold hair, haloing the beautiful head. The features were somewhat slack, the cheeks a bit gaunt. Hutch's face was expressionless, but peaceful. Starsky reached out with his free hand, and Hutch remained; he wasn't a vision or a dream after all. Caressing now, his trembling touch slide over the chin, the smooth cheek, and into the softness of the hair.

"Ah, Hutch..." He realized his voice was broken with anguish, strained with love. It was too much to take in, too hard to believe. There weren't even any bruises or cuts; they'd all healed over time. *How could anyone look that perfect and not wake up? So beautiful... living paradox... sleeping... waiting...*

Dr. Samuels' voice broke the spell. She sounded wistful, dreamy. "I've tried everything I know. If I thought a kiss would work..."

He nodded. "Sleeping beauty..." The words slipped out, more like an involuntary sob, and Starsky didn't feel embarrassed to have uttered them. His fingers outlined the soft lips. He ached, seeing all of his nightmares come true. Hutch was hurt, Hutch was in need... and he was powerless to help.

The face he stared at wavered under his gaze. The room seemed suddenly overwhelmingly warm.

"Lieutenant?" Samuels had come around to his side of the bed, taking hold of his quivering arm. "Come now. Sit down." She slid a chair forward and pushed his unresisting form into it. Her hand on the back of his neck bent his head down. "Breathe deeply."

"M'okay." Starsky tried to escape the solicitude.

"You're white as a ghost." A doctor's contradiction of his protest, tempered with understanding. "It's a shock, I know."

Still looking downward, Starsky's eyes caught sight of a length of clear tubing that ran from somewhere under the covers down to a bag hanging beneath the bed. After a second, its significance sank in for him. He
closed his eyes tight, not wanting to see anymore, feeling as if he were invading Hutch's privacy. *Too real, too graphic, too undeniable...*

A cup of water was pressed into his hand. He sipped it automatically, looking up at the doctor.

"Better?" Her tone was professional.

He drew a deep breath, shrugged. "I guess." Questions were beginning to surface. "What did you say about a stroke? That means brain damage, doesn't it?"

"From what we can tell from the CAT scan and other neurological tests, there is a tiny amount of scarring in the right brain. That looks to be the result of a slight stroke, which may have been caused by the drug he was given." She smoothed the covers across his chest, the small gesture giving Starsky some comfort. "We can't tell the significance of the scarring without him being conscious. It could result in some motor impairment, or other dysfunction -- we just don't know. His respirations were depressed, but apparently they didn't stop entirely."

Starsky jumped on that statement. "That wouldn't be a good sign, would it?"

The doctor shook her head. "No. If he'd gone without oxygen for very long, certainly there would be massive brain damage. But that's not the case." She met Starsky's eyes and gave him a smile. "The effects of the drug may just eventually... wear off. That's what I've continued to hope for. If he does regain consciousness, and has proper therapy, it might be possible for some recovery."

Starsky tried to focus on the positive. "You think so?" He did not want too much explanation of what she meant by 'some' recovery, though.

Her eyes went to the sleeping form. "People have been known to come out of long comas. We know he's alive in there. Look." She uncovered one leg, reaching in her pocket for a slim instrument and ran it along the sole of the foot. Starsky saw the reflex, the foot curling at the touch. "That's the proper reflex. It shows his brain is functional. Watch his eyes," the doctor directed next. Moving to the side of the bed, Samuels pressed her fist against Hutch's sternum. The eyes crinkled, twinging at the pain. There was even a small groan of reaction.

"He felt that!" His heart leaping, Starsky thought Hutch might be coaxed awake with enough stimulation.

"Yes. There's something in there. The body senses pain."

Something in her tone slowed Starsky's soaring spirits. "But there's never been any indication he's getting any closer to the surface?"

"No. It looks like it should be so simple, doesn't it? Speak loudly, shake him... and he ought to wake up. Of course, doing those things can't hurt. They've all been tried. Our staff is quite up to date on all the latest studies. But there's still so much we don't know about the brain. What keeps someone in a coma when the rest of their injuries have healed? We don't know how much of the world he's aware of. It could be he hears us, but simply can't react." She rested her hand against the side of Hutch's face, stroking his temple. "He may have gone into a type of psychological withdrawal -- as if his mind is telling him it isn't yet time to wake up, or that he's frightened of the world waiting for him. That's, in fact, my own pet theory." She sighed. "He could stay just this way, as he already has for so long, and never progress. If only we had been able to determine exactly what drug he was given..."
Starsky shuddered, remembering what had been done to Cindy, Helen's roommate. "Some kind of narcohallucinogenic highball," the doctor had called it. Medical science hadn't been able to figure out what would become of Cindy, either. So far as Starsky knew, the girl had never recovered, she was still institutionalized.

And all this time, Hutch had been here alone. The professionals who cared for him had done all they could, but they didn't know him. They didn't even know his name, much less what it took to make him listen, to get through that thick, stubborn skull of his. If Hutch were even minimally aware of voices, he might hear Starsky's... Having something to respond to at last... he might wake up. He could... "Do you think he can hear me? Know I'm here now, I mean?"

"It's possible. But he still may not be able to respond, if that's what you're thinking."

"Hutch." He reached to clasp the limp fingers once more. "What... what if he does wake up though?"

"It's hard to say how much recovery is possible in these cases. I hate to even speculate." She seemed about to stop there, but seeing Starsky's needful look, she relented, eyes returning to her silent patient in the bed. "He receives all the important nutrients through the feeding tube. Do you know approximately what he weighed?"

"Maybe... a hundred eighty pounds." Starsky could see Hutch was now much thinner than that.

Melissa seemed not to think this a problem. "I'd say he hasn't lost more than forty to fifty pounds of his normal body weight," she explained. "There's some muscle tone. He's massaged and exercised regularly, turned every two hours to avoid bed sores, lung congestion. We have an excellent staff and they're very conscientious, particularly with him. He's been here so long, with only us to depend on... the nurses have all sort of adopted him." She broke off, then began again, her voice steadying. "We all want to make sure he's not slighted in any way, so that if he does regain consciousness, he'll have the best chance of recovery."

Starsky latched onto the positive aspects of her dissertation. "Yeah. I thought he'd be... all twisted or something."

"No. That only happens when the brain is technically dead, when the patient is in what we call a persistent vegetative state. Your friend isn't down that far, you can be sure of that." She smiled reassuringly.

"Oh." Starsky had run out of questions for the moment. His eyes stayed on the sleeping features of his best, beloved friend. He didn't want to talk anymore. He just wanted to be here with Hutch and take it all in. And figure out what he should do next.

Samuels seemed to understand. "I'll leave you alone with him for a while. Later, we'll talk about arrangements and any other questions you have." She pressed his shoulder in light, professional comfort, then was gone.

Starsky didn't watch her leave; his eyes were still on the lax fingers he was holding. A deep calm was descending over him, as if, despite the situation, he was finally at peace, knowing Hutch was found. He leaned close, resting his elbows on the bed, bringing Hutch's hand up to his lips, his fingers stroking down the long forearm. He rested his cheek in the large palm held close against his face.

It was going to be all right. He would make it right.

"Hutch. Hutch, I'm here now. I found you, it's okay. You're gonna make it, buddy. Listen to me, to Starsky. You're gonna make it fine."
Murmuring soft words of encouragement, voice shaking with wonder and rekindled hope, Starsky sat beside the sleeping man for a very long time.

*******
BOOK TWO

VIGIL
June, 1981

As Starsky stepped into the hall outside Hutch's room, he realized it was late. A look at his watch told him he'd been sitting with his partner now for over three hours. He pushed the door open, stealing one more glance at the figure in the bed, then headed down the hall.

Even though it was nearly evening, he hoped Dr. Samuels was still in her office. She was. When he peeked around the half-open door, she smiled and motioned him into a chair.

"You look much better. Did you have a good visit? I told the nurses on duty to hold off coming in the room to turn him so that you wouldn't be disturbed."

"Yeah. It was a good visit." He couldn't hide his grin. "It's so great to see him after all this time, to know he's alive. And he looks so good... Doctor, I want to thank you." He turned serious eyes on the woman. "Guess Hutch has racked up quite a bill here by now."

"We can worry about that later."

Starsky nodded, bringing up the question he really wanted to ask. "I... I'd like to take him home. To the States, I mean."

Soft brown eyes widened a little. Starsky shifted uncomfortably under their look of pity. "I was afraid you might ask about that."

"Why? What would be the problem? You said he was stable..."

"Yes. He is stable. But would you risk that stability by trying to transport him so great a distance? There would be at least three plane changes in a trip from Adelaide to Los Angeles. I can't recommend it."

Starsky's heart rate stepped up. "No. It has to be possible. His home is in Los Angeles. I want to take care of him and I can't do that with him in Australia."

"Lt. Starsky, believe me, I understand how you must feel, but taking your friend back home with you is just not practical. If there were some way to obtain transportation on a private jet, with medical personnel aboard, it would be somewhat less dangerous, though I still wouldn't recommend it. And the cost of doing it that way..." She tapped her pencil against a kangaroo paperweight on the desk. "Does he have family? Would they take the responsibility?"

Starsky looked down at his clenched hands. "No. His parents died last year. They were in a car accident." He sighed. "The family did have money... and there's an account in his name that I've taken care of, but..." Floudering, he looked back up at the doctor. There was an expression of sympathy in her eyes that was a bit disconcerting. Starsky met her look steadily. "I'm Hutch's family now. I've taken the responsibility for caring for his home and his assets since he disappeared and I'm the one who'll take care of him now. We were partners for a long time. I even have his power of attorney."
Dr. Samuels leaned forward, her earnest gaze still on Starsky. "Okay. Believe me, I do see how important he is to you. And I understand why you'd like to take him home. But if it's Hutch's best interest you have at heart, I think you'll agree that the only way to handle this is to allow him to remain here. Can you arrange to stay in Adelaide for awhile?"

Starsky hadn't actually thought beyond finding out what had happened to Hutch. For the last two weeks, he'd been living like a vagabond, following clues, not thinking beyond the present moment. Now the logical next step did seem to be his arranging to stay. This had been the longest time he'd spent away from work since getting out of the hospital, but Dobey had told him to take as long as he needed. He nodded, feeling good about the decision. "Of course, I couldn't leave, not when I've just found him. You do think it will do Hutch good to have me here, don't you?"

"Not only Hutch, but you, too." Dr. Samuels sat forward, resting her elbows on the desk as she spoke earnestly. "You can see him every day, even help with some of the things the nurses do to take care of him. Since you won't be working as you would back in Los Angeles, you'll be able to concentrate on him."

"Yeah." Starsky rubbed a hand through his hair. "Back home, I am pretty busy with work most of the time. I'll get a room in town and call my Captain." His irrepressible smile broke out again. "I've been wantin' to let him know the good news all day, anyway. I'll stay as long as I have to. I'd like to help take care of Hutch. Maybe... maybe you have some books I can read or something. If there's anything, anything at all I can do, I'm willing." He grinned at Dr. Samuels again.

Her eyes were full of comprehension. "It must have been hard, not knowing what had happened to your friend."

"It was..." The twinge of pain left as soon as it had come. That's all over now. Starsky refused to dwell on the bleak past. Everything was going to be uphill from now on. "You just wait. Hutch is a fighter. I'll let him know I'm here and get his mind goin' again. You'll see, Doc. He's not gonna be out of it very much longer."

******

Heads turned at the nurses' station as denim-covered legs and a body obscured by an encumbering armload of goods emerged from the lift. Just the top fringe of dark curly hair was visible behind a large, potted fern. Starsky staggered past, aware of the stir he was causing on the way to Hutch's room.

It was difficult to push open the door without dropping any of his parcels. Once inside, he piled the whole conglomeration on the large bedside chair and moved to open the window shades.

Despite the cold outside, it was a sunny day. Starsky wanted to let the sunshine in. Hutch had always enjoyed the outdoors, the sun, the sand, the wind. The wintry light fell across his pale face now, exposing the shadows over the closed eyelids, the perfection of the profile, glaring off the narrow metal band on the tubing that was taped at his nose. Starsky sighed, undaunted by the picture. He crossed to stand next to the bed, his fingers reaching to pat Hutch's hair into a semblance of his usual style. It should be a little off the forehead, combed back on the sides, curling into a gentle wave in front. The blond hair gleamed in the morning light, feeling soft to Starsky's touch. It smelled fresh and clean. The nurses had been in early it seemed, to bathe their patient.

Starsky got busy then, lifting the heavy fern to the chest of drawers next to the bed. He had a basket with other, smaller plants, too; the spider plants that Hutch had always loved and a couple of flowering varieties more familiar to Australians than to Starsky's American-bred eyes. They were colorful, though, and already the hospital room looked more cheery.
From one of the bags he had carried in, Starsky extracted a bright mobile. Made of colored translucent plastic shapes depicting musical instruments, it caught and reflected the light, sending moving rainbows all over the dull green walls of the room. Starsky climbed up on a straight-back chair with hammer and nail, thinking back to Huggy hanging a kerosene lantern from the automatic sprinkler of his hospital room so long ago. He hadn't bothered to get permission to put a nail in the ceiling of Hutch's room, but Starsky didn't worry about that. Brightening Hutch's environment was more important than anything else. When Hutch woke up, Starsky wanted him to find himself in a pleasant place, not some sterile, empty cell.

Then came the best thing of all those Starsky had brought. He smiled, bringing out a brand new combination radio and cassette tape player. He opened a fresh package of batteries, and when they were inserted, he dialed a station on the radio. It worked great -- the reception was excellent. Starsky put a stack of tapes next to the radio. He had searched a record store for music familiar to Hutch, had found some Simon and Garfunkle, John Denver, and Beatles. The music would play continuously, keeping Hutch company, Starsky had decided. He adjusted the radio's volume, then pulled out a plastic watering can and gave all the plants a drink. He folded the paper bags and tucked them neatly away in the plant basket. Satisfied with his handiwork, Starsky sat back in the armchair he had pulled a bit closer to Hutch's bed.

The door to the room sighed on its hinges as it opened. Startled, Starsky turned, expecting to see Dr. Samuels. Instead, the newcomer was a blonde nurse.

She looked as surprised to see Starsky as he was. Her eyes traveled from the strange visitor to the greenery, to the gracefully swaying mobile, to the radio. Clearing her throat, she appeared to recover her composure and walked on in.

"Hi." Starsky knew he sounded a bit uncertain. "I'm... his friend. Dave Starsky." He extended a hand.

The nurse smiled. "I'm Mary Brownwell. I'm so glad Joey has a visitor."

"Joey?"

"Our nickname for him."

"I see." Starsky grinned, pleased that the staff had a pet name for their patient. The nurse hadn't said anything about the many changes he had so suddenly wrought on the room; maybe it was all right. "His name is Hutch. Kenneth Hutchinson."

Mary Brownwell nodded, looking down at the comatose man for a moment as if digesting the information. "That's nice. It suits him." Then she was all business again. "Come on, dear," she spoke up, addressing Hutch, "time to turn over a bit."

"You're going to turn him over?" Starsky looked at the large man, then at the small nurse.

"Every two hours." She seemed not to notice his doubts, proceeding to adjust the flow from the nutrient bag and making sure the tubing was not in the way. She pulled the covers down to Hutch's waist in order to keep them from tangling under him as he was moved. Then, standing on the opposite side of the bed, she slid both arms under his back, rolling him onto his right side. Extra pillows tucked behind his back and legs served to keep Hutch from rolling back to his original position. Another pillow was placed between his legs.

Starsky watched, his throat tight. Hutch remained oblivious during the procedure, his expression still closed, nonreactive. His arms shifted without resistance, one hand lying palm up on the covers, the other draped awkwardly across his chest. The sheet slipped down a little while the nurse was turning him, exposing a
bare hip. Starsky glanced away, inexplicably embarrassed for his friend. Hutch looked so vulnerable, so helpless.

Starsky kept his eyes on the still face as the nurse finished smoothing the covers, adjusting his arms into an apparently more comfortable pose, resuming the flow of nutrient. Before she left, she knelt to empty the bag attached to the catheter. Starsky swallowed hard. It all seemed so impersonal. But the nurse patted Hutch's shoulder before she turned to go, speaking softly again, real affection in her voice.

"There now, Joey love, you rest there for a while. Oh, I mean, Hutch." With a nod in Starsky's direction, she turned and was gone.

Starsky sat still for a minute, then with new resolve, slid his chair up closer to the bed. Hutch's hair looked mussed again. He smoothed it back. He spoke, his voice a tender whisper.

"Ah, babe. What happened out there? Why'd they hurt you like this?" It was painful to look at the sleeper lying there, remembering the powerful strength that had once flowed through the long body. Starsky tried to visualize Hutch's eyes opening, a smile brightening his handsome features as he threw back the covers and climbed out of bed, ready to start a new day, dignity and intelligence intact, no traces of debilitating illness remaining.

No. Even if he would somehow magically wake up at this very moment, Starsky knew Hutch would not be in any shape to leap right out of that bed, not for a very long time.

Wake up anyway, Hutch. I miss your eyes, your smile.

"Hutch? Come on buddy. Can't you hear me? Don'tcha wanna wake up yet?"

Please, Hutch, wake up soon. I'm so lonely without you.

Starsky forced the depressing thoughts and wishes aside, reaching to stroke Hutch's bare arm. He determined to be patient. He had found Hutch. He was alive, well cared for. It would be all right. It had to be.

"I'm here now, babe. I'm gonna stay 'til you're ready to come back to me."

**********

Starsky slipped another tape in the recorder and pressed the play button. John Denver's high tenor filled the room, begging to be taken home by country roads. Starsky remembered how Hutch used to sing along with Denver on the radio, substituting Minnesota for West Virginia. He did it when he felt particularly fed up with the dirty city, and because he knew it drove Starsky, who preferred rock to the simple folk style of Denver, crazy. Starsky used to complain loudly about Hutch's singing, but his voice had always sounded better to him than John Denver's had.

He sat down again, his gaze fixed on Hutch's face, watching closely for any sign that the comatose man was aware of the music. Behind him, the door to the room opened and closed, but he didn't look up.

"How are you doing?" Melissa Samuels' soft voice, accompanied by her hand on his shoulder, broke into his concentration.

"Oh." Starsky turned to look up at her, smiling. "Okay, I guess."

Her eyes moved to the things he had brought to decorate the room. "You've been busy."
"Yeah. Hutch likes plants -- used to have 'em all over his apartment."

"This is pretty." She lifted a hand to touch the mobile and the colorful instruments began to sway.

"He was always into music. Plays guitar and piano." Starsky's eyes went back to study Hutch's face. The sunlight caught in the translucent shapes of the mobile and reflected in a dance of shadows over his features. "I just thought I should brighten the place up for him."

"It's a good idea, especially the tape recorder," the doctor observed. "Would you like to do some other things for him?"

"What can I do?" Starsky was willing to try anything.

"Range of motion exercises. All of his joints should be put through their complete range of movements each day. How are you at massage?"

Starsky lifted a shoulder. "Pretty good." He remembered being complimented on his massage technique -- by Hutch.

"That would help, too. He can't exercise his muscles himself, we have to do it for him. Deep massage keeps the muscles toned."

Starsky eyed the quiescent figure in the bed. "It won't hurt him to move him around so much, to really use my strength massaging him?"

"No. It's good for him. We raise the head of his bed from time to time -- and he's been put in that chair, sitting up, while the bed is being changed. Be a little careful, of course. We can disconnect the feeding tube. You have to watch out for the catheter."

Starsky's gaze darted over the still form, again feeling a sense of embarrassment. It was still difficult for him to think about the necessity for those devices. Dr. Samuels' voice was full of patience.

"You don't have to do any more than you feel comfortable with." She efficiently unhooked the tube that had been providing Hutch's nourishment.

Starsky turned to her, needing to explain. "It's not that I mind touching him -- I want to do for Hutch. It's just rough seeing him like this. You know, helpless."

"I know. But look at it this way. If he'd awaken, he'd have even more difficulty regaining his physical mobility if we didn't help him now. And not only that, the movement and massage is good tactile stimulation, the way the music provides aural stimulation."

"It will be good to actually do something after all this time." Starsky sighed. "It's been frustrating. Two years of knowing something had happened to him and not having any way I could do anything."

Samuels smiled. "See? It will make you both feel better."

*Both of us...* The words echoed in Starsky's ear. *There hasn't been a 'both of us' in so long, Hutch.*

Always before, they had shared their pain, and the sharing had helped ease and dissipate it. But without Hutch, Starsky's misery had built and built until the wall around his love had seemed insurmountable.
The doctor watched his face closely for a moment, apparently satisfied by the emotion she read there. She smiled. "Here, let me show you what to do."

She lifted the sheet, uncovering Hutch's left leg, draping the white material so that the rest of him stayed covered. The only garment Hutch wore was a brief hospital gown that had merely been slipped up over his arms and not tied in the back. The rest of him was bare.

*He'd be blushing if he knew he was like this,* Starsky thought, remembering how tightly Hutch had kept the strings of his hospital gown laced when the two of them had been put in isolation by Doctor Kaufman.

Melissa Samuels wasn't too much different from Judith. Both were completely professional, dedicated doctors, both were fighting against heavy odds for Hutch's health. If Hutch were awake, Starsky suspected he'd charm Melissa as easily as he had Judith. Then again, Starsky decided while watching the way she cared for him, she seemed to have been charmed already.

"He must have been quite a runner," she commented quietly as she touched one long thigh. "He sure was." Starsky's voice was quiet, too. "It wasn't always easy keeping up with him."

Melissa moved to the foot of the bed, slid a hand under Hutch's heel and lifted it. "He was a good cop?"

Starsky cleared his throat. "A good cop," he agreed. "Good partner. The best..."

"Yes." Samuels' eyes flicked up to meet Starsky's, then returned to the limb she held. "Watch now." She rotated Hutch's ankle gently. "The full range of motion. The joints can't be allowed to stiffen up and the muscles have to be stretched and contracted." She flexed the foot, not forgetting the toes, and took a minute to check the reflex as she had demonstrated to Starsky the previous day. "Now the knee."

Starsky stood up. "Let me." He put his hands on the pale skin, taking the leg in an awkward grip. He held the warm weight of it under the thigh, raising the leg to bend the knee. "Seems kinda complicated," he said, covering his confusion with a short chuckle.

"You're doing just fine. Work on his hip joints, his hands and arms, and shoulders. Don't forget his neck. You mustn't force movement that is unnatural. He's pretty easy to work with, though. There's not much resistance."

Starsky finished with the left leg and lay it back down on the mattress. "Do the other leg next?"

The doctor nodded, readjusting the sheet so that it covered the leg they had finished with and exposed the other one. "Keep him well covered. We don't want him to get chilled or hit by a draft. Even during his bath, only the part being washed is uncovered."

"Okay." Starsky was already moving to the other side of the bed. He was concentrating on Hutch, his touch bringing them together, separating the two of them from the space outside. A touch between them had always sparked the magic that had set them apart in a world of their own, that place where they had spent so much working and off time, all their special time for so many years. Even in Dobey's office, or in the detectives' room with others around them, even on the street, they'd been able to find their place alone. Dr. Samuels, like so many others, faded into the background now.

The door to the room clicked as it opened. "Doctor, I've been looking for you." A young nurse stepped in, her eyes drawn to Starsky as he worked Hutch's leg. "There's an emergency down in four-twelve."
"I'll be right there. Lieutenant?"

"We're okay, Doc." Starsky answered without looking up.

He continued with his task, letting the steady movements weave a new peace around him. John Denver kept singing, "Rocky Mountain High." 'He was born in the winter of his twenty-seventh year, comin' home to a place he'd never been before...' The song could have been written for Hutch, for the hopes Starsky had for his rebirth.

Touching his partner felt good, but Hutch's passivity was strange. Starsky was bombarded by memories of other times he had held him, helped him. The struggling body he had held on Huggy's bed as he fought the craving for heroin had been anything but passive. Hutch had needed him, and had let him know. Starsky knew that his touch, his support, had been what carried Hutch through that time; his willingness to take on a portion of Hutch's misery had made the difference. He wanted his touch to make a difference now.

He remembered another occasion, much later, when they had held each other in Starsky's own hospital bed. Then Hutch's body had been responsive, assured, its movements sensual... No. Don't think about that. Starsky was embarrassed at what he thought of as an inappropriate feeling in this time and place.

"What would you say if you knew what I was thinking?" he asked the sleeper. He looked into the face he knew so well, and saw Hutch's patience, Hutch's understanding. "Nothin' to be ashamed of, huh? Okay buddy. I can keep it together if you can."

He put Hutch's right leg down and covered it, moving to pick up his arm. There was a pliancy in the muscles that had never been there before. The hard biceps and the strength of the forearms had melted away. Deprived of the sun, the golden tan of health had faded. Hutch's arm was limp, moving as Starsky dictated.

"Come on, Hutch. Work with me. You gotta get strong." His partner was out of it, though. "You never let me push you around before. Remember all those years you went to Vinnie's every morning? What would he say if he saw you like this?" He exercised the elbow, then the shoulder. "Okay. I won't bug you about it. You never could put up with teasing, could you?" He straightened, looking at the tube through which Hutch's liquid diet flowed. "At least you're back on the health gunk, I see. What's in there, goat's milk and desiccated liver?" His smile was brief and a little forced. If Hutch could perceive his presence, he didn't want him to detect worry and fear. He figured what Hutch needed was a positive attitude and encouragement. He kept talking, kept touching him.

"You gotta want to wake up, partner." Starsky straightened, looking down into Hutch's silent face. "Nothing can keep you down if you don't let it. You're the guy who's got a hundred plus years to go, remember? You're missin' out on 'em -- that's not what you want." He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the sense of despair that threatened in the face of Hutch's unconsciousness.

I won't let it get to me. He's alive. Like Dr. Samuels said, his body is in good shape. He's thin, but it's not so bad. Could be lots worse. And his mind could wake up. He can recover. It's just a matter of being patient, not losing hope.

Never known for his patience in younger years, Starsky had learned a lot about waiting and accepting limitations in the past twenty-four months. I never gave up hope of finding Hutch alive -- and that paid off. Opening his eyes, the feeling of peace flowed over him again and Starsky released his doubts. He's here and I can touch him and help take care of him. That's more of a second chance than most people get. "Come on, babe. We got work to do."
He stood there a moment, considering how best to work on Hutch's neck and shoulders. "What you need is to sit up," Starsky told him. He bent, searching for the control mechanism to raise the head of the bed. He made the angle a gentle incline. Partially sitting up, Hutch seemed hunched to one side. Starsky took him by the shoulders to straighten him up, then placed a hand on each side of his neck.

No. Gotta be a better way. Holding Hutch by the shoulders again, Starsky put one knee up on the mattress. He let the unresisting body lean forward, making room for himself, then slid his leg behind and to the other side of Hutch. When he was settled, he drew his partner back against him. Starsky just sat for a moment, his arms folding around Hutch's slim form. Close, warm -- the embrace filled him with good feeling, a sense of cherishing Hutch, of really being with him at last.

He closed his eyes, inhaling the clean smell of Hutch's hair. Under his fingers, the skin along the side of the long throat was as satiny as he remembered. "I've got you, babe," he whispered into an ear covered by flyaway cornsilk. "I'm here, and everything's gonna be all right."

His hands rubbed soothing circles over the smooth chest. When his palm encountered the steady heartbeat, he held his breath, awed at the throbbing reality of it. He stroked long hair back from the broad forehead, his fingers going on to massage the scalp gently, Hutch's body seeming to relax against him. There was a subtle difference from when Starsky had first put his arms around him this way. His breathing had seemed to deepen, as if in restful sleep, demonstrating Hutch's utter trust in Starsky's embrace.

"This is good, isn't it?" Starsky asked the question in a hushed voice. "I think so, too. Any time you need me to hold you like this, I will. Promise. I'll give you anything you want, Hutch, everything you need. And if it takes a long time 'til you wake up, that's okay. Because I'll be here, don't you worry about that." He continued the loving litany, moving Hutch's head gently from side to side and forward and back as he spoke.

"There." He sighed, letting Hutch rest in the crook of his arm. His hand slipped under the edge of the open gown, stroking down along his partner's bare side. Starsky found himself feeling completely comfortable and at ease with Hutch now. It wasn't as if he were a stranger lying there. This was Hutch, as familiar as a brother, easy to be with, to care for, to touch. And even though his ability to participate was limited, Hutch, the man, was very much present, here with him. The feeling of intimacy between them, recaptured now, was very precious to Starsky.

"I better let you lie back and rest," he told him quietly. He eased out from behind his patient and bent to lower the incline of the bed once more. Remembering that it was nearly time for a nurse to come in and turn him, Starsky decided to undertake the task himself.

It wasn't too difficult to maneuver Hutch's body, using leverage. Starsky made him comfortable, propping pillows at his back, bending his top leg at the knee, the way Hutch did when sleeping on his side. He straightened the covers over him, making sure he was warm. Looking closely at the sleeping face, Starsky was pleased. Hutch's expression reflected no tension, no stress. Starsky felt good, satisfied that he had done well and could take an active part in Hutch's care.

Finishing, he resumed his seat in the bedside chair. The John Denver tape had come full circle, back to "Country Roads." Starsky was back to waiting again. Waiting... nothing to do but wait. Come on, Hutch. It's okay to wake up now.

CHAPTER II

***

66
"Wake up, Hutch. Come on now. You can do it." Starsky spoke softly, his voice pleading. He drew his chair close to the bed and picked up Hutch's hand, cradling it between both of his.

He closed his eyes, willing his warmth to penetrate to Hutch, wishing so hard it seemed he was shouting from his heart.

"Starsk?" The word was low, the voice rough with dryness. "What's wrong?"

Starsky held his breath, afraid to open his eyes. *I'm hearing things...*

"Starsky…? A sigh, full of entreaty.

He looked and found clear blue eyes regarding him.

"You're awake."

"Course I am." Hutch smiled indulgently as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

Starsky was nearly speechless. "I thought you'd never... God, Hutch..."

"I'm okay. Don't look so worried. You called me and I knew it was okay to wake up at last. You did it, babe."

He blinked, tears spilling from his eyes, falling on the sheet that lay over Hutch. His partner laughed and pushed back his covers. He sat up, drawing in a deep breath, stretching and yawning. Starsky just leaned back in his chair, stunned and happy.

Hutch climbed out of bed. "Where's my pants?"

Starsky closed his eyes. "I've got your watch."

"Come on. Let's get out of here."

Starsky turned in time to see Hutch striding through the door. He had dressed in a pair of faded jeans and his black leather jacket. The long blond hair belled out above the collar. Starsky got up fast, stumbling around his chair in his haste to follow.

By the time Starsky reached the door, Hutch's long legs had taken him down the hall to the elevator. Starsky saw the doors open and he started running. Hutch stepped in, holding the doors open, waiting.

"Come on, Starsk. Let's go!" His voice was like music, his eyes laughing blue sparkles.

Starsky was almost there, ready to jump into the elevator to join his partner. With him still one step away, Hutch winked slyly and stepped back. The elevator doors closed, cutting Starsky off from him, taking Hutch away.

Starsky turned, running for the stairs. He descended as fast as he could, chasing the elevator, down and down. Four flights, five, always just behind the elevator. He reached the hospital lobby and stood there panting, but the doors didn't open. Instead the elevator started back up again.

Breathing hard, Starsky pounded his fist on the closed doors. "Hutch, you bastard...!" He stood watching the indicator on the wall above as the elevator ascended and then came back for him.
When the doors opened, he stepped in, still rubbing his side where his breath caught painfully. If he hadn't been shot, he's still be able to run as fast as Hutch. He'd have caught his infuriating partner, showed him just what he thought about his running-away games. When the elevator stopped, he exited and walked slowly down the hall. He felt lost in the dark, dingy corridor, lonely amid the bustling nurses and orderlies passing by.

Way down at the end of the hall, he came to the door of Hutch’s room. It was empty. It seemed like he'd been chasing after a Hutch he couldn't find for so long.

Hutch was there, though, lying propped up in bed. He grinned, still teasing, but his wide eyes asked for forgiveness.

Starsky came to stand at the bedside. "You're a mean son of a gun, you know that?" He stared down at Hutch, waiting to see what he'd say.

"I know. You mad?"

"Yeah. Remind me to yell at you." Starsky glared at his fiend, but Hutch opened his arms, reaching out for him. Shaking his head, he went to him, moving into the offered hug, feeling strong arms wrap around his shoulders.

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Starsky's eyes opened abruptly, and he groaned with frustration. Just as he'd been getting close to Hutch, the dream had to end. He rolled over in bed, straining to see the lighted dial of his alarm clock. "Four thirty -- shit." He sat up, then pushed back the covers, and got out of bed. Moving to the window, he pushed back the drapes to look down on King William Street.

His room at the Ambassadors Hotel was comfortable and homey, right in the center of town, but he had chosen it more for location than looks or price. Tonight he felt the velvet flocked walls closing in on him. Wide-awake, he knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep.

He felt keyed up, nerves tightened with unused energy. Spending his time in Hutch's hospital room left him emotionally but not physically tired. *Guess I need some exercise. Maybe then I could get back to sleep.* Starsky found his jeans where he'd draped them over the back of a chair and pulled them on. He slipped a cable knit sweater over his head and bent down to pull on and tie his sneakers. Grabbing his jacket, he headed for the door.

The empty streets of the city were strangely soothing to him. He walked off his frustration and tension, wandering blocks from his hotel, ignoring the chill wind that cut sharply across his cheeks. The glow of street lamps painted rainwater in the gutters with gold, and for a time he felt at home. Peaceful like this, Adelaide was like Los Angeles, waiting in the silence between crimes. Yet Adelaide had a sense of newness, of promise, that had gone from L.A. a long time ago. It hadn't been there for him, Starsky knew, for at least two years.

He came to a stop as he stumbled up stone steps. Glancing up, he found himself at the hospital. He'd walked there without paying attention. A look at his watch showed it was only five a.m. *Too early to visit Hutch.* He started to turn back to the hotel, then realized there wasn't anything else for him to do anyway. *Dr. Samuels said I could come any time.* Shrugging, Starsky pushed open the heavy doors and went inside.

********
Starsky bent over Hutch's bed, massaging his back. His hands moved with assurance, thumbs and fingertips going deep to reach down into the muscle tissue. It was hard work, and tiring, but Starsky was already seeing results. In the two weeks he had been working on Hutch, his muscle tone had improved noticeably. Dr. Samuels had commented on how good Hutch looked to her. His color was better, too; the massages helped his circulation as well.

With a groan, Starsky straightened up for a moment, putting a hand to the aching muscles of his own lower back. Then he returned to his task. Beginning at the base of the neck, he worked his thumbs alternately along the groove beside the spine, down Hutch's back. Doing that used to make his partner draw in his breath sharply and then let it out in a grunt of pleasure. Now, Hutch was quiet as Starsky worked.

*It's so odd to stand here talking to you, touching you...* he thought, moving to work on the sacrum and lumbar area. *It's like hearing only one end of a phone conversation, all the questions but none of the answers.* Even the touching was strange, something Starsky hadn't realized he'd need to get used to. He hadn't thought much about it at first, but then it occurred to him that he had had very little physical contact with other people in the last two years.

He hadn't liked the physical therapists touching him. It was embarrassing to seem weak and be in pain in front of strangers, despite their clinical professionalism. And, since he hadn't been emotionally close to anybody while Hutch was missing, he hadn't had to be physically close to anyone, either. Touching Hutch had reawakened him to what it felt like to reach out to another person.

It was like being allowed all your favorite foods after a long, boring diet or slipping on a pair of jeans that were faded and perfectly fit all your contours after having to wear an uncomfortable suit all day -- you could have lived that way, but something seemed to be missing. Sometimes, touching Hutch, Starsky felt his eyes and throat sting with strangled emotion. He'd just stop, drawing in a deep breath, and let the sensation fill him, trying to get it to penetrate all the way to his heart. It warmed him, melting a coldness he'd hardly realized was there.

He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed giving massages. It was a skill he had learned in the army, and he found he still had the talent. He used to ease the lower back pain Hutch suffered after an eight-hour shift in the car; his buddy would sigh with relief and fall asleep wherever he was -- the middle of Starsky's living room floor, usually. Starsky'd let him lie undisturbed for an hour or so before waking him and sending him home. It had been nice, having Hutch there, silent and safe with him. *A little like now...*

His hands were busy kneading the buttocks, then moving to work the backs of the thighs. Hutch was so thin, his bones seemed very close to the surface. His skin was delicate, baby soft, pale with its downy covering of blond hair. Like any good masseur, Starsky's touch was not erotic, but it wasn't merely clinical, either. Massage was an art, a ritual; he and Hutch were being slowly tied together by the sensual bonds Starsky was weaving between them. Hutch's body was absorbing his touches, as clearly starved for the contact as Starsky was to give it.

Each day, Starsky prolonged the massage a little more than the day before. He took time to make each session more detailed and complete, as more of his training came back to him. Now his thumbs moved in a spiral over the sole of each foot, seeking the thousands of nerve endings, stimulating them and the reflexes which connected with the entire body.

"Used to tease you about these big feet, remember?" Starsky continued by stretching each toe, his touch gentle and assured. "You tripped over 'em all the time." His palm stroked a supple sole, defining the perfect arch, admiring the utter logic of Hutch's build, long thighs and legs supported by feet that were actually the perfect size for the rest of him.
His hands were warm from the contact with Hutch's skin, and Starsky felt good. His whole body seemed to resonate with the power of touch. He lay the foot back down and let one hand rest on the back of each leg, beginning a long, connecting stroke that swept all the way up to Hutch's shoulders. He'd been ready to move on, to turn his friend over, but his fingers found a little knot of tension at the base of the neck.

He grasped the muscles, squeezing firmly to knead, trying to loosen the knot. "What's going on in your mind that you're so uptight, huh?" He was really digging in with his thumb and fingers, reaching deep into the tissue, knowing he was successfully soothing the remaining tightness.

Hutch groaned, a sound of deep satisfaction and rich pleasure.

"Mmmm... that does feel good, doesn't it?" Then Starsky froze, his fingers stilling their motion as abruptly as if someone had yelled 'halt.' He hesitated, not sure for a second that he hadn't imagined hearing Hutch make a sound. He leaned over to peer at his friend's face. "Hutch? Did you -- say something there?"

Hutch was smiling -- not broadly, and probably not so that anyone else would be able to tell, but Starsky could see it. That look of utter contentment Hutch wore when he stood on a beach and admired the waves, or when he checked for rain at a window and discovered the sun had come back out, that was the way he was smiling now.

Starsky's heart was going a mile a minute. Carefully, he hurried to turn Hutch over to lie on his back, deft movements not betraying his nervous anticipation. He bent over his partner, taking his face gently between his two hands, searching for any further sign of awareness, his spirit soaring, his eyes devouring Hutch's blissful expression.

"Come on, babe. Come back to me." His breathy whisper nudged the hair across Hutch's forehead. Hutch stayed quiet, his respirations easing in and out with a soft sigh.

Starsky blinked rapidly. He felt dizzy and nearly overwhelmed, filled with love and hope. He dared to move closer, and touched Hutch's lips gently with his own. The kiss was brief, a sanctification, saying more than words could between them. Starsky added one more, tenderly, then stood up, still touching Hutch as he pulled up the forgotten covers.

He sat next to him on the bed, maintaining a light touch at Hutch's shoulder. He felt like he was poised to leap off the roof of a building. He knew he hadn't imagined it. Hutch had made a sound, one that definitely expressed his feelings. Starsky maintained his precarious stance on the edge of that roof, hope daring him to jump off, caution telling him he was destined for a long fall.

I've gotta be calm. It's not like he spoke to me, or opened his eyes and knew me. Starsky continued to gaze down into the quiet face. But it was a good sign, I know it was. He's getting closer to the surface, closer to me.

With infinite care, he leaned down until his cheek pressed against Hutch's. He burrowed closer, as if by merging so deeply into Hutch's space he could will him awake. He lay there, simply communing for long, precious moments. His fingers brushed fine tendrils away from one ear, then curved to permit a whisper meant only for Hutch.

"I love you. You got that, partner?" It was the first time he had said it, here in this room. "I love you."

He drew away from the silken cheek, his eyes moving over the treasured features. Once more... it's been so long... Again he pressed a kiss to his partner's still mouth. Hutch's lips were soft, warm, and he wanted with
all his heart for them to kiss him back. Someday... You let me know this afternoon that it'll happen someday. You'll come back to me, all the way. Soon, Hutch... "Please," he whispered, heart aching, "let it be soon."

He sat up, filling his lungs with a deep, calming breath, pulling himself together. The intensity of emotion was very draining. He offered a sheepish smile to Hutch. "Okay, I know. You just want the rest of your massage, don't you?"

He raised each of Hutch's arms in turn to take off his hospital gown, then pulled the bed a little further from the wall in order to stand at his friend's head. He lifted it, allowing the neck muscles to stretch up and down and side to side. He worked on the shoulders, then treated face and scalp to a delicate massage. Leaning forward, he walked his fingers down the ladder of Hutch's ribs, long strokes of his hands, then pulling back up each side from waist to armpit. He kneaded the pectorals with practiced care. Then, moving to stand at the side of the bed, his hands slipped down to rest gently on Hutch's belly. Spiral motions described large circles, then smaller ones, across the tender plane of the abdomen.

A tiny shiver of reaction followed his fingertips as they found a ticklish spot. Starsky paused, trying a repeat of the touch that had caused it, while closely watching Hutch's face. The wide mouth twitched, just at the corner, and Starsky laughed out loud. "Oh, am I gonna tickle you good someday, boy."

He felt ready to jump for joy; the only thing holding him back was Hutch's continued slumber. He could wait a little longer easily though, knowing through the reactions he was witnessing today that his wait was coming to an end.

He concluded the massage by paying careful attention to Hutch's arms and hands, and the front of his legs. When he was finished, he slipped the white hospital gown back on and made sure Hutch was comfortable in bed.

Tired from the physical effort but exhilarated by the hopeful signs, Starsky sat down in his bedside chair, reading contentment in the peaceful face. He felt good inside. It was really satisfying to do these things for Hutch. All the awkwardness and embarrassment were gone. Being intimate, taking care of each other, that had been their way of life. How many times had they cared for one another? Starsky even remembered helping Hutch when a leg cast, crutches and an attached IV made going to the bathroom too complicated for one man to handle alone.

The door to the room snicked open and Mary Brownwell stepped inside. She headed directly to the bed. Starsky spoke up quickly. "He's all right. I just finished his massage, so he doesn't even need to be turned."

The nurse smiled. "I see." She took the empty feeding bag and made a note on Hutch's chart. Then she bent at the foot of the bed. Standing, she looked over at Starsky. "I see you've emptied this, too."

"Yeah." He shrugged. "I was here. Didn't see any point in calling you away from your other duties."

"Yeah." He shrugged. "I was here. Didn't see any point in calling you away from your other duties."

The eyebrow Mary had raised came back down. "You've been busy. Did you make a note of how much there was before you emptied it?"

"Sure. Of course." Starsky found the paper he'd written on. His eyes went back to Hutch as the nurse left the room.

He glanced at his watch. Time I got back to our reading. He picked up the book he'd begun yesterday, Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land. In a few moments, he lost himself in the story, he and Hutch being transported to a faraway world together.
CHAPTER III

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Dark. A black, unending universe, empty of light, of sound. Cold, desolate black...

Nothing stirs. There is no emotion, no sight, no feeling. Nothing stirs... save awareness.

A sense of... drifting. Tendrils of being afloat without form, without substance, through the void. The tendrils slide far apart from one another, unable to reach, to rejoin, unable to come together in existence, in any understanding of having life.

No time. No thought. Just drifting.

Yet no peace, either. Ripples of disquiet stir the separate tendrils. They are given strength by a growing need to stop the slow, sliding descent into the netherworld of non-existence. Unfinished business -- life -- calls them, beckoning, bringing the threads closer together.

Closer. Nearer. Almost touching. Time has no meaning, but need exists. Life must be defined...

Tendrils touch, beseech, caress, and merge. The dark takes on shape, limitations. It is a cocoon now, a shelter, keeping out the light and the pain, the death. Yet it also keeps out life.

Thoughts sift through the void. Without language to give them substance, they drift apart, lazy with inattention. Yet they tumble over one another, touching, drawing the threads together. Spinning tendrils come closer, weaving a living consciousness out of the emptiness...

To sleep, yet not to dream. Safe without hunger or hurt, never waking, never hoping, never hearing or seeing or touching or loving...


Dark... Why is it so dark?

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Melissa Samuels checked though the appointment schedule on her desk before beginning her morning rounds. As she reached for a clipboard with her case notes, there was a light knock at her office door.

"Yes?"

"Dr. Samuels?" Mary Brownwell pushed the door open and stepped inside. "I wonder if I might have a word with you."

"I have a few moments now."

The nurse approached the desk. "It's Lieutenant Starsky. He... he's driving us batty."
Melissa smiled. She knew what Mary meant. "He's been spending a lot of time here, hasn't he?"

"And he's trying to do so much for the patient... he's actually being rather disruptive at this point. Like right now -- "

"He's here now?" The doctor checked her watch. "It's not yet eight o'clock."

"I know. He said he came in early so that he could wash Joey's hair. We aren't combing it the way his friend prefers. He's always there, giving us suggestions, exercising him... His presence seemed so helpful at first, but it's becoming quite a problem. We can't abide by the schedule we've established for the patient -- he's rearranged it. He suggests ideas and methods that have no basis in medical practice. At least we finally got him to understand that if the catheter bag is emptied, the amount must be recorded..."

"I understand. Mary." Dr. Samuels stood up. "I'll have a talk with him."

She decided her rounds could wait a few minutes and made her way to the nursing home complex, her thoughts occupied with Hutch. This was just the latest in a series of concerns relating to the blond stranger in her care. It had been that way for the two years he had lain in the corner room on the fourth floor. She hadn't told his American friend how delicate Hutch's condition had been at first. Pneumonia had developed in the early weeks, his temperature spiking to 104. She had pulled him through, working at his side long hours past her usual duty shift. She had recognized she was becoming attached to the patient, but her emotional involvement seemed natural, even necessary. He was alone -- there was no one else to take care of him. She wanted very badly for him to get well, to resume his interrupted life. Somewhere, someone was looking for him. Someone missed him, and loved him.

She opened the door to his room quietly. Lieutenant Starsky was blotting his hair with a towel, his hands gentle and precise in their attentions. Finishing with the towel, he reached for a comb, beginning to tame the wild halo of freshly washed hair. Melissa smiled, thinking, Yes, the patient is indeed well loved.

"Good morning." She spoke softly as she approached the bed.


The blond strands lay like silky gold threads across the wide forehead and scattered over the pillow, making the sleeper look nearly as if he were just grabbing a nap in the morning sun. Melissa smiled at his friend. "You're taking good care of him, I see."

The dark blue eyes that flicked down to glance at the patient's face and as quickly returned to meet Melissa's gaze were glowing with intensity. "I got to. He's my partner. And I can tell I'm helping him. Look." He nodded her over closer. "You can see how much better he looks since I've been helping him, can't you?"

Melissa met the fervent look, gauging her words carefully. "I know you can see a difference."

"Yeah, of course." He was perfectly serious. "See -- it's his expression. When I first got here, his face looked so closed, all shut down, you know? He was so far away... lost. Now he looks more peaceful, content. Whatever hurt him isn't so bad anymore. He's getting better."

Melissa turned her gaze to the pale, gaunt face. So many times she had studied it and shuddered with hopelessness. When he had first been brought to her, he was a normal, healthy man in his mid-thirties, with his proper weight and muscle tone. Now, he was frail, painfully slender, his delicate flesh drawn paper-thin over bone. It was hard to determine his age. Though lines of age and character had disappeared, he did not look youthful either. His features were slack, mouth down turned, his expression empty. Was that face a bit
less grim now? Perhaps that was the change to which Starsky was referring, Melissa mused, straining to understand. "I'm not sure I see him the same way you do."

Undaunted by her skepticism, Starsky grinned. He crossed to the dresser where he began putting away the shampoo and comb. "Guess not. Nobody knows Hutch better than me, anyway. But you did say his muscle tone shows some improvement."

Melissa could agree with that. "Having you work so diligently with him has had a positive effect, yes. The staff is good, but they can't devote that kind of personal attention to him. You have been spending most of your time here in this room."

Starsky's eyes went back to the man in the bed. "What else would I want to do?"

The quiet words were spoken with an underlying determination that Melissa thought gave a stronger hint to the man's true personality than anything he had said so far. Two weeks ago, he had walked into her hospital, pale, fragile, a man hanging in precarious balance between hope and despair. Finding his friend lying there so unreachable had been a blow, but he had borne his distress with dignity and restraint. He had been as distant, almost as quiet, as the man he'd been searching for. Yet, as the days passed, he had blossomed, become enthusiastic, almost childlike in his ability to hope. Melissa had wondered how someone so seemingly naïve had dealt with violent criminals in a big U.S. city. Now she saw that there were more facets to his personality -- the eager boyishness was one part of him, but the cop who could be tough, all business, was there, too. He possessed a single-minded dedication to his current cause, but it wasn't motivated by duty, or even mere loyalty.

When she spoke again, Melissa's voice was compassionate. "You know, despite the fact that you really don't have anything else to do while you're here in Adelaide, maybe you should spend some time outside the hospital, visiting some of our tourist attractions. The nurses need to be able to keep to the schedule they've established for Hutch..."

"You mean I'm hangin' around too much? Gettin' in the way?" He took a step closer to the bed, defensively.

Melissa spread her hands helplessly, trying to smile. "Only when you're here at odd times, like now, so early in the morning."

"But -- " Again he retreated, his eyes going to Hutch's face. "I could tell he couldn't stand the way the nurses were washing his hair and combing it. He was... I don't know how to explain it best... uncomfortable. I was here early a couple of days last week, watching them bathe him and wash his hair. I just figured a way to do it that hurt him less."

"You're sure of this?" Melissa came close, touching the patient's shoulder, smoothing back the hair over one temple. She wasn't convinced she could interpret the subtle difference in his expression as Starsky did.

"Yeah! I know him better than anybody. He's my partner. You understand what that means, to a cop? We had to know each other, had to know what the other was thinking, even before he'd think it. Hutch saved my life more times than I can count." His words slowed, became loving, his gaze fixed on someplace distant in his memory. "I know him, Dr. Samuels. You've got to trust me when I say I can tell how he's feeling."

"Okay. But will you trust me when I tell you that I think you should at least check with one of the nurses, or me, before you do anything that will affect the routine? The nurses are beginning to feel as if a layman is giving them orders. You wouldn't want me to tell you how to solve a murder case, now, would you?"
"Whoa. Wait a minute. You could adhere to an arbitrary system when he was just a patient with no name, no background. But now that you're in the position to know more about him, why won't you take my advice, use my information? He should have the best care possible."

"I agree." Melissa spoke in the same carefully modulated tone. "And we can't do our job properly when a visitor tries to take on too many of the tasks that are the nurses' responsibility."

Starsky bristled. "I'm not just any visitor. I'm the only family Hutch has. It's killing me to see him like this -- to watch his face and see him feel pain or discomfort. The nurses -- and you, I guess -- just don't understand."

No. It's easy to understand. You had no way to help for two whole years. Now you want to make up for all that lost time. Melissa regretted the whole bad situation. The American looked haggard, as if the pressure he'd been living under was consuming all his vitality. What he felt was clearly visible on his face, in the bright passion illuminating his eyes. He had to believe that his own efforts would finally bring him out of the coma. Melissa knew she had to be careful -- this man was almost as much her patient as the other was.

"You're absolutely right. You're not just a visitor. I know you want to help as much as possible. And so do I. I just want you to recognize that you don't have to take on all the responsibility by yourself. It's our job to take care of the medical details. The kind of nurturing we'd like to provide but don't have the personal knowledge about him or the time to give... that's your job."

"All right." Starsky drew in a long breath, calming himself with visible effort. "I can admit when enough is enough. I won't be so much in the way from now on. At least, I'll try. But I'll still have my two cents to put in about things, understand?"

"Two cents?" His American expressions were amusing -- and Melissa could tell from the twinkle in his eyes that he was trying to charm her to get his way.

"My opinion," he clarified. "And I don't want to be restricted to coming just during the regular visiting hours. There's nothing else I need or want to do but come here and be with Hutch. I can tell it's helping him. You have to admit that's true."

She wouldn't for the world squash those brave hopes. "Of course. Just don't try to take on too much, and you're welcome to sit by his side as long as you want."

He flashed her a grin that was as dazzling as it was sincere. "Thanks, Dr. Samuels. I... need to be here."

"I know." Along with Starsky, Melissa's eyes turned to regard the quiet sleeper lying there. Wake up, she wanted to tell him. He needs you. She resolved to keep a close eye on the American. How long he could continue to wait and hope, she didn't know.

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"Did I ever tell you how scared I was?" The quiet voice spoke from the bed.

"You, Hutch? No way." Starsky sat forward in his chair, laying aside the book he'd been reading. "You're the bravest man I know."

The smile was faint, a bit wistful. "Sure."
"Come on, Hutch. You faced down two armed hit men that time at the spaghetti joint. You beat up all those
crazy goons that Simon Marcus had turned into killers. Hell, you're the guy that took on James Gunther.
Any one of them could have killed you, would have, without a second thought. And every single, damn,
ordinary day on the street..."

"That wasn't being brave." The words were soft, full of patience. "I was scared the whole time. Scared to
death." Blue eyes burned with intensity. "Scared for you."

Hutch's fire reached out to warm Starsky. He felt full of pride, still surrounded by Hutch's partnership, with
his unstinting comfort and devotion. The caring that they held for each other was a living entity, big as the
world, vast as eternity.

The peace of that eternity was shattered by the earnest voice. "Bet you never knew I wasn't just scared of
losing you." Hutch's eyes were wide with the truth he spoke. "I was scared to love you, too."

No, Hutch, Starsky wanted to say. You loved me all the time, with every breath in your body. But he was
held silent, mesmerized by the intense grief in Hutch's gaze.

"I wanted you such a long time, David. Did you know that?" Soft as a prayer, Hutch's voice crossed the
terrifying void that suddenly seemed to open up between them. "But I was scared to reach out, to make the
move that would bring us together. I waited so long..."

The voice faded, but Starsky heard the rest of the thought. He was the one to put it into words. "You waited
until I almost died."

"I'd been so scared, of so many things, I couldn't even admit what I was afraid of. Of rocking the boat, of
losing what we had, of the streets -- the bad guys finally making something bad out of the two good guys we
once were. I let it burn me up, our last year. But what frightened me most was that if we took that last step
and came that much closer in love, we'd lose it all."

Starsky saw it all in Hutch's eyes, the battle of conscience and need, the wearing down of ideals and
patience until Hutch was the burned-out shell he'd been those last months they'd put in before Gunther's
bullets struck. "There was nothing to be afraid of. We loved each other. That was all that should have
mattered. I had all the same doubts, the same questions. But denying what we really wanted couldn't make it
go away. It only made us waste too much precious time."

"I know." Hutch blinked, his eyes luminous with moisture. "And I was right. When I reached out... we lost it
all..."

"You don't think -- " But of course, he would. Kenneth Hutchinson could blame himself for the weather if
he thought it hurt Starsky. He'd convinced himself that he had no right to be happy, that finding love and
taking it was something he should be punished for. A mile-wide chasm opened up in Starsky's gut. Did you
get careless that last day, partner? Did you go looking for trouble, just to prove loving me was the ultimate
danger, the ultimate mistake? Oh, God..."

"Hutch, you darlin' idiot, love isn't wrong. It's what all of us on this earth deserve. What we need to keep us
going, keep us alive. Come on back, and I'll show you." He got up, took a step toward the bed, wanting to
go to Hutch and shower him with all the love they'd squandered, all the love bottled up inside him with no
place to go.

The fire in the blue eyes locked with his own was fading, the tender voice dwindling to a whisper. "I can't,
Starsk. I'm scared..."
By the time Starsky bent over the hospital bed, the eyes were closed, the man lost again in the vacuum of coma. Starsky wanted to shake him, scream at him. If he could go down there into the dark and the silence to rescue him, to tell him it was all right to come back, he would. But he couldn't. All he could do was sit there on the edge of the bed, holding a hand that couldn't feel him, begging with a voice that couldn't be heard, praying a prayer that would not be answered.

***

Starsky woke in his own bed at the Ambassadors, his throat feeling like a tube of sandpaper, his muscles knotted with frustration, each fist clenching a handful of sheet. He lay there, gasping, trying to concentrate on relaxing, to differentiate the dream from reality. Neither happened. He drifted back to sleep, dreamless this time, but tossed by restless emotions that had no words.

************

Two weeks later, Starsky sat quietly, his eyes on Hutch's face, while Dr. Samuels watched the needles on the EEG monitor. He was tense, expectant, but unsure that the medical gadgetry would indicate the improvement in Hutch's condition he felt in his bones.

After long, anxious moments, the doctor turned off the machine and reached to gently remove the electrodes that had been placed on Hutch.

"How's it look, Doctor?"

Melissa turned. "Not too bad. There does seem to be an increase in the Alpha waves." She pointed out a line on the wide sheet that had come from the EEG. "That indicates an increasing level of awareness."

"Yeah?" Starsky looked up from the paper, and found Dr. Samuels' smiling brown eyes on him. He grinned back. "What'd I tell you? He does hear me."

She nodded to the technician who began wheeling the cart containing the equipment out of the room. "Hearing is usually the first returning function."

Starsky was on his feet, reaching to pick up Hutch's hand. "Come on, partner. I know you're there. Wake up, huh?"

Intent on his friend's face, Starsky watched for any change in expression. "Hutch? You can hear me, I know it. That's it, boy. Listen to Starsky." Under the pale lids, his eyes seemed to be moving rapidly, side to side, as if he were dreaming. "Come on. Open up those baby blues." Hutch looked as if he were almost, almost ready to wake up. Starsky's whole body was tensed, his heart hammering. "Come on, Hutch. Wake up."

The doctor was standing beside him. When the rapid eye movement slowed and ceased, Starsky knew she noticed, too. A gentle hand settled on his forearm.

"No worry. He's going to sleep some more. You keep talking to him, and he'll start waking up like that a little more each time." She squeezed his arm, then turned to go.

"No worry. He's going to sleep some more. You keep talking to him, and he'll start waking up like that a little more each time." She squeezed his arm, then turned to go.

Starsky drew a deep breath, pulled his chair up close to the bed and sat, just watching Hutch, unable to speak for the moment. It was hard to understand, though the doctor had tried to explain how Hutch could be "awake" yet still remain in the coma. The small sound, a grunt of pain or approval, the eye movement and slight changes in expression all showed that Hutch was getting closer. Starsky lived for those moments, his heartbeats tied to the infinitesimal improvements, his soaring hopes dashed every time they abated. The
doctor counseled patience and Starsky tried, drawing on reserves of patience he'd never known he possessed. But it was so hard to keep waiting, so awful to want and hope and need so badly and still have to wait.

He cleared his throat. "Hutch. Come on. Time to wake up now. C'mon, Hutch..." It was okay. He'd keep it up as long as he had to, weeks if need be. If patience was what it was going to take to get Hutch well, then somehow he'd find it, or produce it, or steal it if he had to. He wasn't going to call it quits on the longest stakeout of his life.

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The frustratingly slow pace of the passing weeks was marked by moments of tantalizing improvement. For a couple of days, Hutch's fingers had fluttered when Starsky or the nurses turned him. To his partner, he'd looked as if the movement unsettled or confused him, like he was trying somehow to grab and hold to something solid to make it stop. Starsky would catch the trembling fingers with his own, squeeze tight, his senses straining to feel a return pressure on his own hand.

"Hutch, squeeze my hand, babe." He'd said it a hundred times, a thousand. Once or twice, it had felt like Hutch tried. Yet on the heels of Starsky's brief elation had come the aching sense that he was imagining things.

Dr. Samuels and the nurses couldn't feel anything when they held Hutch's hand.

Now, Hutch's fingers were mostly still when he was being moved. "Try giving simple commands," Dr. Samuels had suggested. Starsky had complied.

"Can you move your hand, Hutch? Come on, do it. How 'bout your feet? Try to move." And more. "Hutch, open your eyes. You can do it." Starsky's back ached with the strain of constantly bending over the bed. His fingers stroked Hutch's cheek again and again, urging him to awaken.

After another week of coaxing, Starsky thought he saw the eyelids flutter. A day later, they lifted, a weary motion that stopped at half-mast. He'd pounded the call button, summoning nurses who had in turn sent for Dr. Samuels. She'd lifted the lids, checked the pupil's response with her flashlight and told Starsky what he half suspected and hadn't wanted to hear, that Hutch wasn't focusing. His eyes might be opening, but it didn't mean he was really any more conscious than before.

Starsky was on the verge of exhaustion. He had been in Adelaide for five weeks. It was rough getting to sleep at night after leaving the hospital, rougher still getting up to return in the morning. He moved on automatic most of the time; it was easier than thinking, making decisions. He continued massaging Hutch, speaking to him, reading his books to him. He ate meals at times he'd scheduled around the nurses' schedule for Hutch. He rarely felt hungry, but maintained out of habit. Every other week, he picked up a check from the Department at the American Express office and cashed it, using the leave compensation to pay his rent and food money. He dropped an occasional card to Dobey and wrote to his mother regularly. In his communications, he stressed Hutch's improvements and downplayed the setbacks, as if by putting the hopeful side down in black and white, it would confirm its reality.

"He's reached a plateau," Dr. Samuels explained. "Sometimes a patient will improve to a certain point, but remain at that level for a length of time." Starsky heard the words she hadn't said; 'and never progress beyond it.' He didn't ask her if it could be that way for Hutch. He didn't think he could stand any kind of medical mumbo-jumbo designed to placate his worries.

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Starsky sat in the easy chair in his hotel room, an open letter from his mother in his hands. She had included a newspaper clipping, a short article about a young girl who had nearly drowned and had awakened from a coma of six months. Starsky read it with a strange mixed reaction. Part of him saw the positive side -- the girl had come out of what doctors had thought was an irreversible coma and it looked like she was going to recover completely. Yet there were many things about the case that were different from Hutch's. She was young, the water had been cold, and hypothermia had been what saved her. There had been no added complications like drugs or stroke. And although six months was a long time, two years was so much longer. The clipping just depressed Starsky.

He leaned back in his chair, staring sightlessly out the window. The constant loneliness, the numb hollowness of his heart, had never felt more profound. Here he was, alone in a city halfway around the world, with only a letter from his mother to let him know that there was anyone anywhere who cared about him. Most of the time, he felt like nobody even knew he existed.

Right now, he felt nearly as empty as he had those first early months of Hutch's disappearance. There had been times when he had questioned the reason he had survived Gunther's assassination attempt. Why'd I live? Why couldn't I have died when my heart stopped in the hospital? What use was pulling through when life has no meaning anyway?

The selfishness of his morbid thoughts had made him feel guilty and ashamed. Would he have condemned Hutch to this life of pain, this unending loneliness? And would I rather I hadn't lived to have that one night with him?

The bittersweet memory brought the ghost of a smile to his lips. Not for anything would be regret that having happened. The physical sensations of that night seemed far away and difficult to recall, but the emotions still played clear and strong in his heart. He had held on to that feeling of love and completion through all the endless days and nights since.

His eyes returned to the thin blue airmail stationary covered with his mother's neat handwriting. "I am so proud of you, son. You never gave up hope that Hutch would be found, that he was alive. He needs you there with him now, so of course you must stay. I will be thinking of you both."

Thinking of us... Knowing that she was there for him, albeit all the way in New York, made him feel stronger. It had been getting harder, lately, to keep the faith.

Starsky was trying not to let the continued lack of further improvement get him down. He stood, glancing down into the street congested with cars and pedestrians on their way to work. They seemed so far away from him, all those strangers. Starsky sighed.

Gotta stop letting it get to me. He shrugged into his jacket. It was drizzling again this morning. The wintry weather in July seemed odd, dreary and depressing. Maybe I've still got jet lag. Australia was hard to get used to; everything was upside down. Nothing seemed real. Starsky hadn't watched television or even bothered to look at a newspaper in weeks. His world had spiraled down to the dimensions of Hutch's hospital room. The only escape was in the books he'd been reading aloud -- and half the time he was just saying the words as they passed before his eyes.

Last night he had walked the same path once again in his dreams. They were always the same as his days; cared for Hutch, sat at his bedside... but sometimes Hutch spoke to him. The things he said, the teasing, earnest, loving, confusing things -- they seemed so real, like Hutch's real words, expressing the way he actually felt and thought. But I'm making them up, out of a lonely subconscious... He was being swallowed whole, the coma was consuming all of him until he couldn't be sure if he remembered the way he and Hutch
used to be or not. Having Hutch alive but still so far away from him, his confidence in his memories was being shaken. If he never wakes up, what will I have left?

That thought scared him more than anything else. He tried to put it out of his mind, chalking it up to fatigue and frustration. Look at it this way, he told himself. Dr. Samuels says there's no medical reason he hasn't regained consciousness -- that means there's nothing preventing his awakening.

It might be Hutch's mind, his own tormented emotions, that were holding him back. He had to know how far away they were taking him. Was he convinced that I wouldn't be able to find him? God, I almost didn't.

Hutch wasn't a defeatist, he never gave up -- on Starsky or himself. Yet Starsky knew he was also beset with insecurities, and that his resilient spirit had been battered by the last years on the force and the attempt on Starsky's life.

I have to keep on trying, work harder to get through to him. It's okay now, I'm here and it's going to be all right. I won't let him give up -- and I won't either.

He found himself at the door to Hutch's room. He pushed it open, his determination once more firmly in place.

"Come on, partner," he said, taking the limp hand in a no-nonsense grip, "we got work to do."

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CHAPTER IV

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He floated tranquil in enveloping blackness. His mind without focus, thoughts flowed as if they were dreams. Memories of motion carried him along, miles and miles of aimless wandering down streets that bore a vague familiarity.

A fast car. A blur of red and white... Two men, riding together, close in the confines of the car, closer still in shared danger, shared laughter. Shared comfort...

Two men... Partners... dark and light... Day and night... white knight... He tried reaching out, but the images slipped away, lost their meaning.

Voices... he became aware of distant voices speaking somewhere above him. The words were indistinguishable, the accents somehow strange. He should know... what they were saying... should be able to place the accents... it's somewhere very far away from home... only a word or two makes sense.

So far away... lost... I'm lost... who will find me... bring me home?

Time stretched, without meaning or direction. The dark enclosed him as before.

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Melissa traded her white lab coat for a brown rain slicker, tucking her hair back under the collar. The rain and dampness were making fuzz out of her natural waves, but that was a fact of life for Australian winter. She cast a glance toward her office window. At five-thirty it was already dark.

*I should be heading home.* Dr. Samuels was off duty, but as happened to her not infrequently she really didn't feel like leaving the hospital. *Not much to go home to,* she mused. She had friends, and a cat that kept her company on quiet evenings, but she felt her life was here, at the hospital and nursing home. She was useful here, fulfilled by her work. *My patients need me.*

Thoughtful, she let her steps carry her to the room where Kenneth Hutchinson slept. She pushed the half-open door back. *Of course.* Starsky, at his vigil still. He was quiet at the bedside, lost in thought, face intent on the features of his friend. The tender openness in his expression told without words the depth of his feelings for Hutch.

'Hutch,' she thought. There was a sweetness in the nickname, the way he said it gave it the quality of an endearment. It suited the patient's handsome face, gave more of a hint to his nature than the somewhat formal sounding 'Kenneth Hutchinson.' *Does everyone call him Hutch,* she wondered briefly, *or just friends as close as you are?*

*How do you bear the pain?* She couldn't ask him the question aloud, couldn't breach the solitude he wrapped around himself like protective armor. The intensity of his watchfulness lent an unrelievable tension to his body. He wore casual clothes, slightly faded denims topped with an oversize sweatshirt in immaculate white, but his posture was the poised anticipation of a cop on patrol, eyes searching out any change in his beat's status quo. His face was carved with worry lines that made the soft mouth look vulnerable. His eyes were anxious, troubled windows reflecting a soul-deep need. The longish, nearly black curls were rumpled, as if a hand had worriedly brushed them back over and over again.

It was a fascinating face, intriguing to her cataloguing eyes; features that at first glance seemed irregular, yet combined somehow into a definition of masculine beauty. The seldom-shown smile could be dazzling, the repressed pain gave an aspect that could bring out anyone's maternal instincts, and the underlying strength attracted her feminine nature. Yet that was as far as it went. Melissa was too professional to cross the boundary that would allow personal feelings to get in the way of a doctor-patient relationship. If things were different, if she had met him under other circumstances... She wondered. *No.* She sensed with certainty that no matter what, he would still carry the indefinable aura of a man who was inaccessible. *As if he's already taken...*

She smiled, stepping quietly into the room. The love pouring out in the way he watched over his friend was the most endearing thing about him.

He looked up. "Hi."

She nodded a greeting. "How is he this evening?"

A sigh lifted both shoulders. "Just the same. I... Never mind."

Melissa turned, still holding the wrist she had lifted to check the patient's pulse. "What? Something wrong?"

A slim hand shoved back the unruly curls again. "I don't know. I feel like I'm runnin' outta ideas. Nothing I've tried so far..." He broke off, unable to complete the thought.

Melissa continued checking Hutch's vital signs. "I know. I wish I had more answers for you."
He didn't respond. Melissa looked toward him to find his eyes wandering unfocused to some point in either the past or the future where Hutch was awake.

"You look like you need to get out a bit. Would you... care to join me for dinner?"

The blue eyes came back to the present, resting on his friend for a moment, then turning to regard the doctor. "Okay. That sounds nice."

Rather surprised to hear his acceptance of the invitation, Melissa smiled. "Good. I know a lovely restaurant not far from here."
They rode in her car, Melissa pointing out a few places of interest along the route. Arriving at The Opal, the restaurant the doctor had chosen, they hurried through a light drizzle and entered the foyer decorated in rough-hewn stone and boasting a large, cheerily burning fireplace. Shown to a table, they spent a few minutes silently regarding their menus.

"What's the specialty here?" the American asked. "Kangaroo burgers?"

Melissa glanced up into smiling blue eyes. He was teasing, trying to break the ice. "A lot of restaurants used to serve all variations of kangaroo meat. But now there are laws protecting our national symbol."

"Too bad," he continued with just the slightest rolling of his eyes. "I'll bet it was delicious."

His laughing sarcasm made her want to tease him in turn. "It is. But if you're interested in really typical Aussie food, I could bring you a jar of Vegemite."

"Uh-uhn. I've heard of that stuff. Hutch would probably love it, though. He used to eat all kindsa goop he thought was healthy." The comment brought the ghost of sadness back to his eyes, but he smiled again, determinedly, and scanned the menu. "Wonder how long it'll take them to serve us?"

"It's all right. Try not to worry about him so much."

"Can't help it." As usual, his candor was self-effacing.

Melissa suggested he try the establishment's excellent roast lamb, and he added an appetizer of rock oysters. The doctor selected wine, while Starsky indicated he preferred Australian beer. He seemed glad for her attempt to keep his mind off the friend lying so quietly back at the hospital.

The food seemed to do its job of lifting the American's spirits. Melissa kept the conversation confined to small talk, Australian customs, the early winter weather. Relaxed, the lieutenant was surprisingly good company, actually quite charming when he took the effort to be friendly.

While spooning up the last of the Pavlova they had ordered for dessert, as if he were running out of energy, his eyes stopped meeting hers. Unfocused, his gaze drifted away to the private world he dwelt in with Hutch.

"David," Melissa ventured, "you seem to be growing more depressed as time goes on."

His voice was soft. "It's tough, hangin' in." A sigh. "I'll be okay. I think maybe I just need a little sleep."

"You're still spending a lot of time at the hospital."

"Sometimes I feel like I've spent my whole life in a hospital." The words were unexpectedly vehement.

"I don't understand."

"We're cops." He shrugged as though stating the obvious. "We've both spent time standing around hoping for the good word to come down from a doctor."

"It's a dangerous job."

"Yeah." The one-word answer was briefly emphatic. "I don't mind waiting for Hutch to wake up. He's waited for me lotsa times. He's looked for me, found me just in time... guess maybe that's why I know it's
gonna work this time. The reason I held on when I was hurt was because I always knew he was there for me. And somehow way down deep, he must know I'm here for him."

"You've both done your share of rescuing, then?"

"Oh, yeah. You shoulda seen Hutch. He saved a whole restaurant full of people when two mob hit men were holding them hostage, waiting for the guy they wanted to kill. They shot me... would've let me die and killed all the customers, too. If Hutch hadn't been there... Maybe another partner wouldn't have been able to save anybody..." He seemed to feel her intense eyes regarding him. Even though she knew there were dangers in police work, Melissa couldn't help looking a trifle shocked by his story. "Shoulder wound, that time," he went on, tapping his left shoulder. "I got it worse two years ago." His hand moved to rub across his chest. "Three slugs from a machine gun. Hutch got the man responsible..." A fleeting ghost of anguish crossed his features and his voice trailed off.

You keep on reliving all your pain, all your narrow escapes and brave stands together. They're your magic, your talisman -- try hard enough and the good guys always win. You're a little like me, aren't you? I hang on to my confidence in cases like your friend's by remembering all the patients I have saved... She reflected for a moment on the specifics of the last injury he had mentioned. "Two years ago? When did you say Hutch disappeared?"

"The day I got out of the hospital. How do you like that, huh?" His voice was wry, not maudlin. "That made it a little tough to go searching for him."

Melissa didn't know what to say to that. She waited for him to go on, silently pleating her napkin while she watched his face. Finally, when the silence had stretched on, she asked a gentle question. "Tell me what he's like, would you?"

The smile he gave her was poignant. "Hutch is smart. Brave. He's gentle. Tough and strong. He's funny... I usedta love to hear him laugh... Grouchy? Yeah, sometimes. Always honest. Loyal... so loyal." The voice softened, she could hear the ache in the reflective whisper. "He's loving... cares so damn much. He's... special." Eyes locked in hers, he summed up. "Like nobody else."

Damn. She wanted to see this man comforted, give him back the friend he'd lost. But she couldn't offer what medicine was unable to deliver. For not the first time in her career, she cursed medicine for not being an exact science.

But his despair had lifted. Somewhere deep inside, his strength still burned strong. "He never gave up on me. So you see, I gotta keep the faith."

The doctor nodded, dredging up a smile. He needs his hopes. But how far will he fall if we can't do anything more for his friend?"

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Starsky scanned the titles in the mystery aisle at the hospital library but found nothing he felt like reading to Hutch. It had been almost eight weeks. He'd read books, talked incessantly, massaged and cared for Hutch, all with no further signs of improvement. Now he was becoming desperate for new inspiration. All his knowledge of Hutch had not been much help so far.

C'mon, Mr. I-Went-to-College Hutchinson, what would you do at a time like this? Their deductive styles had always been distinctly different. Starsky preferred action, while Hutch took his time to think, to reason, to
do research. You'd be more comfortable in this library than I am... The next thought struck him so suddenly, he laughed. A library -- what better place could I go to get information?

Two hours later, Starsky was seated at a table, surrounded by stacks of books and periodicals. Most of the information did little more than clarify what Dr. Samuels had explained to him about Hutch's condition. He'd found several heartening articles about people who had regained consciousness and gone on to full recovery. Still, Hutch's case was so different from theirs that Starsky was left feeling no known medical technique existed that could help him.

He reached for another magazine off the top of the stack. This one was an Australian family magazine, and carried a story about a young boy who'd fallen into a coma after a car accident. The boy was ten years old and the family cared for him at home. A doctor had suggested stimulating the child continuously, giving him a virtual barrage of physical and auditory stimuli. They banged pans, played toy horns and jangled wind chimes, they stroked him with feathers and sandpaper, they alternately placed his hands in bowls of ice and warm water, and they kept it up for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. After three months, the boy's awareness had come back. Now, he was in therapy and the prognosis for recovery was good.

Starsky read the whole article twice, then sat back, stunned. The idea seemed so obvious he wondered why he hadn't thought of it. He had played music, talked to Hutch, touched him. And Hutch had sensed his efforts, had improved until he reached the current plateau. Maybe I just haven't done it for long enough, or haven't used enough contrasting stimulation. I haven't kept it up constantly... Melissa said she doesn't know what's keeping him under -- maybe... The thought of Dr. Samuels brought him up short. Why hasn't she told me about a technique like this? He flipped to the cover of the magazine. September 1980. Last year... damn. Why has she just let Hutch lie there? Something inside him that had been twisting tight for weeks seemed to finally snap.

He pushed his chair back and stood, glaring at the librarian who looked at him reprovingly for screeching the chair across the tiled floor. He charged past her desk, heading for Melissa's office, the magazine gripped tightly in his hand.

The door to her office was propped open, so Starsky barreled right in, throwing the magazine down on the desk.

"David? What's the matter?" Melissa looked up from the file she'd been reading.

"Read it. That's an article about a boy who was brought out of a coma."

She continued to stare up at him for a long moment, her eyes wide, shocked by his surly demeanor. Then she picked up the publication.

Only minutes later, after scanning the article, she sighed. "Oh. You're thinking you should try this with Hutch."

"Of course I am. The question is -- why haven't you? That article's almost a year old. This isn't something that the doctors just thought of yesterday!"

"David. Calm down."

He didn't want to listen to her moderate voice. He'd had it with empty reassurances. "I thought I could trust you! But I should have taken him back to the States with me. Back home, he could be taken care of right, by doctors who keep up with the latest medical advances!"
"Please, Lieutenant," she tried again, her tone more formal and strained. "You don't understand. Hutch's case -- "

"That's the problem. Hutch is just another case to you! Just a body lying upstairs. You weren't even able to learn who he was until I found him here. You don't care whether he ever wakes up!"

"That's completely untrue. If you'll just listen..."

"It's not doing any good anymore. I've listened to what you've told me, and you've let me sit there with him, sure. You've let me do the exercises. But they haven't accomplished anything. The only other thing you've done is tell me I'm interfering, bothering the nurses. Well, I don't buy it anymore. I just want to know one thing -- why don't you want Hutch to wake up?"

Melissa stood. Her eyes were flashing now, the professional patience undermined by hurt and indignation. "You know I don't feel that way. I care. I want to see him recover." She paused, catching a breath, recapturing her poise. "I know it's upsetting, but carrying on this way isn't going to make the situation any better."

With effort, Starsky subdued his anger. "Just tell me one thing -- why haven't you tried what that family did? Was it because you didn't have someone to pay for constant attention for him? Or did you think it was so far-fetched it would be a waste of time?"

The doctor sighed, fixing him with a rueful look. "Just a minute." She crossed to the file cabinet, pulled out a drawer and rifled through its contents. "Here." She opened the file and pulled out a couple of printed pages. "See for yourself."

Starsky took the papers. The heading identified them as a report from the New England Journal of Medicine. It was a scientific study on the effects of stimulating coma patients.

"We did try it," Melissa continued in her soft voice. "For three months. With a crew of ten volunteers. They worked 'round the clock."

Starsky flipped through the pages, a record of all that had been tried. The conclusions were painful to see there in writing. "It didn't work."

"No." She could only whisper now, the sound raw with shared hurt. "Some patients respond, but others... I don't know why, they just don't. I conferred with a doctor in Sydney who's done a lot of work in the field. His opinion is that the attention frightens them. It's possible that they retreat, fearing the very thing we'd hoped would waken them."

Starsky chewed his lower lip. "I don't know what to say."

She took a step closer to him, hand out. "Never mind. I understand."

He backed away from her touch, unable to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry." He turned, needing to get out of the room.

******

Starsky sighed as he stood at the window. There was no inspiration in the wintry August scene. He shivered, feeling more gloomy the longer he stared out at the grey afternoon. Returning to his seat at the bedside, he slumped into the chair. Then he just sat -- couldn't think of anything new to say. Whatever he said didn't
seem to matter. Starsky turned worried eyes to the still countenance before him. The joy he felt at simply having Hutch to look at was now muted by his concern that his friend would always be this way.

The detective leaned closer, resting his folded arms on the mattress. Hutch's eyes had drifted open about half an hour ago, but he lay just as he always did, in whatever position Starsky or the nurses put him. His eyes were heavy-lidded, pale, hardly any blue showing. They were hard to look at. Starsky tried to avoid them, didn't peer too closely to see how vague and unfocused they were. Hutch's blank, empty eyes haunted his dreams. They wandered without conscious direction, not even a ghost of personality in them. It was a relief when they would sink closed again.

And I once thought that his opening his eyes would mean everything. Thought it would mean he was really awake and finally coming back to me.

He cleared his throat, trying to raise his flagging spirits. "Hutch, move your hand. C'mon buddy. Just your fingers." There was no response to the verbal command. Starsky tried a few others, speaking loudly, with authority. Nothing. He picked up Hutch's hand and squeezed it, hard. There was a reaction to that, but it came a beat after the application, sluggishly. Starsky tried to tell himself that Hutch was merely drifting back to sleep. He knew there was more to it than that, though.

*Damnit, why? Why can't I get him to hear me?* Anger twisted into his heart, an insidious torment that destroyed Starsky's tenuous self-confidence. No matter how he tried to rationalize, he continually came back to the same question: *what should I do that I haven't been doing?*

He stood abruptly, stalking to the window again, casting a baleful glare at the winter-cloaked city. Damn this weather. And damn this upside-down country. His gut tightened with unexpressed anger, the litany went on. *Damn this hospital, too. Damn medicine for all its empty promises.*

His clenched fist rapped on the windowsill once, then he consciously relaxed his fingers. The tension within him remained, however. *I must be some kinda fool. I sound like a kid who's mad at the world for givin' him a bad time. Wishing hard enough doesn't make dreams come true. No matter how much I need him... that's not gonna make Hutch get better.*

He turned back to look at the sleeping man. *Hear me, Hutch. You have to hear me...* He had so many questions, so many things he needed to say. Yet in all the hours he'd been sitting at Hutch's side, they had remained locked in his heart. Perhaps he would never have the opportunity to say them.

His mind went back to the ever-present dilemma. Dr. Samuels could not come up with a reason for Hutch continuing this way, yet *something* had to be keeping him in the coma.

*The drug -- it could have affected him more than Melissa thinks. That stuff eats away at the brain. What's left of your mind, Hutch?* He couldn't ask that one question aloud. It was too frightening. Starsky tried to imagine his partner brain-damaged, helpless, yet aware of all he had lost. That would be horrible. *God, staying like he is wouldn't be as bad as that.*

*God help me, I really mean that.* Starsky's gasp broke the silence of the room. *What am I thinking? Isn't any kind of life better than death? Isn't consciousness, in whatever form it takes, what I want for him?* He didn't know anymore. The growing sick emptiness was sucking all the hope out of him, leaving only weary resignation behind.

*This is what it's like without a partner. There's no one to back me up, no one to share the pressure with. No one...*
No. Damnit, Hutch. You can't do this to us.

"You can't leave it like this, partner. You can't give up on yourself and you can't give up on me." He strode back to the bed, the simmering anger igniting under a new focus.

"Hutch. Hutch! C'mon, man. Wake up." Starsky was bent over the bed, his voice loud and demanding. "Hey, partner. We gotta get goin'. Didn't you hear that call come in? Hutch... Hutch!" His hands closed on the bony shoulders.

"Hutch!" Losing control, Starsky stopped trying to cover his fear. "I need you! Right now, Hutch! I'm here. Wake up, partner. Hutch!" What could he do, what words could be the key?

"Hutch -- I'm hit!" Whenever he'd said that before, Hutch had always been there, salvation and strength combined. "You gonna let me down? You gonna stay away? Hutch, come back! Right now! They've got me! They're killin' me, partner!"

He lifted, pulling the unresisting body up. The head lolled sideways and the eyelids lifted a fraction, but there was no other response.

Starsky recoiled from the sight, the lack of reaction fueling his anger. "God damn you, Hutchinson! Wake up, you bastard!" He was shaking, the whole world at the mercy of his desperation. And Hutch was in the heart of the raging storm. "Hutch!"

"Lieutenant! My God, don't shake him! Put him down!"

As if from the depths of a well, the nurse's voice penetrated his anger-hazed mind. Her fingers closed like steel cuffs around his wrists.

"Put him down."

Starsky felt the room wavering. He shook his head, trying to latch onto reality, but he couldn't find himself anymore. All he could do was hang onto the frail shoulders he gripped so maniacally.

"David." Another voice, this one to the right of him, calm and soothing. New hands reached, one to support Hutch's head, the other to stroke down the length of Starsky's back.

The fog of unreality lifted a little. Slowly, he tried to do as he'd been told, but he couldn't seem to let go of Hutch's shoulders.

"Easy. It's okay." Brown eyes glanced into his panicked ones, and his breath came under shaky control. Together, he and Melissa eased Hutch back down on the bed.

Starsky watched the doctor as she checked tubing, as she listened to Hutch's chest through the stethoscope. "I..." He faltered. "...didn't mean it... I might have hurt him... coulda killed him..."

Melissa answered without looking up. "It's okay. Everything seems to be all right."

What have I done? Starsky didn't know what scared him more, the knowledge that he'd lost control or the possibility that he could have harmed Hutch. He was shocked at himself. He had not realized how terribly close he'd been to breaking. Gotta get out of here... before something else happens. "You... think he's okay?"

He had to make sure, first.

Samuels turned, her eyes appraising. "No harm done. Now, how do you feel?"
He shrank from the solicitation in her gaze. "I dunno." He took a step toward the door, running a trembling hand through his hair. "I... think I'll get out of here for awhile. Maybe... take a walk or something."

She nodded. "We'll keep an eye on him."

"Okay." He turned and hurried away from the room. He couldn't even bring himself to look at Hutch before going, he was so ashamed.

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His universe was comprised of sounds and touches. They divided his space and his time, creating spiraling oases of interest. He drifted, trying sometimes to stay, to focus his fragmented ability to concentrate on one of them. But he couldn't. The drifting was stronger.

Some of the sounds were voices. One in particular just seemed to matter more. The new voice came to him, ebbing and flowing, always seeming closer than the rest. At the same time, hands touched him, hands that were warm and strong. When he could focus on the touches, he could tell the differences between them. Most of the hands were soft... light in their touches, yet impersonal. The special hands were stronger, rougher in texture, and they were also infinitely more gentle. They called to his lost consciousness, and he spent uncounted hours waiting for them, seeking the feel of them, so tender as they touched. They would skim caressingly over his face, defining him, and they would shake when they enfolded his own useless hands, communicating with the power of some raw emotion and deep need. Even when the anguish that seemed to drive them became an overpowering tempest, he did not mind. Without them, he was nothing...

And the voice called to him. He listened, content with just its sound, like a symphony that carried him to a place of sweet dreams. So close, so mellow, so welcome, familiar, it called.

I should know that voice.

He tried to gather the disconnected threads of his consciousness, to give substance and meaning to the touches and the voice he recognized but could not name.

He knew only that when that familiar presence was near, he felt secure. When it was away from him, he felt the world drop away until he fell, dizzy and lost, through frighteningly empty space. When he was alone with only the strangers' hands for comfort, he wanted to fade away again, to let go and drift off like a planet cast away from the gravity of its star. Then the so-familiar presence would return, star-bright, sun-warm, and he was rescued, held again in that safe, sheltering orbit. He knew then that he could not let go. He must hold on to coalescing consciousness... try... live.

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CHAPTER V

Dr. Samuels was examining her patient. His heart rate and respirations were normal, slowed as they usually were when he lay alone. Sometimes, when Starsky visited, his heart rate stepped up. But Starsky hadn't been in for many days now. The doctor knew he'd called every morning to enquire about Hutch's condition. But
he hadn't returned to the hospital. She wasn't surprised. His pain, his fear and indignation had had to come out some way. The anger, directed first at her and the science that seemed to have let him down, had quickly transferred itself. Directing a measure of his rage toward Hutch had been only natural. His behavior was much like that of a bereaved relative who feels great anger toward the recently deceased. Once he'd expressed it, however, his wrath had appalled him. He'd fled the hospital and hadn't returned.

"Hutch. Hutch, wake up," Melissa urged, stroking the smooth cheek firmly. "Come on. You can wake up." His eyes were half-open, but he wasn't looking at anything.

Is there anyone in there? Come on out, Hutch. She bent close, wondering how those vague eyes would appear when focused on something, when they saw and understood. Maybe never...

"You've come this far, Hutch. Why can't you come all the way?"

Continuing her examination, the doctor stroked a probe along the sole of each foot in turn. His reaction was as before, reflexive, no closer to wakefulness. She let the sharp point prick the soft skin. His eyes showed a slight wince and that was all. He didn't pull away or frown. No change.

Melissa turned, stopping short when she caught sight of the figure framed in the doorway. The American stepped forward, light from the window falling on his face.

"David." Melissa put out a hand; he looked on the verge of collapse.

The slightest of smiles acknowledged her concern. "I'm okay. Been having little problem sleepin' s'all." He stood at the foot of the bed, looking much the same as he had that first day, as if he were afraid to really look at his friend here, like this.

Melissa had appraised his condition. His face was haggard, unshaven, his hair a wind-blown tangle. But the shirt he wore was clean and pressed, as if he had made some effort to pull himself together before coming in. The big suede jacket he was unbuttoning made him look very American, a paradox of need and strength combined. There were smudged crescents under the arresting eyes.

No sleep, no solace.

Lids framed in thick black lashes closed briefly as he drew in a steadying breath. "How is he today, Melissa?"

"About the same."

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and moved closer. From opposite sides of the bed, they stood looking down at Hutch together.

"I can't understand."

At first, she wasn't sure he was saying the words to her. They were soft, fragile, like the expression in his eyes. "I don't understand how he can lay there with his eyes open like that... and not see me." He swallowed hard. "Kinda scary."

"I know. It's because movies and television would have us believe a comatose person can suddenly open their eyes and then everything's all right." She couldn't help feeling she'd somehow betrayed this man. Having his trust had become important to her. "I'm sorry."
"Yeah." Brief acknowledgement, acceptance and forgiveness all in one. "Look. They're closing. He's asleep again?"

The doctor nodded. "If we could just hold onto him long enough..."

"It's okay, Melissa. You're not to blame. I... I'm not either. What we can't change we gotta live with." He dredged up a sad smile for her. "Sorry I carried on the way I did last time I was here. And that day in your office. I musta sounded pretty ungrateful, the way I yelled at you."

"It's forgotten." The man's emotions were almost palpable. Melissa found herself thinking about the tortures he must have put himself through this last week, fearing to return, to spend even one more hour seeing Hutch in his present condition, yet riddled with guilt for having been betrayed by his heart. His eyes bore testimony to the anguish it had cost him to walk in this room today.

He was speaking again, voice like an open wound. "I yelled at him, too." His gaze dropped to Hutch's face for a moment: his eyes reflected a twinge of pain, yet the expression turned loving. He spoke more softly, with no trace of embarrassment. "Wasn't the first time, was it, partner?" One graceful hand reached out, then fell useless at his side. The dark blue eyes closed, the sensitive mouth drew into a tense line.

When he looked up, Melissa saw the question in his eyes. He couldn't ask it; everything in him demanded he deny its existence. It was up to the doctor to put it into words.

She found herself hedging, however, creeping up on the issue. "David, you're tearing yourself to pieces. Here, alone like you are, so far from home, you have nothing to think about but Hutch. If he's going to go on as he is, what are you going to do? Can you really stay here indefinitely?"

He answered without looking up, a listless shrug punctuating his words. "Guess I'll eventually have to go back. But it doesn't seem... right. He's been here, all alone, for two years. Eight weeks just doesn't seem like long enough... doesn't seem like I've waited long enough."

"You're tired. You've done more than anyone expected. If you decided to go home, we would continue to take care of things here. And I'd stay in touch with you as much as possible."

"You wouldn't think of it as running out?"

"No." Melissa broke eye contact to regard the quiet man sleeping between them. "No one would."

He nodded, letting himself be absolved. "My rent is paid up until the end of the week. Maybe -- " He broke off.

"David, don't set ultimatums for your hopes." She tried to make the warning gentle.

"I won't. I just said 'maybe.' You never know."

"That's right. You never know."

"Maybe my captain will wire me some more pay." His head canted to one side. "Or maybe I'll just get a job on the Adelaide police force, huh?" The little smile died quickly. He began pulling off the suede coat. "I think I'll stay awhile today."

"That sounds good. You let the nurses know if you need anything."
She turned quickly to leave. The pain radiating from him was filling the room. At the door, she caught just a glimpse of the dark head bent close to the blond one, and slender hands straightening the covers on the bed.

**********

What time is it back home? Starsky compared his wristwatch with the alarm clock by his hotel bed. Both read six o'clock p.m. He counted methodically, backwards, calculating the seventeen-and-a-half-hour difference in time between Adelaide and L.A. That extra half-hour had struck him funny when he'd first heard about it. Crazy Aussies, adding a spare thirty minutes to just one of their time zones. He kept counting, making sure. Ten-thirty, yesterday evening. Yeah. Dobey would still be up.

Starsky picked up the phone and asked for the overseas operator. He waited out the long minutes it took for the call to go through, holding the phone like a lifeline. Finally, the distant ringing stopped and a familiar voice said, "Hello."

The operator informed him there was a call from Australia, and it wasn't hard to visualize Dobey's face as he responded excitedly.

"Starsky? Is that you?"

"Yeah, Cap. It's me."

"How are you? How's Hutch? It's been over a month since we've heard from you."

"I know. There hasn't... been any news. He's... he's not getting any better." He cleared the gruffness out of his throat. "For awhile, things were looking pretty good. But the doctor says he could stay on this... plateau... for a long time."

There was a short silence on the other end of the line. "You sound terrible."

"Guess I do. Captain, looking at him, watching him just lie there -- it's awful. He looks so much like he could wake up any minute, but no matter what I do... he won't." His voice trailed off; he hated the lost sound of it. I don't sound so strong and determined now.

"Starsky." The distant voice was kind, but deliberate. "Why don't you think about coming home?"

"Captain... it's not that easy. Staying here has turned into the hardest thing I've ever done, but leaving... I just don't know." His fingers worried a loose thread on the chenille bedspread. "You need me back at the station?"

Dobey grumbled something unintelligible into the phone, then coughed. "There's work for you to do here. Always will be. You're a good cop and this city needs every one it can get."

Work. That would feel good. Get back on the streets; find something to think about besides... Guilt broke off the vision of life without Hutch. Anyway, what would anything I might accomplish there mean if I knew I hadn't succeeded at the most important job I ever tried?

Dobey was still talking. "But you've got to decide that for yourself."

Starsky closed his eyes, seeing the long road he had traveled in the last two years. Decide for myself? I don't think I've done that once in all this time. Fate just keeps pushin' me along. If there was one thing he'd learned, it was that a man had little or no control of the forces that shaped his life.
Isn't that the ultimate cop out? The ironic voice of his conscience niggled at him. It's easy to say you have no choice. But what's hardest of all is to take everything fate dishes out and then face up to making the ultimate decision it presents.

"I know. But to just leave him here, all alone..."

"Listen, son. I know the doctor there said it was too difficult to bring him back here, but maybe if you talked to some nursing homes here, you could work something out. I don't like to think of Hutch all the way in Australia, either."

The rumble of kindness in the low voice soothed, even over the vast distance. "Yeah. Maybe that's a possibility. Dr. Samuels has been talking to me about going home, too. I feel like I'd be abandoning Hutch, but if he hasn't known I've been here anyway..."

"Starsky, don't think of it that way. You're alive, you've got to go on living. What good can you do Hutch beating yourself up over not getting through to him? Back here, you can be the cop he'd want you to be. Think about it."

"I will. I am. I'm getting kinda broke anyway. Maybe I'll check out of my hotel at the end of the week."

"Okay. You let me know when you're coming home. Just call and I'll meet you at the airport."

Saying it like that sounded so final, so certain. Yet it was, Starsky now knew, the only answer. "Thanks, Captain. I... feel better now that we've talked."

"Any time." The older man's patience was a bulwark. "You know where to reach me."

"Yeah. Well, this is costin' me a fortune. Guess I'd better go for now."

Dobey managed a chuckle. "Guess so. Take it easy, Starsky."

"Bye, Cap."

Starsky put the phone down. He wanted very much to be with Hutch, but he sat where he was for a long time. He thought of home: my apartment, my car. The job I do... That's my life. Dobey's right. Hutch would want me to live my life, to go back to work. That's the one thing that always gave us the answers to the questions, that gave us the meaning we were searching for. He sighed, the resolve wrapping itself around his mind like an old, worn quilt.

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Starsky sat in silence for a long time. The nurses had left him alone with Hutch. *Alone for our last few minutes together...*

He reached over to switch off the radio. The music was getting on his nerves, the jangling, up-beat tunes too harsh for his mood. Then Starsky put out a hand to touch his sleeping friend once more.

He smoothed the silken hair back from the broad forehead and let his fingertips trace the pale features. His hand did not shake as he caressed the slack cheek, did not tremble as his fingers trailed down the strong neck to the shoulder. It was a gesture of simple comfort, of swelling love. Starsky knew his hand would retain the feel of the warmth of the familiar body; he had to hope that Hutch would feel and somehow understand his farewell.

An incredible sense of desolation filled him. Starsky swallowed hard, unable to quell it. The futility of the past weeks weighed him down. No matter how hard he tried to rationalize, he could not help feeling as if he were deserting Hutch. Yet the weeks of sitting here had cost him. He had done all he could. He yielded to weariness and reason. He could not sit at this bedside any longer. One day, he would return. Perhaps he could somehow figure out a way to bring Hutch, as he was, home; if not, he would visit this distant place as often as he could. For now, he had to leave Hutch in the care of Melissa Samuels and the devoted nurses.

"I'm sorry, buddy." His own raw whisper disturbed the silence of the room. "I have to go now. You know I don't want to." Starsky blinked and his eyes brimmed over. "You know I'll keep thinkin' about you."

The words seemed so inadequate. He wanted to say it right, this goodbye, even though Hutch was almost certainly incapable of hearing or understanding. Starsky wiped at his eyes with an impatient fist. He did not intend to leave like this. If Hutch sensed anything, Starsky did not want their last moments together to be filled with pain. *Only tenderness now. Only love.*

He stood and leaned over, briefly pressing Hutch's lips with his own. He kissed the closed eyelids and, brushing the hair back from one ear, softly whispered a farewell admonition. "Sleep well."

He knew he should turn away then, make the break clean, get it over with... but he just couldn't.

Starsky sat down again, taking Hutch's hand in both his own. He held on tight, never wanting to let go. *But I have to let go. He was trembling now, grieving already. Miss you so much, babe.*

*Why couldn't you wake up for me, Hutch? You need to wake up, get on with life. And I need you.*

His leaving seemed so damned unfair. He would be lonely, yes, but he could return to a productive life. No matter how empty it was, he'd have more in his life than Hutch would once he was gone. He had to remind himself that it surely didn't seem that way to Hutch.

*I should stop attributing real feelings and reactions to him, as if he's aware of all that's going on. He isn't really here, maybe never was... But Hutch was alive, and Starsky couldn't act like he was anything less.*

*If only I could leave you something of me, of mine.* A ray of wintry light caught on the bands he wore on his left pinky. Releasing his hold on Hutch's hand, Starsky contemplated the rings. They had been there so long they had become almost a part of him. If he gave them to Hutch, it would be like leaving a portion of himself with his partner. Starsky pulled and twisted until the rings slipped off.

He lifted Hutch's hand, looking at the long fingers. The strength, the tenderness of Hutch's capable hands filled his memory. Shooting that big cannon of a gun, gripped around the steering wheel in a high-speed
chase, strumming the singing strings of his guitar... and touching Starsky -- comforting hands, cherishing... loving.

Starsky sighed deeply. The two rings he held looked mismatched, two different styles, two different metals, not made for each other at all. But they had been together so long they had become a joined set. He slipped the two of them together onto the little finger of Hutch's hand. Surprised, he saw that the pale fingers were so slim now that the rings fit easily, as if made for him. He replaced the hand at Hutch's side, his fingertips brushing the gold and silver in an adieu.

Something of his desolation lifted with the gesture, leaving only weariness behind. Starsky placed his hand on Hutch's chest, holding to the soft throb of the beating heart. Its steadiness calmed him, its continuance reassured. His trembling gone, Starsky felt resolute, accepting.

He checked his watch. Time to go. He stood, leaning close one last time.

"Hutch, I love you. Always. Remember that, partner." He bent to touch his lips to Hutch's forehead and turned away.

At the door, he hesitated, then gave in to the temptation to glance back. Hutch lay as he had, deeply asleep, eyes closed as if in true slumber. He was pale against the white sheets, hair light gold on the pillow, Starsky's rings a warm glint on his finger. In his heart, Starsky would always carry the memory of Hutch's beauty and grace, but he did not look like the man Starsky loved. He was a ghost of that man, only a shell, slender and grave-faced, unmoving and silent. Starsky wondered why he hadn't seen it before.

_Maybe I wouldn't let myself. They do say love is blind..._

It hurt to see the still shape marred by the intrusion of the tubes that fed him and eliminated his wastes. Still, a part of him remained beautiful, unblemished despite the sleep that would not relinquish him. Starsky looked for a long moment, adding this final picture to his memories. Then he opened the door and escaped the confines of the quiet room.

Dr. Samuels stood there in the hall. He found he couldn't meet her eyes, even when she moved in close and took his arm.

"David?"

He wet his dry lips. "I'm okay, Melissa." He looked at her. "I want to thank you. For everything. And please --"

"You don't have to ask. We'll take good care of him. I promise." She paused. "You'll keep in touch?"

He nodded. His voice seemed to be failing him. "Gotta go." Her hand stayed on his arm, and he glanced back into her compassionate face.

A slight smile, mingling friendship and pity, came to the pretty mouth. "Take care of yourself, David. I'm glad you found him." Before he could reply, she reached on tiptoe to kiss his face.

The gesture surprised Starsky. Response failed him. It had all been said. He patted her awkwardly and hurried down the hall.

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His mind summoned strength for thought, for recognition. It reached out to the warmth, to the love that surrounded him so protectively. Unable to show that he understood, he felt, he knew, he let hope take him. He wasn't alone, the world held one more person, and suddenly it was safe. Someone waited nearby, outside the dark

Someone...

named...

Starsky.

He'd been reaching for what must have been eons. What had been waiting there so long seemed to have moved away now. The pang of sudden emptiness confused him more than ever. He had tried so hard to move, to respond to Starsky and the warmth that had called to him. Now, he sensed that his chance was gone. It was too late.

He tried to fight the overwhelming panic but it weighed him down. He cursed the dark -- he was so damned tired of it. It had kept him prisoner too long. It had kept him from Starsky, and he sensed how sad that had made his friend. The gentle presence that meant 'Starsky' so often had seemed awkward with concern and tension. He knew he must be very, very sick if Starsky were so upset. He didn't mean to worry him. He wanted so badly to reach out, to tell his friend that he knew he was there, but he lay immobile, locked in a dream-world from which he could not awaken. His mind was powerless to direct his body's functions.

Now he sensed the outer quiet that had descended. The music was gone; the friendly voice no longer spoke to him. His ears missed the comforting words, the constant chatter, the familiar slurred pronunciations. He wanted to cry from frustration, from the loneliness of his solitary universe.

The touches were gone, too. The gentleness, the warmth of fingertips and lips that had wakened him to love but not to light had ceased and left him bereft. If only he could have reached out and squeezed the hand that had held his. He'd tried so long, so hard. It seemed so simple a thing to do. Just like this...

He knew his hand moved that time. His fingers curled and tightened on the bedcovers. He repeated the gesture, this time sensing something unfamiliar on his hand... on his little finger. He tried, but his fingers were becoming tingly, little shocks of awakening nerves making him forget what he'd been trying to do. He drew the shreds of his concentration together, making one more effort to open his eyes.

The assault of harsh, bright light forced them immediately closed again.

*Once more. I know I can do it.*

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It took a moment to focus, but lines and shapes and colors eventually settled into the configuration of recognizable walls and furniture. Yet the room itself was unfamiliar. He had never seen it before.

And he was alone.

Hutch's arm felt incredibly heavy to him. He couldn't even lift it to see his watch.

*What time is it? Where am I?*

In confusion, he tried to make his mind slow down enough to figure out what was going on. He had thought that if he opened his eyes, he would find Starsky...
Hutch sighed brokenly. He'd tried so hard to respond, to show he heard and wanted to come back. Now, he was too late. From being alone in the dark, he was alone in the light, alone in this strange room.

He lay still, breathing hard, trying to concentrate, to get hold of his reeling emotions. Weak and disoriented, he could do nothing. His eyelids were growing heavy. But he had to stay awake. He fought the weakness desperately, but it was nearly too much for him.

The sound of a door opening tugged at his waning attention. Into his fuzzy field of vision came a figure. It was a woman in white, wearing a white cap.

She had been humming to herself, but stopped as she approached the bed. The sound of running water came to Hutch's ears, along with a rustling, as if of cloth being arranged or folded.

"Okay now, dear. Time for your bath."

Her voice was light, its tone carrying the indefinable accent he knew he had heard before. Unfamiliar, yet known...

His arm was lifted, bathed with warm water. He tried to look up, to make his mind understand what was going on. The water helped to stimulate his senses. As her hand touched his, he concentrated and clasped weakly at her fingers.

Her chatter stopped, his arm was laid down. A face framed in blonde hair leaned into his vision. "Joey -- I mean, Hutch? Come on, love. Squeeze my hand again."

It was very important, the most important thing he'd ever tried to do. Hutch gathered his strength and squeezed.

The woman gasped. Her wet hand touched his face, tried to turn his gaze up to meet hers. But Hutch didn't want to see her. The person he wanted to see was Starsky. He looked around the room, finally catching sight of a chair pulled close to the bedside. Starsky must have sat there, all those hours when he was talking to him. The chair was empty and Hutch groaned in frustration, his head tossing from side to side.

She was speaking to him, meaningless words that he couldn't focus on. He was frantic, scared to death.

"All right... it's all right... You're going to be fine. I'll be right back." She patted his shoulder briefly and left him alone again.

Hutch wanted to weep, but whether from disappointment or relief, he did not know.

***********

Dr. Samuels hurried through the long corridors of the nursing home, spurred to haste by the excited call from Mary Brownwell. The usually unflappable nurse had been stammering, trying to tell her about the sudden change in their coma patient. It seemed impossible. Melissa had looked in on him for just a moment after Starsky had left, and he had been the same.

Arriving at his door, she entered at once. Mary was speaking loudly, calling his name. The nurse looked up as she approached. "He seems really upset. I can't get through to him."

Melissa bent over him, pressing her stethoscope to his chest. His heart was thudding so fast she could barely count it. Respiration was up, too. She reached to touch his cheek, to still the restless, feeble movement of his head on the pillow. With a little groan, he attempted to shy away.
"Hutch. Hutch, listen." The eyes were moving, clear blue darting back and forth. "That's right. Wake up. That's good. Look at me." He responded to her tone, following her command, eyes finding and focusing on her face. "Squeeze my hand. Hutch? Come on. Squeeze my hand."

The lax fingers she held pressed weakly against her own, clung. His eyes narrowed in the effort of concentration.

"Good boy. You did it. That's good, Hutch." She smiled and patted his cheek again.

His gaze had wandered, though. She spoke to him, but couldn't call him back this time. His eyes seemed to be searching, seeking to understand where he was and what was going on around him.

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Never saw this place before. Those women, who are they? A hanging, glittering, fascinatingly shiny something caught his attention. He watched it a moment, then his eyes moved on, still searching.

The woman was speaking again, touching him more, a probing, examining touch he tried to ignore. It hurt to have his legs flexed that way.

Why is she pinching? He flinched away with a soft whimper.

"Okay. Okay. You're here, Hutch. Look at me, Hutch."

He didn't want to see her. Her words didn't matter, he was tuning them out. Trying to understand was impossible. There was an ache building deep inside, a need, a want that could not be expressed.

Where's Starsky? The question was there, in his head, but he didn't know how to make it come out. What's gone wrong? The frustration and the fear were greater than any he had ever felt. Where... where is Starsky?

************

"Oh my God." Melissa watched as a single tear escaped from the corner of one blue eye and trembled on her patient's cheek. His glistening eyes were fastened on the empty chair where David used to sit. "Mary! Call security at the airport. They must stop Lieutenant Starsky and get him back here, right now! Hurry, give them his description. His flight to Sydney leaves in half an hour!"

She'd kept her eyes on Hutch. He seemed to have heard and perhaps understood the name she had spoken. She touched the worried face. "You want to see your friend David, Hutch? Do you remember David Starsky?"

His eyes blinked, once again darting to search the room, then returning to watch the bedside chair. The only answer Melissa received was an anguished sigh, but the blue eyes were sparkling, clear-seeing.

She closed her own eyes, uttering a thankful prayer. At last.

************

Starsky trudged through the air terminal, wrapping himself in an emotional fog. He kept his head down, not wishing to encounter the smiling, expectant faces of other travelers. The long flight home loomed before him. He felt more depressed than he ever had, more lonely for Hutch than at any time during the last two years.
"Excuse me, mate."

The bulky form of a uniformed security guard blocked his path. Starsky looked up. "What do you want?"

"David Starsky, American police?" The man glanced at a slip of paper in his hand.

"Huh? Yeah, that's me. What's the matter? I got a plane to catch."

"I'm sorry, sir. We received a call from Pulteney Nursing Home. Dr. Melissa Samuels requests you return there immediately."

Starsky stood staring at the guard for a moment, gulping in consternation. "I don't understand. Did she say...?"

"I don't have any message, mate. Just to get you to the hospital."

Starsky felt a flush of heat sweep over him, followed by a wave of cold apprehension. Afraid to hope for good news, yet trying to rationalize that nothing very bad could have happened in so short a time, he looked around wildly for a moment. Get back to the hospital... find a cab...

The security guard turned him back toward the entrance with a hand at his elbow. "There's a car waiting for you, sir. Staff security."

Starsky mumbled his thanks and took off in the direction of the exit. When he pushed through the door, another security guard caught his attention and motioned him toward the idling automobile.

"I'm Lieutenant Starsky."

"Righto." His bag was taken and Starsky, feeling bewildered, got into the vehicle.

The ride back to the nursing home seemed interminable. Eyes closed, Starsky leaned back against the leather upholstery, his heart pounding in counterpoint to the rattling engine. As the car lurched to a stop, Starsky peered out the fogged window at the hospital façade. Wiping sweaty hands on his pantlegs, he opened the door. Melissa stood in the doorway of the building, her sweater pulled tight against the cold. She was waving at him, motioning urgently. Grabbing his suitcase, Starsky bolted from the car.

He took the steps two at a time. "What?"

Melissa clutched at his forearms. "Thank God they caught you before the plane left! He's awake!"

"God -- how? When? You mean it?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Mary went in and began bathing him and he was looking at her. He squeezed her hand."

Starsky's knees had turned to Jell-o. "He's awake?"

Melissa nodded, laughter in her eyes. "That's what I said. He's really regaining consciousness. He opened his eyes, he focused -- "

"Did he say anything?" Starsky finally remembered to step through the doorway. Melissa came with him.

Her hand found one of his. "No. He's very weak, David. It's been two years."
"Oh." His stomach did a flip-flop. "I thought --"

"Listen to me. This is a real step forward. No, he isn't speaking yet. I don't even think he can actually understand much of what we're saying to him. But he is able to respond. When I asked him to squeeze my hand, he did it. He pulled away when I pinched his arm. He looked all round the room, at the plants -- he watched the mobile."

Starsky hung on to her every word, trying to get the new information to compute. He'd had to make himself understand that Hutch opening his eyes didn't mean he was awakening. It was hard to let go of that idea, now. He had been forced to accept the probability that Hutch would never come around. Though it was the thing Starsky wanted most in the world, he had trouble believing it now.

"How could it happen, so sudden, I mean? When I was in with him today, he wasn't aware at all. He didn't even know I was there."

"I think he did know." Melissa nudged him in the direction of the elevator. "He heard you. You called him back. It may have taken him awhile to show his response, but he did it. David, he was looking all around that room for you!"

"For me?" Starsky's voice sounded funny to him, all breathy and kind of high-pitched. But maybe that was because of the loud roaring in his ears. "How do you know?"

"He kept looking at the chair where you sat. His eyes were searching and when he didn't find you, he became very upset. And when I said your name, told him we were going to bring you back, he calmed. He understood your name. David, he's going to come back."

"Hutch..." Starsky's eyes went to the slow-changing numbers that indicated their progress upward in the elevator. Adrenalin began racing through his system, making him light-headed. Melissa was still speaking, talking of neurological work-ups and physical examinations, but he didn't listen. The only words he heard were the ones that kept repeating over and over in his mind.

He's awake. Hutch is awake.

As the elevator door slid open, Starsky was suddenly conscious of the enormous responsibility that lay ahead, getting Hutch well, getting him through the changes he'd discover when he understood he had lost two whole years of his life.

"Don't look so worried," Melissa chided him, laughing. "The worst is over. He's got a lot of recovering to do, both physically and mentally. And emotionally. But I know you'll be able to help him."

They were at Hutch's door. Starsky couldn't even remember getting out of the elevator. He stopped, feeling scared. Then realization swept over him again, stronger than ever. He's awake! Hutch was in there, really there, now. And he needed Starsky now more than ever.

Starsky drew in a deep breath and shouldered through the door.

The room was different. Forever changed. Instead of a dismal sickroom, enveloped in winter's haze, it was full of sunshine, full of the living, breathing wide-awake presence of Hutch.

His eyes were open, huge and beseeching and blue. And they didn't wander, unfocused and unseeing. They were alert, looking around. At the sound of the door, they swept towards him. So long missed, so well-
remembered. Hutch's eyes locked with Starsky's own as he entered. They lit with trust and pleasure as they rested on him, recognized him.

Starsky was drawn by their clarity. His own heart was waking, too, rousing from the uneasy sleep -- a coma of his own -- he had endured while waiting for this moment.

"Hutch," he breathed.

The eyes opened even wider, anxious with longing. Starsky move quickly, needing to be close to him, knowing Hutch needed the closeness, too.

As he approached, one hand, ever so slightly, lifted from the mattress, its motion shaky, needful, endearing.

"God, Hutch..." Knees giving out, Starsky sat on the edge of the bed. Their hands found each other. Hutch's fingers felt warm, and so good twining around his on their own. Overcome, Starsky gripped them tightly, then tried to ease off, afraid too much pressure would hurt Hutch. He blinked rapidly, laughing, crying, feeling every emotion there was.

He swallowed, clearing his throat. "Hi, buddy. Welcome back."

Hutch's lips trembled as they opened. His eyes registered confusion. Starsky could see the disorientation and weakness frightened him. "Hey, now. Take it easy. Everything's gonna be all right. You're gonna be fine." His free hand soothed, resting alongside Hutch's face, fingers circling at his temple. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. Okay?"

Hutch sighed, relaxed. The reaction seemed miraculous to Starsky. Then Hutch's mouth curved into a brief smile and his eyes lost their anxious expression. They stayed focused on Starsky as Melissa, standing on the other side of the bed, began examining him.

The procedure seemed to disturb him. He frowned, giving a slight grunt of disapproval, and looked as if he'd like to pull away from the doctor's probing hands.

Starsky chuckled out loud. "Look at you. Worst patient in the world." He beamed up at Melissa, joy in his heart. Her own smile was reflected delight.

She finished as Hutch's eyes began to lose their flow and his lids drooped. "Hutch? Open your eyes." He responded to her voice, obviously trying hard to fight weakness and fatigue.

"Hutch. Look at me." Starsky was filled with wonder, seeing the effort his partner was putting forth. "That's good. So good."

"I think it's time to let him rest now," Melissa spoke up. "He's come a long way, and he'll need to sleep."

"Sleep?" Starsky questioned, without taking his eyes from Hutch. He had the uneasy feeling that Hutch might slip away again, drift back under the spell of the coma.

"Don't worry." Melissa finished making notes on his chart. "You stay with him. His waking periods will become longer soon."

"Okay." He patted the hand lying palm up on the bed. The fingers feebly reached for his, and Starsky let his hand stay, grateful to be able to give the comfort Hutch sought. He was content to sit there on the side of the bed, feeling so close to him. He held Hutch's hand while he slept, confident the slumber -- this time -- would be brief.
BOOK THREE

GENESIS
August, 1981

Starsky checked his watch again. Hutch had been sleeping for nearly three hours. *Really sleeping,* he reminded himself. *He's gonna wake up again, and look at me...* The smile just wouldn't leave his face. He grinned widely at his dozing partner, wanting to touch him. But Hutch needed the rest so Starsky waited.

Still, he felt restless; energy coursed through his body with nowhere to go. His aborted departure and sudden return had left him feeling keyed up. The excitement of Hutch's awakening made him feel he should be doing something. He'd been sitting all this time, happy instead of morose and worried, but now he had to act. His eye fell on the watering can and he decided watering the plants would give him something to do.

He took his time, noting new growth on the plants, picking off a couple of withered leaves. He became absorbed in the task, remembering the day he'd purchased them for Hutch. The spider plant was his own favorite. The large mother plant had sprouted many "babies," now nearly ready to take root in their own pot. Starsky fingered the leafy tendrils gently, pleased at the greenery's thriving progress.

He was about to move on to the next thirsty plant when he hesitated, an odd feeling settling over him. He sensed someone's eyes on him, watching. *Who...?* Cop sense on alert, he whirled.

The watcher lay in the bed, blue eyes staring hungrily. Starsky heaved a breath, laughing softly at his mistake. He'd been so used to feeling alone in this room. *Not anymore.* Smiling, he put down the watering can and approached the bed.

"Hey. You woke up again. How you doin'?"

The wide blue eyes never left his face. Starsky watched them, amazed at the changing expressions, the feeling they seemed to reveal. First, they looked happy to be seeing Starsky, then they reflected confusion. A shadow of hurt and anguish seemed to dampen their glow. Hutch looked like he wanted to talk, to ask a thousand questions, but though the words must be in his mind, he couldn't get them out. His eyes became mirrors of frustration then, moving into helpless fear. Starsky didn't want him to look that way.

He sat down and reached for Hutch's hand. The expression in the eyes cleared, relaxing slightly. "It's okay, partner. Everything's gonna be all right." He wrapped both his hands around the warm one he held, trying to convey reassurance. "Bet you're wondering what's going on, huh? Well don't you worry. You're in a hospital, but you're gonna be fine."

Hutch's gaze left his face then, wandering the room, taking in his surroundings. When his eyes returned to look at Starsky again, they lit up. Starsky felt like crying -- or laughing, or grabbing Hutch up in the tightest hug ever. But he just sat, squeezing his hand carefully, worried that by overreacting he might upset Hutch more.

"Do you -- do you remember anything? About when you got kidnapped?"

The blond head tilted to one side, as if Hutch were trying to make sense of the words Starsky was saying.
"You can't understand me?" It had seemed he was following a little of what Starsky had said earlier, when he mentioned that Hutch was in the hospital. He decided to try a test of sorts. "Can you squeeze my hand, Hutch?"

His friend's gaze moved immediately to their joined hands. A subtle pressure tightened around Starsky's fingers.

"Good. That's real good. Now can you say something? Try, babe. You can do it if you try."

Hutch frowned. He blinked several times, as if trying to process what Starsky had said. His lips opened and closed again, trembling slightly.

"Okay. Take it easy. Hey, I'll bet you're thirsty. You want some water?" Starsky reached for the pitcher on the bedside stand. He'd wet Hutch's lips with cool water many times during his vigil, and had sometimes tried to get him to drink, but the reflex for swallowing didn't seem to be operating while Hutch was in the coma. Starsky poured a little water into the plastic cup now and held it to his friend's mouth, lifting his head gently.

Hutch sipped, coughing a little as it went down. He drank again, seeming thirsty, eyes widening at the cool taste. Starsky let him back down on the pillow.

"You're doin' beautiful, buddy," he told him, grinning, feeling proud of his partner's accomplishment. "Did that taste good?" The eyes watched his, but Hutch answered neither verbally nor by expression. He seemed to understand only some of what Starsky was saying.

He closed his eyes for a moment and the slender body tried to shift position. The movement was weak, ineffective. Hutch sighed, opening his eyes to look at Starsky again.

"You gettin' uncomfortable like that?" He glanced at his watch; it was well past time Hutch was turned. "How about I help you roll over? I'll rub your back too, okay?"

He stood, reaching to turn Hutch onto his side, as he had done so many times in the months of silence. Now as he moved him, Hutch gasped deeply, going rigid, hands flinging out, trying to grab hold of something. Starsky bent over him, cupping his face.

"Hey, hey. Easy there. We've done this before. You relax and let me do the work, now, all right? It's gonna be okay." He kept murmuring reassurance and Hutch relaxed, although the movement still seemed to disturb him. His face looked frightened. Starsky wanted to believe it was because the shift confused him, disorienting his tenuous grip on reality. But it could be something else, he thought in concern. Those guys who took him -- maybe he's still feeling afraid of what they did to him.

"There," he said, when he had his friend settled on his side. "Is that better? You can see the window now. See how the sun is shining?" He began to stroke the long, cool back, parting the sides of the hospital gown. Hutch's muscles had tightened with the movement, now they began to relax for him again. Starsky massaged the tense neck and shoulders and Hutch sighed audibly. "Good. That feels good, doesn't it?"

Starsky breathed to him. "Everything's fine, Hutch. You let your partner take care of everything and you're gonna get well so fast..." His hands slipped lower, stroking over the smooth buttocks and down the long thighs and calves. His heart felt so full he thought it would overflow with emotion.

Hutch was awake, he knew Starsky, knew he was there caring for him. Yet they were in a transition phase. Starsky didn't quite know how to treat him. Was this type of massage and the exercises necessary or
appropriate now? Starsky thought he might feel shy about having his partner touching him all over the way he had when Hutch hadn't even known what was going on.

Right now, however, he seemed to be basking in the attention. The fear had left his face, his expression was soft and happy. The joy came back to Starsky. Melissa would be able to tell him how to help Hutch's progress along. And he was making progress. Every minute he seemed better.

Just as he thought of her, Melissa entered the room. She smiled when she met Starsky's eyes. "Looks like things are going pretty well here."

Hutch heard her speak; he jumped a little, as if the sound of her voice had startled him.

Starsky bent close to him. "This is your doctor, buddy. She's been taking good care of you."

"I'm Melissa Samuels, Hutch," the doctor spoke up, slipping her stethoscope into her ears. She rubbed the metal disk a moment to warm it before placing it against Hutch's chest. "You're doing beautifully," she smiled down at him after listening. "Let's ease him over on his back again. I want to take some blood." The clear blue eyes were following every movement she made.

Together, Starsky and Melissa shifted Hutch's position. He seemed to get disoriented again, but when Starsky spoke to him, his eyes lost that scared look. They were fastened on Starsky's face when Melissa wrapped the length of elastic around his bicep and palpated his vein.

Immediately, he turned to look, a hoarse groan erupting from his throat, his expression horrified. "You'd better hold him for me," Melissa directed, her voice calm.

Starsky leaned over him, speaking softly, urging him to relax. Hutch was beginning to breathe heavily, his eyes straying over to his arm as the syringe approached. Starsky held his shoulders. When the needle went in, he jerked feebly, his wavering cry cutting into Starsky's heart.

Melissa's movements were quick and efficient. She pressed a gauze square against the tiny mark at Hutch's elbow, soothing him in her quiet voice. "I know that hurt a little bit, but we need to check your blood to see that everything is all right. You're okay now, Hutch."

"He hates needles," Starsky explained, his throat feeling raw. "A long time ago, a drug pusher kidnapped Hutch and injected him with heroin until he had him hooked. I helped him kick it cold turkey." The doctor's eyes widened in shock. "Probably the last thing he remembers before going into the coma was when the men who brought him to Australia shot him up with that drug they gave him. He musta... musta been terrified..." He broke off, seeing the bright moisture trembling in Hutch's eyes.

"Of course..." Melissa's voice was a whisper. She stroked her patient's head. "Hutch. Hutch, you can rest now. Nothing is going to hurt you here. We're taking care of you." She applied a band-aid to the wound on Hutch's arm, and he whimpered a little. His eyes stayed on Starsky. "Talk to him, David. Distract him. I'll come back in a little while to finish my examination."

Starsky pulled up his chair, thinking rapidly, trying to come up with a topic that would help to banish the fear and pain for his friend. "Hey, Hutch. You oughta see Dobey these days. He's put on more weight than ever."

The name seemed to be something Hutch recognized. His brows went up slightly, as if asking Starsky to go on. 

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"Yeah, but he's the same gruff old bear we always knew. He'll be so happy when I call him to let him know you're awake." He smoothed the hair back from Hutch's forehead. "And Rosey's getting so grown up. She's as pretty as ever. She always enjoyed having you come over and tell her stories. You remember?"

Hutch was looking at him with that expression of confusion again. The sound of Starsky's voice seemed to be soothing him, at least, so he kept on speaking. He talked about Huggy, cops they knew at Metro, realizing that little if anything made sense to Hutch. He kept his voice light, smiling as often as he could, and gradually Hutch's breathing eased again and the tears dried.

Melissa came back with a nurse in tow, and the rest of the examination went without incident. Starsky sat nearby, clapping Hutch's hand, and the patient remained calm as long as he could hear Starsky's voice and see him.

"You and I have our work cut out for us," the doctor said finally.

"How's he doing, Melissa?" Starsky broke eye contact with Hutch to look up at her.

"Basically, better than I expected. He's understanding very little of what is being said, though he does comprehend simple commands. He responds most to the sound of your voice -- with your encouragement, he'll keep trying to focus on what's going on out in the world. He recognized the syringe and was afraid -- that shows he is becoming oriented as to place and thing."

"So you think his intelligence is still there?"

"He's retained something. I'd expected him to be rather blank, accepting the way he is for now without seeming confused or afraid, not really wondering what's going on until he's been awake a good while longer. But since fear, or worry at least, may have been the last thing he was feeling, that seems to be foremost in his mind. The EEG looks very good, and so do his blood levels. I'm going to order another CAT scan. Now that he's regaining consciousness, we'll be better able to interpret it. Physically, he's very weak. One thing we want to do is get him to take some calories by mouth as soon as possible. He'll probably be alert enough to gag on the feeding tube soon, so I'd like to eliminate it within the next few days, if he can tolerate a liquid diet. Also, when someone has been off their feet a long time, the calcium in the bloodstream doesn't circulate correctly and the leg bones become weak. We'll get him up on a tilt table several times a day, just raising it about 10 degrees at first and increasing it gradually -- too much too soon and we'll have him passing out or vomiting. As soon as possible, I want him out of that bed and down in physical therapy. Meanwhile, I want you to work with him on language. See if he looks at something when you name it."

"Should I tell him how long it's been?"

"If you do, he won't understand. Keep it all simple. He's in the hospital, but he's going to get well. There will come a day when it's appropriate to tell him how much time has passed."

"Appropriate?"

"When he asks for the information. He won't be ready for it until then, so there is no need to be specific until he begins asking questions. It will take a while, but they will be inevitable. Right now, he doesn't even realize that there is something wrong with him."

"Do you think he'll ever be able to tell me what happened?"

Melissa turned her gaze to the patient. "I hope so. He certainly remembered what that needle meant. But more specific memories may take longer to sort themselves out for him. I do think he'll begin to speak,
although that will probably be gradual. His brain is not so much damaged as it is... out of practice. He'll have to learn how to use his verbal and motor skills all over again."

"What about the kinds of things I've been doing for him?"

"The exercises? Keep doing those, but I want to see if he can put some resistance against the pull you exert on his muscles. You can help him with his daily care, too. As soon as he's strong enough, we've got to involve him with washing his hands and face, things like that. He's started forward, I want him to keep making progress. You've been very capable at stimulating him up to now, but you've got to step up those efforts. He has to have lots of things to look at, to listen to. Ask him to think. Anything can help, even toys. He'll learn a lot by matching shapes, picking out colors... And you can try to see if he remembers things from the past -- not really what happened to him when he was kidnapped, but from your earlier times together."

Melissa went on, outlining a new schedule for Hutch, and Starsky included ideas of his own. As they spoke, the man they were discussing dozed off again. Starsky felt the hand he held relax. He looked closely at the sleeping face and lost the thread of what Melissa was saying.

"You're not worrying, are you?" she asked lightly.

"No," he answered without looking up at her. "I'm not gonna let this guy slip away from me again."

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Hutch lay in bed, exhausted. It seemed he had been pushed and prodded, turned and tilted, lifted and touched until he couldn't keep track of anything. Of the vague world around him, he comprehended little, feeling only dizziness, loss of equilibrium, a crazy, nauseating sense of falling when he was moved abruptly. And assaulted, when the strange, loud voices spoke to him. To lie here now -- still, quiet -- seemed so good. His eyes closed.

Time had little meaning. He might have been this way for a day, a week, or only an hour. Yet he did not question that anymore than he did anything else, accepting his state of being, incapable of wondering why speaking was too much effort, why he could not understand what was being said to him.

Only two feelings asserted themselves in his mind. The first was fear. It was his constant companion, accepted like everything else, a nagging worry left over from another life. He did not fear anything specific, yet the emotion colored all his reactions. The second feeling helped balance the first. There was no word for it, just a name. Starsky. A presence, a smile. A comforting hand. 'Everything's all right, Hutch. Take it easy now.' If that voice told him to rest, to sleep, to squeeze his hand, Hutch obeyed. If he was afraid, the voice soothed. In a world of images and sensations that made no sense, Starsky was an anchor, a light to follow. If he opened his eyes and did not see that face, Hutch looked for him. If something happened, if he was touched or disturbed, and he couldn't hear that voice, the fear and confusion grew out of proportion, receding only when the presence he needed so badly returned.

Hutch had no words, no vocabulary to explain it. Friend, partner... those terms did not exist in his mind and memory. There was simply Starsky. Without him, emptiness. With him, peace.

Hutch looked for him now with eyes that burned from fatigue. He couldn't see very well; the room seemed dark, blurred. The objects around him didn't make much sense. He couldn't make out details of shape and color, didn't bother trying to perceive their functions or meanings. He knew only one thing. There was no Starsky here.
A wave of loneliness and loss assailed him. *Where...?* The question clawed at his mind, without definition or expression. An ache, born in the depths of his being, swamped everything else he knew. *Starsky?*

Hutch closed his eyes tight, drew in a breath that seemed to catch in his heart. He felt so insignificant, a tiny speck in a huge empty room. Heart tripping anxiously, all he could do was search his mind for a remnant of the voice and face and hand he needed by him now.

Words filtered back to him, out of indistinct memory. *'Shhh. Easy now. You've had a pretty rough day. Go to sleep. I'll see you in the morning.'* The words seemed close, alive almost. Had they been so recently whispered to him? *Starsky says sleep. Go to sleep.* Hutch sighed, letting the echo of their presence calm his fears. His body slowly untensed, his heavy eyelids drifted closed. His hand, empty now, could recall the warmth of a firm clasp. He held on to that image, and settled into sleep.

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"Easy, Hutch. Take it easy. I'm not gonna let you fall." Starsky said the words anxiously, the note of fear in his friend's voice cutting into him. Hutch expressed himself only in guttural growls, moans and sighs. Right now, the sound coming from his throat told of panic, and Starsky did what he could to alleviate it. Hutch was on the tilt board, strapped so he couldn't fall from the forty-five degree angle, but obviously he didn't feel any too safe up there. Starsky kept trying to soothe and reassure him.

The blue eyes were huge in the thin face, darting fearfully around the room. The long throat worked, the laboring chest heaved. Starsky shook his head, imagining the cuss words his partner would be using if he had the vocabulary right now. Hutch hated to be messed with when he didn't feel good; he liked being scared even less. The idea of him cussing out the nurses and Starsky, too, brought a grin to his face, and an idea.

"Cut it out, willya?" Starsky demanded abruptly. "You heard me. I've had enough of the Hutchinson attitude. You're not gonna fall, so shut up and get used to this."

The physical therapist, Amelia, uttered a small gasp and looked at Starsky like he'd lost his mind. Starsky ignored her, his gaze intent on his partner.

Hutch stopped moaning. His eyes still held anxiety, but it was obvious he was trying to control it. Eyes fixed on Starsky, his mouth tried to manage a smile. Starsky felt like he'd been awarded the lottery's grand prize.

"See? You can handle it if you try, buddy." He grinned, ruffling Hutch's hair. "Now just rest there for twenty minutes or so and you can go back to your room." He turned his smile on the therapist. "You just gotta know how to talk to this fella."

Fingers brushed at his wrist and he looked down. Hutch's hand was reaching for him. Starsky squeezed it briefly, then let it go. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes. Gotta make a trip to the comfort station."

Worry crept back into Hutch's expression.

"Just relax, partner," Starsky told him, turning to go.

Five minutes later, he pushed open the door to the therapy room, surprised to hear Hutch's voice again. He wasn't carrying on the way he had been, but he was definitely distressed. The shallow moans spoke of pain and confusion. Starsky felt his gut tightening into a knot.
"I'm back." He moved up close to the table, trying to keep his voice neutral. Letting on he was upset by Hutch's fear would only feed into the emotion, he reasoned. Hutch's eyes turned to him immediately, and in a few moments he was calm again. Starsky patted his shoulder, not really knowing what to say. His own tension did not ebb as easily.

_We've got a long way to go, haven't we? Feels like thousands of miles, as big a trip as it took me to get all the way over here. What's that proverb say about the journey beginning with a single step? You're takin' baby steps, Hutch. I'm glad to see them, but I'm just beginning to realize how hard the road back is going to be._

The session in therapy continued, following the time on the tilt table, with some simple exercises and movements. Amelia worked with Hutch while he sat up in a wheelchair, asking him to grasp objects she handed him. Though there was little strength in his hands, he was able to hold a tennis ball, a plastic ring, a child's block. There seemed to be slightly less ability in his right hand than his left.

He was becoming tired already. Amelia tried to get him to push back when she took his hand and pushed; he didn't seem to understand.

"Let me try," Starsky suggested after a moment. He took the chair the therapist vacated and reached for his friend's hands. "Okay now, I'm gonna push. You push back." Starsky said the words simply, directly, looking into the wide, vulnerable eyes. He placed his palms flat against Hutch's. When the long fingers interlaced with this own, Starsky felt a wave of warmth reach the bottom of his heart. "That's it," he said, voice hushed. "Now push." He exerted only a little pressure against Hutch's light grip. He could feel the meager resistance as Hutch's arms responded.

"Come on, give it some more." He let his arms be pushed back by Hutch's hands, letting his elbows bend slightly. He returned pressure, and felt Hutch respond more quickly that time. Again, there was more strength coming from Hutch's left hand.

"Good. Give me a little more. All right!" He squeezed the hands he held and Hutch's eyes lit up.

Amelia checked her watch. "That's enough for today. You can take him back upstairs now."

Starsky looked up at her. "He's doin' okay, isn't he?" He needed the reassurance for himself, too.

She nodded, catching a strand of her hair that had come out of the band that held it. "Very well. We'll have to work hard on his right side. That's the area that seems to have been affected by the slight stroke he had. But I don't anticipate any longer term disability."

"Good."

"He'll begin to get stronger every day." Amelia looked at Hutch's chart. "How has he been doing on his eating?"

"Okay. We're going easy with that. He's been a little queasy, even on the clear liquids, but Melissa says he's doing well."

Amelia smiled and nodded. "Okay, Hutch. I'll see you tomorrow." She spoke emphatically, leaning down to come into his line of sight. The blue gaze went right past her, though, still fixed on Starsky's face.
You don't have to shout, lady. "Come on, partner," Starsky urged, moving to the back of the wheelchair. He turned it carefully, heading out the door at a slow speed that wouldn't unsettle Hutch's fragile sense of equilibrium.

By the time they returned to his room, Hutch looked exhausted. Mary Brownwell helped Starsky get him into bed. His hands trembled, his breathing was shallow. When they'd taken him out of bed to go down to therapy, he'd tried to help, but now he couldn't manage. It hurt to see him practically on the verge of collapse from the brief activity.

"Get some rest," Starsky told him, adjusting the covers. He then turned to leave the room, intending to go find some lunch in the hospital cafeteria.

An anxious sigh drew him back to the bed. "What, don't you want to be alone?" He smoothed the hair across Hutch's forehead. "Okay. I'll sit with you until you fall asleep." He took Hutch's hand in his own. The bony fingers squeezed his for an instant, then Hutch's eyes closed and his breathing evened out.

Starsky held his hand for a long time. When he finally, carefully, drew away from Hutch's grasp and went down to the cafeteria, he found he wasn't able to eat very much. There was a knot of tension wound tight in his stomach; it had formed in the therapy room and showed no sign of letting up.

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CHAPTER II

The days began to run together in a blur of activity. Starsky watched Hutch's progress, delighted with every small success, worried about each tiny setback. Fortunately, there were not too many of those, although his advances seemed to come slowly to the anxious partner waiting for him. Starsky dreamed of a day when the two of them would emerge from the hospital and, side by side, get on with their lives again.

He had awakened late this morning, feeling tired from the grueling routine of spending so many hours at the hospital. He'd tried to hurry, but couldn't get moving. His throat felt sore and his muscles were achy. He put those feelings aside, though, dressing hastily and jumping into a cab without eating breakfast. He knew that unless he was there, the nurses had a hard time getting through to Hutch.

It was a little after nine when he arrived at Hutch's room. He pushed open the door and stood just watching for a moment. Mary had Hutch in his wheelchair over by the basin. She was rubbing soap into a wet washcloth, talking to him about getting washed and dressed for the day. Hutch took the cloth in his hand, but didn't seem to want to put forth the effort to do what was expected of him.

"You know how to wash your face," Mary told him gently. "Listen, Hutch. David is coming soon. You want to be all ready for him, don't you? Come on now. Get ready and wash your face."

As Starsky watched, Hutch lifted the cloth awkwardly to his face, rubbing it without much coordination across his features. Mary took it back, rinsed it out and directed him to get the suds off his cheeks. Starsky felt a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he watched the procedure; Hutch, totally serious, trying to do something he had taken for granted before, now having to concentrate to accomplish the desired results. But he was doing it.
Mary was rubbing more soap into the cloth. "Here, Hutch. Wash your arms."

Hutch did as she asked, or tried to. The cloth was rubbed lightly along his forearms; forgetting his upper arms and shoulders, he looked up and handed back the cloth.

"Good enough," Mary encouraged. "You're doing fine today. David's going to be surprised..." She looked up then and caught sight of him in the doorway. "Look, Hutch."
The blond turned, eyes curious. When he saw Starsky, he beamed. The look went to the bottom of Starsky's heart, taking him back to the old days. A feeling of nostalgia, sadness for what had been lost and hope for what could still be regained, blurred his vision. He cleared the gruffness from his throat and walked over.

"Mornin', partner." He reached out, fingers catching at the flyaway blond hair. Hutch's eyes were alight, eager. *If you could only say good morning to me...* Starsky tried to quell the ache in his chest. *Soon... Don't be so impatient." Ready to start a new day?"

Half an hour later, with Mary's help, Hutch was ready for his breakfast. He sat up in the wheelchair, wearing a pajama top, a blanket tucked around his waist to keep his legs warm. Starsky moved the chair over to the table and brought the tray when it was delivered by an orderly. Mary, telling him to call if they needed anything, left to see to her other duties.

"Look, you've got some toast this morning," Starsky said, uncovering the plate. It was unbuttered; Melissa was still concerned about the nausea that had been troubling him. The broth they'd started a couple of days ago had made Hutch sick; they'd cut back to clear juices and tea for another day or so, adding jello yesterday and trying toast this morning. It was wheat bread, lightly toasted. Hutch looked at it for a moment. "Go ahead. You can pick it up and eat it." Starsky looked him in the eye.

Hutch's fingers had a little trouble holding onto the toast, but he brought it to his lips, biting off a tiny portion. He chewed slowly, rather thoughtfully, and Starsky watched. *I knew it would be like this, but I didn't know how bad it would feel to watch him this way...*

Hutch looked up at him, eyes asking for his approval. Starsky swallowed his pain and grinned, telling him how well he was doing. Hutch nodded, as if proud of himself, and took another bite. He soon finished all of his breakfast, and didn't seem to have any trouble keeping it down. The episodes of nausea had drained Hutch of what little strength he'd had. He'd ended up trembling, tears in his eyes, leaning weakly in Starsky's arms. He'd protested when the nurses had tried to put the feeding tube back, though. That old determination had come into his eyes. He seemed to realize that he'd have to put up with feeling sick if he wanted to get rid of the tube for good.

Starsky wanted that, too, but he'd worried about Hutch getting enough nourishment. Melissa had told him that if they had to, they could start an IV to provide some support for him, since he so obviously didn't want to be tube fed. She'd also pointed out what a good sign his expressing himself had been. *That friend of yours wants to get well, David. You should be proud of him.*

So the feeding tube was gone; only one more medical intrusion remained. The catheter seemed to bother Hutch at times. Starsky had seen him flinch if the tubing was moved too abruptly when he was being dressed or lifted. Melissa had explained that retraining Hutch's bladder would take time. They had started already, by clamping the catheter for an hour in the morning and evening, to let the bladder gradually become accustomed to being full again. Each day they clamped it for a little longer. Starsky could see that at the end of the prescribed time, Hutch was getting uncomfortable; he supposed that meant the process was working. He'd not thought much about the thing while Hutch had been comatose, now it seemed an embarrassment to him, an invasion of Hutch's privacy. It was necessary, of course, but he remembered from when he'd been in the hospital: it hurt.

"How are we feeling today?"

Starsky looked up and Hutch followed his gaze. It was Melissa, smiling at him, noting the empty breakfast dishes on the tray.
"You look like you're doing well, Hutch." Her eyes went back to Starsky, standing beside the wheelchair. "And how about you, David? You look a bit tired this morning."

Starsky swallowed, and was abruptly reminded of his sore throat. He rubbed at his neck absently. "I'm hanging in there."

Melissa came over to him, reaching to lay a hand on his forehead. "You feel a little warm. Coming down with a cold, perhaps?"

"I'm okay." Starsky shrugged off her concern. *I'm not the one who needs the doctor.*

"David, if you are catching cold, you'll have to be careful of Hutch. His resistance is very low."

Starsky sighed. "It's just a little sore throat. There's a draft in my hotel room. But if you want to check me out, I guess that would be okay."

"Come down to my office later this afternoon," Melissa answered. She then proceeded to examine Hutch, and was obviously pleased when she could announce that his progress was continuing. "Take him down to physical therapy, David. You're ready to get to work, aren't you, Hutch?"

The blue eyes moved from her face to that of his partner. Starsky met the gaze, smiling encouragement. "Tell her sure you are, buddy." Hutch's eyes stayed on him, though. "Yeah, he's ready, but he's just being quiet about it as usual." He ruffled the blond hair, then guided the chair past the doctor and out the door.

Two hours later, Starsky made his way to Melissa's office. Hutch had had a good session in the therapy room, now he lay sleeping in his bed. Starsky felt tired too. Maybe he was getting sick. He felt the need to talk to the doctor, not about his own health, but about his feelings concerning Hutch. Melissa was out on rounds, her secretary said. She invited him to go on into the office and wait, however. Inside, he slumped into a chair, leaning over on the desk to rest his head on folded arms.

He wasn't sure how to begin. *Don't think I've ever been so confused. I'm happy. He's doing so well. But it's so painful to see him have to try so hard. And the way he looks at me... that's strange because it kinda scares me. He's never needed me like this before... am I up to the responsibility? I like it, like knowing he wants to work so hard for me, but what if I'm not there, someday? I want him to do it for Hutch. Maybe that's why it hurts so bad. I want to have Hutch back again, and I'm scared that'll never happen. Has he changed -- have I changed? I love him, but it feels... different. Maybe he can't love me the way he did before... Are we ever going to get back to what we once had? Damn -- there must be something wrong with me for even thinking along those lines right now. Can't I be satisfied with what we've got, what we're gaining every day?"

"David." Melissa was standing beside him, eyes full of concern. "What's wrong? You look terrible."

Starsky sat up and ran a hand over his face. "I don't know, Melissa. I'm just... tired."

Instead of going to sit behind her desk, Melissa pulled up the other chair and sat facing him. "This is a terrible strain, isn't it? It must be almost as upsetting as when Hutch wasn't responding at all."

He looked away, made uncomfortable by her coming so close to the truth. He felt inadequate, selfish. A gentle hand, surprisingly comforting, came to rest on his shoulder. Starsky still couldn't say anything; he felt that if he did, he might start crying.
"David. It's all right. I understand." The woman's hand patted him, staying where it was. It occurred to him that it had been a long time since someone had reached out to him. The ache in his throat, in his heart, got worse. "I've seen patients do this before. They seem to... fixate on one person. It's usually their doctor. They look to that person to explain the world to them, to give them approval, to make their decisions for them. It's like... they're in the womb, and that one person is the first one they've met they can trust. I've been the one they meet in the womb, and it's a terrible, complex responsibility. But I have the training, the experience... you don't. It's very hard on you, and it's made more difficult because you remember all the things Hutch used to be able to do on his own. He's like a child -- and I know how it hurts to see a grown-up reduced to this. But David, he'll grow out of this stage. It won't always be this way. We're going to bring him back, as far as he can come."

"As far as...?" Starsky couldn't make himself complete the thought.

"You're worrying too much. Don't see every victory as if it might be the last. Listen to what I'm telling you. In a way, for Hutch, you being the one he trusts is good. Because you do remember the way he used to be, you can make demands of him that we can't, you can put it all in perspective for him. But if you falter, if your feelings get in the way -- and you can't help it if they do -- or if you get tired or sick, you're worried that he'll slide back, that without you, he won't be able to try anymore."

Starsky nodded, feeling miserable. "He's depending on me. I want him to be able to..."

"He can." The hand on his shoulder squeezed. She smiled when he managed to meet her eyes. "Tell me what you want to do. Do you think you'd feel better if you took a break, if you gradually let him depend on me and the nurses more?"

"I might, but that's not really what I want. I want to be the one who's there to help him." He met the doctor's steady gaze, knowing his deepest feelings were clearly written on his face. "But what if...? I do feel like I might be catching something. Do you think it would hurt Hutch's progress if I couldn't be here all the time? I wouldn't want to give him my germs or anything."

Melissa stood, going to get a thermometer. She gave it to Starsky to place under his tongue, not speaking until he handed it back.

"You are running a little temp." She produced a tongue depressor and light to look into his throat, then listened to his chest with her stethoscope. "I'm going to prescribe an antibiotic. With the hours you've been keeping and this weather, it's no wonder you've caught a little bug. It's nothing serious, though. It you feel good enough to be here, you can wear a mask to keep your germs away from Hutch. And if you feel sick enough to spend a day or two in bed, he'll still be alright. It might give him the push he needs to work harder on his own. If he misses you, we'll install a telephone in his room and you can talk to him."

Starsky grinned, taking some solace from her diagnosis and no-nonsense approach. "You've got an answer for everything, don't you?"

"That's what they pay me for, Lieutenant." She put away the equipment, wrote out a prescription, then turned back to him. "So, are you going to listen to your doctor's advice and stop worrying?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'll try." Starsky took the slip of paper she handed him.

"Good. Now go down to the pharmacy and get that filled, then see to it that you get some lunch before you go back up to Hutch's room."
Starsky chuckled and Melissa raised a questioning eyebrow. "Oh, nothing," he smiled. "You just remind me of our Captain, that's all."

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Hutch had fallen into a deep sleep. It had felt so good to surrender to the physical and mental fatigue and slip under the waves of forgetfulness. In his bed, under the soft covers, he was warm, untroubled, and sleep came easily. For several hours, he floated contentedly in gentle slumber.

Then, he became restless again. Feelings began to seep toward the surface, disturbing his repose. The fears that seemed unimportant by daylight crept back over him in the darkened room, and the suffocating sense of being alone drew him back toward wakefulness. But he couldn't wake. He was held under, pulled down by the weight of strangers' hands.

*Gonna kill me...!* A scream of terror tried to claw its way out of him; he clenched his jaw to hold it back. He wrestled with the unseen enemies, thrashing to escape the fate they planned for him. *Starsky! Help me!* *Find me...* Yet he knew it was no use to cry out. He was alone... they'd taken him somewhere very far away... *never find me...*

Pain crashed into his skull, but he fought the blackness. *Gotta hang on... don't... want to die... not yet...* Yet no matter how he struggled, the fear grew and grew, winning out over his failing strength. It became a living thing, existing independently, consuming him, spitting him out to die. *No more... no more... please. I want to come back...*

He cried out in agony, finally breaking free of the nightmare. It was dark in the room, and he hated it that way. He needed light to banish the terror. The door creaked and he gasped, frightened by the sudden sound.

Someone came in, pushing the door open, light flooding the room.

*Starsky?* Hutch tried to sit up, to reach for him, but he fell back.

"Anything wrong, dear?"

It wasn't Starsky. Hutch turned away from the stranger who approached his bed. She patted his covers a moment, then turned to leave. He moaned, catching her attention at the door.

"What's wrong?" She paused a moment, then adjusted the light at the switch on the wall. "How's that, dear?"

Hutch swallowed, relieved she'd turned up the light, yet still feeling frightened, incomplete and alone.

She quietly exited and he did not mourn her leaving. She wasn't the one he needed. Hutch sighed, bringing a hand up to rub over his face. He should sleep some more, he was still so tired. But he couldn't now. The dream had been so terrifying... Yet now he could not recapture its precise images. All that remained was the all-pervading sense of horror.

He tried to shake off the fear. He pushed himself up on his elbows, intending to take stock of his situation. The sudden movement made him dizzy, and he paused a moment, wondering why. He looked down at himself. White bedcovers were all he could see. Slowly, hand shaking for some reason, he pulled the blankets down.
Damn... I'm so thin. How...? He felt down along his side and stomach, feeling protruding ribs under the light shirt he was wearing. His hand fell to his naked thigh, touching soft flesh where there had once been firm muscle. So pale... And what's this? The attached tubing he could see unnerved him.

He couldn't support himself anymore, half sitting in the bed. He dropped back against the mattress, a profound fear settling in his belly. It had been there, surrounding him, so often, yet it had remained undefined. Now the feeling was coming over him that something was terribly wrong, that he was very ill. What's going on? He should know, he thought, filling with anxiety.

A chill swept over him, but he couldn't make his trembling hand pull the covers back. He heaved a sigh of frustration, hardly noticing that the door had been opened once again.

"Hey, babe." The soothing, concerned voice caught his attention. Hutch looked up, losing himself in Starsky's gaze. "You're all uncovered -- you do this?" Gentle hands pulled the blankets up over his shoulders. A warm weight settled beside him on the bed. Hutch reached to grasp Starsky's wrist; he hung on a little desperately.

"I'm here. Don't worry." Compassionate fingers brushed the hair back from his eyes. "You must've had a bad dream again. Is that what happened?"

Yes. The word dwelt inside him, but couldn't come out. You understand, though. Like always... Hutch continued to look up at Starsky, grateful he had returned, able to relax now that he was no longer alone. Don't go. Stay right here, sitting here beside me on the bed... Starsky smiled at him, with his lips, with his eyes. Again, Hutch saw that his words weren't needed. That felt good, but the question gnawing at him remained: what's the matter with me?

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The cold hit Starsky the following day. He woke coughing and sneezing, and after some consideration, ordered from room service. Wrapped in a heavy sweater, he drank orange juice and tea and took a couple of the pills Melissa had prescribed for him, plus some aspirin. Though the weather was bleak and he knew he should stay in, he thought of Hutch, how he'd be waiting for him this morning as he always did. Besides, I miss him. Keep wondering what he's doing, what he's going to be able to accomplish today that he couldn't yesterday. After an hour or so, he decided he felt well enough to go to the hospital.

He bundled up, but the wind and dampness seemed to sink into his bones on the short trip. Still, the smile he received when he entered Hutch's room was enough to chase the aches and pains away. He stood back, not wanting to cough on his friend, but Hutch gave him a plaintive look and he found himself moving closer.

Hutch was sitting up in bed, a group of objects arranged on the tray in front of him. They were different colors and sizes of rings, and Starsky realized that the object was to place them in the proper order on a spindle. It was a kid's game, pressed into service to retrain a man's mind.

"Hey there," Starsky said, sitting beside him, "you look like you're pretty busy this morning."

Hutch put down the ring he was holding, reaching out with both hands. Starsky took them in his own. The warm clasp felt incredibly good, to Starsky, at least. Hutch shivered.

"Yeah, it's cold out, all right," he chuckled. "Sorry buddy." For a moment, it looked like Hutch was going to laugh right along with him. Starsky squeezed the hands he held, then let them go, consciously fighting the lump forming in his throat. "Go ahead. Show me what you're doing here." He nodded to the forgotten rings.
Hutch looked at them with intense concentration, picking up first one and then another, fingerling them, sizing them up. He sighed when the first one he tried was too small to drop to the bottom of the spindle, looking at Starsky for help.

"You're right. That one doesn't go there. But you can do it by yourself, you know. You're plenty old enough to stack up rings..." His voice trailed off, suddenly realizing the approaching date. *Hutch's birthday -- it's next week. He's going to be... thirty-seven. I guess if he thinks about his birthday at all, though, he'll be thinking he's just turning thirty-five. Damn.* Caught up in the terrible waste of time that couldn't be retrieved, he turned away, not wanting to let Hutch see the pain he knew must be showing on his face.

A gentle, warm hand found its way to his shoulder, silently asking him to turn back. Starsky closed his eyes, and for a moment he was transported back two years. He remembered it like yesterday. He'd been the one in the hospital bed, then. It had been the first time he'd seen his chest without the bandages. The scars had been terrible, frightening, making him feel so vulnerable. *I wasn't me anymore. I couldn't even meet your eyes, Hutch. But you just kept your hand on my shoulder in that sure, steady way, and made me turn back to look at you. And when I did, I saw everything that was going to be okay, somehow...* He wanted to cry now, from the preciousness of the memory, from the pain of their now-reversed situation, from all the things he wanted to say to Hutch but couldn't. *You're still here for me, aren't you?* he realized then. He blinked the tears from his eyes, and turned back.

Hutch's eyes were wide and curious, worried. "Hey, I'm all right," Starsky managed to whisper past the ache in his throat. "I was just thinkin', is all." He put a smile on his face. "Bet you don't know what's comin' up next week, do you? I guess not, what with this crazy weather down here. It's your birthday." He lifted his eyebrows, wondering if Hutch could follow what he was saying. He couldn't tell for sure. "Never you mind. This'll make it easier to surprise you -- for once." Starsky laughed, and he realized his pain was lifting.

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Following the morning session in physical therapy, Hutch was brought back to his room for lunch. He seemed tired, and made it clear he'd rather get back into bed instead of sitting up at the table, but when the tray was carried in, he perked up. Starsky was pleased to see his appetite improving, now that he was less nauseous. Today's menu consisted of clear chicken broth, toast, applesauce and milk.

Hutch sat thoughtfully for a moment, as if contemplating the tray of food. Starsky watched in some bemusement as he carefully lifted the spoon and dipped up a little broth. He wasn't surprised to see the liquid drip off when Hutch tried to lift the spoon in his shaky grasp. Then it slipped from his fingers entirely and clattered back into the bowl, splattering broth over the tray.

Hutch looked up at Starsky, clearly stunned, as if he'd expected to have no trouble with the spoon at all. His face actually went a shade paler and his distress was tangible to his friend.

"It's okay. Remember? You're in the hospital because you've been sick, buddy." Starsky told him gently. "It's gonna take a little while until you're doing everything as well as you always did." The reassurance was not enough to erase the confusion from Hutch's face. *I know what's happening... It's beginning to dawn on you that something's really wrong. How will I ever explain?*

"How about letting me give you a hand?" he offered. He took up the spoon and held it for Hutch, who obediently opened his mouth for a taste of the broth. The flavor seemed to appeal to him, and his eyes finally lost their scared expression as he let Starsky feed him. "That's good, isn't it?" Starsky soothed. "You keep eating this way and you'll be strong enough to do it on your own in no time."
Finished with the soup, he tried offering the applesauce next. Hutch liked that, too. After a moment or two, Starsky saw his hand reaching for the spoon again.

"You wanna try? Okay." He watched anxiously, not wanting Hutch to feel bad if he had trouble again. But dealing with the applesauce seemed easier, and Hutch fed himself a few mouthfuls, not totally without a drip or two, but he managed.

He sighed after a couple of moments, though, and his shaky fingers replaced the spoon on the tray.

"Tired?" Starsky let his own hand cover Hutch's pale one. He didn't speak for a moment, and Hutch did not look up. There was a palpable sadness in the room, a tremulous aura of things being out of kilter with the two of them. Then Starsky sat on the bed beside him, and reached to knead the tense muscles of Hutch's neck. His friend sighed again, this time in pleasure, relaxing against his side. Starsky moved his arm to encircle the wide shoulders and they sat that way quietly for a time, the good feeling of being together nearly dissipating the atmosphere of gloom.

Hutch looked ready to doze off, so Starsky slid the tray back from its position over the bed, figuring that he could finish the meal later. He held Hutch close for a moment longer, then eased him back against his pillow, pulling the covers up over his shoulders. The blue eyes flickered open and Hutch gave him a tiny, tender smile.

"Pleasant dreams." Starsky's whisper was soft. He looked down at Hutch, wanting to show his friend how he felt, to help ease him the last step into sleep. As he watched, the tired eyes drifted closed again. Then Starsky leaned close, brushing his lips across Hutch's forehead in a touch as light as his whisper. Hutch was already asleep, but his face was peaceful. Starsky pulled up the chair, sitting close by, not wanting to leave his side.

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He did end up leaving Hutch's side, however, when he began coughing a few minutes later. Not wanting to wake his friend, he slipped out of the room, wandering down to the cafeteria to find some lunch for himself, and to take another dose of Melissa's prescribed medicine.

_It's so strange_, he thought, remembering the scene they'd played out in Hutch's room. _I can't get used to seeing you vulnerable like this. You were always so strong -- physically, emotionally. Whenever you did get hurt, I always felt that same disbelief. Not you, not Hutch... I never wanted this kind of thing to happen to you; I'd rather take the blows myself any day. I was always so shocked to see you fall -- never really quite knew what to do about it for a second or two. When I'd get hurt, you'd be there for me, knowing just what to say and do... I'm not sure I can be that way for you, be... everything you need. 'Cause I'm missing the thing I need most to feel I can cope with anything life dishes out... you._

He dug into the casserole he'd selected for lunch, eating without tasting the concoction. His eyes were on the window, vaguely watching the wintry sky, longing for California sunshine.

'I need you to get well, Starsk. I can't hack it on the streets without you. Can't hack it anywhere... Please, Starsk, get well...'

The memory caught him unaware. He'd been lying in his bed in the hospital, depressed, worn out from trying to breathe into that damn tube the doctors said he had to use to keep from getting pneumonia. He'd wanted nothing right then but to give up, to just let whatever was going to happen next go ahead and happen. And Hutch had been at his side. For as long as he'd been awake, Hutch had been there, soothing, reassuring, doing the little things the nurses didn't have time for to make him feel better. He'd seemed an
endless source of strength and hope. But Starsky had seen Hutch's despair that day, the self-doubts that fueled his fear. You needed me.... Is this what it was like for you? Were you strong because you knew I needed you to be? The fork lay forgotten beside his plate as new conviction blossomed in Starsky's heart. He realized it must have been just as hard on Hutch to see him the way he'd been in the hospital, in pain, frightened, as it was for him to see Hutch that way now. Gotta pull myself together. Sure, it hurts. But I can't let you know that. Can't let you pick up on my worries. You need me, babe -- we need each other. Now's my turn to be there for you. Starsky sighed, feeling more heartened. I'm just so damn glad I've got the chance to give you what you need...

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He made his way back to Hutch's room an hour later, sure his friend would still be sleeping, but eager to be there when those blue eyes opened and recognized him again. Like getting a Christmas present every day... Christmas in August. Least the weather is cooperating in the myth. He found himself grinning as he stepped from the elevator. Thoughts of Christmas presents brought him back to thoughts of Hutch's birthday. Gotta make a real special party for you. A little excitement. Presents. And cake -- hope by next week you'll be able to eat some. Gotta check with Melissa about getting one you'll be able to enjoy. I'll bet the nurses would love a chance to help you celebrate. They all love ya, Hutch. And the attention will do you good.

As he arrived at the door to Hutch's room, he heard the unmistakable voice from within, the frightened groans and whimpers that indicated Hutch was dreaming again. Each time he'd napped in the afternoon the last few days, something had come in his sleep to scare him. Starsky had seen how nervous and unsettled he'd been upon awakening. Perhaps the nightmares were getting worse.

He pushed open the door and found Hutch writhing weakly on the bed, the room in darkness. Someone had come in and pulled the blinds after Starsky had left. He reached for the light switch, calling Hutch's name as he turned on the lights.

Hutch gasped, breathing hard, looking around wildly. Starsky moved toward him at once.

"Hey, hey now," he crooned, taking the man's hand in a firm grasp. "It's okay. You were just dreaming, that's all. I'm here."

Hutch hung onto his hand as if terrified. Starsky sat on the bed, still murmuring reassurance. "You can't even tell me what's going on in those dreams, can you? What is it, babe? You remembering what they did to you?" He smoothed sweat-dampened hair back from Hutch's forehead. "It's all over now. They're long gone. Nobody's gonna hurt you. I'm here to see to that don'tcha know?"

Hutch quieted, eyes still riveted to Starsky's face. "That's better. Just forget all about it." He cast about for something to distract Hutch from the frightening images, looking around the room for inspiration. His gaze fell on a box of toys that had been brought in by the therapist. It contained the spindle and rings Hutch had been working with earlier, and when he went to pick it up, Starsky found other things inside -- a couple of puzzles, stacking boxes, colorful blocks and magnetized numbers and letters of the alphabet. He quickly picked out some blocks and put them on the bedside chair, then helped Hutch up into a sitting position, pillows stuffed behind his back, the bed raised at a comfortable angle. He pulled over the tray table and placed the blocks in front of him.

"There. How 'bout we give these things a try, huh?" He lined the blocks up in a random pattern; blue cube, yellow circle, green triangle, then gave Hutch matching pieces. "Can you copy my pattern here?"

It took Hutch a few minutes, but he eventually laid out the blocks the way Starsky had them. Then Starsky tried a more difficult pattern, using five of the blocks. Hutch didn't have the right ones to match them, and
he looked over toward the box, obviously realizing that the rest of the set was needed and must be inside. Starsky, grinning, brought it over. Hutch searched diligently until he found another purple pyramid to build a stack of blocks like Starsky's.

"Okay. Let's see if you're really paying attention." Starsky took his stack apart, this time arraying the blocks in a line. First came an orange circle, then a yellow L-shape, next a blue pentagon, followed by a green oval. Hutch watched interestedly as the last piece was put down. It was a brown pyramid.

He shuffled through the blocks on his table, quickly finding the ones needed to repeat Starsky's pattern. He lined them up, circle L-shape, pentagon, oval, but could not locate a brown pyramid to end the game. He appeared to think it over, then picked up his purple pyramid from the earlier example and ended his line of blocks with that. Before Starsky could comment, Hutch then removed his partner's brown block and replaced it with the second purple pyramid shape. He looked up at Starsky, a proud gleam in his eyes.

"Think you're pretty smart, don't you?" Starsky grinned back at him. He couldn't wait to tell Amelia about what Hutch had done. She'd probably say it indicated he was perceiving reality, thinking ahead, exhibiting a sense of humor. Whatever you wanta call it, he didn't care. All I know is, Hutch is really getting better.

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CHAPTER III

Starsky grabbed for a Kleenex, getting it to his nose just in time for his sneeze. He blew his nose loudly, already tired of the cold symptoms that didn't seem to be abating despite the medication. Getting up from the chair beside Hutch's bed, he went to wash his hands after throwing away the tissue.

"You know, buddy," he said conversationally as he lathered his hands, "I think I'm gonna go home early tonight. I gotta get some sleep or I'll never get rid of this cold. That okay with you?"

He turned, but Hutch wasn't looking at him. The door had been opened by a young intern who was heading directly for Hutch's bed, syringe in hand.

"Good evening, mate," the fellow said cheerfully. "I'm Dr. Bram. I need to get just a little of your blood for the lab, all right?"

"Hi," Starsky intervened, moving toward the intern. "I'm Dave Starsky. He doesn't much like needles. Let me give you a hand."

The young doctor shrugged. "Okay. But I'm pretty good at this. Never had one faint on me yet." He took hold of Hutch's arm and pulled the sleeve of his pajama top up.

Hutch had tensed as soon as he saw the doctor. Now he tried to move away from him as far as possible, sliding to the far side of his narrow bed in awkward movements.

"It's okay Hutch. He's not going to hurt you," Starsky said, going to stand on the other side of the bed. "Listen, doctor, is this absolutely necessary? It's nine o'clock. He's had a pretty rough day..."
"Won't take but a minute." The intern swabbed Hutch's arm with an alcohol prep, then wrapped a length of elastic around his upper arm.

Hutch pulled back, eyes widening.

The doctor got a better hold on his arm while Starsky leaned close, trying to distract him. As the doctor brought the needle within range, Hutch groaned, again pulling away. "No!"

"Take it easy, mate--"

"Hutch?" For a second, Starsky wasn't sure he heard.

"No!" Hutch repeated it, this time looking at Starsky instead of the intern.

Dr. Bram took his chance, going for Hutch's vein the instant he was distracted.

The patient yelped in indignation. "I said no!"

The words came out haltingly, but quite clear. Starsky was stunned into silence. He merely held Hutch's shoulders as the doctor completed his task. Finished, Bram nodded to Starsky, then turned to go, unaware that anything momentous had happened. Starsky glanced back toward him.

"Thanks, doc," he murmured, not referring at all to the medical service he had rendered. "Hutch..." He turned back to his friend. "You're talkin'!" His first thought was to call Melissa, but he knew she had left the hospital hours earlier. "Have to wait for morning to tell your doctor about this," he grinned. The hesitant, emphatic words had sounded so good, the dry voice so welcome. "Gonna have you singing any day now. I'll bet once you get started talking you'll never shut up." He chuckled happily, but had to break off when another sneezing attack hit him. He moved away from the bed, blowing his nose again, then again washed his hands before returning to Hutch's side.

"Gotta be careful. Don't want to give you my germs." He settled comfortably in the bedside chair. He talked quietly for a little while to his friend, emphasizing all the positive things that had been happening lately. Hutch didn't say anything more, and his eyelids began to droop. Starsky felt his own fatigue coming back, too.

"Guess there's been enough excitement around here for one night," he admitted finally, lifting his aching body out of the chair. Hutch was just about ready for sleep. Starsky offered him a drink of water from the bedside cup, then lowered the head of the bed to sleeping position. He fluffed the pillows and made sure Hutch was comfortable, then straightened the covers for him, pulling them up to his shoulders.

He patted the soft blond hair across the forehead, stroking a few strands back from one temple, bidding his friend goodnight. Hutch looked up at him sleepily, eyes obviously fighting to stay open.

"That's it," Starsky told him softly. "You get a good night's rest now. I'll see you in the morning."

He patted Hutch's shoulder gently, then turned to go. Hutch was watching him; he could feel it as he moved toward the bathroom. A glance back confirmed it. "Go to sleep," he admonished lightly. He switched on the bathroom light, then pulled the door nearly closed to allow a dim streak of light into the room. Then he went to the door and turned out the overhead lamp.

"No!" The word rang out immediately.
Starsky switched on the light. "What? You don't want me to leave, or you don't want the light out?" No answer was forthcoming. He turned out the light again.

"No." Hutch sounded aggravated.

*Never thought I'd be happy to hear that tone of voice.* "Okay. It's lights on, then." He adjusted the rheostat, turning the light down but not off completely. Hutch seemed satisfied and snuggled down into his covers. Happy, Starsky smiled as he left the room.

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The next morning, Starsky dragged himself down the hospital corridor, deciding that as soon as he checked on Hutch he was going to head to the cafeteria for a cup of hot tea. His head was pounding, his sinuses stuffed and throbbing. He was hot, and at the same time, cold. *Just plain sick.* The urge to mutter something along the lines of "I hate my life" was resisted only because it would take too much effort. He grasped the door handle to Hutch's room, anxious for the welcome sight of his partner's smile, needing it more than ever this morning.

Mary Brownwell was bending over the patient, speaking softly. Starsky saw her hand sweep across the pale forehead and down along Hutch's cheek. He hurried to the bedside.

"Mary?" Hutch was curled up on his side, eyes squeezed shut, clinging to the blankets, looking lost and forlorn.

"He had a bad night," the nurse reported. "Kept waking up. Crying out at all hours. The duty nurse looked in on him from time to time, and she said he seemed to be having nightmares."

"Somebody shoulda called me!" Starsky sat on the bed, reaching for Hutch's shoulders. The frail body flinched at his touch. He thought of Hutch's need to have a light on in the room, and turned to look at the nurse. "Did someone turn the lights out in here? He feels better when they're on."

"I don't think anyone turned them out," Mary said, shaking her head. "I've put in a call to Doctor Samuels. She'll be coming soon to have a look at him."

"Okay. Thanks, Mary. I'll see if I can settle him down." Starsky didn't watch the nurse leave. He began stroking Hutch's back, trying to ease the knots of tension in the long body. He whispered soothing syllables, hardly aware of just what he was saying, only wanting to create a feeling of relaxation and warmth. After a long time, the pale lashes fluttered open and Hutch looked up at him.


He tried to adjust Hutch's position, attempting to get him to lie on his back so he could raise the head of the bed, but Hutch was taciturn, his fingers gripping the covers, his body tense and uncooperative. When Starsky tried once more to help him to sit up, Hutch groaned, so he gave up, settling for raising the bed just a little.

"Look," he murmured, "it's sunny outside today. Still cold as hell, but at least the sun is out. Come on, Hutch, take a look at it. It'll make you feel better."

Hutch lifted his head just a bit to glance towards the window, but the sunshine did little to alter his expression. Then he looked up at Starsky, a heartbreaking vulnerability shining in his eyes.

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Starsky dropped the make-the-best-of-it attitude. "I know, Hutch. I know, believe me. You're scared and you're hurting and you don't even understand why. But you've gotta know that you're going to be all right. Sure, it's gonna take some time. But we've got plenty of that now, babe. And I'm going to be with you all the way." He stroked the pallid cheek, noting the light stubble under his fingers and liking the way it felt. "Listen," he said, leaning closer to confide, "you're a man they can't keep down for long, remember? You're a fighter. And that's what you've gotta do now. Fight, Hutch. Remember who you are -- what kind of man you are."

He was struck to his soul by an image of Hutch's masculine grace, of his honor and integrity and intelligence, all the strengths and weaknesses and hopes and dreams and ideals that made him the good man he was. *That man is still alive, Hutch. I know he is.* "I'll help you all I can, babe," he promised in a broken whisper.

Hutch looked up at him, a wondering openness in his eyes. If he did not understand all of Starsky's words, he must at least have sensed his intent. One hand came up to brush Starsky's cheek, then settled on his shoulder. The strength in the gesture was slight, but steady.

"See? You can make it. Bad dreams are nothing to worry about. You're awake now -- nothing can happen now to hurt you. It's time to get well."

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The day was a long one for both Starsky and Hutch. Melissa had examined her patient and prescribed some medication, a little Valium to ease the emotional fears and act as a sedative. She also arranged for a private duty night nurse to stay with Hutch so that Starsky could go back to his hotel and get the sleep he needed.

Worn out though he was, it was hard for Starsky to say goodnight at eight o'clock. The nurse had already come on duty, but Hutch had barely glanced in her direction when she'd been introduced to him. It was as if he did not need to acknowledge the presence of anyone else -- not while Starsky was here, at least.

Hutch was settled in his bed, and the medication seemed to be making him sleepy already. Starsky sat down and took hold of his hand while explaining that he was leaving and that he expected Hutch to go to sleep now.

"Miss Roberts is going to stay with you," Starsky repeated once more. "If you get scared, she's here. If you need anything, she'll get it for you. I'll be back first thing in the morning, so don't worry about me, okay? And just in case, the phone is right here. Miss Roberts can call me and I'll be able to talk to you if you need me during the night. But you're gonna be fine, aren't you? No bad dreams tonight, buddy. Just nice pleasant ones and plenty of good old-fashioned sleep. Right?" He stood to leave.

"Ma'am, please call me if he gets upset or has bad dreams again, won't you?" The elderly woman nodded, turning a page in the paperback she was reading. "And whatever you do, don't turn off the lights."

"Yes, sir." There was the slightest annoyance in her liltingly accented voice and when Starsky bit his tongue to avoid giving anymore instructions and left, he was certain he heard the words 'crazy Yanks' muttered under her breath.

He took a long hot shower and crawled into bed exhausted. After taking his own medication with a glass of water, he dropped almost immediately into sleep.

The ringing of the phone invaded his slumber, and for a while he tried to ignore the sound. He rolled over, tucking his head deeper into the pillow. *Hope the people next door answer that damn phone soon.*
The ringing didn't stop, and he foggily realized it was too close to be coming from next door. He rolled quickly to grab it, fumbling for the receiver and knocking his glass onto the floor. Cold dread and fleeting anxious hope leapt in his heart; he was carried back to a morning from the first days of Hutch's disappearance when his phone had rung and he'd grabbed it up in desperate joy. It had been nothing but a wrong number, not Hutch. Now, he had to clear his throat and shake the memory before he could manage an uncertain 'hello.'

"Mr. Starsky? It's Nurse Roberts."

"Yeah? Somethin' wrong?" Of course there was something wrong. He could hear Hutch moaning and immediately knew he should never have left him tonight.

"Your friend, sir. He's been dreaming all night." Starsky squinted at the clock. It read four-thirty. "I hated to disturb you, but he just won't go back to sleep this time. I hope maybe a word of two from you will help calm him. Would you--?"

"Put him on," Starsky ordered roughly, pulling himself to a sitting position. He shoved his pillow behind his back, but didn't bother with the light. All his concentration was directed into the phone and the harsh gasping breaths he could hear.

"Hutch? Can you hear me, babe? It's me. Easy, Hutch. Take it easy, now. It's gonna be all right." His shoulders felt the chill of the wintry night, but he didn't take the time to pull the covers up over them. "Listen, Hutch. It's almost morning. You're safe and so am I..."

*What am I saying? Utter nonsense...* He dragged a hand over his face, searching for words that didn't sound so empty, promises that he could keep instead of vague platitudes.

"S-s..." Hutch sounded cold, too, scared and lonely.

"Hang in there," Starsky whispered, begging him to.

"S-S... Star... sk?" The broken voice held both tears and hope.

Starsky's own eyes filled. "Hutch...?" He could only sigh the word, then hold his breath, hoping to hear what he'd just heard again.

"Star..." So careful, so precise. *The voice of an angel, of the past, of all my dreams.* "Stars-ky. Starsky."

"Yeah, babe. It's me." Tears flowed freely down his face as he cradled the phone to his head. He swallowed hard, completely unable to get control of himself. "It's Starsky. Hutch -- tell me how I can help."

"S-Starsky." A tremulous sigh.

"How 'bout I just talk to you, huh? Can you get to sleep if I talk for a while? Want me to tell you some stories?" He cast about the darkened room for inspiration. "Long time ago, back in L.A., there were these two cops, Starsky and Hutch. That's right -- you and me, partner. And Starsky and Hutch were the two best cops ever to drive those streets. It was rough out there, but Starsky always knew that with Hutch to back him up, he'd never have to worry. He was never scared when his partner was there. One time -- do you remember? -- a guy got into Starsky's apartment in the middle of the night. It was about this time, four o'clock in the morning. And the guy had a needle and he gave Starsky a shot. 'You got twenty-four hours to live, pig,' he said, and went away laughing. And it hurt real bad and he was gettin' dizzy, but Starsky reached for his phone and called his partner. All he could say was his name, but that was all it took..." His
voice went on, rising and falling in the dark of night, linking the two of them together. Hutch was quiet, but listening. Starsky could tell. Scooching down in bed, he told the story, the tears drying on his cheeks, the cold draft in his room ignored. "And finally Hutch got back with the hypo and the doctors checked it out and figured out what medicine to give Starsky. And all the pain just kinda drifted away, and he fell into this peaceful sleep, feelin' safe, cause he knew his partner was there..."

"Mr. Starsky?" The nurse's voice came to him, whisper light.

"Hmm?" *Feel so drowsy...*

"He's sleeping. I'm going to hang up now."

Tired eyes opened again. "No. Keep the phone by him. He might wake up. S'okay, I don't mind." If the nurse thought the idea strange, she didn't say so. The sound of her voice was replaced by the quiet soughing of Hutch in sleep. Starsky worked his shoulders until the covers settled over him and he felt warm and secure, the phone still pressed to his ear. It was like sleeping with Hutch, his dreamy thoughts told him, holding him close the way he cradled the phone. Time and distance became meaningless, unable to keep the two of them apart. Starsky drifted into a satisfying sleep.

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CHAPTER IV

The session in physical therapy seemed unusually long. Hutch was tired, though he tried to do everything Amelia asked him to do. He'd begun this afternoon, as he had each day of the last week, by using the pulley to lift weights while he sat in his wheelchair. At first the activity had been difficult, the smallest weights too heavy. But he had persevered, Starsky encouraging him constantly, and by now he could handle five pounds in each hand. The strength was returning more quickly to his left arm, so he worked harder on the right, pushing himself, sure that he should be able to lift the weights more easily.

He had also spent time strengthening the muscles of his legs, by sitting on a table and pushing against a bar with his leg. This was more difficult, and he found he tired quickly, that his right leg cramped easily.

"Hutch?" Amelia moved into his line of sight and Hutch released the tension in his leg, ready to give up on that particular exercise for the day. "I want to see if you can try to transfer out of your chair today, all right?" Without waiting for an answer, she wheeled him over to a bed and spent a few moments explaining how he might best accomplish the move.

He didn't follow everything she said, but he understood what was expected of him. For a moment he sat, looking at the height of the bed, figuring out how he might shift himself out of the chair and onto the other surface. It was strange, he suddenly realized. He'd never given that much thought to so simple a movement before. *I can do that...* He got hold of the arms of the wheelchair, pushing hard to lift himself. The chair shifted a little and Amelia re-locked the brakes, urging him to try again. Hutch felt weak, his arms trembling with effort, his legs stiff and uncooperative. Finally he accomplished the maneuver, flopping somewhat ungracefully onto the bed. He closed his eyes, resting a moment.

Amelia was congratulating him. "Now, can you get back in the chair?"
Hutch gave her a look, wondering when Starsky was going to get back. He'd left Hutch alone in the therapy room today, saying something about errands he had to run. It already seemed like he'd been gone for a long time.

Amelia helped Hutch get his hands around the bar swinging over the bed, and he used it to hoist himself up. Getting back to the chair he felt even more uncoordinated, but he finally managed the transfer, sinking into the seat heavily.

"Encore! Encore!" It was Starsky, applauding from his vantage point at the door of the therapy room. He moved forward to Hutch quickly.

"Look at you! You did that move like a real pro." The praise made Hutch smile. He sat back in the chair breathing deeply, trying to recuperate.

"He's getting stronger all the time," Amelia informed Starsky. "The more he can do for himself, the better." The two of them chatted a moment, but Hutch didn't pay much attention. He let his eyes close for a moment. His arms and legs seemed to be quivering slightly, unused to the exertion. It didn't seem right that doing so little should be so hard.

"Pretty special day, huh?" Starsky was asking. Hutch looked up at him, uncertain of what he meant.

"Special?" The word felt cumbersome on his tongue.

"Yeah. You're on your way to really getting better."

His friend's smile was wide and bright. Hutch smiled a little in return. Getting better... I don't understand. What happened to me? What's happened to all my strength?

He knew he was in a hospital, but there seemed to be selective gaps in his memory, in his comprehension of the situation. Getting from moment to moment usually took so much of his concentration that he didn't ponder his status, accepting the way he felt without question. Yet more often now, his head seemed to clear a little and he'd realize nothing was quite the way it should be.

His shoulder was being rubbed by a strong capable hand. Hutch looked up at Starsky again, letting the man's smile push his fears aside once more. Starsky says everything is going to be all right... that I'm okay. Everything in Hutch reached out to accept his friend's judgment, and he clung to each affirmation the other man offered, needing the words as much as he'd needed to hang on to the bar over the bed a few moments ago.

"Ready to go back upstairs for lunch now?" Starsky asked.

Hutch nodded, realizing he was hungry. Starsky took command of the wheelchair and turned it toward the door, calling a goodbye to Amelia.

"I'll see you later, Hutch," the therapist said as they left. Hutch lifted a hand in a slight wave, already intent on where they were heading.

Starsky pushed the chair through the open door, coming face to face with another wheelchair and pulling Hutch to an abrupt stop.

"'Scuse me, mate," said a man dressed all in white. "Seems like we need a traffic light here."

Starsky chuckled. "No problem. Right, Hutch?"
But Hutch couldn't answer. His eyes were on the occupant of the other chair. It was a man about his own age, but his appearance was shocking. The man sat at an angle, his slender body twisted and leaning against the arm of the chair. His hands lay limp in his lap and his eyes were dull. Hutch stared, feeling upset to see someone look like this. The man was so thin. Wasted... What's wrong with him? He looked into the man's face, but read no expression there, no hope, only resignation. Fear rose up in Hutch with the dawning sense of looking into a mirror. He's like me... in a wheelchair... like me... is that what I look like?

Oblivious to his distress, Starsky struggled to push Hutch's chair past the newcomer and out the door. It was a relief when the other patient was out of sight. Hurry, Hutch wanted to tell him, take me back to my room. He felt exposed, vulnerable out there in the hall, and longed for the safety of his own room.

"Yes, today is really special," Starsky was saying, his light tone helping Hutch to forget the unsettling occurrence. "I'll bet you don't know just how special, do you?"

Hutch shook his head, looking up at his friend as they rode the elevator. Starsky was wearing a barely suppressed grin.

Curious, Hutch tried to ask a question. "What?"

"I'll never tell," his friend answered mysteriously.

The elevator ride ended and Starsky pushed Hutch's chair down the hall, humming a little, sounding happy. They stopped before the closed door of Hutch's room. Then Starsky did something strange.

He moved around to crouch in front of the chair, looking appraisingly at Hutch, smoothing his hair into place and straightening his loose-fitting pajama top. "That's better," he said, almost to himself. "Now, are you ready for a surprise?"

Surprise? Hutch didn't know how to answer, but Starsky didn't wait for one. Instead he rose and pulled the door open, pushing the chair inside.

"Surprise!"

The chorus of voices startled Hutch a little. So many people... The nurses he knew, Mary and all the others, were all standing near his bed. Dr. Samuels, too, and she was wearing a smile bigger than Starsky's. He saw paper streamers draped form wall to wall, and a pile of wrapped boxes on the bed. Then Mary turned to the dressing table and picked up something else. It had lights on it -- candles... birthday cake?

"Happy birthday, dear Hutch, happy birthday to you!" The group finished singing to him and applauded.

Hutch began to smile, his bewilderment turning to happiness. He looked up at his friend.

"You didn't suspect a thing, did you?" A hand ruffled his just-straightened hair. "I finally found a way to put one over on you!"

Hutch didn't know how to respond. A package was placed in his lap.


The paper gave easily and Hutch pulled it off, letting the scraps fall to the floor. He opened the lid and found a small toy kangaroo. He picked it up, smiling and looking around.

"That's from all of us," Mary Brownwell said, indicating the other nurses. "It's a little joey, a baby 'roo."
The toy felt good in his hands, warm. Hutch stroked the brown fur covering, squeezing the softness.

"That's what they used to call you, buddy," Starsky said, grinning. "Before they knew your name here, you were just 'Joey'."

Before...?

"Here, open this one." Starsky placed another package in his hands.

This box was bigger. Hutch pulled off the bow and lifted the lid. Inside was nestled a cream-colored sweater, knit in heavy cable stitches. Hutch ran his fingers over it, liking the texture.

"That one's from me," Dr. Samuels said in her soft voice.

Hutch smiled up at her and lifted the sweater out, wanting to try it on right away. The doctor helped him to slide his arms into the sleeves and pull the sweater over his head. It felt warm, comfortable, like it was made for him. Hutch knew he should say something.

"Thank you." He looked up at the doctor, then around at the nurses. "Thank you." He patted the little kangaroo again.

"One more," Starsky announced, taking the empty box and torn paper off Hutch's lap.

Hutch was enjoying the paper ripping by now, and eager to see his next surprise. The lifted lid of the last box revealed a new pair of jeans and a plaid shirt. He just looked for a moment, feeling inexplicably overwhelmed.

"I hope they fit. I had to guess at the sizes." Starsky's voice was quiet.

Hutch fingered the soft fabric of the green plaid shirt. "Nice," he answered, looking up at Starsky. "Just right..."

The smile he got in return for those words was the brightest he'd seen all day. The look between them held, and for a moment it seemed they were alone in the room. Starsky took his hand and squeezed it, then looked around at the others.

"Looks like it's time for that cake," he announced eagerly. "Mary, can you cut it, please?"

"Awfully irregular," Dr. Samuels was saying as she shook her head "Cake before lunch..."

"Just this once, Melissa," Starsky laughed as he handed her a plate. "Besides, you agreed to this party, and the cake recipe. So stop teasing."

"You're like a kid about this, aren't you?" she asked with a smile.

Starsky nodded, handing a slice of cake to Hutch. "Nobody's ever too old for a birthday party."

The cake tasted good. The cheery voices and familiar activity put Hutch's earlier confusion out of his mind. After a few moments, the nurses and Dr. Samuels began to say they had to get back to work, but they all smiled and wished him a happy birthday as they left. Soon he was left alone with Starsky.

"Pretty good cake, huh?" his friend asked. "But I've gotta find something to wash it down with. You be all right while I go get some milk?"
Hutch nodded, taking another bite of his own slice. He finished it and put aside the paper plate. Then he noticed a bit of paper still in his lap and picked it up.

Attached to the wrapping paper was an envelope. He pulled open the flap and took out the card.

Blue was what he noticed first -- the bright blue of sky above a stretch of white sand. The beach... Nostalgia tugged at his heart. It seemed like forever since he had seen the ocean. Hutch opened the card. Inside there was writing, loosely scrolled letters, also in blue. He found himself staring at them and only slowly realized he couldn't put their meaning together.

I should... know what this says... The nagging fear crept back over him, and he swallowed hard, trying to suppress the lost feeling, looking toward the door and wanting Starsky to return. My birthday... and I didn't even know it... why? In a moment, the door opened, and his friend came in carrying a tray.

"You want some lunch now, or do you want to wait a while?" He placed the tray on the table and turned to Hutch.

Hutch put out a hand, reaching for Starsky, at a total loss as to explain what was going on in his mind. Starsky was there at once, his firm grip seeming to answer the pain in Hutch's heart.

"What, babe? Something wrong?"

Hutch swallowed again, trying to conquer the sense of confusion. He was so tired of the endless hospital corridors, of feeling sick and weak and vulnerable to the routine established here. He wanted his strength and independence back. He wanted to know what day it was without someone telling him... He looked up into the deep blue of Starsky's eyes, feeling he could ask this man for anything.

"Home," he said hesitantly. "Star... let's go... home."

Two arms surrounded him in a swift hug. "Don't you worry, Hutch," a gentle voice breathed at his ear. "We'll be going home soon. I promise."

Starsky squeezed him tight for another moment, then eased away. He looked down at the card in his hand. "Did you like the card?"

Hutch felt a yawning emptiness deep in his center; he truly did not know what to say. His eyes went once more to the card he held, searching, hoping to recognize something he had missed before. "It's the beach," he said finally, in a whisper.

Starsky's fingers took the card from him, opening it and showing him the inside. "Can you read what it says inside?"

Hutch continued staring, growing more and more uncomfortable. He felt embarrassed, certain he should know what was written there. His anxiety blossomed into alarm, his breathing became agitated. "I..." He looked up at his friend. "Star... All his anguish was framed in the single-word question.

"You can't tell what it says?" The blue eyes looking down at him were gentle. "It's... I guess it's because you... you were hurt, buddy. Do you remember being hit on the head? It's hard for you to remember things right now. But everything's going to get back to the way it was. Don't you worry."

Hard to remember things... Hutch broke eye contact with Starsky, looking down once more at the offending birthday card. He plucked at it with his fingers. "Tell... tell me..."
"What it says? Sure." Starsky's smile came back. "It says, 'May your birthday be as beautiful as a day at the beach.' Like it?"

Hutch, feeling slightly dazed, nodded. He took the card back, looking at it again for a long moment. Starsky had told him the words, but the writing inside still held no meaning for him. He couldn't stare at it anymore without becoming upset. The card fell from his fingers and into his lap. Starsky took it away with the wrapping paper.

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September 20, 1981
Hutch pulled himself between the parallel bars, arms and legs trembling with effort. He could feel sweat rivulets running down his sides, and his hands were becoming moist. It felt as though he'd lose his grip on the bars. But Amelia and Starsky were urging him to go on.

He couldn't really walk, but he managed to slowly pull himself forward. Amelia was behind him, hands gripping his waist in case he fell. Starsky stood at the end of the bars, arms outstretched, eyes alight.


Hutch slid his right hand forward on the bar, then moved his left the same way. Then, gripping with all his strength, he dragged first one leg and then the other, making a step. His right arm began to tremble and he felt the awful certainty that his right leg was too weak to hold him anymore. He shook the hair out of his eyes and looked back up at Starsky. The blue eyes were bright with anticipation. Hutch took a deep breath and tried again.

His left leg moved, lifting from the floor in more of an actual step. But the right was uncooperative; he had to concentrate so hard to move it and it felt heavy as lead. Finally, he dragged the foot forward as his arms weakened and he felt himself about to collapse.

Starsky was there, catching him as he started to fall. Hutch sagged against him, breathing heavily, feeling so safe surrounded by his friend's steady strength. He wanted to hang on tight, but his hands were too tired to grip, and he let the therapist and Starsky maneuver him into the wheelchair. Exhausted, he barely paid attention to the words of encouragement and praise they lavished on him.

"Easy partner," Starsky said softly, wiping Hutch's face with a towel. "You want a drink of water?"

Hutch lifted a hand to take the offered cup. His hand was shaking and he spilled a little of the water, but it didn't seem to matter. The cold water tasted good to his dry mouth, reviving him a little.

"Can we...?" he began, still breathing heavily, "can we go home now? You said… when I can do that... we could... go home."

A smooth hand reached out to touch his face. "I said that? You've got a pretty good memory, these days. Well, buddy, it's really up to Melissa, but I think we'll be able to start getting ready. I want to go home, too."

***********

Starsky dropped into a chair in Dr. Samuels' office, waiting until she finished her phone call. He was again beginning to feel the need to move, to accomplish something. In the last three and a half weeks, Hutch had
improved quickly. He was eating well and had put on nearly ten pounds. Work with a speech therapist had helped him regain some vocabulary. He still needed some help, but could manage to wash and dress himself if his clothes were laid out for him. His bladder had retrained well, and he could take care of things in the bathroom by himself. He could transfer from the wheelchair to the bed and back again. Today on the parallel bars, he'd proven how much stronger he was, and how much he wanted to go home.

Melissa hung up the phone and reached out for a file. "I heard from the rehabilitation center in California today, David. It looks as though everything will be ready when you get there." She picked up a brochure and handed it across the desk to him.

Starsky looked through it. In the color photos it looked like a pleasant place, but it was still an institution. "How long do you think he'll need to stay there?"

"A month at least, perhaps two. When he gets to the new facility, there will be a complete evaluation done on Hutch. His physical condition, his mental outlook, his verbal and reasoning skills, all of those will be taken into account in order to determine his therapy, and how long he will have to be in the hospital. Eventually, when he is more able to take care of himself and spend more time without constant supervision he can continue therapy as an outpatient." The brown eyes looked at Starsky closely. "What's wrong, David?"

"Seems like a long time. I know, I know -- " he held up a hand. "He's been sick a long time and it's going to take a long time to come back. It just seems... you know, going from one hospital to another..."

"You knew it would have to be this way," the doctor pointed out.

"Yes. I did. He's a long way from being himself. I think he sort of understands that there is something really wrong with him. Every now and then, I can see such worry in his eyes... real fear."

"Have you two talked about what's happened? I mean, have you said anything specific to him?"

"He really hasn't asked too many questions. I kinda thought you wanted me not to say anything until he did." Starsky spread his hands.

"I know." Melissa tapped her kangaroo paperweight with a pencil. "But part of his difficulty is that he doesn't know how to ask his questions. Have you observed him... appearing to want to ask something?"

Starsky had an immediate recollection of the day of Hutch's birthday. "He got upset when he looked at the card I gave him with his birthday present. He knew he should be able to read it, but he couldn't. I was sort of in shock when I realized that, so I didn't know what to tell him. I said the same old thing, basically. But I did add that he had been hit on the head, and that's why he was having trouble remembering things. It seemed to satisfy him at the time."

Melissa rolled the pencil between her fingers, her eyes thoughtful. "If you sense confusion in him, if he appears troubled, don't be afraid to put his feelings into words. Take a guess at what you think is bothering him and try to tell him what's going on. You know him best. You'll have some time on the trip, perhaps, to really talk. He should be encouraged to express himself. And I think you should begin to explain what happened to him, why he's been in hospital. It's even possible that your being too close-mouthed is scaring him more. He feels his own confusion and it's in conflict with your positive reassurance that everything is going to be fine." Melissa jotted some notes down on the page in front of her, then looked up. "You may find that once the subject is brought into the open, that he is ready to have some answers. Ask him what he remembers, see how much of his past -- his life, his career -- he retains. Your comments will certainly be taken into account as part of his evaluation, as much as my medical file."
"Okay. It's been getting hard not to say too much. I was worried about telling him everything too soon, like you'd cautioned me. But he may be ready now, to have some sort of explanation." He sighed. "Another thing about this new hospital, it seems so far away. He's so comfortable with all the nurses here, with Amelia and with you. I hope all the changes don't cause a setback."

"Sounds odd to hear you refer to home as far away from here."

"Yeah, I guess it does. This has almost become like home these last few months." He leaned forward. "I'm going to miss you. So is Hutch."

"I appreciate hearing that, but he'll be so busy he won't have time to think about us here."

"That takes care of Hutch," Starsky muttered the words, not really intending her to hear.

"David." The warm voice caused him to raise his eyes. "Part of my job is knowing when to let go. I'll miss him. I'll miss you, too. But you're both ready to move on. Even if you were Aussies, he'd be transferred to a better rehab facility eventually."

"Yeah." He ran a hand through his hair, thinking that if he was going back to work he'd better get a haircut. He felt he should say something more, acknowledge the rapport he'd often noted between Melissa and himself. He'd never had to say a word, she simply understood how important Hutch was to him. That had made things easier all around. Now he was wondering if someone else would be so understanding, and how he would ever be able to explain what was essentially unexplainable. "Melissa," he began softly, "I... I just want to thank you. I really appreciate everything you've done..." His voice trailed off as he realized how empty the words sounded. "I'm not always so good at saying things," he tried again, "and I've been pretty confused off and on during all this. But everything you've done, all the help you've given... I guess I really mean you've been like a friend to me, and I really needed that, as much as Hutch needed the medical help. It's... it's been a long time since I even talked about friendship..."

"I know." She reached across the desk to pat his hand. "There have been dark days, but they're in the past now. You made it, both of you. And you have the future." The woman's dark eyes locked with his own. "I hope you'll be able to spend it together."

*She knows. She's always known.* The quiet statement gave validation to his lonely feelings of love for Hutch. "If... if it's okay, I'd like to write to you every so often... kinda let you know how Hutch is coming along."

"Of course it's okay. I've been his doctor for a long time."

Starsky grinned. "I don't know what would've happened if you hadn't been."

Melissa gave one of her sweet smiles in response, then went on as though somewhat embarrassed. "Let's look over these travel plans. Everything needs to be coordinated so you have as little trouble on the way back as possible."

The trip was going to take even longer than when Starsky had come to Australia alone. They would take it in easy stages so as not to overtax Hutch. First, they would leave Adelaide and fly to Sydney, where they would check into a hotel to rest for several hours before taking the overseas flight toward the States. The next plane would carry them as far as Hawaii, but instead of having only a two-hour layover as Starsky had on his first trip, they would spend the night in a hotel and resume the journey the following day. Starsky was going to be totally in charge of Hutch, seeing to all his needs, including any medication that might be required, such as Tylenol for pain, Valium to ease any emotional upset, and a sedative to assure Hutch of getting the restful sleep he would need. Melissa and Starsky had both sat down with Hutch and explained
the trip to him, but they were still uncertain of how much he understood. It was clear, however, that he did comprehend the idea of going home.

*Home*... Starsky, too, was eager to move on, to get back to familiar things. *It's time...*

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*September 28, 1981*

The new pair of jeans felt rough and stiff, but Hutch was glad to be wearing them. He sat in his wheelchair, dressed in the jeans and shirt Starsky had given him for his birthday, wearing the sweater from his doctor, too. Putting them on, he'd begun to feel extremely clear-headed, ready to face the world outside. *No more hospital beds, or tubes in me, or exercises in rehab...*

*It's been... so long.* It seemed he had been here in the hospital for a very long time. He wasn't even sure how long. *Have to ask Starsky.* Starsky would have the answers, Hutch was sure. And asking him seemed natural. But Hutch wondered why he himself did not know.

He looked down at his hands, lying clasped in his lap. *Long enough to lose all of my tan...* he mused. He flexed his fingers, examining, not for the first time, the rings on the little finger of his left hand. He had been aware of them for some time, but had never really considered the sight unusual. Now he looked at them more closely, holding his hand up toward the light streaming in through the window.

*Silver and gold... like... Starsky's rings. No -- these are his. But how did I...?*

His hands clenched tight into fists, and he cursed himself for the void in his memory. *Like being only half a person... only half alive... What happened to me? Where am I, really? Who am I?*

He squeezed his eyes shut, sighing, then opened them again, watching the door to his room. There were so many questions inside him he didn't even know how to begin asking. When Starsky was with him, they didn't seem important anyway.

The rings on his finger felt good. Hutch rubbed the metal bands with the finger of his other hand, feeling comforted, as if Starsky were here with him now.

*C'mon Starsky. I'm ready and waiting. Let's go...*

********

Starsky reached the door to Hutch's room. *For the last time,* he realized. He pushed it open.

Hutch sat there, waiting for him. For a moment, all Starsky could do was look. The jeans, the sweater, the plaid collar of the shirt, they all swept Starsky back to a time years ago. The heavy knit of the sweater seemed to add bulk to Hutch's frame, and with his face all-expectant like that he looked just like he used to, boyish, eager and happy.

"What?" the vision asked hesitantly, as Starsky stood and stared. "Do I look funny or something?"

"No." Starsky shook his head. "Not funny at all. In fact, you look pretty damn good."
A smile broke like sunshine on the pale face, and the blue eyes sparkled. Hutch even sounded like his old self today.

"You ready to hit the streets, partner?"

Hutch blinked, eyes clouding just a little as if he were trying to interpret the question. "Yeah. If you say so."

The door opened again, and Dr. Samuels entered. "G'day, you two. I can see you're ready to leave us." She handed a folder to Starsky. "Here are your copies of the papers. Keep track of the medication you give him on the trip. There shouldn't be anything to worry about, since he's been doing so well these last few weeks."

"I'll be sure to remind him of that." He tucked the folder under his arm, shifting the other things he was carrying so he didn't drop them.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," Melissa began. "There are some reporters downstairs."

"Really?" Starsky was surprised. He knew Hutch's recovery had been reported in the local paper, the one that had run his picture two years ago when Melissa had been trying to determine his identity. There had been calls about his condition for several weeks, and Melissa had fielded the questions, keeping Hutch himself out of the spotlight. "How did they know we're leaving today?"

"I'm not sure. Someone on staff must have called them. I'm sure we can slip out the back entrance, though. There's no need to confuse Hutch..."

"Starsk?" A hand brushed Starsky's wrist. "Are we going soon?"

"Sure, buddy." He turned back to look at Melissa. "I guess we have everything."

"I'll take charge of him on this trip," the doctor told him, moving to grasp the wheelchair handles.

Starsky smiled. "Sounds good to me." He held the door and watched her push Hutch's chair through. Her patient was beaming happily.

They rode down together in the elevator, Starsky and Melissa talking quietly, Hutch watching the glowing lights that told him they were descending to street level. As the doors opened, Starsky spoke to him.

"Almost forgot, buddy. I brought you a new raincoat. It's pretty cold out there today, and it was drizzling a few hours ago."

Hutch looked up. "Coat?"

"Yeah. Let me help you get into it." He bent, and with Melissa's assistance, they put the coat on Hutch. His fingers ran over the fabric curiously. Starsky held the doors open and Melissa maneuvered the chair through.

"There they are!" Excited voices intruded on the small group, and a pack of reporters carrying lights and cameras rushed up.

"You're the American who was in the coma, right, mate?" one said, pushing a microphone in Hutch's face.

"Hey -- Leave him alone." Starsky took charge, stepping forward.

"We just want a word or two with the famous patient," another reporter said, crouching to kneel close to Hutch. "C'mon, tell us what it feels like to wake up from the dead..."
"That's enough!" Starsky got hold of the man's collar and lifted, pulling him away from Hutch's vicinity.

"Gentlemen, please!" Melissa put herself between the wheelchair and the crowd. "This man is recovering from a long illness. He doesn't need to answer questions; he needs to be able to leave the hospital peacefully..."

"Starsk?" Hutch's voice came to him, sounding thin and confused. Starsky turned and saw how much paler Hutch's face had become. His eyes were wide, filled with an expression of shock. He flinched when a flashbulb went off in his face.

"That's it. You're scarin' him. We're getting out of here, right now!" The authority in his tone quelled some of the reporters' enthusiasm and he used the opportunity to turn the wheelchair in the direction of the driveway. Melissa gave them some time by answering a few of their questions herself.

Soon she hurried back to them and helped Starsky get Hutch into the waiting car. The driver folded the chair and stowed it in the trunk -- 'boot' as Melissa called it -- with the luggage. Starsky climbed into the back seat with Hutch, and the doctor sat up front with the driver who hurriedly put the car in gear and drove off.

"They can be frightfully rude," she said, turning to look at Hutch.

"Almost as bad as the ones back home," Starsky agreed, wiping his face and sighing in relief. He followed Melissa's gaze.

Hutch sat there, looking bewildered, breathing shallowly, eyes darting and seeming unfocused.

Starsky got hold of his hand. "Hey," he began gently, "you still with me?"

The eyes turned to him. Hutch couldn't seem to find words.

"It's okay. We're goin' home, remember?"

He didn't answer. Starsky saw the long throat work as Hutch swallowed convulsively.

The remainder of the trip to the Adelaide airport was less distressing. Starsky was glad Melissa had accompanied them; she stayed with Hutch while he took care of checking in and getting their few bags marked. They had timed their arrival so that there would not be much time to wait.

Starsky had thought the noise and bustling crowd would interest Hutch, but he didn't seem to notice. The experience with the reporters had obviously unsettled him.

"Do you think they scared him, asking those questions that way?"

"Don't worry," Melissa insisted. "He was so surprised, I'm sure he didn't understand a word any of them said to him."

"I hope you're right." Starsky wasn't so sure. Lately, Hutch seemed to be understanding things better all the time. He still didn't have much to say, but he was alert and listening most of the time.

They were called to board the plane before the rest of the passengers. A stewardess came over, asking if there was anything special they needed.

"We just want to make sure we have a seat near the men's room," Starsky told her.
"No worries," the woman smiled. "You'll be in the first row, right by the dunny. There's more space in those seats, too."

Melissa walked with them as Starsky pushed the wheelchair through the exit and outside. Unlike the large airports in the States, here it was necessary to go outdoors to get aboard the plane. Most of the passengers would climb the stairs pushed up to the jet, while Starsky and Hutch would ride up on a special lift, one usually used to hoist baggage, Starsky supposed.

Everything was fine until Hutch looked up and saw the airplane.

"No!" He sounded as emphatic as that first time he had spoken, when the doctor had tried to get his blood.

"What, Hutch? We're just getting' on the plane." Starsky patted his shoulder.

"No!" He said it again, louder this time.

Starsky tilted the chair back a little to get it over the lip of the lift.

Hutch tried to get out of the chair.

"Hey!" Starsky used one hand to restrain him. "Take it easy. Nothin' to worry about. We're going for a little joy ride, that's all."

"No! I... won't go! You can't -- No!" He looked around wildly. "Starsky!"

"I'm here. I'm right here." Starsky knelt in front of him, worried now. "What's wrong?"

"Starsky... What? You..." Hutch couldn't explain himself. He was breathing hard, eyes wide and anxious. He looked up, shuddering as he took in the shape of the plane they were trying to board. "No!"

"Jesus." A light bulb went on, but Starsky didn't like the conclusion he was reaching. "Melissa, you suppose he remembers bein' put on the plane... you know, when they took him?"

"That must be it. I can't think of any other reason he should be so frightened." She stepped onto the lift with them. "I'll ride up with you."

The lift operator had waited for Starsky's signal, then he started the machine. Hutch moaned, again trying to climb out of the chair. It was all Starsky could do to restrain him. By the time they reached the door of the plane, Hutch was hyperventilating, still insistently saying 'no' and calling Starsky's name, not understanding he was right there.

They wheeled him down the aisle and helped him into a seat, both the doctor and Starsky trying to offer reassurance. Hutch did not seem to hear even half of what they said to him. The stewardess aboard was watching them doubtfully, as if this passenger was not fit to travel on her plane. Starsky was beginning to wonder if he were really ready for the trip after all.

"Do you have the medication?" Melissa spoke urgently, tugging on his arm. "I think we should give him some Valium. Once you get underway, he'll begin to calm down."

"I hope so." Starsky fumbled in his carry-on bag for the medicine while Melissa asked the stewardess for some water. "Hutch," he said, trying to get his attention. The man seemed not to be able to see or hear him now, however. It took Melissa to get the sedative into him.

Starsky sat back, watching her take charge, feeling as though he had betrayed Hutch by bringing him here.


The blue eyes found him and he waited to see the anguish in them. But Hutch only looked at him gratefully, recognizing him again. Starsky felt as though a fist clutching his heart had finally let go. Cautiously, he reached for Hutch's hand again.

"That's better," Melissa pronounced. She gave Starsky a look. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Guess so." He smiled sheepishly. "Good thing you came aboard with us, doc."

The other passengers were beginning to arrive. Starsky let go of Hutch's hand and stood up. "Looks like this is it."

"I'm glad to have known you, David." Melissa said solemnly, offering her hand.

He took it gently in his own. "We said goodbye once before..."

"But this time it's under much happier circumstances."

"We still managed to make it a little exciting," he returned with a sheepish grin.

The doctor nodded. She bent down to Hutch, touching his cheek one more time. "Goodbye, Hutch. You're going to be just fine. I know it." He didn't answer, but he looked at her unblinkingly for a long moment.

She stood up and faced Starsky again. He felt awkward. He didn't know her very well, but he felt like he was losing a friend. Finally, he reached to pull her into a hug, holding on tight for the briefest of moments.

The doctor's eyes were bright when he released her. He had to swallow before speaking. "Thank you. For everything."

"You take care," she told him firmly. And, squeezing his hand once more, she moved down the aisle and out of his life.

Starsky sat down, feeling like he'd jumped into an undercover assignment totally unprepared. "Just you and me, now," he said, turning to Hutch.

The blue eyes were looking at him with a strange expression. Looking... past me? Do you really see me, Hutch? Or are you totally confused about what's going on?

"Hutch, I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Time to buckle your seatbelts," the quiet voice of a stewardess broke in. Starsky hooked his own belt, then turned to take care of Hutch's.

The new action startled his friend again, but when Hutch said no this time it was with less conviction than before. Starsky wondered if fastening the seat belt made him feel like a prisoner. Forcing the worry aside, he
started up yet another of the inane conversations he'd held with a quiet Hutch, describing the boarding of the other passengers, the sights they would see, where they were going and the other details of the trip. Slowly, the anxiety began to leave Hutch's eyes and by the time they began to move, he seemed more at ease, though his breathing still sounded irregular and nervous to Starsky.

The plane was going faster now. Hutch tensed again, looking as though he wanted to climb out of the seat, turning a worried glance toward the window. Starsky was afraid he'd panic again.

"Hutch," he said firmly. "Look at me." He reinforced the order by grasping his friend's shoulders, tugging until he got his attention.

"That's it. Look at me. Not out there. There's nothing out there that can hurt you."

The plane lifted off, hurling itself into the air. Starsky held Hutch's gaze by sheer force of will. We're together, he wanted to tell him out loud. And we're gonna make it. Just the way we always did. But the words wouldn't come. He just held the frail shoulders, his sight locked in the fathomless blue of Hutch's eyes.

Long moments later, Hutch relaxed totally as the drug took effect. He dozed off, head on Starsky's shoulder, leaving his partner to contemplate the journey and what it would bring them, alone.

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CHAPTER V

Hutch woke as Starsky unfastened his seat belt. The action startled him and he couldn't help flinching a little.

"It's okay." Soothing words were directed to him. "We've landed. Time to get off the plane."

Hutch didn't answer. He was tired, groggy, still a little disoriented. He let Starsky help him get up and into the wheelchair and just rode quietly as they disembarked.

People all around. Who are they? Why are we here? This isn't the hospital... isn't home...

"We're in Sydney," Starsky told him. The words were meaningless. "We're just gonna check into a hotel for a coupla hours so you can rest."

Rest? I've been resting...

"I'll bet you're hungry. Don't worry. We'll have a little lunch when we get to the hotel."

Hutch tuned the words out. Trying to make sense of the confusion in his head and around him was giving him a headache. He let Starsky take charge.

People moved out of the way as they passed, turning when they noticed the chair. Some of them bent down a little and he could see their faces, odd expressions of sympathy or disturbance. He began to feel uncomfortable, as though there were something wrong with him. He looked down at his lap, fingers checking the zipper on the new jeans.
"Hey, what're you doin'?" Starsky's voice was colored with a chuckle. "You're okay, aren't you? Haveta go?"
A hand tugged at his arm.

Hutch stopped his investigation at once, looking up at Starsky. His friend looked exasperated. *What did I do wrong?*

They emerged through double glass doors to a street. Starsky hailed a cab and a few minutes were spent manhandling Hutch and the chair and the luggage into various sections of the automobile.

The taxi lurched into traffic and for a few minutes Hutch enjoyed the quiet.

"Enough heat back there, mate?" the driver spoke up suddenly.

"Fine," came Starsky's voice in answer.

"He's not too cold, is he?"

"No, we're fine."

*He? Does he mean me? Why doesn't he ask me himself?*

"Good," the driver went on. "He a friend of yours?"

Starsky shifted his position. "Right."

"In an accident or something?"

"Yeah."

Hutch watched Starsky's face as he answered. The blue eyes shifted quickly to look at Hutch, then away, out the window.

"Too bad," the driver continued. His tongue made a sound of sympathy and pity. "Yeah. Too bad when things like that happen."

"Listen, 'mate'," Starsky said brusquely. "If you wouldn't mind..."

"Huh? Oh, sorry." The driver threw a quick glance toward the back seat. "No worries. I didn't mean any harm."

"I know."

Hutch felt a flush spread over him, warming his cheeks. He felt conspicuous, embarrassed, without fully understanding why. He knew only that he wanted to get out of the cab and away from the prying judgmental eyes of the driver.

When the car came to a stop, Hutch wished he could make himself shrink so he would be less easily noticed. He kept his head down, barely moving to help Starsky get him out of the vehicle. The air outside was cold and wintry, and he tried to pull the sides of the new raincoat closer around him with stiff, awkward fingers, hunching his neck to avoid the chill breeze. Not wanting to see or be seen, he closed his eyes tight, letting Starsky take him wherever he wanted.
At last, he was pushed no further. The chair came to a stop and Starsky walked from behind him. There was the sound of bags being dropped on the floor. Then, he sensed Starsky's warmth nearby.

He opened his eyes. Starsky was there, crouching before him. His hands reached, touching Hutch's knees and his head tilted appraisingly as he observed him.

"You okay?"

Hutch had no answer. He grimaced slightly, but Starsky didn't ask for more. He stood up then, surveying the room in which they found themselves, pulling off the suede coat he wore. He glanced back at Hutch.

"You mind if I use the bathroom first? That cold air -- " He laughed softly and, without waiting for an answer, hurried to the other room and closed the door behind him.

Hutch looked around then, wondering where they were. It was a room decorated in tones of beige, containing two beds, a desk and a television. *Hope we don't have to be here long...*

Something caught his eye. It was his own image in the mirror above the desk. He nudged the wheels of his chair, edging a bit closer to take a look. What he saw was very discouraging.
It was not the first time he had looked in the mirror. Yet perhaps this was the first time he had observed himself more objectively. His hair was disheveled, his face white, skin pasty. Watery blue eyes looked back at him; they were like the eyes of a stranger. Slowly, Hutch raised a hand to touch his face. The flesh felt delicate, thin. *This isn't me... it can't be. How did I get this way?* Feeling overwhelmed, tears welled in his eyes. Disconnected words filtered through his mind: *accident... too bad... back from the dead... coma... Coma.* There was a world of meaning behind the word, yet it remained beyond his grasp. He didn't know its definition, but it had the power to terrify him, nonetheless.

"Hutch?" The question was full of concern, the speaker moving quickly to his side. "What's all this?"

Slender fingers touched at his cheek, coming away wet.

Hutch shut his eyes, but the flow didn't cease. Shamed, he turned his head away.

"Don't." The order came out choked. "Please, Hutch. Don't."

The sound of Starsky's distress made it hard to stop the tears. Hutch tried, drawing a ragged breath. He felt he should say something, but in his misery the right words stayed out of reach. Finally he managed a shaky, "Hurts."

"I know." Starsky moved closer, arms surrounding Hutch's shoulders. "But you listen, okay? It's gonna be all right. You have to believe in me, man..."

Hutch tried to form a question. "Window..." he gasped. "How?"

"Window? What do you mean, babe?" Starsky straightened and looked out the window.

"How?" Hutch persisted, peering at his reflection once again. The ravaged face now showing there looked even worse with the tear tracks.

"Oh -- You mean, the mirror?" Starsky's gentle voice guessed. He turned the wheelchair, preventing Hutch from staring any longer. Firm hands took Hutch's face and the shuddering man met the earnest eyes of his friend. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," he breathed. "You remember that? Maybe you don't. Maybe, like always, you're only getting fifty percent of what I'm sayin'... but you gotta know, Hutch. You look so good, sittin' there, so wonderful -- I know it must be confusing, but honest -- you're getting better. Really and truly, I promise. You look so much better now to me -- it's just beautiful to see how much you've improved already..." The words petered out and Starsky waited quietly, eyes showing how much he hoped he had helped.

Hutch did not know how to respond. His friend's words were heartening, but what lay underneath them hurt, too. *You look so much better, now... ' God, how bad did I look before?*

Starsky cleared his throat, firmly changing the subject. "Now, let's call down to room service and get us some lunch. We'll be here for about three hours. Do you want a nap? Maybe you should stretch out on the bed for a while. Or do you need to go to the bathroom? If you need help -- just ask." He stood, pulling the wheelchair up between the double beds. Hutch could no longer see the mirror that way. Instead he watched as Starsky reached for the phone.

"How 'bout some soup?" his friend said, glancing his way. Hutch nodded, feeling wrung out. He was content to let Starsky lead the way now, again.

***************
The 747 banked into a turn and Starsky leaned past a sleeping Hutch to peer out the window. Beneath them lay spotty clouds and a blue sea. They had finally left Australia behind. Beginning the second leg of the journey had held less conflict than the first. Starsky had spent a few moments telling Hutch that they would be getting aboard another plane, that nothing was going to hurt him and that everything would be fine. Then, he had also taken the precaution of giving him another .5mg Valium. *Once upon a time*, Starsky thought ruefully, *you'd have given me an argument about takin' those. But once upon a time was over long ago...*

He was dozing now. Starsky hated to see him so out of it. It presented too many reminders. But the trip itself was stressful to him and Melissa had said he should sleep as much as possible. Hutch looked stronger, but he was still a long way from normal. *This travel business is makin' me tired, too*, Starsky thought, feeling more relaxed as he made the realization.

His traveling companion twitched slightly and awoke, bringing one hand up to rub at his eyes. When he saw Starsky smiling down at him, his expression brightened.

"Hi, Stark." A tiny smile.

"Hi there, partner. You feelin' better?"

Hutch struggled up to a straighter sitting position and looked around somewhat warily. "On the plane?" he asked.

"That's right. It's okay. I'm right here."

Hutch nodded seriously. Then he reached with his right hand, feeling under his coat on his left side. Encountering only the fabric of his sweater, he looked surprised.

"My… cover?"

"Huh? What're you lookin' for?"

The troubled blue eyes sank closed for an instant, and the line in the pale brow deepened as if Hutch were concentrating. "Cover... you know," he insisted. His hand groped under the knit of his pullover. "Where... is it?" He began to look distressed.

"You lookin' for your gun?" Starsky said in dawning amazement. Every so often, Hutch came out with one word when he meant an entirely different one. Or he found a word in the same family and used it when the one he really wanted wouldn't come to mind.

The wide mouth shaped the term, as if testing it, then Hutch nodded.

"Neither of us are packing on this trip, partner," Starsky began, suppressing a smile. Then the event took on additional significance. Hutch must remember carrying a gun, being a cop. "We're off duty this time. Just on vacation. Like when we spent the weekend up at Cap'n Dobey's cabin, remember?"

The light eyebrows raised, and Hutch's expression grew faraway. "Needed 'em," he said emphatically.

"You do remember!" Starsky felt joyful. He squeezed Hutch's arm, laughing out loud, and his puzzled friend chuckled a little, too.

Starsky leaned back in his seat, feeling he could fly high even without the plane. It was like a new light had gone on at the end of his very own, very long tunnel, and those little lights, all of them, were getting bigger all the time. *One of these days, Hutch, you and me are gonna get to the end of that tunnel...*
Starsky was well into a travel magazine when Hutch began to shift uncomfortably in his seat. Then, insistent fingers plucked at Starsky's sleeve.

"Hmm? Need something, buddy?"

Hutch squirmed again. "Where's the...?"

"Oh." Starsky closed the magazine and unhooked his own and Hutch's seatbelts. "It's right in front of us. I'll help you get to it."

He stood up and provided leverage so Hutch could also get to his feet. As he straightened, the plane lurched slightly as a bit of turbulence was encountered. "Great timing," Starsky muttered.

Hutch was holding onto him with a tight grip. With the plane still bouncing, Starsky guided him the few feet to the men's room. Fortunately, it was unoccupied. He pulled open the door and, hanging on to the wall and Starsky's arm, Hutch haltingly took the two or three steps necessary to enter the tiny cubicle. Starsky smiled, proud of how well he had managed them. Just as the door closed behind him, however, the plane gave a more severe pitch. Starsky heard Hutch groan.

The two women in the seats opposite the one he shared with Hutch looked up from their paperbacks curiously. At Starsky's weak smile, they exchanged a glance whose meaning he didn't think he should try to figure out.

The plane dipped and tipped again, and once again Hutch's voice, muffled, came through the bathroom door. Starsky had no choice. He slipped the door open a hair, and tried to peer inside, keeping the opening blocked from the other travelers' view with his body.

"You need some help in there?"

Hutch did, indeed. He was leaning against the wall, hand clenched on the rim of the tiny sink. "Shit."

Starsky muttered it under his breath, and squeezed into the miniscule space with Hutch. He couldn't get the door to close completely behind him, so he opted to hang onto the handle with one hand. That'll make it real easy to help him in here, he thought in annoyance.

"Come on. Let's figure out how to manage this, okay?" he told a white-lipped Hutch. "It's easy. Turn around, unzip, aim and that's all. You can do that, can'tcha? I'll just stand here and hang onto you so you don't fall."

It was easier said than done. The plan's seesawing didn't let up, and Hutch had obviously become nervous in the unusual situation. His shaking fingers couldn't deal with the stiff zipper on the jeans so Starsky undid it for him, after first having his partner cling to the door handle. "Don't want to give the folks out there a show, do we?" he quipped. Hutch's face turned crimson.

Starsky felt some embarrassment, too. It wasn't that he minded helping Hutch, it was that on this occasion it was so public. The clothing logistics were eventually taken care of, and then in awkward moves Hutch got turned around to face in the right direction, Starsky holding his waist until he finished. There was a fine trembling under his hands, Hutch shaking with nerves. The tiny room felt over-heated and both of them had started sweating, adding one more element to the uncomfortable set of circumstances. One of these days, we'll look back at this and laugh, Starsky lamented. But he didn't say it aloud to Hutch. Instead, his own thoughts supplied the taunting reply, 'when you speak of this, and you will, be kind...' He sighed, feeling like some kind of moron, wishing there was a way to help his friend avoid all the indignities of his situation.
Hutch's face was still touched with pink when he turned back to Starsky. He kept his eyes firmly on the ceiling as he was rebuttoned and zipped. Starsky looked up, tugging his chin. "You're all right. Wash your hands." At least the turbulence seemed to be finally dying down. At last, after what seemed like at least a half hour later, they got the door open and maneuvered back to their seats. The two women travelers must have been watching the door avidly, but they quickly returned to their reading when Starsky emerged.

The man sitting next to him was still wired with tension. Starsky rubbed gently at his forearm. "Hey, Hutch. It's all right. Everybody needs a friend once in a while." It certainly wasn't the first time he'd given him a little assistance in the bathroom.

"Feel like... a baby..." the words came out sounding strained, mortified.

Perhaps it was the fact that Hutch really was getting better; he realized now when he was incapacitated and it abashed him, while before he hadn't cared who saw him like that. His modesty was returning, a good sign in the long run, Starsky figured.

"I know," he said softly, trying to convey understanding. "Just forget it, Hutch. It's no big thing. These things happen, okay?" The blue eyes finally met his own, and Hutch managed a tentative smile. "That's better."

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When the plane finally began to descend from the sky, Starsky was glad. It had been nearly twelve hours of air time, and they were still only halfway home. Hawaii. Looking down, he could make out the lights of the landing field and longed to be able to see the beach. Tomorrow. It should be warm... Hutch will love it. It'll do both of us a world of good.

He touched the arm of his seat partner. Hutch's eyes fluttered open and a look of happiness spread on the relaxed features. "We there yet?"

"You got it." Starsky grinned back. "Let's go."

He felt he was getting pretty good at maneuvering the wheelchair through crowds of people. This time, Hutch was looking around the airport eagerly, taking note of what was going on around him, though he appeared somewhat tired from the traveling. Starsky collected their bags and they boarded a shuttle bus that would take them to the hotel where they had reserved a room.

The room this time was decorated in tropical colors; the greens were restful, the blues and pinks bright and exciting. Two wide beds with white rattan headboards looked inviting. Starsky ordered a light supper and set about making himself and Hutch comfortable.

"I started runnin' a hot bath for you," he announced after they had eaten, coming out of the huge bathroom. "Oughta make you feel better. It's awful sitting up in those airplane seats all that time, isn't it?" He reached a hand up to chafe at his shoulders.

Hutch looked up, grimacing as he copied Starsky's move.

Starsky grinned. "That's for sure. I'll give you a rubdown after your bath, okay?"

Hutch still wasn't much of a conversationalist. Starsky was not bored with his company, however, and he'd gotten used to the comfortable silences. He helped Hutch out of the chair and settled him on the bed, making
small talk as he laid out pajamas and a robe for him. Figuring the tub was full enough, he went in to turn off the water.

"You start getting out of those clothes, okay?" he called, bending over to adjust the taps. He noted a packet of herbal bath salts which, when opened, had a nice, woody fragrance, so he tossed them into the tub, too. He glanced out the partially opened door and saw Hutch working on the buttons of his shirt.

It hit him all at once, the realization that, for the first time, he was all alone with Hutch. This wasn't the hospital; no one would come in unannounced. This wasn't an institution, governed by rules. This was, even if for only tonight, their private place together.

Starsky sat down heavily on the edge of the tub. *Userta dream about getting him alone in a place like this...* The absurd unfairness of what had happened, what they had been cheated of, rose up to tighten in his chest and throat. *I love him.* That was it, pure and simple. It didn't even come down to emotional versus physical love, or combinations thereof. It was what Starsky felt. *And I want to show it... somehow... isn't there some little way...?* In the hospital, such thoughts had seemed foreign, out of step with the circumstances. Now he was free to -- to what? *Go out there and take his hand... make some kinda declaration? No. He wouldn't even understand.*

That hurt. But Starsky had no wish to confuse or trouble his friend. He looked out toward where he was slowly, thoughtfully, removing his shirt. *You're no more ready to deal with that idea than you are of... picking out what you should wear tomorrow.* Hutch wasn't a child though. He had feelings, strong emotions, Starsky knew. He was a man who was trying to find his way back to a world he suddenly found unfamiliar. Today, too many fresh pieces of the puzzle had been tossed in. Throwing in some new element now wouldn't be fair at all.

*Do you remember?* Starsky's heart was begging him to ask. *Please -- let me just know you remember that I love you, and that you love... loved me, once a long time ago.*

*Is that all it was? Something from long ago that can never be recreated now? We've been through so much - - is nothing of that love we talked about going to survive? I wanted it to. I hoped and prayed and begged for it to...*

"I'm ready, Starsk," the plaintive, eager voice sang out.

"Coming." Starsky sighed, getting up and going out to lend him a hand.

He was sitting on the bed, stripped down to his underwear. Starsky met the blue eyes for a long moment. "C'mon, I'll give you a ride."

Hutch pushed up off the mattress, and Starsky could see how exhausted he really was. Like the old days, Hutch didn't admit it when he was tired. He pulled up the chair and helped Hutch into it, then guided him into the blue tiled bathroom.

He picked up one of the big, plush towels and placed it in the tub, figuring Hutch would slide around too easily otherwise. *Besides, thin as you are, you'll need something to soften that hard tub...*

"Okay. You ready?" he asked, looking his charge over.

"Ready." Hutch said it gamely.
It wasn't too difficult getting him out of the chair and disposing of his briefs, but it took a bit of planning to get him to the point of standing in the water.

"Maybe I should have started filling this thing after you were in," he mused.

"I'm okay," Hutch insisted.

"Sure. Absolutely." Starsky wished he could be as certain. "How 'bout we get you to sit on the edge first? Take this thing one step at a time...."

They managed it with careful, slow movements, improvising, thinking out loud. Hutch's hands were clamped tight to Starsky's forearms, Starsky held Hutch around the chest. They both ended up sitting on the edge of the tub, Hutch with his feet in the water.

"Whew," Starsky muttered, wiping sweat off his face. The bathroom was steamy.

"I..." Hutch began. "I'm sorry I'm... so much trouble..."

Starsky looked at him. It was the first time he had said anything like that. The big eyes were full of apology. That was Hutch, tried and true. He loved to take care of people, but didn't want to be a burden to anyone else himself.

"You're no trouble," Starsky managed, his voice husky. "Like I keep telling you, what are partners for?"

"Partners..." Hutch said the word slowly, trying it out. He looked back at Starsky, eyes bright, seeming so deep, so full of knowledge. "Partner."

"That's right. I'm your partner. And you're mine. Remember?"

Hutch didn't answer in words, but his hands tightened on Starsky, and his face radiated a warmth that went straight to Starsky's hungry heart.

_I do love you. Just as you are right now, as you were before, and whatever way this all turns out... I love you, Hutch._

Starsky drew a breath, trying to curb his emotions. "Okay, fine. Now, can you slide down into the water?"

Hutch looked at him like he was crazy for a second, then gathered himself to make the move. Starsky hung on carefully; the burden he was holding was very precious. The long legs shifted. Hutch edged off the rim of the tub, and cautiously settled his bottom into the water.

Hutch was breathing a bit heavily, and under his hand, Starsky could feel the thrumming of his heart.

"You okay? Not too hot, is it?"

Hutch shook his head, blond strands falling into his eyes. "Feels good."

The deep water lapped at Hutch's belly, beading on the porcelain flesh. Starsky could not resist touching, smoothing the soft water over Hutch's sides and back. Hutch closed his eyes and sighed with pleasure. In that moment, Starsky felt time weaving them closer together, past and present becoming one. As never before since Hutch had awakened, Starsky sensed they were thinking and feeling the same things, sharing without words, the way they used to.
He reached for the soap and rubbed lather into a thick washcloth, then proceeded to bathe Hutch's back. The quiet man leaned into the motion and Starsky reveled in the sweet, simple contact. Hutch sighed, his face looking blissful as Starsky's hands moved up to his shoulders, then shifted the cloth to run it down over his front. The blond head tilted to one side, eyes opening and intent with concentration.

A firm hand came up to catch at Starsky's wrist. "I can..." His fingers tugged at the dripping washcloth.

"Oh. Yeah, you're right about that." It had felt good to be needed, and now there was a twinge of pain as he realized he wasn't, not quite as badly as before. But that meant Hutch was healing. "Okay, go ahead. But don't forget anything important."

Hutch looked askance at him, eyebrows raised as if to say 'who me?' Then he carefully picked up the big bar of scented soap and lathered the cloth for himself.

Starsky got up from his crouched position, knees protesting the strain, and eased into the wheelchair, figuring he should stay and keep an eye on Hutch. The steamy water was likely to make him sleepy and he didn't want him to slide into the deep water. He watched Hutch's progress, feeling as pleased now to see him able to do the simple task for himself as he had enjoyed helping him before. There was a grace in the easy movements of Hutch's hands and arms, of his legs as he raised them, bent at the knee, to wash them, too. *Even pale as you are, thinned down this way, you're beautiful...*

They were together, in perhaps an even more intimate situation than they had been in the men's room on the plane, but this time Hutch was not so self-conscious. And neither was Starsky. They were secure and comfortable with each other, totally safe. *When did we ever need more than each other?*

Hutch's eyes were growing droopy, his gestures more uncoordinated, a sure sign the fatigue was catching up to him. Starsky leaned over to open the drain, deciding it would be safer and easier to get Hutch out of the tub when it was empty.

"There," he said as the last of the water escaped. Looking up, he noticed Hutch was shivering a little, so he draped a towel around his damp shoulders. "Let's get you out of there and into bed."

Two big hands reached for him, and Starsky got his arms around the thin chest, heaving Hutch up to a standing position. Hutch slipped suddenly, hands clinging tight, but Starsky kept hold of him, steadying him until he could help him step up over the edge of the tub. Without letting go, he grabbed for another towel and wrapped it around Hutch's waist, then let his friend ease down into the wheelchair once again. Together they blotted the water from Hutch's body.

Starsky was rubbing all of the long back he could reach. Hutch sighed, whispering, "Good. Feels good, Starsk."

"Now who's a hedonist?" Starsky smiled, enjoying himself and the mellow mood they had created. Finished with the towels, he headed back into the bedroom, where he helped Hutch into his pajama bottoms.

"You lay down on your stomach, and I'll rub your back," he directed. Hutch settled onto the mattress gratefully, eyes closing. Starsky pulled a tiny bottle from his suitcase and let the fragrant lotion warm in his hands before laying them on Hutch's shoulders. He massaged slowly, gently, feeling no resistance or tension under his hands. His palms swept down Hutch's sides, conscious of the ribs under the flesh, then stroked back up the center of his back. He worked carefully, hands in concert, traveling down the spine and into the lower back. Slipping the pajama pants down a little, he smoothed the slim buttocks, knowing how tired those muscles had to be from sitting all day on the plane. Hutch's hips wriggled a little, reacting to the touches, and Starsky smiled, enjoying the feel of the creamy flesh under his hands. He found himself...
sighing, too, the comfort of being this close to Hutch, being able to help him, warming him with contentedness.

Hutch's breathing was becoming deep and regular. Starsky readjusted the pajama bottoms and pulled up the sheet and blanket to cover the bare shoulders. Hutch shifted position, getting comfortable, pulling the pillow under his head. His eyes were closed, his expression happy. Starsky placed a gentle hand on his friend's head, holding it there for a moment in silence.

"Goodnight, Hutch," he whispered finally "Sleep well. We'll be getting home tomorrow."

A subtle smile playing around the full, soft lips was his only answer. Starsky straightened, feeling a crick in his own back. He headed back to the bathroom, where he pulled off his clothes and turned the shower on, making the water as hot as he could stand. He climbed in and stood under the spray for a long time, deliberately blanking his thoughts. *Don't think now about the past, don't worry about the future,* he told himself, *you've got now. Live for this moment. That's all we can do. And the moments we've been having have been pretty good.*

His own body was protesting the fact that he was still on his feet. Starsky turned off the taps and climbed out of the shower, finding one last towel to rub over himself. He dropped it over the edge of the tub when he was finished and headed for the bedroom, stopping only to retrieve a clean pair of briefs from his suitcase. He pulled them on, dimmed the lights and was under the covers of his own bed in less than a minute. Lying there, fatigue wrapping him a drifting, sleep-seeking lethargy, his eyes opened to dwell on the sight of Hutch, slumbering beside him. Only the space of a few feet of carpet kept them separate.

*If I dared, I'd crawl in next to him. Just to hold him in my arms for one night... is that too much to ask?*

Hutch shifted in his sleep, the long body moving crosswise on the double bed, taking up more space and letting Starsky know that he needed it for himself. *Must feel good to him to be able to stretch out like that, after all that time in that narrow bed back at the hospital.* The peaceful face comforted Starsky, and he slipped into sleep with that image in his mind.

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"Stars-ky! Wake up!"

*Damn! Must've overslept for work again. Hutch's here already!* Starsky jerked awake, sitting up in the bed so quickly his head spun a little. He looked around, trying to get his bearings and found he wasn't home in his own bedroom after all. The voice calling insistently had been like a flash of deja-vu, sending him back in time. He rubbed a hand over his face, and turned to look at the speaker.

Hutch was sitting up in bed, too, his blond hair tousled. His eyes were wide and eager, welcoming Starsky to the new day. Feeling as though everything were falling back into perspective, Starsky grinned over at him.

"I see you're awake. Okay, what'll it be? Breakfast first, or a walk on the beach?"

Hutch didn't take long to answer. "The beach."

********
The air was sweet and fresh. And warm. It caught Starsky unaware as he wheeled Hutch's chair through the
doors of their hotel and outside. He blinked in the sunshine, his whole body echoing in the relief provided
by the sun after the grey months in wintry Australia.

He heard a gasping sigh and looked down. Hutch's face was rapt, turned up to the sky, his expression open
and hopeful as a boy's. His eyes caught the light, and began to sparkle as blue as the Hawaiian firmament.

"Beautiful." Starsky sighed too, meaning the man at his side as much as nature's panorama. And then Hutch
met his eyes, sharing a wide, delighted smile. Starsky reached down to squeeze his friend's shoulders. "Been
a long time since we've seen sun like this, hasn't it?"

"Long time?" Hutch echoed his words, sounding faintly puzzled. Starkly patted his shoulder and then began
maneuvering the wheelchair down the ramp and out toward the sidewalk paralleling the beach. It was a clear
day, yet the sun wasn't so intense they couldn't stand it. Hutch squinted a little, his eyes unaccustomed to the
brightness, but he wouldn't wear the sunglasses Starsky bought for him. They set off, heading in the general
direction of Diamond Head, the great black mountain volcano that overshadowed the entire island.

It was early yet, but there were lots of people. All of them seemed intent on their own pursuits, so few took
notice of the men dressed somewhat out of step with the season; both of them were clad in winter-colored
shirts and heavy jeans. As the breeze swept over the sand, Starsky paused to roll up his sleeves. Hutch
reached up to slip open the top buttons of his own shirt and Starsky caught the gesture out of the corner of
his eye. Right now, Hutch looked no different than he had loosening his buttons in the old days.

They passed a pineapple juice stand and Starsky parked Hutch's chair next to a bench, then went inside to
get them something to drink. When he returned, he found Hutch staring out to sea, eyes seeming to search
for something. Their poignant expression touched Starsky's heart.

"Here," he said, offering the cold juice and clearing his throat. Hutch looked up at him, and
there was
moisture in the corners of his eyes.

Starsky sat down, feeling the need to have something firm under him. He gripped Hutch's wrist. "You feelin'
okay?"

Hutch nodded, and the wistful gaze returned to scan the horizon.

"Try some of this juice, then. It's good."

Hutch dutifully took the cup and sipped. They sat there for a moment, quiet yet not really at peace.

"Starsky?" Hutch's voice finally emerged. It sounded so lost.

"What, babe?" Starsky slid closer to him, taking the cup of juice out of his fingers and sitting it next to him
on the bench. He reached to brush back a strand of hair that had blown into Hutch's eyes.

"Will you tell me... what happened? Please?"

Starsky was not totally unprepared for the question. He had sensed it lurking under the surface of Hutch's
acceptance of the situation, seen the flickers of self-doubt and confusion in the shadowed eyes from time to
time. Suddenly he felt a kind of relief, as if having it all come out in the open would relieve the need for
pretense between them. Hutch knew enough to realize that things weren't right. Starsky wanted to reassure
him. And even more than that, he wanted desperately to learn just what Hutch did remember about his life,
about what happened to him, about everything.
Yet it was difficult deciding where to begin. He reached out and took one of Hutch's hands. "Remember your birthday?" he broached the subject gently. Hutch nodded. "You couldn't read the card I gave you, could you? And I told you... you'd been hit on the head. Remember?"

"You said so." Hutch's eyes looked blank; did he remember Starsky telling him that, or did he retain the event itself?

"Maybe..." Starsky began again, then hesitated and sighed. "Maybe you can tell me what you do remember. Okay? Do you remember your job, Hutch? What do you do for a living?"

The light eyes closed for a moment, reopening with a look of intense concentration. Hutch's lips parted; he looked as though he were groping for the proper words. One hand reached up to his left armpit, the way he had on the plane. "C-cover?" The word was faint. The blond head shook. "Gun... I... carry a gun."

"Right," Starsky encouraged. "Do you know what the job is?" He hesitated, wanting to see if Hutch could find the title himself. But as the precise term evaded him, Starsky could see his returning confusion. He patted the hand he held. "We're cops, remember? Detectives."

A smile blossomed on the man's face and he nodded happily. "Cops. You and me."

"That's right! And you remember where, doncha? What city?"

Hutch thought for a few seconds again. "Min... Duluth?" It came out as a question.

"Not quite. That's your hometown. Try for someplace a little further west... like California."

Hutch's brows knit, his eyes scanned the waves as if for inspiration. His fingers, growing moist, clenched tightly on Starsky's.

"Hey, it's okay. Los Angeles, buddy. I don't blame ya, sometimes I'd like to forget the name of the place myself." He tried for some levity, but knew it was falling flat. "Now, do you -- "

"No!" Hutch looked at him, eyes strained with some indefinable emotion. "I ask you. What happened... to me?"

Instantly contrite, Starsky shifted, moving as close to Hutch as he could. "Take it easy. It's gonna be okay. I'll tell you -- don't worry. I was just... tryin' to see what you did remember." He drew in a shaky breath. "I'm not sure of all the details myself. I know that you were working one day, tailing somebody. And somehow, you were nabbed. Abducted. They put you on a plane -- you do remember that, right?"

"Plane." Hutch's lips silently formed the word.

"That's it. That's why it scared you when we got on the airplane yesterday. You remember that. They took you out of the country, Hutch, all the way to Australia..." He could tell from the watching eyes that here he was losing him. "Anyway, they beat you up, I guess. And they... they gave you a shot." His heart was beginning to feel like someone was trying to wring all the blood and feeling out of it. His voice was quavering even as he asked the next question. "Do you remember them giving you a shot?"

"Shot?" Hutch whispered the word, sounding like he'd learned it by rote. His hand went to his temple. "Shot me? In my head -- ?"

Starsky couldn't bear the look of fright that came as the words trailed off. He reached for Hutch, wanting to surround him with comfort, keep the fear outside and never let it touch him again. "No. Not that. They gave
you a shot... with a needle." He let his finger slide to the inside of Hutch's elbow, knowing how the eyes were watching. "Drugs. To knock you out." The words came tumbling out of him then and nothing could have stopped them. "They knocked you out, made you go to sleep. You couldn't wake up... for a real long time. Do you... do you understand? You were in a coma, buddy." He swallowed hard, drew a breath. "That's why you have a hard time talking and remembering... and -- and doing things. But you're fine now. You just need some therapy to get back to the way you were again. You're gonna be just as good as new..." He ran out of words, then. And he couldn't meet Hutch's eyes. Instead, he turned his face away, picking up his forgotten cup and swirling the pineapple juice around.

A hand reached out and brushed his cheek. Starsky's tired, wrung-out heart seemed to start beating again at the gesture. He blinked, trying to rid his eyes of their tears, and looked up at Hutch.

"I'm okay." He dredged up half a smile. "How 'bout you?"

"Let's go home, Starsky. Can we?"

He felt a certain amount of relief that, for the moment, Hutch seemed to have no more questions. Perhaps he had heard all he could handle, and comprehend, for now. "Sure. It's time we got you back where you belong. But our plane doesn't leave for another couple of hours. We have time to have some breakfast and to stay out here and watch the waves for a while longer. Is that okay with you?"

Hutch nodded, patting Starsky's hand as if to comfort him. "Breakfast. Okay."

As long as his appetite was still good, Starsky figured that Hutch was doing all right.

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Wikki-wikki bus... Hutch turned the new word over in his mind. Starsky had explained to him that here in Hawaii that was the word for 'hurry'. He agreed, feeling like he wanted to hurry up and get back home. He hadn't realized, when Starsky had explained that they would take a long trip to get home from the hospital, that it would take quite this amount of time. He was anxious to get there, anxious to see things that were familiar to him. Perhaps, he thought, maybe he would be able to do more once he was home, because everything wouldn't seem so strange anymore.

Starsky's words of explanation had helped a little. But as always, not quite all of his words made complete sense. Coma... There it was again, scaring him just as much as it had when he'd heard it before. Who were those people with the lights and microphones at the hospital? Why did they want to ask him questions, he wondered. Drugs, Starsky said. Put me to sleep for a long time. A long time... how... how long? Hutch rubbed a hand roughly over his face, trying to blot the question out of his head. He tried to focus on the other things Starsky had said. 'You're fine now... just need some therapy... good as new.' He had to believe those words, the alternative was too frightening. Then why did Starsky look so upset when he said them? There's more he's not saying... and I can't ask him...

They had arrived at the air terminal. It took a lot of effort to get off the tram and collect all their things, then Starsky was pushing Hutch's chair along a covered walkway that led to where they would get on the plane. Hutch sat back, trying to relax in the warm breeze. One more plane ride... then we'll be home...

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CHAPTER VI

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"There! I think that one's their plane!" Huggy Bear pointed toward the jet taxiing up to the terminal.

Captain Dobey lumbered out of his seat one more time, looking skeptical. "Are you sure this time?"

"Yeah." Huggy's voice was laconic. "Look. It's coming right up to the gate here."

"Edith," Dobey turned and called for his wife. "I think it's them."

She moved up beside her husband, the spray of yellow flowers in her arms rustling. "I'm so excited... I hope Hutch stood the trip well. He's probably going to be really tired."

"Yes, Edith," Dobey answered her patiently. "We'll take it easy, don't you worry."

"Starsky says he's really lookin' good," Huggy joined the elated conversation. He pulled out the crumpled postcard Starsky had mailed him last week and looked at it again. "He says it's amazing how much progress he's made in such a short time."

"Do you think he'll know us?" Edith's voice sounded worried. "Starsky said he has trouble remembering things."

"We'll just have to see." Dobey remained stoic, straining to clasp both oversized hands together behind his back. "Let's try not to bowl the poor man over," he admonished, used to giving orders. "Take our cue from Starsky."

"Here come the passengers," Edith chimed in.

Huggy found himself watching the faces as the people disembarked. All of them looked relieved to be on solid ground again after the long flight. As the main group dwindled and stragglers began to come out, he felt his eagerness to see Starsky and Hutch elevating once again. Been so damn long. Starsky must be delirious to have Hutch back home again.

He saw a flight attendant coming out and knew it wouldn't be long now. Starsky said that since Hutch hadn't regained enough strength to walk, he was in a wheelchair. That probably meant they'd be last to get off the plane.

And then he caught sight of them. There was Starsky, dark hair disheveled, pushing the wheelchair and its blond occupant. He was leaning down to tell him something, and for a moment did not see the welcoming committee waiting at the end of the ramp. Then, Starsky looked up.

Huggy saw him stop still for a second or two, just taking in the sight of Dobey, Edith and himself. Then Starsky waved, leaning down to speak to Hutch again. He started pushing the wheelchair faster.

The captain and his wife waved back eagerly. Huggy just stood there, an unaccustomed emotion choking him. Hutch always was special people... damn it's good to know he's alive. He waited anxiously for some sign of recognition from him, but Starsky was the only one of the two who waved.

They drew nearer. Huggy sensed the quiet that suddenly befell Dobey and Edith. His own soaring elation seemed to deflate at the same instant. Now he could see Hutch, how he really looked.

Starsky said he looked good... said he had really improved... God -- I can't imagine... Huggy found himself running a hand over his face, trying to get himself together. Hutch's appearance was a shock. He sat in the
chair looking like a wilted flower, nothing but skin and bones. His left arm lay on the armrest, but the right had dropped into his lap, bent at an uncomfortable angle, which he didn't seem to notice. Incredibly pale, face tired and devoid of expression, he didn't even seem to be focusing on the group waiting to greet him.

Huggy's eyes went back to Starsky. The expression on that man's face told a different story. His eyes were so hopeful, as if every bit of him were counting on this moment. As he pulled up in front of the welcoming committee, the Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. Huggy found the reaction terribly poignant.

Edith was the first who managed to break the stunned silence. 'Dave,' she said softly. 'It's so good to see you.' Stepping forward, she folded him in her motherly embrace, the flowers getting crushed between them. Starsky let go of the wheelchair handles and wrapped his arms around her. After a few seconds, they parted and Dobey stepped in, shaking Starsky's hand.

"Welcome home, son," he murmured. Huggy noted that Starsky's eyes were wet.

Edith and her husband then turned to Hutch. "Hutch," Dobey's voice was warm, but thick with emotion, "we're so happy to see you."

The man in the chair did not react. Starsky came back to life then, bending down to speak directly to him. "Do you remember these folks, Hutch?" The lusterless eyes followed Starsky's every movement, summoning his wandering attention to see where he was pointing. After an attenuated moment he seemed to focus on Mrs. Dobey.

The woman extended the bouquet, and when he didn't reach for it, she placed the flowers in his lap. He looked her up and down, but Huggy could see no identification of her in his gaze. The blue eyes flicked back to Starsky, the blond head shook 'no'.

"How 'bout me, Hutch?" Dobey leaned down, voice strained with forced cheerfulness. It sounded like he was talking to a child. "Remember me?"

Hutch slowly transferred his look to take in Dobey. Nothing. Huggy began to feel strangely embarrassed for him, for Starsky.

The dark-haired man bent down again, getting Hutch's attention. "Remember bein' a cop, Hutch? We talked about that this morning. Think about our work and then tell me you don't know this man." The voice was light, cajoling, but forceful.

Hutch's eyes widened, then squeezed closed. His brow furrowed as if in concentration.

"C-Cap… Cap…?" The soft voice was raspy from disuse.

"Yes! That's right. I'm Captain Dobey!"

Huggy cringed. It sounded as if Dobey were saying 'good boy!' "You remember, Hutch!" Starsky said proudly. He looked up at the others, his whole face reflecting what he saw as a miraculous event. Considering how Hutch looked, Huggy supposed it was. He couldn't shake off the chill he felt. Here Hutch was, looking like death warmed over, barely able to communicate and seeming as though he didn't feel like doing that. And Starsky was gleeful with delight. Didn't he see, didn't he know? Hutch was a ghost, the vaguest silhouette of the vital man they had lost two years ago. Where was the strength, the intelligence? Did he really know Dobey, or was he just uttering a fragment of a barely recalled word? Huggy now realized he'd been hopelessly naïve about the whole situation. The good news, that
Starsky had found Hutch alive, had been so wonderful, so in keeping with their history. *I musta thought it would work out as well as all those other times...* Starsky had written of Hutch's progress, that he'd gained weight, was getting his strength back, that he was recognizing people and things and becoming able to speak again. *Guess the way he is now is a marvel at that. What did I think a man who'd been unconscious for two years would look like?* He noted suddenly that Starsky was staring at him, a shadow of concern in his gaze. Huggy decided he'd better pull himself together, for the sake of his other friend. It was painfully obvious that Starsky needed to hang on to his own perception of how Hutch appeared.

He put out a hand, covering his feelings with some archaic jive. "How ya doin', bro?" Starsky slapped his hand, grinning again, and Huggy pulled him close, pounding his back. When they pulled apart, Starsky looked down at Hutch again, then expectantly back up at Huggy. The restaurant owner felt like he was on stage. He crouched down to get on Hutch's level. "It's been a long time, my man." He attempted a smile of encouragement, and found himself waiting with anxiety to see if Hutch would know him.
There was along moment's pause. Starsky squeezed Hutch's shoulder. "We talked to this guy every day, remember? Could hardly solve a case without his help." The hint didn't seem to help. Starsky nodded in Huggy's direction again. And though the man looked back at Huggy, there was still no acknowledgment of who he was. Starsky tried again. "You couldn't forget The Pits, Hutch."

Hutch looked Huggy over once more, then his eyes slid over Dobey and Edith. His face wore a puzzled expression. Finally his lips parted and he struggled to form a word.

"Black."

Ouch, thought Huggy. He was eerily reminded of Hutch's amnesia game, how he had put on an air of disdain toward him and Dobey. But this is no game, and he's not really being that way. He's just makin' an observation. Should get credit for that at least.

"You're right about that," Huggy quipped gamely. "What else?"

Hutch tried again. "Black... friend..."

"You got it now!" Huggy's concern translated to swift elation. "It's Huggy Bear, restaurateur, bon vivant, friend and aid-de-camp." He could see that Hutch understood little of his chatter, but the blue eyes looked happy nonetheless.

Starsky, too, looked relieved. His smile glowed down at Huggy, who realized now that the hardest part was over. Seeing Hutch this way just took a little getting used to. That's why his appearance didn't bother Starsky. He'd been with him every day, had witnessed the progress, however slight it had been. Huggy still hurt inside to see Hutch reduced to this shadow of himself. But I can handle it. We all have to.

********

It seemed to Starsky that it was taking an interminable amount of time for their luggage to emerge from the baggage chute. He felt uncomfortable, tired from the long trip, and awkward with his old friends. There wasn't much to talk about, it seemed. He had imagined this meeting so many times, pictured them reminiscing, joking together, rejoicing in Hutch's return to the land of the living. But there was none of that. Dobey and Edith, and to a lesser extent, even Huggy, seemed strangely subdued. They kept looking surreptitiously at Hutch -- when they think I'm not paying attention -- and then their eyes would meet and they would share a look of shock and pity and disbelief. They didn't say much, and when they spoke, their words were in whispers and half sentences, as if Hutch might overhear if they weren't careful.

For Starsky, it brought home to him just how badly Hutch was changed. He'd forgotten his own shock when he first came upon his friend lying comatose. To his eyes, with Hutch sitting up, dressed and answering questions, he looked wonderful. To his eyes, with Hutch sitting up, dressed and answering questions, he looked wonderful, and he had made himself believe he appeared much like his old self. Now, watching him from their fresh perspective, he hurt inside again, saw how terrible, how hopeless Hutch's condition seemed. I don't want them to have to look at you like this, babe, he thought in silent torment. I want them to see you well again. God, let it be soon...

Their own bags finally passed by on the circular moving ramp. Starsky reached for them and Huggy helped gather them together. "Well," Starsky sighed. "Guess we better be moving on, huh?"

Edith was at his side. "Do you really have to go directly to the hospital? Couldn't we sit down somewhere and have a cup of coffee together at least?"
Starsky looked at his friend, nearly dozing in his chair, exhausted from the interminable trip. He'd wanted to see him comfortable in a new bed as soon as possible. But Edith was right. It was too soon for the little gathering to break up. It wouldn't hurt Hutch to wait a little while. And, Starsky realized, he needed the social moment with old friends for himself.

"It's pretty difficult hauling this chair in and out of cars..." he began. "How about we stop at the airport coffee shop? Would that be okay?"

"Of course, dear." The womanly pat on his arm sent a stab of loneliness to Starsky's heart. *Been so long since I've been with people who know me...*

They moved together to the large, brightly lit coffee shop. There wasn't much in the way of atmosphere, and the prices were twice as high as they'd pay in the city, but the smiles meeting his own around the table made Starsky pleased they'd come. Dobey ordered a round of coffee and the friendly waitress brought five cups. As she poured, Hutch's eyes blinked open and he sat up a little straighter in his chair.

"Uh..." Starsky reached out and removed the cup that had been placed in front of his friend. "He can't tolerate coffee. You want a glass of juice, Hutch?"

The wide eyes registered disappointment, then Hutch nodded. Starsky turned back to the others, shrugging. "He's not really able to eat just anything yet. But he's been doing pretty well."

"I'm sure he has," Edith responded quietly.

Huggy spoke up, obviously moving to fill the awkward gap. "Willya look at this? Captain Dobey, Starsky, Hutch and me -- you know how long it's been since all four of us were together?"

"Too long," Dobey answered, mulling it over. "I remember -- it was that night..."

"Yeah. That night at the hospital." Starsky replaced his cup on the saucer a little more forcefully than he'd intended. He looked up sheepishly. "Sorry."

Everyone was quiet then. Starsky knew what they were thinking. *We were laughing, looking forward to tomorrow, and the day after that, and all the days we thought we'd have...* His eyes strayed to Hutch, realizing that the others were watching him, too.

"Dave, I," Dobey began, "I can't tell you..." The words petered out then, but Starsky appreciated his captain's attempt to soothe his feelings. "Damn," the big man muttered, eyes returning to the slender blond. "I can't believe what those bastards did to him."

Starsky felt every muscle in his body tighten at his words. It had been a long time since he'd thought about the men who'd kidnapped Hutch, who'd left him for dead in the Australian outback. He'd been so consumed with the daily tasks of caring for him, he hadn't been thinking about anger, or even arrest. Yet now he turned back to Dobey, vehement words flowing out of him without the need for consideration. "And I'm gonna get those bastards someday. One way or the other."

"Starsk?" The weak voice at his side surprised Starsky. "Somethin' wrong?"

"No." Starsky forced control of his voice, of his face. "No, Hutch. Everything's fine."

They sat together a little while longer, the awkward moments fading as the group got used to being together again, small talk supplanting the long silences.
"Are you going right back to work, David?" Mrs. Dobey asked.

"Soon as your husband says he needs me. My pockets are pretty empty, that's for sure."

"You can take a couple of days to get settled if you want, you know," the captain told him.

"I don't know." Starsky rubbed his brow. "I kinda feel like I need to get back to the station."

"Yes," Edith nodded. "It will probably do you good."

"Starsky?" Huggy spoke up, "you mind me askin'? Does Hutch... does he know what happened, how long it's been?"

It was hard for Starsky to respond to that, right there in front of Hutch. Eyes on his friend, Starsky answered carefully.

"We've talked... very little about that so far. I think his own memories of what happened are pretty vague. He's retained some of the fear, I know that. In the last few weeks, he's realized that things aren't right, that something's wrong with him, but he doesn't understand what it all means. We used the word 'coma' for the first time just today. But he doesn't have any idea of the time span. Melissa -- that was his doctor over there -- she said he'd start asking questions when he was ready to hear the answers. I think... that time is coming," he finished slowly. "I hope I'll be able to help him understand."

Huggy nodded, though he looked confused. "I was just wonderin'... if we should be careful of what we say. I don't want to upset him or anything."

"I know, Hug. Thanks. I think it pays to be a little careful. I've kinda been walkin' on eggshells myself."

There was a moment of quiet around the table. Dobey shifted in his seat, leaning toward Starsky to speak to him softly. "Any time you need to talk, son... you know my door is always open."

Starsky's glance flicked up to meet his captain's for just an instant, but he couldn't hold the look. The offer made him uncomfortable, vulnerable. It was Hutch who needed help, wasn't it? Instead, he peered at his watch.

"It's gettin' pretty late, folks. I think maybe we should be going."

"Right." Dobey picked up the check brusquely. "I'll get this."

"Thanks." Starsky drained the last of his coffee.

Hutch seemed to perk up, again taking note of the goings-on around him. "Home now, Starsk?" he said, voice cracking a little.

"That's it, buddy, we're goin' to your new home base, okay?"

A vague smile curved the blond's lips and Starsky moved to pat his hand reassuringly. Within moments the group made its way out of the airport.

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Hutch did doze off on the way to their destination, and when Starsky woke him to get him out of the car, he seemed a little fuzzy and disoriented. He didn't say anything, Huggy noted, even as Dobey and Starsky
helped him into the wheelchair. Starsky pushed the chair up the walk of the San Fernando Rehabilitation Facility slowly, his eyes taking in every detail of the place. The walk was bordered by well-tended flowers, and small yellow lights marked the path. Huggy thought it looked like a calm place, one where Hutch would receive good care and therapy.

Dobey and Edith pulled open the double doors and held them as Starsky pushed the chair through and Huggy brought Hutch's one suitcase. It felt pretty light, he realized, and he assumed that Hutch hadn't much need for an extensive wardrobe.

A woman in a white cap greeted them at the reception desk.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Starsky." She smiled professionally, glancing at her wristwatch. "Oh dear, it's nearly ten o'clock. We didn't expect you to be arriving so late."

"Yeah, well, we just got off a plane, you know," Starsky shrugged.

"And I know the trip must have been tiring," the nurse said diplomatically. "Here are some forms you need to complete for us, if you wouldn't mind. We'll try to expedite matters as quickly as we can tonight -- we'll just take care of the essentials." She pressed an intercom button, and within a few moments a tall, salt and pepper bearded man emerged from an office door to the left of the reception desk.

"You must be Lieutenant Starsky," he said, extending a hand in greeting. "I'm Paul Kennedy, Chief of Staff here."

"Good to meet you." Starsky nodded, but Huggy thought how uncomfortable he looked. His eyes strayed back to Hutch. "This is my friend," Starsky told the doctor.

"Ah, yes. Kenneth, is it?"

"Yeah. But he usually goes by Hutch."

"I see." The man bent down to Hutch's level, but the blue eyes didn't focus on him. The doctor's gaze was clinical, appraising. "We'll have time to get acquainted later," he said, rising. "We'll get Hutch settled in his room, Lieutenant. Can you come back in the morning to meet the rest of the staff?"

"Yeah, I can. But I can help get Hutch settled. He's pretty used to being with me and I don't want him to get confused."

"Of course," Kennedy amended. "Right this way, then."

Starsky took Hutch's bag from Huggy. "Uh -- I guess you can sit here in the lobby for a few minutes?"

"Sure. No problem," Huggy answered for them all. Dobey and Edith found seats on the heather-pink couch, but he watched the party heading down the hall. There was something very lonely in the figure of the tall, dark-haired men pushing the wheelchair. Huggy sensed Starsky didn't feel right about leaving Hutch here this way. It wasn't hard to get the idea; Huggy concurred with it. He found himself wishing Hutch had really come home -- come back to his own apartment at Venice Place. Instead, he was to reside for an unspecified time at this 'halfway house.' Wonder how he feels about that? Huggy wondered. Does he mind -- or does he even realize what's goin' on?

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"Isn't this a nice room, Hutch?" Starsky asked after the staff members had left them alone. Hutch sat in the chair by the bed, not looking at him, not looking around the room either. Starsky continued putting Hutch's things into the dresser drawers.

There wasn't very much other than the jeans and shirt he was wearing; a few changes of underwear, socks and toiletries, three shirts, a sweater and two pairs of pajamas. Starsky peered into the small suitcase. Only one other change of clothes remained inside it. He picked them up, and wound them hastily into a roll he tucked under his arm. They were the things Hutch had been wearing the last time Starsky had seen him. Before. They don't even fit now. Guess I'll take 'em home with me. Maybe someday... He sighed. When Nurse Brownwell had given them to him, he hadn't known what to say. The memories they brought back... He didn't look like the scruffy guy he'd become that last year in those clothes. The tan pants had had a sharp crease, the shirt was tailored and a flattering shade of green.

The nurse had said the staff had washed them, that they'd been filthy, covered with dirt and sand, and stained with blood. Starsky was sure Hutch had been wearing a jacket that day, but no one had found that. Did they take it from you? Did it just get lost in the outback? Will you ever remember and be able to tell me? On second thought, Starsky put the clothes into the bottom dresser drawer. Maybe he should show them to Hutch sometime, see what memories they would evoke for him.

He turned back to his friend. Hutch looked strange, closed in and distant.

Starsky walked over to him. "It's time you got ready for bed," he said gently.

Hutch blinked, eyes slowly finding and focusing on Starsky.

"Bed." He paused, licked his lips thoughtfully. "No."

"Huh? You must be exhausted, we..."

"You said..." Hutch drew in a deep breath, lines forming at the down-turned corners of his mouth, "home."

The word went into Starsky like a knife, straight to his gut. "Hutch, for a little while, you're gonna stay here. It's a nice place, Melissa picked it out. You need some more therapy, some rehabilitation -- remember? Like I told you, to get back on your feet again, since -- since you were hurt. Don't you understand?"

He watched the wide blue eyes. Between them, there on Hutch's unlined brow, he became aware of a vertical crease. That frown line, that had deepened over the years but that had become nearly smoothed away by the long sleep that had held him, seemed to reappear.

"You said home." The repeated phrase sounded stronger, firmer. "You said home."

"I know I did, Hutch. And we are home. We were in Australia. Now we're back in the States, in Los Angeles. I explained all that, I thought you understood." He tried to quell the frustration he was beginning to feel. "We're home. You're just not at your own place. I know you'd rather be there, but you just can't for now." He put a hand on Hutch's knee, squeezing gently. "This isn't a bad place, it's just different. You'll like it." Shit. I sound like somebody talkin' to a kid. "Hutch, it's the way things are for right now. You want to get well -- it's gonna take some time."

Hutch looked up at him, accusing and angry. It was the first negative emotion he had shown Starsky in a long time. Right now, Starsky didn't feel at all equipped to deal with it. He was tired. Like Hutch, he wanted all this to end. I want you home, too. I want to get us back to the way things were. You're not... you're not supposed to be here, in a place like this. You're supposed to be strong... Pain seemed to reach into Starsky's
throat and try to strangle him. He felt incompetent, hopelessly rattled by the thought of Hutch unable to care for himself. He remembered feeling that way a couple of times in the past... Just stood there, that time your car blew up and your hand got burned... And when you were shot by that teenage girl, I could hardly bring myself to keep goin' to the hospital. Damnit, what's wrong with me? He'd managed in Australia, holding himself together with the knowledge that he was helping, that Hutch was making progress. Now, tonight, for some reason his strength seemed to be deserting him. I'm just so damn wiped out... he tried to tell himself. When I get some rest, I'll be able to tackle the situation again. Only, how long is it going to go on?

"Come on, buddy," he said, trying to keep his voice even and patient. "Let's get you into your pajamas." He got up and reached for the light blue pair he'd laid out on the bed.

When he turned back, he found Hutch's stubborn gaze on him. He was reaching to unbutton his shirt, but glaring at Starsky nonetheless. They accomplished the change of clothes with barely a word spoken between them. For Starsky, it was strangely awkward to help Hutch that way when he felt tightened up inside with anger and guilt. The intimate gestures seemed to mock them both, and Hutch's eyes seemed to accuse him of betrayal.

As Hutch was climbing into the hospital bed, the nurse who had helped them before reappeared in the doorway. She was tall, dark-haired, a mature woman who looked quite capable of handling a patient like Hutch.

"I see you're making out okay," she said coming into the room. "Can I get you anything?" She put a hand on Hutch's forearm. He seemed to accept her touch more easily than he had Starsky's in the last few minutes. "Does he need a sleeping pill?" she asked as she glanced at his chart.

"He might," Starsky told her with a reluctant sigh. "Sometimes he gets restless. Nervous, really. And I think... he's not so crazy about being left here tonight."

"Hutch," she said chidingly, plumping up his pillows and adjusting his covers in a proprietary way, "you're going to hurt my feelings if you act like you don't want to be here." She received no response, but did not appear surprised. "You can say goodnight," she told Starsky as she turned. "I'll just go and get him a sedative."

When she was gone, Starsky tried to coax a smile out of Hutch. "At least the nurses are pretty. You can stick it out, can't you, buddy?" Hutch wouldn't look at him.

"You want me to stay until you fall asleep?"

There was a moment's pause before Hutch spoke. "No."

Starsky couldn't bring himself to pretend to misinterpret that statement. "Okay. But I'll be back first thing in the morning. Goodnight."

Hutch didn't answer, didn't look at him. The nurse came back. Starsky watched as she got Hutch to take the sleeping pill. At her urging, he slid down under the covers. His movements looked stiff, full of tension. The blond head didn't look comfortable or settled when it finally lay on the pillow. Starsky turned away, and heading down the hall, he felt like the meanest man alive.

********

Huggy had been watching down the hall for twenty minutes. Finally he saw Starsky reappear, walking even more slowly than he had taking Hutch to his room. The wide shoulders drooped, the easy gait contained the
same rolling step that was uniquely Starsky, only now it was marked by a sense of defeat. A glance showed Dobey and his wife were still leafing through their magazines, so Huggy got up and went to meet him.

Starsky did not notice him until they stood face to face.

"Hey, Starsk, everything okay?"

A shrug. "I think he's mad at me."

"Huh?"

"He thought he was really going home. You know, to his own place." The dark blue eyes looked up. "I kept saying 'home' -- both of us did, his doctor and me. I didn't think..."

"Don't man. He'll be all right."

"I know." Starsky glanced back in the direction he'd come. "But I feel like a jerk." He rubbed his eyes tiredly. "He trusted me, Hug. He looked at me just now like I'd let him down."

Huggy didn't quite know what to say. He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans and looked at the floor. "He's mad, you say? Maybe that's not so bad."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm no shrink, man, but it seems to me Hutch needs to start showing some spunk. He gets mad enough, maybe he'll get himself outta here quicker."

"Yeah." Starsky busied himself with zipping and unzipping his jacket. "He has been fighting, though, Huggy. You should have seen how hard he tried back there in Australia."

"Then he is gonna make it."

"You ready to go now, Starsky?" It was Dobey's voice; he and Edith had come up to rejoin them.

"Yeah. I'm ready."

"Hutch all settled?" Mrs. Dobey's well-meaning question made Huggy wince for his friend.

"Yeah." Starsky was short on words, long on tension.

"Then we'd better be going." Dobey said decisively. "I guess you'll be pretty glad to see that apartment of yours, won't you, Dave?"

As the group made its way to the door of the hospital, Huggy wasn't surprised when Starsky didn't answer that question.

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Hutch lay in the dark, feeling intensely alone. So many emotions throbbed under his breastbone he was nearly overwhelmed. Disappointment ran strong, anger and pain followed suit. In his head, he had tried to picture his apartment, how it would look when he came through the front door. But that had been difficult. The place was a hazy memory to him; and the idea was frightening. It didn't seem right that he couldn't call it to mind perfectly. Yet he had been sure that everything would be okay once he saw the place. There
would be the open door and his eyes would recognize everything he saw, and he would know what lay beyond the first room. But just now, no pictures came to mind. He knew there would be flowers, plants, the ones he had tended and loved. Starsky had often talked to him about them back in the hospital, and he'd urged Hutch to help water the ones he'd brought there, reminding him of the ones back at his apartment.

_Is that why I remember? Because he told me? Can I remember on my own?_

Hutch closed his eyes, but his thoughts were dim as the room around him. There was a terrible, haunting void where precise memories should be. For weeks, he realized, he'd relied on Starsky to interpret the world for him. He had ignored his self doubts, figuring that he was getting better, that things would eventually fall into place on their own.

_But I am getting better. Aren't I? Aren't I? He said so..._

But Starsky had fooled him. Instead of taking him home, he had abandoned him in another hospital. The nurses did not look familiar. The room was strange, empty of all his plants and other personal items. Who would be the doctor, what would the strangers tell him? Morning seemed a long time away, and Hutch dreaded its arrival.

He was angry. He latched onto the one familiar sensation and clung to it, clenching his fists in the scratchy hospital sheets. It had not been difficult to turn away from the intense blue eyes, to say no when asked if he wanted him to stay until he fell asleep. If Starsky wanted to leave him here, to take away the illusion that he was getting well, then Hutch didn't care, didn't want to see him, didn't want to feel his worried, mocking eyes. _I needed you -- why did you let me down? Starsky! How could you?_

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The long car pulled up outside Stansky's building. Dobey took the car out of gear and turned in the front seat to look at the quiet man sitting in the back.

"Well, we're here. You want us to come in for a while?"

"No. That's all right. I think I'm just gonna hit the bed." Starsky rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, feeling the grit that signaled the extent of his fatigue.

Edith turned around, her eyes smiling gently. "I took the liberty of dusting for you and running the vacuum yesterday."

"Thanks." He reached for the door handle, wondering briefly at the incredible weakness that was stealing over him.

"How 'bout a hand with your luggage?" he heard Huggy ask.

"There's just the two bags. I can manage."

Huggy climbed out of the car anyway and lifted the bags out of the trunk for him. Starsky nodded his thanks. The hand that rested on his shoulder was appreciated, but the touch didn't really reach down into his tiredness, or into his heart. He watched as Huggy got back into the car and waved listlessly as it drove away, then made his way up the stairs to his apartment.

He unlocked the door and the door swung open. He stood for a moment, just looking inside. Then he crossed the threshold with a sigh. Home, his sanctuary, the one place where he should feel completely
comfortable. It was good to be back. Here, he could kick back, slip off his shoes and shirt, even his pants if he wanted to and just lie around watching TV with no schedule to follow and nothing to worry about. Privacy -- the idea felt very welcome.

Edith had done a good job cleaning. There was a neat stack of mail on the desk. Starsky didn't feel like sorting through it yet. On the hook by the door, just as he'd left it, hung his shoulder holster with the Berretta still resting there. His hand lifted to touch the gun grip, fingers just skimming it and falling away. Seeing the familiar weapon, Starsky at last felt like things could return to normal.

Time to get back to work. Back to bein' a cop. Is it going to be like it was before... before I found Hutch? He turned away from me tonight... does he want me to stay away? If he does... No. I'm not gonna let that happen. He needs me and I've gotta make him understand that I didn't do this to hurt him. Only, I'm not sure I know how to do that...

He walked into the bedroom and switched on the overhead light, dropping the suitcases on the floor. His own bed looked inviting, probably the best sight he'd seen since leaving Australia. His tired fingers tugged at buttons and zippers, yanked off clothes without regard to getting things untangled or turned right side out. Shoes thumped to the floor. Articles of clothing ended up draped over the arm of the bedroom chair. Starsky pulled down the covers and crawled between the dark blue sheets.

I'm home. So how come I still feel so alone? Hutch, how could I hurt you that way...?

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Huggy Bear pulled on his old, frayed bathrobe as be came out of the bathroom. The shower hadn't helped much to refresh him. He hadn't been able to get the images of Starsky and Hutch out of his mind. He wandered towards the couch and flipped on the TV thinking he'd catch th

e news, but he sat there unseeing, still thinking of his two friends.

Hutch has a long way to go. Maybe he can get back a lot of what he's lost, maybe not. Hard to tell about that. I'd like to see him strong again. Hell, I'd like to look up from the bar one day and see him come striding into The Pits, wearing that mean look along with that old black leather jacket of his. I'd pour him a brew and he'd lean back to drink it, and a smile would come back on his face... And Starsky'd sit there, just grinnin' at him...

The phone rang at his elbow. "Yeah?" he answered grabbing it up out of habit. "Oh, Diane. How was business tonight?" He listened as his manager rattled off the evening's figures. Then she asked the inevitable question.

"Yeah, they got here all right. It was... different than I thought it'd be. Hutch looks... pretty bad off. He knew me, and Captain Dobey -- least I think he did. It was hard to be sure. Yeah, they left him at the rehab hospital.

"Starsky?" He rolled the phone cord between his fingers. "He's okay. Looked a little shell-shocked to me, I guess. He's got a lot on his shoulders.

"Okay, Diane. Yeah, I'll tell 'em both for you. Thanks."

He hung up the phone and reached for the remote to switch off the news. If only, he thought miserably, there was some way he could actually help Starsky. But he already sensed that the man was closing himself off from help the way he had for two years while Hutch was missing.
I tried, my friend, but you wanta own your pain, get yourself through the rough times by yourself. Don't know if that's what you should be doin' but I can't think of any way to change it... If you ask... you or Hutch... you know I'll be here.

Suddenly exhausted, Huggy got up and headed for his bed. He didn't know which man needed more help, more understanding -- Hutch or Starsky -- but was certain that as long as one of them was in need, both of them would be in the same state. You two always were enough world for each other. And in this, I guess it's gonna be the same. The rest of us can only stand on the outside, lookin' in... But damn, it hurts, seein' it go down that way...
The next morning, Starsky pushed resolutely through the doors of the Rehab Center. He was ready for what he assumed would be a confrontation. He wants stubborn, he'll get stubborn... he had told himself over and over all night long. Hutch had not wanted him around last night, and Starsky had gone along with him then. Today was going to be different.

It took a few minutes to locate Hutch's new room. Last night, Starsky realized he hadn't been paying all that much attention. When he finally found the right corridor, he strode purposely toward Hutch's door, knocked once and then pushed inside.

Hutch looked up from his breakfast tray, clearly startled. He was sitting up in bed, and when he recognized Starsky, the blue eyes went cold. After a few seconds, he went back to spooning up his oatmeal.

"What's the matter?" Starsky asked him. "You forget how to say good morning?"

"Go away."

Starsky squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself not to feel resentment at Hutch's attempted rejection. He tried to believe that it was only Hutch's disappointment and hurt that was causing him to lash out that way -- the only defense he has... "So, you're still mad at me, are you?" he asked instead.

Hutch carefully placed the spoon back on the tray, then looked up. The wide eyes were still full of accusation, but Starsky could see hurt in them, too. He took a step closer to the bed, sensing more than seeing Hutch draw away from his approach.

"You can be mad at me all you want, but I'm not going to stay away," he said mildly. "Unless you'd really rather be all alone here with all these strangers. Yeah -- you don't want that, do you? You need me and you know it." Starsky tried a smile, but it was a grim one. "Just like old times, partner -- no matter how pissed you are at me, we still gotta work together."

Apparently that struck a chord. Hutch looked at him, a hint of desperation in the blue eyes now. He seemed to want to say something, and was warring with his uncooperative mind to get the words out. Finally, lips pale and thinned in frustration, he managed, "Why, Starsky? Why?"

Starsky reached out, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Because, Hutch, you're just not ready to be out of the hospital yet."

"Yes, I am..." But he did not sound very convinced or convincing.

"Okay." Starsky sat beside him on the narrow bed. "Can you walk across this room without help? Do you know what you're going to wear today? Can you go out and buy groceries and fix yourself dinner? Can you pick up the TV Guide and decide what shows you're gonna watch tonight? Hmm? Can you do any of those things by yourself?"
Two trembling hands came up to grasp Starsky's arm. The blond head shook, as if Hutch were just beginning to realize the truth, as if the magnitude was about to swamp him. "Starsk," he managed, voice cracking, "why... can't I do those things. Tell me... Please?"

"It's okay. It's gonna be okay." Starsky moved closer, trying to soothe. "Listen. Remember Ben Forest?" He looked intently into Hutch's eyes for some sign of recognition. "He and his goons kidnapped you -- long time ago. They... gave you heroin..."

Hutch shuddered, one hand rubbing reflexively at his inner arm.

"Yeah. I know how you hated it. But you kicked it, didn't you?" Hutch nodded, hanging on to Starsky's every word. "That's right. But remember how sick you were, and how weak you felt? And you wanted to go right back to work, but I wouldn't let you?" He raked back the tangled straw-colored hair that had fallen over the furrowed brow. "You had to get your strength back. It's like that now, Hutch. Maybe it's gonna take a little more time, a little more work, but you'll get your strength back again. And you'll have therapy so you can walk just like before, and you'll remember all the words you want to say..."

Hutch was nodding, eyes fixed on Starsky's. "It was the... coma..." He said it softly, using the word himself for the first time.

"That's right." Starsky met the gaze unswervingly.

Hutch had more to say; his forehead creased with the effort. "Those... men... at the hospital? Did they say... I was... dead...?"

"What?" It took Starsky a moment to remember: "What's it like to come back from the dead?"

"You understood what they were saying more than we thought..." he mused, feeling the pain those thoughtless questions had caused. "They only meant that you'd been hurt so bad, babe," he contended, trying to soften the implication. "You know -- 'back from the dead' -- it's just an expression. And a coma -- it's like a real deep sleep. We... we couldn't get you to wake up. That's all they meant." He swallowed hard, afraid to say too much, or worse, of not saying what he said well enough. "You're not... you're not scared you're gonna die, are you? There's nothin' like that to be afraid of -- honest, Hutch. You need lots of rest and therapy... but you're okay. Everything is going along fine. I promise."

They sat there, staring into one another's eyes for a long, attenuated moment of shared anguish. Starsky fought for control, terrified of what might come next. He's gonna ask me how long. It's right there, on the tip of his tongue, but he can't get it out... He knows he wants to ask it, but he either can't find the right words or he can't figure out what the question really is. But that's what he's gonna want to know. And -- I can't tell him that. I'm not equipped to help him deal with knowing he's lost two years of his life... He's not ready. God, he's not nearly ready. Please, don't let him ask me yet.

"Starsk?" The quiet voice penetrated Starsky's distress. A gentle hand lifted awkwardly to pat his arm, "I'm.... not mad at you..." The words trailed off, Hutch looked anxious, serious with hope.

Starsky was relieved that the inevitable could be put off a little while longer, and touched that his friend still possessed the ability to reach out and comfort him. "I know. I'm not mad at you, either." He wanted very much to draw Hutch close and wrap his arms tight around him. I need a hug, babe. Don't you? God, I need one so bad... Hutch's eyes looked so vulnerable, so needful of the closeness. Starsky reached for him.

At that instant, the door to Hutch's room creaked open. "Good morning," a brusque voice said. "I'm Dr. Edwards."
Starsky turned. The man hadn't even looked up yet from the clipboard he was studying. "I'm Dave Starsky."

Edward peered over the reading glasses he was wearing, looking first at Starsky and then towards Hutch. "Mr. Hutchinson?" he asked. A glance at his clipboard. "Kenneth?"

"Uh... he prefers Hutch."

The doctor looked up, nodding, and smiled slightly. "Very well. Hutch?" He turned toward the patient. "I'm glad to meet you." He put out his hand.

Hutch regarded him solemnly for a moment, then lifted his left hand to grasp the doctor's.

"Excellent. Can you give me your right hand, now?" It took a moment, but Hutch extended his right hand toward the doctor.

Edwards nodded, making a note on the clipboard. "I'm the neurologist," he told Starsky. "I've looked over Hutch's charts and it seems most of his problems are in the left brain area. His aphasia -- his problems with language -- plus the weakness on his right side, can all be traced to the left brain. The areas governing language, which we call Broca's area and Wernicke's area, both show some effect, but I believe he will regain most of what he had. The slight scarring in the left temporal lobe worries me -- though we haven't seen a great deal of damage as a result of it, you never know."

"What do you mean?" Starsky asked. He threw a worried glance in Hutch's direction, but could tell that his friend was not really following the conversation.

"Scarring could precipitate a disruption in the electrical currents in that area of the brain. There could be nothing... and then again, at some future time we could see some new symptoms. Tell me -- has he complained of any bad tastes or smells? Has he seemed to lose contact with what is going on around him for a moment or two?"

"No. He hasn't said anything. What would something like that mean?" Starsky frowned; were there still new things that could go wrong for Hutch?

"Those are symptoms of seizures -- but I don't think you should be worrying about them. He's been conscious for... how long?"

"About four weeks."

"If nothing like that has occurred by now, we're probably in the clear." The doctor made another note on the chart. "What I'd like to get started with today is a complete neurological work-up. Then we'll have the speech therapist and the physical therapist have a look at him, and... I don't suppose he's been seen by the psychiatrist yet?"

Starsky shook his head.

"Dr. Williamson will be around to see him in the early part of the afternoon, then. He'll make an evaluation, then depending on how much therapy he'll need, he'll either continue to see him, or the psychologist or one of the social workers we have on staff. We'd also like you to have a word or two with the social worker -- she'll be doing his case management."

"Case management?" Starsky's head was spinning.
"Yes. Keeping all of our efforts coordinated, helping with any problems, out-patient care when it's appropriate, answering any questions about the center you or he may have -- helping in general." The doctor took off his reading glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "She's available for you to speak to, as well. I'm sure you've a lot of questions, and a lot of feelings about all that's happened to your friend..."

"Counseling?" Starsky blurted, suddenly understanding. "For me?"

The doctor shrugged. "It's available. Mrs. Kelley is quite nice to talk to, very friendly and understanding."

"Yeah." Starsky didn't feel like listening to anything more. Hutch was the patient, after all, not him.

"Fine," Dr. Edward concluded. "So, if you'll excuse me, I'll get started on my examination."

Starsky looked at him, a little taken aback. He didn't feel exactly right, leaving Hutch in the stranger's care; things seemed to be moving so swiftly. He glanced at Hutch, who had not yet quite finished his breakfast. The wide blue eyes were curious.

"The doctor needs to take a look at you now, buddy," Starsky told him. "I'll just go and wait outside, all right?"

Quietly, Hutch nodded.

*********

The next several days seemed endless to Hutch. He was assaulted by a host of strangers who examined him, asked him hundreds of questions, required him to solve dozens of puzzles and complete tasks that were sometimes complex and strange, other times babyish in their simplicity. He didn't mind anything as much as he minded the questioning. Why were they constantly putting him on the witness stand? Some of the questions were easy, or at least they seemed that way -- yet his questioners occasionally looked skeptical and wrote down his answers. He planned to ask Starsky what -- if anything -- had been wrong with what he said.

Today's session was more troublesome. He was groping for answers, and having trouble finding them. Dr. Williamson -- what was he? A shrink? -- prodded him gently, but Hutch was becoming frustrated.

"Now, Hutch," the grey-haired doctor began again, "you said you were from Duluth. What year did you move to Los Angeles?"

"Uh... I'm not... I don't really remember." Hutch drew in a breath. "Does it matter?"

"And what year was it you became a plain clothes detective?"

"Uh..." That was easier. "Nineteen seventy-two."

"Very good. What year was your mother born?"

"My... mother?" Hutch closed his eyes. The answer eluded him.

"It's all right. Do you know what year it is now?"

He thought a moment. That should be easy. "Nineteen... seventy-nine."

The doctor made a note. "Do you know the President's name?"
"President…" It should be there. He should know. "C-Carter?"

The questioner looked up, his smile seemed forced. "Nineteen seventy-nine. President Jimmy Carter. That's fine, Hutch." He wrote something else down on the pad, then laid it aside and leaned toward his patient.

"Do you have anything you'd like to talk to me about today?"

Hutch shook his head. "No, just -- when do you think I can go home?"

"I don't know about that, Hutch. You've still got a long way to go. You need more physical therapy, don't you?"

He sighed, looking away, eyes staring at the scene of green grass and trees outside his window. "When's Starsky coming?"

"He'll be here after work. Do you remember what time he told you?"

Hutch shook his head, putting a hand up to rub his throbbing temple. "I... I don't want to talk anymore..."

"Okay. I'll let you get some rest." Dr. Williamson got up from the bedside chair and patted Hutch's shoulder.

********

Hutch wasn't allowed to remain alone for long. Soon the speech therapist came to his room. She opened the door partway, her smiling face looking around at him.

"Hi, Hutch! Remember me? It's Ginny."

Hutch closed his eyes. Her cheerfulness was so nerve-wracking. And her question was downright silly. "Sure. Hi, Ginny."

"Look what I brought you today," the perky voice continued as she entered the room. She placed a box on his bedside table. "All these things are used when we sit down to have a meal. Let's see how many of them you can name. All right?"

Hutch shrugged, feeling no enthusiasm. "Okay."

The first object she brought out and placed before him he knew right away.

"That's a plate."

"Very good. What about this one?"

It was a piece of cloth, and she folded it and put it to the left of the plate.

"Table... cloth?"

"Not quite. Watch." Ginny picked up the cloth and wiped her mouth with it, looking at him pointedly.

"Oh." He felt a little foolish. "A napkin."

"Good. Now -- how about this?"

It was silverware, three expected pieces. Hutch pointed to each in turn. "Fork. Knife. Spoon."
"Terrific." Ginny was beaming. "Now, are you ready for this one?"

She brought one more item out and sat it in front of the plate. Hutch looked at it for a long moment, waiting for its name to come into his head. It wasn't there, and he grew embarrassed. He tried scratching his leg, pretending to be preoccupied, but Ginny was onto him. "Come on, Hutch. What is it?"

"Uh… ketchup?"

"Close. Try again."

"Pickles?"

"No. Maybe this will help." She reached into the box for yet another article. This one was similar to the first. Ginny put it down beside the other one. "Look. Notice they're almost alike. One has something black inside and the other has something white. Tell me what they are, Hutch."

He reached out, picking up one of the glass pieces. He closed his eyes, hoping the search would end. Finally, the word popped in for him. "S-salt?"

"Great!" Ginny praised. "And this one's the..."

"Pepper?" He felt like a fool.

"Very good, Hutch. You're really coming along." He felt her hand, like Dr. Williamson's, coming to rest on his shoulder.

Hutch shrugged it away. "This is stupid." There were more feelings inside him; but like the other words, they remained tied up in his recalcitrant brain.

"I know. I know it seems that way, but you've got to practice. And you're really making progress..."

"Please, lady," Hutch blurted, angry at himself, "just leave me alone." He felt contrite, annoyed at himself for being rude to her, but he didn't know how to fix it. "Where's Starsky?" he asked instead.

Ginny checked her watch. "Oh, he's probably still at work, isn't he? Did he say he was coming this evening? C'mon -- you want to tell him how well you've done today, don't you? Let's try a few more things, okay?"

********

He was escorted to occupational therapy after Ginny left. At least he was out of the boring hospital room, Hutch thought as he was wheeled through the corridors. The large sunny room where other patients were occupied with various tasks was nice, but being around them was disconcerting, too. Hutch sat for a while, looking, studying the other patients.

One man in a wheelchair had only one leg. Hutch felt sorry for him, but the fellow looked up and grinned in his direction and he nodded back. There was another wheelchair nearby, this one occupied by a woman in a faded robe. She tilted to one side in the chair, her left side seemingly immobile. When Hutch smiled and said hi to her, she looked frightened. He noticed the left side of her face looked funny.

Someone placed drawing materials in front of him, a large shiny piece of paper and some colored felt-tipped pens. "Draw anything you want," the therapist, a young man with a short haircut, told him. He moved away, leaning over to look at someone else's project, then going to adjust the black and white television across the room. Hutch followed his movements, his gaze caught by the flickering TV images. What was on at the
moment seemed like a promo for the evening news. There was Ronald Reagan. *Didn't think the governor looked that old...* Hutch mused. He turned to the paper and pens in front of him, and decided it might be fun after all to do a little drawing. It had been ages since he'd picked up a paintbrush.

It was difficult; his weak right hand didn't have the control he needed. He finally settled on making some abstract designs that were pleasing even though they weren't the way he'd visualized them in his head. When he'd finished with his page, he wanted to put his name on it. That was more formidable a task than the drawing had been, however. Frustrated, he took up the black pen and made rough slashing motions with it, spoiling the design but getting fierce satisfaction at venting his annoyance.

The therapist came over, asking what was wrong. "Hutch, it looks like you're a little upset."

Hutch glanced up, glaring into the solicitous face. He threw the pen across the room, shoving the paper and the other marking pens onto the floor. What was even more galling, the therapist didn't seem a bit troubled by his actions. He simply shook his head and bent to help retrieve the clutter from the floor.

"Take..." Hutch was so frustrated he could hardly speak coherently. "Take me... back now. P-please."

********

Hutch was tired following the long busy afternoon. He was also dispirited. He couldn't tell what time it was, but he wished it was time for Starsky to come. The days seemed so long without him at the hospital. Before they'd come home -- the thought made him sigh -- Starsky had been there every day, most all the time. Now, he said he had to go to work.

*He's at work... he's out there... on the street? Alone?* Hutch began to worry, thinking of the danger his partner could be in. *I'm in here... who's working as his backup?*

Before he could spend much more time on the troublesome subject, his door opened and another voice spoke brightly to him.

"Hutch? How are you doing?" He turned to look. "I'm Edith Dobey -- remember?"

Flustered, Hutch managed a shaky greeting. "Hello... Edith."

The woman smiled and entered the room. "I thought I'd stop by and see how you're doing. And look who I brought with me!" She turned, motioning to someone outside the door.

Hutch craned his head to look. A young girl, smiling also, came shyly into his hospital room.

"I picked Rosey up after school and she wanted to come along with me and see you!"

"Rosey?" He tried to place the name, but his mind was being vague and uncooperative. Then, he thought he remembered Starsky mentioning a Rosey. Dobey and... *Edith's daughter? But... she's so tiny... I remember a little girl I used to pick up and hold in my arms. This little girl is too old to be her..."

"Hi, Hutch." The girl put out her hand and Hutch, feeling shaky, took it in his own.

"You've grown..." He was struggling to find the proper words.

"I'm eleven now," the child said proudly. "I'm in the sixth grade."
He nodded, but did not grow less perplexed. *Something... doesn't fit... I can't quite grab hold of it... but I feel it...*

"Are you feeling better than you were the night you came in on the plane, dear?" Edith was asking him. "You seemed so tired that evening."

The art of conversation was not something Hutch had practiced recently. He wasn't sure what to say, yet he felt he should be a gentleman, and he should be gracious to these guests, his first. "Would you... like to sit down?"

"Oh, I don't know if we can stay for long, dear." Edith moved closer and straightened his covers in a motherly way. "We just wanted to see how you're doing."

"I'm fine." Hutch was beginning to feel a little more comfortable. He peered at Rosey again. "I can't believe how big you are..."

The child cocked her head, as if what he'd said was incomprehensible. Then Hutch saw her mother look sharply at her. That expression was followed on Edith's face with a look Hutch found unreadable. She brought her hand up to her mouth and looked somewhat distressed.

"You can just about watch these kids grow, don't you know, Hutch?" the woman asked, chuckling a little. Hutch wasn't quite sure what to say to that.

They stayed a few more minutes, but Hutch was having trouble keeping track of what was being said. He couldn't stop wondering why Rosey looking so big was bothering him.

"Well, we don't want to tire you too much," Edith finally said, her voice soft and comforting. She stroked the hair back from Hutch's forehead and he looked up at her, too confused to speak, but glad that someone had come to visit him. "We'll come back again soon."

"Good," he offered. "I'd like that."

The two left him then, and Hutch was alone with his mixed-up feelings. *Rosey... so tall... feels like I haven't seen her in a very long time... and I've been so alone here... just Starsky coming day after day, but nobody else. I'm sick, in the hospital... doesn't anybody else know? Does anyone care?*

The thought brought him up short. For such a long time, he had been content with Starkey's presence at his side. *All I really need is him... but aren't there... a few other friends? What about... maybe my family?* He sat in the bed, bewildered.

********

Starsky entered the Rehab Center, glancing at his watch. It was past five-thirty, and he had promised Hutch he'd be there by five o'clock. Police business seldom kept to a schedule, and he knew Hutch would understand, but he hated to make him wait. Hutch was lonely during the day without him. And Starsky missed him, too.

He was on his way directly to Hutch's room, when Dr. Williamson accosted him in the hallway.

"Lt. Starsky? May I speak with you a moment, please?"

"Sure." Starsky nodded a greeting to the psychiatrist, then at the woman with her.
"You've met Mrs. Kelly, the case manager?" Williamson asked.

"Right. Nice to see you, Mrs. Kelly. What can I do for you? Is Hutch doin' okay?"

"He's improving verbally and physically every day. We're very pleased with his progress in those areas." The dark-haired social worker said.

"But?" Starsky was direct.

"He's having trouble opening up to us," she explained. "Both Dr. Williamson and I have had conversations with him -- trying to assess his memory of the past and his understanding of the current situation, but frankly, Lieutenant..." she broke off.

"He's a little resistant," Dr. Williamson concluded. "He seems to relate so much more comfortably with you. Every time we've talked, when he becomes upset or confused, he starts asking where you are and when you'll be getting back here. We think it would be much better for him if you could help us in the assessment of his faculties. You have a close knowledge of his background anyway, and perhaps in more relaxed conversations you can determine just how clear his memories are."

"You mean," Starsky tried to put it in more concrete terms, "about what happened to him when he was kidnapped? Or about everything?"

"Basically, everything. We need to know which memories have survived, how he has retained ideas and feelings. His reasoning ability, things like that, have been somewhat effected, but that has been hard to determine because of his aphasia," Williamson elucidated.

"But he's improving verbally," Mrs. Kelly took up the explanation. "And since he relates so easily to you, you wouldn't have the vocabulary problems to the same extent we've had anyway."

"Yeah," Starsky nodded, "I see what you're saying. I talked to him a little on the trip back here. He seems to remember stuff. And I... I've wanted to have the time to sit down and go over things with him. What should I do -- just kinda... reminisce?"

"That would be fine," Williamson agreed. "Just let us know what areas he seems to have the most clear recollections about and what causes more difficulty. Our preliminary conversations with him seem to indicate that his police work is the easiest for him to recall. It's other aspects of his life that seem more vague to him."

"Yeah, I've noticed that, too." Starsky spent a few more minutes in conference with the doctor and social worker, then made his way to Hutch's room.

Opening the door, he felt nervous, as though he should still tread on eggshells with the man, be careful about what he said and how he said it. Yet he wanted so very much to get back to the kind of feeling there used to be between them, and the best way he could think of to engender it was to talk, to bring back the emotions they had felt during their years together as partners.

Hutch looked up, and his eyes were eager when he recognized Starsky. One hand lifted from the mattress, reaching for him, and Starsky was reminded of Hutch's awakening, how that same hand had tried to reach for him even then. He moved to the bed and sat beside his partner.

"Hey, buddy. How you doin' today?" His voice was soft as he squeezed the fingers wrapped around his own.
"Okay." Hutch's eyes belied the answer, however. Starsky could see they were troubled.

"They been giving you a hard time around here?" he asked. "Those doctors keep asking lots of questions, don't they?"

Hutch nodded, gaze intent on Starsky's face.

"It's important to try to remember all you can about your life," he went on, trying to make the explanation gentle. "You know what? They think it'd be easier for you if it was you and me that talked about all that stuff. I think so, too." He rubbed the knuckles of the hand he held. "How would you feel about that?"

Slowly, Hutch nodded.

"Good. Where should we start then?" Starsky looked at him, recalling the first time he had seen such naked need in Hutch's eyes. "I asked you a few days ago if you remembered Ben Forest," he began, mindful of the fact that the doctors believed Hutch retained what was linked with his police work and had tended to forget other aspects of his life. "Do you remember Jeannie?"

"Jeannie?" Hutch said the name as if he'd never heard it before.

"She was your girlfriend. Tall, blonde? Before you met her, though, she'd been with Forest. She'd asked you to protect her from him." Still looking vague, Hutch shook his head. "You first got her a job at Huggy's place. Then, one night, she saw Forest there. He was back in town and she got scared, so you took her out to a place at the beach to hide her."

Still no recollection from Hutch.

"Then Forest's men kidnapped you." That got a nod immediately. "Can you tell me what you remember about that?"

Hutch began slowly. "They were... hitting me. I was in a chair. Tied up. They wanted me to... tell them... something..."


"Oh." That seemed to be news. Hutch shrugged, accepting the information. "When I wouldn't talk, they... gave me..." His fingers pulled out of Starsky's grasp, again rubbing at the soft flesh of his inner arm. Shuddering, he wrapped both arms around his middle. "I ran away... I remember that." The blue eyes looked up. "You found me." His voice lowered, the events apparently playing out in his mind. "You helped me... kick it? I... got mad sometimes... asked for..." Wincing again, Hutch suddenly looked away.

Starsky put a hand on his shoulder. "You're doing fine. That's right. You did ask for help, for me to get you some of the drug to take the pain away. That's nothin' to be ashamed of, though. Anybody'd do the same thing in those circumstances." Hutch nodded, but he looked miserable. Starsky decided to change the subject. "Hey, do you remember any other cases we worked on? Think a minute, then tell me."

Easily distracted from his troubles, Hutch's brow creased with the effort. After a long deliberation, he said, "In the hospital."

"What?"

"You were... the sick one then. I... worked there." Hutch looked at him sharply, as if this explanation should suffice. "Under..." Words failed him.
"Undercover," Starsky supplied automatically, still thinking. Then the obvious popped into his head. "Oh. Cabrillo State? The mental home? Where I was the patient and you were the orderly?" Hutch nodded, pleased with himself. "Okay. What was the crime we were investigating?"

There was only a brief hesitation. "Murder. Some of the... patients. It was... the doctor..." Hutch's voice faded.

Starsky leaned close. "Hey, you're not thinking about that kinda thing happening here, are you? I checked the guys out real well before I brought you here, okay? They're on the up and up."

Hutch looked at him, then grinned, as if he knew Starsky were teasing. "You tryin'... to get back at me?"

Starsky laughed, delighted that Hutch could share the joke with him. They continued discussing cases from the past, and each time, Hutch could recall the circumstances and what their work had involved. Starsky decided to stray a little from their professional memories.

"Sometimes we had to be cops even when we were off duty," he started slowly. "Remember any times like that?" Hutch seemed uncertain. "How about when we went on vacation up to Captain Dobey's place in the mountains? We talked about that some on the plane."

"Yeah... we didn't have... our guns." Hutch rubbed at his forehead. "A girl was kidnapped, wasn't that it?"

"That's right. You remember the crazies that got her? And almost got us?"

"No, I..." The forehead rubbing continued. "I... can't... they had robes..."

"You've got it. They were Satan worshippers. Believed in the devil. Remember the sign they painted on our door in blood?"

"I guess."

"Think, Hutch, can you remember any other times when we were off duty and something came up?"

Hutch looked up and stared at him for a long moment, eyes totally serious. Finally he spoke. "Hit men. In... that restaurant." Starsky held his breath, his emotions from that long ago night very strong for him at the moment. "They... shot you," Hutch said then, and his voice sounded concerned. "I remember... they were gonna kill everybody..."

"You remember you came on like a one-man army?" Starsky interjected softly.

"You... were bleeding..." was Hutch's only answer. His hand came up to feel Starsky's head. "Got a little... crease..." The hand touching him grew stronger, more inquisitive. "And your arm... you couldn't... feel anything from the... bullet..." Sensitive fingers ran the length of Starsky's arm, then slid along his side and belly.

Shaken, he reached out to grip the questing hand. "I'm okay," he breathed. "That was years ago. I'm fine now."

Hutch's slow nod still held traces of worry. He sat still, watching Starsky closely and for a moment, neither man spoke. Starsky was nearly overcome, seeing the brave partner he'd missed so badly returned for that moment. He remembered so well the strong arms that had enfolded him as he lay dazed on the floor of the back room. *There'd been more gunshots. I thought you were dead...*
"Years ago..." Hutch looked at him still, eyes studious. "Long time? But... I remember..." He turned away then, concentrating. "I remember... you were shot... again?"

Starsky swallowed what felt like a huge lump in his throat. "I was shot a couple other times."

Hutch looked as though he were in a trance. "It was... it was morning. Right by the car. They looked like cops." His voice grew less hesitant; the memories must be more intense. "I shouted for you to get down."

"I remember." Starsky drew closer to him, heart thudding in sudden fear. "M'fine. I was in the hospital for a good while, but... I made it. Remember?"

"It was... it was bad. So much... blood." His eyes widened, he took in Starsky's appearance. "It wasn't... years ago. This was... Starsk? You okay?"

He couldn't meet the eyes filled with concern and confusion. "He couldn't meet the eyes filled with concern and confusion. "M'fine. I was in the hospital for a good while, but... I made it. Remember?"

Hutch was shaking his head, breathing hard. "I -- I can't. I can see you... lying there... but that's all. When did all this... Starsky? Explain -- "

"Take it easy." He had to think of a way to erase the fear in Hutch's eyes. "It all happened before you were hurt. Maybe that's why it's hazy to you. You've said you don't actually remember how you got kidnapped. The doctors think maybe all the memories around that time got blurred."

Hutch nodded, though he looked unconvinced. "I remember you were hurt so bad." The blond head shook. "Can't quite put it all together. You... got out of the hospital... No. I can't see that. It's... gone, I guess."

Starsky's throat felt raw. "I guess."

He sat there, holding Hutch's gaze, knowing they were on the brink of something. The question he'd feared Hutch would be asking soon was very near to the surface now, he was certain. I never realized it was all tied up with me getting shot that time. It's got to be odd to him. All he remembers is me in intensive care, and here I sit. Even confused as he has been, he knows it takes a while to recover from injuries as bad as those.

********

Everything was a jumble in Hutch's mind, yet the confusion he'd been feeling all day seemed to find a focus. He wanted to ask Starsky... so many things. Why the doctor wrote it down when I gave him the year and the President's name... why Rosey looked so tall and I couldn't remember her being that grown... and now... how did Starsky recover... so fast...?"

Oh, no. Oh, no. I gotta be wrong... Can I... can I have lost that much time? Where've I been? How long was I out? How much time did I miss?"

"Starsk..." He could hear his voice shaking, but he forced himself to go on. "Please... I know there's something more. Isn't there?" He looked up in fear and desperation. "Tell me. Tell me everything."

********

Starsky tried hedging just one more time. "Tell you what, babe? I told you about being abducted -- as much as I know about that part of it, anyway. They took you away and drugged you. I found you and you were in the coma -- "

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"Found me -- when? How... did it take a long time?"

Starsky grabbed desperately, pulling Hutch to him tighter than he'd held him in all these weeks. "Oh, babe. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." His hands closed around the broad shoulders, fingers gripping spasmodically. "It... it took a long time, sure. You were in the coma... all that time. And even after I found you, it seemed like... like forever 'til you woke up." He drew in a tremulous breath, despairing, not knowing what might scare Hutch more -- the fact that he'd been lost for a long time, or that he'd been unable to wake up for even longer.

The heart pressed against his chest seemed to be beating out of control. Hutch was hyperventilating, shuddering as he whispered, "No, no," over and over again.

Starsky pulled away a little, took the sweating face between his hands. "It's okay, Hutch. It doesn't mean a thing. You're fine. You're gettin' better every day..."

"Stop it!" The vehemence in the reply was stunning. "You tell me I'm okay... but I know different! It's... it's all changed. Isn't it? The world's... all different... and I'm..."

"No! Hutch, don't do this to yourself. Come on, you've gotta be calm. I don't know how to help you understand. Just listen a minute..."

Hutch moaned, eyes squeezing shut while tears escaped, and the next words forced out of him sounded as forlorn as Starsky'd ever heard. "I'm scared..."

The point where Starsky could handle this alone had been passed. He kept hold of Hutch, but groped along the bedside for the call button, pressing it viciously and not letting up until a harried nurse appeared at the door.

"What's wrong?" Her voice sounded surprised, but professional.

"Is... is Dr. Williamson, the psychiatrist, still here? I think we need him." Starsky turned to give the young woman a look. "Now. Hurry!"

The nurse grabbed up the phone. "Have Dr. Williamson paged. Room 145, STAT." She tried to help, to soothe the gasping patient, but her attempts were as ineffective as Starsky's own. In seconds the doctor arrived, sizing up the situation and barking an order for a sedative. While the nurse went to get it, Starsky held on tightly to Hutch, and tried to explain.

"He's beginning to realize... how long it's been. Doc, I... I guess I let him get too upset... before callin' you..."

"Don't worry," Williamson soothed. "This isn't unexpected. I'm sure his emotional reaction is more a result of his other impairments than anything else. He needs to know -- or he wouldn't have let you get into the subject, I'm sure. I've noticed how he's come close to asking me questions, then backed off. It's really no surprise this is happening now."

Starsky nodded. What the doctor said made sense. Yet he was consumed with fear, hating to see Hutch so shattered by the realization. And he doesn't even know the real truth yet.

In a moment the nurse returned, and the doctor administered the shot. Hutch flinched, his hands clenching on Starsky's shirt. Gradually, however, he relaxed, and at the urging of the doctor and his friend, lay back down in the bed.
When the patient seemed calmer, Dr. Williamson leaned close to him and asked the question straight out. "Do you want to know how long it's been, Hutch?"

The blond head nodded, eyes turning apprehensively to Starsky.

Together, they began to tell him, gently, honestly, but Starsky could not help thinking the words sounded cruel.

"Remember I asked you who was the President today?" Williamson was saying.

"Yeah..." Hutch breathed, intent on the man's words.

"You remembered President Carter. But now our President is Ronald Reagan."

"Reagan?"

"Yeah. You believe that, buddy?" Starsky tried for levity.

The doctor went on in a serious vein. "And I asked you the year."

"I said, seventy-nine."

"Uh-huh. But it's not seventy-nine any more."

"Eighty?"

"No. It's 1981. October."

Hutch's eyes went wide.

"Do you understand how long a year is?"

The expression became uncertain.

"How old did you tell me you were the other day?"

"Thirty-five?" Hutch was looking at Starsky now, in dismay.

"You've had your thirty-seventh birthday."

"Remember? At the other hospital?" Starsky asked cautiously.

Hutch's eyes blinked. 'When I... couldn't read the card..."

"You were abducted two years ago," Starsky told him then, and Williamson added his own soft words.

"You were in a coma for two years, Hutch."

The wide mouth trembled, the brow knit as understanding was sought, rejected, dawned. "Two years?" The voice was very faint. One shaking hand reached for Starsky. And Hutch began to cry.

*********
CHAPTER II

Hutch felt weighted down by despair. He moved woodenly through his days, doing what he was told, yet participating only a minimal amount in the required forms of therapy. It was too hard to care, yet too difficult to resist the orders of those who kept telling him he was getting better, that he should get better.

He could find no reason to agree. There were sessions with the shrink, with the social worker, speech therapist, with Starsky. He endured them as though of no more importance to him than dreams. Worst were the hours in the physical therapy room. What use would the full function of his limbs be in this world he no longer recognized, with which he no longer had anything in common?

The mental deficits seemed enormous to him. Before, he hadn't realized there was actually something wrong. Yet now -- he knew, he understood. What he had been, was no more. He felt stupid, unable to reason through even the simplest of tasks. He could not read or write, could not do mathematics -- only comprehended the most basic of numbers.

I understand what two years means... that it's possible to be 37 when I only remember being 35... Why did I have to wake up and realize how much time was stolen from me, how I've been left as only a useless shell of a man? He had a past, but it had receded into the insignificant distance. The present was something he had no idea how to deal with. And the future? Inconceivable. Hutch possessed no way to even imagine it -- no desire to, either.

His powers of speech and comprehension of language were coming back to him -- and he damned his mind for bringing his losses into such improved focus. There were times when he sat in a therapist's office and pretended he couldn't figure out what words to use, feigned not understanding what was being said to him. It was easier than coping with the subjects it was deemed he should talk about.

But despite his pretenses to the contrary, his mind continued working, confronting the issues brought up, tormenting him with memories and half-remembered visions of the person he used to be. And against his will, he kept searching for some point of light in the dark world he now inhabited.

Today, his thoughts had come back to the subject of visitors. Edith and Rosey, and the young man named Cal -- Hutch remembered him as a gangly pre-teen -- had been by again. Huggy Bear had once brought food. That had been a treat, nearly enough to lift some of his melancholy for a short time, and he'd seen Starsky beaming with delight when the tasty concoction had disappeared. Yet there seemed to be a gaping hole, a significant absence, and his mind worriedly scanned the same idea over and over again.

Dad and I were never close. He and Mom were never the type to drop everything and fly out to California just because I was in the hospital, so I guess it's no surprise they haven't been to see me this time. But when I was sick before... can't remember the name of the disease, just being unable to breathe and a sense of impending death... I talked to them by phone. Mom had sounded worried, and Dad was relieved when I said I was getting better. So why haven't they called this time?

Maybe Starsky told them what kinda shape I'm in. Maybe they heard from Huggy and Dobey's family how awful I look, how I can't talk and think and act like I used to... and they don't want to have to deal with it... Why does Starsky hang around, anyway? I'm no partner to him now... Wish my parents would call, just once, though... even with Starsky, I feel so alone.
The door to his room opened, and he looked up hopefully. It was his friend, and Hutch felt an odd mixture of despair and pleasure at seeing him again. Starsky was here, by his side, the only thing left from the life of before. But things would never be the same. The realization made Hutch feel like he should be in mourning.

"Hi." Starsky moved to his side and touched his hair. "How's it goin' today?"

Hutch sighed. The touch kindled an ache deep in his heart, and for a moment he sat simply looking at the man who stood over him. Then, embarrassed, he glanced away.

Starsky pulled the other chair in the room up next to where Hutch sat in the wheelchair. "What're you doing sitting in that thing?" he asked chidingly. "I thought you were getting ready to give it up for good."

Hutch shrugged. "I'm tired. I walked... all over the place today." He nodded in the direction of the steel walker by the bed. The object made him feel like some elderly, senile man; he hated it. What good was walking anyway, when the only place he had to go was up and down the grey-drab halls of this place?

"Okay." Starsky seemed to sense the despondency in Hutch's voice. "Just take it easy for now. Wanta talk? Have things been going any better with you and Dr. Williamson?"

"Sure. He keeps wanting me to tell him everything I remember. Trouble is, there's no point to it. He said today I'm..." He groped for the proper word. "Hostile." The idea was amusing and he gave a short, bitter laugh. Whatever happened to the Hutchinson boy's sunny disposition?

Starsky chuckled, too. "Aw, he just doesn't know you as well as I do. What sounds like hostility is really just your natural, down-home charm."

Hutch didn't know how to answer that statement. He closed his eyes, thinking about the cheery, eager-to-please child he had once been. Mom used to act so proud of me when company came and I'd be so friendly... Mom? Where are you?

He turned to Starsky. "Can I ask you something?"

"Course you can. What's on your mind?"

The question seemed to take root in his throat. A sudden premonition, suspicion of fear, made it hard to get out. Do I really want the answer? What if...? "I was... wondering. Have my parents heard I'm awake?"

"Uh... not exactly."

Hutch continued looking at him, unable to ask for further explanation. Then Starsky slid his chair closer, taking Hutch's hand in his and meeting his gaze with suddenly solemn eyes.

"Hutch. I'm so sorry. They're both dead."

For a moment, he could only stare at Starsky. He felt nothing. It wasn't real to him. "Both... dead?"

Starsky nodded. "It happened about six months after you disappeared. They were in a car accident."

He closed his eyes, tried to visualize their faces, but instead all that was conjured in his mind was the twisted hulk of a vehicle, the tan Cadillac he remembered his father driving the last time he'd visited them. Inside it, there was nothing, no living bodies, no trace of the parents who had raised him, who'd often hurt him with their pretentious attitudes and grandiose plans for him, no essence of the people who, despite everything, had been the first in the world to love him and care for him.
"They didn't suffer," Starsky was saying quietly. "It... was all over before an ambulance could get there..."

Hutch gasped, knowing he couldn't handle any more details, pain flashing in his brain. "D-damn. I didn't... know... I wasn't... there..."

His hand was held more firmly. "I took care of everything for you, buddy. Just like you would have wanted. I went to their funerals, tried to help out your cousins back in Minnesota..."

Hutch turned his face away as tears slipped from his eyes. *So much wasted time, so many lost opportunities... I'll never have the chance to make up for all the arguments we had... they'll never know I really cared..."

"Hutch, Hutch, don't..."

He ignored Starsky's soft pleas, lost to his grief. It bore down on him like a great, unavoidable wave. He felt helpless as the tears took him, shook him, punished him. He cried harder, unable to stop or think. He cried for his lost years, for his parents, for himself and for Starsky.

*I left you alone, too...* The realization struck suddenly, stabbing deep, heightening his pain. He looked up, rubbing his knuckles against his streaming eyes, seeing Starsky for real for the first time. The blue eyes held evidence of suffering, their innocent-wise look marred by worry lines. *I hurt you... letting this happen to me...*

Hutch turned away, deeply ashamed, feeling more useless than ever before. *Should have been there for my parents... for Starsky... Now, it's too late.*

Starsky's hands were on him, trying to hold him, help him. Hutch wanted to pull away, engulfed by disgrace and guilt, but consumed by need as well. Starsky's never-ending capacity to care washed over him; words of unhesitating solace drew him back. Hutch's arms reached out for Starsky and Starsky was there.

His shaking body was enfolded in security, in supportive warmth that fought to keep his pain at bay. He was pulled up out of the wheelchair and helped to the bed, so Starsky could sit close beside him. He held Hutch tightly, his strength shoring up against the sick man's vulnerability, his stamina enduring the pain that Hutch could not. Then Starsky's tears began to fall against Hutch's skin, wetting his cheek, his hair, mingling their healing touch with his own tears of desperation.

Hutch was staggered to realize Starsky was weeping, too, frightened about how much his friend had suffered. He tried to get control of himself, worried that his own weakness would upset Starsky more than was necessary. He pulled back slightly, trying to look at Starsky's face. What he saw there shook him to his core. The man was beautiful to Hutch, now more than ever, his face anguished with sympathy, his eyes bluer than anything real should be, lashes damp with clinging tears, his mouth somehow managing to curve up into a smile that said everything would be all right. Before that rare quality of beauty and caring, Hutch felt dazed, shaken by a power he was unable to define. His eyes sank closed as fresh emotion swept him away on new currents of despair.

His focused then on Starsky's touches. One hand stroked his hair, soothing, reassuring. The other arm was wound around his back, lifting him up into a close embrace. Held warmly against that firm support, Hutch found his own arms were wrapped around his partner's neck, his fingers clenched in the material of his shirt, face buried against his throat.

Distinct memories of other tears, other embraces like this one rose up clear and pure, their perfection offering their own kind of comfort. *You've held me before, like this... and I've held you...*
Hutch drew a shuddering breath, needing to express what he was feeling. "I... I'm... sorry..." It was harder to speak than usual; the surrender to emotion seemed to have sapped all his strength.

"Shhh. What's a few tears between friends?"

Hutch shook his head. "I mean... thanks... for sticking it out... for... finding me... for waiting..."

The arms surrounding him tightened convulsively. It seemed for a moment that Starsky was trying to speak, too, but despite an attempt at clearing his throat, there were no words from him. He pulled back, eyes reaching deep into Hutch's soul, as if they were searching for something. Hutch did not know what it was, he only hoped it was in him to give it. The moment held, and his doubts reappeared -- there didn't seem to be much left of him for giving.

The smile Starsky showed him then was tinged with shades of regret. Hutch cringed from that image. *Don't wanna fail you... ever again...*

It was becoming hard to concentrate. Exhaustion was stealing over his battered spirit, and he sagged in Starsky's arms, confused by emotional upheaval and the physical duress. The bed felt very far away beneath him, only Starsky's strong arms keeping him safe from falling.

His friend seemed to sense his growing fatigue. The beautiful mouth turned gentle again, full of tenderness and acceptance. "How you doin'?"

"I think I'm gettin' dizzy up here."

Starsky eased him back onto the mattress, helping him get his legs up on the bed. He tossed the light blanket folded at the foot over him, then sat beside him once more. "You look like you need a nap."

Hutch's eyelids were incredibly heavy. His tired hand crawled up Starsky's arm toward his face, his fingertips just managing to caress the strong jawline. "Thanks... Starsk. I'm... sorry..."

"Shhh." Starsky whispered it again, his eyes looking even more deeply blue, like sapphires and smoke. Hutch wanted to watch them forever, but his own lids kept closing.

"Don't... let me sleep through... dinner..." He was drifting, at peace.

"Don't worry." Starsky's fingers were gentle on his face as they wiped away wetness. "I'll be here to wake you, love."

*Love.* The word was a whisper, a dream, the reality that was Starsky. Hutch slept.

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Starsky sat watching him for a moment, then moved carefully to get up from the side of the bed. Incredibly drained, he sank into the chair and rubbed a hand over his still-wet face. He tried breathing deeply, attempting to slow the furious beating of his heart. There was a knot of pain in his stomach, and a matching ache was throbbing at the base of his skull.

He looked over at Hutch, watching the now-peaceful face. The man looked so lost. The tears had seemed to batter him, and Starsky had hated seeing them. He felt guilty for having to tell Hutch about his parents, angry that they had died, furious at fate for never ceasing to hurt his friend. *Seems like I've had to watch you cry a lot lately,* he thought with regret, blinking away the residue of his reaction to the other man's tears. Hutch's emotions, always close to the surface since he'd awakened, had become even more volatile since
he'd begun to understand how much time he had lost. *So much to hurt you, and it seems like I'm the one that's always doing the hurting.*

*I want to make you happy, give you a reason to smile... shower you with love...* Starsky sighed; everything seemed upside down. Nothing was the way it should be, even back here at home. He wanted to tell Hutch how much he loved him, but instead all he did was keep telling him bad things. He wanted to hold him in joy, but could only clasp him near when the pain got so bad that both of them reached out.

The embrace they had shared just now had reminded Starsky how hungry he was for some kind of closeness. Despite the awful pain they had both been experiencing, he'd actually rejoiced at having Hutch's arms around him so tightly. *I need you, Hutch. Need you back with me...* In the last few days, Starsky had begun to feel even more lonely than before. Hutch's depression seemed to shut him out. There was no one for Starsky to talk to, no one with whom he could share his own pain. He somehow got through each day on the job, mainly by working constantly, demanding total involvement from the detectives in his command. He never let up on them or himself, never paused for a moment's rest. He couldn't afford the time to stop and think about the rest of his life. So confused, so utterly alone, he felt like he was slowly going insane.

There had been a moment, following the worst of the emotional storm just past, when Hutch had looked up at him. There had been a kind of wonder on the man's face, his feelings for Starsky had seemed so clear, so open. Starsky had nearly spoken of his love, but he'd stopped himself, fear keeping him quiet. It was not rejection he feared, however. He had simply not known how to say the words locked in his heart. *Maybe I really believe it would be too much for Hutch to understand right now,* he thought, rubbing his forehead tiredly, or *maybe I've just forgotten how to tell someone I care. It's been so long...* He'd looked deep into Hutch's tear-bright eyes, hoping to gain some clue, some spark that would help him know how to handle his feelings, but Hutch's expression had become clouded with doubt and confusion and the moment had been lost.

*But the way he looked up at me, just as he began to fall asleep...* Starsky closed his eyes, letting the feelings of tenderness wash back over him. *I couldn't help what I said... Did he hear me? Did he understand? Will there ever come a day we understand each other without words again?* He cast his eyes back in the sick man's direction again, smiling fondly at the shape of the long body curled under the cover. Before Hutch's disappearance, it had taken a long time for both of them to learn how to talk about loving each other. *Someday, we'll figure it out again, Hutch...*

********

Starsky made a stop at the candy machine in the hall on his way back from court; it was after three o'clock and he realized upon seeing it that he hadn't eaten lunch. He wasn't actually hungry, but he knew a pile of paperwork was waiting for him so there wouldn't be time to stop for a burger on his way to the Rehab Center. That was what he usually did when he went to visit Hutch at the end of the day.

"Lieutenant, is that your lunch?"

A female voice broke into his thoughts. Starsky looked up into the eyes of Sally Hagan. He smiled despite himself and bent to retrieve the Mounds bar that had fallen into the slot at the bottom of the dispenser.

"You got me pegged," he acknowledged. Then he realized that Sally, who had worked with him and Hutch on her first few assignments out of the file room, had just been transferred back to Metro. "Congratulations on your promotion, Detective."

"Oh. That's right. You're going to be on my team, aren't you?" He hated to admit it, but until seeing her he had actually forgotten her reassignment.

"I'll pretend my feelings aren't hurt that you didn't remember," the brunette smiled. "I know you've got a lot on your mind. How is Hutch doing?"

It had been a while since anyone in the department had asked the question, and Starsky knew why. He had become determinedly close-mouthed on the subject that occupied most of his waking hours. It was so tiresome to repeat the same platitudes over and over again. But there was something in Sally's eyes that made him reply more gently than he had to the questions of others.

"He's... as well as can be expected. It's all been pretty hard on him. Just as he was starting to do better physically, he began to realize how long it's been. And yesterday..." He broke off, not wanting to bore her with the details. *Besides, it hurts to say it out loud, let someone see all the pain he and I are going through..."

"What?" She put a hand on his forearm and Starsky felt its warmth transmit through his shirtsleeve. He looked down, fascinated that the feeling could penetrate the insulation he'd built up around himself. "I've got a few minutes, if you'd like to talk to an old friend for a while."

"I had to tell him his parents had died," Starsky heard himself say. Once the words were out, surprisingly, some of the weight of having to tell Hutch lifted.

Sally's eyes went wide. "I didn't know. That's terrible. He must be awfully upset." She looked away a moment, then back at him. "I'm sure it was hard telling him, too."

"In a word, yes, it was." He looked at the floor, at the candy bar in his hand, anywhere rather than back up into her sympathetic eyes.

Sally remained quiet for a few moments. "Starsky... I might be sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong, but if there's anything I can do, I wish you'd let me know. Not just for Hutch. For you, too. Both of you guys were always pretty special to me, you know?"

An easy rejection of the offer came to his lips. "Oh, we're doin' okay. Hutch has the best of care..."

"What about you?" Sally, it seemed, wasn't easily put off.

"Me?"

"You have plans for dinner?"

"I gotta finish up some paperwork and then head out to the Rehab Center to see Hutch." He made a move to head back toward his office. "Sally, I'm fine. Really. I've gotta get back to work..."

"I don't want to intrude," she insisted, touching him on the arm again. "But you look to me like you've skipped a lot of meals. Look, my cat's been fed, all my plants are watered and there's nothing I have to rush home for. Why don't I just pick you up something decent from that new carry-out place down the street and bring it to your office? Would you mind a little company?" She dropped her gaze, somewhat sheepishly. "There're so many new faces around the department, I'm feeling a little out of my element."

Starsky relented, even while a part of him believed she might be saying she was lonely merely to get him to agree. *After all, I do have to eat. And a little friendly conversation would be nice.* "Okay, why not?"

"Great." Sally sounded relieved. "Anything special you want me to get for you?"
"No, whatever sounds good to you will be fine. Here," he pulled out a couple of bills. "I'll spring for dessert in honor of your promotion."

"Okay. I'll see you around five."

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Starsky wiped the cheesecake residue off his mouth and sat back in his chair, feeling stuffed. "That was great, Sally. Thanks for suggesting this. I hadn't even had time to try the new place until now."

"That doesn't sound like the Starsky I remember." Sally's comment was quiet.

"Guess so." It had been relatively easy to engage in small talk while enjoying the meal, but now Starsky was growing uncomfortable again.

"Do you ever get out, to socialize, I mean? I guess most of your time is divided up between here and the hospital."

"That's right. I'm afraid I'm not very good company anymore."

"Maybe you're just out of practice." Her green eyes sparkled as she looked at him.

He looked at her blankly, not knowing how to respond. It had been a long time since anyone had flirted with him.

"Look, I know we all used to kid around a lot, but that's not what I'm going for now. I don't want to try to 'date' my commanding officer. I just thought -- maybe -- you could use a friend."

"I really appreciate your being so nice to me, but I don't... it's just kinda hard to talk." Unintentionally, he glanced at his watch. "I should be goin' soon. Hutch'll be waiting."

"Dave," she said more firmly. "Maybe you should try to talk about things. If not with me, with somebody else. You do have friends -- I hope you remember that."

Starsky had to look away. I'm gettin' as emotional as Hutch... He couldn't figure out what hurt more, her offer of friendship or his own need. He knew he was walking around with an open wound in his soul, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out how anyone could help. He had to blink a couple of times and swallow hard before he could turn back to her.

"I remember, Sally. Don't know why I'm bein' so unsociable..." The words trailed off.

"S'okay." She smiled again, and began to gather the trash left from their supper. "Just remember what I said -- if you ever feel like talking, I'm a real good listener."

"Thanks," he said finally, deciding to let the subject rest at that. Why should it be so hard to let go? he wondered. He and Hutch had built an insulated world for themselves, really never needing anyone else to complete their private circle. But there used to be friends. And God knows, the circle isn't quite the same as it used to be. He's inside, and I'm somewhere on the outside, trying to figure out where I fit in.

The last of the impromptu meal had been cleared from his desk. Sally reached for her jacket and shoulder bag. "I guess I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

"Absolutely. We've got a briefing at eight o'clock sharp." It wasn't as hard as he thought to grin back at her.
Sally winked, saluted again, and left his office chuckling.

********

Hutch sat in the late afternoon sunshine on the wide patio that flanked the left wing of the hospital, his wheelchair turned to face the slanting rays. The warmth felt good to him, but his spirits were not soothed very much by being outside. His thoughts were in turmoil.

He tried to block the unwanted images from flashing inside his head, but they were insistent. Some of them, he was certain, were only the vestiges of dreams, fantasies conjured by his comatose mind. Others held the horror of being all too real. They passed before his eyes, swirling in his brain, confusing and tormenting him even while he merely sat quietly in the sun.

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Fire... a brief, white burst from a heavy gun... he flinched from the sound and the smell of cordite, even as he realized that the gun was held in his own hand. "Starsky!" He screamed the name again, and again he heard no answer... there was only the squealing of tires, the crunch of metal as two cars collided, and the answering shots from a semi-automatic weapon...

Pain exploded in his head... he tried to fight back but was outnumbered three to one... he managed to open his eyes, but his vision wouldn't clear... someone was snapping the cuffs around his wrists... he was secured to the armrest of the seat... he pulled hard, and the metal dug into his flesh... under him, he felt an engine start up...

Exhaustion pulsed under his skin, but he wouldn't give in and do as the others asked, go home and get some rest... Better to sit here, try to think and sort it all out at his partner's side... as if Starsky really could hear him and respond to what he was saying... 'What am I talkin' about...?' He got up from the seat, stretching tired muscles, and walked a few steps from the bed. Then he turned. Blue eyes, open and seeing, were fixed on him. 'Starsk... you're awake!'

Free! He was free and running, at last... His feet pounded on the dry, caked earth... and he tried to get his bearings, but he knew he would be lost forever... nowhere to run... but even being lost seemed better than dying at their hands... and they were coming after him, running, too, and gaining on him...

'That's it, take it slow...' He kept his arm around his partner's waist, supporting him as he took the first, tentative steps... 'You're doin' fine...' Starsky looked up at him, and pride danced in the blue eyes... Hutch tightened his grasp on the slender waist...

Fists pummeling him... pain crashed in his skull, his ribs, his kidneys... he tried to fight them, but days of being cuffed to the seat in the plane and being allowed to consume only water exacted a price... he was growing weak, groggy... easily they pinned him to the ground, flipped him over on his back... rough hands pulled at his sleeve, yanking it up above his elbow... all he could see was the needle, filled with death, coming toward him... **Starsky**...!

His arms wrapped tightly around the precious body he held... his heart pounded, full enough to burst... what was this new pain? life, death, beauty passion? he didn't know, didn't care... shuddering, he let the sensations take him, surround him the way the legs tightening around his hips clenched hard...

He was falling, falling forever through the black smoke of a never-ending tunnel... lost... no hope, no life, no death... only emptiness...
Hands reached out from the darkness... the touch felt like honey poured over his parched body... so smooth, so comforting... so warm, so real...

He bent over the sink, reaching to splash water over his face... the wetness released the tears trying to break out... he sobbed... can't lose him... I love him...

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Where is Starsky? There was no one to whom he could voice the question aloud, so he sat silently, clenching his fingers around the armrests of the chair. He turned his head, peering into the dim interior of the visitor's room behind him. There was a clock on the wall facing him, but he could not decipher the time. His loss of the ability to do even that once-simple task angered him. Frustrated, he turned the wheelchair so he wasn't able to see into the room at all.

He squinted into the sinking sun, then put his hands up to his face.

"Hutch? You all right?"

The voice startled him with its nearness. Hutch slowly removed the hands he'd put up to cover his face. He shivered, realizing he was having trouble sorting out the past from the present, reality from fantasy.

A warm hand took hold of his shoulder, and blue eyes moved close to examine his expression. Hutch tried to smile but knew he managed it only weakly. "I'm... okay."

"You sure about that?" Starsky grinned and pulled up a chair. "You look really spooked about something."

Hutch nodded, agreeing. The familiar depression settled over him. He looked at the man beside him, wanting to participate in his life again, yet knowing it was impossible. "Tell me..." he began tentatively, "tell me about... your day."

"My day?" Starsky grinned as if delighted. "Business as usual, pal. Regular cop stuff. Oh, you remember Sally Hagan? She's just been promoted to detective. I grabbed a sandwich for dinner with her."

"Oh?" Is that why you're so late?

"It was kinda nice seeing her again. And I think she's going to make a good detective." Starsky paused, settling himself more comfortably. "You wanta hear about the cases we're working on?"

"Sure."

"Okay." Sounding happy that he'd been asked, Starsky launched into a description of his current outstanding cases.

Hutch leaned back in his chair, listening to the sound of Starsky's voice. He couldn't really follow everything he said, yet it warmed him inside to have him there talking to him. This is the way it should be with us...

"So what did you do today?"

The question startled Hutch. He shook his head, confused for a moment about what he'd been asked.

"I said, what have you been doing today?" Starsky was leaning close, looking at him guardedly.
Hutch sighed. "Not much. It's... hard. I get so tired." He looked away.

"Hey, what are you tellin' me?" Starsky got hold of the wheelchair and turned it so Hutch had to face him.

"I don't... know what all this is for..." He shrugged, unable to explain how useless he felt. "I mean... why should I keep on with all this... therapy... when I'm not ever going to get better anyhow?"

"What makes you think you're not going to get better?" Starsky looked startled himself now, and annoyed.

"It's always the same... I can't... do..." His voice trailed off. It was too hard to put his fears and sorrows into words.

"Look, Hutch. I don't know what's making you feel this way, but you're wrong. You've gotta try. You've improved so much already..."

"But it won't... bring back... those two years!" Hutch snapped.

"No. It won't. But do you wanta spend another two years getting back on your feet? I can't turn back the clock, Hutch. And you can't either. All we've got is now. You've gotta try. The world is waiting out here for you and you can't just let everything slip through your fingers by giving up!" Angrily, Starsky got up and strode across the patio. He stood still for a long moment, fists clenched impotently at his sides.

Hutch sensed the torrent of feelings the man was trying to suppress. Without turning, Starsky spoke again, and the words seemed more for himself than for Hutch. "Two years... two years of continual worry and fear... and all those weeks when you wouldn't respond to me... it's all gonna go for nothing, unless..."

Hutch could not bear to see him hurting so badly. My fault. I'm letting him down. Slowly, with difficulty, he pushed himself up out of the wheelchair. He'd left the walker back in his room, so he steadied himself against the rail that surrounded the patio as he took the first few, cautious steps. His body, as always, felt betrayingly weak. But he persevered. Starsky was standing with his head down and eyes squeezed shut, fists still balled at his sides. Hutch approached him with halting steps, finally getting close enough to reach out. His fingers barely brushed one of the tightly clenched hands.

Starsky started in surprise. He turned, face awash with tenderness for an instant, then he quickly schooled his features in an obvious effort to conceal his feelings. Still, his voice cracked when he spoke. "Look at you... walkin' all this way all by yourself..."
"I..." Hutch hardly knew how to begin. He tightened his grip on the railing to steady his body and his nerves. "I... will try... if you want me to..." He looked up. "Do you really think I can do it...?"

"I do." Starsky reached out, getting a grip on Hutch's shoulders. "I know you can do it."

Hutch tried to smile. He still wasn't sure of himself, but Starsky had confidence in him, and that was what mattered. He didn't want to hurt the man anymore.

They stood there together for a long moment, looking into each other's eyes. Hutch felt an indefinable emotion flare between them for an instant, but when he tried to grasp and understand the feeling, it slipped away. Starsky's eyes were asking questions for which he had no answers. There was an interval of confusion, then the feeling transmuted into one more easily described. Starsky, looking sheepish, removed his hands from Hutch's shoulders and brusquely cleared his throat. "I'm embarrassed, too, Hutch wanted to tell him. But he didn't know why, and so kept his peace.

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CHAPTER III

"Are you going to the reception, Dave?"

Sally Hagan's question seemed to come out of the blue. "What?" Starsky asked, totally confused. He'd been looking over the list of officers promoted to sergeant.

She pointed to the notice next to the sergeant's list on the bulletin board. "The reception they're having for Captain Dobey."

'Honoring Captain Harold Dobey for thirty years of service,' the notice proclaimed. Starsky nodded. The reception was marked on his calendar and had been for weeks, though he hadn't realized it was coming so soon. He wanted to help Dobey commemorate the occasion. Still, it would seem odd to go to a party. He hadn't done anything like that in years.

"Of course I'm going," he answered Sally. "I'll stop by and shake his hand, maybe hang out for awhile, but I don't think I'll be staying long."

"Why not? It should be fun. How many times does this entire department have a chance to socialize?"

"Check out Eddie's bar any night of the week," Starsky scoffed. He had things to do, so he turned to head down the corridor toward his office.

Sally kept up with him. "C'mon, Dave. You really should spend the evening. How long has Dobey been your Captain?"

Starsky stopped in the hallway. "It's on Saturday. I usually spend the day and evening with Hutch."

"Oh." Sally's protest was quelled for an instant. Then, before Starsky could turn away, her eyes lit up even more brightly. "Why don't you bring Hutch to the reception?"

"What?"
"Bring him along. Don't you think the hospital would let him out for the evening?"

The idea hadn't occurred to Starsky. "They might," he considered, "but I don't know if he's really ready to handle a large group of people. He's still actin' kinda shell-shocked since he found out how long he was out."

"Then it ought to do him good to see people, to begin to participate in activities again. He always got along well with the Captain. He probably would enjoy going to the reception. He'd get the chance to see a lot of his old friends from the force. And you wouldn't have to keep him out too long. When he gets tired, you can take him back."

Starsky thought the idea over, beginning to see that it might be worked out. It would be nice to see him somewhere other than the clinical setting, he decided. Like we were on the trip home, the two of us, goin' places together again. "The change might do him good at that," he conceded. "I'll talk to his doctors and see what they think."

Sally smiled and squeezed his arm. "The change might do you some good, too."

"I'll see you later," Starsky said, pulling away. "I've got a lot of paperwork to catch up on."

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It had taken most of the day, but Hutch was finally ready to go to the party. He sat before the mirror in his hospital room, carefully combing his hair. The task was still difficult; he did not have complete control or strength in his hand yet. But he wanted very much to finish the process of getting ready by himself.

Just as he lay down the comb, the door to his room opened. Starsky, grinning, poked his head in.

"All ready?" he asked, eyebrows on the rise. Hutch broke into a smile.

The door opened the rest of the way and as Hutch watched, not one but two visitors came in. Behind Starsky, wearing a bright but tentative smile of her own, was a young woman.

A tingle of nervousness edged its way down Hutch's back. He'd put off worrying about recognizing people, figuring that wouldn't happen until they actually arrived at the party. This was... too soon. He wasn't prepared. His confidence, never on solid ground these days, was about to slip into a canyon.

"Do you remember Sally, Hutch?" Starsky spoke up, drawing her near by the hand he was holding. "Sally Hagan -- we were on her first big case. I mentioned she was one of my detectives now."

"Oh." Hutch did recall Starsky talking about her. Quite a lot in the last couple of weeks, now that he thought about it. He looked the woman over, responding to her smile, yet still feeling somewhat uncomfortable. As had happened with other visitors, he didn't know what he should do or say.

"I invited myself along with you and Dave," Sally explained. "I just couldn't wait to see you again, Hutch." She came forward, reaching for his hand, as Starsky let go of hers. She grasped his fingers and crouched to see eye-to-eye with him. "It's wonderful to see you."

"Good to... see you, too, Sally," Hutch managed. "Do I look all right?"

"You sure do," she grinned, standing up again and taking Starsky by the arm. "Dave said he shopped especially for that new sweater and slacks."
Hutch looked down self-consciously. He'd been pleased with the navy and cream sweater and dark trousers Starsky had picked out for him. They fit better than the jeans from Australia. In the new outfit, Hutch had begun to feel nearly 'normal' -- not at all like the sick person he had begun to identify himself as.

"I'm a little surprised to see you all set to go," Starsky spoke up. "I thought I might be in time to give you a hand or something."

Hutch looked at him, not quite knowing what to make of that comment. He had felt proud of his ability to get cleaned up and dressed unaided. "Didn't you think I could do it?" he couldn't help asking.

The left side of Starsky's mouth curved upward in a sheepish grin. "It's not that I didn't think you could..." He stopped, took a breath. "You did real good, buddy. I knew this party idea was a good one from the very beginning." His glance moved to include Sally.

The woman laughed out loud. "Yeah, that's why I had to point it out to you on the bulletin board that day. Why I had to keep after you to get the doctor's permission to take Hutch." She shook her head, winking conspiratorially at Hutch. "That's the boss for you -- takes his employees' ideas and then hogs all the credit."

She was joking, Hutch could tell that, but he was unsure of how he should respond. There was something so familiar in the way Sally interacted with his friend; he couldn't put his finger on it, but it made him feel somewhat left out.

Starsky, however, turned his full attention on Hutch, beaming down at him, reaching to touch the just-combed hair that spilled over his forehead. "You look great. It's gonna be so good to go to that party together." There was the light of reminiscence in his eyes, and the feeling warmed Hutch.

"Can we go now?" he asked, wanting to get started. He had been anticipating the event for so long, he just couldn't wait any longer.

"We sure can." Starsky brought the chrome walker and helped Hutch get up, steadying him until he had a firm hold on the walker. Then they started out of the room together.

At the reception desk, he paused to check Hutch out officially. Mrs. Kelly, the social worker, was there, along with Paul Kennedy, the head of the hospital. Both of them wished Hutch well on his first sojourn out of the institution. The process of walking took longer than riding in the wheelchair, but Hutch was glad to be moving under his own steam. Tonight, he didn't even mind the fact that Starsky and Sally had to stand close at his elbows, watching, keeping an eye on his progress. Starsky was always ready to reach out in case he lost his rather precarious balance.

And then they were on their way. Hutch looked around eagerly as they emerged into the sunlight, anxious for his first ride in Starsky's car. But he couldn't find the Torino. "Starsk?" he asked, making sure he was steady before letting go of one side of the walker to tug at his friend's sleeve. "Where's your car?"

"Right over there." Starsky nodded toward a low-slung black model pulled up to the curb.

A hollow feeling swept over Hutch, and for a moment, he was unable to speak. Then he swallowed hoarsely and tried to ask his question. "Where's the... your car?"

"Oh." That was all Starsky said for a moment. He came around beside Hutch. "I had to get this one, finally. The Torino just wouldn't take the potholes in these streets any longer. It's a Camaro, 350 liter engine, plenty of speed. You'll like it."
Hutch didn't know what to say. "More changes... nothing is the same as I remember.... "At least it... isn't red," he whispered finally, hoping that by teasing his friend his own spirits would lighten.

"I love red cars!" Starsky defended himself staunchly. "Almost got this one in red. But I couldn't wait long enough for it to come in to the dealer in that color. I needed wheels." He shrugged, eyes slipping over the new car and then into the distance. "But the old Torino is still around. I... couldn't get rid of it, when it came right down to it. It's in my backyard, up on cinder blocks. I keep thinking I'll get the time to go out and do some work on it..."

"Couldn't..." Hutch groped for the name, "Merle do something with it?" He sensed Starsky's pain, wanted to help.

"Oh, he moved back east a year ago. Besides... it just wasn't the same, riding in the Torino after you..." His words again petered out.

Hutch reached for his friend's arm, needing to touch him.

"Come on, you two," Sally spoke up. "We'd better get going before the traffic on the freeway is completely impossible."

"Yeah." Starsky cleared his throat, shoving his hair back with the hand Hutch had reached for. He moved away, fishing for his car keys in his jacket pocket. In a moment, all three of them were involved in the business of getting Hutch and his walker stowed in the car. Hutch looked over at Sally, wondering again why he felt odd about her impromptu arrival in their midst. Had her speaking up served to diffuse the painful moment that had occurred between Starsky and him, or had her presence been more of an interference? He wasn't sure; didn't think he could analyze the idea further. She was okay, he remembered liking her, but he felt out of kilter with her around now.

When they were ready to depart, Sally was ensconced in the back seat, and Hutch was feeling better. This was the way things should be -- himself in the passenger seat, right next to his partner. Even though it was a different car, it was still Starsky's. Hutch recognized the care that went into keeping the dashboard neat and dust-free, noted the police band radio and hand-mike, the red mars light for the roof, the switch for the siren. And hanging from the rearview mirror was a little trinket, this one a kangaroo that had been in Hutch's hospital room in Adelaide. Starsky liked things neat, but he also loved to decorate. He always made the space he occupied uniquely his own. Hutch smoothed his palms over the leather seats, feeling comfortable, at home.

"All set, partner," he said at last, his voice hushed.

"Zebra Three, logging in," Starsky grinned, turning the key and starting the car with a flourish. He gunned the motor and they shot out of the hospital parking lot, into the street. Behind him, Hutch heard Sally gasp a little at the speed and the swerving motion, but he ignored her. He felt fine, pushed back against the upholstery by Starsky's driving. Feels like home.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, but already the surface street was clogged with traffic. The cars fascinated Hutch; they all looked so different to him -- some were like midget cars, smaller than his own Belle, like toys instead of vehicles for men. Others were sleek, painted in strange hues, resembling science fiction ideas of transportation for the future. Guess this is the future, he reflected, feeling more bemused than upset by the notion. It was a great big world out here and Hutch found himself wanting to explore it, to find out how he could fit in. Most of it was pretty familiar. Maybe it won't be so bad. All I have to do is get used to a few things...
Starsky stopped for a red light before turning onto Renaldi Street. Hutch gazed out the window at a group of teenagers waiting to cross the street. His eyes opened wide as he took in their purple-dyed hair, cropped close on one side and hanging long on the other, the big safety pins attached to their clothes and -- *their skin, too*?! "Starsk?" he asked, "is this the way... all the kids look?"

"Huh?" Starsky was busy watching traffic. "Oh." He glanced toward the group but didn't seem much bothered by their appearances. "You'll get used to it. It's just a bit more extreme than the punk fashions you used to bitch about. Remember?"

"Not exactly." Hutch shook his head, craning his neck as his curiosity about the changes grew. At the next corner, he could hear a radio blaring. "Look, Starsk!" He pointed with excitement at a group of black teens cavorting on the sidewalk. Some stood in a semi circle, clapping to the music screaming from a huge chrome radio, while two in the middle spun on their rear ends, then leapt to their feet and flipped over backwards.

"That's break-dancing," Sally informed him. "It's just a fad. They say it started on the streets, like these kids are doing it, but I hear they've been doin' it at the discos lately, too. They're even having dance contests where people do it."

"Break-dancing," Hutch mused, assimilating the term. "Guess they do break a lot..." He looked over at Starsky.

"Yeah," his friend picked up smoothly, "mostly their necks." Starsky let out a chagrined laugh. "Man, do we sound like a buncha old fogies or what?"

The Camaro turned onto the 405 Freeway on-ramp and the sound of the kids' music faded. "Turn on the radio, Starsk," Hutch asked.

Starsky tuned automatically to the station Hutch often listened to at the hospital, one that specialized in oldies from the sixties and early seventies.

"No. Get something recent," Hutch urged, anxious to continue his sampling of things new.

"Okay. But you'll be sorry." Shaking his head, Starsky punched the dial and selected a station that blared with rhythms so novel Hutch was fascinated. This wasn't the acoustic sound he loved so well, nor even the solid rock beat he enjoyed. It was clanking, dissonant, raw sounding, with lyrics as bizarre as the tunes. "What do they mean, 'whip it good?'" he wondered. Both Starsky and Sally just laughed.

"I can't take it," Starsky chuckled a moment later. "This stuff is too much even for me." He adjusted the radio again, choosing something more in line with the music Hutch usually favored. This was a song that wasn't familiar to him, but he did recognize the voice and the style. He sat back, listening with acute pleasure, as happy that he could bring to mind the name and the face of the performer as he was to note the beauty of the song itself. It was same easy, confident voice that could also be raised in the most strident of rock screams; the sound was melodic and pure, with echoes of yesteryear, the music of the man who had made Hutch want to learn guitar. He was singing about the woman he loved... Hutch spoke in a near-whisper. "That's John. John Lennon. He finally recorded a new album! When'd it come out, Starsk? Can you get me a copy?"

"Sure." Starsky seemed distracted. From the back seat, Sally cleared her throat.

"I guess it's still in the stores," she said, sounding a bit subdued.
"Starsky?" The song ended and Starsky abruptly leaned forward to switch off the radio before another one began.

"Yeah, that was John Lennon," Starsky said at last, his voice sober. "The album came out, oh, I guess almost a year ago now."

Hutch nodded, unable to interpret his friend's quietude yet feeling a prickle of curiosity. "I haven't missed a Beatles reunion or anything have I?"

"No." Starsky switched lanes to make the transition to the 101 West, the Camaro slipping between two flashy trucks on oversized tires "John's dead, Hutch." The dark blue eyes stayed on the road.

"What?" Speared with shock, Hutch gasped. What could have happened? Illness, heart attack...? Lennon was only a few years older than they were...

"He was murdered outside his apartment in New York," Starsky said bluntly. "By some psycho. Guy came up and asked for his autograph earlier in the day. Later, John and Yoko were on their way out -- and he just shot him. Four times or something, wasn't it, Sally? Lennon died on the way to the hospital."

The car swerved as Starsky changed lanes again, picking up speed as if its driver wanted to leave the words he'd said back with the slower moving traffic. But they stayed there with them, buzzing around Hutch like flies you couldn't get rid of around a garbage can.

He felt suddenly helpless, swamped by feelings he couldn't accept. *John Lennon -- murdered?* It couldn't be. Assassination happened to statesmen, murder to ordinary people, but... not to men like Lennon, a musician, an artist... It was like a chunk of his youth and dreams had been blown away, Hutch thought, staggered by the implications. *Mine and everybody's. And I didn't even know. Jesus, what else has gone dawn in this hostile world while I've been asleep? Do I even want to ask?*

"I heard some cops rushed him to the hospital. They put him in the back seat of their unit." Sally spoke from the back seat, her voice strangely hoarse. "I remember reading in 'People' that they asked him if he knew who he was... and he said he was John Lennon... that must have been about the last thing he said..."

There were tears in her voice, Hutch could hear them plainly. He squeezed his own eyes shut, recognizing the familiar burning sting, the knowledge that he was about to lose control of his fragile emotions.

His friend's eyes were on him, Hutch could feel them. "Shit, Sally, didya hafta say that?" Starsky muttered without malice.

She cleared her throat again. "Sorry, Dave. I'm sorry, Hutch." A soft hand came to rest on Hutch's shoulder. He looked away, though the images outside the window were blurred and not just from the speed of their passing. No one in the car spoke for many minutes.

Finally, Starsky pulled off the 101, and Hutch began to recognize the businesses and houses they were passing.

"Where's the party going to happen?" he asked, hoping the strained feelings would soon dissipate.

"At the Bonaventure Hotel," Starsky told him. "Remember being undercover there as hairdressers?"

*Hairdressers?* Hutch shook his head.
"You know -- Mr. Marlene and Mr. Tyrone." Starsky wiggled his eyebrows. "Doez zat not zound famil-ee-aire?" he went on in an outrageous accent.

Hutch gaped at him. He was drawing a complete blank.

"I heard the stories about that case," Sally piped up, giggling. "Looks like Hutch managed to put it out of his mind altogether."

"Lucky bastard." Starsky was still smiling, but at least his voice had returned to normal. For once Hutch decided not to worry about having forgotten something from the past.

Within moments, they pulled up in front of the hotel. The facade of the building was familiar to Hutch, and he spent a few seconds hoping seeing the inside didn't trigger a more complete memory of the bizarre case.

The trip inside the building and up inside the glass elevator to the room where the party was to take place seemed an arduous one. Hutch wasn't fully comfortable with using the walker. Around the hospital, he didn't mind that it took him a long time to get down the hall. Here, however, the bustling of other people, people without similar disabilities, seemed to highlight his own weakness. The noise and movement of so many people made it hard to concentrate on coordinating his steps with all the activity around him.

A light hand hovered near his elbow. "You okay, buddy?" Starsky's voice asked, very softly, pitched so that no one else, not even Sally, could hear.

Hutch nodded, tightening his grip on the walker, determined that he could make it to their destination. He was feeling a little shaky; the muscles of his arms and his legs were beginning to quiver, but he kept on, not wanting to stumble in front of so many watchers and, particularly, not in front of Starsky.

They finally arrived at the ballroom where the reception was already in full swing. Tons of people, lots of men and women in police blue, others dressed in cocktail dresses and suits, jostled together, smiling, laughing, carrying small plates laden with food, cups overflowing with beverages. Hutch stopped still, amazed at the crowd's size, suddenly embarrassed by his awkwardness. He turned to look for Starsky.

"Here we are, I guess," his friend quipped, peering into the crowd to get his bearings. "There's some tables along the wall over there. Let's get you a seat, okay?"

By the time they neared the tables arranged along the far wall, Hutch was nearly at the end of his strength. His palms were sweating and his hands began to slip on the handles of the walker. His steps were faltering. I'm gonna fall down in front of all these people... Then he felt Starsky's hand at his waist, at once bracing and encouraging him. Sally hurried ahead and pulled a chair out for him and he sank down on it gratefully as soon as he was close enough. She then took the walker and put it aside behind the table.

"There. We're all settled," she announced, appearing pleased. Hutch thought she sounded just like the nurses. He was getting decidedly tired of that tone of voice.

"All right, all right -- now we're ready to party!" Starsky was getting that effusive, eager inflection in his voice, and Hutch couldn't help smiling when he heard it. Starsky pulled up a chair, rubbed his hands together and looked directly at Hutch. "So, whaddya want to eat? Any little thing your heart desires, m'sieur -- within reason, of course."

"Oh, I don't know..." He thought for a minute, then grinned. "You know the kinda stuff I like. Surprise me. Anything that you can't get in a hospital, okay?"
"You got it, babe." Winking, Starsky jumped up and started toward the buffet table. "You coming, Sally?"

"Uh..." she hesitated. "Shouldn't I stay here with Hutch?"

"Oh, he'll be okay for a minute, won't you, Hutch?" Starsky reached for the woman's elbow, his eyes still holding his partner's gaze. "He hates to be mother-henned, y'know." With another wink in Hutch's direction, he led her off through the crowd.

The teasing felt delightful. Hutch realized he hadn't seen Starsky behave quite like this in a long, long time. Most of the time, when he did make a joke, the gaiety seemed forced, done to humor the patient. This was real. Starsky was open, enjoying himself already. *He said it would be good for me to get out -- seems like it's gonna be good for him, too.*

The crowd had swallowed up Starsky and Sally, so Hutch sat there, people-watching for a while. He was aware that he didn't know any of the men and women he saw, yet he wasn't uncomfortable or overwhelmed by the strangers around him. It was as though he did this sort of thing every day.

One man that looked somewhat familiar ambled up to his table and kind of bent down to get a look at him. "Do I know you, fella?" he asked in a voice slightly slurred by his party drink.

"I'm... not sure," Hutch equivocated, not wanting to reveal that he didn't recognize him in case it was someone he had known well.

"Hey, that's all right. We're all brother cops, aren't we?" The man put out a large hand, and Hutch took it, shaking it in response.

"Yeah." A slow smile spread over his face. "We're all cops."

"You ever work directly under Captain Dobey?" the fellow questioned.

Hutch nodded, feeling more and more at ease. "Yes. My partner and I..."

"Hey, Ernie!" A shout from across the way caught Hutch's companion's attention. "I thought you went to get some more dessert!"

Ernie shrugged, started to meander away. Hutch tried to keep him involved in conversation, saying the first thing that jumped into his mind. "Say, did you hear about John Lennon getting killed?"

The man turned, favoring him with a peculiar, speculative look. "John Lennon?"

Hutch nodded. "Shot to death." The pain was still fresh for him. "Isn't that terrible?"

"Yeah... it sure was... I guess."

Ernie's friend came up to him. "Say, what's goin' on?"

The big man caught his friend's eye. "This guy was just tellin' me about John Lennon being murdered." The look held between the two of them for a moment, and Hutch watched as smiles fought for control of the smirking faces. Ernie's eyes rolled toward the ceiling, and Hutch knew he had said something wrong. He didn't protest when the two men walked away.

He couldn't help following them with his eyes, however. They took seats at a table not far away from his own, putting their heads together but not bothering to lower their voices as they spoke.
"So, who's the geek?" the second man asked as soon as they sat down.

"I dunno." Ernie tossed back the remainder of his drink. "They must be lettin' retards on the force these days."

"What?"

"He said he's a cop!"

The laughter between them stung Hutch deeply.

"What's so funny?" Another man joined the group.

"Guy over there," Ernie's friend nodded, enjoying the joke. "He's kinda... slow, I guess."

"Told me he's a cop, but..." Ernie began.

The newcomer looked his direction and Hutch wished he could disappear.

"Hey, he is a cop. Or at least, he used to be."

"Huh?" Both Ernie and his friend were doubtful.

"Yeah -- didn't you hear? That's Hutchinson. Lieutenant Starsky's partner. He was kidnapped -- disappeared for a couple of years. They finally found him and he's been in pretty bad shape, I heard. I'm surprised to see him here. I thought he was still in the hospital."

"Shit. I guess I do remember hearing something about him." Ernie sounded apologetic.

"Damn," his friend contributed, "I hope nobody overheard what we were sayin' about him. If it gets back to the Lieutenant..."

"No shit. We'll be in the jackpot for sure."

"Don't you think he heard?" the newly arrived man asked, sotto voce, eyes glancing in Hutch's direction.

Hutch quickly looked away, acutely embarrassed. He could hear chairs being pushed back and knew the men were approaching him again. He just wanted them to go away and leave him alone.

"Say, you're Detective Hutchinson, aren't you?" a kind voice said.

He spoke without looking up. "Yes."

"Good to see you, sir." A hand was extended toward him.

Hutch finally peered up. All three men stood there, one with his hand outstretched. Cautiously, Hutch took it. His hand was shaken firmly, while the other two shifted their feet and looked uncomfortable.

"What's goin' on?" Starsky had returned with a couple of overloaded plates.

"Oh -- nothing, Lieutenant," Ernie was quick to answer. "We uh... just realized that Sergeant Hutchinson was here."

"I see." From the tone of his voice, it was obvious that he didn't.
"Uh..." Ernie stammered again, then shrugged and leaned toward Hutch. "I hope you didn't think we meant anything by what we were saying, Sergeant. I guess I've had a little too much to drink..." The strained voice trailed off and Hutch was grateful when the three wandered away at last.

"What was all that about?" Starsky asked as he sat down and settled a plate in front of Hutch.

He just shrugged his shoulders, unable to put any of the incident into words. He stared down at the plate of food, not really seeing it, while echoes lingered in his mind. *Geek... retard... That must be what I seem like now. Starsky's partner... They'd used those words too, but they seemed as mocking as the derisive ones. Not much left for me to give to a partner, is there?"

"Hutch?" Starsky's voice was edged with uncertainty. "If those bastards were bothering you..."

Hutch cringed. He didn't want Starsky to fight his battles for him, didn't want to feel as though he needed defending, not from insulting words. He just wanted to forget the incident. "I'm okay." He sighed, trying to find something else to say. "The food looks good."

Starsky grinned once more, apparently satisfied that Hutch was all right. "I picked out all your favorites. Sally's bringing the drinks."

"Oh." Hutch felt his barely regained equilibrium shift again. He'd prefer to just sit there with Starsky. They didn't need the company of anyone else. *Why is she here? Did she want to check out the 'geek', too?"

"Look who I found!" Sally announced brightly as she returned. Beside her were Captain Dobey and his wife. Edith looked beautiful in an elegant red dress. Dobey was in a tuxedo.

Starsky stuck out his hand, his grin widening. "Congratulations, sir!"

"Hmph," Dobey grumbled. "You've never called me 'sir' in your entire career, and meant it."

"Hey, there's a first time for everything," Starsky wisecracked. "Just like there's a first time for you to put on a tux! Look, there's a spot on your shirt already."

Dobey glanced down, looking annoyed. He brushed ineffectively at the stain with a crumpled napkin. "I know..."

"You can dress 'em up but you can't take 'em out," Starsky laughed.

"I seem to remember a certain tuxedo that you rented, officer." Dobey's voice rumbled ominously. "Isn't it true that the rental company wouldn't even take the thing back?"

"I don't remember a thing," Starsky said, straight-faced, attempting to pull dignity around him.

Hutch chuckled. "I remember that. First the seam split down the back..."

"That was your fault!" his partner declared.

"Then you dropped a chili dog right in your -- "

"Enough!" Edith broke in. "Can't you people stop carrying on even for a little while? I want to tell Hutch how good it is to see him."
Hutch smiled up at her, completely at ease at the reception for the first time. "I'm glad to be here," he said with heartfelt emotion. "Congratulations, Captain."

Dobey smiled at him with affection. "It makes my night that you could come to this, Hutch."

The group continued chatting for a while, and Hutch was able to contribute to the conversation. It pleased him that no one paid him extravagant compliments about his remembering Starsky's tuxedo, or the other things he said. He felt more like a perfectly normal person. He picked up a plastic fork and began eating the food Starsky had brought him, enjoying the varied tastes of nachos, fruit salad, pasta and crisp veggies.

Gradually, the Dobeys drifted away, but soon a steady stream of people began to pass by their table. Word had apparently spread that Hutch was at the reception, and everyone seemed eager to greet him, to welcome him back. He put the awkward incident with Ernie and his friends out of his mind, and began to enjoy himself.

Minnie Kaplan displayed the warmest reaction to his presence. She rushed toward him at full speed, grabbing him around the shoulders and hugging tight.

"Baby, I never thought I'd see you again!" she enthused, laughing and crying at the same time.

Hutch got a grip on the woman's shoulders, and drew back a little from the unexpected embrace. It took him a full minute to recognize the face.

"Minnie?"

"It's me." She wiped her eyes unashamedly. "Hutch, darlin', you sure are a sight!"

He looked down at himself. "I... guess I have lost a little weight..."

Minnie laughed. "Not so much that you still aren't the most gorgeous cop in the place, sugar."

"Are you..." he searched for the right word, "flirting with me?"

"You bet I am," Minnie winked, then pulled up a seat and settled in for an informal chat.

It didn't seem to matter whether or not Hutch made appropriate comments or knew the name of everyone who came up. He was out in the world, fitting in, interacting. It felt very good. Minnie stayed and talked for a while, and others he had worked with continued to stop by the table. Hutch was warmed by their welcome-home sentiments.

During a lull in conversation, he glanced over at Starsky. His friend seemed more relaxed than usual, too. So often, Starsky was tense, on his guard, trying so hard to be helpful and encouraging to Hutch. When was the last time he got out like this and had some fun? Hutch wondered.

When everyone had had enough time to eat and drink their fill, Police Commissioner Robert Rogers came up to a lectern and called the gathering to order. "We're here this evening to honor Captain Harold Dobey for thirty years of service on the police force of this city. I think everyone will agree with me when I say that he has continued to serve and protect the citizens while commanding the respect of the officers and men under him. Captain Dobey, it is with great pride that I present you with this gold watch as a token of our thanks and esteem."

Hutch clapped with the rest of the assemblage, thinking back to his first months working under Dobey. He and Starsky had just been partnered... The memories were very sweet.
After the formal speeches, music flowed over the sound system and couples began to take to the floor to
dance. Starsky, Sally and Hutch sat quietly for a while, just watching them.

Hutch became aware of Starsky's fingers tapping in rhythm on the table, his body moving unconsciously to
the beat. *You used to go dancing for hours at a time,* Hutch mused, recalling evenings they'd spent at discos.
They'd often come home in the company of two beautiful women. Thinking back now, Hutch could recall so
many nights with Starsky, their conversations, the way he'd been dressed, the way he'd looked dancing, yet
he could not bring to mind the faces of any of the girls they had dated in those days. *Women passed into and
out of our lives, never making any difference, any impression. But you and I are constant.* He sighed,
knowing the truth in the concept. There had been women they'd loved, but even Terry and Gillian had faded
into the inconsequential distance now. Hutch knew there was no one he'd rather be spending an evening
with than the man sitting beside him.

"Starsk," he said abruptly, "why don't you get up and dance?"

"Me?" Starsky looked surprised. "Nah. I don't go in for that stuff anymore."

"You were always a great dancer, as I remember," Sally spoke up.

Starsky glanced away, peering down at the empty glass sitting before him. "That was years ago." He
shrugged, as if searching for an acceptable excuse. "I'm a Lieutenant now."

"Oh yeah, you've gotta watch that image," Sally sniffed. She pointed across the room. "I see Captain Dobey
doesn't worry about such things."

Taking in the sight of Dobey and Edith dancing, a smile briefly appeared on Starsky's face. Then his
expression darkened again. "I don't know..."

"Go on," Hutch urged him. "I can't dance now... but I'd like to see you out there." He smiled, feeling shy for
some reason. "I always liked to watch you dance."

For just a heartbeat, Starsky's eyes locked with Hutch's. His gaze was tender, gentle with surprise. The grin
trying to break free did so, broadening when Hutch answered with one of his own.

"Okay," he said finally, quietly, his tone seeming at variance with the blazing smile on his face. "Sally?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Her voice seemed to puncture the spell that had been woven between the two
friends.

Starsky glanced over at her, looking as if he'd nearly forgotten her presence. "Let's go." He grinned once
more at Hutch, then led the woman out on the dance floor.

Hutch sat back in his seat, content to watch.

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Starsky almost felt awkward out there, taking a few moments to just feel the beat of the music, let it start to
pound in time with his blood. Though once dancing had seemed almost as necessary an activity as
breathing, he couldn't now remember the last time he had participated. *Sure haven't felt like it. Haven't felt
like socializing much at all in the last couple of years.* Now, moving more confidently to the brisk beat, he
realized he hadn't even missed the active social life they'd once led.
Sally was smiling at him, enjoying herself, getting into the dance. Her body was slender, wrapped with toned muscle, in as good condition as anyone who worked the streets had to be. Starsky watched her move, timing his actions to her own, his hips flexing, gyrating. Dancing with an agile partner had always brought out the exhibitionist in him. His body was easily seduced to outdo itself, and now he let himself go, retaining the thought that Hutch was watching him. This is for you, babe, he thought, tremors of warmth chasing down his back. Wish we could be out here dancing together.

They’d never actually been partners on the dance floor, of course, though they’d occasionally fooled around. Starsky recalled one evening when Hutch had relaxed enough to show that he really could dance better than he usually let on, when the step known as ‘the bump’ had been in. They’d abandoned their female partners, and took to the middle of the disco floor, rocking through a Donna Summer record, hips meeting on every downbeat.

The first song ended and a new record began. This was a slow tune, and Sally was coming toward him, her arms outstretched, expecting to be taken hold of by her dance partner. Starsky couldn't back out now, but he felt every muscle tense as she neared him, nearly flinching when her hands came in contact with his shoulder and hand. She drew herself close to him, trying to fit her body to his. Starsky pulled back as much as was polite, not wanting to insult her, but definitely uncomfortable with being in close contact.

"I remember you had some pretty smooth moves on the slow tunes, too," she said in a silky voice.

Starsky couldn't answer. He didn't know how to react to this kind of contact anymore. Actually, he hadn't been this close to another person in years. Except... except for Hutch... These aren't the hands I want touching me...

"Hey," Sally whispered cautiously, "I don't bite, you know."

Starsky cleared his throat. "Isn't this known as fraternization?"

"I won't report you if you don't report me."

This is ridiculous, he told himself firmly, feeling foolish. He made an effort to loosen up again before she thought he was really weird. "Sorry. Guess I'm a little out of practice."

"You're doing fine."

********

Hutch watched the dancers move together as the music slowed. Sally was close to Starsky now, inside the circle of his arms and for some reason, the sight bothered Hutch. Am I jealous of her for coming along tonight? Why? Who'd I expect him to dance with?

Starsky looked like he was having a good time. Hutch wondered if he liked Sally, if he had taken her out on a date yet.

He shook his head, rubbing his eyes, suddenly feeling confused, tired. His gaze on the dance floor slowly unfocused and he flashed on a vision he couldn't explain. He and Starsky, locked together in a fast embrace, feeling as though everything were suddenly right with the world. Memory or imagination...? He wasn't sure which.

Did that ever happen? He couldn't tell. So many times, these last few weeks, he'd think himself on the verge of a memory, only to realize his thoughts were born of his dreams, part of the endless dark that had held him
prisoner so long. Some of the images were frightening. Others, like this one, were so sweet he nearly wept, wanting to touch them and know that they were real.

We held each other many times. Of that he was sure. When you or I were hurting, holding close sometimes was the only way to fight the pain. But did we ever... cling together, draw tight as if to force the world and all its precepts away?

I can't ask you, can I? It's too... close... too easy to misunderstand. I've got to figure it out by myself.

He rubbed at his eyes again, focusing once again on Starsky and Sally dancing.
You look good together. Maybe I'm the one who's interfering. Maybe if I wasn't still so sick, there'd be no need for Starsk to spend all his evenings at the Rehab Center with me... The thought hurt, but Hutch couldn't force it out of his mind.

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Starsky and Hutch stayed until the reception was declared officially over. Hutch was tired, but he could see that Starsky was having a good time, and didn't want to make him leave any sooner than necessary. As the merry-makers began to leave, offering last congratulations to Captain Dobey, Hutch felt strange, not quite a part of the world moving on around him. They've all gone on, while I've been standing still. Will I ever be able to catch up?

He knew he wanted to try. One thing this evening had proved to him was that he did want very much to get back into the world. It was good to be away from the hospital regimen. It was good to laugh and smile and joke around, even good to learn about the changes that had taken place while he'd been in the coma. I'm alive, and it feels so good. I'm really lucky just to be alive.

The party was breaking up, and Sally and Starsky helped Hutch make his way out of the ballroom and out to the parking lot. He had to hang onto the handles of his walker tightly, countering the fatigue stealing over him, but he didn't want to miss any of the sights and sounds of the city by night as they emerged from the hotel. The air was close, still smog-filtered, cars ground past, horns blaring occasional insults from one driver to another. Lots of people passed by, even this time of evening, all with somewhere to go, something to do. A sense of nostalgia swept over Hutch. Years ago, he and Starsky were sometimes just getting ready to go out at this time of night. Now, it was time for them each to go home. Separately. Me back to the Rehab Center, him to his apartment.

An attendant drove the black Camaro up to where they were waiting. Hutch was again struck with surprise to see Starsky getting behind the wheel of another car. So many changes... maybe he doesn't even live in the same apartment I've been picturing him in all this time... I'll have to ask sometime...

The passenger door was opened for him and he sagged onto the front bucket seat. Starsky bent to help him lift his legs into the car, then he and Sally again stowed the walker and she climbed in the back. When Starsky got in on the driver's side, he noticed that Hutch was watching him intently.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

"Sure," Hutch answered. "Thanks for tonight."

"Anytime, partner."

"You can just drop me at Metro," Sally spoke from the back seat. "I left my car in the parking lot, remember."

"Oh, yeah."

Hutch was surprised to hear that. He'd thought Starsky would take Sally home after he'd been dropped off at the hospital. It was only a short ride to the station from the hotel, and soon Sally was on her way. She'd waved jauntily at Hutch and Starsky as she unlocked the door to her Mustang. Hutch felt an incredible lightness overcome him at her leaving.

He looked over at Starsky just as his friend reached to switch on the radio.
"Just an oldies station this time, hmm?" Starsky asked softly.

"Okay." Hutch leaned back in the seat, content, watching the city pass by in the car window.

As they pulled out onto the freeway, the strains of acoustic guitar and intertwining harmony spread soothingly through the car. Simon and Garfunkle, Hutch recognized. "Old Friends."

Old friends...
Sat on their park bench like bookends,
A newspaper blown through the grass
Falls on the round toes
Of the high shoes
Of the old friends...

"Ummm," Starsky sighed. "I used to love this song." He seemed to relax fully, getting comfortable, stretching to drape his arm around the back of Hutch's seat, encompassing his shoulders.

The familiar melody, the humming of road sounds outside the car, the sense of safety inside, knit them closer. Hutch turned to watch Starsky's profile as he drove.

Long ago it must be,
I have a photograph,
Preserve your memories,
They're all that's left you...

The song died away, slipping into the night and leaving them alone. Starsky sighed.

"Reminds me of you and me, partner," he said dreamily. "How terribly strange to be seventy -- huh? Can you imagine?"

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut, tears threatening again. Photographs, memories... that's all we have left. Maybe all we'll ever have. He knew Starsky was thinking of good times, adventures still to be. Yet Hutch was filled with the poignant knowledge that perhaps they would never regain what they had once had together. Is that what we'll become, two old men with dreams of long ago and far away, nothing to look forward to...? He rubbed his aching eyes, letting his head drop back against the seat cushion. Starsky's fingers slid lightly through his hair, but the touch brought a kind of ache, something unfulfilled trembling just out of Hutch's reach. Unhappy, confused, he drifted into sleep.

"Come on, sleepyhead. We're here." Soft voice, soft touch at his shoulder. Hutch didn't really wake, he just sat up groggily.

The car door was open, Starsky bending down to help him out. The walker sat nearby, and Hutch wished they'd brought the wheelchair instead. Easier to hide sitting in that thing... walking on my own hurts too much...

"You can make it. It's not too far." With Starsky holding his waist, helping him to move the metal walker, they finally arrived at Hutch's room.

He pulled off his clothes and let Starsky fold and drape them over the chair while he crawled exhausted into his bed. The other man was quiet, not speaking as he moved about the room, and Hutch was grateful for the silence.
Starsky moved close to him again at last, slender fingers adjusting the covers over him, lingering as they passed over one bare shoulder. He turned to dim the light, then bent close, searching Hutch's face.

"Pretty tired, huh?" The words were an intimate whisper.

Hutch nodded. "Thanks... again."

"Glad to have you." The intense eyes closed a moment, then reopened, looking brighter. "You don't know how much..."

Hutch looked up into the sapphire eyes, wishing with all his heart that he could read them as well as he used to. It's like we've forgotten who we are, what we are together. Sometimes, it seemed like they were as close as they'd always been, that each one understood the other. More often, however, Hutch felt a strange distance between them. No, not distance... something waiting... watching... He gave up trying to analyze the empty feeling he'd often encountered. Now, as usual, it slipped away, kept him unable to confront it. Yet he felt he should, that he needed to find his way through it. That it held the truth.

He was still looking into Starsky's eyes. The gaze warmed as he watched it, Starsky leaning closer as the seconds passed. There was utter silence in the room. Hutch saw a faint expectancy on Starsky's face; it looked very similar to the empty watching feeling he'd just been thinking about. He was bewildered, but it felt good to have his friend this close, this protective. Tucking me in. Do I get a goodnight kiss? The thought curved his lips in a tiny smile. Hutch drifted to sleep thinking of his partner's mouth touching his own.

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Starsky straightened after he was certain Hutch was asleep. The night had been a good one, though there had been some painful moments. I love you, he thought at the sleeper. Don't you see how much? Just now, he'd felt so close, needed him so much. He'd nearly given into temptation and kissed the full lips that seemed waiting for his touch. But I couldn't. You wouldn't... understand, would you? All you remember is the friendship. I'd know if you remembered the love; I wouldn't feel this... this distance. Ah, Hutch... when will you really come back to me?

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CHAPTER IV

He lurched awake, rolling over in the narrow bed, opening his eyes wide to look around and make sure of his real surroundings. Noting he was surrounded by the familiar shapes of his hospital room, Hutch sighed in relief. He peered toward the window, but could see only pre-dawn grey skies. Even without knowing how to read the clock at his bedside, he knew it was too early to be awake.

Yet he was too disturbed to go back to sleep. The images that had broken his rest had been some of the most vivid since his return to the waking world; now he lay in silence and deliberately tried to recall them, to give them definition and understanding.

They were trying to kill me. Even here, where he knew he was safe, those hours of danger stayed with him. He had been in positions where his life was at risk before, yet even in the midst of those situations, there had been some action he could take, some hope remained. Not this time. They carried me half a world away
from any sort of help. I was outnumbered. They got my gun... He tried to remember just how he'd become their prisoner, but the exact sequence of events had flown from his memory. What remained was what had been done to him. They used a needle...

The thought stripped reality away, and he imagined again the dripping hypodermic, its thin metallic blade coming for his exposed arm...

Please... no! I want to live... I want... Starsky!

Whether he had screamed aloud in that moment, or only imagined he had, Hutch would never know. He did feel the bite of the steel point, the cold shooting spark of death arcing into his bloodstream.

He fell then into an endless dark abyss, lost, alone and comfortless. Only one thought remained. Starsky. How he loved him...

Hutch's lids drifted shut and another part of his dream replayed as silent fantasy. He lay in another bed, arms wrapped around his friend, bodies pressed close as if to bind them soul to soul. He could feel... so much. His body echoed with the aftermath of sensation, tingled with the glory of touch, of satisfaction. He dreamed he could feel the press of lips warm, masculine and hungry, against his own. His skin, sensitized and aroused, slid luxuriously along the naked flesh of another. His arms tightened, reaching out for the fantasy that seemed so real...

Hutch opened his eyes again, abruptly. Why'd I dream those things? Why does it seem so real, so much like it really happened? Did Starsky and I...? For a moment, he wanted the answer to be yes. Yet he feared looking too closely -- the idea scared him for reasons he could not define. Although he wanted to examine the intimate, sweet half-memories, he felt inadequate -- either to fully understand them or to ever recreate them again.

He was still sleepy, however, and was content to lie in the warm bed, accepting the remembered sensations and letting them lull him back into dreams.

When he next awoke, it was to full daylight outside his window. Both the terror and the love had faded into recollection, and he was safe from both. The sun came slanting through the venetian blinds, and Hutch sat up, feeling free and alive, eager to face the world he'd sampled the day before at Dobey's reception.

I'm alive! They didn't kill me. I'm here. And the whole rest of my life is ahead of me. He found he couldn't wait to get started on his regimen, the therapy to regain his strength and faculties. He sat up, rubbing the tangle of hair back from his forehead, looking impatiently ahead to whatever the new day would bring.

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For the next two months, Hutch maintained a delicate balance between hope and defeat. Mornings found him eager to begin the day's therapy. Disappointments and frustrations came as due course to bring his spirits down. Yet he continued to fight back the best he could. He was lucky to be alive, and he knew it. Even though he'd lost two years, he'd survived. How many times he chanted those words before falling asleep, he didn't know. For some reason, they eased his aching muscles and helped him combat his occasional depression. He would never regain what he had lost, but he was alive.

The hard work had begun, and Hutch could see that it was going to be a long time before it was finished...

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**December, 1981**

It was a red-letter day. Hutch was going home. *Finally,* he thought, still marveling that the day had at last arrived. There had been times when a life outside hospital walls had seemed like a distant dream to him. Life outside, on his own, was part of his past, but it didn't seem as though it could be a part of his future as well. *I've been living in limbo, marking time, just waiting...* Now, Hutch felt as though his life were beginning again.

He got up to look out the window for perhaps the fiftieth time in the last hour. He was anxious to see Starsky's car coming up the driveway, eager to gather his possessions and be on his way.

It was not, however, the last he would be seeing of the hospital. Arrangements had been made for him to continue therapy on an outpatient basis. He would return daily for physical, speech and occupational therapy, as well as his twice-weekly appointments with the psychiatrist.

At last, he saw the black Camaro making the turn into the Rehab Center parking lot. Hutch watched as it slid into a space and his friend climbed out. Starsky stood for a moment, peering up at the hospital facade, a hand shading his eyes from the brilliant sun. Catching sight of Hutch at the window, he waved, flashing a huge grin. Excited, Hutch waved back.

In moments, Starsky appeared at the door to Hutch's room.

"All ready, partner?" he asked, still smiling.

"Been ready since breakfast," Hutch told him, teasing. "What kept you?"

Starsky looked him over, frank admiration in his gaze. "If you knew how you sound, talking like that..."

"Do I sound like my old self?" Hutch asked, feeling suddenly shy.

"Yeah -- vain as ever," Starsky shot back.

Hutch didn't have an answer to that, but he sensed it wasn't required.

Just then, a nurse arrived with a wheelchair for Hutch to make his exit in.

"I don't need this," he told her rather plaintively.

"I know. But that's hospital regulations. You understand," the woman smiled.

"Yeah, Hutch," Starsky reminded, "take it easy while you can. I'm not gonna keep bein' soft on ya now that you're officially released from this joint."

Laughing, looking forward to his future, Hutch climbed into the chair.

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In fifteen minutes they were on the freeway. Starsky adjusted his rear-view mirror, eyes glancing swiftly in Hutch's direction.

"You sure you want to stay at Venice Place? I really wouldn't mind having you at my apartment."
"I know. But I want to go home." It seemed so obvious to Hutch. They had discussed the arrangements several times, and he had remained adamant on that point. He wanted to be in his own home. Starsky would come over and help him as often as he could, but Hutch had also pointed out that he felt he was being a burden to Starsky. They had asked the social worker, Mrs. Kelly, for suggestions, and with her help had found a man who would stay at the apartment at night in case Hutch needed anything. Christopher would also drive Hutch to the hospital in the mornings, and pick him up on the days when Starsky's work kept him beyond the hour when Hutch was ready to go home. Christopher was young, friendly, and had training as an LPN, so Starsky had agreed that having him around would be good. Hutch remembered, however, that Starsky hadn't been totally enthusiastic at the thought of someone else practically living with Hutch.

"You've been so busy with me all this time," Hutch had tried to explain. "You've got to take some time for yourself, Starsk." He had actually started worrying about his friend. Most evenings, Starsky had stopped by the Rehab Center for at least an hour, usually longer. The only days he missed were those occasions when he was kept working late on a case. Most of the time, he seemed over-tired and withdrawn to Hutch. He'd often asked his partner to discuss the cases he was involved in, but Starsky hadn't shared much with him. "Just talk," Hutch had urged repeatedly, despite the fact that he wasn't always able to follow the entire conversation. "I like to listen." But too often, Starsky had kept his work to himself, claiming he was so tired and the work so dull that there was no pointing in boring Hutch with the events of his day.

Maybe now that I'm home, he'll realize that I'm able to participate in his life again, Hutch hoped. He turned to watch his friend's profile as he drove. We're together every day -- why do I feel like I miss you so much?

There were faint lines under the cerulean eyes, and grim marks engraved at the corners of the sensitive mouth. He's been through a lot these last two years, Hutch reminded himself. Maybe both of us just need to develop some patience, to take the time to get back to normal again. Starsky had been a constant, supportive presence for him for so many months; Hutch wanted to be there for his friend, too. He wasn't sure what Starsky needed, but he was still searching for the answer, and a way to provide it for his friend.

At last they pulled into a parking place on Ocean Avenue, and Hutch looked up at the salmon pink facade of Venice Place. There was a sharp tug, a burning ache, in his heart as he stared at the building. Home... I've come home at last...

They climbed the steps, Hutch cursing his slowness every step of the way. Finally, Starsky unlocked the door and swung the portal wide.

Hutch just stood in the doorway and stared, feeling a pulse race at his temple, and a giddiness try to overtake his head. It seemed unreal, unbelievable. Here was his home, just the way he stared at the building. Home... I've come home at last...

"Star... it's beautiful! How did you manage to keep it like this?"

Starsky shrugged, his cheeks coloring faintly. "Why should I have changed anything? I knew you'd be coming back some day."

Hutch squeezed his friend's shoulders, then turned and stepped into the room. He was overcome with emotion, moving slowly, savoring the feel, the ambiance of the rooms he loved. The furniture was still arranged the way he'd left it, the wood glossed to perfection without a speck of dust. "You found me a new housekeeper," he said in a husky voice, fingers running over the polished oak of his dining table. The profusion of plants still shaded the windows, the green hues welcoming him. In awe, Hutch moved through the rooms, finding his way to the porch. There, the feeling of homecoming was stronger than ever, and he sank down for a little while on the friendly bench, sighing in the slanting sun.
Starsky moved out to sit beside him. "It looks okay to you?" There was a note in the voice that told Hutch he needed to be reassured.

"Sure. I... can't believe it. Feels like I've only been away a few days." His gaze turned to include the interior of the apartment. "Starsky... I don't know how to thank you."

A firm, yet somewhat cautious hand reached out and grasped his own. Long, slender fingers intertwined with his for the barest of instants. Then, Starsky released his hand, standing up abruptly.

"Guess I'd better go bring up your luggage, huh?"

Before Hutch could answer, his friend was on his way down the apartment stairs.

He got up off the bench, intending to continue his tour of the rooms, but Hutch was first drawn to the living room window. Starsky was down there, busily unloading the boxes and suitcases Hutch had accumulated in the hospital. What's wrong, babe? Hutch wanted to ask him. Why can't you let up for a little while? What's pushing you to keep trying so hard? Sighing, he turned away, unaccountably uncomfortable by the image Starsky presented. Hutch drifted into his bedroom.

The brass bed gleamed, too, and it was obvious that this possession had also been well cared for in his absence. How much of the work had Starsky himself done, Hutch wondered. He had a feeling that, if he asked, his friend wouldn't answer him.

He sat on the bed, running his fingers over the old-fashioned chenille spread that had belonged to his grandmother. The clock on the bedside stand was ticking away, sounding loud to Hutch in the silent room. He smiled; Starsky had thought of everything.

He got up again and moved to his dresser, pulling out one of the drawers. Clothes he remembered wearing were folded neatly away, but he wasn't sure how many of them were still useable. Styles had certainly changed in the interim, and he knew he still had not gained back much of the weight he'd been carrying when he'd been whisked out of L.A. He opened an oak box on the dresser, finding his jewelry neatly arranged. His fingers slid over his gold cufflinks, seldom worn since Van had given them to him one Christmas long ago, various rings and old tie tacks, and settled on the little necklace he'd worn constantly for a while. The white star and half moon decorating the chain made him feel definitely nostalgic. Hutch picked up the piece and slipped it over his head. The celestial shapes settled at the base of his throat and Hutch looked into the mirror to see the effect. What he viewed was not the man he expected to find staring back at him. Here, in the home he remembered so well, he'd felt like that other Hutch, the one who lived here and went to work on the streets of L.A. every day. Instead, the mirror didn't lie. He was thin, still almost gaunt-looking, eyes full of emotion and pain. He shied away from his somewhat desperate appearance. Is this what Starsky sees when he looks at me? No wonder he acts kinda spooked sometimes...

"I'm back," Starsky called from the doorway. Hutch hurried over to help him with the load of luggage he was putting down on the floor. When Starsky stood up, he immediately noticed the necklace Hutch had donned. His eyes flicked up to his friend's face, then back down again. "That looks nice," he offered faintly before carrying one of the suitcases into the bedroom.

They unpacked Hutch's things, incorporating them into the dresser drawers and closet, making room for the new clothes that fit him, sliding aside the older things that were obviously too large now.

"You can get rid of this stuff if you want," Starsky shrugged. "I wasn't sure what you'd decide."
"I guess some of it I may as well keep," Hutch mused. "Some of the jeans are all right, I guess." He didn't really feel like thinking about such practical matters at the moment; he was busy going through his desk drawers in the living room. "Starsk?" he asked, looking up from a nearly empty drawer, "where's my gun?" He shut the one drawer and pulled out the next, finding it stuffed with papers -- old junk mail from the look of them. "I was sure my gun case would be here..."

Starsky moved out to stand beside him. "Don't you remember? I told you your gun was found in an airport locker."

"I know. But what did you do with it? I sort of expected it'd be here in the lock box. I mean..." he hesitated at the odd look on Starsky's face, "everything else is pretty much where I always left it."

"Yeah, I know." Starsky rubbed a hand through his already tousled hair. "The gun's over at my place, in the lock box. I... didn't feel right about leaving it here with the place unattended and all." A faraway look had come into the man's eyes, one Hutch could not interpret.

"Have you... used it?" Hutch knew the question sounded awkward; he didn't mean to seem like he was prying.

"No." Starsky shook his head. "I... just felt better having it at my place. It's in perfect condition -- been cleaned regularly..." The words faded.

Hutch stood up, clasping Starsky's wrist. "Okay. Sounds like you took care of just about everything." He essayed a smile, hoping to bring the light back into Starsky's eyes. "I really do appreciate all you've done, Starsk."

The deep-set eyes regarded him levelly for a moment, their look full of affection and yet absent, sad somehow, at the same time. "I was glad to do it." The words were barely a whisper.

Hutch didn't know what to do. A part of him felt like drawing Starsky into a fierce hug, wrapping him up close and comfortable the way they used to when both of them were feeling sappy. Yet he felt that would be somehow an invasion of Starsky's space. He seems so closed off, remote... if I reached out, would he shy away, or would he be glad I tried to hold him? Before he could puzzle through the feelings further, though, Starsky changed the subject.

"Hey, how' bout a meal down at Huggy's place? He's got a great new restaurant -- better than The Pits ever was. You'll love it, lots of pita sandwiches..."

"Okay." Whatever Starsky wanted sounded fine to Hutch.

"When's that guy coming over?"

"Christopher? He doesn't start until tomorrow morning."

Starsky looked surprised. "Not 'til then?" He seemed as though he wanted to say something else, but was seeking a way to phrase it.

"Don't you think I can handle a night by myself?" The concern of his partner was nice, but a part of Hutch longed for some feeling of independence.

"No, it's..." Frustration evident in Starsky's eyes, he let the words trail off.
I know, Hutch wanted to tell him. I understand. And I guess I don't really want to be alone, either.
Memories of other homecomings rushed back at him; Starsky hadn't let him out of his sight for a week after Hutch had recovered from the mystery plague that had swept through the city. What'd he say -- 'gonna take you home and tuck you in...' 'If you don't mind that crummy couch,' he spoke up, gesturing in its direction, "you're welcome to camp out. Guess I'm not ready for the big leagues quite yet, anyway."

Starsky laughed, obviously tickled at the reminiscence. "You bastard," he said affectionately. "Okay. Let's go get some lunch. I'm starved."

********

The day seemed a very long one to Hutch, who was thoroughly tired by the time evening drew near. He sat on the couch with Starsky, watching the ten o'clock news, already dozing and thinking of his comfortable bed. When his friend nudged him, he readily agreed to call it a night.

"I'll get you some covers," he offered as he levered himself up off the sofa.

"I know where everything is," Starsky chided gently. "You don't have to treat me like a guest, you know, especially not your first night home. Go on, brush your teeth or whatever. I'll make up the couch."

Hutch conceded that Starsky could fend for himself and headed for the bathroom.

It felt good to slide on an old, familiar pair of pajama bottoms he located in a dresser drawer, even if they were a little too large. Hutch tied the drawstring of the faded blue garment, preferring the thin cotton to the newer, fancier pajamas he'd worn in the hospital. A guy always has to look presentable around those nurses, Starsky had told him once. Now he was home, and comfort took precedence over both modesty and style.

He could hear Starsky moving about in the other room. The sofa pillows tumbled to the floor so he'd have enough room on the couch to sleep, the covers he'd gotten from the linen closet rustled as he shook the folds out of them. His sneakers clunked to the floor and keys rattled in his jeans as they were tossed over the back of one of the oak chairs. As Hutch moved to turn down his own covers, Starsky called to him.

"You all set in there?"

"Yeah," he answered, looking over his shoulder.

"Aren't there some pills you need to take or something?"

"Not at night. In the morning," Hutch reminded. "I'm fine." You could come over here, you know, you don 't have to shout from the living room...

"Well, goodnight then." Starsky said it without moving nearer.

Hutch climbed under his own covers. "Goodnight."

"Okay if I turn out this light?" Starsky indicated the desk lamp.

"Sure. There's enough light from the street lamps."

"Okay." He switched off the last remaining light and the apartment settled into quiet.
Hutch lay awake for a long time after he heard Starsky lay down on the couch. Illumination from the streetlights warmed the rooms, welcoming him. He was grateful to find so many things the way he remembered. *Just wish you didn't feel so awkward with me, Starsk...*

Sighing, he plumped the feather pillow under his head, enjoying its comfort and the smooth caress of percale sheets under and over him. *Lots better than those hard lumps the hospital calls pillows, and those scratchy muslin sheets...* The night reached out for him, and he sensed that here, in his own home at last, there would be few dreams to disturb him. Slowly, he drifted into a relaxing sleep.

Much later, something awakened him. He didn't stir, just lay quietly, silently investigating the night surrounding him. It hadn't been a noise or movement that had disturbed him. *Then what?* He opened his eyes just a slit, to seek the source of the change.

All was dark. His eyes slowly adjusted, finding a silhouette of deeper darkness in the depths of the night-shrouded apartment. *Starsky.* He stood near the foot of the bed, a silent sentinel wearing only pale briefs, arms clasped across his middle as if the night air was chilly, or something pained him. Hutch almost whispered his name, but didn't wish to disturb the silence, sensing Starsky needed it, as much as he needed to stand guard over him this way. *I'm okay. I'm here...* The words couldn't be said however, didn't really need to be. Starsky's presence was a comfort, no matter how awkward his bearing might have been. Hutch kept quiet, settling back to sleep after long moments of cherishing the picture of his friend so near, yet still so far away.

********

Starsky stood for a moment, watching the lone figure on the beach. Hutch was seated on the sand, blond hair flying in the stiff ocean breeze. Even this late in December, the wind was warm, the sun bright. Starsky was glad the weather seemed to be holding, that the mountain snows were delayed enough to keep the coastal weather clear. Somehow, even a California winter seemed like it would be too much to bear right now. He preferred seeing Hutch under a sunny sky that would give him a chance to grow strong and tanned once more.

As he watched, Hutch got slowly to his feet. He was still a little unsteady due to the weakness that persisted on his right side. The tall figure looked slender in its black running pants and sweatshirt, but was more muscular now than the unnaturally gaunt body that had come home from Australia. Added to his continued physical therapy had been daily walks along the beach. *He needs a haircut,* Starsky thought, watching the wind tangle the gilded strands. There was never enough time, it seemed, for him to take Hutch to get one, or to go out with him much at all, lately. At work, he was bogged down on a couple of major cases, both coming to a head at the same time. *I guess I should ask Christopher to take him...* Somehow, Starsky knew he wouldn't take that option, however. Christopher was a great help to Hutch, but Starsky didn't like him doing everything for his friend. It made Starsky feel as though his own help wasn't needed. *Besides,* he told himself, *he looks better with his hair long, even if most men are wearing it a bit shorter these days. Reminds me of... other times...*

Hutch turned, shading his eyes to search for Starsky. When he caught sight of him he waved, beckoning his friend to join him. Starsky headed out toward the water's edge.

"How's it goin' today?" he asked as he neared him.

"Not bad. I'm a bit tired," Hutch admitted, squinting into the sun.

Starsky took hold of his arm. "You know, you might be pushing yourself too much. You're not in training for the Olympics, remember."
"I have to," Hutch told him, "if I'm ever going to get back in shape." He looked down at himself, hands running over his hips, outlining the prominent bone structure. "I can't stand myself looking like some ninety-pound weakling."

"You never weighed ninety pounds," Starsky chided. "I oughta know; I picked you up enough times."

The teasing didn't seem to work. "Come on," Hutch said, "let's walk." He started off and Starsky had no choice but to follow him.

The firm sand held their footprints easily. Starsky glanced back, finding solace in the sight of the lingering images of the two of them moving side by side.

Hutch stumbled, bringing his attention back to the present. Starsky caught him before he could topple, wrapping one arm around the slim waist, grasping the arm closest to him to hold his friend steady.

"I'm okay." Hutch's protest was automatic.

"Sure. Where's that cane they gave you, anyway?"

"I left it upstairs. It sinks into the sand. Besides, I can't keep relying on a cane like an old man, Starsky." The voice was petulant.

"You can if it's the only way you have of getting around without falling down every three steps." It was hard remaining objective, understanding Hutch's need to seek independence. Starsky took a deep breath. "You gotta be logical, Hutch. You need it. When that leg gets tired, you know it won't hold you up. There's nothing to be ashamed of in using something that helps."

Hutch sighed, eyes staring out across the dashing waves. "I've got the brace on," he said finally, still not looking at Starsky.

The brace was something Starsky knew he hated. It was a light, plastic contraption, not nearly as unsightly as the braces kids crippled by polio or other infirmities years ago were seen using. Under his clothing, it made a barely visible outline, yet Hutch detested wearing it. It pinched, he often said, making it more difficult instead of easier to walk. Just excuses, Starsky knew. His partner didn't like having to admit any kind of weakness now that he was out of the hospital.

"The doctor said I might always need it," the troubled voice confessed.

Starsky didn't know how to comfort him. "Well, if you do, you do. It's no reflection on you, Hutch. You can still be a strong man, even if you have to wear a brace on your leg." He sighed, blurring the first thing that came to mind when Hutch didn't respond. "I have scars, you know. Can't do anything about them, either."

Hutch swung around to look at him, his eyes wide in anxious concern. "You do? From when you were shot back before I was hurt? I... guess I've never seen them." A hand reached out for his shoulder, the big eyes full of innocent curiosity. "How bad are they?"

The scrutiny made Starsky distinctly uncomfortable. He shrugged, not wanting the attention put back on himself. It was Hutch they were supposed to be talking about. "They're not that obvious anymore. I've kinda gotten used to them. They're just another part of me, like that brace would be a part of you if you stopped worrying about it."
"I'm sorry." The soft-voiced apology was impulsive, and Starsky didn't know if Hutch was speaking about his own behavior or the scars. The intent gaze seemed to look directly into his soul, asking questions. For a moment, Starsky couldn't speak, so sure he was that Hutch was about to take him into his arms. A part of him needed desperately to be held and comforted by this man he loved so much. Yet another side of him panicked at the thought. Hutch might want a friend's embrace; Starsky needed something deeper. But on an intuitive level, Starsky knew he didn't know how to express his own feelings anymore, either.

After a long moment, Hutch reached with his hand, plucking at a stray curl that had blown into Starsky's eyes. Gentle fingers smoothed the strand back, then slid down the side of his face. Starsky held perfectly still, fighting the impulse to tremble under the touch. Then Hutch broke the look, glancing away again, back toward the waves.

*Why didn't I reach out for you?* Starsky asked himself, bitter now that he had let the opportunity slip through his fingers. *I'm a fool; too much in love with him to know what I'm doing, too scared to let him know how much...*

"Can we... walk some more?" Hutch asked, without turning to look at him.

"Sure," Starsky answered in a rough, remorseful voice. "It's okay, Hutch. You're doin' better all the time." Trite or not, the litany came automatically.

"Maybe... the doctor's wrong. Maybe my leg will finally get stronger." Hutch took one and then another cautious step, testing his strength.

"Maybe it will."

"It's almost Christmas, isn't it?" Hutch asked suddenly, perking up.

"Uh-huh. What's that got to do with it?"

"The old year is ending. A new one is coming along. I want to... start over, too."

"Start over?"

"Yeah. I can't get back the past, can I? All that time I lost... I want to move forward."

"I know. You are." Starsky took Hutch's elbow, still concerned that he might falter again. *All that time we lost... it looks like there's a lot that won't be recovered from those days. I think I lost a part of myself back then, too.* Heart aching, he got a better grip on his friend, determined to let neither of them dwell on the problems that lay ahead. Only the possibilities were important; Starsky vowed he'd never lose sight of them, for Hutch as well as for himself.

*******

*I'll be home for Christmas, you can count on me..."* Starsky heard the music as he climbed the steps to Venice Place. Reaching the landing, he stood outside Hutch's door for a moment, listening, imagining. It felt like everything the song talked about was finally coming true.

He tapped on the door, calling out "Ho, ho, ho!" When the door was pulled open, he fully expected to see Hutch. Instead, it was Christopher who greeted him.

"Uh, hi." The chill in his voice was something he couldn't hide. "Didn't expect to see you here today," he went on, passing the nurse and going into the living room.
"Hutch asked me to stay for a while." There was not a single note of defensiveness in the young man's tone. "He wants to go to the Rehab Center later. They're having a Christmas party, you know."

"I know." Starsky bent to place his packages on the table. He glanced around the room. It was regally trimmed for the season. He'd taken Hutch shopping for the tree himself and together they had decorated it. Every surface glittered from the light of candles, and the air was filled with the scents of bayberry and pine and cinnamon. Hutch had been waiting for Christmas for a long time.

"Would you like some eggnog?" Christopher, acting as host, offered him a mug of frothy punch.

"Sure. Why not?" Starsky took a sip; it was laced with just a touch of whiskey. "Where's Hutch?" he asked when his friend still did not appear.

"He's getting dressed, I think." Christopher nodded toward the bathroom door. "He couldn't decide what he wanted to wear."

Starsky joined the caretaker in a smile. Lately, it seemed that Hutch took a long time choosing his clothes and putting them on. He was as fastidious as he used to be, but less efficient. Now, he did everything with a kind of cautious deliberation, as if he didn't wish to make any errors that couldn't be corrected.

Just at that moment, the bathroom door opened, and Hutch stepped out. Starsky was caught by surprise. He found himself struggling to catch his breath. Hutch looked -- Starsky blinked, the image remained -- beautiful.

The tall blond had selected a dark green v-neck sweater and wore it without a shirt underneath. Its bulk camouflaged the thinness of his frame, but clung to his shoulders, showing off their breadth. The deep tones of the sweater against smooth, tawny skin did weird things to Starsky's blood pressure. The gold hair, catching light from the candles and tree bulbs, looked like spun satin. Starsky wondered how long he was going to be able to keep from running his fingers through it.

"Merry Christmas, Starsk." Hutch's voice drew Starsky back from his reverie.

"Merry Christmas, partner," he managed. That was all he could say for the moment.

"Do I... look funny or something?"

Starsky grinned. "Not a bit. Get your skinny carcass over here -- the day's half over already!"

Laughing, Hutch complied. He knelt beside the tree, indicating the small pile of presents there. "Do you want to unwrap things now, or wait until the party at the Rehab Center is over?"

Starsky sat on the couch and shook his head. "It's up to you. This is your holiday, buddy."

"I wished you Happy Hanukkah," Hutch said defensively. He turned, picking up the packages Starsky had placed on the coffee table. Each one was gently shaken before being placed under the tree. "Maybe I'll open just one," he decided, selecting one of them. Starsky watched, enjoying his friend's enthusiasm. The paper was torn off, and a bottle of English Leather Timberline was revealed. "Thanks!" Hutch was already opening it and sniffing at the fragrance. He put some of the cologne on. "It smells good."

For a moment, he and Starsky sat looking at each other, Starsky wondering if Hutch could feel the emotion that seemed to throb in the air. Who woulda thought we'd ever feel this much joy again?
Christopher spoke quietly. "Breakfast is going to get cold if we don't start eating soon." Though his presence was a bit intrusive on the holiday, Starsky didn't really mind. The guy was kind, practical -- good for Hutch. And at the moment, he seemed to realize that Starsky and Hutch were each other's family and he was the outsider.

"Right." Hutch looked up as if he just remembered the breakfast. "I made most of it myself."

Starsky groaned as he got up and headed for the table. "Christopher, not again?"

"I'm afraid so," the nurse shook his head, grinning. "He's been enjoying the cooking at the center they do as therapy."

"I know. I know." Starsky took his seat at the table, surveying the heaping dishes. "But he doesn't really have all the techniques down."

Hutch was blushing. "I know. Guess I've forgotten how I used to do all this."

Starsky couldn't bear to see that eager face fall. Hutch was trying so hard. But between his clumsiness and erratic thought processes, he didn't quite have the hang of it anymore.

The three of them sat down to the meal Hutch had prepared with Christopher's help. The eggs Benedict weren't too bad, but Starsky couldn't figure out whether the other dish was black bean soup or terribly overcooked cranberry sauce. Or maybe oatmeal. He ate as much as he could of whatever it was. The rest of the food -- hard-to-ruin toast, marmalade, juice and coffee -- was a little easier to get down.

Following the meal, the three of them drove out to the Rehab Center for its Christmas gala. There, staff and patients alike celebrated the holiday, joined by family members and friends. Hutch's doctors and therapists greeted him with delight. Starsky noticed that his appearance was not lost on Ginny, the speech therapist, or even on Mrs. Kelly, the social worker. That individual took a moment later in the afternoon to draw Starsky aside.

"It's good to have you here, Lieutenant," she said with a smile. "We don't get to see you as often now."

As always, Starsky didn't know quite how to talk to this woman. She was friendly, caring, but he didn't feel he could actually relate to her. Still, she had Hutch's best interest at heart, and besides being a lot of help with insurance forms and cutting through other red tape, she did try to involve Starsky in the recovery process.

"I've been pretty busy at the office," Starsky told her now, taking a sip of punch to gather his thoughts. "I pick him up just about every day, though, as often as I can."

"I know. I was just wondering, how are you doing these days? We've never had time for that talk I wanted to have with you."

"Mrs. Kelly," Starsky began, already uncomfortable, "I know you'd like to talk -- but there's nothing else I really can think of to tell you. I'm fine. I do appreciate all you've done for Hutch."

The social worker smiled slowly. "His illness has affected you, too. It's all right to admit that."

"Sure, it's affected me. But he's getting better."

"I know. Have you spoken to his doctors lately? Have they indicated how much better Hutch is going to get?"
"What do you mean?" Starsky's defensive posture came to alert.

"I mean, you must know he may never regain his former skills -- not entirely. His short-term memory is still not good. His ability to reason isn't what it used to be. The physical problems are not as bad as they were, but I'm not sure he'll ever be as strong as he was..."

"I don't want to talk about it. He's gonna be fine."

Mrs. Kelly paused, obviously choosing her words very carefully. "But what if he isn't... fine? Isn't as perfect as he once was? What are you going to feel then?" Her glance was penetrating.

"I'm not gonna throw him out, if that's what you mean."

"No. I know that. But can you deal with his deficits? Can you cope with them?"

"Lady, Hutch is my friend. You think I'd drop him -- after all he's been through -- just because he's missing a few..." The sputtering words died away.

"No." The social worker's voice became infinitely kind. "But you -- and he, too, for that matter -- you're both counting on things getting back to the way they were before, exactly the way they were before. Don't you see? If Hutch can't do everything the way he used to -- he's going to fail, in your eyes and in his own. And Lieutenant -- David -- he doesn't want to fail you."

"You mean I'm pushin' him too hard?" Starsky felt real distress. "It's hard not to, I admit that. But you should see him -- he's the one who wants to keep exercising, workin' out all the time, and..."

"You're helping him a great deal. And I know you're not trying to make him feel like you're pushing. But you want him to do so well. He feels that."

"I know." Starsky set his empty paper cup on a table, his heart twisting with the dilemma. "I don't know how to help any other way."

Starkey nodded.

"Just... take things easy, as they come. Let him know you accept him just as he is." The two of them sat quietly for a few moments. When Starsky didn't speak after a while, Mrs. Kelly began again. "You told me his remaining family is in Minnesota, but... aren't there some other close friends here? The two of you seem so alone in all this."

Starsky looked away. "We have friends. Some of the cops we used to work with, our Captain and his family. A bunch of them came over to Hutch's place last night." He didn't tell her that the little party had broken up early because the noise and confusion in the small apartment had seemed to rattle Hutch. No one knew quite how to behave when Hutch's voice got that breaking, tremulous quality to it. Starsky knew it was just fatigue and loss of control, but to the others it sounded as if their old friend were close to tears. And none of them could bear to see him that way. It was difficult for Starsky, too.

"Isn't there anyone who... can take over for you from time to time? You work all day, drive out here to pick him up and then stay most of the evening, I understand. When do you get a break, David?"
"I had a break for two years." The clipped words just seemed to slip out. Starsky sighed, looking straight at the woman's concerned hazel eyes. "I'm okay. Cops' hours are never nine to five. After all these years, it's second nature to me."

"And there is no one else, is there?" Mrs. Kelly said softly.

Starsky shrugged. They had insulated themselves from the rest of the world, not needing anyone else. And they didn't now, either. But he knew it looked odd. Did she see him as only a devoted friend, or did she suspect...? He cut off the thought, not really caring what the woman's opinion might be of their relationship. She didn't seem judgmental anyway -- of course, in her line of work, people got paid to not be judgmental. But all that was beside the point. He could cope with Hutch. He had been doing just fine and he would continue to do so. That was the way things were.

"It's okay," the woman's soft voice came again. "I'm here, if you ever need to talk."

Starsky swallowed. "Thanks." He knew he wouldn't take the social worker up on her offer. There were no words he could use to talk about his feelings, not with anyone.

The party gradually wound down and it was time for them to leave. Hutch gathered the presents he'd received from the staff and other patients, handmade tokens of the season that he treasured as though they'd been bought on Rodeo Drive. Christopher helped him carry them to the car.

"I'll see you in the morning, Hutch," he told his charge as Starsky started the engine. The nurse had driven his own vehicle to the Center and was leaving to spend the rest of the holiday with his own family.

"Thanks, Chris." Hutch smiled up at him.

"Yeah. Preciate all you've done today," Starsky nodded. He'd begun to realize that without Christopher his life would be a lot more complicated, full of a lot more worry for Hutch. The young man waved and then turned to head for his own car.

They were on their own at last. Starsky put the car in gear, turning to look at his companion. "Having a good day?"

Hutch nodded. "I'm ready to go home, though." The blue eyes looked up. "If you are."

"That's where I'm headed." Starsky tried to keep his eyes on the road, but the fluttering feeling in the bottom of his stomach didn't help his concentration. Anticipation. Hope. Confusion. He felt all those things, and couldn't sort them out -- wondered if he ever would. Yet somehow, even the bewildering mix of emotions was pleasant. He was with Hutch, and whatever happened between them was bound to be good.

He parked in front of Venice Place and Hutch didn't argue when he fished the cane out of the back seat for him. His friend had grown exhausted at the Center's party and for once wasn't beyond admitting it. The steps seemed cruelly steep, but even though Starsky had brought up the possibility before, Hutch still wouldn't hear a word about relocating.

Inside, Hutch sagged onto the couch and watched Starsky plug the tree lights back in. He accepted another cup of eggnog and nodded agreement as Starsky put some more Christmas records on the turntable.

"Ready to open the rest of your presents, now?" Starsky was definitely ready to play Santa Claus. He'd been waiting all day to see Hutch's face when he unwrapped one box in particular.
"That big, flat one is for you." Hutch pointed it out. Starsky pulled it from under the tree and inspected the wrapping -- Hutch had used at least three different papers on it, because of its size. Curious, he couldn't resist tearing all the stuff off at once.

It was a painting Hutch had done. Starsky sat staring at it, feeling his eyes mist over, unable to say a word. The delicate colors spoke to him of Hutch's gentleness, the subject matter, of his spirit. Hutch had painted the beach, not quite with as much technique as he had possessed before, but certainly with the same feel for mood and wind. Standing before the incoming breakers stood two men; one was dark-haired, the other blond.

"Is that the two of us?" Starsky asked finally, Adam's apple jumping.

"Sure. Can't you tell?"

"Always fishing for compliments, aren't you?" Starsky teased. He kept his eyes on the painting, admiring its quality, loving the idea that Hutch had done it just for him. The two of us, lookin' out to sea. Reminds me of that day we threw our badges in the ocean. Yet he couldn't help wishing the two figures stood closer to each other. Too much space separated them. Hutch didn't intend deep psychological significance with the design, he told himself, it had just turned out that way. Yet the distance between the two of them was there, and no imagining would move them closer. The back of Starsky's throat began to ache, replacing the fluttery anticipation he'd been experiencing earlier.

"Thanks, Hutch," he said thickly. "I'm gonna put it up in my office. It's beautiful." He looked up to find Hutch beaming. He reached for his own favorite present for Hutch. "Here. This one's for you." Handing it over, he moved to sit on the couch with his friend.

It took several minutes for the fancy store-wrapping to yield to Hutch's fingers. He pulled at the gold seals, tugged off the tight ribbon and finally tore away the stiff, embossed paper. Then the lid on the box was lifted.

Hutch just stared for a moment. He looked up, then quickly back down at the present. Finally, he whispered, "Starsky..."

Starsky found himself able to do little more than whisper as well. "Go on... take it out of the box."

Hutch lifted it carefully, eyes bright. "A watch. A..." he groped for the term, "pocket watch." He laughed, delighted that he had remembered the word, and looked up at Starsky. "Time. You've given me time, haven't you?"

You understand! You love it as much as I hoped you would... One shoulder lifted, while Starsky felt his face grow warm. "It's a regular, analog watch, not one of those crappy digitals. They only show one minute at a time. This one shows you the time that's gone by, and the time that's coming up. It all matters, Hutch, it's all every bit as important as the instant we're living right now."

The clear eyes moved from the watch back to Starsky's face, seeming to caress him with their expression of tenderness. "That's beautiful, y'know? You're beautiful..."

Starsky sat there, feeling a rush of love for his friend. He was swept away by the emotions washing over them, growing between them. He had an impulse to reach out and pull Hutch into his arms. Don't blow it this time, a warning voice went off in his head, remembering that day on the beach last week when he'd hesitated too long. He opened his arms, moving closer. Hutch moved, too, into the circle of Starsky's arms.
He let his head fall onto Starsky's shoulder. The dark-haired man let his embrace close with a sigh of gratitude.

*You're here. With me. Safe. And I'll never let you go.*

He folded Hutch close, wanting to shelter, to cherish. He let his head fall against Hutch's, closed his eyes. Pressing his lips into the gilt hair under them crossed his mind. He felt the ache of love all the way down to his soul.

Yet something about Hutch made him pause, something about the feel of the man in his arms. He was close, yes, needing the nearness. Yet where was the sense of surrender, of yearning that Starsky felt pulsing in his own veins? He held his breath for the space of a heartbeat, seeking his own emotion's counterpart in the body he held, finding caring but no desperation. This was an embrace of friendship, purely and simply that. Only that. As damming and as sweet. Starsky opened his eyes, gathered his frayed emotions together, anchoring them in the reality of the room around him. He squeezed Hutch reassuringly, patted his back, and released his hold. Hutch sat up, smiling, still clutching the watch.

"I'll keep it with me all the time," he promised in his soft, young-Hutch voice. Starsky closed his eyes, and behind his lids saw again the eager, boyish cop just out of uniform, glancing at the old-fashioned pocket watch his grandfather had given him. A sniper's bullet had ruined that timepiece years ago, but the case, in deflecting the bullet, had saved its owner's life. "Thank you, Starsky."

"I'm glad you like it," he managed. The moment had still been beautiful; Hutch loved the present, understood what Starsky had been trying to say with it. *So he didn't fall into my arms with a declaration of love -- what am I -- ungrateful? I'm thankful for what I've got. It's damn precious. These things take time.* His eyes fell on the watch still held in Hutch's hand. *Didn't I just say we have plenty of that?* When Hutch looked up at him again, he was able to smile fully, with no regrets.

*I'll give you all the time you need, babe,* he vowed silently. Yet his own need still beat in his veins. *I want to find out if the way I remember it felt to be held tight in your arms is the way it really is. Hutch..."

"Open this one now," he urged, handing over another, larger box. Starsky was particularly proud of having thought of this gift. As Hutch tore into the wrapping, he began to explain. "It's a video game. Kinda like that pong game that Huggy used to have at his old restaurant, only much better. You hook it up to the TV and use that little joy stick to move your men."

Hutch was looking at the different devices encased in Styrofoam, puzzled.

"It's called Pac Man. These games are gettin' real popular. With this set, you can buy more games; when you get tired of doing Pac Man we'll move you on up to Donkey Kong or something. I asked your doctors about buying it -- it should be good for you to practice eye-hand coordination with."

"What does it do?" Hutch asked, still looking lost.

"You have a grid on the TV. Pac Man has to gobble up power pellets and get away from the ghosts."

Hutch was quiet a few seconds longer. "And this is called scientific progress?"

Starsky broke up, ruffling his companion's hair.
They went on, opening the remaining presents, laughing and teasing each other about them and the mess they'd made with the paper and ribbons. Hutch volunteered to pick it all up, and he bustled around, making a lot of noise crumpling and squashing it into the trashcan. Starsky looked over the items on the coffee table.

"Looks like you got some more cards."

"Yeah. From the relatives in Minnesota." Hutch returned to his seat beside Starsky. He picked up one of the cards, glancing at it before handing it over. "This one's from my Aunt Priscilla Hutchinson. She wants to know when I'm coming for a visit."

"Uh-huh," Starsky mused, looking at the wintry, Minnesotan scene on the card. Then he looked up, directly at Hutch. "You read these yourself?"

"Sure." The nod was nonchalant. "I'm getting better, but handwriting is still hard. Aunt Priscilla typed hers - she always does. Used to be a high school English teacher and she always does things very neatly and properly."

"Sounds charming." But realizing that Hutch's reading skill was progressing became one more present to Starsky. "You know, this has been quite a day. Plenty of good old-fashioned euphoric sentimentalism." He waited for Hutch's response to that.

"Hmmmm? Euph -- what?" The wide brow crinkled in confusion. "I don't think I ever heard that word."

"Don't you remember? Oh, never mind." Starsky laughed. He'd always had a fondness for this holiday he'd adopted. This year, for the first time in a long time, the season meant something to him. Christmas, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving... they'd all been just days on the calendar to him without Hutch. Last year, he recalled, he hadn't gotten around to opening the gifts his mother had sent until two days later. This year, the old excitement and anticipation had come for him again.

"Euph..." Hutch was still trying to puzzle out the expression.

"Don't worry about it. I have a feeling you won't be complaining that I have the Christmas spirit anymore." So many things he doesn't quite remember. But with time, surely our love will come back to him.

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CHAPTER V

March, 1982

Once again, Hutch's night was filled with dreams. The experience with his abductors, their threats of death, still haunted him. But now they didn't wake him or craze him with fear as they once had. He dreamed the dreams and continued to sleep. Sometimes, the images played out long enough for him to begin a desperate flight to freedom. He would get away, as he knew he must have done at some point during his captivity, and begin to run for his life in the desert. That was what would usually wake him, the pounding of his heart, the straining of his muscles to succeed in the escape. He ran and ran... until in his dreams he lived for the running itself, not merely to escape the death they planned for him... until he was running toward something. Something he wanted, needed very much...
Hutch wrenched awake, his sweating skin sticking to the damp sheets twisted around him. He lay panting in the lamplight, trying to quiet his breathing and not disturb his caretaker, Christopher. If he woke at night, the LPN would come in, talk to him and try to ease his fears, but the talking actually upset Hutch more. It made him feel like he was incapable of handling things on his own. So this night he lay in silence, slowly letting his breathing return to normal. He was so tired, it was a matter of moments until he drifted under the veil of sleep again.

Running... toward what I need and want most... His steps slowed as he neared the place he sought. Gradually, out of the windblown landscape, objects became clear, and he recognized where he was. That flight of steps... Starsky's place.

Heart thumping, he climbed the stairs, pushing open the door to the place that had been like a second home. He looked in the living room, but Starsky wasn't there, nor in the kitchen. The bedroom, then?

There. Lying propped on an elbow, glowing bronze skin on deep blue sheets, was Starsky. Hutch leaned in the doorframe, indolently regarding him. The pose showed off the well-built chest, suggested intriguing secrets beneath the draped sheet. Shameless tease...

What are you waiting for?

You sure you want this?

No more lies, Hutch... we both feel the same way... c'mon...

The blue eyes beckoned, the slender hand pulled back the sheet to invite him in

Hutch reached to unbutton his collar and realized his clothing was already gone. He moved, feeling as though he were floating toward the bed. Then he was slipping under the crisp, cool percale, drawn close in a warm embrace, his body covered by his partner's taut, muscular form...

He wrenched awake painfully this time, found himself sitting upright in the bed. It was dark, still, and the room was his own. Not Starsky’s... of course not. Where the hell do those dreams come from?

He sank back to his pillow, eyes staring into the darkness. He was hot, so he pulled the sheet from over him, one hand running the length of his body. All his nerves were strung tight with tension left over from the intimate dream. Hutch let his hand descend lower, curving over his genitals. He could have sworn that he had been hard and aching with desire, but that had not seemed to survive his waking. His penis was soft, and even though the few tentative strokes he gave it felt all right, it did not respond. He sighed, letting go, wondering when he would feel normal again. For a long time, there had been a residual soreness, a tenderness from the catheter. When he had become alert enough to notice its presence, having it there had disturbed him, given pain that was felt even after the thing had been removed. Starsky had realized he'd been hurting. Hutch recalled how his friend had told him not to worry, that soon even that part of him would be back in working order.

That was months ago... Still doesn't seem to be 'in working order'... He'd not thought much about his sexuality, and for the first time, that puzzled Hutch. He didn't know where to find the answer. Is that part of me taking longer to wake up, to recover? Is this normal? Or is it one more of those changes that are going to be... irrevocable? He shivered suddenly and tugged at the sheet until it covered him once more. Dr. Williamson talked about having to grieve over his losses... was sex to be another casualty of the coma?

He was certain that, at one time, sex had been easy and natural, pleasurable, an important part of his life. There had been some beautiful women in his bed... yet they seemed only vague shadows now. He knew he'd
been married; he could remember Van's face, but he had no clear, specific memories of other women. He knew they had been real, but it was not them that he dreamed about. In his dreams, it was Starsky whom he held, who held him.

What do I remember... did I really feel desire for him? I remember wanting... I think... Why don't I feel the same way now? Is it because I only dreamed of wanting him? Because nothing ever really happened between him and me? Is that why my body... refuses to work? Because I love Starsky, but not that way? When I meet a woman I want, will I feel it, deep inside?

The conflict was too heavy to be solved in the middle of the night. Confused, Hutch dozed off again. Though his sleep was fitful, no more dreams came to him that night.

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Hutch was still thinking about his dreams when he sat down with Dr. Williamson the following afternoon. He wasn't going to bring them up with the psychiatrist, but Williamson could usually tell when something was troubling him. Today was no exception.

"Hutch," the even voice began, "you seem to have something on your mind. Would you like to talk about it?"

Hutch stared out the window, searching for a way to begin. Finally, he asked, "How can I tell what really happened and what I just... imagined?"

"You mean about the kidnapping?"

"Yes," he answered hesitantly, "and about other things, too."

"Other things?"

"From before." Hutch brushed at a piece of lint on his pants leg. "I remember so much about my job... the police work... but other things seem like ghosts. The people I knew... it's all faded... I can't tell any more what was real life and what wasn't." He finally raised pleading eyes to the doctor. "I'm so confused..."

"We've talked quite a bit about your memories. I thought you felt you had remembered a lot."

"I know..." Hutch groped for a way to explain. "I do remember things... I know the events, the substance of what happened, but it's like I know it because someone told me... not like I was there. It's like I read a book about my life. I don't feel as if some of these things really happened to me. I can't remember how they felt."

The doctor paused in thought for a long moment, with Hutch growing more uncomfortable while he waited. Finally Williamson offered a suggestion.

"In many cases of coma, particularly those resulting from severe head injury, there is a great deal of memory loss, as well as a change in the person's emotional make-up. Some people lose a lot of their ability to get emotional about things -- people who aren't even upset that they are paralyzed, for example. There are some changes in your emotions. We've discussed this. If your memories seem faded, like you only heard about them second-hand, perhaps it's really the distance created by the coma itself. Your ability to feel those past experiences deeply has lessened a bit. But that actually is quite normal. You may recall something that seemed quite tragic when you were a child -- your ice cream cone fell on the ground, for example, -- and you cried about it. But remembering that today, you don't feel that same emotion."
Hutch nodded, not completely understanding what the doctor was getting at. At least Dr. Williamson had indicated this was normal for people like Hutch. Still, he was disturbed. "But what about the things that I can't be sure about -- I don't know if they really happened, or if I just dreamed them."

"What things?" The doctor's quiet probing continued.

"When I was in the plane, when I tried to get away... things like that. I'm sure most of them are true, but then there are... what seem like memories, too... but they are different, not like something real. I keep... dreaming about them..." His words ran out.

"Are you still having nightmares?"

"I dream a lot," Hutch shrugged. "They don't wake me as much. They don't scare me like they used to. But they bother me. I feel so strange..."

"Hutch, I know you're at home now, but you are still in the process of recovering. Your mind has to learn how to function -- to think and reason -- all over again. Have patience -- "

"But I have to know!"

"Why? Are you having dreams or recollections about something bad, or something you think could have prevented all this from happening to you?"

He hung his head. "Not exactly. I just... seem so stupid to have let them grab me. I was supposed to be a better cop than that." He was shaken by voicing that admission. He had not even acknowledged those personal guilt feelings to himself. Yet he realized they had been lurking under the surface.

"Do you remember the men who kidnapped you? Their faces?"

"Vaguely. They seem real clear in the dreams... then when I try to visualize them when I'm awake... they're gone..."

"Do you feel it's important to remember them?"

Hutch nodded, surprised by the question. "Of course. They have to be arrested."

"What if they never come back to this country?"

He didn't have an answer to that one. "Starsky would know..." He rubbed at his forehead. "I just want to have all the pieces. It feels strange walking around like... half a person. I want to be me, not something people who don't really know me just put back together the best way they could."

"Starsky really knows you."

"Yes. He knows me. But he's never lived inside my mind. He can tell me about things we did together, but he wasn't always there... and he doesn't know what I was feeling..."

"Are there some things that he could help you remember, though?"

Hutch nodded, though he didn't want to voice which things aloud. How would I ever ask him? He might think I was crazy... or worse...
"Why don't you ask him when you're uncertain?" The doctor waited for a reply; when none came he continued. "As for the rest -- Hutch, hypnosis can help us a great deal. If there are specific things that you want to recall, like the kidnappers' faces, we can hypnotize you and see if you can describe them or remember them when we wake you up. We can explore what you think are dreams and find out if they are memories after all. Would you want to do something like that?"

"I don't know." The prospect seemed frightening. It could be the key to his confusion, yet he feared losing control and talking aloud about the things that had been troubling him. "Can we decide... later?"

"Of course. I just wanted you to know it is an option we have. Try not to worry about your memories that you aren't sure are memories. If there is something that becomes so important you have to be sure, we can try what I suggested. Otherwise, trust yourself. Things you've experienced over and over in dreams are probably real. Or they represent real things that happened. Dreams can be symbolic, too, you know. And the way your thought processes have slowed down, you might not be able to interpret them. I'll be glad to help with things like that, if you can talk about them with me."

"What else can dreams be?"

"They can be something you want to happen. Or something you fear will happen."

*Something I fear... or something I want...?* Hutch shivered at the dual possibilities.

"They can't hurt you though," the doctor was saying solicitously. Hutch barely heard him.

April, 1982

Hutch was at loose ends. His therapy had progressed to the point where he only had to go to the Rehab Center three days a week. That left him with time on his hands. He usually spent a few hours puttering around the house, taking care of his plants, keeping the place clean, taking walks along the beach and working out. He was still trying to get back the strength that had been bled out of him while he lay inert for two years. Sometimes, when the crippling fatigue came crashing back after what he considered only a brief session, he felt all the work was useless, doubting that he would ever return to what he considered 'normal' again.

Today was Saturday, and Hutch found the beach more crowded than it was on weekdays. Dozens of people seemed to be out, seeking the sun, seeking companionship. He watched them walking in groups or in pairs, suddenly feeling left out. They all had somewhere to go, something definite to do. He was different. Starsky was working. Even Christopher was off today. It was a terrible, empty feeling to acknowledge that his life was so devoid of meaning and purpose. Sighing, Hutch turned back and headed for Venice Place, preferring the quiet solitude in his apartment to the loneliness of the crowded beach.

As he opened the front door, the phone was ringing. His leg was aching, making hurrying difficult, but he picked up the receiver mid-ring, hopeful that whoever was calling hadn't decided to hang up yet.

"Hello?"

"Hiya. It's me. Whatcha doin'?" Starsky's voice sounded so good coming through to him. Hutch sank down on the sofa before replying.
"Not much. I was just out for a walk."

"You sound tired. Christopher making you work too hard?"

"He isn't here. Someone in his family got sick, so I told him I'd be okay."

"Oh." There was a beat of silence. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. He hasn't been staying at night for two weeks now, you know."

"I know."

"I don't need a nursemaid."

"Know that, too."

"Sorry." He didn't mean to sound so petulant. A part of Hutch desperately wanted reassurance, yet another part of him pulled back from too much solicitude. He knew it was difficult for Starsky to know when and how much was required; he didn't often know that himself. *If I was the same man who left two years ago, it wouldn't be so hard for him to talk to me...*

Starsky sighed, starting over. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"I'm off today. That is, most of today -- I think."

"I don't get it."

Starsky chuckled. "I may or may not have to go downtown and question a prisoner. He's been brought back from Fargo, North Dakota, but the plane's been delayed. If he arrives, I'll have to run down there. Otherwise, I'm on my own." There was a pause. "Want me to come over?"

There was something Hutch wanted more. "No. Can I come over to your place?"

"Sure!" Starsky seemed surprised, but his hesitation lasted only a second. When he spoke again, his voice was eager. "I'll come over and pick you up. Wanna go out for lunch?"

"Yeah."

Lunch at Huggy's was fun. Sitting in the booth at Huggy's, laughing about old times, listening to Huggy's stories about the neighborhood, he felt the depression lift.

They returned to Starsky's place and hooked up the Pac Man, attempting a game together. Starsky was better at it, but Hutch didn't mind; it was fun watching his friend laugh and enjoy. He didn't get to see that side of Starsky very often now.

"You're like a kid with that thing," he told him, smiling. "I think you bought it for yourself instead of me."

Grinning, Starsky looked up. "This was bought for purely therapeutic reasons. But I admit I always was better at stuff like this than you."
"You wish. I'll show you on the next round." He reached for the joystick as the telephone began to ring. Starsky got up to answer it. Hutch was busy making Pac Man gobble up power pellets when his friend crouched next to him.

"That was Dobey. The plane got in. I have to go downtown."

Hutch was disappointed. "How long?"

"Could be a couple of hours, at least." He looked sorry to be breaking up the day, too. "Hey, you want to come with me? You'd enjoy seeing the gang down at the station again."

"No." Starsky had invited him down a couple of times before, but his answer had been the same. Hutch just wasn't ready to face Metro yet. He didn't want to go back looking like an invalid. He didn't want to show up until he could work there again.

Starsky shrugged, knowing not to push him. "Okay. I shouldn't be too long. You can hang around here, okay?"

"Okay. I'll make dinner. If you've got anything in the refrigerator," he tried to tease.

"I shopped yesterday," Starsky chuckled. He rose to get his jacket and holster. "Call if you need anything."

Hutch nodded absently, watching Starsky get ready for work. It had been a long time since he'd seen him slip the well-worn holster on and check the heavy Beretta. Being a cop was all Starsky knew and Hutch had no doubts that he was still one of the city's finest. But I'm not out there with you anymore... Starsky waved goodbye as he hurried out the door.

The apartment seemed too quiet as Hutch sat alone on the floor. He switched off the Pac Man, no longer interested in bettering his score. Sighing, he got up and wandered aimlessly through the rooms. This was Starsky's place; every piece of furniture, all the eclectic decor carried his inimitable stamp. It was pretty much as Hutch remembered it, yet there were no longer the many plants he'd given his friend over the years. He took care of my plants, why are his all gone?

Stepping into the bedroom, Hutch looked around. The place was as neat as Starsky always kept it, bed neatly made, closet door closed, dresser dusted. There was one drawer slightly open; something was sticking partway out. Hutch moved over to investigate.

When he pulled out the drawer, he discovered it was an old, stuffed toy bear that had been protruding. He held it in his hands for a long moment, realizing that it held some significance, yet not knowing at first just what. This used to be at my place... he mused. And then he remembered. It had been given to him. By... Terri? The girl he loved who died. The memory came back sharply. He'd had to watch Starsky lose the woman he loved, all because of a deranged criminal who'd carried a grudge against his partner. Thus intertwined with their work, he supposed that was why the memory wasn't hard to find. It was all there, his own sense of helplessness, the anguish he'd felt at seeing Starsky suffer, the quiet peace that had descended over him when he'd managed to soothe his friend's pain at last, to share it. They'd cried together. And he remembered that night in Starsky's kitchen when they'd drunkenly opened the presents she'd left behind. Starsky's had been that silly book. Hutch's had been the bear. He closed his eyes, trying to remember the note. '... I entrust Ollie and Dave... please love them both... don't let either of them change...' Tears welled in Hutch's eyes. He hadn't followed through on his part of Terri's bequest. Starsky did seem changed. Time and too much pain had eaten away at him, leaving him a quieter, less easily reached man than he had been before.
He clutched the bear tightly, closing his eyes, trying to picture Starsky bringing it from Hutch's place to his own apartment. *You still must miss her and love her... if you wanted this possession of hers to remember her by...* he sighed, intending to replace the memento in the drawer.

There was something else inside. He recognized the lock box where he'd kept his gun immediately. Hutch carefully tried the lid and found it open. There lay his Python. He just looked at it, didn't touch. He knew how weak his right hand and wrist still were, didn't want to confirm his inability to hold the weapon steady. Starsky had told him he'd brought the gun here, rather than leave it in his unoccupied apartment. Was there another reason, though? *Did you bring it over here because you wanted to have something of mine around, like having something of Terri's?*

With a murmur of regret, Hutch closed the gun box, nestled Ollie down beside it and closed the drawer. He raised up off his haunches and stood, feeling at a loss. Deciding he was tired, he lay down on Starsky's bed. There, where Starsky slept, he found some comfort, felt close to him even though he wasn't there. *You've been with women here, with Terri a long time ago... Did we ever...?* Hutch couldn't even put the question into words. He rubbed his eyes. Close as they were now, there was a distance, a remoteness he sensed from time to time in Starsky. *Could I tell if anything did happen from the way you act with me now? Wouldn't you have made some indication?* He wasn't certain. And if they had ever touched each other in love, he didn't know if Starsky would feel the same now. *I'm changed. So are you. Even if we'd want to go back, could we?*

He shifted position, trying to get comfortable, pulling the rough bedspread down from the pillow. He rested his head there, noting the scent of Starsky's shampoo, of his body. He inhaled deeply, aching with the thought of holding Starsky the way he had in dreams. A feeling surfaced, something he identified at once as true memory and not imagination. *We felt so much for each other, sometimes it really did seem like love. But it was hard to talk about it, even knowing we were both aware of those vibes.* He closed his eyes tight, searching for a recollection of putting those feelings into words. Whatever fit with the memories he did have seemed to be locked away, meant only to come to him in diffuse dreams. *Memories or symbols?* He didn't know which.

He must have dozed off; when he stirred sometime later, Hutch realized the angle of sunshine slanting in through the window had changed. Stretching out the kinks in his legs, he sat up on the side of the bed. He ran a hand through his hair and stood, then remembering he had said he would prepare dinner, headed out of the bedroom and toward the kitchen.

'*First, wash your hands,'* he silently quoted his therapist's instructions, turning on the water and picking up the soap. While lathering his hands, his eyes glanced out the window. What he saw made all thoughts of cooking fade from his mind.

*The Torino!* He had all but forgotten that Starsky had told him he'd kept the car when he purchased his new one. Hutch headed out into the yard, absently wiping his soapy hands on his pants legs.

The car was beautiful, as sweet a sight to his eyes as any he could imagine. *And to think I used to complain about this thing on a daily basis.* Hutch caught himself grinning as he ran a hand along one smooth, glossy fender. *Both of us knew I was just teasing...* He tried lifting the door handle and found to his pleasure that the car was unlocked. In a matter of seconds, he was behind the wheel.

Its black leather warmed from the sun, the bucket seat seemed to enfold him in a nostalgic embrace. He put his hands on the steering wheel, gripping it tightly as he might do if driving in some high-speed chase after the bad guys. *How many times did you ever let me drive this buggy?* He closed his eyes, scanning his memories. The first that occurred to him was related to the battered toy bear he'd found inside. *I drove you home from the hospital after you'd spent the night waiting for news about Terri.* Starsky had been exhausted, out on his feet, and hadn't so much as quibbled when Hutch offered to drive. There had been
other times, few and far between, when he'd let Hutch take the wheel of his prized automobile; perhaps once only when he'd actually made the suggestion -- to let Hutch see how well the Torino handled. *Coupla times you were in no condition to object.* A picture of Starsky, unconscious but still writhing from deep abdominal cramps caused by a killer's poisoning, came to Hutch then, seeming to blot out the late afternoon sunshine. *You'da had a fit if you'd seen the way I took those corners that night, buddy. But I got you to the hospital in time... got back with the syringe the professor had intended for me, too, in time... in time... I had to concentrate, had to stay alert, had to maneuver through the traffic, not lose my cool..."

"Damn." One fist trembled as it pounded ineffectually against his knee. *No way could I come through for you like that now.* He desperately searched for a more pleasant memory. When it came, he smiled despite himself. Another case, a couple of years later. They'd gone undercover looking for, of all things, moonshiners in California, and Starsky had felt it was his duty to sample the evidence. Trying to humor him, Hutch had repeatedly told him he could drive, all the while piling his staggering partner into the Torino's passenger seat. *Those were good days... good times... but so long ago now...*

The inside of the car was stuffy, too warm. Hutch realized that he would only become more depressed if he stayed where he was, yet he couldn't bring himself to let go quite so quickly. He turned to glance at the seat next to him, wondering how many thousands of miles he'd ridden there. Despite his complaints, he'd felt safe there, at home with his partner's driving. *Most of the time... How many hours did we just spend sitting here, on stake out? Must have been hundreds.* Thinking of the time, he realized he'd been wasting his own. He pulled out his pocket watch and determined after several moments' consideration that it was nearly five o'clock. He had forgotten he'd been about to start dinner. Shaking his head in consternation at his brief attention span, Hutch climbed out of the Torino and went back inside.

There he discovered that he had forgotten to turn off the water; it still ran in a strong stream down the drain. He washed his hands again, this time drying them on a paper towel he carefully dropped in the trashcan. A search of Starsky's cupboards and refrigerator left him with the decision to make hamburgers and macaroni and cheese. That pleased Hutch because only last week they had served that as the menu for a practice meal his therapy class had cooked. Concentrating hard, he calculated the steps necessary to get everything done correctly. *Shape burgers. Boil water. Turn on oven...* He hesitated. What if Starsky didn't come home when the hamburgers were cooked? They'd get cold. Or overdone. *Cook the macaroni, but let the burgers wait.* Satisfied with his decision, Hutch checked the pan of water and macaroni he'd set on the stove. It wasn't boiling yet. He went to sit on the couch until it did.

What was Starsky doing right now, he wondered. Questioning a suspect? Hutch remembered how they had done that before. Most often, he'd play the good guy, gregarious, fair-minded, pointing out to the prisoner that his hot-headed buddy was likely to do bodily harm if the truth wasn't forthcoming. Other times, they'd reverse the tactic. *Or both of us would play hardnosed... Had to be, out on those streets we patrolled...* Lost in the past, he tried to visualize how he and Starsky would be doing things now. *He's a lieutenant so we wouldn't be partners. God, I miss working with him so much. Just miss working, for that matter.* Filling the days with repetitious exercises and therapy didn't make a man of thirty-five -- thirty-seven, he corrected with a twinge -- feel exactly fulfilled. *I want to work, do something! I just want to feel useful.*

The sound of something sizzling in the kitchen caught at his attention. Hutch leaped up from the couch, cursing his lack of concentration, and hurried to the stove. The pan of water had boiled dry, macaroni was congealed into a scorched, brown mass in the bottom. He yanked it off the burner, giving a yelp when the hot handle burned his fingers. "Damn!" He put the pan in the sink, taking hold of the edge of the counter, trying to calm down. He felt foolish, stupid for not paying attention to what he was doing, for letting his mind wander. Breathing slowly, he thought about what Ginny had said during cooking class -- *'mistakes happen to everybody. A good cook either fixes them, or learns to deal with them.' That's it, he told himself, you burned pans even before you got sick. It's no big deal. Take care of it."
His stinging fingers required attention first. He ran the cold water and held the injured digits under it until the pain lessened, pleased that he had thought of the remedy. Then he looked for some antiseptic and band-aids. He pulled out drawer after drawer, and looked through all the cabinets, too, but couldn't find any first-aid things. Finally, he made a tour of the house, searching methodically. When he found the items in the bathroom cabinet, he shook his head, feeling he should have known to look there first. He took care of the minor wound, then went back to the kitchen.

He got out another pan, found more macaroni, and put it on to boil, this time staying nearby to watch it. Then he turned to clean up the mess he'd made. He was just dumping the ruined pasta in the trashcan when he heard the front door open.

"Starsky," he called without looking up.

"Yeah. It's me." Starsky's voice sounded strained. Hutch listened to him moving about the living room, then heard a groan as his friend sat heavily on the couch. He put down the pan and hurried to find out what was wrong.

"Starsk?"

His friend looked up, blue eyes dark and wide in a pale face. He held his arms wrapped across his stomach, and there was a handkerchief tied awkwardly around his upper left arm. There was a red stain darkening the cloth.

"What happened?" Hutch moved to him at once, crouching down to meet him at eye level.

Starsky shook his head, obviously trying to get himself together before speaking. "Damn these rookie cops. They didn't search the prisoner well enough. Bastard had a knife in his boot. When we tried to lead him to his cell, he went for it and slashed me on the arm. I don't think it's too bad." He essayed a smile, trying to make light of the injury. "Dobey said I should go to the hospital, but I told him that wasn't necessary. Besides, you were here waiting and I..."

"Let me take a look at it," Hutch heard himself saying. He moved to sit beside Starsky, gently lifting the sodden handkerchief. There had been a good deal of blood. Perhaps the wound wasn't serious, but that didn't mean it hadn't bled a lot. When he tugged at it, Starsky winced. "Easy," Hutch told him. "We better get you into the bathroom before we do anything to this."

He assisted him to stand, guiding him with a hand under his elbow, and Starsky let him lead the way. In the bathroom, he sat on the lid of the john while Hutch turned on the water and got out a washcloth. "You better take your shirt off."

Starsky began undoing his buttons, then slipped one arm out of its sleeve. The bandage was in the way on the other side, however. "Can you untie that?" he asked.

"Sure." Hutch looked at it closely, then loosened the knot. When he pulled on it, he realized that the blood had dried, effectively pasting the cloth to the open wound.

Starsky realized the same thing. "Shit. That's gonna hurt when you pull it off."

"I'll be careful." He used the washcloth dampened with warm water to soak the cloth away from the torn edge of skin. That eased the job, but he didn't accomplish it without starting the bleeding again.
"Mmmn." The sound of pain was cut off abruptly as Starsky sucked in a breath. He sat there white-lipped while Hutch applied pressure to the wound with another washcloth.

It was awkward to hold the position, standing bent over him. Hutch wrapped his free arm around Starsky's shoulders to give himself more leverage. Only the sound of Starsky's ragged breathing marked the passage of time.

Hutch realized that he was holding his friend, taking care of him. Here we are, just like old times. He could be useful again, he could do something for his friend, rather than always being the one who needed Starsky's care. And there was more.

How good you feel in my arms, as though your being there is very right... You're so strong, yet needing me, accepting and giving back... A profound emotional certainty rose up in Hutch, blotting out everything else for a moment. I know, no matter what, I wouldn't have willingly given up your friendship -- or your love -- I would never have wanted to lose you forever... I'd have fought, to escape to live... That was why, in his dreams, he was struggling to escape, to get away from his captors and return to where he belonged. To get back to you... The thought took his breath away.

"Hutch? You okay?" A strained, concerned voice brought him out of his reverie.

"Sure." He blinked, trying to pull himself together. "The bleeding's almost stopped." He eased up on his desperate hold around Starsky's shoulders, checking to be sure that what he'd said was indeed true. "Hold this," he directed, helping Starsky to keep pressure on the wound while he slipped the shirtsleeve down his arm and off. He dropped the ruined shirt in the tub, then he turned to open the cabinet door and get out the first-aid things. He let his mind go blank as he worked, using an antiseptic pad to cover the cut, wrapping Starsky's bicep round and round with gauze and taping it securely in place, realizing that if he'd tried to consciously think out each step before he did it, that he might get nervous and confused. Letting his hands do what they remembered how to do made the procedure much easier.
As he finished, he felt Starsky's eyes on him, warm and proud. "You did that real well, Hutch," his patient offered almost shyly.

He shrugged. "Guess some things a guy never forgets, huh?" He found another washcloth and used it to clean the blood that had dripped down Starsky's forearm. He felt his heart thudding in his chest so hard his friend could probably hear it. They hadn't been this close, he realized, since he'd been in the hospital. And then he'd been the patient, with Starsky giving him some intimate assistance. He ran out of things to do, finally, and realized he hadn't looked Starsky in the eye in several minutes. He started to, but then his gaze was caught by something unexpected.

Scars, faintly red, with raised silvery traces ran across and down his chest, dividing the dark hair swirling across the musculature. For a split second, Hutch couldn't figure out how they got there. Then he remembered. Starsky had been shot, very badly. 'Massive damage...' Whose voice had said those words? Long hours of waiting, praying, hoping... those could never be forgotten... But he very nearly had, or at least he hadn't thought about the marks that damage might have left. On the beach that day, when Hutch had been complaining about his leg brace, Starsky had mentioned having these scars. Fascinated, a little scared by them, yet wanting to understand, his hand lifted, fingers just brushing along the edge of the one that curved over Starsky's left breast. So close to your heart... Then, realizing in shock what he had done, sensing that Starsky had only managed not to flinch away by sheer force of will, he jerked his hand back and let it fall uselessly to his side.

He felt horribly embarrassed to have called attention to the scars, and shocked to see that his friend had suffered such agony. He was totally at a loss to what he should do to make amends for his thoughtlessness.

"Hutch," Starsky said, very softly. His fingers reached out to clasp Hutch's cold ones, tugging gently. "It's okay." He bent, trying to get Hutch to look him in the eye. "Say something, huh?"

"Do they hurt?" he blurted. He could have kicked himself.

Starsky didn't seem to mind. "No. They feel tight, sometimes. But these on the outside don't really... hurt..." His voice died away.

Hutch managed to look at him. "On the outside?" he whispered, scared to understand just what Starsky meant.

His throat was cleared, rather noisily. "Yeah. Inside -- well, let's just say if I try to run like I used to, I pay for it the next day."

Hutch stood there, lost in the depths of those calm blue eyes, thinking about the words he'd used. Inside, you have scars, too... real ones, and ones no one, not even an x-ray, could find, don't you? He wished he possessed some magic that would take them all away, yet he knew that no amount of recovery on his part would grant him that ability. How do I ask you to forgive me for not being there? Yet there in Starsky's eyes was the answer. No forgiveness was necessary.

The warm, supple fingers squeezed his own, then let go. "Look at us," Starsky said, smiling crookedly, "anybody'd think we were a couple of saps."

"Yeah." Hutch still couldn't tear his eyes away from the blue ones that held his own captive.

Starsky sniffed. "Is that something burning in the kitchen?"
That broke the spell. "Oh, no!" Hutch lamented, dashing once again to investigate the damage his forgetfulness had done.

Starsky followed him out, shrugging into a new shirt as he walked. Together, they took care of the mess -- this pan wasn't as severely damaged as the first, at least -- and finished getting dinner ready. Starsky insisted that Hutch had done most of it himself, and praised the hamburgers when they were finished. "You did a great job -- and don't worry about those crummy pans. If they weren't so cheap they wouldn't have boiled dry so fast. Besides, you used to ruin them all the time, too."

"I know. But I guess I should have put in more water." Hutch felt his cheeks turning red. "Anyway, it did something good after all."

"What?" Starsky asked around a mouthful of macaroni and cheese.

"When I burned my fingers on the first pan, I found out where you keep the first-aid stuff. Came in handy later." He grinned, pleased with himself.

"You're really somethin', you know that?" Starsky gave him a beautiful smile, then went back to his food.

The evening ended after another round of Pac Man, and Starsky drove Hutch back to his own apartment. It was only after the sound of Camaro's engine died away that Hutch realized that Starsky had been hurt with no partner at his side to protect him. I should have been there. I should be there again... the sooner the better. He went to bed, determined to get back to work, to be where Starsky needed him once more.
BOOK
FIVE

RENAISSANCE
Hutch took a cab to Metro, dressed in his best clothes, anxious for the meeting with Dr. Zephram. He had told no one, not even Starsky, about the appointment he'd made with the department physician. He'd decided that it would be a terrific surprise when he told his friend he was back on the force. He was a little nervous, hoping he wouldn't run into anyone he knew. For all his eagerness to begin working here again, he still felt he wasn't quite ready. Of course, I'm not ready to take on the duties of a detective sergeant of homicide just yet. That will come in due time. For now, a desk job or anything where my experience can be put to good use will do just fine.

Dr. Zephram's secretary motioned him to a seat in the waiting room, and Hutch tried not to look anxious as he sat there. After what seemed like an hour, the doctor said he could come in.

The older man, grey-haired, spectacled, stood and reached across his desk for Hutch's hand. Hutch shook it, trying to put as much strength in the gesture as he could muster, though the weakness on his right side still annoyed him.

"Have a seat, son," the doctor offered with a smile. "What can I do for you today?"

Hutch didn't quite understand. "I wanted to talk to you... about getting back on the force. Didn't your secretary tell you?"

"Of course, of course." Gruffly clearing his throat, the doctor began pawing through papers on his desk, finally coming up with a folder. "Ah, yes, this one's yours." He opened the cover, studying the first page with his reading glasses down on the bridge of his nose. "Yes. Yes. Hutchinson." The glasses came off, the folder was put down and the doctor stared right into Hutch's eyes. "Yes. I'm familiar with your case from the news, of course. There hasn't been an article in the paper for a few months, has there?"

Hutch shrugged. "No. Starsky -- Lieutenant Starsky -- told me the Sunday paper had a story on me when I first got back to the States."

"Yes, and the TV news kept running updates on your progress in the hospital. I didn't realize you'd gone home, though."

"I've been home since before Christmas."

"I see. Can you tell me a little about what you've been doing since then?"

"Well, I had outpatient therapy every day for a couple of months. Now I only have to go in two days a week. At first, a nurse stayed with me at night, but I'm able to do everything on my own now. I'm ready to come back to work."

"Hmmm. Yes." Large fingers drummed idly on the desktop for a long moment. "That's very commendable, Hutchinson," the doctor said slowly, "but surely you don't intend to ask for a return to active duty on the streets."
Hutch grinned. "No. I know I'm not up to street strength. But I wasn't bad at paperwork." He tried to chuckle, but the result was somewhat weak. "Really, sir, whatever the department has for me, I'll be glad to take."

This time the doctor didn't mumble or drum his fingers. "Have you talked to Captain Dobey about this? Or your former partner?"

Hutch shook his head, beginning to feel that this doctor wasn't understanding what he'd been trying to say.

"Son, I believe your friends would try to discourage you from taking on more than you can handle."

"What does that mean?" Hutch was suddenly on guard.

"It's my opinion that you are a long way from going back to work on the police force."

A warm flush began to unpleasantly wrap itself around Hutch. "How..." he struggled to keep his voice under control, "how can you say that?"

"I've looked over your medical records."

Hutch shook his head in disbelief. "But... don't you have to have a review board hearing? You didn't even know who I was... when I came in here..." His treacherous voice was getting the better of him. He knew he sounded as though he were on the verge of tears.

"I wasn't sure which of several appointments today you were," the doctor patiently corrected. "I've had your records from the San Fernando Rehab Center sent over. The entire review board has taken them under consideration. It was thought that testing you would be unnecessary since you underwent a battery of tests just three weeks ago at the center. In most cases those are the same tests we use to determine suitability of candidates coming before the review board." He drew a breath, then pushed some papers aside and opened the folder, apparently to show Hutch what he was talking about. "Look here. This indicates that you are reading on a sixth grade level. Your mathematical ability is even lower. On tests measuring reasoning ability, you score far below the lowest acceptable levels. Your short-term memory is spotty at best. You are still taking medication that would preclude your using most equipment. Your physical strength and stamina are far below par. The committee simply cannot reinstate you at this time. Even such positions as equipment officer or khaki officer are quite beyond you at this time. Of course, your many years of dedicated service do carry some weight with us. And we realize that your injuries were sustained in the line of duty. You could fill a kind of dummy position, created precisely to be in tune with your limited resources, but I'm sure that being a glorified janitor would not be what you wish. Keep working at your therapy, Mr. Hutchinson, and I'm sure that as your skills improve, we can help you out at some point in the future." The folder was closed abruptly, then the doctor sat back and looked at Hutch.

"Of course, you will continue to receive your pay and insurance, as you have been throughout the time since you were found, and which, I believe, you have been receiving retroactively from the time of your disappearance." Dr. Zephram put the folder away. "Is there anything else?" he asked quietly.

Hutch just sat there staring at the man in disbelief. He was stunned, hurt and confused. All he could understand was that he had been summarily rejected. Instead of this being a preliminary meeting to set up a time for him to come before the review board, it was a dismissal. He hadn't wanted to be handed a job on a silver platter, but he did deserve more than this. Cheeks hot with embarrassment, he dropped his gaze. Why'd I think the department would roll the red carpet out for me? Didn't I bitch about the system for years before all this happened? Why did I think I'd be welcomed back with open arms? He looked back up, glaring
at the doctor, letting all his anger and frustration show. *The bigwigs always were against us, Starsk. They never understood what it really takes to make a good cop...*

He cleared his throat. "Well, I guess that just about sums it up." He stood, the ice in his eyes pinning the older man. "I just hope you need a job someday, that you need to feel useful and worthwhile. If you come to me, mister," he hesitated, then said it the way it came into his mind, "I'll tell you to eat shit." He turned abruptly, needing to get out of the office as quickly as possible. His right foot slid on the polished floor, causing his ankle to twist. Ignoring the pain and the humiliation of looking weak in front of the bastard who had so curtly dashed his hopes, he strode out of the room, venting his anger by slamming the door as hard as he could.

By the time he reached the parking lot, Hutch was shaking from the combined effects of adrenalin and despair. He stood there a moment, bewildered, unable to figure out what to do next. He caught sight of a cab and yelled loudly, attracting the driver's attention, then hurried to catch the vehicle.

"Hutch? Hutch, what are you doing here?" He turned, hesitating for only a second until he saw the caller was Sally Hagen. He couldn't face her, couldn't face anyone. All he wanted to do was get away. Running for the cab, he opened the door and threw himself inside. Before Sally could recover and call after him again, the driver sped off from the curb.

His mind was a maelstrom of emotion by the time he returned to Venice Place. He got out of the cab, flinching at the yell the driver gave him, remembering only belatedly to pull money out of his pocket to pay the man. Trembling, he climbed the steps to his home.

He slammed the door behind himself, panting, nameless fears making his heart thud in his chest. He could hardly breathe, could barely see. Rubbing one hand over his eyes, his vision gradually cleared. He stood where he was, taking in the sight of his furniture, his possessions.

He couldn't bear to look at the place so carefully arranged -- it was a sham, a farce. What good did it serve to have his home looking just as it had when he'd been kidnapped? Did that mean he had returned unharmed and unchanged? Obviously not. He was not the man who had left this place one June morning in 1979. Though he had felt safe here, happy to have things as they had always been, now the perfection of the place mocked him. It was like a museum, not like a real dwelling. Suddenly, he couldn't stand the ordered furniture and plants, the carefully arranged paintings and knickknacks. He looked for something breakable, wanting to watch it shatter. He picked up the cherub statue on the coffee table, and flung it across the room. It gave a satisfying crunch as it fell, smashing to a hundred fragments. *Broken in pieces, just like me. All the king's horses, all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again...*

Anger and disappointment were seething in him, boiling over. There was nowhere to run, nothing he could do but take his feelings out on the only available target, his apartment. He let himself go, picking up and crushing every breakable in sight, battering the furniture, using the scissors he found on the desk to gouge the fabric of the couch cushions, throwing their guts all over the room. He uprooted plants, tossed the dirt and broken pottery down and smashed them under his feet, cursing, screaming out all the wrath and frustration that had been building in him since he realized he'd lost two years of his life -- two precious years that could never be bought back, could never be rescued from the oblivion that he had been thrown into.

He flung open cupboard doors, finding more breakables, throwing his plates and glasses on the linoleum. Running out of things to destroy in the kitchen, he moved on to the bedroom. He pulled out bureau drawers, dumping their contents, slashing clothes with the sharp scissors. It didn't matter, none of it did. They were all clothes worn by that other man who used to live here. This man, this crazed, gasping madman didn't need jeans that were too big, suits that didn't fit. He had nowhere to go, no job to do.
He turned to the paintings stacked against the room divider. He kicked at them, bashing in the canvasses, tearing up paper, snapping wooden frames in two. "Go to hell!" he rasped, voice breaking in an agony of despair. "Leave me alone!"

He turned, caught sight of his ravaged face in the mirror, and grabbed up the first thing that came to hand, a small lamp, to smash the image staring back at him. Mirror and glass shattered, flying all over the dresser. Hutch screamed profanity as loud as he could.

"Hutch? Hutch!" Someone was shouting his name, over and over, but he didn't care. He looked around for something more to break, found his jewelry case, raised it up and threw it down. Cuff links, rings and chains flew all over the chaotic room.

"Stop it!" Hands grabbed at his shoulders, gripping as tight as they could. "I said stop it!" He was shaken roughly. Fingertips touched his cheek, trying to get him to look up at the speaker.

"No! Let me go!" He tried to wrench away.

"Hutch -- babe, what's wrong? Sally said she saw you getting in a cab at Metro -- Tell me what's goin' on!"

His fury refocused, took firmer possession of his soul. Hutch drew back his arm, balled his hand into a fist and swung wildly, aiming for Starsky's face.

The other man dodged the blow, making Hutch even more angry.

"Let me help you, for God's sake, Hutch!"

"Leave me alone! Get the hell out of my life!"

"Why are you doing this? What's wrong? Why are you trashing the place?"

"I don't want this! I don't want any of it! It's all fake! It has nothing to do with me. You kept it all like this -- you don't know anything about what I want! I want to forget everything I had and everything I was -- get out of my life!" He struggled, throwing himself out of Starsky's hold.

*******

As Starsky watched, Hutch staggered away from him, favoring his right leg, but refusing to acknowledge the disability. For a moment, Starsky was speechless, totally at a loss to comprehend what was going on. All he knew was that Sally had come dashing to his office, telling him she'd seen Hutch running out of the building. He hadn't stopped to investigate; just knowing that his friend had for some reason come to Metro and left in a hurry was enough to worry him.

Yet he hadn't expected the scene that greeted him at Venice Place. Hutch was in hysterics, using foul language the likes of which he hadn't uttered since he'd disappeared, and in a matter of minutes he had wrecked the apartment.

It flashed through Starsky's mind that he might not be able to handle his out-of-control friend. He turned around, trying to locate the phone in the disaster area, but the sound of a crash brought him back.

Hutch had fallen. Either he'd tripped, or his weak right leg had simply given out, and he lay in a heap on the sun porch. Heart pounding, Starsky approached.
He bent down, half-expecting to be rebuffed again, but Hutch was quieting down. He lay there glassy-eyed, breathing shallowly, muttering unintelligible phrases. When Starsky tried to help him up, he didn't even seem to realize he was there.

But when he put his weight on his right leg, he groaned aloud, gripping his knee in distress. Starsky helped him to the bed and got him to lie down, then went back to look for the phone.

********

Hours later, Starsky dragged himself out of his Camaro and up the steps to his apartment. He was dead on his feet, emotionally drained and monumentally pissed off. It had taken hours, but he had dealt with Hutch and then gone back to find out what had happened at Metro. Now his partner lay in sedated sleep back at the Rehab Center and Dr. Zephram's ears were ringing from the chewing out Captain Dobey had given him. Starsky, however, hadn't gotten to say half of what he'd wanted to the insensitive doctor. There would be time for that later, however.

Exhausted, he pulled off his clothes and tossed them toward a chair on his way to the shower. He turned the water on full force and stood under the punishing spray, hardly feeling it. His mind seemed to have become numb also; on the drive home he had felt calmer, less worried, less terrified of what he'd seen Hutch doing. Now he had time for the hurt to begin seeping in.

_He didn't know what he was saying._ Dobey had said so, as had Christopher and Sally, when he'd told them. Hutch didn't really want Starsky out of his life. Yet Starsky himself couldn't help feeling the sting of those words. They felt sharper than the smarting shower spray. They beat at him, playing over and over again in his mind.

"_I don't want this! I don't want any of it! It's all fake! It has nothing to do with me. You kept it all like this -- you don't know anything about what I want! I want to forget everything I had and everything I was -- get out of my life!_"

The words pounded at Starsky, mocking everything he'd done for Hutch in the last year. _He was hurting, lashing out, venting his anger..._ But people often speak the greatest truth when they are hysterical, when inhibitions are broken down. Starsky turned off the water and stepped out of the tub, rubbing a towel over his back and legs.

_That bastard Zephram told him he couldn't be a cop, any kind of cop -- what do I expect he should have done? He'd been planning on surprising me... if only I'd known, I could have paved the way, made sure the review board gave him a fair chance, cushioned his disappointment. But it didn't go down that way. He wanted to be independent. And now he says he wants to stay that way. Maybe he does mean it. The world is a different place to him. He can't cope trying to go back to the way things were. It probably does seem to him as though the only thing he can do is get rid of all vestiges of his past and start over._

Starsky crawled into bed, trying to turn off his thoughts. _He said he wanted to forget everything he ever had and ever was... And it felt like he wanted to lump our partnership, our friendship, our whole goddamned life together in with all of that. I don't want to believe that's what he really wants..._ Starsky pulled the covers up over his shoulders and concentrated on going to sleep.

_But, oh God, it hurts so damn much..._

********
The next day, Sally and Huggy met him at Venice Place to try to pick up the pieces left in the wake of Hutch's destruction. Starsky, feeling grim, didn't have much to say, and the feeble jokes of his two friends did little to help his mood.

"I've cleaned up this devastated domicile plenty of times," Huggy mused as he scooped stuffing from the couch into the trashcan, "but this is the first time my man Hutch messed the place up all by himself."

"You know, it isn't too bad. Most of this stuff is salvageable." Sally tried to find something affirmative to say. "The clothes he ripped up he probably can't wear, anyway."

Starsky sighed, sweeping fragments of plant pots and dirt into a receptacle.

"Have you called the Center yet this morning, Dave?" Sally asked, walking out to the sun porch.

"No. Haven't had the time." The curt reply left her with nothing to say.

The trio worked on in silence for a time. Finally, Huggy tried to start a conversation again.

"Starsky, quit feeling like you did something to hurt Hutch in all this. It was that idiot doctor's fault. By the way, is Dobey gonna have the bastard fired?"

Starsky shrugged. "It's not up to Dobey. Besides, in many ways, the guy was right. Hutch isn't ready to go back to work."

"But you think someday -- ?" Sally tried to inject a note of hopefulness.

"I don't know. I don't even know if it's worth thinking about." Out of the corner of his eyes, Starsky saw Huggy exchange a glance with Sally. "Look, you two, stop trying to cheer me up. I'm not taking the blame for what happened here. He did it all himself. I don't think he cares whether anything can be saved or not. He made that pretty clear last night -- he was trying to destroy all his ties to the past. Maybe if he can at least succeed at that..." His words petered out. "I'm just beat, okay? I don't really feel like discussing it."

After that, Sally and Huggy left him alone.

********

Hutch came back to his apartment the following day. He was quiet, sullen, taciturn. He'd refused to go to therapy, wouldn't even talk to Dr. Williamson. And it seemed he wasn't in the mood to talk to Starsky, either. Christopher came over and Hutch virtually ignored him, too. Starsky left for work feeling morose.

That evening, Dobey followed in his own car, stopping by Hutch's place to try to talk to him. Hutch was sitting on the sun porch bench, temporarily in use in the living room since the couch cushions weren't repaired yet. He barely looked up when Starsky and his old captain entered the room.

"Hutch," the big man said, pulling a chair over to sit near him, "Dr. Zephram was out of line. He didn't understand what you mean to the department. If you'd only told us you were planning on coming downtown, things wouldn't have gone so badly." He paused, glancing up at Starsky when Hutch made no answer. "Listen, son, you take a few days to get yourself together, and then we'll meet with the review board. You'll have a job with us as long as you want it."

Hutch closed his eyes for a long moment, then replied in a soft, defeated voice. "No. I don't want to come back. There's no point to it."
"Hutch..." There didn't seem to be anything more Dobey could say. "You think it over. In time you may change your mind. The doctors think you're going to continue to improve..." Hutch turned away from the earnest words. Finally, Dobey sighed and stood. "I think I may as well head home."

Starsky lifted his eyebrows in an expression of apology. "Thanks, Cap." A beefy hand on his shoulder did nothing to lift his own sagging spirits. He watched Dobey leave, then turned to Hutch. "I stopped by the grocery store yesterday. Want to help me fix dinner?"

Hutch slowly turned to look up at him. "I can do it myself."

"Okay. You fix dinner. I'll see if I can find two plates for us to eat off of."

"I meant it, Starsky, leave me alone. Please, just leave me alone." The blue eyes burned with an unbelievable torment.

"No," Starsky told him, his voice leaden. "I can't do that. You can tell me to get lost all you want, but I ain't goin' nowhere. Now, you wanna have something to eat, or not?"

********

They settled into a routine. Hutch refused to have Christopher come over to take care of him any longer. He seemed to put up with Starsky's presence, and his help, but didn't respond to any overtures of camaraderie. Without bullying, he wouldn't eat, wouldn't clean up. Starsky spent his evenings at Venice Place, trying to encourage Hutch to at least watch television, to see what was going on in the world, but he doubted the man paid much attention, even when he stared directly at the set. During the day, Hutch was on his own. When Starsky phoned him, he seldom answered -- most of the time he was out of the house, wandering the beach. He got up in the morning, pulled on an old pair of jeans and a wrinkled t-shirt, and drifted aimlessly around the neighborhood, not bothering to eat breakfast or lunch. His appetite was poor; even the dinners Starsky prepared didn't interest him. The weight he'd regained since returning from Australia seemed to be melting off him again. There were other losses, too. The setback seemed to have deteriorated the mental and emotional strides he'd made. He seemed to understand fewer complicated words and phrases, and used mainly simpler language himself. His reasoning powers were nil -- without guidance he frequently hurt himself, not realizing the consequences of his actions. Yet he didn't seem to mind the bruises and minor cuts. He simply existed. He didn't care about his appearance, he only combed his hair and shaved at Starsky's insistence. He grew back his moustache, and Starsky recognized the burned-out look around the shadowed eyes. The sense of giving up clung to him like a nimbus cloud.

Starsky felt their relationship eroding, turning from a friendship to that of guardian and ward. He didn't like it, and he knew Hutch didn't either, but both of them were locked into their private cells of despair, and there was no avenue of escape.

********

Hutch meandered along the beach, kicking broken seashells out of his path. He had grown used to the stares of people he passed, and realized they took him to be a bum. He didn't care what they thought. The muttered words of disdain that occasionally wafted his way were no different from the jibes that haunted his memory: *geek, retard, reading on less than a sixth grade level, job as a glorified janitor.* He didn't want those terms of description to fit him, but he didn't know how to change. As hard as he had worked, all of his efforts had made no difference.

Hutch knew that in another lifetime, he wouldn't have gone down without fighting. He had always thought of himself as a survivor. Even in his blackest moments, when it seemed that being a cop meant only staying
one jump ahead of the bad guys, that the world could corrupt even the strongest of men, he hadn't lain down like this. Yet now, he refused to give himself pep talks, refused to heed the ones Starsky continually badgered him with. Two years of his life had been stolen, and along with them a good deal of his personal sense of identity had been drained away as well.

Why does Starsky hang around? Doesn't he see, doesn't he understand? I'm nothing. What does he want from me? The answer seemed obvious. He wants what he remembers -- a friend, a partner. He's trying to bring back something I used to be -- something that just doesn't exist anymore.

He caught the sound of children's laughter, turned to watch a couple of kids chasing a ball into the surf. Turning his head to see where they'd come from, he saw their parents fondly watching. He should have a wife, kids of his own. He should let go of me and get on with his life. Yet Hutch knew on an instinctive level that that would never happen. I'm all he has.

He mulled that thought over as he continued to walk, finally coming up to the sidewalk in search of a place to buy a Coke. As he stood in line at a soft drink stand, he caught sight of his reflection in the smoked glass of the window.

I look like hell. How can he put up with me? Maybe... maybe I should go in and clean up -- he'll be coming over later... Forgetting the drink he'd intended to purchase, Hutch headed back in the direction of Venice Place.

*******

As he pushed open the unlocked door of his apartment, the phone began ringing. This time, he felt like answering it. Might be Starsky. He settled on the couch and lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"Ken? Is that you?"

"Hello?" The voice on the phone confused him.

"Ken -- this is your Aunt Priscilla. In Minnesota."

"Oh." He dredged up her face from his faulty memory.

"How are you, dear? You sound tired."

"I'm all right." He belatedly remembered his manners. "How are you? I got your Christmas card."

"I'm fine. My arthritis kicks up every now and then. I was thinking -- would you like to come and visit me?"

Hutch didn't know how to answer that.

"Perhaps it would do you good. You're so alone there in Los Angeles. Wouldn't you like to visit with your relatives?"

"Uh... why?"

"Because we're your family. None of us have seen you in all this time. Don't you miss us? Wouldn't..." she hesitated for the first time, "wouldn't you like to know about how your mother and father died?"

"How they... died?" Hutch felt faint at heart at those words; he'd done all he could to blot their deaths from his mind.
Priscilla Hutchinson sighed. "I'm sorry, Ken. I don't wish to upset you. But the family is concerned. As the only son, you do have an inheritance, you know. The lawyers called me again the other day. So many things cannot be settled without us seeing you."

"I don't understand." He was truly confused; many of the words she was using made no sense at all to him.

"There are the other relatives -- I'm your father's sister, you know. There is a question about how much the other relatives and I will inherit, and that can't be determined until we talk to you... how are you doing, dear? Are you... back to normal?"

He didn't understand, but instinctively felt there was something he shouldn't trust in his aunt's conversation. "I'm okay. I don't know when I can visit you. This is my home now."

"Shall I have the family lawyers write to you?"

"Okay."

"Good. We're all so concerned about your health, Ken. You really should let us hear from you."

"Sure." Nervous, Hutch only wanted to end the conversation. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye, dear."

He put down the phone, dismissing the call from his mind.

Hutch sat for a few moments, trying to get back to the line of thought he'd been following before the phone call. At last it came to him. I was thinking about Starsky... getting cleaned up before he gets here. He rose, heading for the bathroom.

After showering, Hutch put on a cleaner pair of jeans and a fresh shirt, then went to sit on the couch to wait for Starsky. For the first time in several weeks, he found himself anxious to see him. Even if he bitches at me again tonight, it's lonely without him.

The lock rattled suddenly, alerting him to the arrival of his friend. Starsky had had his own key to the place for a long time, but he made use of it these days more often than he had been. He swung the door open and strolled into the room.

"Hey, there you are," he said, sounding somewhat surprised. "I thought I might have to go down to the beach looking for you again."

"I came back earlier," Hutch told him. He cast about for a remark that would welcome Starsky, yet small talk eluded him. "What time is it?"

"Almost six." Starsky kept his eyes on him for a moment longer, then brusquely slipped out of his jacket and holster. "You feel like eating tonight?" That question came with a long-suffering note to it, as though he wasn't expecting an affirmative answer.

"Sure. What're we having?" Hutch watched for a change in Starsky's expression.

The smile was brief and tentative. "I think there's some of that baked chicken left."

"Good." Hutch levered himself off the couch. "Can I help?"
Starsky's smile broadened a little. "Okay."

They pattered around in the kitchen together, not saying much, and Hutch felt the discomfort at having to live this way keenly. He arranged the table while Starsky stirred what was on the stove -- burning his fingers a lot lately, he'd begun to shy away from the appliance. Finally they sat down to the meal, and Hutch tried to muster the appetite he'd claimed to have. Starsky hadn't noticed he'd cleaned up and now he wasn't sure why he was bothering to make an effort.

"What did you do today?" the dark-haired man asked.

"Walked along the beach," Hutch answered him with a sigh. "Not much. I got to thinking..." He let the sentence trail off without finishing it. Though the abstract thoughts from that afternoon had seemed clear to him at the time, expressing them now was more difficult. "I was thinking about you."

"Yeah? What about me?" Starsky was busy scooping vegetables onto his fork.

"Lately... you've been getting mad at me... because I'm so slow..." That wasn't really what Hutch intended to say, but once the words were out, he couldn't clarify them.

"I'm not mad at you -- and you're not slow. You just seem like you've given up. No therapy, no more exercising... Hutch, all the gains you made are just slipping away."

"I can't go back. I tried to say so."

"Healing takes a long time -- "

"And sometimes it never happens. Why can't you accept it, Starsky? I'm not the man I once was and I never will be again." Talking about it, the defeat came creeping back up on him, sapping his will. "I'm dumb. It's hard to remember things, to figure things out. I'm... no use to anybody."

The fork held in the slender hand was laid gently on the table, as though Starsky were gathering precious strength to hold onto his emotions. "You're not dumb. And you're not useless. To me, you're..."

"I know. But not to myself."

They sat there for a long moment, looking at each other, all the unfinished feelings between them chilling in the empty air. Are you as lonely for me as I am for you? Hutch thought, longing for time to bend back upon itself and carry them to a place he remembered as being so warm, so comfortable, where they had been so very close.

Finally, Starsky drew in a breath, shoulders lifting with the effort. "I don't know what to say to you anymore, Hutch. I don't know how to help you."

Hutch couldn't maintain the eye contact. "It's not your fault."

"It's nobody's fault. We shouldn't blame ourselves." He leaned closer and Hutch felt his gaze being pulled back to him again. "Look, I'm not tryin' to make you into something perfect. I don't want to set you up for failure. I just want you to feel good about yourself. And you know that lately you haven't."

Hutch simply nodded.

"I just want you to try. Do you think you can put some effort in again? Why don't you go back to the Center and have some more therapy? You should talk to Dr. Williamson, too."
"I don't know. It didn't... do any good before."

"Sure it did. You just don't believe it because of what happened down at Metro. It was too soon, Hutch. You weren't ready to go back to doin' a job. That bastard Zephram hurt you by the way he said it, and you've lost sight of what was really going on. You just have some more work to do. I -- " he broke off, looking away. "I just can't stand to see you losing everything you worked to get back..." He choked the words off, sounding strangely as if he were trying to fight back tears.

Hutch couldn't stand to see him hurting -- to know that he was the cause of the pain. He took a deep breath and spoke softly. "I came home and cleaned up before you got here."

For a long moment, it seemed that Starsky wasn't going to respond. Finally, his gaze slowly returned to Hutch. "I noticed. You put on some clean clothes."

Hutch smiled at the approval, then remembered something else that had happened. "I got a phone call."

"Yeah? From who?"

"My Aunt Priscilla. In Minnesota. She said come visit."

"Would you like to do that?"

"Sure. I haven't been home... in a long time. Can we go?"

"Well, maybe sometime. Don't you think you should get back to feeling better first?"

Hutch glanced down at his unfinished dinner. "I guess so."

"Okay. How about this? You do some more work at the Center, and then when I can get the time off, I'll take you."

"Alright."

"You'll go back for more therapy?"

Hutch met his eyes. "All right."

Starsky gave him the first genuine smile since he'd arrived. "That's good. You'll be happier, Hutch, I know it."

They continued the meal, both of them feeling better.

"Did your aunt say anything else?" Starsky asked after a few minutes.

Hutch thought back to the conversation; most of it had been over his head anyway. "She talked about... lawyers, I think."

"Lawyers?" Starsky looked puzzled, too. "Maybe about your parents' wills."

"What?"

"You know -- their wills, what they left behind when they died. I remember now, when they died you were still missing. And there was a lot of fighting among the other relatives about what to do with the money."
They thought they should get it, which they would have if you'd been dead." His eyes narrowed as he reasoned it through. "But now you're back. They must be wondering what kind of shape you're in. Hutch, if you're not capable of handling the inheritance, they might try to take it away from you. They might try to contest your parents' will."

"I don't understand."

"Just understand this much. It's more important than ever for you to go back to therapy. Your parents left you a good deal of money, and you're going to be needing it in the future. We may have to prove you're competent -- that you can live on your own and take care of all that money -- in order to make sure you can keep it."

The conviction in Starsky's eyes was persuasion enough. "Okay, Starsk. I'll go back. I'll work hard."

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Gradually, the despair that had seemed to follow Hutch around began to lift. Starsky noted little things at first, like his taking greater interest in his appearance and a desire to help with daily chores, and they heartened him. But things had changed. If the first few months of Hutch's rehabilitation had seemed like the early enthusiastic days of their time on the force, the atmosphere now provoked memories of the burned-out Hutch who had worked alongside him in the last year of their partnership. When he worked now, it was a sense of dogged determination that pushed him to continue, not the zeal for the work alone.

Starsky himself felt he was continuing the way he was through sheer obstinacy, too. It bothered him sometimes -- no, all the time -- but he didn't know how to change. I'm hanging on, doing the only thing I know how to do... exist with him, for him, because of him. What keeps us tied together? Memories? Is that enough? I don't think either one of us has the same hopes for the future that we once dreamed about, not even about working together again. Then what is it? Simple obligation? No, not simple. Anything but simple. It's the most complicated form of obligation that exists. And it hurts, having to prod and poke and nag him, to look out for him instead of just being with him and enjoying him, but it's all we've got, either of us. So obligation will have to do.

There were times when a certain light would shine in Hutch's eyes, when the spark seemed to come alive between them again. Starsky tried in vain to capture those moments, to make them last. But the magic would be gone again in a flash, leaving him to wonder if he had imagined it all.

Sometimes, he wasn't sure the Hutch he remembered still existed at all. He was so changed, so tentative sometimes. The strong, decisive, tender person he used to be seemed tragically lost. But he was no child; this was a man in search of himself, a man needing to find a new way to live with his limitations. There were times that the Hutch of old was still recognizable; he was still a man capable of impatience, sudden anger, frustrating pigheadedness. As annoying as those attributes could be, Starsky half-welcomed them -- it made him feel his familiar Hutch was back. And the tenderness of his touch, of his smile, would return fleetingly, too, making Starsky long for sweeter times of shared laughter, shared comfort. Those little moments seemed like torments to his hungry soul, promising an end to the dry perseverance that marked their life together now.

The harder he fought to keep his place in Hutch's life, the harder Hutch fought to pull away. He doesn't want to need me, that's obvious. And a part of Starsky understood; Hutch simply longed for independence. Yet Starsky could not forget the terrible truth that had been uttered in the ruined apartment that day, Hutch telling him he wanted nothing of his past around to remind him. He puts up with me... for now... because he does need me. But someday, he won't anymore... or he'll run away, cut himself off from my help before he's truly ready. What'll happen to us both then? I don't know...
Hutch wandered the halls of the Rehab Center, feeling out of step with the people existing there. His therapy session was over for the day, but because he had gotten the time confused, he was left waiting for his ride home. Christopher had not been rehired, since he no longer really needed nursing-type care. Now he usually caught a ride on the van that picked up other patients who lived in L.A. and came out to the Center for their therapy. He looked at the patients pushing themselves in wheelchairs and using walkers, and was glad he had progressed to the point where he no longer needed such devices. He watched their expressions, and wondered if their minds would ever come out of the cold wilderness it appeared they had gone into. *Is my mind coming out?* Sometimes, he felt it might be; other times, he wasn't sure if it ever would.

Arriving at a room he'd seldom been in, Hutch pushed open the door and stood looking around. It was the library, filled with row upon row of books and magazines, wide oak tables and only a few people sitting and reading. Hutch realized it had been a very long time since he'd picked up a novel to read for enjoyment. He wasn't sure he could do such a thing now.

A young man looked up from the book he was reading, nodding at Hutch as the blond moved to explore the stacks of books. Hutch recognized him; he'd seen him in the therapy rooms and halls from time to time, but they'd never spoken. Hutch thought he was younger than he was by a few years. He was tall with a thick mane of long, dark hair and a pair of careless brown eyes. Now, seeing him here, Hutch wondered why he was at the Center. He certainly didn't look like the other patients shuffling along the halls.

It had been a long time since Hutch had struck up a casual conversation with a stranger. He hardly knew how to begin. Still, his curiosity was strong, pushing him to attempt social moves he hadn't thought he remembered. He walked over to the table where the younger man sat, pulled out a chair and sat down. The receptive brown eyes looked toward him and the smile he offered looked genuine.

"Hi," Hutch began, having to clear his throat before he spoke the word clearly.

"Hi," the other man grinned. "I've seen you around. What's your name?"

"Hutch... Ken Hutchinson." Hutch felt color rising in his cheeks as he sought the next item on the agenda. "Who are you?"

The long line of a dark eyebrow rose. "I'm Ted Fletcher." He put out a hand. "Good to know you, Ken."

After a second's hesitation, Hutch shook the offered hand. "Do you work here?" he asked the young man then.

Ted just laughed. "No. I don't even live here anymore. I'm an outpatient -- just like you."

Hutch reacted with surprise. "Really? You... you don't look sick."

"Thanks." He went back to the magazine he was reading.
Hutch cast about for something more to say. "I... I was in a coma. For two years. I'm still having therapy." It was the first time he'd ever told any stranger; it felt like realizing you were in school naked.


"What? I don't understand."

"Heads -- you know, head injury cases. They never totally recover."

Hutch drew back, fearing the direction the conversation was going in. Something twisted inside him, sensing the absolute truth of what Ted stated, yet he felt a need to deny. "How do you know so much about it?"

Ted closed the book and looked directly at him. "Cause I'm one, too. I had my accident three years ago. That's how I know heads never recover."

Hutch was shocked. He'd seen the way Ted walked, there seemed to be nothing wrong with his gait. And verbally, he was so much smoother in conversation that so many of the patients. How could he paint such a bleak picture of recovery if he was doing so well? "But you... you don't seem like there's much wrong with you."

"Right." Ted smiled again and tapped his temple with his index finger. "You learn to make adjustments, to compensate for what doesn't come back. People don't know you're doing it, but you have to. I use whatever tricks I can, making notes of what I've done today, memory devices, rules of logic -- whatever it takes to get along."

Hutch's mind was reeling. "What happened to you?"

"It was a car accident. I hit the dashboard. I was unconscious for six weeks. My parents didn't think I would ever come out of it. Then, when I did, they thought I'd never walk or talk again."

"Wow." Hutch was impressed. Seeing Ted was doing more for him than all the talks with Dr. Williamson. There really was hope for him. "Can you..." he faltered, not knowing how to put his feelings into words, "can you show me how you do it? I mean, most of the time I walk around feeling sort of lost, not knowing who I am anymore, how to do things..." He realized he was babbling, but the floodgates to his feelings had been opened. Here was a kindred soul, a person who'd experienced a similar loss of self and knowledge, and he wanted to ask him about everything. At last, someone else understood, someone else had been there, too.

And though he had said flat out that there was no absolute recovery, the very fact that they were talking about it proved it was possible to cope. "I mean... could we talk sometimes, Ted? Nobody else really knows what I'm going through..."

"Sure." The brown eyes that seemed so assured crinkled at their corners when he smiled.

For the next two hours, the stream of conversation between Ted and Hutch was constant. They discussed not only some of the devices Ted used to compensate for his deficits, but how it felt to wake up different than you'd been when you lost consciousness. Hutch learned that all had not gone smoothly for Ted. Though he'd been living on his own at the time of the accident, twenty-four-year-old Ted had had to move back in with his parents when he came out of the hospital. That loss of independence still rankled, but he admitted that it was good not to have to do everything alone. The girlfriend to whom he'd been engaged had hung around until he woke up, but it had taken Ted a year to remember that they had been in love and planning to marry. Eventually, she just couldn't take it anymore and left.
He spoke of that loss with little emotion; there was regret, but it had been inevitable. Ted wasn't the same man she'd fallen in love with, not the same man who had needed that girl. "I felt bad, but when I remembered that we'd been engaged, I didn't know what to say to her. At the time, I knew I wasn't ready to get married." Ted shrugged, then looked a question at Hutch. "You got a girlfriend?"

Hutch shook his head. "Nobody's hanging around, at least. Is that how it was for you -- you remembered some things but not others? I remember lots about being a cop, but other stuff just sort of fades in and out."

"Do you remember getting hurt?"

"Not all of it. There are a lot of vague dreams... but I don't try to piece them all together."

"You should. When that big gap of what happened was solved for me, I felt like I could handle so much more."

Hutch thought that over. "Makes sense." He grinned a little, self-deprecatingly. "Listen to me. I'm no judge of what makes sense or doesn't."

"That's one thing that's gotta stop right now," Ted told him sternly. "You've got plenty of brains. Just because you're a little rusty doesn't mean you're retarded or something now. Has somebody been calling you dumb or anything?"

"No. Just myself," Hutch admitted, a little uncomfortable, but he felt at ease talking about even that with Ted.

"Is that the way you always were -- judging yourself so tough?"

Hutch had to smile. "I'm not sure. I think so. Hey, wonder how come someone's bad qualities always are the ones to come back, instead of all the best ones?"

"Who's to say? Some people change personality completely, I've heard. Some turn into complete bitches. They tell me I'm lots easier going."

"You're nice, Ted. Thanks for talking to me," Hutch said earnestly.

Ted checked his watch, then pulled out a small notebook. "I've gotta get going. My ride's here by now, I bet." He saw Hutch watching him. "You should use a notebook like this. Mark down everything -- even that you've had lunch."

"Ginny tells me to, but I've never started."

"Well, we gotta do whatever works. And like I said, read as much as you can. Kid's books that explain scientific things -- they helped me a lot. And if you feel like there was so much you missed being out so long, look up old magazines. Then you can find out what happened while you were... gone."

Hutch nodded, getting out his own pocket watch. The increased confidence he'd acquired through the conversation with Ted helped him figure out the time more quickly. "My ride will here in an hour," he said, standing. He shook hands with Ted. "Are you sure it's okay if I call you on the phone?"

"Put my number in your book as soon as you get home," Ted advised, patting the pocket on Hutch's shirt where the folded slip of paper was tucked away. Nodding, smiling again, he turned to leave the library. Hutch watched him go, then turned to explore the stacks of books on his own.
Hutch kept silent about the new friend he'd made. Though he'd almost told Starsky the very day he met Ted, he decided to hold back. He realized that there wasn't anything Starsky didn't know about his life, and something inside him needed to retain the semblance of privacy about this one facet of his existence. He felt the pull of Starsky at all times. Even though he had gone back to therapy, Starsky seemed to be pushing at him to work harder, quizzing him about what progress he'd made. Part of it was genuine interest, and Hutch knew that he grew to resent the feeling that Starsky was his guardian, his caretaker. He wanted so much to be his own man again.

He had tried to figure out why Starsky couldn't seem to let go. Despite the progress Hutch was making, Starsky still treated him like a forgetful kid. *He keeps bossing me around, telling me when to do everything, how to do everything. I'm not his child -- I used to be his friend, his partner.* As a result, Hutch felt rebellious. He'd stubbornly do things exactly opposite from the way Starsky recommended, taking pleasure in seeing Starsky get mad.

There had been so many arguments lately, most recently over Hutch's mail.

Starsky came in the way he usually did, unlocking the door and making himself at home. Hutch had been reading on the sun porch; he closed his book and came into the living room. There, Starsky was sorting through a pile of mail on the desk.

"You don't have to do that," he told Starsky defensively. "I had it in separate piles."

"Then what's this letter from your family's lawyer doing in with the bills?"

Hutch shrugged. "I don't know. Guess it got mixed in." He came over and took the letter in question from Starsky's hand. "He keeps saying I have to go to Duluth, Starsky. When...?"

"I'm right in the middle of a big case, Hutch. Dobey just can't let me have any more time off. You keep forgetting, I took a four-month vacation last year."

The tone he said it in bothered Hutch. Starsky sounded exasperated, as if he were patiently repeating what ought to be obvious. "Right," he said, a little acidly, "and that was my fault, too."

"I didn't mean it like that," Starsky said immediately, but the aggravation was still in his voice.

Hutch sighed. "I told you I was going to pay the bills myself this month."

"Hutch, why don't you just let me take care of these -- I've been doing it so long I know when they're all due. And I don't mind, really."

"Well, I mind." He snatched the rest of the mail from Starsky's grasp. "I don't like somebody knowing all my business." He knew he sounded petulant, but he didn't care.

"It didn't bother you until just recently. What do you think I'm doing, keeping part of your money for myself?"

"No, of course not. It's just... why can't you let me take care of things myself?"

"I'll tell you why -- " Starsky grabbed the envelopes back from him. "Because you're bound to screw things up if you try to handle it all on your own!"
"So what? It's my life, let me screw it up for myself!"

"You know what? That's just exactly what I oughta do! You're so damned pig-headed... you figure one day you want to pay your bills, so you just will. Well, I've heard this before, buddy. You know what's gonna happen? It's gonna get too complicated, or you'll forget something or get yourself overdrawn, and then you'll have to let me help. Why don't you just let me take care of it to begin with and save us both a lot of trouble?" Starsky's eyes had narrowed, his jaw tight with anger.

Trouble? Is that all I am to you now? Hutch's heart twisted in pain, but all he could do was lash out and inflict his feelings on Starsky. "Terrific. Way to be supportive, buddy. Why don't you just have me committed? Aren't you the one who said it was important to prove to the family lawyers that I'm capable of handling the inheritance? How do you expect me to learn unless you let me try?"

"You don't want to learn! You think you can just do it without any practice," Starsky snarled.

"You don't even have the patience to teach me!" Hutch glared at him, daring him to deny the accusation.

"Come off it, Hutch. I'm too tired to put up with your tantrums tonight."

"Then why don't you just go home? Leave me alone!"

Starsky turned, looking at him for a long, silent moment. Then he dropped the mail back on the desk, turned, and without a word, strode to the door and walked through it. He didn't bother closing the door.

Hutch stood rooted where he was, breathing harsh in his chest. A big part of him wanted to rush to the landing and call Starsky's name. He knew he'd hurt the man this time. But I'm hurt, too... What in hell are we gonna do, Starsk? Why can't we talk anymore?

He heard the sound of Starsky's Camaro starting up, and waited until the noise of the engine died away. Then he very quietly closed the door to his apartment. The silence seemed too vast to contain the feelings throbbing within his heart. He couldn't stand Starsky being around, yet when alone, he missed him terribly. I don't really want to be without you... but why don't you understand me anymore? Why don't I understand you? He sighed, leaning his forehead against the door. It didn't matter, the argument would be forgotten by tomorrow, he knew. Starsky would be back. But we'll probably have another one before the day is out... Damn it, Starsk, what's happening to us?

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May, 1982

It was a quiet evening. Starsky and Hutch had finished dinner and were sitting on the sundeck. There wasn't much conversation; they'd both grown tired of pretending. It was easier if they didn't force what wasn't there, so they just sat, quiet in their individual pursuits. Starsky was scanning the evening paper, occasionally muttering about the press coverage of one of his recent cases. Hutch was practicing some math from a high school text he'd checked out of the library, hoping vaguely that if his skills were good enough, he might be able to prove he could handle his inheritance. The sun was low in the sky, but bright enough to hurt the eyes if it were stared at too intently. Hutch glanced up, watching the way the light glossed the silky curls over Starsky's forehead. He wished he knew how to tell him he looked good that way.
Starsky looked up suddenly, as if realizing he was being watched. He gave a sort of nostalgic half-smile, then cleared his throat rather noisily. "You want to go out for some ice cream?"

The request sounded strange; they so rarely went out without a specific destination in mind. Hutch found he did want some ice cream; he nodded enthusiastically. In moments, they were out in Starsky's car.

Hutch rolled down the window, letting his hair blow in the breeze. The early evening air was just cool enough. Starsky had slipped on a pair of sunglasses to fight the glare. Hutch sat back in the seat, enjoying the way his hands moved on the steering wheel, the way his eyes lingered over the road, then glanced in the mirrors. Starsky was in complete control, and Hutch felt at ease. The only dissonance was knowing he had no such control over his own environment. He wasn't the one behind the wheel and it was hard to remember the last time he'd driven a car, impossible to imagine a time when he would again. But tonight he felt no resentment toward Starsky. He was, after all, the only one Hutch didn't mind being vulnerable in front of. *There were times when I took care of him... times when we were equal. It's all upside down now.*

The radio squawked to life and Starsky leaned forward to adjust the controls, keeping his eyes on the road.

"All units, there is a suspect heading north on Figueroa in a brown '81 Ford. Suspect is considered armed and dangerous. He is wanted in connection with the 2-11 at the Metropolitan Bank this afternoon. Zebra 14 is in pursuit and requests back-up."

"That's only a block from here," Starsky announced tersely, switching on his turn signal.

"We're gonna go after him?" Hutch asked, a little thrill of anticipation skidding down his spine.

"Sure." Starsky's eyes glanced toward him. "Like old times?"

Hutch tightened his seatbelt.

They swung onto Figueroa and spotted the brown Ford a couple of car lengths ahead. The driver, obviously in a hurry, was tailgating the car in front of him. Starsky reached for the mike.

"I have the vehicle in sight."

There was a moment of cross-talk, and Zebra 14 indicated they were backing off, allowing Starsky's unmarked car to pick up the suspect. They established a two-car tail, following for several blocks. Then the Ford pulled into a just-vacated parking space in front of an office building. Starsky and Hutch watched from their vantage point, back half a block.

"He's gettin' out," Starsky mused. "Wonder if he's made us?"

Hutch sat staring as the man climbed out of his automobile and walked nonchalantly toward the revolving door of the building. A sudden flash of something, perhaps a sense of deja vu, jogged a cloudy area of his brain. He sat forward suddenly, senses on alert. "Eddie Strouse."

Starsky leaned toward him, eyes still on the suspect. "What did you say?"

"Eddie Strouse. He got out of his car and went into the building." Hutch was in the process of memorizing the suspect's clothes. "He's gonna cut through to the side street entrance." He threw a look at Starsky. "I'll follow him through the building. You swing around to the side entrance and pick him up again."

He unlocked the car door and slipped out before Starsky could utter a word.
Shocked, Starsky watched him go, dumbfounded. He couldn't argue with Hutch's assessment of the situation. For a second or two, he nearly forgot all about the suspect and dashed off after him. As he pulled into traffic again, what his friend had said reverberated in his mind. "Eddie Strouse." Starsky knew that name, it was seared into his soul. Eddie Strouse was the man Kurt Flavin had waited for before leaving for Australia. Eddie Strouse must have been the man Hutch followed that day... The man who made him... and then kidnapped him... Starsky forced himself to concentrate on the immediate situation, though his brain wanted to ponder the events of the past. He wasn't sure whether Hutch thought this present suspect was Eddie Strouse, or if his actions simply reminded him of that day so long ago. I don't know whether I'll want to slug him or hug him when I get hold of him again.

Hutch moved swiftly through the lobby area of the large building, paying no attention to the people he passed. His gaze was fastened on the figure he was following. Can't let him see me... For some undefined reason, this thought was paramount. He didn't question, didn't second-guess himself. He was following a quarry and he dared not let it get away.

The tall subject, dressed in dark pants and a baggy windbreaker, hesitated at the elevators, pressing a button. Hutch hung back as the elevator doors opened, trying to keep his eye on his man. A large group of people got off the elevator, but Hutch saw that his suspect did not get on. He's tryin' to fool me! Grim satisfaction pulsed through Hutch as he saw the man work his way through the crowd and head toward the side of the lobby.

His heart beat faster as he got closer to the suspect. A buzzing sound seemed to drown out the sounds of footsteps and voices, and the cars on the street outside. A subtle fear began slipping through Hutch's veins, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from. It wasn't the familiar twinge of strength adrenalin provided. Instead, it was the very real consciousness that something was about to go totally, irrevocably wrong.

Nothing's going wrong, he tried to tell himself firmly, Starsky's out there. Then why do I feel this way?

Bright light from the low-hanging sun streaked the black-tiled floor as he came closer to the outside doors of the building. His quarry was moving faster and Hutch knew he'd have to speed up to keep him in sight.

He brushed past a middle-aged woman, nearly knocking the packages from her arms. He didn't say a word, however, he couldn't let himself be distracted from his job.

Suddenly, with no warning, the man pulled up short. He reached into his jacket, turning in the same, swift motion. Hutch glimpsed the dark object in his hand as the man's eyes fastened on his.

"Everybody get down!" Hutch shouted at full volume. His own right hand reached under his jacket without conscious thought, yet there was nothing there to fill his grip.

The man had seen his gesture. He turned sharply again and made for the door. Hutch rushed him, grabbing him around the upper body, pinning the arms at his sides. I'm alone this time... gotta do it all...

The heavier man's momentum carried them through the doors. Hutch hung on, though an iron hard grip tried to dislodge his hands. His mind exploded in panic, instinct vying with a terrible need. Can't let go... for Starsky's sake... A brutally hard blow to his wrists weakened his grasp, and then his right leg buckled. The concrete came up to meet his cheek.
In the distance, a police siren was wailing. Shots were fired, and Hutch pushed up from his fallen position, seeking their source. His eyes fastened on Starsky, under cover of the front fender of the Camaro, firing. Two feet ahead of Hutch, the suspect crumpled and fell. More sirens followed, cops and other people crowded around. Running feet hurried toward his position on the sidewalk, but he kept his eyes down, didn't look to see who it might be.

Hutch flinched as terror blotted out his understanding of reality. "You lost this time, cop. It's all over." More running footsteps, shrill curses, shouted commands. "Hold him down -- get his arm ready..." He doubled over, trying to make himself invisible.

Hands took a painful grip on his shoulders. He moaned, pulling away. The words, "Babe, it's me," came at him from a vast distance, and he curled into a tighter ball.

"Lieutenant, can you come here?" another voice, harsh baritone of a young man. The presence at his side slipped away. With it, some of the panic lifted and Hutch eased from his crouched position.

He knelt on the sidewalk, watching the action around him. Starsky was in the center of the disturbance, taking charge, giving orders, helping to calm the anxious bystanders. That, in turn, calmed Hutch somewhat. Starsky motioned to the ambulance that was pulling up, directing uniformed cops, yet it was obvious to Hutch's practiced eye that a part of his attention was still on the writhing suspect. That man was groaning loudly, but Hutch couldn't see much blood, except for a splash on the knee of his pants.

The man was slowly moving to a crouched position, protectively curled on his stomach. Yet his hands were moving. One of them, the right, reached carefully for the gun under his hip.

"STARSKY!" Just as Hutch shouted, his friend turned sharply, bringing his Beretta to bear on the man. The big gun fired, the sound exploding in Hutch's ears and the suspect fell loose-limbed on the street again. Hutch closed his eyes, and shuddered.

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It took about ten minutes at the scene to wrap up the details. Starsky was kept busy, but tried to maintain a watch on Hutch, who hadn't moved from his crouch on the ground since he'd shouted his warning. Every instinct in the police lieutenant's heart demanded he go to his partner, but as ranking officer, he had duties to perform. If Hutch wasn't injured, he would have to wait until Starsky could spare him the attention he needed.

It seemed as though Hutch was all right. He appeared to be quietly watching Starsky work, and the fact that the blue eyes never left him brought a wave of comfort that was like warm pleasure. Finally, he was free to go to his friend.

"Hutch? You all right?" Starsky bent to meet the wide blue eyes. They seemed unfocused now, shadowed with hurt and fear. He reached out with a careful hand, touching the broad back.

Hutch flinched, eyes roaming the scene. They finally fastened on Starsky's face. "I'm... sorry..."

"What for?" Starsky managed to say it with a smile. "You did everything right, partner."

Hutch appeared confused. "I... I made a mistake... forgot... I was working alone..." The words stopped, and his hands came up to rub at his eyes.
Starsky tensed, not sure he understood what Hutch was mumbling about. He seemed to have lost touch with where he was and what was really going on. Starsky shifted position, moving still closer, and took firmer hold of him. "Hey, look at me, hmm? You know where you are, Hutch?"

A groan was the only reply for a moment. Hutch shuddered, as if a great wave of torment were passing through him. "I forgot... what I was tryin' to do..."
"Hey, for a guy who's been off the streets as long as you, I think you did pretty well." Starsky kept watch on the vague eyes; it didn't seem Hutch could follow the conversation.

"But... they got my gun... No! I don't want... damn! Starsk! Help!" He flinched away, but lacked the coordination to pull himself to his feet. Starsky was certain that if he had the strength, he'd have been up and running in a second.

Shaken, he got a grip on him and heaved the man to his feet. Wrapping an arm over his shoulders, he led Hutch back to the car. As he eased him into the passenger seat, he saw silvery tears slide down the pale cheeks. He reached to brush them away, noting how the fair skin was scraped from his fall. Hutch's right cheek was skinned and turning purple, but he didn't seem to notice any pain. Is he remembering? Is he somehow lost between what just happened and the events of that day?

Worried, Starsky hurried to the driver's side and slid in, starting his car. He eased out into traffic and drove back to Hutch's place.

During the ride home, Hutch said not a word; he leaned against the door, arms clasped around his middle, eyes closed tight. Starsky let him be, afraid that talking might upset him even more. When they parked in front of Venice Place, he quietly told Hutch they'd arrived.

"You ready to go on up?" he asked softly.

Hutch slowly opened his eyes, looking around as if in some confusion. He peered up at the facade of the building, eyes widening in a look of surprise. "I'm home." The voice sounded wistful with surprise.

"That's right. We made it back in one piece." Starsky pulled the key out of the ignition and cut off the lights. He opened his door and noted that Hutch was unlocking his own. That made him feel better; Hutch apparently was not so out of it that he didn't know what to do next.

Nevertheless, Starsky came to the other side of the car and got an arm around him. Though Hutch had made it to a standing position without trouble, he worried about his strength still. And a part of Starsky needed the close physical contact right then.

They made their way up the steps and Starsky unlocked the door. Hutch's stamina seemed to be fading fast; he lurched to the couch and slumped down, bending to rest his head over arms folded on his knees. Starsky sat beside him, trying to cover the urgency in his heart with a softness of manner.

"You okay?" For a few seconds, there was no answer. "Hutch?" He ventured another touch, this time a gentle stroking of the bowed head. The fine, blond strands felt cool and he wished he dared to sink his fingers in their glossy mass.

"I... made a mistake, Starsk," the quiet voice croaked. Hutch raised his head to look into Starsky's eyes. "I don't know how it happened. I just... don't know..."

"What are you talking about? Do you mean what just went down tonight? Or are you talking about a long time ago?"

"Tonight?" Hutch seemed truly bewildered. He shook his head no. "I was following Eddie Strouse."

"Not tonight, Hutch. That was another guy we followed. But you thought of Eddie Strouse when you saw him, didn't you?"
A nod, and restless hands rubbed up and down the long, slender thighs. "I saw him... that day. Recognized him from that drug case a couple years back. He was selling on the street, but when I got close enough, I realized it wasn't drugs."

"What was it?" Starsky made his voice encouraging.

Hutch squinted, trying to see through a veil of memory. "Opals. Big, white... lots of colors in them..."

*That figures, if he was part of a gang working out of Australia.* "What did you do when you saw him?"

"He was using them to buy drugs... to set up a meet with someone else." The quavering voice steadied. "He went back to his car and I tailed him for a while. I... think he must have spotted the tail." He looked directly at Starsky.

"It's okay," Starsky soothed. "Then what happened?"

"He parked his car. Right in the shopping district. Got out before I could call it in. I had to follow him -- into a building. Like tonight." Hutch nodded, looking more certain. "I left my car... Inside, he was making a phone call. I stayed back and listened... And I heard him say something about the airport. I knew a deal was going down -- there was no time to call for back-up. I'd have lost him and I thought if he mentioned the airport, maybe he was... leaving the country." Hutch shrugged sheepishly. "He hung up the phone and I thought I'd call in when I got back to my car. But he went out on the other side of the building and jumped into a cab. I had to keep him in sight..." He looked to Starsky, reaching for his hands. "Starsk... I don't know..."

Starsky gripped chilled fingers. "Take it easy. Just tell me what happened then."

"I..." Hutch groped for words. "I couldn't get back to my car without losing him... so I hailed a cab." He paused, eyes narrowed as he searched his memory.

"Take it easy," Starsky urged. "One step at a time. What next? Do you remember?"

Hutch rubbed at his eyes again, looking confused. "Not much. The airport... another guy... Maybe two of them... No... it's gone." He glanced up. "Damn."

"It's okay. Was the other guy named Flavin?"

Hutch thought about it for a moment. "I can't remember. How would you know?"

"I found out -- finally. One of these days, I'll tell you about my investigation. What happened then -- they get you on the plane?"

"Somehow... I don't know... I can't remember anything after jumping into the cab. Maybe I got careless." The look in the blue eyes was wild with self-doubt.

"Hey, cut that out. I know you weren't being careless. Your instincts were good. A deal was going down. It was probably something big. And maybe the perps were leaving the country -- you were right about that. Something happened, and they grabbed you. Exactly how might never come back. But it's okay now."

But Hutch was still shaking his head. "No... Damn, I still can't remember. Starsk... did I... have something on my mind that day? What was goin' on?" He rubbed mercilessly at his temples.
Starsky sat frozen, not knowing what to say. He didn't want to force the memories, yet he wished so hard they would return. "You did have a few things on your mind. I... I'd just gotten out of the hospital."

Hutch turned to him in surprise. "Yeah... I drove you home... didn't I?"

"That's right. Do you remember anything else?" It was as much as Starsky dared ask.

"I... The plane taking off. They'd handcuffed me to the seat... I knew... that was gonna be it for me..." He groaned, leaning forward as if in intense pain.

"Shhh. Take it easy," Starsky told him, getting an arm around the shaking shoulders. "Listen, Hutch. Do you know what this means? You remember what happened to you." He swallowed hard. "Just about everything. That's supposed to be somethin' good, you know."

Hutch looked up, eyes wide and more aware than they'd been in months. "Starsk?"

"Yes?" It was hard for Starsky to speak around the lump that had formed in his throat.

"I... didn't mean to mess it all up so bad."

"I know." It seemed best to say no more than that. "It's okay, babe."

"I guess I just had a lot on my mind..." The gaps still bothered him.

And Starsky, too. He couldn't help thinking of the one other thing Hutch couldn't recall. Why don't I say it? Am I that much of a coward? Perhaps a touch, a caress... could I help to bring back the memories that way?

Hutch sighed then, leaning toward Starsky, coming to rest against his friend's side. "God, I'm tired..."

No, I better not push. "'Course you are. Remembering like that is pretty exhausting. And you got roughed up a little, too." Gently, Starsky touched the abraded cheek. "Hey, I forgot to thank you. The instincts are still there. You done good, partner."

A vague smile. "Yeah? So when do I get my ice cream?"

Starsky smiled from his heart. "You remember that, too, huh? Okay, how about I fix up this face o'yours and then go out and pick up a carton? What flavor you want?"

"You decide." The blond lashes fluttered once and then slipped closed. Starsky maneuvered out from under his dozing burden and got up to search the medicine cabinet for first-aid supplies. Returning with them, he stopped for a moment, loathe to disturb his friend's rest. *You did have something on your mind that day, Hutch. More'n me coming home from the hospital. Were you having second thoughts; is that why it still hasn't come back to you after all this time?*

Starsky tried fiercely to keep the questions from whirling through his mind. It did no good to speculate, but he still couldn't allow himself to ask Hutch anything more. Right now, his own feelings were as confused and confusing as ever. *I feel like there's something I should mourn, despite the fact that he's made so much progress tonight.* Yet Starsky knew he couldn't grieve for the death of love without full confirmation of its end, no more than he could have given into grief for Hutch without knowing for sure that he was dead.

He sat near him on the couch, just watching him slumber for a while. At length, Hutch stirred, lids fluttering open. For a moment, he linked gazes with Starsky. Neither man spoke a word, neither of them quite
breathed. Hutch's eyes held... *something*. Starsky thought surely his heart's beating could be heard. *You're here, it's really you! Hutch, you have come home...*

The tense shivering of his emotions rose to a crescendo. He watched Hutch's eyes, convinced the words were about to be spoken, pleading silently for the moment to hold. Hutch was looking at him with such certitude on his face. *All you have to do is lean forward... and kiss me.* Starsky waited, his quivering hope like a flame. The moment drew out, then something bright faded from Hutch's eyes, as if the idea had been lost before it could fully blossom. *Or as if he changed his mind.* Starsky did not know which of the two would be worse. He tried to believe Hutch wasn't deliberately yanking him back and forth, but he couldn't help feeling rejected once again. *He's said it before, in so many words. 'Leave me alone. Let me live my own life.' But what is my life without you?*

Repressing a sigh, Starsky went to work, and Hutch lay patiently under his ministering fingers, allowing Starsky to apply the ointment to his cheek. It was good to be able to touch him this way again; it filled up an empty place in Starsky's heart. If he had nothing else from this man who meant so much to him, he did possess this comfort.

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The moments of closeness and revelation had felt so good. Hutch, growing drowsy, leaned against Starsky, feeling so much more at ease than he had with him in recent weeks. The fatigue eased him toward the escape of dreams. He felt Starsky's return to the couch, knew he was sitting there watching him; the warm presence still, waiting, yet full of comfort. Hutch was drifting, peaceful. Yet in that odd space between wakefulness and chimera, something caused him to reopen his eyes. They shared a look, the depth and reach of which Hutch could hardly fathom. His heart began to beat, as if from some mysterious secret, and in Starsky's deep-blue eyes he believed he saw reflected his own churning, yearning emotions. There came a spark -- of electricity? chemistry? -- that felt so familiar, so precious that Hutch wished desperately to cling to it. Was it attraction, reminiscence, rapport? The sensation was so strong, so swift taking over his heart and head... and then, in a burst, he felt an even stronger marvel, a truth so bright he felt he could reach out and touch it with his hand.

*I once loved you, touched you, held you... it wasn't a dream, or my imagination! It was real.*

The moment held, tight as suspense, for a drawn-out second. *Starsky... Starsky! It did happen. Say something, tell me what to do. Don't you want it anymore? Your eyes, it looks like you don't know what to say, either. Is that it -- you're just as confused as me?*

Then, like the sound of fine china breaking, it was gone. Starsky broke eye contact with him, and Hutch felt the tension ebb over into the pain that usually surrounded the two of them. For a moment, he nearly doubted the reality of what he had remembered. But he couldn't deny it anymore. He knew. But Starsky, he could almost swear, had pulled away.

*I couldn't hang onto it... why? Why didn't you reach out and help me? It needs both of us, don't you know, to happen again...*

Hutch felt like screaming or crying, but he did neither. All that escaped him was the softest of sighs. He drew into himself again, wrapping his private hell around him, finding sanctity in the loneliness. And the only touch that Starsky gave him was the gentleness of his fingers applying the medicine to his scraped cheek.

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In the next few weeks, Hutch did a lot of thinking about that night. His memories' return had helped him understand the reality of how he’d been hurt, but though many doors had opened to him, beyond each of them lay confusing territory.

In many ways, it had been a good evening. He and Starsky had been able to talk more easily than they had in weeks, and Starsky hadn't yelled at him for jumping out of the car to follow the suspect, even though Hutch wasn't a cop anymore. It was only later that Hutch realized his behavior had been reckless, that he might have endangered innocent bystanders and Starsky because of what he'd done.

They were together, and yet things were not the same. What remained unspoken lay between them, more a barrier than a bridge. Hutch's realization had not served to draw them closer. He and Starsky had made love, but once upon a time, long ago and far away. The Starsky and Hutch of those brief moments no longer existed. Starsky had never mentioned the occurrence in all this time; it was obvious that he believed Hutch did not remember. Yet at the moment of Hutch's own revelation, he had thought Starsky could see the truth in his eyes. I thought, for a second, that he saw how I felt, and he was glad, or hopeful. But it faded away so quickly, I'm not sure anymore. Did he see that I remembered, and it made him uncomfortable? How did Starsky feel? Hutch knew there was no one else in Starsky's life. For a while, he'd thought his friend was dating Sally Hagan, but now he knew differently. Perhaps Starsky thought it could never happen again, and that it was useless to speak of it. Possibly, he was glad to pretend the act of love between them had never happened.

I've changed. So has he. Neither of us can go back to the way we used to be, not as friends and partners, so certainly not as lovers. He needs to hang on. And I need him to let go. Good moments are there sometimes, but it's so hard to find them. And the bad ones... they just keep chipping away at us, turning us into a parody of what we once were together. I'm afraid that it's gonna go on until there's nothing left.

Hutch didn't know how to explain his feelings to Starsky, and realized that even if he could find the words, Starsky probably would not understand. He sensed a loneliness in his friend that just sitting there with Hutch did nothing to assuage. His newborn knowledge was embarrassing. He wasn't even sure if he could actually engage in sex anymore, or if he'd ever want to. There were bigger questions in his life at this moment. I don't know who I am. You want the past, as you remember it, the partnership. Or maybe you want something that we started, but now can never finish. But I'll never be me -- the new me that is being forced into existence, unless you let me go a little. He began to believe he might have to risk breaking away before Starsky could accept the necessity of his move.

He threw himself into the work of rehabilitation, spending every day at the library, reading, trying to learn about the years he'd missed. He pursued physical therapy, weight lifting, working relentlessly to rebuild some of the strength he'd lost. It was hard work, leaving him tired at the end of the day. He had his therapists quiz him, test his reasoning powers, his memory; and little by little, he realized he was improving. He still used his notebook to make sure of his schedule, to recall what he'd done and when, and he kept trying to fit a little more into each day, expanding his abilities. He stressed math in his remedial classes, knowing he might have to understand finances when it came time to settle his parents' estate, and the concrete figures and definite patterns appealed to him, now as never before.

Yet with all the improvements, there were times he felt painfully inadequate, and he was always aware of the length of time he'd been out of touch.

Ted Fletcher understood. He and Hutch talked most afternoons at the Rehab Center. Ted told him that for months his parents had refused to let him arrange his own transportation for his therapy; that they hadn't wanted to leave him in the house alone. "They made me into a kid again, always making decisions for me,"
he complained. And even though Ted eventually came to understand their attitude, he had not learned to accept it.

"I know what you mean," Hutch told him with a sigh one afternoon. "It was like that for a little while with Starsky and me. But he had his job to go to, so he had to leave me on my own during the day, eventually. With him, it's more of an... emotional dependence. I get the feeling that he's comparing everything I say and do to the way I was before. And it makes me feel like I can't measure up."

Ted sighed. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think it might be best for both of us if I just leave town and never come back. He was doing fine before I was found -- all I'm doing now is holding him back. But I don't know if I can do that. I... I don't really have anyone else."

"What about your family, back in... Minnesota, is it?"

"They keep asking me to come for a visit. Phone calls. Letters. I'm supposed to meet with the lawyers about my parents' estate, too. But Starsky can't get away from work."

"Do you think you can handle the trip on your own?" The dark eyes focused intently on him.

Hutch gave it a few moments' thought. "It shouldn't be so hard. I can call for plane reservations, let my aunt know when I'll be arriving..."

"There, you see?" Ted was smiling at him.

"Have you ever done anything like this, since you recovered, I mean?" Hutch fully expected his friend to say yes.

Ted shook his head. "Don't know where I'd go." Then he looked away. "I guess maybe I'm not as desperate for my independence as you are. It's just... easier to put up with the problems than go out on my own."

Hutch understood, but Ted was younger than he was. He hadn't had the kind of autonomous life that Hutch had been living before his own accident. It was so important to Hutch that he be able some day to work, to be the kind of man Starsky would want as a friend again. Starsky was looking for what used to be -- or maybe what almost was -- and Hutch knew he couldn't provide that now. But if he tried very hard, perhaps they could make something new together. If only he'll understand when I try...

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CHAPTER III

July, 1982

"What's goin' on?" Starsky's eyes took in the sight of the suitcase by the chair, of Hutch slipping on an old leather jacket. "You think you're goin' somewhere?"

Hutch looked up, his expression sheepish. "I didn't expect you to be stopping by." He drew a shaky breath, then his voice hardened. "Guess I should have. It would be typical of you."
Starsky knew he had to say something before something irrevocable happened. But he didn't know where to begin, how to stop Hutch from drawing away. "Sorry. I don't mean to act like a mother-hen or something. Never did..." His voice trailed off. He was so tired, so sick of feeling ill-equipped to handle Hutch.

Hutch shrugged, as if nothing mattered. "I know. Listen... I'm sorry, buddy." He glanced up, meeting Starsky's eyes for an instant, then pulling away again. "I was going to leave you a note."

"A note?"

"Yeah." He glanced at his watch with a strange mixture of eagerness and reluctance. "I - uh... I'm in a hurry. I have to be at the airport in twenty minutes."

Starsky took a step toward him, his voice steady, but he knew the dread could be heard. "Where you goin', Hutch?"

"Duluth. For a while, anyway."

Starsky latched on to the destination. "I told you, I'd take you to see your relatives as soon as I could get some more time off."

"No. That's not necessary. I... I'm capable of going by myself." A defensive tone.

"You shouldn't have to. It will be too hard on you." Starsky took in the drooping shoulders, the lined face, the still-too-thin frame. He knew that to remind Hutch of his physical condition now though would be a grave error. "Emotionally, I mean."

"I can handle it, Starsk. I... think I have to."

"But..." Starsky sputtered a minute, at a loss, feeling suddenly desperate. For the last month he'd felt Hutch pulling away, making plans of his own without consulting him, sheltering his true feelings from the man with whom he'd once shared everything. Starsky had known this break might be coming, had in fact imagined it over and over again. Now he was powerless to stop it. "But you need..."

"I know. That's the problem. It's always been what I need." Hutch's voice had gone soft again, with the exquisite tenderness in it that Starsky had never forgotten in all the long months without him. It hurt to hear it now, layered over as it was with infinite weariness and regret.

Overwhelmed with compassion, Starsky stepped forward, wanting to close the distance between them, wanting to hold on.

"No, Starsk." Hutch moved back, the tenderness dissipating, replaced with a kind of brutal honesty. "You see, it's not what you need."

"Hutch --"

"Hear me out. Please?" Again, Hutch tried to meet Starsky's eyes, and failed. "You don't need me. There's nothing wrong with that, Starsk. Nothing to feel bad about. I'm glad. Really. You survived. You went on with your life. You're a police lieutenant, for God's sake. I've seen you working, Starsky. You've still got it, and even more, now. You don't know it yet, but you really don't need... whatever it is you think you need." The voice faltered at last. "I can't come back and be what I used to be. I can only be what I have left." He sighed, as if facing the hurt, the waste. "I have to get going."

Starsky found his voice. "You're running away."
"Maybe. I kind of hope I'll be getting my head together. Please, let me go."

'Please let me not need you so much.' Starsky heard the desperate plea as plainly as if Hutch had said the words aloud. "You're comin' back, aren't you?"

Hutch's eyes met his at last, cloudy blue, full of shadows. "I'll try to call."

Starsky didn't repeat his question, couldn't stand to hear a negative answer. "Let me drive you to the airport."

A horn honked outside. Hutch started in guilty embarrassment. "Cab."

So. You don't need me anymore. At least you're tryin' to prove it, all the way. The hurt crowded in, making him afraid and angry. He wasn't even sure if his anger was directed at Hutch or at himself. Now all he could do was let go. Two... three empty years now of holding on, and now the letting go...

He didn't say anything as Hutch collected keys and checked in his pocket for the plane ticket, didn't offer to help when he hefted the weight of the suitcase. He knew he'd be refused, anyway. I guess you need to do this, babe. I don't want to let you. And I don't have to pretend I like it. You almost don't look like you should be out of bed, much less like taking a plane all the way to Minnesota. But if I made you stay, you'd pull away sometime, some way. You stand there, telling me I don't need you when you're all I ever needed, damn it. Damn you, Hutch! Starsky swallowed, unable to say a word, not of entreaty or recrimination. He didn't dare make demands or plead. He could only watch and cry inside.

He followed Hutch out of the apartment, stood by while the door was locked, followed him down the stairs to the cab. Hutch opened the door and slid his suitcase in. He turned to face Starsky.

"I will call." The voice was firm with resolution. "I'll... let you know --"

"What? That you've decided to stay away? That you've found what you're lookin' for?" Starsky's throat hurt so badly now that the angry words came out soft. He doubted the cab driver had heard, but he didn't care if he had.

Hutch shrugged. "Something like that. But... maybe to let you know..."

"Don't!" Starsky held up a hand. "Don't make promises you can't keep. Look. I'll keep an eye on the place for you. Maybe you don't want me to do even that, but who else will? And if, someday, you wanta put it up for sale, just let me know."

Hutch's eyes were raw torment. "Stark, I didn't mean to... you don't need..."

"Don't tell me again what I don't need! I know what I need, man. You're the one who's messing up."

Hutch stood facing him a moment, then, resolved, got into the cab.

Starsky grasped the door handle. Hutch turned, the metal and glass between them.

"You know what I need?" Starsky finally had to say it. "I need us. The way we used to be. And so do you, babe."

Hutch's eyes closed, his face looking more weary than ever. His voice was a whisper, rough, like back in the hospital in Australia. "I'm sorry, Stark. If I stay now, it'd just ruin what we were then. You'll see that if you think about it."
Starsky let go of the cab door. Hutch pulled it closed. His lips moved, telling the driver his destination. He did not look back in Starsky's direction.

Starsky stood staring down the street long after the yellow cab had disappeared from view.

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Bags checked. Ticket in hand. Hutch stood outside the departure gate, his eyes on the portion of the runway he could see from the huge windows. He felt... he cast about in his mind for the perfect word, and finally found it. He felt strong. Just like anyone else, here he was, traveling somewhere on his own. He felt good, anxious about the trip to come, but not worried. The only thing that felt wrong was the tender spot in his heart occupied by Starsky. He'd looked so hurt as he followed Hutch out to the cab. Hutch hurt, too. It had to be, Starsk. You'll see that in time.

The plane pulled up to the gate, a stewardess called the flight. Hutch was first in line to board. As he walked along the ramp, he remembered his fear at getting on another plane, not so long ago. He'd been wheelchair-bound then, and only the man at his side had made boarding bearable. His heart twinged, but he walked forward, into whatever this flight would bring him.

It was exciting, the taxi down the runway and take-off. There was a young woman, who looked about eighteen years old, seated next to Hutch, and she gasped with a combination of nervousness and delight as the plane lifted from the ground. She turned, meeting his gaze and the two shared a smile. Hutch sighed, settled back, and watched the earth recede as the plane rose. He hadn't been coherent enough to notice these things going on the last time he'd flown. Now, he wanted to savor each bit of the experience. The jet emerged from the flossy clouds into the upper atmosphere, where it was clear, clean and blue. Hutch relaxed in his seat, adjusting it so he could lie back a little, and closed his eyes in relaxation.
He'd thought he might drift off to sleep. But his mind was wide awake and he couldn't turn it off. His thoughts lingered over Starsky, so strongly that he felt his presence with him. At first, the idea made him uncomfortable, as if he were being followed. Then he took comfort at the image. *I can't get rid of you. Maybe you can't get rid of me, either.* At peace, he let his thoughts drift, pictures of Starsky keeping him company.

_We made love. I remember... lying there in your hospital bed, holding you, closer than I'd ever dared... the touch of your mouth, like a sweet reunion with something I'd constantly imagined, but never met. You were so beautiful... warm... full of life... why did the memory take so long to come back to me? Why didn't I know it really happened? Why did I remember all the pain and fear I felt from when I was kidnapped, but not the sensations of your loving me?_

_Maybe you didn't want me to remember. It must have made you uncomfortable... thinking about it all those months when I was unconscious. I'd become... a scarecrow... a mannequin -- put me in one position and I stayed there all day... Couldn't talk, couldn't think... couldn't do anything for you, with you. Even when I woke up... I wasn't the same... even now, my head remembers, but my body doesn't... I might as well still be in the coma, from the waist down._

_Ah, Starsk... I wish I could somehow make it all up to you... You seem so lonely, so in need of comfort. I used to know how to help you when you felt like that. I wish I could put my arms around you and shelter you, be strong for you, make you feel love instead of always pain... It was good, that one time, wasn't it? I didn't want it to end... but I was overruled, wasn't I? They took me away from you, and I had no choice. I'm gonna be murdered, I thought, and he'll never know what happened -- damn, stop thinking about it! Hutch shook his head fiercely, causing his seat companion to look toward him in concern. He gripped the armrests and turned to peer out the window, unwilling to close his eyes and let the images torment him anymore. But they returned anyway, playing out over the cloudless blue through which he was flying._

_Wish I could make it up to you... if I could, I'd hold you forever, kiss you, take away the tears, both our tears... I miss your laughter, your smile, your teasing. I've done this to you, turned you into something empty, forcing you to take care of me long after I should be able to take care of myself. I wanted to care for you. Now that dream is gone. Forgive me..._

_His eyes burned with the pain of holding back his tears. Furious with himself, Hutch fought the painful images, but only one thing could take them away. Sighing again, he gave in to memory._

_You and I wound tight together... the bed's narrow, but we have all the space we need... let me touch... you're so warm, so hard... you're trembling. Let me make you tremble, writhe... Feels so good, like burning up, dying, being born together... love you..._

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Stepping out of the shower, Sally Hagan reached for a towel and began drying her hair. Midway through the process, she thought she heard her doorbell. Someone was practically leaning on it, she realized, as the buzzing continued. Sally bent over to wind the towel around her still wet head, and pulled on her robe. Tying it hurriedly, she headed for the door.

_Pausing to peer out the peephole, Sally gasped in surprise. She hadn't expected a visit from her boss, or anyone, at this late hour. Quickly, she undid the lock and opened the door._

"Dave -- what's the matter?"
Finally taking his hand off the buzzer, he leaned back, catching himself with a grab to the doorjamb. "Hi, Sally. You home?"

Sally had to smile, taking in his disheveled appearance and bleary expression. "Yes, I'm here. What can I do for you?"

He looked surprised when she asked, his brows drawing together over sad, blood-shot eyes. "I don't..." he hesitated, as if he couldn't figure out what to say.

"It's okay. I was just getting out of the shower," she told him reassuringly. "You want to come in?"

"Okay." But he made no move to comply.

Sally reached out and took hold of his arm, urging him inside. He grinned down at her and his new proximity confirmed her suspicion that he had been drinking.

"Come on in the living room and sit down, Dave. I'll just take a minute to go and change." She hurried out of the room and went to throw on some clothes, wondering all the while what on earth he was doing there. Starsky stopping by was unusual in itself -- she hadn't thought he remembered her address -- but his being drunk completely mystified her. Still, she thought as she returned to the living room and found him sitting morosely on the couch, she could make a guess at the reason. "Is it Hutch? What happened, Dave?"

"Hutch." He murmured the name as if it weighed heavily on his heart. Then he looked up, eyes full of naked pain. "He's gone, Sally."

She sat beside him, aghast. "What do you mean -- gone?"

"He left town," Starsky answered, looking away. "Went to Minnesota." There was a heavy pause. "I don't know..."

"Don't know what?" Sally urged softly when he didn't continue.

"Don't know if he's ever coming back."

"What?" Sally couldn't keep the incredulity out of her voice.

Starsky was shaking his head, reaching up to rub at his temples. "He's gone. Made all the arrangements himself, plane tickets, cab to get him to the airport... never told me anything... 'til I walked in there tonight..."

Sally didn't know what to say. She registered surprise that Hutch had made plans without Starsky's help; that was essentially a sign of improvement. Yet there was far more significance to his actions than that. Why -- how could he leave Starsky?

"Didn't he tell you anything?" she began cautiously, laying a hand on his arm.

Starsky shook his head again. "I been feelin' him pullin' away. This has been comin' on for weeks now. He says... I don't need him, and he doesn't need me. So -- he left." The arm under Sally's hand went rigid with tension, tendons standing out on the back of his hand.

"Can I get you anything?" she offered. "Some coffee?"

Starsky raked the curls back from his forehead. "You got anything stronger?"
She raised an eyebrow, then stood. "I don't know. I don't do much drinking." She went to a cabinet in the
dining area and opened it. Inside was half a bottle of scotch left over from Christmas. She picked it up,
turning back to her unexpected guest. "How's this?"

"It'll do." Starsky glanced away as if embarrassed.

Sally collected a glass and brought it over. She watched as Starsky poured a shot and gulped it immediately.
He winced as the strong drink went down.

"Dave, this isn't like you..." she ventured.

"I won't... try to drive home, if that's what you're worried about." He met her eyes. "Wouldn't do for a police
lieutenant to get pulled over for drunk driving, would it?" He gave a bitter laugh. "Maybe I should blow this
town, too. Get out and start over."

"Start over?"

"Yeah. I'm wastin' my time. Got no reason to stay, after all." He poured another drink but sipped it more
slowly. "Sometimes... I wish he'd never come to..."

Sally swallowed hard. "Why? How can you say that?"

Starsky's eyes focused on a point far away. "When he was like that, I still felt I had him with me. All that he
was -- it still existed 'cause I remembered so well. Then, he started wakin' up... and it hurt so bad to see how
weak he was. But, you know?" He turned to her and his eyes held a glistening of tears. "It really was him.
He was still my partner, my friend..." The words died away and he continued in the driest of whispers, "My
Hutch."

Sally couldn't answer, sensing that any comment from her would be an intrusion on her friend's private
misery. She'd never heard him talk about his own feelings about Hutch's condition. She wondered if he'd
done so with anyone until now. Starsky leaned forward, staring for a long moment at the bottle and glass on
the table. Sally reached out and poured him another drink, then picked it up and handed it to him.

He closed his eyes as he sipped, then spoke again, in a dead voice that made Sally's throat ache in sympathy
at the sound. "And then, he found out how long it had been. And all the shit that went down while he'd been
away. I... I couldn't make it up to him. I couldn't give enough of what he lost back to him."

"Dave, he doesn't blame you."

He didn't seem to hear. His voice went on, a faint elegy for what once had been. "He doesn't know what he's
doing. I don't know him anymore -- hell, I don't even know myself anymore. And we've just been torturing
ourselves these last few months." A sigh. "You know we fight all the time."

"You always did bicker." Sally tried to make him smile.

"No. Not like that. It's like we're two different people." He leaned back to drain the glass of whiskey, then
let his head rest on the back of the couch. "Sometimes I think... I want... but there's no way. I don't know
how... It's too late. The one thing you can't do is turn back time."

The anguished eyes closed tight, his face twisted and Sally heard a choked sob.

Starsky made a move as if to get up from the couch, but she reached out to catch his arm. He shook his
head, tears seeping from beneath the closed lids, his expression and body fighting against the release of
emotion. For a moment, he struggled, but Sally wound an arm around his trembling shoulders and pulled him close, and he sank into her arms. The sobs broke free, yet she sensed he was still holding the worst of it back. His hands tightened on her arms, and Sally sat still, patting his back.

She didn't know what to say, how to help him. She liked Dave Starsky, cared for him the way one cop cared about another, the way one person felt about another who'd once saved their life. These last few months, she'd watched an undefined pain eating away at him. Every time she'd offered friendship, he'd shied away, as if he didn't need or didn't want anyone to care. It had bothered her for months now, but she'd had no idea how to get through his protective shell, or why it had formed around this guy who'd always been so outgoing and warm-hearted. He'd locked himself away from everyone, probably ever since Hutch had disappeared. And even with Hutch back, he still had the barriers up. Hutch couldn't or wouldn't break them down, and now Sally could see the damage they were doing. Starsky was locked away, his imprisoned, solitary heart crying for love, for one touch of caring, though he'd nearly forgotten how to ask for it.

And now here he was, turning to her, finally, as a friend. Sally saw his need and her heart opened wide to him. If he could just broaden that crack in the wall he'd built, maybe he could find some peace.

"It's all right, Dave," she soothed, stroking the long back. He was fighting the pain, but the tears wouldn't shut off. Sally couldn't help wondering how long it had been since he'd cried. The tightly choked-off sobs reminded her of the sound of her own father's tears the night of her mother's death. Sally had never seen her father cry, and it sounded odd to her, pinched off, bitterly hard for him, as if he didn't really know how. That was the way Starsky sounded now.

"Let it out, Dave. I'm here," she whispered, fingers gentle on the nape of his neck. The curls under her fingers were soft and fine, the tendons in his neck taut. She stroked his head and it settled more firmly against her shoulder. "That's it. Let it out," she urged, her heart aching with sympathy. Not knowing how else to comfort him, she pressed her cheek close to his, lightly kissing his wet face.

Starsky groaned as if the touch inflicted pain, and tried to pull out of her embrace. "Dave?" Sally didn't know what she'd done.

"I can't. I can't," he repeated, voice beleaguered by guilt. "I can't let anyone…" The words faded out and a fresh sob cut Sally's heart. "All this time, I was faithful to him," the hopeless, tear-drenched voice cried out. "I was faithful to him... and now he's left me..."

Sally was shocked into stillness. She didn't know what Dave meant, and the one obvious explanation seemed impossible. He had to be speaking figuratively, of the faithfulness of friendship. But what if he wasn't? Wouldn't that explain how desperate he'd been to do everything he could for Hutch? Wouldn't that explain why he'd locked himself away from help these last years?

He'd never said, never hinted. Sally had never suspected and she was certain that no one else did, either. She didn't know how close they'd been, how much they'd shared, but now she did know the secret that had been tormenting Starsky. And one other thing. He wouldn't want her to acknowledge what he'd let slip.

"Shhh. It's all right. It'll all work out." Sally gentled the arms she held wrapped around him, soothing with voice and peaceful rocking motions. She patted his back slowly, and gradually his crying ceased. He wasn't cried out, she could tell, but he'd won the battle to make himself stop. His body grew heavy in her clasp and Sally sensed his nearness to sleep. She moved cautiously, careful not to disturb him as she got up and settled him full length on the couch.
She picked up her afghan and draped it over him, taking a moment to brush tangled curls back from his brow. She knew of no similarly simple gesture -- or for that matter, of any more complicated one -- that would truly help him.

When morning came, he looked sheepish but had no real difficulty meeting her eyes, so Sally supposed he didn't remember what he'd said. She fed him breakfast, which he consumed gratefully, and they parted company at her front door, each driving their own car to Metro. Once the workday officially began, Lieutenant Starsky was himself again, efficient, yet quiet and remote as ever. The only sign of his night of whiskey and tears was a slight redness around his eyes. It seemed to Sally that no one else noticed.

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The plane taxied down the runway, Hutch watching out the window all the while. Landing was exciting to him this time. He had no reason to fear, only to anticipate. When the plane was finally stopped, Hutch unbuckled his seatbelt and made his way off with the other passengers. He realized he was grinning widely when his young seatmate smiled back at him, offering a friendly goodbye. Hutch hefted his carry-on bag and headed down the aisle.

There was a little physical tiredness nudging him around the edges, though he was determined to ignore it. His right leg wanted to drag a little as he walked down the concourse, but he refused to stop and dig the collapsible cane out of his bag. No, he wanted to meet with his family without any outward signs of his ordeal.

As he emerged into the terminal, Hutch paused to look around for someone he could recognize. He didn't really expect a big welcoming party -- Hutchinsons didn't usually go in for noisy reunions in airports -- but he had told Aunt Priscilla when he was due to arrive. He didn't see her, though, and wondered if he should try to get a cab to take him to her house, worrying that a drive that long would be expensive.

"Ken!"

At the sound of his name, Hutch turned, scanning the crowd. A tall man with dark blond hair was coming toward him, hand outstretched. For a moment, though Hutch realized he was a relative, he couldn't recall the name.

"There you are!" the fellow enthused, taking Hutch's hand in his own for a brisk shake. He stood looking him up and down, as if gauging his appearance for signs of illness. When Hutch didn't answer, he grinned encouragingly. "It's Stan, Ken. Your Aunt Priscilla's son, remember? We're cousins." The statement was made without malice or judgment.

Hutch relaxed, remembering his cousin Stanley Hutchinson now. About two years older, Stan had been a favorite playmate of his when he was little. Hutch also remembered riding bikes with him in the summers of their high school years, discussing baseball and girls.

"Hi, Stan. Thanks for coming to meet me. How's your mother?"

"She's fine. Getting on in years, you know. Her arthritis acts up a lot. That's why she sent me out here to get you." Stanley picked up Hutch's suitcase and glanced around. "You have any other bags?"

Hutch nodded, trying to recall where he'd stashed his claim ticket. He was feeling a little overwhelmed, seeing the cousin he hadn't communicated with in years -- more years than he'd been out of touch due to the coma. Unable to remember, he finally pulled out his notebook and thumbed through its pages. There it was, written down. Hutch looked in the zippered pocket on his carry-on bag.
"Here's my claim check. I guess they'll be unloading this one soon."

"Sure." Stan took the stub and nodded in the direction of the baggage area. "Come on, Ken."

In a few minutes, they had collected Hutch's bag and found Stan's car in the parking lot. Hutch's ankle and leg were growing tired, but he tried not to let it show, blaming a stumble on his well-remembered clumsiness. Stan, if he realized at all that Hutch was trying to cover up his true condition, was too polite to mention it.

There wasn't much conversation during the drive to Aunt Priscilla's. Hutch found there wasn't much to talk about. He had expected a lot of questions about what had happened to him, but Stan didn't pry. Instead, he pointed out changes in Duluth as they passed and Hutch made non-committal comments. He really hadn't remembered much about his hometown until the drive began. Instead of a feeling of homecoming and nostalgia, however, he began to feel more out of place than he had in L.A.

The awkwardness increased when they arrived at Aunt Priscilla's house. Hutch suddenly remembered he'd never felt comfortable there; it was too perfect, too proper -- Aunt Priscilla was an even fussier housekeeper than his own mother had been. Hutch suddenly remembered that even Stan's room had had that decorator, no-real-boy-lives-here kind of look. Back at his parent's house, Hutch's room at least was his own domain.

"Ken. Here you are at last."

His aunt came forward regally to greet him. She held out her hand and he took it, not quite knowing whether he was expected to shake it or kiss it. He tried to remember how the woman had looked the last time he'd been to see her. It must have been at least ten years ago, he realized, noting she now seemed more stooped with age, more grey-haired and wizened, but the large jewelry and painted nails still remained. Something else about her seemed incongruous. Hutch stared until he figured it out. Aunt Priscilla must be nearly eighty by now, but her clothes looked like those of a much younger woman. They were dressy, too, like women who worked.

As he stood there clasping her hand something clicked in his mind, pieces of family history snapping into place, aided by remarks Stan had made in the car, and Hutch relaxed a little as he met his aunt's eyes. She still acted the matriarch of the Hutchinson family, even though she'd been an Adams by birth. She had married Hutch's father's brother and had set out to rule the family, arbitrating disputes, monitoring behavior, hovering over everyone. Yet he had never felt any emotion coming his way from her; and he supposed everyone in the family noticed that omission, too. There was no warmth, no sense of bonding, only that all of them were her property.

Her husband, Hutch's Uncle Harry, had been more down to earth, funny, warm-hearted and kind. As a boy, Hutch had often wondered how his chilly aunt had ever gotten together with his jovial uncle. His own father, Harvey, had seemed more like Aunt Priscilla's type. Hutch abruptly remembered that not only was Uncle Harry gone now -- he'd died ten years ago -- but that his own parents were gone, too.

"Dear, you look so tired from your trip. Won't you have a seat?" Priscilla gravely waved him toward the living room. "We can talk while Stanley takes your things upstairs."

"Oh, that's okay," Hutch spoke up, turning as he saw Stan gathering his bags. "I don't want to put you out. I thought I'd stay at a hotel."

"Certainly not!" Priscilla huffed. "The very idea. We're your family, Ken. Your only family now. And we won't have you off on your own in some lonely hotel. We want you where we can be with you, where we
can get to know you again. You remember, Stanley's house is just down the block. So even if I have to go out, someone will be with you all the time."

"Okay," Hutch accepted, flushing. You want me where you can keep an eye on me, I guess. He didn't mind acquiescing, however. He felt he was equal to the task of demonstrating how well he had recovered.

"You were in the hospital for a long time," his aunt observed, jumping into the most important subject she could find. "Actually, dear, we don't know the whole story even now. Your partner, Mr. Starsky, didn't see fit to call us to say that he had found you until he brought you back from Australia. The details he gave us were rather sketchy. Can you tell us a little more about what happened?"

With her bright brown eyes boring into him, Hutch felt a little out of his conversational league. He leaned back in the brocade chair and rubbed a hand through his hair. "I don't remember much about being in Australia. I was in the coma for a long time before Starsky found me. And I didn't wake up for quite a while even then. When we left to come home," a slight ache built under his breastbone as he said the words, "I really didn't understand everything that was going on. I couldn't walk. I could only talk a little. I couldn't... keep track of what was going on." He cleared his throat, looking first at Stan and then his aunt. "But I've been out of the hospital since before Christmas, as you know. I go to therapy, but I'm taking care of myself."

Aunt Priscilla gave one of her practiced, brittle smiles. "I see. And can you do everything that you used to do?"

"Mother." The protest Stan offered sounded a little weak.

"I mean," she went on, not even looking toward her son, "will you ever be able to be a policeman again? I understand you're not working yet. What are you going to do with yourself, Kenneth?"

A measure of anguish, never quite healed, pricked at his heart. "I... haven't decided yet. I admit, I'm not ready to go back to being a cop. Things have changed for me. I became a cop because I felt I was needed." Saying the words, the feelings came back clearly to him. "I was good at my job. I helped people." His words trailed off and he realized he'd forgotten the point of what he'd been trying to say. "I don't know if I'm as needed now as I once was. I've changed. I'm not as strong. Not as quick..."

"Physically?" she dove right to the heart of the matter. "Or mentally?"

Hutch couldn't believe how quickly and deftly she had maneuvered him into admitting his deficits. And I was gonna cover so well. They were never going to realize how much I have to compensate for. He tried to retain his composure. "I'm no idiot. I remember mostly everything from the past. I can still think..."

"Yes, I know, Ken. But it's obvious that after so long an... illness, no one is ever quite the same."

"I said that already. What do you want me to say? That I need some guardian to take care of me? That's certainly not the case. I... I made the plans to come out here all by myself. No one had to help me -- " He broke off, realizing that his petulant tone was doing his image more harm than good. Now I remember why I left here. No matter what you do, it isn't good enough.

"There's no need to get upset," Priscilla was instructing him calmly. "We just have your best interests at heart."

Hutch was about to make an acerbic reply when a slender form rushed headlong through the door and into the living room.
"He's here!" The young girl came to a stop in front of his chair, and impulsively threw her arms around his shoulders, tightening the hug for a long moment. Despite the fact that Hutch had no idea who she was, the warm greeting felt good to him. She finally let go and stood back to look at him at arm's length. "Dad, Grandma -- he looks great! See, I told you Ken would be fine!"

Stan was chuckling a little self-consciously. "Yes, you did. But don't you think you're overwhelming him a little?"

Hutch tried to recover his own composure. "Hi," he said weakly. "I don't remember..."

"Ken, this is Chelsea," Stan filled him in. "My oldest daughter. The last time you saw her must've been at dad's funeral... that was over ten years ago. She's sixteen now."

"Just got my license," the teenager stated proudly. "Any time you need to go anywhere, just let me know."

Hutch smiled at her enthusiasm, trying to equate the sunny blonde with the tiny, pigtailed child he vaguely remembered as his cousin's little girl. "Do you remember me?" he asked finally.

"Sure." She dropped into a cross-legged position at his feet, smiling up at him rapturously. "I sat on your lap and you read me Charlotte's Web. I thought you were wonderful."

Hutch felt himself blushing. He couldn't remember any little girl ever having a crush on him before.

"Just like all the Hutchinsons," Stan was saying with a laugh. "She speaks her mind."

Aunt Priscilla was heard from again. "Hutchinsons are supposed to have tact."

Hutch realized that Chelsea and he were both ignoring her.
The day was turning out to be better than Hutch thought. He had found a compatriot in Chelsea, someone who wasn't intimidated by the starched-perfect order of Aunt Priscilla's house and ways, someone who cared more about his feelings than his abilities. Looking at him, as Priscilla outlined the schedule she thought they should observe during his visit, her wide blue eyes held laughter and a hint of rebellion. Hutch felt himself being drawn into a circle of instant friendship with his younger second cousin. The girl's gregarious nature left him a bit dizzied, but he gamely tried to keep up with her conversation and ideas.

When Aunt Priscilla informed him that he had been lax in contacting the family up to now, Chelsea defended him, saying that it was obvious he'd been very involved with matters of his own health. When Priscilla seemed about to force him into visiting the cemetery to see his parents' graves that very afternoon, despite the fact that Hutch said he wasn't yet ready to go there, Chelsea stepped in on his behalf. And when he asked to go to the house where his parents had lived and the elder Hutchinsons did not want to go, Chelsea offered to accompany him.

"I get away with murder," the girl laughed as she gunned the engine on her father's car.

Hutch sat back in the passenger seat and relaxed. "How do you manage it? Even your father never acted that way with her."

"It's easy. She knows I'm a genius. I'm going to do more for this family and the family business than anyone yet, so she puts up with me. She chalks it all up to my youthful spirits, but I hear her grinding her teeth sometimes."

Hutch laughed, remembering how he'd heard that sound years ago when he and Stan would get into arguments in Stan's mother's presence.

"And she dotes on me. She can't help it. For some reason," she grinned, flipping the long fall of blonde hair back over her shoulder, "I'm her pet. I'm the smartest. I'm special. None of my cousins or my sister and brothers can get away with half the stuff I say to her. Besides, she knows I respect her deep down. That's why she respects me."

Hutch marveled at the wisdom she spoke. He'd been feeling distinctly at a disadvantage talking to his aunt. She seemed able to remember every word a person said, not just during the current conversation, but also from years ago. Hutch felt like he was floundering around. It seemed certain that Aunt Priscilla, who'd always found him flawed anyway, had no remaining respect for him at all.

"What do they want from me?" he asked her suddenly. "Do they want to take the money my parents left? Is that it?"

Chelsea sighed. "It's not just the money, though they always seem to want more of that. It's partly that they don't think you 'deserve' it. They keep talking about how you deserted your parents, went all the way to L.A. to fight bad guys and take care of total strangers instead of staying here and taking care of them. If you had been a better son, you'd never gone out there in the first place, and you'd never been kidnapped and hurt and spent all this time in the hospital. You'd have been here when they died."

Hutch closed his eyes, shutting out the sight of the passing Duluth scenery. "I can't change what's already happened." He turned back to his young cousin. "And that wouldn't have prevented their deaths, anyway. From what I understand, they died almost instantly in the accident."
Chelsea shrugged. "You know how my grandmother is. She doesn't care if it's logical. If it's her way, that should be enough. You have to understand that everyone back here thought you were dead." She looked at him quickly. "That's what they told me, that you were dead." Her eyes returned to the road. "When your partner called and told us you were found again, it threw everybody into a tailspin."

"Because they thought if I was dead they could get everything that I would have inherited?"

"Guess so. Nothing had been done about your folks' will up to that time, because a person isn't legally dead until they've been missing seven years or something. My grandmother and all the other relatives, and even the lawyers, have been getting antsy ever since. They wanted to find out what kind of shape you're in so the will can finally get through probate. And I think they've been worried that someday you'd show up on their doorstep looking for a home."

Hutch tried to feel anger and wondered why he didn't. He wasn't even very hurt by their attitudes, and was very close to saying he didn't care about the money one way or another.

"Here we are," Chelsea announced, shutting off the car. They found themselves in the wide driveway of his parents' home. Hutch drew a deep preparatory breath as he climbed out of the car.

He stood still for a moment, looking up at the impressive facade. The white Georgian columns of the house rose above him, the many-paneled windows beckoning. He remembered the view from inside and anxiously waited for Chelsea to open the front door.

Standing in the foyer, Hutch began to soak up the feeling of the house. He felt as if he could just catch the sound of his father's footsteps on the polished marble floor, or hear his mother's soft laughter wafting down the stairs. But the house was empty, quiet, unlived-in. The furniture was covered in white draping, stairs and banister hidden by a layer of dust. No one lived here anymore, and that seemed a shame.

This was not the house he'd grown up in. His parents had sold the home he'd known in his childhood when he'd left for college, trading it for this huge domicile that was more upscale, more prestigious. He remembered there were at least five bedrooms. *Me, an only child, and after Van and I broke up it was obvious there'd be no grandchildren to come and stay... why did they have to get such a big house?* Nevertheless, he had enjoyed staying here the few times he'd come on visits from L.A. Starsky had been with him once. Hutch smiled, remembering that his mother hadn't quite known what to do with his irrepressible partner. Two days with Starsky under her roof must have seemed like an eternity.

"My grandmother loves this place," Chelsea said quietly, coming up behind him. "It's killing her to let it sit like this. Nothing's been touched. I can swear to that. Oh, everything was catalogued and appraised when your parents died, but they've left everything intact; I guess one of the things you'll have to do is sort out what you want to take and what you want to let others have."

Hutch shrugged; he hadn't thought about that duty left to the living. He stepped into the living room and wandered over to the mantle, fingers touching some of the porcelain Hummel figures his mother had collected. *Maybe I'll pick out one or two... Aunt Priscilla and the others are welcome to the rest.*

"Did you know my mother and father very well?" he asked suddenly, almost painfully anxious to hear something about the parents who now seemed so very far from him.

"We ate Sunday dinner with them all the time, but mostly the adults talked to each other. We kids got up from the table as quick as we could." Chelsea giggled. "I always thought your dad was the handsomest thing -- for a man his age, I mean. My dad was never as good looking." Her eyes slid up to his face. "You take after your father, you know."
Hutch was amused to realize he was blushing again. "I... don't know how to take you, Chelsea," he said honestly. "Not many people talk to me like that anymore."

The girl blushed, too. "Grandma always says I'm too forward." A shrug lifted the slender shoulders. "I'm not flirting with a cousin, though. Just being truthful. I always remembered Daddy's cousin Ken."

Hutch didn't know how to respond. A little girl had liked him, looked up to him, and he could barely remember her or why she had even noticed him. *Is there anything in me now that she'll want to look up to?*

"Do you want to see the upstairs?" Chelsea changed the subject quickly. Hutch was glad to follow her out of the room.

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For the next two days, he had to listen to his Aunt Priscilla's condemning his behavior, the way the hospital had organized his therapy -- all with the statement that the advice and commentary was being doled out for his own good -- and, of course, the fact that he still had not gone to the cemetery. Finally, tired of the negativism, he agreed to go. He'd hoped that Chelsea could take him on this trip as well, but Stan was to be his escort this time, and Aunt Priscilla was coming along.

The drive seemed unusually long -- or perhaps Hutch's anticipation and dread made it seem that way. By the time they arrived, he found he was nervously wringing his hands, and that when he tried to talk, he stuttered. *If she keeps her mouth shut, he thought, looking at Aunt Priscilla, I can get through this.* Stan wound along the narrow drive through the cemetery, finally coming to a stop overlooking a low-lying section of the property, and the three family members got out of the car.

"It's over there," Stan said quietly, pointing out a red granite marker for Hutch.

It was time, no putting the inevitable off any longer. Hutch wished he'd brought his cane with him, but he'd been trying to use it as little as possible around his relatives. Here, though, the ground was somewhat rough and it would have helped him to keep his balance. For one of the first times, he was glad to be wearing the brace on his leg; he didn't want to fall in front of Priscilla.

He stopped in front of the red marker which bore his parents' names. It was simple, lettered in Roman, carrying their dates of birth and death. Hutch stood still, just staring for a moment, feeling an incredible sadness come over him, as if now, for the first time, he truly believed they were gone. It hadn't been real to him before. Now, they both lay here, under the ground that was cold and hard in the wintertime, buried in a dark forbidding vault away from the world of the living.

He closed his eyes, and the accident played out in his imagination. *It was terrible,* Aunt Priscilla had told him. *The car was almost completely crushed by the tractor-trailer. You wouldn't even have recognized them. We had to have closed caskets...*

He'd hated her for telling him all those details. He'd preferred to remain sheltered from the worst facts, and he realized that had mostly been Starsky's doing before. His friend wasn't here to protect him now, to run interference. *I had to come and do this on my own,* Hutch remembered wryly. But he knew he had to face these things if he were to finally emerge from his cocoon into the real world. *I'm strong enough to face it all. I have to be."

His feeling of grief grew stronger, and Hutch's tears ran down his cheeks. He tried to hold them back, imagining his aunt would tell him such behavior was unbecoming. He decided he didn't care. *She wants to know that I felt something about their deaths. This is the proof she was lacking before.* He tried to draw a
steadying breath, but it escaped as a sob. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stan look abruptly away, as if to leave him his privacy, or because he couldn't deal with his cousin's tears. Hutch sensed Aunt Priscilla standing next to him, a white embroidered hanky in her hand. She was daubing at tears of her own.

Hutch felt very alone in the world at that moment. His parents, for all their faults, had cared about him. Where was his family now? He didn't feel close to Priscilla or even Stan. None of these people had come to visit him when he was in the hospital, none had offered help or consolation. They'd left the burden to Starsky, apparently unworried about Hutch and his health problems. It was as though when his parents died, his ties with the family had been effectively severed.

His tears became bitter, born of the loneliness he had suffered since coming out of the coma. No one truly understood, not even Starsky. To everyone, it was a small matter beside the important fact that he was at least alive. But those people had never been taken out of the world they knew and returned two years later, confused and weakened by the ordeal. They can't imagine what I'm feeling now. And they won't even try.

"Ken, dear," Aunt Priscilla spoke up, tucking her hanky back in her purse. "You must compose yourself. Tears won't bring them back, you know."

It seemed the cruelest remark he'd ever heard. Hutch reached into his back pocket for a handkerchief and wiped his face. A deep-seated part of him wanted to know what his parents' reaction to his disappearance had been, but he kept the questions to himself, fearing to learn how they had taken that news. They couldn't have been glad, could they? Maybe disappointed to realize I'd never come home and be the son they wanted me to be again... He wished desperately for a comforting touch. But Priscilla and Stan were already heading back to the car. Starsky would know how to help. Just laying a hand on my shoulder would make it easier to bear this. Incredibly alone, Hutch made his way back to the car and climbed in.

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When Stan's car pulled into the driveway at Aunt Priscilla's house, Chelsea, who must have been watching for them from her own front porch down the street, came bounding up to the car. Hutch saw her eager, welcoming face fall when she caught sight of him. He tried to pull himself together for her sake.

"There you are, Chelsea," Priscilla said as she climbed out of the car. "Good. I need you to run down to the store to pick up a few things for dinner." The older woman dug into her purse and came up with a list she handed to the teenager.

"Okay," Chelsea responded without taking her eyes from Hutch. "You want to come along with me?" she asked him softly.

His first impulse was to decline the invitation, but the warmth in her soft eyes was impossible to resist. What else did he have to do anyway, he thought in resignation, sit in his room upstairs and brood?

"Sure," he answered, and was rewarded by a blinding smile.

He followed the young girl across the street to get her own car. The blue TransAm made him think of Starsky for some reason.

"You wanta drive?" Chelsea's voice startled him. She was holding up the keys.

Hutch chuckled despite himself. "No. I haven't got a license anymore."
"Oh." Chelsea looked momentarily abashed, and busily went around to unlock the passenger door for him. When they were both settled in the car and had their seatbelts fastened she started the engine. She stole a look at Hutch. "I'm sorry, Ken. I didn't think." A nervous giggle. "It seems weird to be driving an adult around."

"It didn't seem weird to you the last time."

"I know. I didn't realize you didn't have your license then, though." She put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway. "How come you don't? I mean, if you don't mind me asking."

Hutch shrugged. "It expired while I was in the hospital. And I've just never thought about doing anything to get it back."

"Is there any reason you couldn't drive?" The question arose from the girl's natural curiosity.

"I never really thought about it," Hutch mused. "At first, I was pretty weak and... I couldn't concentrate too well... and I couldn't read, either." It didn't seem as painful to admit those things to his new friend as he would have imagined.

"But you've got your strength back pretty much, don't you? And I know you can read again."

"Yeah." Hutch was silent a moment, considering. "My -- uh, my right leg gets kind of weak sometimes." It was the first time he'd said anything about that handicap thus far.

"I noticed. But you don't limp all the time. I bet if you had cruise control on your car it wouldn't matter so much. You could just rest your leg if it got tired."

For the young, it seemed, there was always a logical answer for everything. "I don't know, Chelsea," Hutch sighed. "I don't even know if I remember how to drive."

"That's crazy! Nobody could forget that. It just comes naturally once you know how, doesn't it? Hey, if you'd like, I'd be glad to let you practice in my car." She smiled over at him, obviously trying to make up for the hurts he had suffered.

"Well -- I'll think about it, honey." Hutch felt himself relaxing under the sweet attention she paid him.

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Hutch sat staring at the telephone in his bedroom. He was trying to decide if he should call Starsky. It had been days since their painful goodbye and he hadn't called to tell him he had arrived safely at his destination. He does deserve to hear from me -- if he still wants anything to do with me at all, that is. Hutch felt a prickle of guilt at the way he'd treated Starsky. He'd been selfish, thinking more about his own problems than what his friend might have been going through. Couldn't help it, I guess. What's been going on with me has pretty much taken up all my attention... But it was time he reached out to the one person who'd been there for him.

The phone was in his hand without further thought. It took Hutch a couple of tries before he dialed correctly -- he had to think a moment to remember the area code -- but finally the phone at the other end of the line began ringing.

"Starsky," a sleep-fogged voice answered on the third ring.

"Did I wake you?"
"Hm? Who is this?"

"Me." Hutch found he was clutching the receiver in both hands, as though it were a fragile hope.

"Hutch?" The grogginess was fast departing the distant voice, replaced with a measure of surprise and eagerness. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. I've been... pretty busy since I got here."

"I'll bet." The gladness faded from the voice; now Starsky's tone was flat and defeated, the way it had been when the two of them had said goodbye.

It was hard to interpret his friend's mood over the long-distance connection. Hutch wanted to make things up to him, tell him not to sound so hurt, but he didn't know where to start.

"Yeah," he said finally. "I don't know how much longer I'll be here."

"Stay as long as you like. It is your home." The comment contained audible bitterness.

"We have an appointment with the family lawyers tomorrow."

"About the will?"

"Yeah." Why can't I reach you anymore? "Are... are you okay?"

A silence. "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

Okay. I won't pry. I won't try to discuss the pain we've been feeling, the pain we've caused each other. "Just checking."

"Look. I overslept this morning. I gotta get ready to go to work."

"Oh. All right. I'll... call again..."

"Don't put yourself out." Though Starsky didn't hang up, there was a tone of finality to his words.

"Goodbye, then."

"Goodbye." The line went silent.

Hutch put the receiver back in its cradle. What, after all, was there left to say?

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CHAPTER IV

Martin Pemberton stood as his secretary ushered his guests into his paneled office. Priscilla Hutchinson looked as she always did, tiny yet with a bearing that made her seem formidable. Her son, Stanley, deferential as always, had taken her elbow, a sheepish look on his face indicating he was somewhat
embarrassed by his mother's attitude. Behind him, though, came the man Pemberton most wanted to meet. He'd heard a lot about Kenneth Hutchinson, at least about the fact that the former police detective had been kidnapped and found after two years in a drug-induced coma. Priscilla had told Martin that she was concerned that Kenneth would never recover his physical strength or mental faculties. In fact, she had suggested that he would not be capable of managing the inheritance his parents had left. Though Pemberton knew it would be difficult to prove this unless the man was a complete invalid with extensive brain damage and had advised her thus, he needed to see the man with his own eyes before making any further decisions.

Experienced at judging people from sizing up witnesses on the stand, he watched carefully as Kenneth Hutchinson entered the room. He was a bit taller than his cousin Stanley, his hair a more striking blond. He was walking with the aid of a cane, yet his gait seemed fairly steady. The hand clenched on the cane spoke more of a painful anxiety than physical weakness. Pemberton studied his face. He'd expected the air of a stroke victim, the lost expression of slack features, the vague eyes that indicated they saw but did not comprehend. Yet that was not what he found. The slender man became aware of his scrutiny and drew himself upright, meeting Pemberton's gaze, doing some appraising of his own.

The large blue eyes were clear and cold, almost daring the attorney to judge him. Yet for all their determination, there existed the subtle shadow of pain endured, of being haunted by self-doubt. What would it be like, Pemberton wondered, to fall into a coma lasting two years? How could anyone emerge unscathed, intelligence intact?

"Please be seated," he invited his guests, pointing out the chairs arranged in a semi-circle facing his desk. "Priscilla. Stanley..." He turned his eyes back to the other man.

"This is my cousin, Ken," Stanley spoke up.

"Kenneth." Pemberton extended his hand.

The hesitation was brief, but all in the room noticed it. Hutchinson glanced at the offered hand, then seemed to take a second to decide on the proper reaction. Then he leaned his cane against the desk and, straightening to his full height, reached out. The handshake he returned was firm, however. Pemberton wondered how strong he was. The bone structure on the tall frame was large, the shoulders broad. The clothes he wore were well-fitting, yet the design of his sport coat was unconstructed and of heavy-textured material, capable of making a thin person appear to carry more bulk. Still, he did not appear overly frail. Physical therapy -- probably months of it -- had given him back some muscle tone.
Something flickered in the blue eyes as Pemberton addressed him. "Please," he said, "call me Hutch." The eyes, defiant now, darted to his aunt's face as if expecting some reprimand.

"Fine, Hutch. It's good to meet you at last," Pemberton smiled. Of all the Hutchinsons in his office at that moment, this man looked the most like he should be called 'Hutch.' It was obviously a nickname he'd acquired away from home. And the statement told the lawyer something more. It was as if he were saying to his relatives, 'I'm me, not who you want me to be.'

Hutch returned the comment with a nod, but before he could make a reply, his aunt spoke up instead.

"Martin, we do have a lot to discuss this afternoon."

"I know, Priscilla," Pemberton said smoothly, without a trace of audible impatience. "I think we should begin by reading the will."

"We've been over that before," the elderly woman frowned.

"I know. But Hutch hasn't heard it."

The carefully lipsticked mouth drew into a tight line. "Oh, yes. Of course." The woman turned to her nephew. "Ken, do you want to have Martin read the will? These things are somewhat complicated."

Pemberton watched Hutch's reaction closely. The fair lashes dropped for an instant, as if he were trying to hold onto his composure.

"Yes. I do want to hear it, Aunt Priscilla. I've read a few legal documents in my time."

"I'll explain any legalese that you can't follow," Martin assured, smothering a smile at the tone with which Hutch had answered his aunt. It held the same longsuffering note everyone used with their elder relatives who thought that, even though you were over thirty-five, you were still one of the kids.

The attorney opened the sheaf of crisp legal documents and began to read slowly. The will was fairly straightforward. The bulk of the estate, including the house, was designated to go to Hutch, with about one-third divided between the other relatives. The usual statement that if their son should predecease his parents, the estate would be divided among the surviving relatives, was a part of the main document.

Hutch sat forward as he heard those lines. Martin glanced over the paper he was holding to note his attention. The blond man nodded, obviously following the meaning of the formalized words. Another glance showed Pemberton that Priscilla was also watching her nephew, and that Stanley was sitting with his gaze on his own folded hands.

The attorney continued to the end of the document, then paused. "This codicil was added just a month before your parents' accident, Hutch." He cleared his throat. "At the time of this writing, our son Kenneth is missing and presumed to be dead. If he is not found alive within a period of seven years from the date of June 21, 1979, the estate will be divided in the manner stipulated in the will should our son predecease his parents."

Hutch winced at the words 'missing and presumed dead.' Pemberton knew the terms hurt him. He'd felt the addition of the codicil necessary, though at the time he'd told the Hutchinsons that they could be acting prematurely. He had been wrong about that. But they had also been wrong; it had taken more than two years, but their son had been found after all. And here he sat in Pemberton's office, obviously alive and well.
Hutch looked away as Pemberton folded the document and put it down. His voice sounded faint. "Looks like they didn't hold out much hope that I'd be found."

Stanley turned to soothe him. "Ken, you have to understand. It did look hopeless. It had been five months. We'd been in touch with your partner. He never had any news. All he could tell us was that you had disappeared without a trace, that there were no clues at all to what had happened to you."

Fine-boned hands clenched on the arms of the chair as Hutch listened. A flicker of pain chased across his fair features, followed by a firming of his determination. He looked up at his cousin and his aunt, eyes flashing. "I suppose it would have all been so much less complicated if I never had been found. All you'd have to do was wait another couple of years and you'd have everything my parents left for yourselves! As it is, my coming back has ruined your plans, hasn't it?"

"Really, Kenneth," Priscilla spoke up, her own eyes as fiery as his. "There is no need to take such a tone of accusation. It isn't that we wished you dead. We have our own money, you know. But your parents worked years to accumulate the inheritance they left you. What concerns us now is that you might not be able to handle the responsibility..."

"Responsibility! Isn't that just another way of saying you don't think I deserve --"

"Everyone, please," Pemberton broke in, aware that he had to take control of the situation. "Priscilla, Hutch, please calm down. You're acting like adversaries and you're not. You're members of the same family. Wills and inheritances have a tendency to make everyone lose their heads and say things they later regret."

"I haven't said anything I regret," Hutch snapped. "I feel as though I'm being accused of wrongdoing, and I want to know why. If my parents didn't want me to inherit their money, they would have written a different will."

"All right. All right," Martin spoke up before Priscilla could answer. "We have to deal with the will as it was written. Priscilla, there is nothing in here that says anything about Hutch's ability to 'handle' the inheritance. He is alive and apparently quite well recovered from his ordeal."

"'Quite well recovered' is a relative term, Martin," the dowager said tightly. "Until coming here to visit, he was still undergoing physical therapy as well as psychiatric counseling. He attempted to rejoin the police force, but it was decided that he would not be able to go back to work. He isn't working at anything now, and it doesn't appear that he will become employed in the near future."

Pemberton wanted to snap that in that case the inheritance would be very important to Hutch, but he held his tongue, knowing that only the most professional demeanor would serve him in this instance. "Priscilla, what do you suggest?"

"I believe someone should be appointed to manage his money for him."

"You wish a conservator to be appointed to administer the estate," Martin translated into legal terminology. "Priscilla, the need for a conservator would be extremely difficult to prove. It would take the testimony of two physicians in a court of law, stating that Hutch is incapable of managing that sum of money."

"I think we should look into the possibility," Priscilla insisted. "Martin, he's like a child in many ways."

"Mother!" Stanley sounded shocked. "Ken isn't... retarded, you know."
"He forgets things! He gets confused. Accomplishing the simplest tasks takes him an hour..." The elderly woman wound down, tugging a handkerchief from her purse. "I remember what he used to be. He was so much like my dear husband's brother, his father. They never wanted him to leave Duluth and become a policeman anyway. They'd hoped he'd stay here and take an interest in the business. But he doesn't know anything about how it runs. Stanley and I have had to keep things going in the time since Harvey and Margaret passed away. What's he going to do now? Take his money and go back to Los Angeles? He'll go through the inheritance in a year's time..."

"That's enough!" The sharp voice from across the room startled everyone, even Pemberton, who'd realized what the words had to be doing to Hutch. "Stop talking about me like I'm not in the room. I'm right here, you know. I'm wide-awake and listening to you. I'm not in a coma now!" He gripped the chair arms tighter, chest heaving, eyes full of rebellion. "For two years, yes, I had to lie in a bed and let others take care of me. I couldn't do a damn thing for myself. Nurses bathed me and changed my diapers. I was fed through a tube and I went to the bathroom through a tube. I couldn't move a muscle or open my eyes and look around the room." The words were caustic and full of self-hatred.

"But I finally came out of it. Someone was there who cared enough to pull me through, and I finally began to respond to the world around me again. Even then, I wasn't able to take care of myself, though. It was still up to doctors and nurses and therapists and my friend, Starsky. I couldn't walk, I couldn't talk, couldn't feed or dress myself. Learning to do those things again was hard work, dammit, but I managed them. All without anybody from this family ever calling to see if I needed help, if Starsky needed a break from taking care of me, if there were any bills I couldn't pay!"

The ragged voice grew louder. "I learned to read again. I learned to tell time and add and subtract and divide. I learned what had happened in the world while I was sick. And I learned that I wanted to get back on my feet and take care of myself again. And now I can. And nobody's going to tell me how to live my life or what to do with my money!"

For the first time since becoming her lawyer, Martin Pemberton found Priscilla Hutchinson speechless. She had paled under the verbal assault, her blinking eyes the only response to the words that had rained like blows, their vehemence like slaps in her face. Stanley had sat forward in his chair, reaching toward her, but he remained wordless, too, rendered silent by his cousin's outburst.

Pemberton turned to the man who, a few moments ago, had been raging and defiant. Hutch looked stunned, as startled by his flare-up as everyone else had been. He reached out to grasp his cane, as if it could offer him support in the sudden silence. Pemberton could only guess at what the description of what it had been like for him had cost the proud man: fresh lines seemed grooved into his features, curving around his wide blue eyes and etched at the middle of his forehead, between the brows. But he was still a proud man, and perhaps speaking out of his bitterness and shame, a measure of his tarnished pride had been restored. Though his mouth was downturned and his face flushed with emotion, the blond head seemed to be held a little higher than when the outraged speech had begun.

"Hutch," Martin approached him quietly, "tell me something. How did you get here to Duluth from L.A.?"

Though surprised at the question, Hutch answered succinctly. "By plane."

"Yes. And who made the arrangements for you?"

"Nobody." A light dawned in the large eyes, and he turned again to look at his relatives. "I made all the plans myself -- travel connections, buying the ticket, everything."
"I see." Martin pretended to straighten papers on his desk. "And what do you plan to do with the money you will inherit from your parents' estate?"

The hopeful face fell a little, but the man was still determined. "I... don't know. I haven't made any specific plans."

"You see?" Priscilla broke in. Stanley nudged her arm this time.

Pemberton ignored her. "Well, you do have a need for money, don't you? I imagine you have quite a number of medical bills that have piled up."

"Yes. Being in the hospital for two and a half years and continuing therapy is expensive," Hutch admitted. "But actually, my health insurance through the department is taking care of everything."

"No insurance pays all the bills," Priscilla humphed.

"I was injured in the line of duty," Hutch pointed out, turning to her. "And because of that, they've picked up all the expenses -- the two years in the nursing home in Australia, travel costs, the rehab facility in L.A. and my outpatient therapy."

"And what do you do for other living expenses?" Martin probed gently.

"I get disability pay from the department. It's about eighty percent of what my salary would be." There had been only the slightest hesitation over the word 'disability.' "And I own a small piece of property in the Venice Beach area, the building where I have my apartment. I have three other tenants. While I was missing, Starsky collected the rent and put it into a savings account."

Pemberton drew a breath before phrasing his next question. "And does anyone help you manage your affairs?"

The eyes that had been locked with his own dropped to where he clutched the handle of his cane. "Starsky helps me."

"Do you make some of the decisions yourself, or does he do everything?"

"We talk things over." A brief, half-smile tinged with chagrin and self-deprecation. "I admit I don't always get everything together just right."

"Martin, please." It was Priscilla. "I don't want to hurt Ken, but you must understand. He's done very well to come through his illness so well, but he just isn't the same as he was before." There was honest sympathy in her eyes, but Pemberton could see that hurt as much as the content of her words.

The attorney turned to the elderly woman. "He seems very competent to me. His answers make sense. He knows what's going on. Are you telling me that he's not always this alert, this mentally proficient? Are there periods when he seems bewildered, confused, unable to accomplish the daily tasks of life?"

"I believe a doctor would be better able to make that determination."

"Priscilla, does he or does he not function as well the rest of the time as he has in this office?"

The woman drew her gaze from the intense scrutiny of her attorney to look at her nephew. "When he is particularly... fatigued... he has some difficulty. He seems weaker, physically, and he seems to lose track of what he's trying to say. But he is a guest here, not required to manage anything, financial or otherwise, so
we don't know how other considerations would affect him. He's said himself that his friend helps him with his accounts, paying his bills, balancing his checkbook..."

"All right! You want to prove I'm unfit, go ahead and try!" Hutch threw himself out of his chair and strode toward the door. Pemberton watched as he tried to hide the weakness in the leg he favored.

"Hutch," he called out. "Your leaving isn't going to get anything solved."

Stanley rose from his seat also and went to his cousin. "She doesn't mean to hurt you, Ken," he said softly.

Hutch ignored him, but he walked back to the center of the room, stopping to peer down at his aunt. "What do you want? You want to take me to court? You want to parade me in front of a row of doctors and shrinks in the hopes they'll tell you I'm mentally unstable and deficient? What will happen then? When your 'conservator' is appointed?" He turned his angry gaze on the attorney. "Tell her, Pemberton. Doing all that isn't going to make it turn out so that she'll have the money, will it? A conservator will be in charge, but it will still be my money, won't it? And that person will be charged with acting in my best interest, won't he?"

"That's right, Priscilla," Pemberton conceded, respect for the beleaguered man growing in him. "And I must say, listening to him right now, he sounds like he's pretty good at standing up for himself, at reasoning through things. I don't know if you'd be able to find two doctors who will testify to the need for a conservator."

Hutch was moving slowly, coming back to his seat, tense hands shaking a bit on the cane he used to steady himself. One hand reached to rub at his forehead. After a moment, he looked back up at his aunt.

"What do you want, Aunt Priscilla?" he asked again. This time, his voice was not roughened with fury. Now he sounded wrung out, near the end of his strength and determination. "Do you want the house? Chelsea told me you love it. I've been there and there are some things I'd like to take back home with me, but I don't want to live there. It's... too much house for me. And there aren't that many memories. It's not the house I grew up in, after all." He let go of the cane, using his hand to smooth his jacket that had become disarrayed during his angry tirade. "Will you agree not to take me to court if I give you the house? I... don't want to go through something like that."

"Hutch," Martin spoke in a warning tone. "Nobody's offering you an ultimatum. You are under absolutely no obligation to give away part of your inheritance."

"I know that." The weary eyes closed. "If my... family... thinks I've never done anything for them, maybe this will make up for that. I wouldn't want the house to live in, so it would probably be sold. Since it means more to Aunt Priscilla, she should have it. All I ask is... to be left alone."

Silence reigned in the room for a long moment. Finally, Stanley Hutchinson spoke in a compelling whisper. "Mother..."

Priscilla looked up, a wan smile for her son, a look of gentleness turned toward her nephew. "I do love the house, Ken. If you have no other misgivings, I will accept your offer. And I'll say no more about the need for having a conservator."

The only outward sign of Hutch's feelings was a tiny relaxation of the tenseness in his facial muscles. As he set out to conclude the meeting and draw up the necessary papers, Martin Pemberton found himself wondering once more what it must be like to leave the world for a period of two years, to fight to return, and to have to continue to fight once the return was achieved.
"Ken!" Chelsea seemed surprised to find him looking for her in the garden behind the house. "How'd it go at the lawyers?" When he didn't answer, she moved closer to him. "Are you okay? You seem -- different."

Not knowing how to answer her, Hutch simply shrugged. "I'm okay. It was kind of... trying this afternoon."

She grinned. "I'll bet it was. Did you put Grandmother in her place?"

"Yeah. I think I did, a little bit." He still hadn't decided if he had won a victory or sunk to new depths.

"Good. We don't want her getting too complacent, do we?"

"I don't think there's much danger of that." He looked around and ambled over to the porch swing, tired beyond words.

Chelsea followed him. "You seem different. Want to talk about it?"

"How do you mean, different?" Hutch didn't want to recount the conversation at Pemberton's office.

"I don't know," the young woman appraised. "You look kind of tired, but... stronger somehow, I think. When you first got here, something was missing. You didn't seem all that sure of yourself."

"How do I seem now?" Oddly, he found he was hanging on her every word.

His cousin looked him up and down, her long-lashed eyes frank in their scrutiny. "Like you might have found what was missing."

A smile broke free, when he hadn't thought himself capable of smiling again. "How'd you ever get so perceptive, hmm?"

"I told you I was a genius, didn't I?" And Chelsea laughed, completely destroying the image of soothsayer-wise-beyond-her-years. She was a teenager again, fresh and just what Hutch needed to keep from taking things too seriously.

"What were you saying about helping me learn to drive again?" he asked suddenly, finding himself wondering where the idea had come from. Something like that is what I need, though. A way to empower myself; to take control and go where and when I want to go.

"Hey, you mean it? Great! Let's hop in the car and go see about getting your learner's permit." Chelsea jumped up from the swing, taking his arm to pull him to his feet. "We'll pick up one of the rule books so you can study the regulations -- I burned mine when I passed the test!"

The days became filled with activity: driving lessons that ended in laughter, sorting and packing things he wanted to keep from his parents' house, visiting some old friends and old familiar places in Duluth. Hutch took up jogging again, running each morning with his always-energetic cousin, Chelsea. He felt more of his old stamina beginning to return, more strength, and he began to revel in the feel of his long legs eating up the pavement.

There were long conversations with Chelsea during the pleasant afternoon driving sessions. He knew he'd never forget the feeling he'd experienced when she asked him about being in the coma.
"It was..." he'd groped for the right description, "kind of eerie. I don't really remember being unconscious, but I must have dreamed a lot. Waking up didn't happen all at once. At first I was too weak to even turn over in bed. I remember feeling scared, then confused, then I found out how long it had been and I was angry. Sometimes, I felt like a baby, with people teaching me how to do everything again, and it taking so long. That still bothers me -- it's been hard being with the relatives; they're worse than Starsky is."

"Boy, can I identify with that," Chelsea had sighed. "My mom still makes me feel like a baby. Seems like every time I start to talk to her this summer, we have a fight."

Hutch knew how that felt, too, and that made it easy to commiserate with the girl. "What do you fight about?" he'd asked.

"My driving. How long I stay out. Where I go. But especially about... Andrew."

"Andrew?" He had noticed a shadow of hurt in her expressive eyes at the name.

"We went together last year. He had to move away. I want to be with him, so I'm trying to get Mom to let me go visit him. But she doesn't understand. She just calls it puppy love."

Hutch pulled the car over to the side of the road, putting it in park, and then laying a hand on Chelsea's slender shoulder. He hated to see her hurting and a strong protective feeling made his heart seem very full. "You want to talk about it?"

When she turned to look at him, there was a mist in her eyes. Hutch listened, and it was strange to realize that a measure of his own pain lifted when he tried to give encouragement to Chelsea.

The days turned into weeks and soon nearly a month had passed. But if the days were full, the nights were long and lonely.

Before he could fall asleep in his room each night, Hutch had to allow himself to think about Starsky. He kept so busy all day that he fought the images of his friend's strong presence, of the smiles he so generously bestowed, of the tenderness and boyish charm, because with them came inevitably the remembrance of that hurt expression the beautiful face had worn when Hutch was leaving. *I had to leave, Stark, to find myself. I didn't believe in myself anymore. That's not who you need. I'm so sorry...*

Now he welcomed the memories. He pulled them out like cherished snapshots, looking them over lingeringly, always finding some nuance he'd missed before. And he would relax, the pain fading, the presence of Starsky very close to him, soothing him into restful sleep. In his dreams, all was forgiven, and they were together again, as they'd been meant to be. In the morning, with the light of day, he wondered if those dreams could ever be reality.

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The day he passed his driver's test was a special one. Hutch was filled with pride, amazed that such an ordinary thing could make him feel so complete, so productive. Stanley looked proud of him, too, and even Aunt Priscilla was effusive in her congratulations. Chelsea positively beamed. His teenage cousin suggested a dinner out for the family to celebrate, but her brothers and sister were busy with homework, her mom had a meeting and Stanley wanted to watch a baseball game. Aunt Priscilla declined the invitation, too, but urged Chelsea and Hutch to go out anyway. She offered to pay for the dinner, but Chelsea said no; she wanted to treat her 'student' herself.
They ended up in a nice, moderately priced restaurant that catered to a young crowd. Hutch didn't mind the teens and young adults there, he felt kind of adolescent sometimes himself, especially with his fun-loving cousin. They consulted their menus for a few minutes, and Hutch soon felt himself being stared at.

He looked up to meet the eyes of the waitress. She was blonde, brown-eyed and closer to Hutch's age than to the rest of the restaurant patrons and help. When he caught her looking at him, she smiled unselfconsciously.

"We don't get many men in here that are my type," she said with a little lift of her shoulders. "Are you from around here, honey?"

Hutch tried to fight the feeling that he was about to blush. "I grew up here, but I've been living in L.A. for the last couple of years."

"Well, welcome back to Duluth." A few more seconds of frank staring and then the woman seemed to shake herself and remember her job. "What'll you have?"

She kept her eyes studiously on her pad as she wrote down what Hutch and Chelsea ordered.

After that, Hutch tried to ignore her. It wasn't easy, because every time she brought something to the table, water glasses, the ketchup, the sodas they'd ordered, she kept looking at him and Chelsea teased him every time.

"I bet she'd go out with you if you asked her," his cousin prodded as she bit into the huge hamburger she had ordered.

"Why would I ask her out?" Hutch was truly baffled.

"She likes you, can't you tell?"

"She doesn't even know me."

"Well," Chelsea chewed a French fry thoughtfully, "she's attracted to you, then. What do you think of her?"

Hutch turned to watch the woman wait on a table across the room. "She's pretty," he shrugged. "I always did like blondes, but..."

"Well, then? I'll get lost if you want me to."

"Chelsea." He sighed, not knowing how to put his feelings into words. "I don't want to ask her out on a date."

"Why not? Do you have another girlfriend back in L.A.?"

"No, I... it's just..." Hutch couldn't frame an answer. His heart felt like someone was turning it inside out. There was only one other person he cared about. The thought of being with someone else had never entered his mind. Hutch looked toward the waitress again, trying to see if anything about her attracted him. She had a slender, feminine body, with curves in the expected places, but he felt nothing. No, not quite nothing. A vague curiosity in him wondered if he could actually function sexually again. He had felt no stirring inside himself for such a long time, but what if he were with someone and that someone touched him? Shouldn't he try to find out? The possibility of embarrassment or humiliation seemed too probable. Hutch shook his head and brought his eyes back to his well-meaning cousin. "No, Chelsea, you have to understand. I've been sick a long time. I'm feeling pretty good these days, but..."
"Oh." An incandescent blush swept the face of his young companion. She took an enormous bite of her hamburger.

Hutch smiled, feeling sorry that he'd embarrassed her. "It's not just that," he continued softly. "I have my own problems on my mind. A few years ago, yeah, I'd have picked a woman up if she acted like she was interested. But now I'm different. I don't know if I could ever tell some stranger about... what happened to me." That answer was mostly the truth. But there was more, Hutch knew. If I can ever be with anybody again, I know who it's going to be.

Chelsea seemed to regain her composure and the rest of the meal continued without incident. When the waitress came up to ask them if they wanted to order dessert, she spoke for both herself and Hutch.

"We want the biggest, richest ice cream and cake dessert you have. We're celebrating."

"You are? What are you celebrating?" She looked from one to the other.

"My cousin got his driver's license today," Chelsea announced proudly.

Hutch felt like sliding under the table at the look the waitress gave him. A bit of his sense of accomplishment slipped when she seemed surprised and befuddled by the announcement. "You're just getting a license?" she asked, seemingly unable to stop herself.

He lifted one shoulder in a dismissive gesture. "It's been a long time."

There was another uncomfortable silence at the table. Then the waitress cleared her throat noisily and offered, "Congratulations, then. I know what you should order. Our big devil's food cake, ice cream and hot fudge combination." She pointed out a page in the menu. "See, there it is. It's called 'Death by Chocolate.'"

"That's perfect! Bring us two of them," Chelsea told her before Hutch could say anything else.

The huge servings almost daunted both of them when they arrived. Hutch just stared down at the plateful of dark chocolate cake covered in rocky road ice cream smothered in hot fudge and melting whipped cream. Chocolate sprinkles and a maraschino cherry completed the confection. Hutch picked up his spoon but could hardly figure out where to start.

Chelsea dug right in. "My face is sure to break out from eating all this," she said between mouthfuls, "but it'll be worth it." She ate quietly for a few minutes. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you when I told her," she said softly as she caught a drip of hot fudge at the edge of her bowl.

Hutch, enjoying his own dessert, felt magnanimous. "That's okay." Though rich and almost too much for one person to finish alone, the Death by Chocolate reminded him of someone else who might like it. Miss you, Starsk. Someday, I'll take you out for a meal like this. He dipped a huge spoonful up and put the whole thing in his mouth, catching his cousin's grin.

He drove her car back to the neighborhood and parked it in her father's garage. "Now that I've got my license, all I need is something to drive."

"Why don't you buy a car?"

Hutch looked at Chelsea. "Here? In Duluth?"

"If you're going to stay..."
He turned away from her. He hadn't been thinking of staying -- or leaving, for that matter. The comfortable limbo of his 'visit' had been enough for him these last weeks. "We'll talk about it later," he said then, touching the girl's shoulder. "Thanks for dinner, Chelsea, and for all your help."

"Hey, it was fun." She checked her watch. "I gotta go in. See you tomorrow?"

"Sure. Goodnight." He turned and headed down the street for Aunt Priscilla's house.

Tired and full, he turned in early, bidding his aunt goodnight before the evening news came on. Talking to her had become a little easier since the truce they'd achieved in Martin Pemberton's office.

"Did you have a good dinner?" she asked as he let himself into the house.

"Yeah. Chelsea's a fun kid."

Priscilla smiled. "She means a lot to me. Someday, she's going to bring a lot of happiness to this family."

"Actually, she already has, to me."

The older woman nodded. "Have you had any thoughts about what you're going to do, dear? Martin said he thought you should invest the money in the trust fund right away. It will be a while before the will is out of probate, but you could work with the trust fund money right away."

Hutch had been thinking about that money all week, not really deciding yet what to do with it. The trust fund had been set up for him by his grandfather and it had been in his name along with his father's, so it passed to him outside the will and it wasn't necessary to wait for the will to go through probate for him to get those finances. The trust fund was worth about fifty thousand dollars. It seemed an incredible sum to Hutch.

"I guess I'll talk to Martin about some good investments," he shrugged. "I might spend part of it on a car."

Aunt Priscilla looked shocked but held her tongue.

In bed in his room, Hutch thought more about Chelsea's suggestion. Having a car of his own would allow him to go wherever he wanted without having to depend on others. Wonder what Starsky will say when he finds out I can drive again? The thought brought a smile to his lips. Perhaps Starsky would tease him about his driving again someday.

He settled into sleep easily, crediting his full stomach with helping him drift off. As he sank into dreams, his thoughts were on the waitress' face when she had brought them their Death by Chocolates.

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The wide brown eyes smiled at him over the cash register as Chelsea paid for the meal. "What time do you get off?" he heard himself asking.

"Nine o'clock," the waitress told him. "Would you like to take in a movie?"

"Maybe." He felt his cousin's approving gaze as they left the restaurant.
He was walking home from the movie with the woman he'd just met that night. Without invitation, she wound her arm around his waist, falling into step with him. Hutch laid his arm across her shoulders, feeling strong and possessive. It had been a long time since a woman had looked at him like she thought he was handsome.

Inside her tiny apartment, she lit candles and poured wine. Hutch drank some, feeling lightheaded almost immediately. Soon the woman was in his arms, kissing him deeply. It felt good. She was warm, the soft curves of her body melting against him. But he still didn't understand why she'd been so eager to be with him.

He pulled out of a kiss, taking another sip of wine. "Why did you want to go out with me?"

She ran a finger over his lips. "I don't know. Most of the guys that come into the restaurant are too young for me. A girl gets lonely, you know. And there was just something about you..."

"What?"

"Don't talk," she urged. "Kiss me again."

The kisses were delicious and Hutch lost himself in them, letting the warmth suffuse his body. Without his realizing it, they'd arrived in the bedroom. He let her push him back against the mattress and begin unbuttoning his shirt.

A frisson of excitement chased her touch down his chest. Hutch closed his eyes for a moment, trying to understand his feelings. He wasn't really responding to her, but seemed to be watching from a distance, curious about what was going to happen next. It was like a science experiment. Would all the right elements bring about the expected result? She was so sweet and gentle, he thought he might let her take him where she wanted to go.

Deciding to take the lead, he wrapped his arms around her, feeling his strength as if it were coming back after a long absence. He kissed her mouth, her breasts and felt her legs opening under him so he could settle between them.

"Come on, baby," she breathed. "I'm ready for you..."

Hutch pressed himself against her willing body for a long time, content at first, still waiting to see what would happen, then feeling more uncomfortable. At last, he rolled away from her and sat up at the side of the bed.

"I'm sorry."

A small hand stroked his shoulder. "Hey, it's okay. Don't be embarrassed." He couldn't answer. "Is there something wrong? Is there anything I can do to help you?" The hand slid slowly across his bare chest.

It didn't move him, so he gently pushed it away. "It's not you," he finally croaked. "It's me. I... I've been sick a long time." He hung his head after the admission.

She sat up beside him. "It's okay. Happens to everybody sometimes. " She touched his face. "Maybe that's why I was attracted to you. You seem so... vulnerable."

He cringed from the description, pulling on his clothes and shoes and trying to hurry out of her apartment. At the door, she touched him again, and he winced. "I'd like to see you again."
He didn't look at her. "No. I don't think so."

"At least tell me your name."

"It's... it's Joey," he mumbled, stumbling through the door.

***

Hutch woke in a sweat, wondering where the words had come from. 'Joey,' the name he'd been called by the nurses who hadn't known who he was, the name for a baby kangaroo. Had his dream called the image up because he felt he was a nobody, or because he was able to function only on a childish level? It was a horrible feeling, as if he'd been humiliated for real. Miserable, struggling to unwind himself from the sheets, he finally found a comfortable position and dropped into sleep again.

***

He was weighed down by heated darkness, unable to see, only to feel. Someone was nearby, touching him. He felt strong fingers slip up his thighs and brush over his penis. "No." He sighed the protest. Why bother? Nothing worked right.

Soft hair brushed his belly and his mind at first supplied the image of smooth blonde strands. But it didn't feel like that. It was more like short, curly hair. He looked down, tried to see, but couldn't. Then soft lips kissed along his swelling length, and moist warmth opened to swallow him up. The sucking pulled at him, at his heart and soul. His hands reached down, holding the head to him, crying out in pain-laced arousal. The sucking stopped, the mouth left him. Anxious hands framed his face.

"It's all right, Hutch. I won't hurt you. Let me make you feel good."

The voice penetrated the haze of darkness, and he could see Starsky's eyes. The earnest, expectant love in them was almost more than he could bear. "I'm home," he whispered, glad and afraid at the same time.

"That's right. You're home with me. Everything's gonna be all right."

Firm, loving lips touched his own, then bent again to his erection. Hutch fell back against the bed, every pore open to sensation. Starsky was so good, a dead man would have responded. Wake me up, Starsk. Let me be alive again...

***

He cried out, lurching awake in stunning disappointment that the dream had ended too soon. Hutch reached down under the covers and touched himself. His penis was slightly hard, and he rubbed and stroked it slowly. Vibrations of feeling seemed to gradually tingle through him and he continued, allowing himself to enjoy the sensations, to visualize Starsky's face, Starsky's hand doing the touching. The pleasure built over a long moment, and he thought it might really happen this time, but then the glow faded away. He sighed, turning his face away from the light streaming from under his curtains. Starsky, I love you, he thought in anguish. With you it might be okay. Don't you think? He didn't know how to ask his friend, how to let him know what he remembered.

The dreams that night had proved one thing to him, and that was how much he loved and needed to be with his partner.

I want to come home, Starsk. It'll be different this time, you'll see.
A growing desire to be with him again, to show him how much he'd improved during the weeks in Duluth, fueled his thoughts.

Eager to make sure the day was a productive one, he climbed out of bed. The clock read nine and he realized it was Saturday, that Stanley would not be going to the office. He decided to call his cousin and ask him to go along with him to shop for a car.

Both Chelsea and her father accompanied him from car lot to car lot. He looked at American cars, European cars, a proliferation of new Japanese models he'd never heard of. It was strange to discover yet another part of life that had changed while he slept away in the coma. The new prices seemed astronomical to Hutch, who had bought so many older used cars in his day that he'd seldom paid over a thousand dollars for transportation. It had been his inclination at first to look for something reminiscent of his old LTD.


*Starsky might like a car like that*, Hutch thought, but he'd never been comfortable driving something that looked like it belonged on a racetrack.

The little sporty Japanese autos seemed disproportionately small to him, leaving Hutch wondering how he would fold his legs enough to climb into the driver's seat. And with these new makes he'd never seen before, he had no idea of the cars' reliability.

"If you want something reliable," Stanley finally pointed out, "go with the best. Get a Mercedes."

Hutch just looked at him at first. "I never thought of myself as the Mercedes type. What would Starsky think? They seem like you should have a chauffeur driving you around."

Chelsea giggled at him. "It's not like we're telling you to get a Rolls Royce. I have a girlfriend whose dad drives one and it never breaks down."

"That's what you'd need on a long trip, Ken," Stanley agreed. "If you're thinking about driving all the way to L.A., you don't want something that's going to break down in the middle of the desert."

He had a point, Hutch decided, though it hadn't occurred to him to drive all the way home. *How did I expect I'd get there once I bought a car?* he laughed at himself. All at once, the adventure of setting off cross-country seemed like a wonderful idea. He could visualize the pride in Starsky's eyes when he drove up and climbed out of a brand-new but somewhat dusty automobile. "Okay," he said to his relatives, "let's go check out the Mercedes lot."

On the way, he contemplated the trip. It would be difficult, maybe boring and lonely to drive all that way without someone else with him. He figured such a trip would take several days, and that his route should be well planned in advance. *That's what the Triple A is for. They give you all the maps you need.* He'd always enjoyed being behind the wheel, especially when a long drive provided time to think things through. Years ago, he'd get in the car and wind through the Los Angeles canyons just to puzzle through the details of a case and put the pieces together in his mind. *Driving back to L.A. would be good for me. Like a test, to see what I can handle all on my own.* A need for the sense of accomplishment making the journey would give him made Hutch determined that that was what he would do. *Starsky'll have a fit when I tell him. He won't think I'm up to it.* Hutch thought it over and considered not mentioning it his friend. *He might point out difficulties I haven't thought of and then I'll lose my confidence.*
They had arrived at the tastefully designed Mercedes showroom. Chelsea went immediately to the sports cars, but Hutch was attracted to the smaller Mercedes model nearest the wall-size window, shining in the sun. It was blue in color, with a hint of metallic glaze in the paint. Hutch's eyes widened when he looked at the price sticker, but as he explored the showroom further, he realized that the car he'd first looked at was more moderately priced than the larger ones. It didn't take long for Stanley and Chelsea to agree with his choice. He took a test drive, learned of the many features the car included and interested to learn there was an 800 number he could call for road service anywhere. The car was equipped with cruise control, and Chelsea reminded him that would be an important asset when driving long distances. In a little over an hour, the deal was struck, the papers were signed and the car was his. Stanley wrote a check on his own account for the down payment and Hutch would come by on Monday with a cashier's check to pay for the car in full. He couldn't wait to drive the beautiful car off the lot.

The days sped by, filled with going to AAA to get his Triptik, tooling around in his new car, getting used to the way it handled on the country roads on the outskirts of Duluth. Hutch was having a good time, but his desire to go home and be with Starsky grew until it became as strong as his need for food to sustain him, for air to breathe.

He awoke early Wednesday morning and lay under his covers, rehearsing his arrival in L.A. Starsky would be happy again, both of them would be. He'd dreamed of them being together again last night, and once more had awakened partially erect. I need him so much...

Thinking so much of Starsky made him need to talk to him. He sat up in the bed, reaching for the telephone on the nightstand.

The sleepy voice answering reminded him that it was a couple of hours earlier in California, but his joy at hearing it didn't diminish.

"Hi, Starsk," Hutch whispered warmly, wishing he could touch his friend.

"Hutch?" There was a moment's pause and the sound of movement. "You okay? Why are you calling? Is anything wrong?"

"No." He wished he dared risk an endearment, but 'babe' seemed too much, 'partner' awkward now. "No, I'm fine." He settled on making his intonation as gentle as possible, hoping his caring would come through.

"Okay." The concern left the voice, and Hutch imagined Starsky might be smiling.

"I was just... thinking about you."

"Yeah?"

How to say all he longed to? "Are my plants okay?"

"Sure. I've been taking care of them, just like I told you I would."

"Thanks." He didn't know if he'd said that before. "I... miss the place, I guess." Starsky said nothing to that.

"Starsk? I think I want to come home."

"Hutch." There was a cautious pleasure in the voice. Don't break my heart again, it seemed to beg. "You mean that?"

"Yes. I've been here long enough."
"What have you been doing?"

"Going through my parents' things, taking care of business. I've been to the lawyers a few times. Everything is settled with the will." He took a few moments to describe how those sessions had gone. "How about you?"

Starsky started talking about his work, and Hutch relaxed and listened. It had been ages since they'd shared anything like this, filling each other in on the days they'd spent apart; he didn't really pay much attention to the words, just filled up his soul with the tone of his friend's easy manner. *He must be glad I called.*

"When..." Starsky hesitated, his voice seeming as though it could break, "when do you think you'll be coming home?"

Hutch cradled the phone with both hands, wishing Starsky were as close to him. "I was thinking about leaving tomorrow morning."

"You know what time your flight gets in?"

Hutch nearly told him then that he'd be driving. He bit his tongue while he wrestled with a decision. It didn't seem very fair not to explain his plans, and he was almost bursting with his own eagerness to share them.

"Listen, if you want," Starsky hurried on, "I'll make the reservations for you here at my end."

"Why would you need to do that?" Some of the pleasure at talking to Starsky again faded with his friend's peremptory suggestion.

"I'd know then just what was going on. In case... in case you didn't get the flight number or the time right or something." Starsky himself sounded aggrieved that he'd brought it up.

"You don't think I'm capable, do you?" Hutch bristled, feeling indignant. "I made my own plans to get here, remember? I can make my own plans to get back."

"Hutch, I didn't mean anything by it..."

"Of course you did." He caught himself before getting any further into an argument. But he did decide it was no business of Starsky's whether he was taking a car, a plane or even a boat back to L.A.

"Well," sounding very awkward, Starsky continued more softly, "be careful, okay? Don't... don't get your wallet lifted or anything."

*He cares*, Hutch's heart told him, *but just like me, he doesn't know how to show it anymore...*

"I'll be careful," he answered sincerely. "I'll probably leave tomorrow morning, or if not tomorrow, the next day."

"Just give me a call if you want me to pick you up."

"I can find my own way." A remaining stubbornness wouldn't let him totally remove all the obstacles to Starsky understanding him.

"Okay." The voice had lost its anger, but also a measure of its openness. "I guess I'll see you when you get here."
"Right." They finished the phone conversation on a note of tentative peace.

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Leaving Duluth was not like leaving the hospital. Then, he'd felt only joy and no regrets. There was joy in the anticipation of this departure, too, of excitement in undertaking the journey. And a part of him was only too eager to be out from under his relatives' watchful eyes. But it was hard to say goodbye to Chelsea. She'd worked her way into his heart like no one else since he'd awakened. The friendship and camaraderie she'd offered came completely without strings, and she showed no indication that she thought Hutch was less than he should be. It had been an uncomplicated relationship that had allowed him to grow, to flex his wings in tentative rebirth. With Starsky, the old ties of partnership and obligation and unexpressed love always got in the way.

Aunt Priscilla and Stanley and the rest of the family bid Hutch goodbye in the foyer of Priscilla's house, but Chelsea followed him out to his car, gripping his hand as if she didn't want to let go.

"I'm going to miss you," she told him without looking up. "You've been a good listener."

"I have?" He hadn't thought about the relationship going both ways, but it had, and that knowledge gave him a good feeling, a feeling of becoming a whole person again. He drew the girl to him in a gentle hug.

"I'll miss you," he told her. "I want you to come visit me some time."

"Okay!" The anguish faded from her eyes as she looked up. "I'd just love to see California. You take care of yourself, okay? Be careful driving."

"I will." He pulled the shiny set of keys from his pocket and inserted one into the door lock with pride.

"Use the cruise control if your leg gets tired. And don't try to stay on the road too long at a time."

Her admonishments didn't make him feel as though he was being badgered. Instead, they made him smile. He pulled at a strand of her hair. "Don't fight with your mother anymore. She may let you visit Andrew yet."

Chelsea made a face, but quickly tiptoed up to kiss him on the cheek.

Hutch swiftly settled in the driver's seat of his car and started the engine. "Thanks, cousin," he grinned as he began backing out of the driveway, "for everything."

********

The road was his, a black, unrolling ribbon of never-ending challenge and familiarity. He felt as though he were driving through the country of his consciousness, turning pages of his memory and wistfully contemplating them. Hutch had become accustomed to being by himself by the middle of the day, and he found he wasn't such a bad person to keep himself company after all. He listened to the radio, singing along with songs that were familiar, listening to those that were new to him. Yet traveling the highway, he could see that the basic shape of the world was just the same as it always had been. And he also began to believe that the man he used to be hadn't changed so fundamentally as he had thought.

He nearly got lost a couple of times, despite the route being clearly marked on the Triptik and maps. They showed he was to drive around the outskirts of Minneapolis and St. Paul, but the traffic there confused him and he made a couple of wrong turns. Yet he wasn't scared about getting lost, preferring to think of it as
Daniel Boone used to say, "Never lost -- just a mite bewildered for a few days." It was actually fun, a challenge, to figure out where he went wrong and get back to the road he was supposed to be on.

He'd wanted to make it all the way to Kansas City that first day, but the trip was more tiring than he'd expected. His foot seemed to want to drop, falling heavily on accelerator as it tired. He turned on the cruise control, imagining Chelsea's approving look as he did so. That night, he stopped at a hotel in Des Moines, and fell asleep almost immediately after crawling into bed.

He didn't remember dreaming of Starsky, but the man was on his mind as soon as he woke up. Hutch dressed and breakfasted hastily, eager to set out, needing to go home to be with Starsky as soon as he could. There was so much he wanted to tell him. So much he hoped he would be able to show him.

He let himself relive the days before his kidnapping, going back to Starsky's stay in the hospital. His feelings of love and concern had been nearly overpowering, even after they knew Starsky would live and after Gunther's capture. The night of the party in Starsky's room had been one of the singular experiences of his life.

He drew the memories out, lingering over them like faded snapshots. He remembered hiding in the men's room after the sprinkler had doused their party, and he remembered sneaking back to Starsky's room.

He hadn't known how to begin to tell him how he felt, only that before the night ended Starsky would know. And when his friend has awakened and touched him, there had been little need for words after all.

For the first time, he contemplated the love they'd made to each other that night. He'd thought his memory of it would be sketchy, but once the pictures started in his mind, the recollections became vivid. He remembered their first kiss, a subtle and sweet discovery. He remembered unbuttoning Starsky's pajama top, and pulling down the pants, getting his own clothes out of the way. His hand could clearly recall the feel of both their cocks nestled in his palm together. The sensations were heartbreakingly beautiful, precious as nothing else to him.

He rubbed awkwardly at his tearing eyes as he drove, conscious of the terrible waste, the knowledge of how they'd been cheated. We only made love once, never got the chance to touch each other as lovers again. The unfairness swept him, and he realized the horrible cost to Starsky, left alone when Hutch was kidnapped, alone when he was comatose, alone when he woke up but didn't remember.

Has that awful aloneness burned out Starsky's love, scarred his soul so badly he can't conceive of us being together again? Hutch didn't know the answer, and was nearly afraid to find it out. Yet he continued toward his goal, relentlessly pushing for home. Whatever waited for him in L.A., it was his future he was driving toward and he wanted it for its own sake now.

The names of cities passed him by on the interstate: Wichita, Liberal, Oklahoma; Tucumcari, New Mexico; Albuquerque, Gallup, Flagstaff. Beyond lay the desert. Hutch felt a little chill down the back of his neck as he neared the Mojave. He remembered another desert land, where he'd tried to run with nowhere to go, been recaptured and beaten senseless, where a needle had taken two years of his life -- and where it had sent Starsky to wander in endless barrenness, still alone after all this time. I want to take you out of that desert... if you'll let me.

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CHAPTER V

310
"I don't feel right about doin' this, Mr. Flavin."

The small, bearded man looked disgruntled as he drove the Cadillac. Kurt Flavin turned a disparaging look toward him.

"Why, Eddie? I should think you'd be glad to get home again. It's been almost three years."

"Yeah, time flies when you're havin' fun," Eddie Strouse grumbled. "What if there's still a warrant out on us, Mr. Flavin? We got no business comin' back to L.A."

"There is no warrant, Eddie. We left no witnesses. Nobody knows what happened to that cop, so we're off the hook. I admit, it was a good idea staying out of the country for as long as we did, but we've been in New York for almost a year, with no problems. Forget the whole thing. It's ancient history."

"We kidnapped a cop, Mr. Flavin. We took him out of the country and killed him. Somebody's gotta want to see us busted for that. They have partners, you know."

"Shut up, Eddie. You forget who runs this operation. I've had Victor check into things since he got into L.A. last month. There are no warrants out on us. Nobody knows a thing about us. Quit worrying."

Eddie sighed, trying to loosen his grip on the steering wheel. Killing that cop had never set well with him, and he'd always had the feeling that the murder would come back to haunt him someday. For two and a half years, he'd worked with Flavin on the international drug and gem market, and the venture had been profitable. But Flavin still talked and acted like the hood he'd always been. It would have been better never to come back to the States, even if the money here was better than anything they could make elsewhere.

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Starsky ran the rough, air-dried towel across his back, his movements jerky and tense. He had just run home for a quick shower and a bite to eat, then he planned on heading for the airport.

*Five days.* It had been five days since Hutch had called to say he was coming home. Starsky's elation had faded now. In the intervening days he had not had any further word at all. At first, he had assumed that Hutch would call back with his specific time of arrival so Starsky could pick him up at the airport. When he did not, Starsky grew a bit anxious. Hutch had sounded so good on the phone, more like his old self. Starsky had thought that there might be a chance for the two of them to work things out after all. Yet that had been days ago. When he heard nothing from Hutch, he tried calling Minnesota, but the family had apparently left town on vacation. The only person he spoke to who had seen Hutch, the lawyer, told Starsky that Hutch had left Duluth three days ago.

Worried, Starsky had tried to conduct a quiet investigation. He had checked all the airlines and buses, but could find no record of Kenneth Hutchinson's departure for the West Coast. Not knowing what else to do, Starsky was prepared to fly to Duluth to try to track his errant partner down. Memories of a frantic search that had lasted much longer than a couple of days preyed on his mind. Starsky tried not to overreact, but he couldn't help himself, couldn't stop fearing that something had happened to Hutch again.

He yanked on a pair of jeans and selected a shirt at random from the closet. As he stepped into his boots, he heard a car pulling up outside and a horn begin to blare loudly.
Annoyed, Starsky moved to the window and pushed aside the shade. In the street below was a silvery blue Mercedes, brand new by the look of it. As Starsky stared, a tall blond man climbed out. Hutch looked up, spotted Starsky at the window. His face broke into a grin as he began to wave.

For a moment, Starsky just looked, his mind frozen. His first emotion was relief -- Hutch was all right. Then, something more sank in. There stood Hutch, obviously none the worse for wear, waving jauntily as if Starsky should have had no reason whatsoever to be concerned.

Damn him, he can be so inconsiderate... Like a parent whose wayward child has been found to be close by all the time, Starsky's relief metamorphosed into anger. Rage at Hutch, at himself, at their whole situation surfaced, no more to be denied. His overriding thought was that Hutch had not bothered to call him, and he let it dominate his feelings. Starsky turned, stomping through the apartment to charge down the steps. Seconds later, on the street, face-to-face with Hutch, he took a deep breath. The smile of pure joy on the other man's face staved off the explosion. Then Starsky judged the expression as one oblivious to all his pain, the suffering he'd undergone for three years as well as the worry he had gone through in the last week.

"Where the hell have you been, goddamn it? I was expecting you days ago!"

"Look." Hutch gestured with pride toward the sparkling new car. "Bought it in Duluth. I drove home instead of flying."

As if that made any sense, made amends to Starsky. His mouth dropped open, the total incongruity of the purchase of a car like this hitting him. "You bought this?"

"Yeah. Doesn't look much like my old 'squash' does it?" Hutch was animated, a kid with a new toy. "It's a 390, rides like a dream. I always wanted a Mercedes, believe it or not."

He's out of his mind, totally out of his mind. A Mercedes -- how much did it cost? And driving all the way alone. Incredible. Starsky looked closely at him. Despite his good spirits, Hutch seemed tired. Was he trying to get himself killed?

"Whatever possessed you, Hutch? Only an idiot would take to the road on that kind of trip after..."

"Goddamn it." Hutch's curse was soft, low, full of venom. "I knew it. I knew that would be the first thing you'd say."

He's actually surprised that I'm annoyed with him. "Well, what else should I say to you? You pull a dumb stunt, you deserve to hear about it. What'd you expect, that I'd congratulate you for driving cross country when any sane person would have taken a plane?"

"Something like that."

"You're wrong, buddy boy. I'm not in the habit of thanking people for being jerks. Don't usually enjoy being made a fool of, either."

Hutch's angry tone matched Starsky's now. "Nobody's making a fool of you but yourself, Starsky. Naturally you see what I did as an idiot stunt. You're convinced that I'll never be able to do anything on my own, no matter how many ways I can prove myself." Hutch turned, going to the driver's side of the car. He spoke again, his voice low this time. "And if I can't prove it to you, why bother proving it to myself?"
Starsky didn't understand, couldn't figure out where they'd gone so wrong with each other. *I should let go, like he wants me to. Neither of us can live this way. It's over.* Yet something about the tension in the departing figure made Starsky call out to him once more. "Hold it."

The order halted the retreat. Hutch stopped, turned to look at Starsky, his face anguished, between anger and hurt. Starsky couldn't deal with Hutch's pain, however. He had too much of his own that had never been dealt with. He'd pushed it aside for years, letting everything else take precedence, but now it was making its existence known. They'd walked on eggshells, fighting only about unimportant details, never really expressing their innermost feelings. Starsky didn't want to hurt Hutch. *But maybe you have to hurt someone else some of the time -- if you're aching inside yourself -- if either of you wants to heal.*

The light blue eyes fixed on him questioningly. Starsky realized they were standing in the middle of the sidewalk. Suddenly, he wanted to get back inside; there were things he wanted to say to Hutch, and he didn't feel like forcing his neighbors to listen.

"You're not leaving. Not after putting me through five more days of hell. You ran to Minnesota to avoid talking to me, but you can't get out of it any longer."

He turned and Hutch followed him inside. Starsky knew the other man was more angry than hurt now, too. That was good, because Starsky could yell at him all he deserved without feeling bad about it.

The door slammed behind Hutch and Starsky turned on him immediately. "So you bought a car. What precisely did you use for money? You said the will won't be out of probate for weeks."

Hutch looked at him as if he were crazy. "Since when do you make my financial status your business?"

"Since you made it my business. This is the same argument we've had a hundred times. It's okay with you that I collect your rent and pay your bills, but you don't have to check with me on any of the spending that you do."

"All right. I'll tell you where I got the money. There was an account the bank had in my father's name and mine. It passed to me outside the estate. Fifty-thousand dollars. I paid cash, in full, for the car."

"Good God, you are insane." Starsky stared at Hutch in utter disbelief.

Hutch turned and dropped heavily onto the couch. "Wonderful. First I'm an idiot, now I'm insane."

"What would you call it? Hutch, you spent a virtual fortune on a goddamn car. In the old days, you drove a heap you could have bought for a song. Granted, maybe now you'd like to have something in a little better repair, but whatever possessed you to get something like a fucking Mercedes? Why didn't you fly home and go car shopping out here, with me? You could have found something economical, taken out a loan... there're all kinds of cars on the market now that weren't available three years ago."

"Yeah, and with a loan I'd be in debt and saddled with a car you thought was best for me, one that I'd know nothing about because I'll always be two years behind the times. No way. I bought the car with my money, Starsky. It's done and there's nothing you can do about it. That's what you're really mad about. All you can do is condemn my actions, forget trying to understand my motivations."

The emphasis on the word 'understand' made something inside Starsky snap. "Understand? That's one word that's not even in your vocabulary. Ever since you've gotten back on your feet, you haven't been a bit concerned about me and my feelings, my 'motivations'."
"That's not true!" Hutch's eyes flashed denial.

"Shut up and listen! All you want to do is for yourself, because you need to do it. You'd rather set yourself up to get lost or hurt again simply to avoid taking any advice I have to give you. You're so set on proving yourself that you can't stop to take anyone else's feelings of concern into account at all."

Hutch looked defiant. "If it was only advice, I wouldn't mind. You've helped me a lot, Starsky, and believe me, I'm grateful. But you can't figure out where your obligation ends and where our friendship begins. If you don't stop smothering me, things are going to go down the drain after all. Neither of us can change what happened. When are you going to stop feeling guilty about my getting hurt?"

"I feel guilty? That's a good one. The guilt-trip king tells me not to feel bad about takin' two years to find him. Fine. Terrific. I'll just turn off my emotions. I'll forget all the sleepless nights I spent worrying. I'll forget all the people who kept telling me to give it up, to realize that you were probably dead." He looked away, closing his eyes for a moment before turning back to Hutch. "I used to try to make myself believe them, accept that you were gone -- so I could just get some rest, you know, but it didn't work. I knew that somewhere out there, you were in need."

He took one step in Hutch's direction, then backed off again, still angry, yet not inclined to hide his other feelings. "I'll pretend those years never existed. And I'll forget the last month and a half, too, when I thought I might never see you again. You don't need to know anything about feelings like that. You spent those two years in a blissful cocoon and you're all better now, so just get on with your life. That's what you've been telling me you want, isn't it?" Starsky turned away to stare out the window, his anger draining away into the empty kind of pain he had come to know so well.

Silence stretched out behind him. Finally a voice spoke, one born of the same defeated agony he suffered.

"Starsky, don't you think I feel guilty about those years, too? Gunther's men almost killed you. You needed me when you got out of the hospital but I wasn't there for you."

Starsky couldn't turn around, tried not to listen. It sounded too much like the old Hutch -- and even in those days, he was sometimes someone who played games with Starsky's heart. Better to have the new and unfathomable Hutch around, one not to be counted on, one that couldn't hurt him because he wasn't someone Starsky could love.

But he did hurt, because no matter who Hutch was, he was so much a part of Starsky that love didn't even begin to define the tie that held them together. Maybe they should have gone on stepping on eggshells, he realized belatedly. *When you let yourself hurt the other person, you can't help inflicting some of the pain on yourself.*

"If you think I'm going to coax you out of a guilt trip over something that wasn't your fault, you can forget it." His voice was dead, as were his hopes.

Behind him, Hutch drew a ragged breath, the sound breaking as if on unshed tears. Starsky sensed him moving to stand behind him at the window.

*Don't do this. Why can't we save what little dignity this relationship has left? No matter how much I want 'my' Hutch back, Starsky thought, his pain doubled by determination, I've got to admit he's gone forever.*

Starsky wanted to keep staring out the window, wanted not to care, not to hope. Yet the presence behind him was too compelling. He was drawn, physically and emotionally, to turn his gaze away from the setting sun and see who was there.
The man with Hutch's eyes stood looking at him. The soft, full lips that looked like Hutch's trembled as words began to form. A voice from Hutch's soul spoke out, touching Starsky where he hid from pain; finding him, knowing him, reaching him.

"Don't you understand that I waited for death knowing you'd probably never find out what happened? Knowing I wouldn't be there for you when you needed me most?"

Starsky could only shake his head. The wounds went so deep, for both of them.

The blue eyes that could tempt and hurt and heal and love him looked down into Starsky then, and he saw his own fears and his own guilt reflected, saw his own need mirrored. The voice of their past spoke to him again.

"Don't you realize I waited for them to kill me knowing I'd never make love to you again?"

The shape of the words on the lips penetrated Starsky's mind before their meaning. He had to visualize them forming again before he could make sense of their meaning.

"M-make love to me... again?" he repeated softly, incredulous. "You remember?"

Hutch looked away and his voice sounded small. "Maybe you wanted to forget -- or hoped I had."

"No! Never. I was afraid you didn't remember, or that you'd changed your mind. You never said anything..."

"Neither did you." Hutch was still looking away.

"You were sick. I felt awful thinking about... about wanting you when I should've just been grateful you were alive. I thought if you'd forgotten, maybe it wasn't meant to be anyway. If you remembered and didn't say anything it was because you didn't want to bring it up. Didn't want it ever again." Starsky's insides tightened with the weight of all his fears. It was out in the open at last, but that still didn't change anything.

The soft voice answered him. "I remembered. Not at first... it was like it had been a dream, something I wasn't sure was real. There were so many pictures in my head, and not all of them made sense. Some of them scared me so much... But you and me... I guess it was something I'd dreamed about for so long that I didn't consciously believe it was actually a memory of us being together. Then, as my mind cleared, I was sure. It had happened. At the time, it had felt right. But -- you didn't say anything. You'd had two and a half years to think it over. You saw me the way I was then... Maybe you'd fallen in love with somebody else."

"You found out that wasn't true."

Hutch shrugged eloquently. "Thought I'd never be right, never be whole in mind or in body. I knew I once wanted you, but so much had been lost... I don't think either of us knew what it was we wanted. And... I wasn't sure I could love anybody, physically, again."

"Oh, babe." They stood still, side by side, touching only with their words. Their realization that they had been at cross purposes left them vulnerable, their emotions too delicate for an embrace of any kind, too subtle even to bear prolonged eye contact.

Yet more words were necessary. Starsky had to say what he really felt at last. "Hutch. I love you. I love you no matter what."
Hutch seemed to flinch from the sincere declaration. The blond head began shaking, as if he couldn't believe. "Don't you see -- I have to get well, all the way. Have to trust myself again, before I can let you entrust yourself to me."

"I do trust you. You are well now." Humbled, Starsky couldn't think of how to prove his true feelings.

"That's why I drove home instead of flying," Hutch went on as if he hadn't heard. "I... had to see if I was able to do it, all by myself. If I'd told you, you'd have tried to talk me out of it, and because I didn't want to worry you, and because I was afraid, I'd have let you." He turned to face Starsky tentatively. "I was... kind of testing myself."

Starsky raised a hand, let it settle lightly on Hutch's shoulder. The man was real, solid, substantial. It was only the emotions that were like wisps of dreams. They were becoming real now, too.

"I didn't even suspect you might try to drive." He tried out a cautious smile. "Didn't think you could -- " He broke the statement off, fearing Hutch would think he was belittling his accomplishments again.

Hutch was seeing more clearly now. "I had to take the test for my license. My second-cousin, Chelsea, taught me how to drive, helped me study for the written test."

"Who?"

"Chelsea. Stan's daughter. She's sixteen."

"A sixteen-year-old kid taught you to drive?" Starsky shook his head, not knowing whether the picture amused or frightened him. He felt a twinge of regret that he hadn't been there, hadn't been able to give that gift to Hutch, but the old demons, the feelings of having to be everything for him were falling into perspective.

"Why'd you buy the Mercedes, though? That money could have stretched pretty far."

"I know. But I thought about something less reliable breaking down out on the desert. I didn't want to take any chances. And besides, the more money I spend, the sooner I'll have to get out there and get myself a job."

Starsky shook his head, fondly smiling at the Hutchinson brand of dumb logic. He'd done what he thought he had to do, but he had been considering his own safety. Starsky's heart felt like it was going to overflow. His lifted his other hand, reaching toward him.

"Come here."

Hutch fit into his arms like he always had, as if they were two carvings from a single branch. Starsky held his breath, closed his eyes, reveling in the feel of him, the warmth, the weight, the texture. There was the roughness on his cheek from the collar of the suede jacket Hutch wore, the silk of the strands of hair caught in his fingers where he cradled the blond head, the trembling heave of the chest pressed against his. Starsky had never felt more complete than he did as Hutch's arms encircled him to seal the embrace. They tightened, bracing him, clutching at him, both supporting and seeking. The two of them held each other close until Hutch's weight began to fall too heavily against Starsky and he realized the man was staggering with fatigue.

They swayed as Starsky parted them a little. His eyes met blue pools of moisture; Hutch was crying silent tears of relief and exhaustion. Starsky made his fingers gentle as he wiped their traces from Hutch's cheeks.
"Whatever you say, that was still a hell of a long drive. You look beat. Come on inside. What you need right now is some sleep."

Hutch's lips formed a smile of rueful assent. He let himself be steered toward the bedroom and braced one arm against the wall as he pulled off his shoes while Starsky turned down the covers. He sank down on the blue sheets, shrugging out of his jacket. "I do seem to be crashing all of a sudden." He loosened his belt and wriggled out of his pants, then dropped down against the pillow.

Starsky was drawing the drapes against the glare of the setting sun. He turned to find Hutch's bleary gaze, expectant and anxious, still on him. He smiled. "Ain't goin' nowhere."

He got out of his boots and jeans and shirt and came to the other side of the bed. "Just wanta hold you for now." It was as much a question as a promise.

Hutch slid into his arms without a word.

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Hutch woke slowly, savoring the comfort of the bed. Without opening his eyes, he tried to define the reason it felt so good to him -- all his senses seemed content, touch especially, as well as smell. Then it came to him; this was Starsky's bed. The subtle scent of him lingered on the pillowcase. He rubbed his nose against it, breathing in, breathing out. The pillow was soft, the mattress firm. He felt like he belonged here, and that was a very good feeling indeed.

Hutch sat up in the bed, listening, watching.

There was light coming from the rooms beyond, and an odd rattling noise, accompanied by a soft whistling. That was strange; it sounded like Starsky, but he never whistled. The musical sound came closer and Hutch saw that he'd been wrong. The figure framed in the doorway, backlit, stood tall on bowed legs, one hip jutting forward, an arm propped high on the doorframe. A froth of wild hair haloed the head, and Hutch couldn't say a word.

"Come closer, so I can see you," echoed plainly in his mind, but his dry throat couldn't force the words out. Starsky heard him, though; he stepped forward, switching on the overhead light as he did so, and Hutch could see his face. There was an open anxiousness in his expression that gave him a grave kind of beauty. The eyes that looked toward him, ringed with lines of worry, seemed haunted and hopeful at the same time. Hutch knew it was time for him to say something.

"I woke up and you weren't with me." He swallowed; his mouth was so parched he could barely speak. "I missed you."

The words seemed to release Starsky from his hesitation. His face relaxed into a wistful smile, as if he still could not believe Hutch was here, talking to him that way. Hutch smiled a little in encouragement, and raised his hand toward his friend.

Starsky came to him immediately, sitting at the bedside and taking his hand firmly in a needful grip. "You've been asleep almost five hours. I got kinda restless, so I got up. I didn't want to wake you when you needed the rest."
Hutch nodded, not taking his eyes from his friend. "I guess I was pretty wiped. What were you doing out there?"

"Hm?" Starsky seemed to have lost himself in Hutch's gaze for a moment. The realization touched the blond. "Oh. I was cooking. Figured you might wake up hungry."

"Hungry?" Hutch echoed, not really following the conversation. He'd been too preoccupied with watching Starsky's mouth as he talked.

"Yeah. I made us some hamburgers and salad." Starsky got up from the bed, tugging on the hand he still held.

Hutch sat where he was, confused. "But I thought..." He broke off, not knowing what he meant to say.

"What's wrong?" Starsky asked, his concern immediate.

"I just..." Hutch shut his eyes, rubbing his fingertips across his brow. So many things had gone wrong because they'd been afraid to speak. "I thought we... Starsky, did I dream something happened a little while ago... or was it real?"

His friend smiled then, more fully than Hutch had seen him do so in a long time. He shook his head, overlong curls swaying, mouth curved endearingly. "No," he whispered, apparently overcome by the emotion he felt, "you didn't dream. It was real."

"Then...?" Hutch ran out of words. His fingers simply lifted toward the supple lips he'd been watching, their tips just grazing, sensing warmth and inner secret moisture. He longed to know that mouth, realized he'd had that longing forever, but he didn't know how to ask...

Starsky gave him permission. He leaned forward, eyes carrying only the barest trace of his own hesitation, and Hutch sensed that it wasn't from doubting the feelings, but because he, too, wasn't quite sure how to take the next step. But take it they must, Hutch decided, homing in on the mouth, never so sure of anything but that this was their destiny.

The contact was sweet, dizzyingly so, waking new memories on a tide of nostalgia. Starsky's mouth was warm, gentle, unexpectedly soft, Hutch discovered. He raised his hands, delved them into the abundant curls at either side of Starsky's head and pulled the man closer to him, deepening the kiss. A warm rush of excitement spread down through his chest, tingling through him, reaching places he'd feared would be closed off to sensation forever. He threw his worries to the wind, convinced that Starsky was the key to the lock that had imprisoned him. **He'll wake up the rest of me now, just the way he brought me out of the coma in the first place...**

Starsky's lips parted under Hutch's insistent mouth, allowed the probing of his searching tongue. Hutch felt a little smug that he remembered how to do this so well. Starsky had begun trembling, and as Hutch plundered the sweet mouth, the other man suddenly whimpered, moaning in an anguish of love and hunger.

Starsky pulled back then, gasping for breath, holding Hutch's shoulders and looking into his eyes a little wildly. The black, long lashes framing his eyes were wet, blinking, and there was a blush caressing the high cheekbones. He rubbed his hand across his face, as if aware of the reddening and trying to wipe it away.

"What's wrong?" Hutch breathed, his eyes searching for nuances on the expressive face.
"I..." Starsky sighed, unable to put his feelings into words. "For so long, I've wanted... waited... now it seems like things are goin' so fast."

Hutch didn't know how to answer. "You mind? There's a lot of time we have to make up for."

The Adam's apple bobbed in the slender throat. "I know." He looked over Hutch's face, eyes full of love and a measure of chagrin. "How about we eat the burgers I fixed first, and then..."

"Then?" Hutch asked again, smiling, reaching up to pluck a stray curl out of the eyebrow in which it had tangled. He rubbed his thumb lightly over the dark brow line, smoothing lines of concern on the forehead.

"We've taken so long to get here," Starsky went on, his voice hushed, "don't you think we should take the time to get everything just right?"

"Okay," Hutch nodded. "We wouldn't want to let the burgers get cold, either."

Starsky moved back and Hutch climbed out of the bed. His clothes had been folded on the back of the chair, and he slipped into his jeans and shirt, leaving the shoes and socks where they were on the floor. Starsky turned toward the door when Hutch turned around, and he secretly surmised his friend had been watching him dress. As he followed him out to the kitchen area, Hutch left off buttoning his shirt; he'd fastened the third one down, and that would do.

They sat facing each other at Starsky's table, and the hamburgers Starsky had prepared were the most delicious Hutch had ever tasted. It could have been because he hadn't found much decent food on the trip, or it could have been that they'd been prepared by someone who loved him. The salad was good, too, crisp and tasty with a fresh Italian dressing Hutch knew Starsky had learned to make from his grandmother who lived over the Italian restaurant. Memory brought a smile to his lips. That night, so long ago, he'd been able to care for his injured partner... that's what he wanted to do now, if he could. Care for him, and never stop.

When they had finished, Starsky started to clear the dinner things away, saying, "I showered while you were still asleep. Why don't you grab a quick one -- my robe is hanging on the hook on the bathroom door." His eyes slid down the bared length of Hutch's chest.

"Okay." Hutch took the suggestion and left Starsky to the domestic chores, tingling inside at the realization that their loving was being planned for this time, not just happening. That night in the hospital had been spontaneous, beautiful, but now the anticipation, the build-up, was giving this event a special significance. Hutch showered carefully, washing himself with slow patience, letting his body know it was about to be touched by someone who loved him, willing himself to respond when the time came. He was almost giddy with nervousness. It's okay. It's gonna be okay. Starsky's the one. With him, everything will be fine.

He ran a big towel over himself, hurrying to get rid of the moisture, but more anxious to get back to the bedroom. He pulled Starsky's navy blue robe on, not bothering to wrap it tight, just knotting the belt once. As he walked, he felt the cool caress of night air on his thighs and chest where the robe parted.

Starsky had been sitting on the bed, but stood when Hutch came into the room. He moved to stand facing him, eyes still a little shy. It occurred to Hutch that Starsky had said the proper words, but that he himself hadn't as yet. He wanted to let him know that this meant everything to him, that the love he felt was the kind that was eternal. What he wanted for them was to love each other for the rest of their lives. His mind sought the right words to explain all that, some vow that would let Starsky know all that was in his heart, but his intellect seemed determined to frustrate him as it so often did when speaking eloquently mattered. He took Starsky in his arms, moving as close as he could get to him. "I love you," was all that he was capable of uttering. He hoped the feelings in his heart were evident from the way he said the words.
Starsky's arms went around him, tightening, offering their own assurance. Hutch bent his head and found his lips once more.

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When Hutch whispered those three words, Starsky fell in love with him all over again. It was going to be easier than he thought, he decided, just flow with the feelings. At first, he'd been so startled by Hutch's eager kiss that he'd backed away, not knowing quite how to handle the demonstrativeness. The decisive way Hutch had kissed him had come as a surprise. He'd expected the same cautious reticence Hutch usually displayed with new activities. Yet this one wasn't so new, he told himself. Maybe making love was like riding a bike -- once you knew how, you never really forgot, no matter how out of practice you were. At least, he told himself as the warm, hungry mouth took possession of him again, he hoped that was how it would be for himself, too.

He hoped he would remember how... it had been so long. Now, so close to what he'd dreamed of, he didn't know if he could release the ingrained inhibitions that had built up over the endless, lonely years. It's easy. It feels good. He feels good... just go with it and let it happen... it's natural...

Two strong hands were moving on his back, sliding down from his shoulders in a learning caress. The hands ended up on his rear, squeezing and pulling at him until they were pressed groin to groin. The reaction of Starsky's body was immediate. He felt himself hardening, lengthening, and he couldn't deny the urgent motion of his hips that caused him to rub against Hutch.

He could feel him, a long shape beneath the velour of the robe, but Hutch wasn't hard yet. His own feelings lurched to a halt as he demanded his body slow down. He felt almost guilty for giving in to the sensations. Though it felt good, something inside him kept repeating no. But that was crazy, he told himself. Hutch wants this. It's okay now. Yet something he couldn't control forced him to clamp down on his reactions. Take it slow. There's no rush. We're in this together. His mind was a swirl of confusion, need and desire bound up with guilt and repression.

Hutch moved one hand around to his front, sliding it between their bodies to rub up and down over the still-evident bulge in Starsky's jeans. He gasped aloud, twin bolts of pleasure and distress jolting through his frame.

"Feel good?" Hutch's whisper was a suggestive rumble that caressed his ear. Starsky's only response was a shudder. He rested his head against Hutch's shoulder and trembled when soft lips slowly nuzzled his exposed neck.

"Hutch... Hutch..." His own ragged voice surprised him. He pressed closer to the man he loved, every part of him needing, yet his heart still enchained by the years of suppressing his own desires. He didn't know what to do. A part of him feared that if those chains broke, he'd rush things, be too forceful with Hutch, maybe hurt him. Every time he touches me, I kinda go crazy. Being touched was not something Starsky was used to. But he knew how to touch Hutch. That was easy, that pleasure manageable. That was safe.

He unlocked his arms from where they had clung to Hutch's waist, and brought his hands up, one stroking the long back and broad shoulders, the other sliding into the silk of fresh-washed hair. The long strands were baby fine, cool and clean smelling, the skin of his nape warm and soft. A little whimper broke from Hutch's throat as Starsky pressed a kiss against his Adam's apple. His fingers followed, caressing the long throat, eyes drinking in its tawny contours. He's beautiful, he marveled, kissing again and again, his lips descending to the smooth chest. Hutch sighed, stilling all motion as Starsky's mouth found a nipple. He leaned into the caress, holding his breath as if to miss not a dram of the sensation he was being given. Starsky was pleased that he could make his friend feel so good. His lips tugged gently at the soft, puckered flesh, tongue licking,
his breath cooling the wet skin and causing tiny shivers in his companion. Emboldened, his hand traveled
the length of Hutch's torso, encountering the robe's belt and pulling it out of its loose knot. As the ties fell
apart, his fingers snuck inside to stroke the satin skin underneath.

The belly was smooth and flat, the hip flowing into a graceful thigh. Starsky moved toward the center, his
fingertips finding the brush of curling hair at the base of Hutch's groin. Hutch gasped and Starsky looked up
to meet his eyes. There was a plea in them, an eagerness that the next step be taken. Anything you want,
love.

His fingers descended. The shaft that filled his hand was not quite erect, but it had stiffened a little from the
preliminaries and Starsky stroked it now, closing his eyes to savor the warmth, the life he held in his grasp.
Hutch grew still and held his breath, as if to capture every nuance of the touches, to let the feelings go all the
way through his needful body.

It was strange to touch him so freely, Starsky thought absently, as he continued to stroke the penis. He had
touched it before, when Hutch had lain insensible in the coma, when his newly awakened friend had needed
his help, but those touches had been for practical reasons, not designed to produce pleasure nor to give
Starsky any, either. Now, Starsky closed his eyes, letting the reality of what he was doing soak in. It feels
good to do this for you. I could stand here like this all night, just enjoying it.

The caressing was having its effect on him, but he finally realized not quite as much on his friend. The long
column was still not all the way hard, and though Hutch did seem to enjoy the stroking, he soon sighed
unhappily when his response remained incomplete.

"Let's lie down," Starsky suggested. He smiled bravely and stepped back from the embrace, tugging open
the buttons on his shirt. Hutch's own smile was hopeful as he let the robe fall from his shoulders. He turned
to drop it on the chair and Starsky began to undo his pants. When his friend turned back, Starsky was
embarrassed to be displaying his own full erection, so he hurried to the bedside and climbed under the
covers. Hutch followed, a whimsical look on his face.

The blond moved eagerly into his embrace, and Starsky gave a wondering chuckle. "I can't believe this is
really happening," he stammered in explanation. "I almost... don't know what to do with you now that I've
got you."

Hutch chuckled, too. "It's real. And you can do anything you want with me." There seemed to be an
unconscious seduction in his tone. Starsky gulped guiltily, still not knowing how to handle the sudden
changes in their relationship. He'd held back his true feelings so long, never giving them up, but never
believing Hutch would echo them. Now to actually have him in his arms... his mind was having trouble
catching up with his body.

Hutch moved in to kiss him again, and the surety and expertise knocked the earth from beneath Starsky this
time. Hutch stole his breath away, made him feel things he'd forced himself to believe were forbidden. It's
good. It's bad. It's right. It's wrong. Hold on... let go... don't start... don't stop... don't...

"Hutch." Gasping, he pulled out of the kiss, a fear he couldn't even name making him shake all over. Hutch
looked disappointed, and the remorse that then stabbed through Starsky made him feel even worse. "I'm
sorry. I just..." He tried to laugh again, to cover his dismay. "Like I said, I don't know what to do..."

"What's wrong with what we did the last time?" Hutch whispered, disarming him completely. That he
remembered the fact of their loving had been one thing, but that he could recall the substance... Starsky
sighed in wonder and surprise. He looked at Hutch, putting all his devotion into his gaze, then, realizing he
hadn't really taken the time to get a good look at his soon-to-be lover, the last time or now, he pulled back and let his gaze descend over the golden body that was stretched out in his bed.

Hutch's eyes glittered and he moved restlessly under the scrutiny. Starsky just peered in disbelief. "What did you do to yourself back there in Minnesota? You've put on weight..."

"You mean I'm fat?" the soft voice teased.

"I mean, muscle." He looked back into Hutch's eyes. "You been workin' out?"

A shrug. "Running with my cousin."

Starsky swallowed; his mouth had gone dry. When he'd last seen Hutch, he'd still seemed frail and too thin to him. Perhaps it was merely the time apart that now gave him fresh eyes to see with, but Starsky didn't think that was all. In the intervening weeks, he had become more like the Hutch he remembered. The long body had filled out, become wound tight with muscle and sinew. Still slender, he was more like the youthful Hutch than the heavier, more tired cop who'd brought his partner home from the hospital. His long legs stirred, hips shifted. He was beautiful, desirable. Used to choking down those kinds of feelings, Starsky shook his head, gaze returning to the tender, open expression on Hutch's face.

"I..." No more words would come. He blinked, eyes tearing.

"I know." Hutch moved close again, surrounding him with warm, comforting arms. "I think you're beautiful, too, Starsk. Let's make love." He kissed him encouragingly. "Like I said, the way we did the last time."

Head swimming, Starsky let himself be pulled into the tightening embrace. He hadn't realized Hutch would be looking at him, too. The scars... He forcibly quelled that thought, trying to let himself go with the feelings, not with the incongruous thoughts that kept interrupting his pleasure. Hutch's hands were sliding down his sides and all he wanted to do was experience the sensations. He was struck suddenly with the picture he'd once seen of a long-caged lion who wouldn't try to run, even when the door to his cage was finally thrown open. Hutch wants this, needs this, he tried to tell himself. It's for him, not for me. That thought made it a little easier, those patterns of behavior had been ingrained for so long. Yet when Hutch's hand swept around to grasp his penis, the sparks of pure pleasure flooded him with only thoughts of himself. And that he couldn't handle. He's the one. He's been sick, been lost. Not me. I don't need, shouldn't take... I can't!

Hutch's hips shifted closer to him, the warm hand bringing his own shaft nearer, nestling it with Starsky's in his clasp. Helpless desire made Starsky feel faint; he was terrified of losing control, letting go. He fought the impulse to wrench himself out of Hutch's hold, needing the touches, wanting to beg for them. He felt the pleasure as a punishment, his heart pounding like a captured animal's. He threw his arms around Hutch's shoulders, holding on, clinging in a panic of hope and despair. No one had touched him or held him or kissed him in so long... Gasping, he sobbed against his friend's neck, his hips accepting the rhythm Hutch set with his caresses.

"Easy, easy," Hutch breathed against his ear. Starsky tried to catch his breath. Don't ruin this for him. He's scared, too. He knew that was true, that despite his desire, Hutch's body was not responding all the way. Starsky closed his eyes, felt his own full cock sliding along the softer one in a clasp that piled thrill upon thrill for him, but seemed not to do the same for his friend.

"Okay. It's okay." He forced himself to calm. His hand stroked down Hutch's side, massaging the smooth hip and ass, eliciting a moan of pleasure, a shiver, from the man. "Shhh. Let yourself feel it..." His hand moved on, replacing Hutch's on the tight-pressed cocks. He wrapped the two of them close, pumped slowly
up and down. His own was hot and tight with desire, Hutch's still that same partial erection. He felt guilty to be so close and his friend still so far away from completion. Please, he prayed, don't let me fail him.

Hutch shifted position, as if he were becoming uncomfortable, and Starsky wanted to cry. He kissed the soft cheek, the trembling lips. "Hutch, what can I...? Do you want me to...?"

The blond head shook once; Hutch groaned bitterly.

"It's okay. It'll happen," Starsky tried to reassure. "Just let me..." But he didn't know what he was saying, couldn't understand his own feelings, much less direct his friend's. Was their love meant to be? He wanted it with all his heart, but he didn't know if that would be enough.

He shifted back an inch or so, looked down at what he was doing. He let go of his own swollen shaft, tenderly took Hutch's in his palm. His thumb rubbed the tip, he milked it carefully, tried to be gentle and loving, to bring forth desire. It was still slightly erect, but nothing else was happening. Finally Hutch gave a cry of despair and wrenched away.

They lay in silence for a long time. Starsky's heartbeat gradually returned to normal and his erection subsided on its own. He didn't feel disappointed for himself; what he felt in that department was more like relief. He'd been terrified of what would happen if he'd finished, yet he knew he could never let Hutch know that was the way he felt. It was all right, though, he'd grown used to concealing his feelings from this man he loved. Hutch, on the other hand, was bitterly disappointed. It was poignantly obvious. He wasn't quite crying, but his breathing was punctuated with raw torment. Starsky, as always, needing him to feel better, slid closer to him in the bed.

He could feel his friend's despair radiating from his tense position on his side. "Shhh. It's okay. We'll... try again..." His words died away. How? I can't...

"No. You don't understand," the muffled voice protested. "I thought I'd be okay, but... you can see... I'll probably never..." He sighed, drawing in a breath and turning over to face Starsky. "I wanted us to be lovers."

Starsky framed the shamed face in both his hands. "Hutch," he whispered with the sincerity of his own lost soul, "we are." He kissed him, trying only to soothe. "We are lovers. We're together. We love each other. Whatever happens, we are lovers."

Gradually, Hutch seemed to calm. He let himself be pulled close and the two men, each in his own separate fantasy, drifted off into sleep.

********

Hutch woke at the sound of Starsky sighing in his sleep. The darker man's hands tightened their grip on him for a moment, then released. Starsky rolled away and his body tossed fitfully without waking.

Hutch couldn't really sleep either. He'd already had a long nap and now it was only -- he stretched to look at the bedside clock -- twelve-thirty. Carefully, he eased himself out from under the covers and left the bed. He found Starsky's robe on the chair and slipped into it, quietly padding out into the living room. There, he sank onto the couch, put his feet up on the coffee table and sat, brooding.

He tried to be philosophical about what had happened -- or, more precisely, hadn't happened. After all that's gone down in the last couple of years, I should know by now that things don't get fixed so easily. He closed his eyes, clenching his hands on his knees, wishing that, for once, things had gone the way he'd hoped they
would. Dreams... that's all I have... should've learned by now not to put too much stock in them. But Starsky hadn't made him feel inadequate; he'd been both patient and accepting. Hutch tried to believe his dreams hadn't been destroyed, that instead they'd only been postponed a little while longer.

He settled lower on the couch, resting his head on the back, crossing his hands over his stomach. He gazed upward, watching the patterns of light and shadow on the ceiling. As passing cars went by outside, the light from the street lamps wavered, and looked to Hutch like lights from a ship on the moving waters of the ocean. He smiled at the whimsical illusion and, unbidden, words filtered into his thoughts, recalled from somewhere nameless. He wasn't sure if they were the words to a song or a poem, but the graceful images pulled at the strings of his heart, seeming poignantly appropriate to his life...

_Soft reflections hiding my eyes, fill my darkness with the warm harbor lights,
Oh, babe, you came and I was saved..._

_That's you, Starsky. I was dying in the dark, until your light broke through._

_I lost you on a stormy night, understanding swept away..._

_That really was some storm. Swept away understanding, knowledge, everything..._

_From distant shores, you have brought me home again._

_You came, found me when no one else could, brought me home despite all predictions that it'd never happen._

_Across the water, you can follow the stars,
Look a lifetime, still not know who you are..._

_That's for sure, _Hutch realized ruefully. Even before he'd been hurt, there had been times when he'd had doubts about what he was doing, who he was. Accepting that helped him now to put the current confusion into perspective.

_Oh, babe, I know I'm here to stay,
From distant shores, you have brought me home again._

Hutch sat up, thinking intently of the next words he recalled.
Winds told me that you would hold me again.  
Ocean breezes would soon release me,  
And all my searching would end...

I was only waiting for you to come and find me so I could wake up. I knew you'd be there eventually. The coma would let me go, and I'd find what I'd been searching for... it took a long time, but you did hold me again.

He got up from the couch, crossing silently to the bedroom. There, he stood looking down at the silent, uneasy figure in the bed. Starsky wasn't relaxed, he tossed and turned, face wearing a worried frown even in the abandon of sleep. Yet he was beautiful. Hutch had only had a few brief glimpses of the shapes the sheets concealed, but the raw beauty called to him even now. The body was ripe, loveable, wrapped with the muscle of a mature man. Hutch could see the sensuous curve of ass and flank, knew that a washboard belly descended to an abdomen dark with hair, where a cock as beautiful as the rest of him nestled between downy thighs.

There you go, inviting my eyes...

Hutch smiled, drawn nearer, wanting to ease the tension in the restless body, to give the man what time and injustice had stolen from him.

Oh, babe, you came and I was saved...  
Just laying down in your loving arms, takes the emptiness away,  
From distant shores you have brought me home again.

Ah, Starsk, let me do for you, let me give you something back...

From distant shores you have brought me home... again...

The light from the other room created deep shadows, blended colors into a chiaroscuro dream. 'We are lovers.' The words reached out to him, soft as smoke, ardent as a marriage vow. Hutch knelt beside the bed, smoothing back tangled curls that fell over the furrowed brow. With breath-holding gentleness, he lifted the covers draped at Starsky's bare shoulder, pulling them down to his waist. His friend shifted, but still didn't wake. Hutch drank in the sight of him, the angular beauty of his face, slender throat with deep-carved hollow, broad muscular chest with its pattern of dark hair and interwoven scars. He had never touched them before.

He did so now, lightly, afraid to wake the sleeper who might not understand his exploration. These are the only things that makes you a stranger to me. Life had been cruel to Starsky, given pain to this man who loved so unreservedly. There were scars inside him, too, Hutch was aware. He'd glimpsed Starsky's anguish many times in the months since his recovery had begun, but his own torment had interfered with his ability to reach out to the other man. Now he could step outside his own fears and problems and look to someone else. And Starsky needed the care he could give. A swell of protective love rose up in Hutch, calling to him as surely as if Starsky breathed his name.
He leaned close, eyes following the curve of the vulnerable mouth, fingers tracing the line of cheek and jaw. Drawn in to the aura of the man he loved, Hutch kissed him, lightly at first, then with more firmness, lovingly, until he woke.

"Hutch?" The sleepy voice sounded shocked and uncertain.

"It's me. Who'd you expect?" Hutch answered with a smile, leaning in again for another kiss.

"Hey..." Starsky moved back. "You don't... I mean... it's not necessary to..."

"Yes, it is," Hutch demurred. He captured the retreating man with a firm hand around the back of his neck and found the lips again with his own. He kissed him with all the authority he could muster, wanting to feel the tension of arousal that he knew he'd caused before.

Starsky groaned into his mouth, body twisting. Hutch kept his lips prisoner, wrapping arms around him and climbing onto the bed to take possession of him. He broke away for a breath, and Starsky's hands clenched on his shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to love you," Hutch explained, tasting his lips again briefly. "Don't you want me to?"

Starsky swallowed, looking uncomfortable. "But, I... if you can't... I mean..."

"Shhh." Hutch kissed his brow, the tip of his nose. "What I can and can't do doesn't matter right now. You... that's what matters."

He didn't allow a reply. Instead he dropped to feed on the warm sweetness of Starsky's mouth again, using his tongue, sucking, savoring the heat of the contact. He felt Starsky begin to tremble beneath him, and, without breaking the kiss, let one hand wander down the length of the virile body, skimming with fingertips to increase the shivers. His hand unerringly found the cock stirring from its nest of dark hair. He clasped it gently in his palm, wrapped his fingers around it and began to pump.

Starsky shook in his clasp like a storm-tossed tree limb, hands at his shoulders half clenching to hold on, half struggling to be free. Hutch's fingers encountered moisture at the tip of the engorged cock, and he knew his friend wanted his loving. He was elated that he could provide such pleasure.

But Starsky, it seemed, had other ideas. He groaned almost like he was in pain, and finally twisted himself out of Hutch's embrace, harshly crying, "Don't!" He rolled over, turning on his side with his back to his dumbfounded friend.

Hutch just sat there a moment, trying to understand the rebuff. He didn't know what to do, what to say. Finally, listening to the harsh breathing of the other man, he lay down close at his side, pillowing his head on his own folded arm.

"Starsk?" he asked when the silence had stretched to an intolerable length. He received no answer.

"Starsky." He tried again. "Please talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

A shaky sigh preceded Starsky's words. "I don't know," He swallowed wetly. "I... can't talk about it. Just... leave me be, okay?"
Hutch considered, but he couldn't do that. "No. Something's wrong. I just want to help you. Don't you... need me?" He ventured to place a hand on a cool, bare shoulder.

The muscles contracted to stone at his touch. "Oh, God, Hutch," came the breaking voice. "Yes, dammit, I need you. But... Jesus, I just can't talk about it."

Hutch kept his hand where it was, gently stroking the tense muscles. He didn't understand, but he knew Starsky's pain was deep-seated, and he knew he himself must be the source. Why should he fight what he wanted and needed so badly? Was it so hard to open up to him now, when for all this time he'd been the one taking care of Hutch?

Hutch leaned closer, pressing a gentle kiss on the man's shoulder blade. A desperate gasp escaped Starsky, but he didn't move away. "Listen," Hutch told him quietly, "everything's gonna be all right. Let me help you."

"Hutch." There was infinite patience in the voice. "It's okay. Really. Please don't feel bad. If you can't..."

"Like I said, what I can or can't do doesn't matter."

Starsky turned a little, glancing over his shoulder. "You... want to try again? I'm sorry..."

"It's not that I want to try. I just want to make you feel good."

"I can wait until you're ready." Stubborn blue eyes looked at him, then Starsky turned away again.

"You shouldn't have to."

"Hutch, I just want to be fair to you."

"Who's been fair to you all this time?" He leaned close and nuzzled the bronze skin of shoulder and bicep. A sigh, part anguish, part desire, floated to his ears. Hutch reached around the tense body, stroking the chest with the palm of his hand. "That's it, babe. Just relax. Everything's gonna be all right now."

Starsky didn't try to push him away, but he remained restive, muscles clenched in what seemed like an attempt not to feel. Hutch was patient, taking his time, touching him only on his chest as his hand gently circled, resting his own cheek against Starsky's arm. After a long time, he felt a gradual relaxation, and he let his fingertips become more inquisitive, finding a nipple to stroke and explore. The bud of flesh rose up to meet him, greedy for sensation, which Hutch gladly gave. He moved on to rub and fondle its twin, planting kisses along Starsky's arm and shoulder, drawing a line with his tongue up the back of his neck. The wet stroking made Starsky shiver. Hutch captured his earlobe with his lips, hand moving lower on the man's tender body.

Starsky sighed again, and relaxed more fully. Pleased, Hutch continued his slow caresses. His hand warmed and smoothed the dark belly, circled the narrow waist, drifted around to his back and up his side. They lay like that for long, peaceful moments, Starsky accepting the petting, Hutch contentedly repeating his actions over and over. He sat up, leaning over to see better. Starsky stayed on his side, and his eyes were closed, black lashes trembling on his cheeks. Hutch sensed that he couldn't show his acquiescence any more fully at the moment. He hurt inside for the wounds that had cut Starsky so deeply. Don't act like you don't deserve this. You do. You were made for loving. Your body, your spirit, everything about you brings out the desire in me to make love to you. Hutch kept the words to himself, not wanting to make his skittish friend any more reticent.
He leaned forward, mouth finding and sampling the erect bud of a nipple. He took his time, giving Starsky all the sensation he could before moving on, kissing his way down lower. His lips skimmed the taut belly and waist, dusted kisses over the hip and flank, pausing to lick and suck soft skin here and there, eliciting whimper and sighs from his friend.

Finally he sensed that Starsky was his, and carefully turned him onto his back. He sat up, hands modeling the firm thighs, massaging away the last vestiges of resistance. One glance showed Starsky's eyes were still closed tight, but his body was open to him, expectant and grateful for the stimulation. Hutch's fingers traced veins under the delicate skin of the lower abdomen, brushing the soft pubic hairs before moving on to the join of thigh and groin. He watched the stirring of the fine cock. It was hardening, lifting toward him in need. The rosy tip was moist, the column elegantly sculpted. Hutch was reminded of the shape of Starsky's hands, economical, refined, graceful, as if designed by an artist. His penis was the same, in perfect harmony with the rest of his body. Hutch bent closer to it, drawn to find out how it would taste, realizing as he opened his lips that he'd never been this close to another man's cock. The idea slid away, totally inconsequential, as he took his first taste of the only man, only person, he truly loved.

He closed his eyes to savor, giving first a gentle, cautious kiss, then taking the tip into his mouth, holding it between his rounded lips as Starsky sighed and went totally still beneath him. He moved down on the shaft, tongue sliding against the underside as his mouth descended and drew back. He felt Starsky's thighs part further and he quickly lay between them, settling himself to the precious task. He took the base of the cock in one hand, supporting it, slowly drawing it deeper into his mouth, going down on it as the hunger in Starsky called to him. The art and intimacy of the act created a hunger in Hutch, too, a swift addiction to Starsky's essence, his smell, his warmth. His other hand stroked and rubbed his belly and thighs, descended to cup the vulnerable sac beneath. Starsky trembled again, but this time from pleasure, not denial, and Hutch was enchanted. His own heart began beating in time with his actions; he feasted on the column of flesh, reveling in his ability to give favor and delight. There was an echoing tingle in his own groin, but Starsky was what mattered now; he was the only jewel in the crown of Hutch's life.

His adoration of the other's sex continued, and he heard pleasure cries cutting the air, held on as hips began to thrust in the inexorable journey to completion. Starsky was sobbing his name, hands clenched in his hair, urging the motion of Hutch's head. Hutch took his satisfaction from the apparent ease with which he understood what Starsky needed. I always knew you better than anyone else, didn't I? Can I prove it to you, now? Will you come for me?

He drew wet lips up the length of the throbbing cock, swirled his tongue around the head while Starsky thrashed beneath him, head tossing on the pillow. He closed his fingers around the base, drawing his tightened lips down the heated length. Starsky cried out, the sound wounding Hutch right in his heart. He sucked the cock deep into his throat, marveling that having it there felt so right, so comforting, as Starsky bucked up from the mattress, hips arching to propel himself further into the wet tightness of Hutch's mouth. One more cry pierced the night, an almost savage yell, and then Starsky was spasming, hot fluid jetting into Hutch's mouth, leaving him insensible, only knowing that he had to swallow and swallow over and over again as the bursts of release continued. Starsky's climax went on and on, dying out in little shudders, ending slowly, leaving the man weak and shaking. Hutch drank all he had to give, proud of what they had achieved together, finally drawing off the spent cock, licking it lovingly as Starsky's breathing returned to normal.

Only it wasn't returning to normal. Hutch raised up, leaning over him, dismayed to realize his friend was crying. Huge tears squeezed from beneath the tight-shut eyelids and he seemed unable to stop them. Hutch wrapped himself around the inconsolable man, whispering words of encouragement and patient soothing.

"I'm here, babe. I'm here. I've got you."
Starsky's sobs seemed to come harder at the words.

Shaken by their intensity, the crazy thought came to Hutch that it might have been as long for Starsky as it had been for him. At first, that didn't seem possible. Did you lock yourself away from these feelings, too, all this time? If so, no wonder it had seemed to cause as much pain as pleasure, no wonder it had gone on so long, and brought forth copious tears as well as semen. Hutch drew him near, memory directing him in all the ways Starsky liked to be held, to be stroked and comforted. Hands sought and found him, clenching tight at his shoulder and waist. Gradually, the tears diminished. Hutch smoothed the curls back from Starsky’s forehead, wiped at the wet cheeks with careful fingertips.

"Shhh. It's all right, babe. It's fine. Wasn't it good, darlin'? I just wanted you to feel good..."

A tremulous breath was drawn, held, a hand closed around his wrist. Starsky drew the hand to his mouth, solemnly kissed the palm, then at last opened his eyes and looked deep into Hutch's. "It felt good." The words were the tiniest whisper. He raised his head to kiss Hutch's mouth, a reverence in the gesture that warmed Hutch's soul. "You're beautiful, you know that?" He closed his eyes as if gathering his meager strength. "Thank you for..."

"Don't say thanks," Hutch told him, laying his head next to Starsky's, rubbing his cheek against the other's stubbled jaw. "Say you love me."

"I do..." The words died out in a sigh of pure contentment and, exhausted, Starsky fell asleep.

********
Starsky woke feeling warm. His eyes drifted open, then sank closed again, and he cuddled closer to the warm presence wrapped around him. Then, the image of what he'd seen when he looked came into focus in his mind. *Hutch...*

"I must be dreamin,'" he mused lazily, not attempting to move and disillusion himself.

"That's what I used to think," a silky voice told him. "But it wasn't a dream. It was real." Soft lips brushed his cheek.

Starsky raised his head, looking up to find himself the object of an affectionate gaze. "Hutch." He couldn't have stopped smiling if he'd wanted to. He felt good, complete as he hadn't in longer than he could recall, yet there was still a residual sense of something not yet being quite in phase. "Last night," he began cautiously, "last night was..."

"I know. For me, too." The blue eyes never wavered. Hutch said no more; he merely seemed to be waiting.

"Like some kinda fantasy come true." He felt shaky just thinking about it. The love Hutch had given him had been incredible, tender and unselfish. He'd closed off that part of himself so completely and for such a long time that he'd never realized the wall he'd built had no gate. Last night he'd wanted to open the gate and let his heart go, let the love in, but he couldn't. Instead, Hutch had patiently, lovingly, begun tearing the wall down. "You just seemed to know, to understand... You knew what I needed."

"You tried to tell me no." The soft voice was chiding, yet underlined by a need for reassurance.

"You knew best," Starsky offered simply. He reached out, placing his hand on Hutch's chest. His friend still wore Starsky's own blue robe, but the garment was disheveled, parted to reveal an expanse of fair, smooth skin. Starsky let his fingers slide down to where the belt held the sides of the robe together. Hutch closed his eyes, shivering a little under the touch and his scrutiny. Starsky felt awkward, unaccustomed to touching and being touched this way, and he flashed on a scene back at the nursing home in Adelaide. The first time he'd tried to do the motion exercises on Hutch, touching him had seemed a totally foreign experience. *But I got used to it,* he reminded himself. *Touching you was good. I felt it creating a bond between us. We've always had that bond. I should just relax and let it function...*

He slid closer, nuzzling his lips along Hutch's warm skin. "Last night... you were there for me. It was like a fantasy come true." He felt a hand slide into his hair, softly stroking his head. "But that was only half the fantasy. I want to be there for you." His fingers began to undo the knot in the belt.

"Starsky," Hutch sighed, "I don't know if..."

"Quiet," Starsky admonished softly. "Last night, you knew best. This morning, I'm gonna do what's best for you." He pulled the robe out of his way and slipped a hand down along Hutch's abdomen. Lower, hiding in the dark between his thighs, he found a partial erection. He wrapped his hand around it and began to pump gently. Hutch drew in a quick breath, and tried to protest once more.

"Starsky, please. That's just because it's morning. You know..."

"I know. But I remember reading somewhere that if it happens in the morning it means there's nothing physically wrong and it can happen other times, too. Relax, okay?"
"I've tried before. We tried last night."

Starsky stopped what he was doing and looked into his eyes. "Hutch, I love you. Let me help you. Last night... you were tired, we were both pretty emotional. It was even difficult for me. Well, it's a new day, now. I want to make love to you. I..." he hesitated, the words hard to say. "I don't want to yell and push you around. All I want to do is love you."

The blue eyes watching him grew large and luminous. "I love you, too."

"Do you trust me?"

Hutch nodded. "You trusted me last night."

Starsky kissed him. The full lips melted against his own, and he sensed both acceptance and need. He used his mouth lovingly, gently. Hutch needed his slow patience now but a response began to warm Starsky's insides and he pressed himself close to Hutch, wanting as much of his own body to be in contact with Hutch's as possible. He felt two strong arms close around his back, drawing him closer, and he lost himself in love.

Long moments passed with them just getting acquainted with each other's mouths. Finally, Starsky tugged on the velour fabric at Hutch's shoulders. "Get rid of this thing, willya?"

Hutch pulled away a bit and wrestled out of the robe, then returned to Starsky's embrace. He shivered slightly, and Starsky shivered, too. "Ever seen two people with this much performance anxiety?" he asked lightly, trying to break the tension.

Hutch giggled, lips brushing Starsky's neck. The contact sent a bolt of electricity through Starsky and he arched, sliding against the now nude body lying beside him. His own solid erection rubbed against Hutch's long thigh. A warm hand moved down to find it and before he knew what was happening, Hutch was stroking him, creating waves and waves of pleasure.

"Hey, slow down. I'm getting way ahead of you again," he protested. He adjusted their positions, making Hutch lie on his back. He moved as close to him as he could, lying on his side, one arm wrapped protectively around Hutch's shoulders. Then he reached down and took the partially erect cock in his hand. He pumped it carefully in a slow, definite rhythm.

"Tell me," he whispered against Hutch's neck, "does this feel good?"

"Mmm." Hutch nodded, his breath catching in his throat.

"How about this?" Starsky changed his rhythm slightly. "Nice?"

"Yeah." Hutch was very still, as if throwing all his concentration into following the feelings. "A... a little faster."

"Like this?" Starsky could feel the response; the cock was harder and his own shaft ached to press itself against Hutch's.

A low moan was his only answer. Hutch's hips arched a little, his thighs opening. Starsky smiled. His eyes were hungry on the stroking action of his hand, turning him on even more. He realized he was pressing hard against Hutch's hip, and tried once again to control himself.
"You're so beautiful," he whispered, wanting to encourage Hutch and hoping that speaking would help him keep his own feelings in check. "Blond all over..." Hutch sighed, but Starsky thought he detected a tiny bit of frustration.

"Relax, just relax and go with the feelings. It's so good..." He slowed the pace, not wanting to overwhelm Hutch's shaky reactions. "That's it. Feel my hand around you. You feel so good." He kissed the skin over Hutch's collarbone. "Easy, babe. Easy. It's gonna be so easy."

For a while, he thought it might be working. Hutch was becoming relaxed, seeming to enjoy what was happening. Yet as time passed, it became obvious that the penis was not going to become completely rigid.

He wouldn't have minded if he had to keep trying all day, but Hutch eventually reached down and stopped his hand. "I'm sorry," the blond said quietly.

Starsky thought his heart might break. "Don't," he said somewhat harshly. Then he groaned, pulling Hutch against him in a regretful embrace. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." Hutch's hand trailed down his side, finally finding Starsky's own still erect cock.

"No." Starsky felt suddenly exhausted. "You don't..."

"I want to."

"I don't want you to. It's not..."

"We don't need to talk about fair."

"Hutch, please! I... I just can't take it right now." He pulled out of the embrace and bounded from the bed, closing the bathroom door tight behind him. He leaned against it for a moment, breathing deeply as his own aching hard-on subsided. Then he turned on the shower, hot, and stood under it for a good ten minutes.

When he emerged, wrapped in a large blue towel, he saw Hutch sitting up in the middle of the bed, the covers drawn up to his waist. He'd calmed down in the shower, and spoke gently.

"Go grab a shower, okay? I'll put some coffee on. It's Saturday and I don't have to go in to the office."

Hutch looked up at him, that little-boy vulnerability fully noticeable. "You don't?"

"No. We can have the whole day together. If you want, we'll go out to the beach, maybe take a long walk..."

"Sounds good. We can... talk things over."

Starsky looked away, fighting embarrassment. "Yeah." Then he turned back to meet the anxious eyes. "Don't worry, Hutch. We know we gotta talk. After all we've been through, I don't wanta blow it. We can work things out."

"I know." Hutch moved to get out of the bed, and Starsky turned deliberately toward the kitchen, offering him his privacy.

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They walked side by side along the beach, leaving behind the crowds of sun worshippers. Starsky liked the lonely stretch of sand; it made him feel peaceful, just himself, the ocean washing in and out, and Hutch.
He turned to look at his friend. The clear-cut profile looked good against the bright blue of the sky, long light hair swept back by the breeze. The moustache was neatly trimmed, and Starsky remembered how it had felt against his mouth. And against other parts of him. He moved closer to the other man, coming into step with his long strides. Starsky could hardly detect any weakness in his gait, and a swell of pride for what Hutch had accomplished rose up in him. It felt so good just to be together.

"Hutch?" he asked quietly. "Wanta sit down here and talk?"

"Okay," the blond agreed easily. He sank to his knees in the dry sand well back from the surf and Starsky settled cross-legged in front of him. Tranquil, they just looked at each other for a long moment.

Starsky reached out to take Hutch's hand. The long fingers intertwined with his own, and the warmth and confidence in the clasp felt as good as an embrace. Starsky hardly knew where to begin, so many emotions were throbbing in his heart.

He shook his head slightly in wonder. "Look at the two of us. I feel like a kid or something, my tongue's all tangled. I wanna talk but I don't know how to put all I'm feelin' into words."

Hutch grinned affectionately at him. "Me neither. I feel like I'm out of breath, excited. Like I've been running, looking for something for a long time and I finally found it."

Starsky agreed, beaming across at his companion. "I've been such a jerk," he told him without malice. "Shoulda said somethin' a long time ago. I was just..."

"So was I. Let's not worry about what we should or shouldn't have done, okay?" Hutch sounded almost shy asking him that. "Maybe we just weren't ready before last night." He drew a deep breath, glancing out to sea for a moment. When he spoke again, it was without looking back at Starsky. "You know, except for a couple of things, I almost feel like none of it ever happened." His gaze returned to his friend. "Me gettin' kidnapped, I mean. Being in the coma. All that time apart from you, and all that time getting better. Last night and this morning -- it was almost like we took up where we left off." His eyes seemed to glow. "I feel happy, Starsk."

The dark-haired man nodded, a solemnity coming over him that did nothing to reign in his soaring spirits. "I hear ya. I'm happy, too." He ran a hand through his curls. "Isn't it amazing? It's just about perfect..."

The long fingers laced with his tightened and a blush of color rose in Hutch's cheeks.

"Don't be embarrassed," Starsky told him. "It'll work itself out."

"I hope so," Hutch said fervently. "I... want to be with you."

"I know. And I want to be good for you." He shrugged ruefully. "I figure we've just got to be patient."

The Adam's apple bobbed in the long throat as Hutch swallowed. "It felt good to be as close as we were..." He raised his eyes, locking his gaze with his friend's. "It meant a lot when you said we really were lovers, Starsk. I want you to know... I hate not being able to do everything yet." Starsky could sense his frustration. "But I don't want to stop. I want to hold you anyway, kiss you anyway." The frown line between his brows had appeared as the earnest words continued. Starsky leaned forward and kissed his mouth. Hutch continued quietly. "I want to be intimate with you. Seeing you happy is enough for me right now."

Starsky tried to demur, saying what he'd said before. "Hutch, that doesn't seem fair."
"Life hasn't been fair, has it?"

He had to look away from the intense gaze. "I guess not. But I'd feel guilty... like I'd be using you or something."

"You wouldn't be using me. I want to touch you. I'm offering, freely."

Starsky felt his emotions start into that same tailspin he'd gone into the night before. His heart wanted, his body needed, but it was so hard to let go and face all the feelings inside. Hutch had begun chipping away at the wall last night. Starsky couldn't help trying to tear it all down with him, to throw away all his restraints and suppressions. Still, it didn't seem right. "I waited for you a long time. I don't mind waiting a while longer."

"Why?" Hutch asked, rubbing the back of Starsky's hand with his thumb. "Why wait for me when I'm right here?"

Totally disarmed, a smile began at the corner of Starsky's mouth, and progressed until he felt flushed with pleasure. "You think you're really somethin', don't you?"

Hutch shrugged, eyes twinkling.

Starsky reached to catch hold of the man's other hand, shifting to sit even closer to him. "It's not all gonna be easy, you know. We'll probably start fighting again day after tomorrow."

"I don't care. Do you?"

"Nope. As long as I have ya to fight with, I guess I can handle anything else."

"That's pretty much how I feel, too. Starsk -- I really have tried, this last month I was away, to get better. I'm still not ever gonna be exactly the same as I was before. But I can handle things now. If you don't mind my... uh, problems, I'd like to be around you."

"I want you around. If you don't mind my problems." Starsky looked into the blue eyes; they were shining with such love it made him tremble. Hutch nodded slowly. Starsky felt a strange mixture of deja vu and clairvoyance. Just as they had been in a darkened hospital room so long ago, they were poised on a precipice, about to discover that world they'd been searching for all their lives. He glanced down at their joined hands, fingers wrapped around each other in a comfortable clasp, and a sweeping reverence filled him. He blinked, trying to believe the mist in his eyes was caused by the sun and windblown sand.

It was then that he saw that a few other people, perhaps as much in search of solitude as they, had found their section of beach. It meant they were outside, in public, not alone in the world after all. Yet it didn't matter that the people strolling only yards away were unknowing witnesses to the moment he and Hutch were sharing. The vows they were about to say to each other should be said in the presence of others.

"You know you were right before," Starsky said, squeezing the long fingers. "It does feel almost like none of it ever happened. Here we are again, makin' plans. And they're gonna work out this time. We've got a second chance."

"Second chance," Hutch mused, his voice a little shaky. "I'll do everything I can to make sure it works out this time."
"It's going to," Starsky assured. "But we're not going to go around worrying about what went wrong before, or what might go wrong now. What we've gotta do is take each day as it comes."

"I'll go along with that." Hutch's smile flashed, then his eyes looked into Starsky's once more. "And we shouldn't keep secrets from each other. We should promise that, too."

"Okay. We won't keep secrets. We'll always tell each other what's going on in our hearts." The earnest words didn't sound corny or sappy -- or if they did, Starsky didn't care. Words of love were meant to be that way.

Hutch looked down at their intertwined hands as if memorizing the way they looked. When his eyes lifted again, they were bright with hope and expectancy. "We're going to be together. Always."

Starsky nodded, the reverence of the moment capturing him again. "Always, babe. Me and thee." He tugged on Hutch's hands, pulling him near enough for another kiss. It was brief, but enough to seal the pledges they had given. When they parted, Starsky couldn't help a quick glance out of the corner of his eye. No one was paying any undue attention, and his eyes went back to Hutch. They helped each other up from the sand and walked slowly, side by side, back to the car.

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Huggy Bear put the heavy tray down on the bar, stretching to rub at his aching back. He listened to the clamor in his restaurant, but refused to turn around and identify any of what was going on. A much repeated phrase floated through his thoughts, *I'm gettin' too old for this.* Still, this was his life, the way he made his living. Running a restaurant was the only way he'd ever been able to keep his head above water -- honestly, that is. Yet things had changed. The Pits had been in a neighborhood where he knew everyone, where he enjoyed meeting the friends and acquaintances that made up his clientele. Here, in his newly renovated steakhouse, although the atmosphere was casual, he sometimes felt like a stranger. Though some of the patrons were old stand-bys who kept him up on the word on the street, he really didn't recognize that many of those who came to eat. And he wasn't very close to the waitresses here, either. It seemed he managed the running of the place, but didn't have time to get friendly. *But every so often, like tonight, I get stuck doing double duty as manager and busboy.* Standing behind the low partition dividing the serving area from the dining room, he began removing the used dishes from the tray, dropping them noisily in the larger bin so they could be put in the dishwasher.

"I said, I want to see Huggy Bear!" An indignant voice rose to catch his attention. Huggy glanced around the room divider, eyes widening the minute he realized who the speaker was. And who was with him.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!" He emerged from his corner, an impossible-to-hide smile on his face. Huggy glanced around the room divider, eyes widening the minute he realized who the speaker was. And who was with him.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!" He emerged from his corner, an impossible-to-hide smile on his face. Starsky and Hutch both turned toward him at the same time.

"Huggy!" Starsky was positively effusive, his manner so cheery that Huggy was taken aback. Starsky reached out and grabbed his hand, pumping it half a dozen times before releasing it. He grinned at Huggy, but before the handshake was over, his eyes were back on his companion.

Huggy also looked at Hutch, surprised at finding a similar smile on the blond's face. He blinked, unable to stop staring as the expression in Hutch's eyes took all his attention. There was something... *different.* He was so much more *there* than he'd been before. Huggy had often had the feeling that Hutch didn't really remember him after all.

"Hello, Huggy," the soft voice now offered. "We came to have dinner."
"Well, my man, dinner is what you'll get. Damn, it's so good to see you!" He turned to one of his waitresses. "Milly, get these friends of mine the best table in the house." The waitress came over carrying menus and escorted the duo to the corner table near the large fireplace. The lighting there was muted, the area around the table spacious. Huggy nodded to his friends, telling them he'd be over to chat in a few minutes. Watching them go, he noticed the gentle hand Starsky placed at Hutch's elbow as if to steer him on his way. But Hutch didn't look as though he needed steering. As they approached the table, Hutch's hand went around Starsky's back, gliding down in the lightest of touches. As if he just wants to touch him 'cause he's there.

Huggy smiled at the affection in their manner together. He knew that Hutch had left town about a month ago to visit his relatives in Minnesota. He'd spoken to Starsky a couple of times on the phone, and found him depressed and distant. This was like the old Starsky. And that had to be because of the additional change in Hutch.

The restaurant owner went to the cash register to ring up a bill for some departing customers, still maintaining a watch on his old friends. They were looking over the menus, talking quietly, showing smiles. It looked as though Hutch chuckled at something Starsky said, and even from a distance, Huggy could tell his eyes were shining. The time apart must have done both of them good, he decided.

By the time he got back to their table, they had already ordered. Huggy approached, feeling a warmth emanating from that corner while he was still several steps away. He pulled a chair from an adjoining table and sat down with them.

"You two really are a sight for sore eyes," he said with a grin.

"Yeah, I know we haven't been to eat here in a while," Starsky told him, eyes still on Hutch's face.

"I thought you were in Minnesota, Hutch," Huggy went on. "When did you get back?"

"Last night," the blond said, at last glancing away from his partner. "I bought a car and drove here."

"What?" Huggy yelped in surprise.

Hutch began to laugh. "You're as bad as he is," he said, nodding toward Starsky.

The dark-haired cop rolled his eyes, his voice teasing. "No. Just like me, Huggy is a sane person. Do you know he drove all the way by himself?" he asked in a tone that mixed pride and astonishment.

"Sounds like a bone of contention to me," Huggy protested. "I'm not getting into it."

"I bought a Mercedes." Hutch defended himself.

"Whew -- comin' up in the world. If you're that rich now, I guess I'd better tell Milly to make sure you get the best steaks in the house tonight."

"It is kind of a celebration," Starsky said more quietly. His eyes, a bright, deep blue, stayed on Huggy a moment, then returned to Hutch. Huggy was instantly reminded of the way Starsky had looked when he got off the plane with him. An indefinable something had returned to Starsky's eyes. He no longer wore that haunted look of desperation, of hope torn by chronic defeat. Hutch had come home now, seeming more at ease with himself, and with Starsky. There was a new peace between them, as if for the first time since Hutch's illness, they envisioned a future.
"Well, I'm glad you decided to do your celebrating here," Huggy pitched his voice low, too. "Can I send you over a bottle of bubbly? I stock better champagne than I used to at the old Pits."

"Sounds great," Starsky said, and Hutch nodded.

Duty soon pulled Huggy away from their table again. Though he longed to talk with them, they didn't have eyes for anyone but each other anyway. Their meal was served and he watched them covertly, memories of yesteryear making his heart feel very full. He'd never thought they'd recapture the way they'd been before, but he was pleased to see himself proved wrong.

"Milly," he said, catching the waitress by an elbow, "you got the check for my friends' table?" She nodded, and handed it over. Huggy tore it in two, and waved the halves at his guests, touching his forehead in a brief salute. The two men beamed back at him, draining their glasses of champagne.

"I said, I want to drive!" Hutch reached for Starsky's car keys as they approached the black Camaro.

"Not my car, buddy." Starsky pulled his arm out of Hutch's reach.

"Hey, I've driven your car -- your beloved Torino -- plenty of times. Don't tell me you like this hunk of tin any better."

Starsky just stopped under the streetlamp, eyes going up and down Hutch's frame. "You've been drinking." But he didn't sound as stern as he had.

"I only had one glass. You had three," Hutch pointed out logically. "See -- nothing wrong with my memory now."

"You only remember what it serves you to remember." Sounding acutely disgruntled, Starsky sighed, and handed over the keys. "Okay. You can drive. But no speeding, or I'll have to give you a ticket." The order was delivered with an admonishing swat to his rear end.

"What'll my fine be?" Wide blue eyes twinkled as Hutch looked over his shoulder while unlocking the driver's door.

Starsky was so surprised at the suggestive comment and look from his friend that he was momentarily speechless. Shaking his head, he went around to the passenger side and slid into the car.

Hutch put the key in the ignition and the Camaro roared to life. He turned excited eyes to Starsky as the engine settled to a purr.

"This has got a little bit more power than that sedate Mercedes," Starsky warned. "Take it easy."

Hutch lifted a shoulder expressively. "Easy is my middle name." His eyes moved to the rearview mirror and he put the idling car into reverse. Starsky found himself holding his breath as he tightened his seatbelt.

The car was gradually backed out of its parking space, and Hutch leaned forward to check the street for oncoming traffic. Then, with a delighted gleam in his eyes, he stepped hard on the gas and pulled out. Starsky just gritted his teeth at the sound of squealing tires.

"Here we go!" Hutch cried in his most jovial voice. He patted the steering wheel, adjusted the mirrors, and pulled around a slower vehicle to pass. Starsky felt his Adam's apple gulp in his throat.
He forced himself to relax. They didn't have to take the freeway, and fortunately the traffic wasn't that heavy. Hutch was actually doing quite well. Starsky tried to blot out the idea that a sixteen-year-old girl had taught him to drive again. He looked over at his friend, smiling despite his nervousness, appreciating the proud look on Hutch's face, the eager desire to please, the subtle need for Starsky's approval. He realized he was seeing a sight he'd never expected to view again. Overcome with the delight of the moment, Starsky couldn't speak. He slid his arm along the back of Hutch's seat, resting his hand just above the collar of his shirt. Feeling the touch, Hutch tilted his head back a little, like a cat asking to be petted. It was easy for Starsky to comply; he let his fingers comb through the long, silvery blond strands while they drove.

They arrived at Starsky's apartment without mishap. Hutch leaned forward to turn off the ignition, then turned to drop the keys into Starsky's hand. Starsky took them, then twined his fingers through Hutch's, wrapped his other arm around the broad shoulders, and pulled his friend into a tight embrace. His mouth found Hutch's parted lips and he kissed him as though he would never stop.

A few moments later, they made their way into the house, arms draped around each other, moving in the warm silence of love and belonging. Without discussion, they entered the bedroom and stood close, kissing again, beginning to undress each other. Starsky sensed his heart pounding fast. He pressed his hand to the center of Hutch's chest, not too surprised to find a similar trip-hammer beat. For a moment, he stroked his palm across the smooth flesh, eliciting a few goose bumps. Then he hugged Hutch close, and tumbled him down on the bed, pressing his entire length against the other man's lean form.

"God, I love to hold you!" he said in a growl, lips nuzzling along one stubbled cheek. Hutch wriggled closer, rolling over with him. They played together, rumpling the covers and the remaining clothing they wore. Legs parted, gripped, tightened, fingers stroked and pulled and teased. Capable hands stripped Starsky out of his jeans and briefs, sweeping up his now-bared torso. A shiver of arousal followed the touch and Starsky hurried to divest Hutch of the rest of his clothes. Soon he lay naked across the bed, an expanse of tawny skin, long legs and tousled blond hair. Starsky wanted to gobble him up, but not knowing where to start, he lay down on top of him, taking the full lips possessively once more.

The kisses became hotter, more insistent, full of true passion. Starsky's hips began rocking, causing his full crotch to rub against Hutch's groin. His friend urged the movement, gripping and stroking his ass until Starsky thought he might lose his mind in the sweeping pull of arousal.

Feeling delirious, he was rolled again to his back, kissed thoroughly on the lips and gently on the nose and chin. Then Hutch turned, wet, deliberate kisses following the change in position, and Starsky moaned aloud when the expert mouth took his cock to suck. Needing to share the exquisite sensations, he found Hutch's shaft with his own mouth, and began a more careful version of the intimate act.

Hutch had the same partial erection as before, but Starsky allowed his own inhibitions and guilt to fade away. Hutch wanted to be with him, no matter how complete his own response could be at this point. And Starsky couldn't resist his loving for anything. Hutch was enjoying the sensations, pausing every so often to gasp as Starsky ran his tongue up the underside of his shaft or mouthed his balls. Starsky was delighted by the taste, the texture of him, feeling totally at ease with what they were doing together. Nothing else had ever seemed so right.

He was quickly losing touch with the real world, with the notions of up and down and light and dark. He closed his eyes, breathing through clenched teeth, gripping Hutch's thighs with desperate hands. The loving mouth bore down on him, accurately assessing his needs, wringing every morsel of pleasure from his hungry body, sending him into orbit. The orgasm broke swiftly, the universe blanked out, leaving Starsky alone with the only thing he needed to survive, Hutch. The gentlest of hands cupped his ass, the smoothest of tongues bathed his throbbing organ, the thirstiest throat drank the seed he offered. When every drop was
spent, Hutch's mouth drew away and the hands began to silkily wipe away the perspiration that had broken out on his body. Starsky realized with wonder that this time he didn't feel like crying at all. Instead, he caught himself chuckling with pleasure. Hutch rearranged his position again, falling into a heap at Starsky's side, reaching up for a kiss as if to ask if it had been good.

"You bastard," Starsky managed through panting breaths. "How'd you manage to get so damn good at this?"

"I don't know," a confident voice responded while long fingers ran through the hair on his chest. "Maybe I could always do this stuff. Or maybe it's a side effect."

"If it's a side effect, I don't know if I can handle the medicine that started it." Starsky knew they were talking nonsense as they cuddled, but he imagined the conversation to be the most clever of his life.

"I think you can handle anything I dish out." His chin was nipped lazily.

"I think you'd better make sure I try." He wrapped his arms around the smooth body and squeezed.
I hate Mondays, Sally Hagan grumbled to herself as she poured a cup of the strong coffee brewed in the office percolator. It was ten minutes to seven a.m. and she was due in the chalk room to be briefed on her assignments for the day. She yawned as she added a liberal amount of cream and sugar to her Styrofoam cup, remembering the date she'd had Saturday night, the one that had lasted all day Sunday, too. She'd hated to return to the real world this morning.

With her fellow cops, Sally made her way to the chalk room, finding a seat just in time for roll call. She noticed that Starsky wasn't there yet and wondered why. He was seldom late for work. She still worried about him, though she hadn't really talked with him since that night a month ago when he'd come to her apartment drunk and despondent about Hutch. He'd grown quiet, pale and exhausted. Sally knew others were talking about Starsky, too. Some other cops believed it was only a matter of time until he'd get careless on the street and be blown away. Sally didn't know if he was that bad yet, but she knew he wasn't the same man who'd taken her and Hutch to Dobey's anniversary party. There had been hope in his eyes then. It was a damn shame the way things had worked out.

"All right, folks, listen up." The watch sergeant brought the roll call meeting to order.

Sally looked up from her cup, picking up her pen to make notes. Before the sergeant could begin, Starsky opened the door and hurried in, mouth curved in a barely repressed grin, and paused only a moment to throw a jaunty wave toward the sergeant before finding a seat along the wall among the other ranking officers.

As the sergeant began speaking, he settled into his chair, not realizing that Sally was watching him. The cheerful wave and smile were not things anyone expected of him these days. Now he sat, not -- as usual -- ramrod straight, all business, with his eyes on the blackboard, but leaning back casually, one leg crossed over the other. His face still bore evidence of tension and strain, but looked more relaxed than it had in months.

As if realizing someone's eyes were on him, Starsky peered around. When he saw Sally gazing toward him, he gave her a nod and a quick wink in greeting.

Sally returned the look with a smile. If I didn't know better, I'd think his weekend was as good as mine, she thought. She resolved to ask him if Hutch had come home as soon as roll call was over.

When the crowd of officers began to leave the room, someone pulled at Sally's sleeve and she turned to speak to another of the women cops. By the time she was through, Starsky was disappearing out the door. Sally sighed; her assignment was going to keep her out of the building all day. It didn't matter, though. There was really no reason for her to ask what had changed. Only one thing -- having Hutch back -- could have brought the life back into David Starsky's eyes. Smiling at the thought, Sally headed out to find her squad car and her own partner.

It was hard to concentrate. All day, Starsky fought to keep his mind on the job. But his thoughts kept drifting to the man he'd left at home. God, I act like I'm completely smitten, he thought without embarrassment. Actually, he enjoyed the feeling. I'm in love... The love had always been there, bound with the cords of concealment and frustration, and remembrance of pain greater than the hope that had survived. Now, the joy had broken free once more, and he could hardly hold it in.
He smiled to himself at the memory of Dobey's face when he'd announced Hutch's homecoming. The dark eyes had opened wide, not so much in surprise that Hutch had returned, but due to the way Starsky told him the news. Guess I should try to rein in the exuberance a bit, Starsky tried to tell himself. My feelings for Hutch have gotta be pretty obvious. Then he thought, So what? They didn't intend to sneak around, did they? Didn't plan on hiding their feelings from the world. Making some grand announcement didn't really fit their style, but then neither did playing games. He finally figured they would go on together as they always had, not trying to cover up the depth of their caring. Let the rest of the world make of it what they would.

He felt as though his life were finally following the path he had expected it to. He and Hutch, together, going through the years at each other's sides. Only one item was out of kilter with the picture. Hutch wasn't with him on the job. Years ago, another lifetime seemingly, when he'd been the one in the hospital, Starsky had thought about Hutch being on the streets alone, and himself unable to follow. There were still times when he wondered how the situation had gotten so reversed. Perhaps, in time, Hutch really could come back on the force. He leaned back in his chair, eyes closed, imagining them as partners for real again, riding through the L.A. streets. The fantasy felt very good.

At last it was time to leave for the day. Starsky felt like a kid on Friday afternoon as he walked out of the building. He opened his car door and tossed his briefcase in the back seat, knowing full well he wouldn't touch it until he pulled it back out tomorrow morning. He stopped by a store to pick up a couple of steaks and the makings of a salad for dinner, then headed for home.

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The dark-colored sedan wound its way through the streets of downtown L.A. Kurt Flavin was at the wheel, re-familiarizing himself with the town he'd left three years ago. Now he was back, looking for his old haunts and cronies to start up business where he'd left off.

"I think coming out like this might be a mistake," Eddie Strouse spoke up from the passenger seat. "I thought you agreed we should call a few people and check things out without leaving the hotel first."

"Eddie, you worry too much. I have a lot of old friends in this town."

"I know a lot of people here, too," Strouse answered. "Some of them are on our side -- and some aren't. Some of them are cops. You remember, I knew him."

"Shut up about that." Flavin threw the cigarette he'd been smoking out the car window. "You've talked about nothing else since we crossed the Continental Divide."

"If he hadn't recognized me, none of that shit would've happened in the first place," Eddie said stubbornly. "He wouldn't have been on my tail, wouldn't have stumbled onto our operation."

"Just shut up. The guy is dead and forgotten. Nobody witnessed a thing."

"We killed a cop. They don't get forgotten. And there was a witness or two. What about that guy we paid to fly us into Australia?"

"What about him? He got paid good to keep his mouth shut."

"You never know, Mr. Flavin. You just never know."
"Eddie," Flavin pronounced slowly, "I'm gonna say this just one more time. Either you shut up about that dead cop or I'm gonna feed you the same syringe highball as we gave him. Then you won't have anything more to worry about."

Eddie just looked at him, feeling the chill of the man's glance sink all the way to the bone. "Okay," he finally conceded. "I'll shut up about it." But, he told himself, that didn't mean he would forget the subject.

"All right," Flavin said, the scowl leaving his face. "Look. Here we are." Eddie noticed that they had pulled up beside a rundown bar. Flavin parked the car and the two men climbed out.

They entered the smoke-filled front room, Flavin waving his hand as if to push aside the thick air. A man at the bar looked up, stared for a second, then broke into a wide grin.

"Kurt! Am I seen' things? What are you doin' here?" The tall thin man came forward, one hand extended.
Flavin shook the offered hand, nodding toward Eddie. "You remember Vic Underwood, don't you, Eddie?"


The bar owner led them to a corner booth, shouting an order for beers to one of his waiters. When the three were seated, he pulled a cigar from his pocket and lit up.

"Kurt, I heard you left town a couple of years ago. Where've you been all this time?"

"We moved the whole operation out of the country," Flavin explained. "It was time to get out. The heat was getting pretty close." Eddie rolled his eyes and Flavin glared hard at him.

"I heard you ended up in Australia or some place," Underwood continued.

"You heard right. We holed up in the outback, managed to get a couple of hundred thousand bucks together buying up some opal mines and then moved in on the drug trade in Sydney. We ran the whole show down there until last year."

"What happened then?" Underwood questioned, leaning back to take a long drink from the mug that had just been served.

"What d'you think?" Eddie spoke up. "The heat got wind of our operation, so we moved back to the States."

"You been here long?" Vic wondered.

"Went back to New York, first," Flavin explained, already finished with his mug of beer. "Last week we decided it was time to come back here again."

"I see." Underwood sat for a long moment, staring into his mug. "You know what I heard?"

"What?" Flavin asked.

"I heard you had to make a pretty quick getaway from here. Something about kidnapping a cop."

Eddie sat forward, nerves already winding taut.

Kurt Flavin remained cool. "Where did you hear something like that?"
"The pilot who owned that plane you used," Vic said quietly. "He came through here a couple of weeks later and said how he knew what had happened to that cop everybody from the locals to the Feds was looking for."

"Maurice Jenkins?" Flavin said. "He didn't go shooting his mouth off to the cops, did he?"

"Not that I know of. At least not at that time."

"What do you mean," Eddie asked, "not at that time?"

"I heard he got busted over a year ago. Charged with smuggling. I think he's in the Federal prison up in San Quentin." He expelled a large puff of acrid smoke, which seemed to hang over the booth. "He might have told the cops anything they wanted to know then -- you know, trying to get his own sentence reduced."

"Shit!" Eddie moved as if to get out of the booth. Flavin reacted by grabbing his jacket collar and shoving him back down.

He fixed Underwood with a cold stare. "If you know something else, Vic, you'd better spill it now."

A shrug. "What else is there to know? The cops don't tell me all their business."

"You look like there's something more."

"I was just wondering. Did you kidnap that cop? That musta took balls, man."

Flavin relaxed slightly. "When you know how to do something without leaving any evidence, you can pull anything off."

"Without evidence?"

"Jenkins may have seen us with that cop, but that was all he knew," Flavin explained.

Underwood flicked ash into the large glass tray on the table.

"He didn't see what happened to him," Flavin went on, his voice growing more cordial. "We left that cop's body to rot where nobody would ever find it. He's nothing but bleached bones in the Australian outback by now."

"That so?" Underwood asked quietly. "I guess you didn't keep up your subscription to the local papers, then."

"What are you talkin' about, man?" Eddie couldn't stand the complacent look on Underwood's face.

"That cop is no more dead than I am," Vic said with a smile. "He was found in a hospital somewhere in Australia. It made all the headlines here when his partner went over there and brought him back."

"Brought him back?" Eddie's clenched fist pounded on the table. "You mean to tell me he's back here alive and working the streets again?"

"I don't know about whether he's working as a cop again or not. I haven't exactly saved clippings on him, you know. I think the story went that he suffered some kinda brain damage, but he was walkin' and talkin'... and probably rememberin' what you guys did to him." A white-toothed grin hovered for a moment over the
lit cigar. "And when you stop and think the Feds have Jenkins... it doesn't sound like you're gonna be shown the welcome mat around this town, does it, Kurt?"

Flavin's mouth was drawn into a tight grimace. "Of all the fucking..." he muttered. Then he looked up at Underwood again. "Do you know whether there's a warrant out for us or not, Vic?"

Underwood put his cigar in the ashtray, meeting Flavin's cold eyes. "I guess there's ways of finding that out, Kurt."

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Starsky pulled into a parking space beside the shiny blue Mercedes and looked up at the pink facade of Venice Place. When he'd called Hutch that afternoon, they'd decided to meet back at Hutch's apartment for this evening. Seeing the car there confirmed that Hutch had arrived on his own. Though Starsky had known he could do it, a small part of him, unrealized until this moment, was relieved that Hutch was indeed capable of getting there all right.

He grabbed his sack of groceries from the back seat and headed up the stairs, whistling as he went.

His friend was inside, but since he was running the vacuum, he didn't notice Starsky's arrival. Starsky put down the grocery bag and moved stealthily up to the tall blond. He quickly wrapped his arms around the slim waist, grinning at the jump of surprise Hutch gave. The vacuum was shut off abruptly, and Hutch turned in his arms. In seconds they were engrossed in a welcome-home kiss.

"Mmm..." Starsky said with his lips reaching again for Hutch's warm mouth. "I'll take seconds on that..."

Hutch obliged and for a few minutes they stood close in the embrace, savoring the joy of their reunion. Finally, Starsky tried to shift the grocery bag that was becoming steadily heavier and Hutch released him. As Starsky moved toward the kitchen, the blond followed on his heels.

"What'd you do today?" Hutch asked as he watched Starsky unload the steaks and other items.

"Oh, not too much. Paperwork mostly. It was pretty boring."

Hutch sighed. "I was bored, too."

Starsky turned and looked at him. The tone of Hutch's voice concerned him. "What do you mean, bored?"

"I don't really have much to do, Starsky."

"What do you wanna do?" Starsky asked quietly. The realization that Hutch had forgotten vacuuming gave him a slight twinge of concern. On the surface, Hutch seemed much as he had before -- but some things might never be as they once were. His short-term memory might never come back all the way. And that would prevent him from doing a lot of the things he had been capable of before... like being a cop again?

"I..." Hutch was speaking hesitantly. "I want to get a job, Starks. I don't really need much money... but I want to do something useful."

"So? What kind of a job?"
"Well, I guess being a cop is out. After the mess that happened down there before..."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Starsky couldn't help trying to make the forlorn expression disappear. "That was a long time ago, Hutch. You're doing lots better now."

The wide mouth curved in a regretful smile. "You always try to make me feel better, don't you?" The blond head shook. "No. I don't even think I really want to be a cop again. I-I've changed, Starsky. I don't need to prove what I used to need to prove out there. I just want to do something useful. Maybe with my hands. Maybe... making things grow." He turned to finger the lush green leaves of a Boston fern hanging from the kitchen ceiling.

Starsky moved closer to him, watching the strong hands grow gentle with the delicate foliage. Hutch's eyes were lit from within with his obvious caring for the plant. "Sounds like a good idea," Starsky told him softly.

"When I was out today, I saw a sign at a florist's," Hutch mused. Then the faraway look left his eyes and he eagerly brought out his notebook again. "On Pacific Avenue, down by the beach. They had a 'help wanted' sign."

"Did you go in and ask about the job?"

"No. But I was thinking -- maybe someday I could have my own shop."

"Working at a florist would be a good way to start," Starsky encouraged, lightly brushing a strand of hair over Hutch's forehead.

A big grin lit up his friend's face. "That's what I thought."

"We'll go down there after we eat and see if you can apply for the job." Two strong arms went around Starsky then, and Hutch squeezed him tight.

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The night breeze coming through the open window teased the naked skin of the men entwined on the bed. Starsky shivered, reaching for the blankets, then realized that they'd been thrown all the way off the bed as the two of them had tumbled down on the mattress together. Hutch moved closer to him, either instinctively realizing he was cold, or needing warmth himself. Starsky huddled against him, enjoying the sweep of hands down his back, of a long leg thrown over his flank. Hutch made the best kind of blanket he could think of.

"I should let you get to sleep. You start your new job in the morning," he whispered, nuzzling Hutch's ear with his nose. The suggestion of going to sleep was purely perfunctory. For his own part, Starsky felt restless, more keyed up than tired. Just being in Hutch's arms right now was enough to excite him.

The investigating hand smoothed over his ass, fingers teasing between his cheeks. Starsky shivered again as an arc of swift desire surged through his loins. He sought and found Hutch's mouth, invading it with his tongue as he rolled the blond onto his back. His knees came up on either side of Hutch's hips and he continued to kiss him deeply while his lower body began to thrust against the man pinned beneath him.

Hutch accepted the dominance and the feeling of sexual power began to carry Starsky away. It was so good to be in Hutch's arms, to hold him, to love him. So good to be able to do all the things he'd only dreamed of for so long. Starsky left the moist mouth he'd been devouring, and proceeded to tongue and kiss his way
down Hutch's body, sucking and nibbling along his throat, wantonly laving his nipples, the reality of the act turning him on hotter than he'd been in years.

Coherent thoughts fled, burned away in the bright heat of desire. He needed... he needed... What they'd done together in the few days since Hutch's return had been good; sweet, beautiful, totally romantic lovemaking. Now Starsky needed more. Control was burning to ash, need consuming him, and he let himself go in the delicious tide of full arousal. Hutch's legs spread wide apart, his hands on Starsky's hips urged the thrusting motion. Starsky reached under Hutch, lifting his ass, fingers delving deep. His fingers grasped his stiff, aching sex, positioning it, wanting to thrust it hard within the moist heat he sought, to feel the contractions of the muscles deep within the body he was ravishing.

Hutch groaned, panting as he tried to ease his position under Starsky. The dark man looked up, peering with lust-hazed eyes at his lover. There was a struggle going on in Hutch's eyes, desire to be everything to Starsky lost within the hurtful knowledge that his own physical capacities had not yet returned.

"God, what am I doing?" Barely realizing he was speaking aloud, Starsky let go of Hutch, rolling off of him and away, ending up with his back to his gasping partner. He sat shivering on his side of the mattress, quaking not from cold but despair.

"Starsk?" The voice of his friend sounded far off and scared, the hand that fought his shoulder seemed to be trembling. "What's wrong? What did I do?"

Starsky swallowed, trying to find his voice. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Then why are you turning away from me again?" Hutch moved closer, and without his volition, Starsky's body reacted to his nearness. Every inch of his skin was still sensitized to Hutch's proximity, and he damned himself for the need that would not be quenched.

"I..." he began, voice barely controlled, "Don't you know what I almost did to you?"

"You wanted to fuck me."

Hearing it stated so simply like that, Starsky nearly cringed. "I'm sorry, Hutch. I... guess I got carried away."

"But there's nothing wrong with that." The hand on his shoulder rubbed soothingly. "We're lovers, remember? I want us to be able to do everything two people can do." There was a moment of contemplative quiet. "What's hurting you, Starsky? Just because I'm a man and you're a man... I mean, labels don't mean a thing. I don't mind if you..."

"Hutch, please." Starsky turned quickly to face him. "I wasn't thinking. I started without realizing where it was gonna lead. I'm sorry. I can't do that to you..."

"Why not? I could feel what was goin' on inside you." The ingenuous blue eyes were so certain as they regarded him. "You needed to be inside me..."

"Yeah." Starsky couldn't take the frank scrutiny any longer. He turned his head aside. "But I can't..."

"What?"
"All right." He met Hutch's gaze again. "I can't do that to you now... like this. I won't... use you like that when you can't..." His voice trailed off. "Shit. I don't want to make you feel bad or anything. You're terrific. But I won't do that to you while you can't do the same thing to me."

"I don't think of it as you using me," Hutch said quietly.

"I know that. But I can't help it if that's how I feel." He stroked Hutch's face. "I don't want to hurt you, babe. But for now, I just can't do that. Okay? Even if you don't mind, even if you're willing to let me... I just... won't."

"What if I want you to?"

"Don't, Hutch. My head is messed up enough. Just, please accept what I'm sayin' here. We have plenty of time. When the time is right... then both of us will do everything. Okay?" His voice carried an order in it and Starsky regretted having to sound that way, but he had to make Hutch understand.

"Okay."

They lay down in each other's arms then, eyes still holding an intent gaze. The look drew them closer than any embrace, and gradually Starsky felt himself relaxing, felt Hutch relaxing with him. The wide mouth moved in to kiss his lips.

He moaned in the kiss, arms reaching to pull Hutch closer. *I love you so damn much...* He had to say it out loud, tell him in words how much he was treasured.

But Hutch spoke first. "You still need me, don't you?" The quiet voice expressed truths Starsky couldn't keep hidden. He felt Hutch's hand surround his still tumid cock, and he gasped, sensitive nerves jolting to life. "Come here," Hutch whispered. "Do it this way."

He pulled Starsky's body to him, thighs opening just enough for his cock to slide between them. The smooth flanks closed against him, muscles tightening in a delicious caress.

"Ahhh..." Starsky gasped, pulling at Hutch's hips with both hands. They rolled around on the bed, adjusting and improving on the position, snuggling closer, tighter, sweat breaking out on their bodies, creating helpful lubrication wherever they touched and rubbed together. Starsky ended up on top again, thrusting between Hutch's thighs, feeling the head of his cock brush Hutch's balls with every stroke. Hutch's penis was trapped between their bellies, and just having it there, hard or not, excited Starsky beyond belief. If he couldn't be encased within the body he loved so dearly, this was the next best thing, and he marveled again over how thoroughly Hutch understood him, how devoted he was to satisfying him. Head and heart spinning in a soaring new ecstasy, Starsky felt the spasms of release begin. His semen flooded Hutch's thighs, the sheet beneath them, a prolonged outpouring that was as emotional as it was physical.

When it ended, he slid down beside Hutch, sharing a few languorous kisses. He felt a hand move between them, slipping down to encounter the warm fluid and he looked down to follow the gesture with his eyes. Hutch was smoothing the semen over his abdomen, stroking his own flaccid penis with the sticky result of Starsky's pleasure. The taller man sighed deeply, and Starsky looked up again in time to see the blue eyes sink closed as the sensuous self-caresses continued.

"Let me," he murmured, replacing Hutch's hand with his own. He used his fingers and palm gently, assuredly, calling forth all the skills he'd developed on himself while experimenting as a teenager to elicit delight from his lover now. Hutch stretched and sighed again, face soft with enjoyment. "Come on, babe. Feel how good it can be," he urged, moving closer to caress a nipple with his lips while still working his
"That's it. Just go with the feeling. You can do it." He breathed along Hutch's rib cage, causing shivers. "Good... so good... don't you feel good?"

"Mmm." Hutch nodded, one hand clenching on Starsky's shoulder, the other gripping the rumpled sheet. "Starsk... ahhh..."

"Shhh, nothing to worry about, just good feelings." Starsky's voice dropped to a suggestive whisper. "Feel my hand on your cock, feel my fingers rubbing your balls. You're getting hard... getting hard... just relax..."

"Starsky," Hutch's breathing was growing ragged. "When I was... in the coma... what was I like? How did you touch me then?"

"Hmm?" With difficulty, Starsky dragged himself out of the fantasy he'd been creating, wondering where the odd question had come from.

"Did you ever... touch me like this?"

"No," he told him quietly. "I touched you all the time, but never like this. I... I did kiss you sometimes. I told you I loved you." He kissed the soft lips, remembering how he used to silently beg them to respond. This time they did. "Ah, Hutch, I love you. I love you so much. I want you to feel good. Come on, let me take care of you."

"Mmmnnn... take care of me..." The soft echoing words drifted into a sigh. Starsky kept stroking the long penis, willing to repeat the caresses forever to get a response. He kissed him deeply again, silently urging Hutch's body to relax, to surrender to the feelings.

And gradually, he felt the cock in his hand hardening, lengthening. Hutch's breathing became harsh, all his muscles tensing, his brow furrowed with anxiety and need. Starsky tried to keep him calm, fearing too much tension would overwhelm the dawning pleasure. He eased his ministrations, chanting encouragement, but he felt the penis softening despite his best efforts. Hutch reached down to still the motion of his hand.

"No. It's all right." He let his words be gentle. "You can get hard, Hutch. That's something."

"I want to come."

"I know. But every step takes time. You'll get there, if you don't worry about it." A light went on in Starsky's head. "We had to train your body to do everything over again. You couldn't turn over in bed, you couldn't feed yourself or walk. We had to retrain your bladder, had to teach your body what control felt like again. Maybe you have to learn how to let go, too."

"Like you did, you mean?" The voice at his ear was gently teasing.

"Yeah, like I did," Starsky agreed. He began again, encircling Hutch's penis with his fingers, stroking its length, pumping languidly, trying to stimulate it as he had before. He didn't talk this time; he put his mouth to better use. He centered on the right nipple, tongue swirling flat on the swelling tissue, then licking and sucking. Hutch gasped again and his whole body relaxed. Starsky felt the cock begin to harden once more. That's it. I've really gotta stimulate him, make him feel good all over. He moved to the left side of Hutch's chest, treating the other bud of flesh to the wet caresses, still fondling the growing penis. With his free hand, he tugged on the other nipple, pinching gently, rubbing with his fingertips until it stood out hard and tight from the smooth chest. Starsky spent time sucking more insistently on the other one, and Hutch's body seemed to come alive underneath him. The cock Starsky was pumping grew to new proportions, the hips
gradually beginning to rock in time to the motions of his hand. Hutch was moaning, legs spread wide, hips thrusting, his cock stiff and full. Starsky looked down, anxious to see his success, and he found the arousal he'd created beautiful. He continued stroking Hutch for long, exquisite moments, sure in his own body that the pleasure was sweet for his friend. He thought at first that Hutch might actually orgasm, but as the moments passed, he realized that might not happen this time either. Still, a climax wasn't the only reason to have sex. He looked up, trying to read Hutch's expression.

The blond looked transported, face awash with tenderness and joy, lips parted, eyes tightly closed as if to deepen his concentration on the physical sensations. With a sudden, almost desperate need to kiss him, Starsky bent to his lips and Hutch responded, welcoming his tongue, sucking on it eagerly, grinding their mouths together. The rocking movements and the caresses of Starsky's hand seemed to peak, then gradually ebb, until the only motion was in the slowly calming throb of their heartbeats.

Finally, Starsky drew his sticky hand away, reaching up to cup Hutch's face and look into his eyes. "Okay?" he asked in a whisper.

Hutch nodded, eyelashes misted with what might be teardrops. "It was good," he paused, catching a breath, "even though I didn't really come."

"I know. I could tell." Starsky kissed the corner of his reddened mouth gently. "Coming isn't the be all and end all, you know. We've made some progress tonight, haven't we?"

The blond nodded again, arms wrapping themselves around Starsky at shoulders and waist. "Sleep this close to me, all right?"

"Anything you want." Starsky burrowed even closer and allowed sleep to steal him away.

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CHAPTER VII

Starsky stared dreamily at the afternoon edition of the Los Angeles Times, none of the words making the slightest impression on him. He was sitting at his desk, sipping a cup of coffee after lunch and attempting to read the paper, but thoughts of Hutch kept intruding, and he had no will to stop them. He thought of last night, the warm sensations of being surrounded with love, the laughter they had shared upon waking up freezing at two in the morning and searching for the forgotten blankets; the sheer, sweet togetherness that he had missed so long. And he thought about the night to come.

He wanted to know what it was like when he was in the coma. Maybe I should show him -- take care of him, wash and massage him from head to toe, then begin to make love... we've seen he can get an erection... maybe I should just pull out all the stops. And if I do it right, with enough patience, maybe he'll finally get all the way there.

Starsky still marveled over the way Hutch seemed to be accepting his limited ability to respond. He's so willing to do everything for me. And God knows, I can't turn the pleasure aside after all those years of loneliness. But deep down, he has to be hurting, feeling incomplete. I'm a man, too. I know how I'd feel if I couldn't...
We talked about both of us doing everything to each other. Can he even imagine what I really want? More than being inside him -- though I need that, too -- I want him inside me. He's driving me crazy these last few nights... takin' charge of me, making love to me, giving me all those sensations... 'til I want more and more... him fucking me...

He closed his eyes, recalling the size and shape of Hutch's erect penis, of the strong motions of the man's flexing hips. Starsky knew that, all along, deep down, that was what he wanted Hutch to do to him, but when he was missing, the desire only existed in the dreams Starsky couldn't suppress. Now, held by him, caressed and at last loved by him, he wanted Hutch to possess him completely. Sometime soon, he told himself, trying to summon patience. I'll be good to him, good for him... I want to give him back the manhood he lost out here in the outback... want to assure him that his recovery really is complete...

The ringing phone startled him out of the heated daydream, and swallowing the sense of having been caught at something naughty, Starsky picked up the receiver, barking a hello worthy of Captain Dobey.

"Hey, my man, better learn to relax and take life easy," a slow drawl welcomed his outburst.

"Huggy! Hello -- what can I do for you?"

"It's the other way around this time, Starsk. I've got some info for you." There was a pause and Huggy didn't volunteer to continue.

"Okay. I'm listening. What is it?"

An abrupt intake of breath. "Well, there's a rumor goin' around that the men that tried to waste Hutch are back in town."

Someone had just knocked the desk chair from under him, Starsky thought, and he was falling all the way to the center of the earth.

"Didya hear me, man? I said -- "

"I heard you, Hug. How much truth is in this rumor?" One hand held the receiver to his ear in a grip almost tight enough to crush it; the other was clenched on the edge of his desk.

"I think it's the real thing." The other man's voice dropped a level. "I also heard somebody's handing out some big bills to anyone who can give them any information on what Hutch is doin' right now."

That can only mean one thing, a cold, passionless voice in Starsky's head insisted. They want to finish the job they started. They mean to find Hutch and kill him.

"Okay. Okay." He'd been running and had to catch his breath. "Thanks, Huggy. I'll get back to you." He closed his eyes, finding the calm center where the police lieutenant part of him existed. "And Huggy, if you hear anything more -- "

"You'll be the first to know."

Starsky hung up the phone, still fighting to let the professional side of him take control of the situation. A part of him was ready, capable of going by the rules. But another portion of him, fueled by rage that had never had a chance to be expressed, wanted to take over, to see those bastards smashed into an oblivion deeper than any coma.
Where's Hutch right this minute? Could they have found out anything this soon? Starsky reached for his phone, then stopped short. *I can't call him up while I'm goin' nuts like this. He'll know right away that something is wrong. And I can't tell him.*

**But how can I keep this from him?** When he was still sick, Starsky knew he could have managed hiding the information from his friend. But Hutch was independent now. It would be impossible to truly protect him without his realizing that something was going on.

Yet Starsky resisted telling him. He remembered the terror that had stalked Hutch almost constantly from the time he'd first awakened in the hospital. The fear had been so real, so long lasting, haunting his dreams, coloring his every waking moment. Those men were responsible for the ruin of his career, the loss of two years of his life, the fragmenting of their relationship. *Those fuckers almost killed him -- I can't put him through finding out they're coming back to finish what they started.*

Starsky sat still for a long moment, wrestling with his own demons. And then the words he and Hutch had shared only last Saturday on the beach came back to him. *We promised never to keep secrets from each other.* He closed his eyes, running a shaky hand over his suddenly sweat-sheened face. Hutch had a right to know. It was his life, his future that was at stake. *I can't keep it from him. Not if I truly believe he's recovered now. It's cruel enough thinking of him having to be frightened for his life again, but it would be crueler still if I tried to hide the truth. And after we promised... I can't betray what that promise meant.*

Drawing a deep, calming breath, Lieutenant Starsky picked up the phone and dialed the number he'd jotted down only that morning -- Seitz's Flower Shop. It was one forty-five and Hutch was scheduled to get off at two o'clock this first day on the job.

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Hutch took his eyes off the road for a second, just to glance at the directions he'd hastily written down when Starsky had called. *'Come down to the office right away. I have something important to discuss with you.'* It had been Hutch's first impulse to protest that he never wished to set foot in the police station again, but something about Starsky's voice had made him hold his peace. Something was wrong. So he hadn't asked questions, he'd simply written the directions for getting there down in his notebook, figuring he'd find out what was going on when he arrived. His first thought had been concern for Starsky's safety, protective instincts leaping into full gear. But then Starsky had ended the brief conversation with his own caution to Hutch. *'Be careful, Hutch. Don't stop to talk to anyone on the way. Just get down here.'* It had been more than a reminder to drive carefully.

Hutch turned into the familiar parking lot, sliding his car into a space right next to Starsky's Camaro. He felt a surge of adrenalin wash through him, feeling as though they were about to embark on a case together. His curiosity growing about what was going down, he hurried inside the building.

He had to ask directions twice to find Starsky's office, but when he finally saw his name on the door and pushed it open, Hutch found not only Starsky but Dobey as well, seated inside. He came forward, a tentative smile on his lips, glad to see his partner, worried by the look in the dark blue eyes.

"What's goin' on, Starsk?"

A hand settled on his shoulder in a brief, meaningful clasp, then Starsky motioned him to a chair. "Sit down, Hutch. We'll tell you."

He felt Dobey's brown eyes looking at him penetratingly. "Hi, Captain. How've you been?"
The big man shifted his bulk in the armchair, clearing his throat and nodding briefly. "I'm fine, son. Listen to what Starsky has to tell you, now."

Hutch turned his attention back to his partner, his own worry deepening.

Starsky began to speak. "You remember the men that abducted you, Hutch? Eddie Strouse and Kurt Flavin? I found out from Huggy that they're back in town."

He just stared at Starsky for a moment while the words sank in. Then he got up from the chair and strode to the room's one window. Peering outside, he saw a normal, smog-filtered Los Angeles day. There was danger out there all the time, crime in the streets, crazy drivers on the highway, but Hutch hadn't personalized it in a long time. Now someone was out there, with a face he could never forget... possibly looking for him.

"What do you want me to do?" he said, turning, strangely calm, to look at his friend.

Starsky took a step in his direction, a look full of anguish on his face. Then Dobey's voice broke in again. "That's what we brought you down here to discuss."

"Captain, I want every available cop on this right away," Starsky's words were terse, authoritative. "I want an APB out on these men. I checked, and the federal warrant is still out on them. All we have to do is find 'em and..."

"And how simple do you think that's going to be?" Dobey's rumbling voice cut in mildly. "These men may have been back in the country for weeks already. They might be able to elude the police for quite some time, especially if they still have good connections on the street."

"I know. So what do you suggest? Make them come to us?" Starsky was pacing now, his body betraying a need to act, to get onto the streets and take matters into his control.

"What else? They're looking for Hutch..."

"And what do you think I should do? Set him up as the bait to reel them in?" He whirled on Dobey, looking as though he could slug the older man where he sat.

"Why not?" Hutch broke into the conversation.

Starsky turned on him, then. "No way! I'm absolutely against it. Hutch, do you think I'd let you take that chance?" He strode up to him, glaring at him -- with love written all over his face -- for a long moment. Then he turned and paced back to his desk, perching on the edge. "Damn! I should never have let those stories about you get into the papers. That's gotta be how they found out you're alive. If there'd never been any publicity..."

"Don't, Starsky," Dobey interjected. "There's no use crying over spilt milk. What's done is done. They know. But we might make that work to our advantage."

The dark head came up slowly, anger still flashing from the blue eyes. "You're talking crazy, Captain. I'm not gonna set him up as the bait. We're gonna get Hutch out of town and then comb the city until we find those bastards. And then I'm personally going to tear them apart with my bare hands!" Starsky was shaking, livid with anger. Hutch moved to stand close to him, hand tracing gently down his back, but Starsky shook off the gesture, unwilling to be comforted or calmed.
"What did the articles say about me?" he asked quietly. "I don't remember the interviews too well." Don't pull away from me, babe.

Slowly, Starsky turned to look at him again, drawing a breath as if to steady his raging nerves. "When you first got back to the States, there was one in the Sunday supplement that detailed your medical condition, how you were improving and what the prognosis was. The reporter talked to me on that one. And then there was the interview you did when you got out of the hospital, remember? It talked about how well you were getting along."

"You did make the news a good deal, Hutch," Dobey said from his seat across the room. "Starsky, it wouldn't be difficult at all to get something new in print."

"Forget it, Captain," Starsky snapped again.

"Wait, Stark," Hutch began, "I'm part of this, aren't I? This is my life we're talking about. It could take days or weeks even to find these men if they are any good at hiding. Wouldn't we be likely to get them faster if they know where to find me?"

"What do you want to do? Go on a talk show and tell the world about your new job?" Starsky's tone was sarcastic.

"New job?" Dobey piped up. "I hadn't heard about that."

"I just started. Working five hours a day at a florist shop out on Pacific Avenue."

Starsky continued with his own reaction. "It would work just great to tell them exactly where you're working, and how well you've recovered."

"Maybe they should think I'm not quite as recovered as I am." Hutch, half-surprised that the logical thought occurred to him, pinned Starsky with a look, daring him to continue rejecting his input.

"He has a point, Starsky," Dobey quickly came to his rescue. "If they think he's an easy mark, they may not take too many precautions when they come looking for him."

Starsky's eyes went from Hutch to Dobey and back again. The anger in his gaze was being supplanted by pride and a shading of humor now. "Think you're pretty damn smart, don't you?" he said in a hushed voice.

"I always was the brains of this outfit." Their gazes held, Dobey forgotten, time spiraling back to bring their partnership into focus.

The discussion continued for an hour or longer at the office, points raised, rejected, modified and planned out. Newscasters and reporters were called, Hutch's new boss at the shop consulted, details ironed out. And even later that evening, at Starsky's apartment, the discussion went on.

Hutch was still seated at the dining table, watching Starsky pace like a caged animal in the confines of the room. He wanted to tell him to stop, but knew that would only make Starsky more agitated. When the mood worked itself out, he'd calm down.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" he asked once more, turning to face Hutch.

"Of course I am. And it's not like I'll be out there alone. You'll be right there. So will half a dozen other cops. What can go wrong?"
Deep blue eyes rolled ceiling-ward. "You're just taking it all kinda quietly, that's all."

"I thought one of us carrying on was enough." He raised an eyebrow, knowing the dig would get a response.

"I can't help it, babe." Starsky moved closer to him, kneeling beside his chair. "When I think about what those guys did to you, what they put the both of us through all this time... I do lose my sanity a little. I admit it. I'm not looking at this from a cop perspective. I wanna toss out the rule book and destroy them the way they almost destroyed you." His chest heaved with the effort of keeping his voice even minimally calm. "What about you? Don't you feel angry toward them? Don't you want to get back at them?"

"Sure. But it all happened because I was a cop. I want to see them arrested, to watch them go to trial. A good, long battle with our legal system should take up as much of their lives as they took up of mine. And when justice finishes with them, they'll be locked up for the rest of their time here on earth. Just like I'll be the same as they left me."

"Babe..." Starsky's eyes grew moist and both his hands came up to rest on Hutch's thighs. "You're not the way they left you. You're not even the way you were the day they took you away. You'd changed from those years on the streets, remember? You were burned out, ready to chuck it all, to give up on the system. But right now you sound like the idealist you used to be, a long time before you ever heard of Eddie Strouse or Kurt Flavin."

"Maybe." He laid his hands over Starsky's, trying to warm his friend, to reach into his heart. "I don't want to see you tearing yourself up over these guys. They aren't worth it, Starsky. I know you'd like to take your anger out on them, but it won't do you any good. I'm here. I'm okay. Can't that be enough?"

"It's enough." Desperately, two arms wrapped themselves around his waist and Starsky buried his face against Hutch's chest. "I just don't want to take a chance on losing you again. I can't face that. I won't let them take you away from me again!"

He stroked the rumpled curls. "I'll be careful, babe. I'll do it just the way we've planned. I won't take any chances. Promise."

Both the evening and late news carried the story of Hutch's new job. With Starsky seated beside him on the couch, he watched himself on television, part of him pleased with the way he'd managed to come off as a somewhat handicapped person, part of him cringing from the realization that there had been a time when this had really been the way he appeared. I'm just playing a role, going undercover, he told himself, doing what has to be done. Yet it irked him to realize that people who didn't know him, and who'd only heard of him from the media, now believed his recovery was so limited.

And though he hadn't admitted it to Starsky, the prospect of seeing his captors again was terrifying. For months after regaining consciousness, the nightmare of the hours he'd spent at their mercy had haunted him: the handcuffs, the thirst, the discomfort, the death they planned for him... He'd worked so hard to forget. I fought my way back from the edge of the death that they showed me and now they're making me face my own mortality again. His own fears were too difficult to confront, so he pushed them aside, trying to concentrate on helping Starsky deal with the situation instead.

Following the last news broadcast, he took Starsky to bed, the tension in the muscular body making him easy to arouse. Starsky whimpered and moaned as Hutch sucked him, thrashing on the bed in a tumult of pleasure and anguish. His climax was powerful, emotional, and afterward he sank into a deep sleep almost immediately, letting Hutch hold him near. For Hutch himself, however, sleep did not come so easily. He lay long into the night, Starsky wrapped close in his arms, staring into the darkened room as he contemplated what the morning would bring.
Hutch climbed out of the shower and reached for his shaving things, thinking about how different this morning was from the preceding one. Just yesterday, the butterflies in his stomach had been caused by the prospect of starting his new job. Today, what he felt was more than eager anticipation. A part of him was shaking inside with fear and caution, yet the rest of him was actually looking forward to the possible confrontation. He felt like... like he was a cop again.

He wiped the residue of shaving cream from his face and studied his reflection in the mirror, considering how the moustache made him look. He'd been wearing it when Strouse had first caught sight of him that day, thus making it more likely that he would again be able to identify him. And it had been visible on the newscast. But he thought that somehow he looked more vulnerable, more innocent, without it, and thus an easier target. This is me, though. I'll be going enough in disguise today. He put the razor down.

"You want me to scramble some eggs?" Starsky called from the kitchen.

"Sure. I'm gonna get dressed," he returned, making his way into the bedroom. They'd carried a lot of his clothes over to Starsky's from Venice Place last evening, and Hutch slipped on those he'd laid out to wear. The faded jeans were two sizes too large, and the striped shirt was also too big for him now. Starsky came into the room just as he finished buttoning the shirt.

"Do I look skinny enough?" Hutch asked, running his hands through his disheveled hair.

"Guess so. But you still look kinda cute."

"Flatterer." Hutch sat on the bed to adjust the brace worn on his right leg. He usually didn't wear it unless he planned on a lot of walking or driving, but since he would be on his feet at work today, it was necessary again. Then he picked up the cane he planned to carry as a reminder to limp and turned, ready for his assignment.

"Sergeant Hutchinson reporting for duty, Lieutenant," he grinned, trying to take the edge off the tension both of them were feeling.

Starsky just stood there, favoring him with a long, unreadable look. "No. You're not quite ready yet. Hold on a minute."

Puzzled, Hutch followed Starsky out of the bedroom to where he was going through the contents of his desk in the living room. Finally, under a sheaf of papers in the top center drawer, Starsky unearthed the thing he'd been searching for. "There," he pronounced, turning back to Hutch. There was a look of expectancy in his eyes. "I almost forgot about this. Here." He handed over the object that remained concealed in his hand.

Hutch took it from him, immediately realizing that it was a badge folder. The feel of the leather was so familiar to his fingers that he looked up at his friend, his heart pounding in recognition. The devilish blue eyes nodded to him to continue. Hutch looked down, opening the badge folder. It was indeed his own police ID.

There was his photo. His name on the ID card. And his gold shield. The sight swam before his suddenly tear-filled eyes.

He took a deep breath, looking up at Starsky once more, then was drawn to gaze a while longer at the badge. "I threw this away once. Didn't want to have it... polluting me. Remember?"
Starsky made a soft sound of acknowledgement.

"I... remember when Flavin pulled it out of my pocket on the plane. That's the last time I ever saw it. I-I wasn't a cop anymore after that." He felt Starsky coming closer and reached to grasp his friend's hand. "I didn't think I'd ever see it again."

"I got it from the plane. It was found by the Feds when they busted the pilot. That's the clue that led me to Australia. I put it away here when I left to go look for you." A shoulder lifted briefly. "It's been here in my drawer... I remembered I had it last night. I want you to take it with you today." He squeezed the hand holding the badge case. "You're still a cop, Hutch. One of the best damn cops this town has ever had."

"That's because I had the best partner." Hutch blinked the moisture from his eyes, and let his gaze meet Starsky's. The look held, memory and anticipation solidifying the bond between them.

"Let's go then," Starsky nodded emphatically. The two of them made quick work of the breakfast Starsky had prepared, then went out together and climbed into the Camaro.

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Starsky watched as Hutch counted back change to an elderly customer, wondering just how much of his hesitation was part of his act. It was positively eerie how confused his friend managed to look as he waited on people. Flavin and Strouse might come in at any moment, or they might send someone to observe him first, so the plan included having Hutch look as 'limited' as possible throughout the day. Starsky found the act strangely disturbing. He went back to the duty he'd taken on as part of the assignment -- that of loading flower arrangements for delivery. He was decked out in a blue dustcoat over his jeans and t-shirt, one with the name 'Dave' over the breast pocket. It had been years since he himself had participated in an undercover, and he'd forgotten one impossible to ignore element -- boredom. It was already three o'clock in the afternoon, and nothing had happened yet.

"Getting tired, Lieutenant?" Sally Hagan moved up to him, carrying a big spray of gladiolas. She was wearing a florist uniform of her own, as well as a huge grin.

"No, no. Certainly not," Starsky was quick to protest. "You know," Sally went on in a tone of confidentiality, "this reminds me a little of my first job out on the street. Working undercover in that motel restaurant... at least the costume this time isn't so skimpy."

"More's the pity, my dear," Starsky quipped as she turned back to her floral arrangements.

Hutch had finished with his customer and was walking toward Starsky now. He used the cane to lean on, limping as though his right leg was quite wobbly, effectively giving the impression he was an easy target. But the light in his blue eyes when he got closer was anything but feeble.

"I'd forgotten how much time something like this can take," he complained, standing shoulder to shoulder with Starsky.

"Tell you a little secret," Starsky said solemnly, leaning up close to him for a moment, "so did I."

Hutch chuckled softly. "Then it's not just me and my faulty brain circuits. That makes me feel a lot better, partner." He lost his amused air. "Seriously, do you think they've gotten the word that I'm hangin' out here by now?"
"I hope so. It was in the morning papers, too. And Huggy was supposed to put it out on the street. They may just be taking their time, making sure... I don't know when they'll show up, but they will. We've just gotta be ready for them."

"I'm trying."

"You're doing terrific, Hutch," Sally said, returning. "It's great to be working with you again."

The three shared a few more cordial words before getting back to the business at hand. But for the remainder of the day, no one seemed to be checking out Hutch, or acting suspicious in any way.

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The stakeout went on for two more days. Hutch's nerves were strained and he was getting sick of putting on an act. Worse, he'd gotten the feeling that his new boss, Mr. Seitz, really believed he was as stupid as he was acting. If something didn't turn soon, he might not keep the job much beyond this week anyway.

The bell over the door jangled as a new customer entered the shop. Hutch slowly moved to his place behind the cash register, watching the man wander around looking at the displays. The man was in his late twenties, and was someone Hutch didn't think he had seen before. Still, with his memory the way it was, it was hard to be certain. After a few moments, the man came up to him at the counter.

"Hi," Hutch spoke up in his deliberately hesitant voice. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. I'd like to order some flowers for a funeral."

"I see." Hutch picked up a pencil. "What kind?"

"A big bouquet, any kind of flowers."

"We have some for twenty-five dollars, sir."

"That's okay." The man leaned on the counter, pulling out his wallet to pay.

"Would you... like to fill out a card?" Hutch asked as he finished writing down the order.

"Oh, you can write it out for me," said the customer casually. "Put 'in deepest sympathy, from a friend.'"

"Just... just 'a friend?'" Hutch questioned, his pencil poised in mid-air. "Who is this to be sent to?" The doorbell jangled again as Hutch looked down toward the order form.

"The name of the deceased?" the customer verified, reaching this time into his jacket. "It's Kenneth Hutchinson."

The events played out as if in single-frame advance. Hutch registered the sound of his own name as a flash of skin marked the movement of a hand reaching into and out of the man's leather jacket. The hand came out holding a silver gun.

"Starsky!" Hutch shouted as loud as he could, at the same time grabbing with both hands for the gun.

"Police! Hold it!" It was Sally's voice, as she sprinted forward from the left side of the store, her own gun already in view.
"Put it down!" Starsky, to Hutch's right, barked the order just as Hutch felt his own fingers close on the gun barrel.

The man reacted just as quickly. He dropped to the floor, rolling out of Sally and Starsky's line of fire. Hutch, forgetting all caution, vaulted over the counter, throwing himself toward the man.

"Don't, Hutch!"

He ignored Starsky's shout, intent on the powerful man's retreating figure.

The man got off a shot. Hutch felt the bullet whiz past his left ear. He dove toward the man's ankles as another shot seemed to blast through the store. He landed on his right leg. The brace bit into his ankle, and Hutch winced, losing his grip on the man's legs.

"What's going on?"

The voice was a new one. Hutch looked up from the floor to recognize his friend Ted Fletcher from the Rehab Center. And behind him stood someone else. He must have come in behind Ted -- the second shot had come from the gun this man held. Hutch stared up at him, eyes narrowed. Eddie Strouse! In the moment of recognition, the man moved, grabbing Ted Fletcher from behind, placing the handgun at Ted's temple.

"Don't do it, man!" Starsky's harsh command resulted only in Strouse backing slowly toward the door, still clutching Ted.

The standoff between cops, Hutch, two gunmen and the hostage, Ted, held for a breathless five seconds or so. Then the sound of gunfire erupted once again, a deafening crossfire full of blurred movement and angry voices -- and the stench of burned powder.

Hutch pulled up to his feet, running toward Ted. Caught in the crossfire, his young friend was falling, blood appearing at his shoulder. Hutch grabbed him as he fell, turning to see the original gunman drop as well, that man's wound apparently in the leg. Eddie Strouse was making his getaway, roaring away in the car he'd parked in front of the shop.

"It's okay, Ted. You'll be okay," Hutch murmured, easing the young man to the floor. He turned around, glancing to make sure Sally and Starsky were both all right. To his relief, both of them were up and moving. Sally, covering the fallen gunman, was talking into her radio, summoning help, while Starsky hotfooted it to the sidewalk, intent on getting the license of Strouse's car.

It was a moment before he returned to the shop, bending down to where Hutch sat holding a handkerchief over Ted's shoulder wound. Warm fingers brushed under the hair at his nape.

"You okay there, partner?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Fit as a fiddle." Starsky winked, the fingers squeezing Hutch's neck gently.

"How 'bout the bad guy? That was Strouse, you know."

"Bastard got away." Starsky got up, pulling the handcuffs from his belt as Sally frisked the wounded gunman who now lay face down on the floor. "But with any luck at all, we'll at least get some information from this one."
"Hutch?" For the first time since the commotion had started, Ted spoke up in a shaky voice. "What's goin' on?"

"You know this guy?" Starsky asked, returning to Hutch and Ted.

Hutch nodded, lifting the handkerchief a little to check the bleeding wound. "Starsk, this is my friend from the Rehab Center. Ted Fletcher."

"Hi, Ted. Sorry you happened into this."

"I saw you on TV, Hutch," Ted was saying as he winced in pain. "I wanted to come and congratulate you on getting a... a job..."

"Take it easy. Ambulance is on its way," Hutch reassured. He drew a deep breath, realizing for the first time just how hard his heart was pounding. An attempt had just been made on his life. Unsuccessful, but Strouse and Flavin still remained at large. Hutch looked up to find Starsky's expression reflecting his own dismay and frustration.

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"Room service."

Starsky opened the motel room door a fraction, leaving the chain on until he was certain that no armed felon was attempting to get into the room. He slid the chain off, then opened the door wide to permit the bellboy to bring in the tray of food. "Thanks," he said, pulling a few bills out of his wallet to pay the man. Completing that exchange, he closed, bolted and put the chain back on the door. "Come on, Hutch. Dinner's here."

Hutch slowly drew his gaze away from the window he'd been staring out of for the last two hours. He knew it was well past dinner time, but his stomach was still tied in so many knots he doubted he'd be able to eat.

"Come on. It's getting cold." Starsky had already lifted the lids over the plates, having pulled up a chair and unfolded a napkin over his lap.

Tiredly, Hutch got to his feet and joined him. He removed the lid on his own plate, relieved to see nothing more exciting than a hot roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes and gravy. He'd half feared that Starsky had ordered spicy burritos or some heavily seasoned Italian dish.

"Hey, this stuff isn't too bad," Starsky commented.

Hutch felt a smile twitch at the corners of his mouth. There'd been a time, many years ago, when that pronouncement would have ensured he stay far away from whatever Starsky was urging him to try. Fortunately, both of them had mellowed in their eating habits over the years. Still, a part of Hutch missed those days. He picked up his knife and fork and began to eat.

"You look beat," Starsky commented as he took a sip of his cola. "I hope you can rest okay on this bed. I know it's not the same as home."

Hutch shrugged. He had agreed to the necessity of staying in a motel rather than risk going back to either of their apartments tonight.

"Are you going to talk or what?" Starsky reproved him gently, attention returning to his own meal.
"Sorry. Guess I've had a lot to think over." Hutch tasted his food, found Starsky's recommendation to be true and decided he was hungry after all. "I just... I keep reliving what went on today. Can't seem to get it out of my mind." He stared out into space. "That guy... Eddie Strouse. He seemed so close... so real..."

"He was real, Hutch."

"With a real gun, I know. But I wasn't afraid at the time, until I remembered how scared I was when I knew they were going to kill me. When there was no hope of rescue or reprieve." He shuddered. "I thought I was all over it..."

"Hey -- you and I both know some demons never go away. But we'll get him next time, Hutch, and Flavin, too. The guy we arrested doesn't know much, but we did get some ideas from him on where to look for them. And Huggy is out there getting whatever word on the street he can. Don't worry. We're safe here."

"I know. The place is crawling with cops," Hutch managed a grin as he chewed another bite of food. "Seeing him... just took me back a bit."

"Don't think about it," Starsky advised. He glanced around the typically decorated motel room. "Think about the two of us shacked up here for the night."

Hutch chuckled out loud. "Being chaperoned by L.A.'s finest?"

"Who better?" Starsky leered, wiggling his eyebrows. He licked a morsel of food off his fork with a lecherous tongue. "Say -- do you remember the last time we stayed in a hotel together?"

Hutch searched his memory, in vain.

"On the way back from Australia. We had a really nice room in Hawaii." He ducked his head. Hutch noticed that the man who a minute ago was making sexual innuendoes now looked like a kid on his first date. "I was completely alone with you for the first time and I couldn't help thinking what we'd be doing if not for the circumstances. You were still pretty out of it, so I just helped you to take a bath and get into bed. I slept in the other one."

"Feeling alone?" Hutch whispered, touched by the look in Starsky's eyes as he spoke of the trip he barely remembered. "I'm sorry. I just didn't know..."

"I know." A tender smile softened the poignant expression. "And when you rolled over in that big double bed, like you were really able to stretch out for the first time in forever, I didn't mind leaving you over there by yourself too much. You looked so comfortable."

They shared a warm look and Hutch felt his cheeks begin to heat. Starsky wanted to make love tonight. He'd be only too glad to oblige, but he was coming to regret more and more the fact that he could not maintain an erection long enough to make their loving complete. He'd been able to satisfy Starsky, but deep down, he knew his lover wanted more. Hutch was as recovered physically and emotionally as he would probably ever be; he just wished the lower half of his body knew that. He'd thought he was handling the 'temporary' impotence, but every time they were together, his lack of response became more and more upsetting to him.

A strong hand covering his own let Starsky know he was on the same wavelength. "Remember the other night, when you asked me what you were like when you were in the coma -- what I did for you?" Hutch nodded, then looked up into the earnest, caring face. "I was thinking... what if I showed you? I mean, I used to massage you all over. Afterwards -- it was so strange, the nurses couldn't really tell, but I could -- you'd feel so good all over, so relaxed and peaceful. I got to thinkin' the other day that if I took real good care of..."
you like that, maybe..." The words petered out. "I don't know. Maybe it's a stupid idea. Besides, with it all on your mind tonight after seeing Strouse today -- "

"No," Hutch interrupted quickly. "It's okay. I-I think I'd like that. Seeing him today, I guess I know now he's not some phantom who's out there trying to ruin my life. He's just an ordinary hood who's going to be in custody sooner or later. And I'm sorta curious about what it was like when I couldn't wake up and really respond to you. Did I ever tell you I knew you were there, even though I didn't have a name to call you? I'm sure I could hear you, and feel you... touching me. You were different from all the others." The intimate discussion was having an effect on both of them; an anticipatory tension began to fill the room, drawing them together as they hastily finished the meal.

"What do I have to do?" Hutch asked, sensing a tremor of eagerness run down his backbone, when the remains of their meal had been cleared away.

Starsky looked up at him, midnight eyes full of promise. "Oh, you don't have to do anything. Just lie there and take it, partner." He crossed to the venetian blinds on the window and adjusted them so that no one, especially the cops, could see inside from the street. Then he turned the one lamp down low and bent to pull back the covers on the bed.

"You said you helped give me a bath in Hawaii," Hutch pointed out.

"Yeah, but you were up and around by then. This is gonna be like when you were really doing your Rip Van Hutchinson act."

"Rip Van -- Starsky, cut the comedy, will ya?"

Starsky straightened from his smoothing of the bedcovers. "Okay. Take all your clothes off and lay down."

"All my clothes off?" Hutch wondered aloud. "You mean I can't even keep my skivvies on?"

"If you think you laid there in pajamas all that time, you're very much mistaken." Starsky sounded as though he were trying not to laugh. "There was just you, a little bitty hospital gown and a blue pad under your butt."

Hutch shuddered, muttering, "Embarrassing," as he began to surrender his clothes.

Starsky did chuckle then, and Hutch could have sworn he heard him say, "I knew it." His partner went into the bathroom and he heard water running, so he continued to undress and then sat down on the edge of the double bed.

After a few moments, Starsky came out, carrying a large basin of steaming water with several towels draped over his arm. He put the basin on the night table and piled his towels and a few other items on the opposite bed, then turned and eyed Hutch. All traces of mocking humor were gone. As he spoke his voice was serious, though tender. "Now this is what's gonna happen. You're going to lie there -- you can't do anything on your own. I have to move your arms and legs. If I put you in one position, you pretty much stay there. I'm going to give you a bath and then a massage."

"Starsky, doesn't this seem a little silly?" Hutch asked, running a hand down his lover's thigh. Not being able to contribute at all struck him as missing half the fun.

"Maybe. But I think it's kinda important, too. Just lie there and do nothing but think about feeling me touch you."
Hutch still tried a token protest to cover his stronger feelings of embarrassment. "But I thought... I mean, this is really supposed to be lovemaking, isn't it?"

"Not so fast. I think I read somewhere that if a man is having trouble in the bedroom, he should have his partner do exercises like this, where he just concentrates on touching that isn't necessary sexual, just to get used to it, before gradually moving on to... Stop looking at me like that, or this will never work!"

"Okay," Hutch managed to pull a straight face. Then another thought occurred to him. "I... thanks for doing this, Starsk. I know it wasn't easy for you when I was really like that."

Strong fingers slid over his bare shoulder in a brief caress. "S'okay. Now, lie down on your back."

Hutch did as he was told, locking eyes with Starsky for a long moment, realizing that all traces of laughter were falling away. His partner was about to do something very beautiful for him; and he wanted so much for things to work out right.

Starsky placed one of the towels over Hutch's chest and torso, drawing the sheet up to cover his legs. He bent to dampen a cloth in the steaming basin, then turned and stood looking down for a moment. The partners shared a long, intense, promise-filled gaze, then, as if Starsky had asked him out loud, Hutch let his eyelids drift slowly closed.

For a few seconds, he felt intensely alone, as though enclosed by his own private darkness once again. He couldn't move or speak, could not reach out in any way. But a peaceful realization -- that Starsky was nearby -- came sweeping over him, and he began to relax.

The sound of water teased at his attention, then before he knew, a soft, warm, wet cloth was sliding over his face. It felt so good, Hutch wanted to lift his head and encourage the gentle washing, but adhering to Starsky's rules, he held still. His face was carefully washed, then gently blotted dry, and Hutch marveled at the unexpected intimacy of the simple procedure. The cloth moved on to cover his right arm; it was lifted, washed and dried in the same attentive manner, hand and underarm not being left out, then recovered by the towel while his left arm received the same treatment.

"That's good, Hutch," Starsky's voice murmured above him. "Now we'll take care of those long legs of yours." Hutch found himself straining to hear, not just every word, but every nuance of Starsky's speech, while still concentrating on the touches he was being given. The wet cloth started up high on his thigh, then stroked slowly down the length of his leg, swirled over his foot and back up. When the repeat gesture rinsed away the soap, Hutch found himself anxious for the cloth to touch the top of his thigh, hoping it would sneak a little further toward his groin. When one leg was finished, the second was also bathed and dried, then recovered by the sheet.

A warm hand rested on his knee for a moment. "We don't want you to get cold, Hutch. We'll keep you covered as much as we can."

Now it was time to wash his torso. Hutch felt the soft air of the room across his chest when the towel was lifted away, and waited while the cloth was sloshed in the water again. He nearly sighed aloud when its wet warmth caressed him, but maintained his quiet in an effort to savor as much of the sensations as he possibly could. A stray bead of water was slowly trickling down his side, teasing a shiver, apparently unnoticed by Starsky. He was surprised when his caretaker did notice and caught at it with the tip of one finger. Eager nerve endings followed in the wake of the finger stroke, up over the individual ribs to the center of his chest.
The washing continued, the cloth brushing over his nipples more than once. Hutch felt the sensitive flesh responding and was half-embarrassed by the knowledge, telling himself he was merely being given a bath. The cloth moved on, lower on his belly and he caught himself holding a breath, anticipating the moment when it would reach lower down. Starsky stopped washing, drying his chest and stomach, then -- by the sounds Hutch was following -- dropped the cloth back in the basin.

For a second, he thought the delightful bath was over, but Starsky's hands wedged themselves under his body at shoulder and hip and he felt himself being rolled to his side. He started to help, knowing he was heavier now than when in the coma, then controlled the impulse, remembering Starsky's directive. Slowly, the position of his arms was adjusted, and he was helped from his side to lie on his stomach. Concentrating, he realized the change in position was necessary to complete the bath, and his hopes were rewarded when the warm washcloth stroked over his shoulders and down the path of his spine.

Starsky was precise, so thorough and tender. Hutch had never experienced such exquisite care. His back was washed clean, not a single spot missed by washcloth or towel, and Hutch felt the worries and tensions of the day begin to drift out of him.

He was almost totally relaxed when the warm rag next found its way to his buttocks. His reaction was almost embarrassing; he'd known Starsky used to do this for him, but at a time when he himself was unaware. Thus the idea of the act had seemed less intimate than the reality was proving to be. Starsky's touch now was just as careful, neither impersonal nor too suggestive, and yet the movements of his hand made Hutch's nerves shiver beneath his skin. The procedure seemed to go on for prolonged moments, during which Hutch wondered if it was only his imagination that made it seem that way. As he was slowly stroked over and over with the soapy cloth, he realized that, underneath him, the response of his nervous system was taking shape. His penis was lengthening, crowded under him on the mattress. It felt trapped, needful, and he didn't know what to do at all, when he suddenly realized that eventually Starsky would turn him over and see...

His backside was dried and then it was time. Careful as before, Starsky changed his position again, and Hutch allowed it, close to mortification. But Starsky made no comment. He merely brought back the wet cloth and began to wash Hutch's groin area, not gingerly, but with patience and soothing concern.

He was murmuring to Hutch all the while. "That's it. Here's what we're going to wash last. Feel good, buddy? I know it does." The litany sounded to Hutch as though it had been repeated many times and his body quivered at the thought of how long he'd lain apparently insensitive to Starsky's presence. Yet he had known, on some deep, primordial level, that his friend was there.

The cloth became intimate, sliding over and around his penis and balls, washing and rinsing all of him, leaving him tingling with pleasure. He was carefully dried once more and the bath was finished. Feelings of deep love and commitment washed away the last vestiges of his embarrassment, though Hutch noted that the partial erection was subsiding on its own anyway.

That thought surprised him: he should have been worried when it went away, when it didn't become totally hard. But Starsky knew what he was doing tonight, and Hutch had entrusted himself to him completely.

There were some indefinable movements, perhaps Starsky rearranging his supplies, and then the side of the mattress depressed and Hutch knew his friend was sitting beside him. He was ready, open to what might come next, as involved with the complex fantasy as he could be. It came as a charming surprise when Starsky slid a comb into his hair and spent a few moments gently removing all tangles, arranging his locks to suit himself. Hutch realized that even this, the maintenance his own personal appearance, he had owed to Starsky during the time of his illness. The impression was confirmed when Starsky resumed speaking.
"That's better. Those nurses don't know how you like to wear your hair. There. That's more like the Hutch I know." Warm fingertips stroked over his sideburns and the comb was apparently laid aside.

Starsky sighed, and Hutch understood at once how the loneliness was affecting him. He longed to break the spell and reach out to his friend, but Starsky moved away again, and Hutch held back. *It's not yet time...*

More movement and soft, incomprehensible sounds. Then firm hands reached out and took control of his body, lifting and turning him over again. *Do anything,* Hutch wanted to tell him, *anything you want with me.* His friend sat beside him now, and Hutch was lying on his stomach. The sheet was resting just over his hips and Starsky was rubbing his hands together, with something moist between them.

Starsky's palms came to rest on Hutch's shoulders, and the moist something turned out to be body temperature oil. Then the exquisite massage began.

Stroking, deep slow stroking, fingers pressing into his muscle groups, kneading away stress and tension. Shoulders surrounded with caring, smooth sliding down sides and the center of his back, thumbs pressing down the length of his spine. All knowing fingers dismembered him, took him apart to reassemble him as they wanted, as they knew best. Strong hands worked him over, pulling out pain and the memory of pain, until he was newborn, malleable as bread dough and open to impression as a baby. Under the hair at his nape, across his shoulder blades, down and back up, down and back up, nothing left unattended until his entire back was warm and stripped down to an essential purity. The hands moved on, treating his arms to equal attention, bones investigated, biceps and triceps molded, fingers separately massaged and exercised. His scalp, lovingly massaged, temples surrounded with ache-dissipating finger-circles. Then stroke, and stroke, and stroke again, connecting head and shoulders and arms to the spine, and swift movement of knowing hands to pull aside the concealing sheet, sliding down to his legs and on.

Each leg lifted in turn, hip joints worked, knees, ankles and feet, toes stretched and realigned. Soles massaged, stroked lovingly, caressed with sensuous, oil-slicked hands. Never-discovered new erogenous zones created, Achilles tendons, backs of the knees, all stroked and savored by the sculptor's, the magician's hands. Stroke joining stroke, up the backs of his thighs, up and over his cheeks, soft and softer, then deeper and deeper as the muscles of his buttocks were thoroughly patterned, pulled and pressed together, temptingly rubbed and massaged by hands that obviously, thoroughly enjoyed their work.

He couldn't help groaning, didn't miss the throaty chuckle of approval his succubus uttered upon hearing his groan. *Please, just there, down further,* he silently begged those fingers, and they magically complied. Delicious heat was radiating from all the way inside him, stretching out, lengthening, stiffening him again, and he never, ever wanted the sensations to stop.

Hands stroked in circles, circling over and over and over again, across his well-warmed cheeks, up over his back and sides, long, connecting strokes that reminded his nerves and sinews that he was one complete, feeling being, coming alive slowly to the tender treating hands that owned him so thoroughly. Then he was being turned again, face up, so that the spellbinding fingers could touch and trace over his features, down his jaw line, so that whispers could call him in his slumber, gently tease him until all he wanted to do was wake, wake and open his eyes to see his loving, giving friend.

_Not yet, not yet. There are still more secrets, more promises to keep. Wait 'til the calling is all-insistent, 'til the answer cannot be stopped any longer...*_

Touch was all he knew, all he needed, the ever-lengthening strokes that patterned his chest, the fingers that walked down and up his individual ribs, that swirled and circled over his pectorals, paying teasing attention to his nipples until they rose up tight and aching for more than touch, more and always more. Hands
widened the path of the fingers, spreading warmth and oil down his sides and front, gave his nerves tingling fire to open them up and make them live.

Wider circles smoothed and silkened his abdomen, round and round his belly chasing frissons of sensation. Down. Move down. Please, please move down. Something new was reaching, hoping and needing to be touched, for attention to be paid but the hands weren't finding it yet. Strange, that though their caress had not yet come to where he most wanted it, he could imagine the heart-rending effect it would have. Fantasy, so sweet, so pure... he begged silently and waited with tight-drawn patience for the magic to continue.

The hands slipped down to the top of his thighs, and his legs involuntarily started to open. "Mmn, you can't move. You're asleep... drifting... Wait, Hutch. Just wait." And he had to obey.

The stroking, sweet torment, continued forever, tender mercies reminding him of all that life means, all that love promises, creating and fueling his needs. And he knew that he was arching, blood-engorged, standing out to meet the unexpected brush of an arm as a hand reached somewhere else. Soft sighs escaped him, soft whispers encouraged him, and his darkness began to pulse with new light. The light was reaching for him, swooping down for him, begging him to arise.

"Hutch? Hutch, can you hear me?" Light whisper breath right at his ear. "Are you ready to wake up now? It's all right. It's all right, I'm right here."

He opened his eyes to find the ones he loved best, blue eyes glowing with pride and with love. Tender lips bent close to him, just brushing his mouth and he wanted to cry out with joy. "Easy. Rest easy," the quiet words shushed him again. "Feel everything. Lie still. We're almost where we want to be... but give it a little more time..."

*Time... hopelessly lost, never recovered... what he hadn't known was that there was always more to be had. If you're lucky. If you love hard enough...*

He lay spellbound and watching as the flushed lips descended, covering his mouth in a kiss. Then they moved on, down over his chin, nipping, finding the pulse in his throat, searching for and finding his sensitive nipples, taking delicate tastes of him. They moved lower, tongue drawing a line down his middle, until all he could see was the top of a dark curly head, and a flash of bronzed shoulders.

His friend had undressed, too, but Hutch hadn't known when. He was content with that state of affairs, and tried hard not to squirm with delight as the nipping mouth traveled still lower on him, licking its way over the bones of his hips, touring the indent of his navel, skimming over the soft skin of his lower belly.

"That's right. Stay still -- if you can. Just feel."

A firm, bristly chin bumped the sensitive tip of his cock and Hutch couldn't help jolting from the surprise. He could hear Starsky laughing, enjoying his torment, and knew when the incident repeated that that time was on purpose.

Hands took his thighs in an authoritative grip, parting them and allowing the still thirsty tongue to bathe them up and down. Hutch was close to whimpering out loud, wanting to beg for the same touch on his now-straining cock. Yet still he waited, knowing that when Starsky finally gave him what he wanted most, the feeling would be sweeter still for all the anticipation.

Then he was being repositioned again, legs pushed up and open, hips pulled up until he rocked back on his spine. "That's right. Lay open for me just like that," the breathy order came to his ears. Hutch allowed his
hands to move finally, so that they could hold his knees. Heart pounding with arousal, his eyes opened wide as he watched Starsky proceed.

Fingers touched him intimately first, just brushing and lifting, holding his balls so the eager tongue could lick. Then the heat of a mouth surrounded them, sucking first one and then the other and Hutch felt tears trickling out of his eyes. Then a spear of wetness reached lower, sliding between his cheeks and up deeper, into intimate recesses of his body, and he gasped aloud. The tongue made him wet, wetter, and then one slender, expert finger slid inside him, and he held his breath and thought he died. A second finger joined the first and death tumbled over into raw, unvarnished pleasure. And finally, the hot mouth found his rock-hard erection, lips brushing the responsive head, tongue stroking, moist heat surrounding, and the hungry throat sucked him deep and deeper. Hutch found himself pulling back hard on his knees, willing Starsky's fingers to twist inside him more thoroughly, for his tongue and mouth to suck more wantonly. And Starsky did. He gave to him, reawakening him, teaching him all of life and love again. Hutch was alive through him, because of him and never anywhere else but with him.

"Come on, babe," a breathless voice panted, urging him on, then a tongue licked him up and down again. "Wake up. All the way, now. Come for me..."

He was engulfed once more in the moist heated sucking of the most loving mouth he had ever known. If he'd had to sleep for a hundred years before he could have experienced this rapture, he wouldn't have minded. Two years was an instant in the infinity of time. *Wake up. Let go. Love is real... love is now!*

He groaned deeply, body twisting, hips lifting, held in place by deep pressed fingers and swallowed by a greedy throat. He shouted, felt his heart stop, an instant of pain transmuted into an eternity of pleasure. He felt his semen rush, drained from his balls into his cock, pumping and pumping while Starsky drank and savored, consuming all he had to give. Never tiring, his lover didn't let him go; the sweet mouth stayed on him, milking every drop, reducing Hutch to shudders of ecstasy, little sighs and gasps of satisfaction, leaving him sprawled in exhaustion across the bed.

He could have fallen into a deep, restorative sleep then, but he willed his eyes to open, to see the one person so capable of providing for all his needs. There was Starsky, the most beautiful sight Hutch could conceive of, sitting on his haunches between Hutch's open, trembling thighs, chest heaving, cock jutting high and hard, standing out from his body in need. One hand had been brought up to the reddened mouth, wiping off the residue of Hutch's seed. Eyes hot and hungry gazed intently into Hutch's own.

He sat up then, kissing the hot mouth that had loved him so expertly. He folded protective, thankful arms around the sweat-sheened body, then cradled the head full of damp, tangled curls and pressed Starsky back against the bed. He knelt between his lover's thighs, opened his lips, and found success in seconds. He fell asleep with his arms wrapped around a slim waist, listening to Starsky's lazy, sated laughter.

They woke again, two hours later, and Starsky repeated the lesson he had taught, arousing Hutch more quickly and easily than before. This time, they did it sixty-nine, pleasured and pleasing, redefining their bond of happiness and love.
Starsky woke first, as narrow bands of light filtered in through the angled venetian blinds. He sat up, rubbed his tousled hair out of his eyes, and looked down at his partner. Hutch was sleeping peacefully, stretched across most of the wide bed. His gilded and cream-toned skin was bare to the light and Starsky's loving gaze, one hand resting across his belly, one knee bent, and the penis that had surged with so much life and love last night lay curled on his groin. Starsky couldn't stop himself from reaching out, and smiling when it responded to his questing touch. *Sleeping beauty is awake*...

"Hey," a morning-fogged voice questioned abruptly, "after last night, I don't think..."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Starsky let his own dancing eyes meet Hutch's, then lay down beside his lover and kissed his mouth. "Morning. Sleep well?"

"I must have." Two strong arms wrapped around his shoulders and like a big cat coming awake, Hutch rolled him over. "But I don't remember a thing."

"The hell you say." The rest of Starsky's protest was lost in a much more thorough kiss.

The ringing of the telephone made both of them jump.

"Shit. Forgot about my wake-up call," Starsky said, stretching to grab at the receiver. "Yeah? Okay, all right, it's seven-thirty. Thank you very much." He tossed the receiver in the general direction of the phone and sat up again. "Babe, I hate to say this, but I gotta go to work." He climbed off the bed and grabbed one of the towels off the floor. "Mind if I shower first?"

Hutch followed him into the bathroom. "This is a side of you I've never seen before."

Starsky straightened from turning on the taps. "Huh?"

"I mean the all-business-even-on-your-honeymoon side. I don't think the building's gonna fall down without you, Lieutenant Starsky."

"Today it might. I want to be there when the Feds come in to question that hood we arrested yesterday. When he sees the pressure they're putting on, he might give us some more information about Flavin and Strouse."

"Then I want to be there, too." Hutch held up a hand. "And none of that crap about me being a civilian. You gave me back my badge, remember? Isn't that the same as deputizing me or something?"

"I love ya, sweetieheart, but I outrank ya," Starsky winked. "You're staying here today, in 'protective custody.' I don't want you setting foot out of this room until we know we have Flavin and Strouse under wraps. With the boys in blue outside, I won't have to worry about you while I work on this case, and the two or three others I happen to also be in the middle of."

Hutch didn't answer for a moment, then sighed in agreement. "Okay. I'll play the good boy. Besides, I could use a vacation," he went on with wry humor. "It's been a long haul since I started at Seitz's Flower Shop."

His lover kissed him on the cheek. "Preciate that, babe." Then Starsky climbed into the steaming shower.

Twenty minutes later he was dressed, had eaten a room service breakfast with Hutch and was ready to go. They stood kissing behind the locked door.
"Call me," Hutch admonished as he let him go. One tawny eyebrow arched; Hutch still trying to tease him about being left behind. "And have a good day at the office, dear."

Starsky grinned. "You're an idiot, you know. I can't believe it took all these years to figure out how to get you to do anything I want you to do." He opened the door and felt two hands on his rear shove him outside. The door closed and the blinds moved aside at the window. He waved at Hutch and hurried out to his car, pausing to speak to the uniformed officer on duty. Then he slid behind the wheel of the Camaro.

Arriving at Metro thirty minutes later, he concentrated on wiping the sappy smile off his face as he turned off his ignition. He was locking the car when a voice spoke from directly behind him.

"Lieutenant Starsky?"

He answered without turning all the way around. "Yeah?"

The movement of something black swinging through the air alerted him, but not in time. A blinding blow caught him in the back of the head, and Starsky dropped to the ground.

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Hutch finished his own shower and had decided to grab a little more shut-eye. He was startled awake by the ringing of the phone, and glanced at the clock, surprised Starsky would be calling him so early. "H'lo?" he mumbled, trying to wake up more fully.

"Hutch? Is Starsky still there?" It was Dobey's voice and he sounded, as usual, disgruntled about something.

"No, Cap. He left about forty-five minutes ago. Hasn't he arrived yet?"

"If he'd arrived, do you think I'd be making this phone call?" A few more unintelligible mutterings and the connection was cut.

Hutch lay back down, figuring Starsky was probably caught in traffic. Then, considering more carefully, he got and up and searched through his pockets for his notebook, jotting down the time of Dobey's call. *Just in case it's important.* Wide awake now, he dressed and sat in the room's one easy chair, checking to see if the uniforms were still posted outside. They were, and waved at him as he nodded. The minutes began to drag as Hutch became more and more certain that something was wrong.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang again.

"Yeah?"

"Hutch, it's Sally. Captain Dobey didn't think I should call you but..."

"Sally, what happened?"

"We found Starsky's car in the lot. He was nowhere around. I think they've got him."

"Oh, my God." Feeling dizzy, Hutch sank down on the rumpled bed. *Think, think... I've gotta think...* "Was there a note? Anything? Any calls?"

"Nothing so far. We're interrogating the guy we arrested yesterday, but honestly, Hutch, I don't think he knows anything. Besides, they know we have him, so surely they wouldn't take Dave anyplace that guy knew about. It would be too easy for us to get that information from him."
"Yeah." Hutch held the phone with both hands, trying to concentrate through the pounding in his ears.

"Hutch, are you all right? Try not to worry. I'll let you know as soon as we hear anything. Dobey was afraid that if I let you know you'd try to help us, but I told him you'd listen and stay put. Okay?"

Her words washed over him, making no impression. "Sally... I gotta get out of here. I can't just sit still all day waiting for you people downtown to do your job."

"Starsky wouldn't want you to take any crazy chances!"

"Starsky wouldn't expect anything less from me, Sally!" He stood up, glancing at his watch and at the time he'd written on the page in his book. Too much time had gone by since Starsky had been missing. "I'll be in touch." The phone was in its cradle an instant later.

He went out the door and strode purposefully up to the uniformed officer leaning against his Mercedes. "Listen, guys. Dobey just called to tell you to call this thing off. They've arrested the men who tried to hurt me, and I'm going home."

The cop looked at him skeptically a moment, and Hutch realized something in his eyes told the man not to question what he'd said. "Thanks a lot, okay. Lieutenant Starsky and I really appreciate it." He pulled the car keys from his pocket and climbed into his car, backing out of his space and giving the officer not another thought. Then he raced as fast as he could back to Venice Place, glad that they hadn't traveled to a part of town he didn't know as well.

He parked his car and raced up the steps to his apartment, his ankle protesting the strain already. Hutch told himself the twinge was just caused by the stress he was under and ignored it, but he wished he'd taken the time to put on his brace before leaving the motel. There was no time to worry about that now, however. He had to sit down and think what to do to find Starsky.

There was a large piece of paper taped to his front door. Hutch unlocked the apartment, took it inside and read it.

"We don't want your partner -- we want you. If you want him to live through this, come to 418 Coldwater Canyon Drive and we'll release him. Don't alert the police, or he'll die."

Shaking, Hutch couldn't get his bearings for a moment. A part of him was terrified that he didn't possess the reasoning ability to help Starsky now when he most needed to. Yet a patient voice inside him told him to rely on his instincts.

"Come to Coldwater Canyon Drive." That was a residential section, if he remembered correctly, not patrolled by as many police cars as the downtown area. Was he supposed to think they were holding Starsky there? It would be stupid if they were, Hutch realized, because he could alert the cops to the location. If he showed up there, they'd simply kill him and then kill Starsky, too, to keep him from coming after them.

I need help. Who -- ? Huggy... Hutch rifled through the pages of his notebook, searching for Huggy Bear's number. He finally found the address and phone number of his friend's new restaurant.

The manager himself answered. "Morning at Huggy Bear's."

"Huggy, it's Hutch. I need some help," Hutch blurted it out at soon as he heard the familiar voice.

"Hey, take it easy, my friend. What's goin' down?"
"Have you heard anything about where those two guys that tried to waste me, Flavin and Strouse, are holed up?"

I'm waiting for a contact to stop by right now, but -- "

"Good. As soon as you get the word, meet me at Starsky's place." Hutch hung up the phone, smiling as he imagined Huggy's startled look when he heard such commanding tones from him after all these years. Realizing that he'd been able to pull himself together at least that much gave Hutch more confidence in himself. *I'm going into this with nothing but guts and and gamble, Starsk. Hope to God it's gonna be enough.* He headed out of his apartment, pausing for a moment to pull on an old black leather jacket from the closet. The bulky garment made him feel safe, more sure of himself. *If I look like I used to when I was a cop, maybe I'll be more likely to act like a cop.*

His hands began to shake on the steering wheel as he drove up in front of Starsky's apartment, and he took a few moments to draw deep, calming breaths before climbing out. On the way over, a frightening scenario had occurred to him. Starsky might already be dead -- Flavin and Strouse hadn't been afraid to try to kill a cop before, as Hutch knew from first-hand experience. He didn't know whether his partner was still alive, but he was going to find those men regardless. It was time they were brought to justice. If Starsky was dead, Hutch didn't much care what happened to him, but if necessary, he'd give his own life to make sure Flavin and Strouse didn't get away again.

He began going systematically through the drawers in Starsky's apartment. He knew his gun was there somewhere, Starsky had told him he'd brought it over from Venice Place. He had to find it. He looked and looked, his breathing growing labored, and he recognized the signs of stress and despair. Realizing that unless he calmed down he'd never find what he was searching for, he sat, then lay down on Starsky's bed, willing himself to relax.

A light went on in his mind. *I napped here that day, too.* Hutch sat up, trying to let the memory form a picture for him. Then, eager to find out for sure, he slid to the floor and pulled out the bottom drawer of Starsky's dresser.

There was the bear Terri had left him. And the lock box with his gun. Hutch heaved a sigh of relief and wiped the perspiration from his face, then opened the box. The sight of the Magnum lying there created a quiet sense of calm for him. He picked up the gun, carefully loading it. It was heavy, more so than he remembered, and he cursed his betraying body for trying to let him down. *Damn wrist.* He'd never be able to shoot straight unless he took care of that problem. Hutch closed his eyes, praying logic would help him find a solution.

He climbed to his feet, taking the .357 with him to the bathroom. In the medicine cabinet, he found a roll of adhesive tape and wound it tightly around his right wrist and lower arm to stabilize it. Then he hefted the gun again. It was easier to hold it steady now. He had no idea where his holster was; he'd have to settle for carrying the gun in his belt.

A tread on the floor in the hallway startled him, and Hutch whirled, aiming the Magnum.

"Whoa!" Huggy stood there with his hands up, eyes not quite certain Hutch recognized him. "I'm a good guy, remember?"

"Sorry, Huggy." He lowered the weapon, sliding it into his waistband. "What've you got for me?"

Another strange look from his old friend, then Huggy shrugged and began speaking. "Flavin rented a house out on Coldwater Canyon Drive -- "

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"Yeah, yeah. What else?"

"But he also has a place down on Sepulveda Boulevard, or that guy Eddie Strouse does, anyway. You know, out near the airport."

"The airport." Hutch closed his eyes against the involuntary memories, then smiled coldly. "The place on Sepulveda is where they probably have Starsky, Hug. I have to go down there and get him. If he's still alive."

"Wait a minute, amigo. Slow down, you're makin' my head spin. What's goin' on?"

Briefly, Hutch filled Huggy in, including his recently realized fear that the villains might already have killed his partner.

Huggy considered for a few moments. "Okay. You're right, they wouldn't hesitate to waste a cop. But think about it this way, Hutch. They're also concerned about their own hides. When they tried to kill you, they took you all the way out of the country to do it, and waited three years before coming back. I don't think they're desperate enough even now to kill Starsky right in town. It's too risky -- especially if they don't have you yet."

Hutch thought that over, recognizing the validity of Huggy's theory, hoping it had a grain of truth. Both of them knew the bad guys didn't always act true to form.

"All right. Thanks, Huggy. Maybe Starsky and I will see you later." He started to move past his friend.

"Not so fast." Huggy reached out and caught at his arm. Hutch felt the adhesive tape tug at his skin. "You're not going down there alone. You might have forgotten all the streets, for one thing, and for another you're breathing about as heavy as a train right now. What are you going to do when you get down there and hyperventilate?"

"Huggy..."

"I'll drive, Hutch. We'll take my car. It'll be less conspicuous than that pricey number you're driving these days." With that, Huggy steered him out into the hall. Hutch recognized the wisdom of his advice, and went with him willingly.

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At last they pulled into a parking space in a rundown block of Sepulveda Boulevard. Huggy pointed out the house three doors down, and nodded toward the empty homes on either side of it. It was a perfect place for them to be holding Starsky.

"How do you want to play it?" Huggy said, stepping around the car to stand next to Hutch.

He looked at his friend, pleased that Huggy trusted him enough to let him call the shots. "Fast and easy. We don't want to let this thing get complicated. Let's get up to where we can look in some windows and try to figure out where they're holding him."

"Right." Huggy led the way to the house, crouching low the nearer they got. Hutch followed suit and they spent a few minutes quietly casing the building. Still early, the sun was up high, but filtered through the smog it didn't cast many shadows. The house was tumble-down, barely furnished. One room Hutch looked into was empty. Then he peered through a half-open front window, and saw Starsky tied to a chair.
There was a dark bruise on the side of his face, but other than that, he looked all right. Eddie Strouse hovered over him, while a man Hutch recognized instantly as Kurt Flavin lounged more casually in the corner. His heart twisted with revulsion at the sight of the man who'd attempted to kill him. *I survived... but the cost was too high. And what you did to Starsky...* Three days ago, Hutch had told his partner he really wanted these men to stand trial. Now, a coldness inside him said he might not care what happened to them, so long as they paid.

"See anything?" Huggy's voice was a whisper at his elbow.

"They're right in there," Hutch nodded, then held up a hand in a signal for silence as he caught a few words from the men within.

"Your idiot pal must have gotten our note by now, cop. We're gonna go out and pick him up in an hour or so -- that is, if he's smart enough to figure out what Eddie's handwriting says!" Flavin laughed at his weak joke.

"Don't worry, Mr. Flavin," Eddie spoke up, "I printed it in all capital letters."

"Good boy, Eddie." Flavin rubbed at the knuckles of his right hand; it must have been what he hit Starsky with. "I watched your friend on the news, Starsky. It was so nice to see they hire the handicapped here in good old L.A."

"Goddamn you!" Starsky spat at them, struggling against the ropes that bound him to the chair. "You bastards almost killed my partner. He lay like a dead man for two years! And after he's spent another year piecing his life together, you're not gonna take it away from him again!"

"Huggy," Hutch whispered, knowing time was short, "you go around back. Wait thirty seconds and then throw a rock through a window on the other side of the house. I'll get in the front door."

"Gotcha." Huggy was off without a backward glance.

Hutch slipped up onto the porch, praying a loose board wouldn't alert those inside to his presence. He tried the door and found it was locked with a simple bolt. It was easy to wedge a credit card in and unfasten it. Thanking somebody up there for letting him retain the knowledge of how to do that, he carefully opened the door.

"Oh, he may have 'pieced his life together' as you call it, but from what I could see on the tube, he can't tell his ass from a hole in the ground," Flavin retorted.

"Go ahead," Starsky taunted him. "If you want to find out how stupid my partner is, kill me. He'll come after you, no matter what it takes. And if you kill Hutch, somebody else will come after you. There'll always be somebody else..."

*Where have I heard those words before?*

There was a resounding crash and glass sprayed the floor in a room at the back of the house. Both Flavin and Strouse turned in the direction of the sound, pulling their weapons.

Hutch was into the room where they were holding Starsky in four strides.

"All right, both of you -- drop your guns!" He hoped his voice sounded as menacing as he meant it to.

Eddie Strouse looked terrified. Kurt Flavin remained more casual.
"Well, look here, Eddie," he said, still holding his gun up, "it's the cop we thought we left sleeping Down Under."

"Y-yeah." Eddie sounded near the breaking point. Hutch tried to remember more about the man; his weaknesses, his fears... he feared going to prison. Maybe I can use that... or maybe it'll make him more likely to take a chance with his own life.

Flavin's eyes narrowed, as if he were gauging Hutch's potential. The gun didn't waver. Then he barked an order at Strouse. "Aim at his friend, Eddie," he said, directing his own weapon at Starsky. Eddie followed suit.

"What are you gonna do now, Hutchinson? Damned if you do, damned if you don't. You fire at either one of us, and the other will get your ex-partner."

"Are you sure you haven't underestimated him, Flavin?" Starsky spoke up, his voice calm and unruffled. "Did you call him my 'ex-partner'? I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"What are you going to do, cop?" Flavin's voice lashed out at him again, a voice from Hutch's nightmares. "Maybe we're gonna make you watch us kill your old friend here. How about we pull up his sleeve while he's tied to that chair? Remember the needle we gave you?"

Hutch was shaking inside, willing his hand to hold the gun steady. He watched, seeing the man's eyes darting from Flavin to Starsky and then back to Hutch.

"You don't want to do that, do you, Eddie?" he asked, quietly. He kept his own gun leveled at Flavin, who was easily the more dangerous of the two.

"You're not going to shoot, Hutchinson," Flavin sneered again. "You can't trust your aim, I'll bet. I saw on the news how you favored that arm."

The gun was already becoming heavy, but Hutch was determined not to let Flavin's words get to him.

"Stay cool, Hutch," Starsky's voice was even, soothing. "You're in control."

"Yeah, he looks like he's in control, all right." Flavin's jeering continued. "Like he did when he tried to keep you from injecting him with that needle. Remember, Hutch?" He sneered the name.

Hutch steadied his breathing, determined not to allow his memories of horror to interfere with the reality of what was happening now. "You had the upper hand then, Flavin," he told him scornfully, "but you're not facing down an unarmed man now. Besides, do you think I'm stupid enough to have come here alone? Cops always send for back up -- keeps the odds more in our own favor."

"I'm not worried. You'll let us go. We hold your partner, and the only way we'll let him live is if we get a free pass out of this country. If we don't get what we want, Starsky ends up a corpse."

"Touch him once more, and I'll kill you where you stand." They were the most ominous words he'd ever spoken. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eddie move a little further away from Starsky's chair. Strouse's gun lowered a fraction.

"No you won't." Flavin still had the nerve to defy him. "Cops don't shoot people outright."

"That may be true, Flavin." Hutch took more careful aim, supporting his grip on the Magnum with his left hand. "But thanks to you I'm not a cop anymore." His mouth curved in a deadly smile.
"I got you covered, man!" Huggy's voice rang out.

"Shoot him, Eddie!" Flavin barked the order, moving into firing stance himself.

But the only gun that fired was Hutch's. Kurt Flavin staggered, then took a step toward him.

Strouse's gun fell heavily as Eddie backed into a corner of the room.

Hutch fired again. Flavin dropped. Hutch kept the gun muzzle pointed toward him. He fired again. Then a fourth, fifth and sixth time.

The sound of gunfire reverberated in Hutch's ears, growing louder, coming close like a siren. There were more voices now, puncturing the siren wail, and the sound of running feet. Doors at the front and back of the house burst open.

A sudden darkness seemed to be crowding his vision. Hutch shook his head slightly, fearing the encroaching blackness would pull him under again.

He was a cop. No. Not a cop. Never again...

He had to remind himself to breathe, force his heart to keep on beating.

He staggered. The gun was so heavy. But he had to keep holding it. His prisoner couldn't get away. He kept it aimed on the crumpled body. Keep the gun up, he told himself. He held it steady while he slowly sank to his knees.

Getting dark. Getting darker. Endless night... no one here but me...

He was peering through a narrow tunnel. He was deep inside, lost in the dark, and all he could see was the gun he held, the prisoner who lay bleeding on the ground. The sound of his own breathing grew loud in his ears.

The voices were louder now, seeming to swarm around him. Hands were touching him, but he couldn't connect, couldn't respond. Not the right voices... not the hands I know... They pulled at his gun, but he wouldn't give it up.

He was alone, fighting the expanding darkness.

"Hutch."

One word, spoken by a voice he could never forget.

"Hutch, come on. Come back to me, babe."

He blinked, tried to shake his head to clear it again. Hands were on him, grasping his shoulders, supporting the heavy gun he still held.

"That's it, Hutch." The voice was so soothing. "Look at me."

He tried to focus. The swirling dark fell back somewhat and a face swam before his eyes. A tangle of near-black curls, eyes the color of midnight blue.

"That's right. You're comin' back. Come on, Hutch."
He swallowed, fighting the dryness of his parched throat. "Starsk?"

"That's right. It's me, Starsky. Come on, Hutch, let go of the gun, now." Hands wrapped around his own frigid ones, gently pried at his fingers locked on cold steel.

He saw a large man bend over Kurt Flavin's still body. Captain Dobey. "He's dead." The gruff voice was low, not disappointed.

It was okay to let go of the gun. Starsky took it from his hands, fingers sliding over the white tape on his wrist. "Pretty good idea, partner," the even voice praised.

Hutch blinked, answering slowly. "Wanted to... make sure I could hold it."

Starsky was nodding, his eyes sparkling, full of life and pride. He smiled at Hutch crookedly.

There was a dark bruise on his left temple. Hutch raised a hand to carefully investigate it, then slid his fingers into the riot of curls. There was a large lump at the back of Starsky's head.

"You all right?" Fear formed a cold rock in his chest.

"I'll be fine. Long as you're okay."

He remembered all that had happened. Running his hands down Starsky's arms, he looked at him curiously. "Somebody untied you."

Starsky grinned. "Sally did the honors. Hutch -- I'm okay."

He couldn't stop staring into those eyes. So many times he'd come this close to losing the sight of them forever.

Hutch opened his arms, pulling Starsky to him tightly. The weight of the man in his embrace felt solid, real, permanent. Starsky answered by winding his own arms around Hutch, pulling tighter, sealing the bond between them.

The voices of the others in the room were still there, and they were real, not some part of a coma-inspired fantasy. The other cops had their work to do, yet here were Starsky and Hutch, kneeling in the middle of the room, holding onto each other. Hutch didn't care. Starsky showed no sign of being ready to let go, and Hutch didn't plan on releasing him until they'd both had their fill of the embrace.

He realized slowly that his face was wet. Starsky pulled back just slightly, fingers wiping at the moisture. "It's all over, babe," he told him softly. "You won."

All Hutch could do was hold him tighter.

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The two tired men drove back to Venice Place together in Starsky's Camaro. Hutch's car was left at Starsky's apartment, since Hutch was -- in Starsky's opinion -- in no condition to drive. Hutch protested that he was perfectly all right, but he acquiesced to Starsky's wishes nonetheless. They'd stopped off to check out of the motel and retrieve the rest of their clothes that had been left there when Hutch had made his sudden departure to go looking for Starsky. Now as they pulled up in front of Venice Place, both of them groaned at the thought of unpacking.
"Leave it," Starsky decided succinctly. Hutch didn't disagree.

Hutch led the way up the stairs. Starsky was worried. In the hours since the shooting, Hutch had become quiet, looking nearly as withdrawn as he'd been in the depths of the depression that had plagued him during his recovery period.

Once inside the apartment, Starsky heard Hutch mutter something about going to the bathroom. Starsky dropped onto the couch and started unbuttoning his shirt, when he heard Hutch yelp as though in pain.

He opened the bathroom door without knocking and found Hutch, seated on the lid of the toilet, trying to pull the adhesive tape off his arm. The big eyes looked up at him sheepishly.

"Maybe I should do that, partner," Starsky said softly, coming into the room and bending down to see how he could help. Hutch let him take over, and didn't make any more noise, though he did continue to wince and grimace as Starsky removed the tape. "You know, for a guy who doesn't have a lot of body hair, there's still a good bit of that blond fuzz on your arm there," Starsky told him, rubbing the reddened area to restore circulation and soothe the chafing a bit. Hutch's only answer was a deep, soul-reaching sigh.

Starsky hunkered down in front of him, taking the large-boned hands to hold in his own. "You okay, really?" he asked, eyes intent for any sign of fear or self-recrimination.

Hutch nodded, not avoiding Starsky's perceptive gaze. "I guess I don't have anything to be afraid of anymore. Flavin is... gone. And Eddie..."

"Eddie's going to go away for a long time."

"Starsk," Hutch began, then paused, "I... killed Flavin. I didn't intend... I mean, there I was, telling you how I wanted them to go through the legal system, and when it came right down to it... I just blew the man away." He shook his head, seeming amazed and contrite.

"Hey, you didn't know what you were doing. You were provoked, and the man was threatening both our lives. It was totally in self-defense, Hutch. You know that, and every cop there knew it."

"Yeah, and I'm not going to be charged with anything, either."

"You don't want to be, do you? Come on, no guilt trips, babe."

"No. I just... I can't believe I emptied the gun... I thought I was more in control than that. But I just... snapped, I guess... As soon as I fired the first shot... I don't even really remember..."

"Shh. Don't talk about it anymore." Starsky squeezed the hands he held. "By the way -- thanks for saving my life, partner."

Hutch's hands pulled out of his grasp and went to lock behind Starsky's neck. "I love you," the earnest voice whispered. Then the eyes looked at him more carefully. "You've been treating me like I'm the one who was hurt out there. How's your head? Still hurt?"

"I'm fine." Starsky got to his feet.

Hutch stood up, too. "Not so fast there. The doctor said you have a slight concussion. And that bruise isn't getting any better." The smooth fingers that softly investigated the hurt were incredibly soothing.

_I've got my partner back...!_ Starsky realized a mist was filling his eyes.
"I'm going to get you an ice bag," Hutch said suddenly. "You lie down on the bed."

Starsky obeyed, taking time to strip down to his underwear and slide under the covers. Hutch returned in a moment, looked down at him, then sat at his side and held the ice pack on the bruised area. Neither man spoke for several moments, but the quiet was a comforting one. To Starsky, it felt like those times in the past when trouble had gone down on the street. They needed the easy companionship to regroup.

Hutch glanced thoughtfully toward the window. "I don't think there's much in the refrigerator. And since my cooking skills aren't really what they used to be anyway, how about I order from Chez Helene tonight?"

"Sounds good." Starsky was feeling a little drowsy. The wrap-up of the incident today had left him a bit wiped out.

Warm fingers stroked his shoulder. "You rest. I'll go take care of dinner."

Starsky sighed. Hutch was taking care of everything...

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They dined in bed on ratatouille and salmon quiche. Leaning back on the feather pillows, luxuriating on the fine percale sheets, Starsky felt incredibly decadent. They watched some television, enjoying each other's company. The late news carried the story of what they'd been through earlier in the day.

"Kenneth Hutchinson, the LAPD detective who was abducted and left in a severe coma by two men three years ago had a chance to bring his kidnappers to justice today," read the announcer. "You will remember that we broadcast a story about Mr. Hutchinson getting his first job since the incident, in which he began working for a flower shop on Pacific Avenue. Today, when the men who had taken him and left him for dead in the Australian outback captured his former partner, Lt. David Starsky, Hutchinson proved his recovery has been better than it seemed in our earlier report. He managed to figure out where the kidnappers were holding his friend, and hold them until police arrived. Former Detective Hutchinson is credited with saving Lt. Starsky's life, and with apprehending his own abductors. One of the men, notorious drug and gem smuggler, Kurt Flavin, was killed in the incident. The other, Eddie Strouse, has pleaded guilty to all charges."

Starsky leaned over and switched off the set. "You're the hero of the day, Hutch."

"Guess so." There was a faraway look in the eyes that met his own.

Starsky lay down beside him, pressing his lips against a bare shoulder. "I know how to make you forget what happened today."

Hutch pulled him close, but was shaking his head. "I just want to hold you tonight, Starsk. I..."

"I know. I don't want to let go of you, either."

They turned out the lights, and settled together in the center of the bed, bodies finding their perfect match. Long moments passed in the quiet darkness, then Hutch sighed deeply again.

"What, babe?" Starsky asked, running a finger down the smooth chest.

"I was just thinking... I guess I found out something else today, too."

"Hmmm?"
"That if I wanted to... I could be a cop again."

"Do you want to?"

A long pause, subtle shifting of the long body. "No. But it's okay. I could. I don't have to prove it anymore. Not to myself... or anyone. I'm-I'm content, Starsk."

Starsky wrapped his arms more tightly around the precious man who lay next to him. "I love you." The words came from the bottom of his heart.

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EPILOGUE

Memories... sometimes so much sweeter than reality... yet sometimes, the memory of yesterday can be exceeded by the promise of tomorrow...

Starsky sprawled in the middle of the brass bed, waiting for Hutch to come out of the shower. It had been a long day at work, but instead of being tired, Starsky felt keyed up, restless. He was anxious for his lover to come and take him into his arms, couldn't wait for those strong hands to wrap around him and turn him into a pool of jelly.

At last the bathroom door opened, and Hutch came out, a big white towel wrapped around his waist. He came up to the bed and gazed down at him, eyes curious as he tried to fathom what the look in Starsky's eyes meant. Then his eyes traveled over Starsky's body, down his bare chest to where the sheet was pulled up just enough to cover his groin. One tawny eyebrow rose.

"Starting without me?" The soft voice was seductive.

Starsky lifted a shoulder. "Just thinking about you. In there. Warm water and soap suds sliding all over you."

Hutch sat on the side of the bed. "You should have come in with me."

"You're here now."

"Yep. I sure am." Hutch smiled, one hand pushing aside the sheet that was poor concealment for Starsky's erection. Hutch bent to take it in his mouth.

The effect was instant dizziness for Starsky; wracked with pleasure, he fell back against the pillow, hips uncontrollably thrusting as he sought more and more of the delicious heated mouth. In minutes he was at the edge of orgasm.

He willed his eyes to open, taking in the sight of the blond head bent over him. His fingers slid into the long strands of gilt hair, just the touch of that cool, shiny mass adding to the sensations flowing throughout his body. Any second now... Yet he suddenly didn't want it all to be over so quickly. He wanted -- needed -- more. Something they hadn't done together yet, but something that had been on his mind for a long time.

"Hutch," he hissed, fingers clamping in the smooth hair. "Wait."
Hutch stopped, looking up through a spill of blond bangs. "What...?"

"I..." Starsky didn't quite know how to put it into words. He didn't want to sound like a sap, but somehow his desire was so important, he didn't want to voice it too crudely, either. "Let's... I want you to..." He was wryly reminded of their first night together, the awkwardness and hesitation; and the need. Right now, his own was intense.

Hutch was gazing at him intently, eyes slowly growing more perceptive. "You want me?"

"Uh-huh. Please."

"No need to say please, babe." Hutch pressed a soft kiss to the tender skin of Starsky's abdomen. "I'll make love to you. Give you everything you need. Everything I can."

Starsky found himself smiling. "I have a feeling you have everything I need." He reached to undo the wrapped towel around Hutch's waist, finding a beautiful erection, feeling the responsive surge when he wrapped his fingers around it. Hutch, once released from the bonds that had imprisoned him, was a lover as quick to arouse as Starsky himself, and the two of them had rejoiced in the new aspect of their compatibility.

Hutch was getting down to business now, stretching out on the bed, kicking the sheet out of his way and taking hold of Starsky by the shoulders. He kissed him deeply, with enough authority that Starsky actually felt he might pass out. The idea brought a surge of giddiness and he found himself chuckling into the kiss.

"You gonna take me seriously, or what?" his lover growled, nipping at his lower lip.

"You better make damn sure I do," Starsky threatened. He reached up for another kiss and Hutch shifted to lie on top of him, both hands sinking into Starsky's hair, holding his head securely as he took time for a most thorough duel of tongues.

Hutch's lower body began grinding against him and a burst of pleasure spread through Starsky's loins as he felt their two cocks moving together in the tight press of bellies. His own hands slipped down Hutch's back, pulling him closer, encouraging the thrusting movements of his hips. In a powerful mix of joy and need he groaned aloud.

Hutch left his mouth, moving lower with his kisses, tongue tracing along the curve of Starsky's throat, moist lips pressing in the hollow between his collarbones. The passion in the act left Starsky melting inside. Then Hutch's lips traveled over his chest, each taste seeming to create a hunger for more. Hutch ignored no part of him, not even the scars, and Starsky had never felt more treasured.

"You're beautiful," Hutch whispered, his lips hovering over the furred chest, descending to suck, first gently, then with more insistence, at a nipple. Starsky arched up to increase the stimulation.

Hutch had him in his spell and the universe spun down to a place of fantastic sensations. Every part of him was stroked and sampled, nerves brought to life with consummate, commanding lovemaking. He was turned, legs parted, his ass massaged until he was glowing with warmth. A gentle finger probed between his cheeks and one delicate stroke across his anus sent a fire through Starsky's system. The action was repeated, a slow circling, the touch experimental yet eager. Both of them began breathing somewhat heavily. Then, the loving hands both left him.

"Hutch?" He turned his head, lifting up to look for him.
Hutch, his expert lover, looked puzzled. "I... need something..."

Now Starsky understood. "Try some massage oil. I think I put some in your medicine cabinet."

Hutch hurriedly went to get it and Starsky waited for him. The hesitation in the midst of the skillful seduction had something very endearing about it. As recovered as he was, Hutch could get such a little boy expression on his face sometimes. It wasn't a weakness; instead it gave him back the softness that had been eroded by those years on the street. The hard-edged man was someone whom Starsky loved very much, and Hutch could still get angry, indignant over injustice and the world's cruelty, but he didn't let it rule him now. The tender side calmed him down, gave him patience, helped him celebrate life. Hutch was a strong man who had come through fire, and sometimes still had to take the time to seek his way in the world. Starsky was glad to have him at his side while he sought his own way. They'd come through the fire together.

He returned to the bedside, eyes lit from within, and Starsky saw his eagerness had not diminished while he was finding the oil. He swept Starsky into a kiss of greeting, then pushed him back down on the mattress, covering his backside with well-oiled strokes of his hands. When the fingers slipped low this time, a careful probe gained admittance. Starsky gasped in reaction and his head fell onto the pillow, eyes closing as he focused on only sensation. He could picture the finger, the length and shape of it as it pressed into him, and his body rebounded in need. He'd wondered if his sphincter would be able to relax and accept Hutch; now he was reassured that his body would respond as he'd hoped. The addition of a second finger increased the stimulation. Hutch made love to him that way for a while, stretching and easing the way, free hand stroking his ass cheeks, mouth nipping delicately in unexpected places until Starsky was nearly delirious, thrashing on the bed, drawing his knees up, body begging for more.

"God, you're beautiful turned on like this." Hutch's voice slipped like honey over his soul. "So hot... It's like you love everything I do to you..."

"I do, lover. Keep doin' it..." Starsky was fast steaming up, loving each separate thrill as the fingers thrust in and out of him.

"Don't plan on quitting." Fingers still working, Hutch leaned over him, covering his back with kisses, lips moving down the line of Starsky's spine. "You ready? Want me now?" the lush whisper breathed soft at his ear.

Starsky had to take a couple of deep breaths before answering, and then he could just about nod. "Yeah... come on, Hutch... Do it..."

"Then turn over." Hutch's fingers left him, hands taking him by the shoulders to roll him onto his back. Starsky's desire increased a thousandfold at the thought of watching Hutch make love to him.

Their eyes met, a gaze full of heat, as Hutch knelt between Starsky's spread thighs. Starsky's cock stood up hard, and when Hutch leaned forward his own brushed it in a tantalizing meeting of flesh. He placed his hands on Starsky's shoulders, slowly stroking down the length of his torso. Starsky realized he'd broken out in a sweat; his hair was plastered to his forehead and the room felt like the steam bath at a health club. Hutch's hands slowed as they moved lower, finally grasping his cock, each wrapping around it in succession as they stroked up and up its length, milking him until Starsky thought he'd burst right then.

Hutch reached for more oil and began to lubricate his own cock, glancing up to find Starsky's eyes on him. "Want to watch this?" he asked in a throaty voice.

Starsky couldn't tear his gaze away.
The blond's skin was flushed pink, his belly dewed with sweat. The cock he handled was fully erect, standing out from his body, moist head a flare of deeper rose. As Starsky watched the hands in motion, the foreskin slipped up and back, trying to hide the tip, then letting it reappear. He'd never been so turned on just watching someone move before. This was Hutch, though, and he was going to take that huge cock of his and put it inside Starsky. Soon now. Very soon.

One slick hand reached under to lift Starsky's ass and Hutch pulled him close. They spent a few seconds settling into position, both of them keyed up with their thinking processes going out of kilter.

"Hope I can get this right," Hutch said, his voice light with amusement this time.

"Looks like you know what you're doing," Starsky told him. Then, patience exhausted, he begged him to hurry. "Come on! I want you inside me! What're you waitin' for?"

"For you to say that." A self-assured smile appeared on Hutch's mouth. He glanced down, watching as he positioned himself, cockhead pressing at the opening of Starsky's body.

*Relax. Let him in,* Starsky told himself. *We're together, all the way. Finally.* His eyes sank closed, but he reopened them in a hurry, not wanting to miss a thing.

The head of the penis felt plush as it probed him, but solid steel was underneath and behind the first push, velvet smoothness covering Hutch's strength. He slipped in slowly, Starsky gasping, shocked that there was so much pleasure in the slow introduction of his lover's flesh into his body.

They rested briefly, Hutch allowing Starsky's muscles to adjust to the new circumference, then he tested his ability to thrust, moving a little further in, then not quite all the way out. It was working, they were becoming one. Starsky remembered to breathe again, watching as Hutch pushed in a little further, and deep interior muscles he'd never known he had reacted to the invasion, stretching, accommodating, being stimulated beyond belief.

Hutch sank all the way in. His eyes closed, his head fell back in abandon, face imprinted with rapture. His arousal was at its peak, and to Starsky he seemed the living embodiment of manhood: joy, strength, health, in all their robust perfection. This couldn't be the same man who for two years had lain lost in a coma. He was strong, in mind and in body, full of life and love. Starsky thought, for the first time, that seeing Hutch this way, he might finally forget.

Then his lover began moving, and Starsky couldn't have philosophized more if his life depended on it. Hutch pounded into him, carried away on the tide of his own need, gripping Starsky's hips to mold them tighter together. Each stroke sent an arc of fire through Starsky's body, each thrust pulling a groan of pleasure out of him. His penis, stiff and taut, needed more stimulation, too, so he reached to wrap his own fingers around it. Hutch's hand got there first, and gave him what he needed, a fast rhythmic stroking, quicker than the long, deep strokes of his thrusts, compounding pleasure until Starsky's system began to overload.

Hutch's eyes opened then, as if Starsky's body had given him some signal. They watched each other as they fucked, gradually transported to a higher plane where love ruled the world, where two men who loved each other could be joined forever. The act of love was a blessing, knitting them together in passion, making each a part of the other's soul.

"I love you -- " The words came from each of them, almost at the same instant.
Hutch bent over him, lips finding Starsky's harsh, gasping breaths, kissing him until he felt faint, still pounding into him, long, deep, soul-stretching thrusts. Deep inside, there was an edge of pain, but Starsky wanted another thrust as each one ended, wanted more and still more pleasure, more of the sweet, transfiguring pain that made Hutch part of him. There'd been so much emotional pain for them, they could handle any amount of the physical, especially knowing that the release and rapture would be so joyous.

**We're there. We made it.** Starsky's thoughts pounded in rhythm. He reached up, wrapping his arms around Hutch, gripping at his shoulders, dragging his hands down to squeeze and pull at his muscular ass, loving the feel of it flexing as he worked. The thigh muscles felt iron solid, legs continually pushing, and Hutch's breathing was never stronger. He began groaning as the pleasure built, and Starsky knew he was nearing orgasm. The thought of his body giving Hutch so much pushed him over the edge, and almost before he realized, he was spasming in Hutch's hand, seed spilling over his belly and up onto Hutch's.

Hutch yelled out in his passion, body hesitating in its crouch over Starsky, then thrusting deeply again, wrenching another moan of satisfaction, another, another thrust, and then a deep, shuddering joy. Starsky felt his come spill inside him, sealing them together. He savored the sensations. *My soul, my body, my all... they're yours.*

Hutch slowly pulled out of him when it was over, looking at Starsky with wet eyes. "We did it," he breathed, proud of himself, flushed with pleasure. "Starsk... you were so... you felt so beautiful pulling me in... I wanted to be in you forever..."

"Guess I could arrange that," Starsky mumbled, feeling all the strength begin to seep from his bones.

Hutch reached up to give him a big, very sloppy kiss, then fell down next to him, the echo of Starsky's sated exhaustion.

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**October, 1982**

Starsky came out of the cocoon of memory, eyes squinting up at the glaring light. He lay stretched out on the sparkling beach of Daydream Island, warmed by the sun and sand. Daydream Island was a resort along the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, and one of his and Hutch's last stops of their vacation. They'd spent a month Down Under, celebrating life and their love.

The trip had been a cleansing one, making memories, allowing them to share their differing remembrances of their first trip to the island continent. First, they'd gone to Adelaide to visit the hospital. Starsky would never forget the way Melissa Samuels looked when she saw Hutch walking toward her. The three of them had gone out to dinner, laughing and sharing the friendship that had grown between Starsky and Melissa while Hutch had slept in the corner room of the fourth floor of the Pulteney Nursing Home. She'd looked at Hutch with unconcealed delight in her wide brown eyes and flushed pink when he took her hand and earnestly thanked her for saving his life.

"If not for you, Doctor," he'd said fervently, "I wouldn't have been here when David came looking for me."

Melissa patted his hand with her small one, smiling through a tear or two. "I knew that there had to be someone out there looking for you. All I did was hold on to you until he got here."
Then, taking a rented car not too much different from the one Starsky had explored on his own with, they drove to Coober Pedy, and Hutch had been as amazed as his partner on first seeing the town below ground. Starsky recounted the details of his long search in the foreign land, how people like Jack Donahue, the police detective in Sydney, and John Jarratt, the pilot who'd discovered Hutch unconscious in the bush, had helped him in the quest.

They ran into John himself in a Coober Pedy bar, the same way Starsky had met him in the first place, and the friendly pilot had been pleasantly surprised to see the man he'd found near death so well recovered. Staying over in Coober Pedy for a couple of days, they'd even tried mining, and had found some little opals and a few gold nuggets to take back as souvenirs.

Starsky and Hutch had explored the wonders of the beautiful country together, taking their time, living like tourists, like lovers without a care in the world or a schedule to follow. After visiting Ayers Rock, seeing koalas and kangaroos, and enjoying bustling cosmopolitan areas and even the Sydney Opera House, they ended up on the Sunshine Coast, where both could indulge their love of sports. Boating, fishing, water skiing; they tried it all. Starsky was taken along on innumerable nature hikes and he photographed dozens of trees and birds and inlets with pristine water on white beaches.

He'd taken hundreds of photos, many of them of Hutch, as he'd promised he'd do if he ever had the chance again. He didn't want to have only memories of his partner's happy face as he explored and played on the islands, as he swam in the clear bright waters.

Hutch seemed reborn, alive with light and joy. His hair had turned silver-gold under the burning sun, his body was lean and tan. Starsky knew his own skin was darker bronze than it had been in years, and he felt himself growing healthier here, physically and emotionally. At night, sleeping in each other's arms, there were no more nightmares, and even the unhappy memories did not have the power to hurt as much.

Running feet approached him now, and Starsky quickly closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep. A shock of cool water splashed over his chest, and he sat up in dismay.

"Hey -- can't a guy take a nap on his own vacation?"

Hutch laughed. "You've been napping all afternoon. Come on, Starsk. There's a lot to see here."

"We've seen every bird and sea creature in the whole animal kingdom," Starsky groused, pretending to scowl. "Everything's starting to look the same to me."

"I've had it with your belly-aching," Hutch told him, folding his tall form into a cross-legged position beside his partner's stretched-out length. "Besides, it's all a front and we both know it." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to his lover's mouth.

Starsky sat up when it ended, putting his arm around Hutch's broad shoulders. "Okay, babe," he said in a tone of indulgence, "what do you want to show me?"

Hutch's eyes moved to watch the shore, excitement lighting the blue from within. "Everything." He looked back, lovingly. "Everything, Starsk." He stood, grabbing Starsky's hand and pulling him to his feet as well.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" he said happily, starting to walk toward the water's edge, one arm around Starsky's shoulders. "I think this is the prettiest place we've seen on the whole trip."

"I bet that's why they call it 'Daydream Island,'" Starsky concurred. Still, to him, none of the natural scenery could compare to the tall man beside him. Bright flow of hair, perfect curve of cheek, straight nose, full
mouth, long sculpted throat, clean-limbed body clothed in white t-shirt and drawstring pants... "Yeah," he sighed, at peace, "sure is beautiful, all right."

"I want to find out about the regulations on importing plants," Hutch went on. "Seitz is anxious to get some new varieties for the store." He was doing well there, but still planned on opening his own shop in time. Hutch made the plants thrive, and proud of being able to hold down the job and earn an income, he thrived, too.

"Strict as they are about bringin' stuff into this country, I'll bet there's not much you're gonna be able to take out," Starsky told him. "Ya might get arrested for smuggling."

"Never," Hutch said complacently. "I've got my own personal police lieutenant. He'll do anything from fixing parking tickets to getting me out of international trouble."

"You think so?" Starsky shook his head, amused by the conversation. He planned to continue with the LAPD. *I'll be around long enough to try out for captain.* Starsky felt very good, very confident about the future now. Being a cop was his profession and he knew Hutch was very proud of him.

Hutch turned to him, running light fingers around the neckline of Starsky's own white t-shirt, bringing a shiver to his throat. The capable hands smoothed over his shoulders, then slid down his sides where his thumbs hooked in the waist of Starsky's matching drawstring pants. They stood in the loose embrace, becoming very aware of each other.

"You want to start carryin' on on a public beach, or would you rather go back to our room before we do something that'd get us arrested?" Starsky quipped, not too worried about the latter.

"They're pretty free and easy here, babe," Hutch told him. "Pioneer spirit, free thinking... nude beaches... we could get away with anything..."

"All right," Starsky purred, wrapping his arms around him. "I love taking chances, anyway."

Hutch kissed him, but pulled away laughing. "Not now, lover. It's too beautiful out to miss this sunshine."

"All right," Starsky acquiesced. "I love you so damn much you can get me to do anything you want."

"I know." His partner winked, then started off, a proprietary arm around Starsky's waist. They walked for a few minutes, then Hutch stopped, gazing all around at the sea, the sky and the land. Finally, his eyes rested on Starsky, and his smile became tender and warm.

"You know... sometimes I can't believe I'm really here. There were times I thought..."

"I know." Starsky touched his cheek.

"When I woke up, I found that everything in the whole world had changed. Even me. The only part that stayed the same was you."

Starsky couldn't speak. The gentle eyes looked down at him, and he knew he didn't have to say a word.

"Starsk, I can never thank you enough."

"You thank me every day, babe."
Hutch's smile broadened, carried along on pure contentment. "I'm just so happy to be alive!" His chest
heaved with a deep-drawn breath.

"Me, too, Hutch."

The arm at his waist squeezed him. Then all at once, Hutch took off at a run, dashing down the beach, bare
feet kicking up the sand. He ran full out, supple strength in his legs carrying him along. He glanced back,
waving Starsky to come with him.

Starsky broke into a run, too, charging along the sand toward him, legs pumping hard as he laughed in
reflected joy, catching up with Hutch and running with him, side by side.

_From distant shores, you have brought me home again..._