Summary: Rosie Malone has come back to town. Whose heart will she break this time?

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Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings
"You owe me a dinner, buddy-boy," Starsky insisted as they exited Parker Center. He'd won the Ping-Pong match fair and square, and he wasn't about to let Hutch weasel out of their bet.

"Well," Hutch said, capitulating, "a bet's a bet." Hutch's blue eyes glittered as Starsky chided him.

Starsky chortled as they headed toward the Torino. "All right!"

They were feeling good, and why shouldn't they? They'd been through hell and back in the last few weeks, uncovering a nest of corruption that fouled everything it touched, including themselves. They'd quit the force, become targets of the same corruption they'd uncovered, and somehow ended up back where they'd started, smelling like roses. Through all of that, their partnership had been unwavering.

"Hey, as long as I'm buying," Hutch said, too-helpfully, "why don't I pick the date? How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow sounds great!" Starsky agreed.

Hutch nodded. "How about 5:00 in the morning?"

It had taken a woman to do what all the crime, all the filth, all the stress of the job had never been able to do -- get between them. But they'd defeated even the green-eyed monster that had threatened to destroy them. Arm-in-arm they'd walked away from Kira, the woman who'd nearly ended their partnership. Their friendship was intact. They still had their always-reliable port-in-the-storm -- each other.

Starsky had to laugh. "You owe me a three-course dinner!"

"That's a hamburger, fries, and a chocolate shake," Hutch insisted, naming one of Starsky's favorite meals.

As Starsky prepared to open the Torino's door, he felt like they'd been renewed. It was as if time had gone back, all the way back, to the Academy, to those first heady weeks of friendship as two opposites couldn't help but attract one to the other. Having rejected Kira, they were once more inseparable; their future together. And all that youthful exuberance seemed theirs once more.

"No way," Starsky insisted as he pulled out his car keys. "I'm talkin' 'bout a broiled lobster, maybe, or even a New York steak."

Hutch rolled his eyes as Starsky fumbled with the keys, but he was laughing.

"What are you lookin' so ill for?" Starsky asked, enjoying the chance to rub in Hutch's defeat. "It's not every day you can buy your best friend a meal."
Hutch looked better than he had in a long time. He didn't seem as burned out as he had just a few weeks before. He'd started running again, eating better. He'd started harassing Starsky about his own diet -- always a good sign.

Starsky leaned against the car as he prepared to unlock it. The metal was sun-warmed, the gleaming red and white hide heating his thighs through his worn jeans.

Suddenly, Hutch did a quick double take, his eyes flicking to the side. A harsh, crunching noise came from the east end of the lot that sounded like a minor fender bender. Hutch turned toward it. Starsky was watching Hutch so intently, he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings. They were in the police station parking lot. Black-and-whites were pulling in and out. It was just another day at Parker Center.

Hutch tensed, his face a sudden mask of alarm.

*But we're in the police parking lot, Starsky thought. What could happen here?*

He glanced to the side. A black-and-white had pulled out too sharply, catching another car's fender. The driver of the police car ignored the collision, kept on coming.

Starsky frowned. *What the...?*

The cop driving the black-and-white hit the gas and the powerful police car lurched forward, heading straight for the Torino.

Even though everything seemed to be happening in slow motion, Starsky had no time to react.

"Starsky!" Hutch said warningly, confused as the vehicle bore down on them.

*But it's a cop car.... Isn't it?*

And then he saw the barrel of an automatic pointing straight at him.

"*Starsky, get down!*" Hutch screamed.

It was happening too fast. No. Too slow. Starsky felt as if his feet were glued to the ground, as if he were frozen in place while everything around him kept moving.

Even confused, however, he knew his priorities.

*Get down? What about Hutch?*

He had to protect Hutch. Starsky was totally exposed, but brazenly, he pulled his Baretta.

"*Starsky, get down, get down!*" Hutch kept yelling.

Before Starsky could free his weapon, the gun aiming at him chattered, firing rapidly again, again, again --
Bullets slammed into the Torino, rocking it, shattering the windows, punching their way through red metal then white -- then tearing their way through fragile flesh. Starsky felt each deadly pellet impact his chest, his gut, felt them ripping into organs, tearing open his body, then exiting his back, right through his best leather jacket. He went down like a brick as air bubbled through one of the holes in his chest.

That's bad, he thought distractedly. It's bad when air comes out. Remember... from 'Nam....

The pain hit like a secondary reaction, blocking everything, flooding his body, igniting every nerve. Pain like he'd never known -- worse than the Italian restaurant, worse than Bellamy's poison, worse, even, than watching Hutch die slowly from the Plague. Dimly, he heard Hutch shouting at him, then the loud report of his big cannon. Distantly, he heard his partner screaming his name over and over.

"Starsky! Starsky!"

It sounded like Hutch was in a tunnel, his voice reverberating with an eerie echo.

Hutch quit firing and ran around the front of the car. Starsky was on the ground, his head nestled incongruously in the big mag wheel of the Torino, as if the car were trying to comfort him for loving it so much. Starsky's eyes were open as he lay gasping, fighting to breathe, struggling to understand what had just happened in the space of seconds.

Does this mean we're not going to the restaurant? he wondered, drawing in a painful breath.

Hutch stood in front him. He looked terrible, his gun hanging from his hand, his blond hair wild and wind-blown, his eyes --

Shit, is he cryin'? Hutch? Whassa matter? He blinked once with agonizing slowness.

Hutch approached him cautiously, then knelt before him as if he were praying. "Oh God, Starsky, don't die! Please, don't die." Now he really was praying, and that scared Starsky. What was even weirder was that Hutch was clearly afraid to touch him, afraid to come too close.

Am I gonna die? Starsky wondered. That wasn't possible, was it? They were in the police station parking lot!

Starsky could hear sirens, and footsteps, people running all around. He heard Dobey bellowing for medical assistance. He'd never heard the captain sound so frantic. Someone put a blanket over him. But none of that mattered -- not while Hutch was crying.

"Don't leave me," Hutch begged. "I'll do anything if you just don't leave me."

Starsky struggled to speak, but he couldn't spare the air. You big turkey, I'll never leave you, don't you know that? You didn't get hurt, didja Hutch?

He started drifting away and thought about getting some sleep.
"Don't, Starsk! Don't leave me!" Hutch begged again, touching Starsky's cheek with a gentleness that surprised him. "Stay with me, buddy."

Starsky struggled to open his eyes, focus them on Hutch's face. That beautiful face, so sad now when it had been so happy just a few minutes before. *I'm here, Hutch. Ain't goin' nowhere. Least, not without you.*

Hutch leaned down, his lips close to Starsky's ear. He was speaking louder now, almost shouting, but Starsky could barely hear him. "I love you, Starsky. You know that, right? I love you so much. You can't leave me."

Starsky managed to blink again, and tried to swallow but couldn't. He fixed his eyes on Hutch's, needing to understand what was happening, what he was being told.

There were people everywhere now, a whole crowd, with Hutch and him as the center. But in spite of the mob, it was as if they were all alone on the tarmac beside the Torino. Hutch leaned closer, cupping Starsky's cheek gently with his palm. Starsky could feel Hutch's breath on his face as Hutch told him again, "I love you, Starsky. Never loved anyone else the way I love you. You believe me, don't you?"

And before Starsky could think of an answer, Hutch's mouth touched his. Starsky closed his eyes, felt Hutch's breath filling him, felt the air swelling his lungs, giving him needed oxygen, needed strength. Then Hutch's tongue slid between his parted lips, and Starsky felt an electric shock of pleasure so sweet it was blinding. His pain grew dimmer, lessening enough so that suddenly he could breathe, just a little at first, then more.

Hutch kissed him with all the love he had inside, all the love Starsky knew he was capable of, and as he did, his kiss began to heal Starsky's mortal wounds. The holes in Starsky's chest and gut slowly closed, and his breath stopped making bloody bubbles.

Suddenly able to move his arm, Starsky brought his hand up to cradle Hutch's head, needing to tangle his fingers in the soft, long strands of Hutch's hair. Hutch's strong arms gathered him up carefully, gently, holding him close, keeping him safe -- curing him. With the utmost tenderness, Hutch's fingertips slid inside Starsky's bloody shirt until he could touch his seeping wounds. Cautiously, he stroked them, easing their pain. Under Hutch's hands, the wounds closed, healed, and finally disappeared.

Little by little, bit by bit, so did the Torino, the parking lot, and the frantic crowd. All of it disappeared, like fog breaking up before strong sunlight. Where it all went Starsky didn't know, and didn't care.

For him, there was nothing now but the strength in Hutch's arms, his broad, bowed back, and the love pouring through his kiss, the most soul-rattling kiss Starsky had ever known.

They broke for air, and Starsky sighed as he felt the pain ease away from him, dissipate, like all the other material things around them. He exhaled, relishing the ability to do that again, and inhaled slowly, languorously. Breathing was something he would never again take for granted.
Hutch was unbuttoning Starsky's bloody shirt as he murmured, "Ssssh, that's all right. You're all right now. I've got you." He didn't have to shout anymore; Starsky could hear him just fine. He touched Starsky's eyelids with gentle fingertips and his lids became heavy. Closing them, he willingly yielded, surrendering himself to Hutch's embrace.

There were things Starsky wanted to say, too, but his jaw was lax, his mouth slightly open. He couldn't force it to form words.

Hutch didn't seem to need words. His lips found Starsky's open mouth and he kissed it again, delicately, chastely, just lips on lips pressing light. Then Hutch's mouth was at his ear, comforting him, taking all the pain away and giving reassurance. "I've got you, babe. I'm here. Nothing can hurt you now, not while I'm with you. I love you, Starsky."

He sighed, smiling. Hutch was with him. Hutch loved him. Did they ever go to the restaurant? He couldn't remember.

His shirt was gone. He was no longer on tarmac. While he wasn't sure where he was, he no longer cared. He was on something soft and yielding, and he was warm and safe in Hutch's arms. Hutch's mouth slid smoothly over his jaw, down his throat, leaving a path of soft kisses. The coarse hair of Hutch's mustache teased and tickled as he kissed his way over Starsky's wounded chest. Then Hutch's mouth touched the bloody bullet holes. They were closed now, but still raw, still throbbing. Hutch's gentle mouth robbed them of their heat, their pain. They grew smaller, dimmer, until they could barely be seen under the swirling growth of Starsky's chest hair. Hutch kissed them away until Starsky forgot all about them and the pain they caused him, until Starsky could think of nothing but Hutch's sweet mouth and the pleasure it gave him.

He shifted, bringing his other hand up to cup Hutch's head, burying his fingers in the long mass of his blond hair. He sighed again, his lids still too heavy to open.

"Oh, that's nice," he thought, as Hutch kissed his wounds, nuzzling him, using his tongue. So nice. He stroked his fine hair, wishing he could tell Hutch how good this felt. Starsky moved under his gentling mouth, loving its attention.

"Ssssh," Hutch soothed, kissing the last of the wounds and robbing them of their sting. "I'm here, babe. I've got you." His mouth moved lower, his cheek and nose rubbing against Starsky's furry belly, making him smile. "Feel that?" He murmured. "Like that?" He slid the tip of his tongue around Starsky's flat navel making him sigh again and toss his head on the pillow.

Pillow? he thought groggily. Starsky's right hand groped blindly around his own head until he snagged a corner. Pillow. His hand swept down, palmed the surface he lay against. Sheets. Soft, clean sheets. The surface moved as Hutch shifted on it. Bed? Am I in bed? What happened to the parking lot? He touched his own bare chest and wondered where his shirt had gone. Sliding his palm down over his abdomen and bare hip he discovered he was nude. Where the hell are my clothes?

Then Hutch kissed him just below his navel and he stopped worrying about that. His sigh was half moan now, as his right hand blindly sought purchase again in baby-fine strands of yellow
hair. Hutch's tongue traced a thin line of sensation where Starsky's leg met his groin, and suddenly he was in pain again. A different kind of pain. A delicious one.

He was throbbing once more, but not in his chest. His heart rate increased, his lungs gulped air, and he felt something stirring at his groin, but he was still too disoriented to be sure.

Then the wet tip of Hutch's tongue touched the blunt end of his cock making him gasp in shocked surprise. *Hutch? What are you--? Why are you--?*

Hutch did it again, slowly, tenderly, the gentlest, wettest touch. Starsky moaned aloud, and tossed his head. That was so *good*! Hutch purred in response and did it again, sweeter, wetter. Over and over the tip of Hutch's tongue rode around and around the head of Starsky's cock, making the whole thing grow and swell and throb and pulse like something with a life of its own, something not a part of his body at all.

Starsky gasped softly with every exhalation. It was as if all there were in the world was the tip of that tongue and the end of his cock -- as if all feeling, all sensation, all awareness was right *there*, electric nerve jolting electric nerve.

He tried to call out -- to ask why, to ask when, to ask how -- but he couldn't spare the breath. Everything he knew, everything he felt, everything he experienced all ended right at his glans, his hot, bobbing glans, that enraged, enraptured part of him that wanted to spend the rest of forever nestled gently against the wet tongue of his best friend. Who knew Hutch could even do such a thing?

Hutch licked him slowly, wetly, until he thought he'd go crazy. He could never come like this, it wasn't enough. He couldn't come but he could lose his mind. But he couldn't say anything, his vocal cords were still frozen. He didn't have the slightest idea what to say anyway. Besides -- *That's so good, babe, so good*....

Then Hutch shifted, making the bed dip. Starsky, flat on his back, rode it out, helplessly in thrall, unable to fathom what might happen next. Hutch's teasing tongue outlined the ridge of his crown two, three times, then dipped below it, tracing the vein that snaked down the side of his painfully erect organ. Using his whole tongue, Hutch licked Starsky's erection all over, every inch. Collecting it tenderly into his hand, Hutch held it still and licked it wetly, lovingly, until Starsky felt his hips lifting of their own volition to meet that loving, lapping tongue.

The hands he'd buried in Hutch's hair clung hard now, holding on for the ride, scared to let go as if he might fall off a cliff and find himself plunging down into some dark abyss. Hutch's tongue carried him higher, higher, higher.

Suddenly, Hutch shifted and held Starsky's cock straight up so he could go straight down. Starsky slid into a tunnel of heat and moisture and realized with a shock that it was Hutch's mouth.

*Hutch's mouth?*
He moaned low and loud, thrusting up, thrusting in, as Hutch took him, swallowed him, sucked him so sweet he couldn't bear it. His hips rocked, he clung to that long hair, pulling Hutch's head down, his need suddenly insatiable, uncontrollable. Hutch's mouth. He had to have Hutch's mouth. All of it. Now.

And Hutch obliged, purring deliciously around the mass of man shoving into him, demanding what Starsky was willingly giving. Hutch swallowed him. Hutch sucked him. Hutch licked him raw.

Starsky cried out in delight, in heedless, unbridled passion, and opened his eyes, finally awake, towed out of his nightmare gently, relentlessly by Hutch's loving skill.

"God, Hutch," Starsky breathed, making the name one long exhale. "So good. Am I still asleep?"
Starsky blinked, looking down at the blond head poised over his groin. The most beautiful man in the world was going down on him, easing him out of his terrible repetitive nightmare the way he always did -- with his tender mouth and magic hands.

Hutch couldn't answer, but looked up. His ice blue eyes met Starsky's dark ones. Starsky watched, mesmerized, as Hutch made sure he could see what he was doing, what he loved to do. No woman had ever loved going down on him the way Hutch did. Still half-asleep, Starsky tried to remember why, and for a moment, couldn't.

Then it all came back in bits and pieces. The shooting in the parking lot. His near death. His real death. His return to life as Hutch raced into the hospital.


It was his own prayer.

Hutch's beautiful blue eyes watched Starsky watching him suck so good, so sweet, so long. Hutch could make this last for hours if he wanted to, and how could Starsky stop him?

The nightmares had started in the hospital. Not right away. A few days after his return to consciousness. After the sprinkler "accident."

He was still being heavily drugged against the pain when they started, and he couldn't wake up. He was locked in a cycle of terror and confusion as his subconscious played the film of the assassins firing on him again, again, again, knocking him down over and over, the pain ripping through him --

Maybe there was something weird in the way he was breathing, but Hutch figured it out. He had been dozing in the empty bed beside Starsky that first time. The nurses never could make him leave and had gotten tired of being surprised by the big hulk: lurking in the bathroom, in the closet, in the privacy curtains (like that wasn't the most obvious place in the world!) and once even under the bed, with the two of them giggling like kids every time and giving the hiding place away. So, finally, the nurses let Hutch have the other bed to save their own sanity.
So, Hutch was there when the nightmares started. He climbed into bed with Starsky and started whispering as he massaged his aching wounds, trying to ease him out of it that first night. He succeeded and Starsky had spent the rest of that night sleeping soundly, dreamlessly, in Hutch's arms.

The next night it happened again and the night after that -- Starsky's nocturnal terrors were tearing Hutch apart. It was even worse the fourth night. At the fever pitch of the nightmare he heard Hutch, in frustrated desperation, confess his love.

Starsky came awake that night with Hutch's lips against his face, Hutch's eyes full of tears. Before they ever had a chance to deal with Hutch's embarrassment, Starsky initiated their first real kiss. Starsky didn't question his reaction to Hutch's passion; it just seemed right to respond to his need, to return something to the man whose love had brought him back to life. After that first kiss there was no embarrassment between them -- and no barriers any longer. No barriers. No limits. No labels. Just two friends in a twin bed chasing away their mutual terrors with a love that had been growing for years.

Now, six months later, at home in his own bed, Hutch's love once more pulled Starsky from the grip of the dream.

Blinking dazedly as he stared into Hutch's eyes, Starsky whispered, "I love you."

That was always the final exorcism of the dream; the moment when Hutch could be sure Starsky was really awake. It was the first thing he'd said to him in that pivotal moment in the hospital, right after they'd kissed the first time.

I love you. The words that solved everything.

Hutch's eyes said it back to him. They were soft, bright, full of love, full of longing, full of hope, and all the deep emotion he felt inside. These were not the eyes of a burned-out cop who'd seen too much. These were the eyes of man who'd only learned recently that he was not too old to find the truest love of his life.

Starsky swam in the blue waters of Hutch's eyes, and felt a joy that was fresh and clean and new. This was what waking up to Hutch's love was like.

Slowly, reverently, Hutch released his tantalizing oral grip on Starsky's fevered flesh. Kissing his glans, Hutch rose to his knees, bestowing soft kisses randomly over his thighs, his hips, his furred testicles. Before Starsky could collect his wits enough to protest or plead for more, Hutch's large hand collected Starsky's erection, and stroked it smoothly.

Starsky gasped in delighted surprise. Hutch's hand was filled with something warm and slick, a thick, comforting lubricant that made his stroke incredibly exciting. Hutch coated him, anointing him slowly, using his touch as deftly as he'd used his mouth.

Hutch's gentleness was always a tender surprise to Starsky, belying his strength, his height, his intimidating presence. He moved his hand over Starsky's sensitive flesh with the touch of a
musician pulling forth from his instrument the purest note, the cleanest tone. Starsky sighed and watched Hutch tend to him lovingly. Hutch was beautiful when he loved Starsky.

His gentle stroking didn't last nearly long enough to suit Starsky -- but would forever be enough? The bed dipped as Hutch moved around him, clambering over, then on top of him. He blinked as Hutch straddled him, ass over Starsky's groin, weight balanced on his knees and elbows. Hutch leaned over for a kiss.

"You awake?" Hutch asked, wanting to be sure. "You with me?"

"I'm in heaven, right?" Starsky murmured, his sleepy lassitude heightening every sensation. It was pure pleasure to be tended by Hutch, one hundred percent pure pleasure.

"No, not hardly," Hutch told him, grinning. "You can't be in heaven, Starsk, cause you're still alive." Hutch kissed him then, lightly on the lips.

Starsky purred and opened his mouth, wanting more. Hutch gave it to him with the next kiss, the tip of his tongue touching his, just the tip, gently. "Not in heaven," Starsky murmured. "Can't be. Heaven'd have to much to live up to."

They kissed again, deeper this time. "Not heaven," Hutch agreed around the kiss. "Here. With me. Alive."

"Alive," Starsky said, reaching up to hold Hutch's head in place. His kiss grew hungrier, more intense. "Alive. With you."

Hutch reached between them, captured Starsky's bobbing organ, positioned it, then lowered himself with a sigh. "Alive. Ah, God, Starsky, so alive."

His arms slid around Hutch's long, lean back, as Hutch took Starsky's raging cock deep inside his own body. "Hutch! Hutch!" It was like being swallowed by the tightest, hottest mouth, pulled into a wet furnace by that strong, powerful body. The blood pounded in Starsky's temples, in his throat, in the bends of his elbows, behind his knees. It was like being all-powerful and completely helpless at the same time. He was captured by Hutch, devoured by his body. He was being drowned and burned alive all at once. This was Hutch's love, Hutch's need.

No, not just Hutch's....

With a sound that was half-growl, half-roar, Starsky rose up, arms locked around Hutch's back. Hutch gasped as Starsky pulled him hard into his lap, driving deep inside him.

"Oh yeah," Starsky whispered in his ear. "I'm alive all right."

"Starsk!" Hutch breathed, his eyes widening. "Oh, damn, Starsky!"

"Mmmm," Starsky agreed, sliding his hands down Hutch's spine to clutch his buttocks. He lifted Hutch slightly, adjusted their positions, then eased him down again. Hutch moaned and Starsky purred along with him. "I changed my mind. I think it is heaven."
Starsky shifted them in the bed, lifted them, and drew his knees under them. Hutch gripped him with arms and legs as if afraid of losing his precarious seat. It felt incredible to have so much man wrapped around him. He nuzzled Hutch's long neck, nipped his shoulder. Hutch shuddered, losing it, clinging to him desperately.

"Is it good?" Starsky whispered, feeling Hutch's big frame tremble in his arms. "Is it?"

"God, yes," Hutch breathed. "You're so deep in me, Starsk. So deep...."

He smiled and relished the sensation of Hutch sitting on him, holding him tight inside. *Oh, so good to be alive for you.* He rose up, lifting Hutch, then eased them both down, so that Hutch was on his back against the mattress.

Hutch made a small sound of surprise.

"Goin' deeper," Starsky warned, once he had him settled. Slipping an arm under one of Hutch's knees, he pulled his long leg up higher and drove in, making Hutch cry out. "Deeper yet."

"Stark! Oh, dammit, Starky!" Hutch clawed his back as his hips moved to match the rhythm.

Starsky was breathing hard, his lungs moving air as efficiently as they ever had as his legs pumped his hips, driving his cock in and out, deeper, deeper. He was *alive,* completely alive, totally alive, here and now, in Hutch, thanks to Hutch, because of Hutch. He moved harder, faster, stronger, feeling like he could last forever. Wanting to. Needing to. Needing Hutch.

Hutch called his name, not like in the dream, not like in the parking lot. Hutch called his name with a pure note of passion. "Come on!" Hutch called, tightening around him, meeting him stroke for stroke. "Give me everything! Everything!"

"Oh, yeah," Starsky promised, lost in it now. There was nothing but the two of them killing the bed, tearing each other apart, pounding away, fucking, fucking, *so good, so good* --


Hutch cried out and shuddered. Starsky knew that sound and smiled. "Now you come on. You give *me* everything!" His balls tightened up hard, aching. Hutch's strong muscles squeezed --

They shouted at the same time, their voices mingling in one pure note. Hutch convulsed beneath him as Starsky came painfully hard, filling Hutch. Giving him everything. Hutch spilled a flood between them, gluing them together, the warm liquid searing them, melding them.

*It's like getting shot,* Starsky thought dimly, *only lot's nicer.*

They clung together, making soft sounds of pleasure, sharing tender kisses, murmuring words of love that were nearly meaningless in their mutual exhaustion. Hutch was wrapped tight around Starsky's body as if he could prevent them, somehow, from ever separating.
"Better every time," Starsky murmured into Hutch's neck.

"That's the truth," Hutch said quietly, tiredly.

"I'm too heavy," Starsky said insincerely. He couldn't bear the thought of rolling off and moving away from Hutch even that short distance.


"Mexican," Starsky said quickly, before sleep claimed him. Hutch was still trying to get him to regain all the weight he'd lost after the shooting. "Best toshados this side of Guadalajara."


_As if I could do anything else_, Starsky thought as his body sagged slowly into a dreamless, peaceful rest.

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_It's funny what a difference a few months can make_, Hutch thought, as he leaned back in his chair, putting some distance between himself and the table.

Seven months ago, he was a burned-out cop with too much mileage, barely able to find enough reason to wake up every morning. Then Gunther happened. And Kira. And, of course, the shooting. He glanced over at his partner, still cleaning up the last of his dinner, and savored again that incredible sense of peace he had every time he realized just how much in love he was. At this moment, Kenneth Hutchinson bore no resemblance to that tired, road-weary, burned-out cop.

Today, he was a man who'd rediscovered the joy of living, the righteousness of working, and the wonder of loving.

It still amazed him.

Deciding this was too much contemplation on a full stomach, Hutch patted his abdomen and complained, "I don't know why I let you talk me into ordering these things -- "

"'Cause it's good, s'why," Starsky mumbled, tucking the last bit of taco into his mouth and washing it down with beer. "You loved every bite. Don't try telling me you didn't."

Hutch looked at the devastation on his plate. The world's biggest chimichanga had fought valiantly there and lost. Or had it? Hutch suppressed a burp and stared at his partner. "You're right. I loved it. I'm just not sure it's real fond of me right now."

"Have another beer. It'll settle your stomach," Starsky assured him, shoveling in the last of his rice.
Where does he put it? Hutch wondered admiringly. He'd have to run an extra mile tomorrow morning to make up for this indulgence, but on Starsky's lean frame the heavy Mexican food just disappeared. No matter what Hutch fed him, Starsky couldn't seem to gain back those last five pounds. Starsky couldn't, but Hutch's attempts to pack the pounds back on him were taking a toll on his own body.

Two miles tomorrow. Gotta do it. He found himself smiling. Two miles -- or another half hour in the sack with this mad man.

"You thinkin' dirty thoughts again?" Starsky said softly, as he glanced up slyly through lashes too long and too dark for any man.

Hutch blushed and glanced around, as if anyone could hear what was going on in his mind.

"Caught'cha!" Starsky crowed, grinning.

"Hard to think of much else," Hutch admitted, striving for a nonchalance he did not feel.
"Considering how productive the day has been...."

It was a rare day off after a week of long, tedious stakeouts that had accomplished nothing. The boring, yet stressful, job had left Starsky wired, edgy. So Hutch wasn't surprised when he'd suffered from the dream. After he'd loved Starsky awake, they'd drifted back to sleep, only to wake and make love again on and off throughout the day. It had been a while since they'd spent the whole day in bed, but Hutch knew they'd needed it. The dream rattled them both, reminding them of the closest call they'd ever had. Making love was the best way to reaffirm their grip on life, and the amazing power of their passion.

"I checked the calendar," Hutch said quietly. "It's been a whole month since you've had one of those dreams."

Starsky nodded, staring at his plate, trying to appear unconcerned. "Well, the therapist said the incidents would start diminishing. Guess he was right."

Hutch wondered if the police therapist would approve of their unique form of therapy. Sometimes Hutch wondered what the therapist thought of them -- off the record. The therapist never came out and asked, but after the fourth session after the shooting, he'd stopped seeing them separately. After the fifth session, Starsky started referring to the therapist as the "marriage counselor."

Hutch wondered, too, what his reports to Dobey must've said. The man wasn't stupid. But after Starsky had survived Gunther's assassination, and Hutch had brought his empire down, the media had declared them the centurions of the decade. He suspected they'd have to be caught in the act to suffer any repercussions. Still, they were both concerned enough to be discreet. Starsky more so than he. While wonderfully uninhibited and loving whenever they were alone, Hutch knew Starsky was still adjusting to this new image of himself. Hutch had had longer to adjust to the secret desire he'd harbored for Starsky, but it had taken him a while, too. It was easy for him to be patient with Starsky. He assumed that, in time, those societal pressures would concern Starsky less and less.
It had been a relief when the therapist had finally cleared them both for active duty, though they still had to see him once a month. Starsky was losing patience with the process and, Hutch suspected, was anxious that the doctor might eventually confront them about their affair. Hutch wondered what Dobey would do if forced to face the facts in black and white. He didn't want to think about that, so pushed the thought away.

"You going to tell him about the dream, when we go?" Hutch asked.

Starsky shrugged. "Sure. I guess. Why not?" He paused, then really looked at Hutch. "You're not gonna start worrying about the dreams again are you?"

Hutch grinned. "I don't have enough energy left to worry, thanks to you, partner." Funny, how that word meant so much more to him, now.

"Yeah," Starsky said smugly, "you always say that, but I know the minute we get back to Venice Place, you'll be giving me that 'come hither' look!"

Hutch pointed an accusatory finger at him. "If you so much as even flirt with me when we get home, so help me, I'll lock myself in the bathroom and sleep in the tub! We've got to work tomorrow, Starsk! It would help if I could stand up on the job!"

Starsky just laughed and shook his head, chasing the remains of enchilada sauce around with the last of his tortilla.

*How is it possible,* Hutch thought, for maybe the tenth time that day, *that I could be this happy? He looks at me, and I'm lost. He touches me and I'm helpless. He makes me feel like I'm 18, and makes me act like I'm 16! How is it possible that I could have fallen so impossibly in love with a man -- a man! -- that I've known as well as I've known this man for almost 12 years now! How is it possible?*

"You gettin' desert?" Starsky asked, his mouth still full of sauce-covered enchilada. Hutch couldn't take his eyes from the touch of red at the corner of his mouth until the tip of Starsky's tongue snaked out to clean it up.

He had to look away with a smile. "You've got to be kidding! I'd explode if I ate another bite. Don't tell me you're getting desert?"

Starsky shrugged. "Maybe something for later." He looked up under those indecently long, dark lashes and his expression made Hutch blush from the bottom of his soles.

Hutch leaned forward. Two could play at this game. "Well, if you're good, I could make something for desert later, once we're home."

Starsky smirked. "I thought I'd already been good. In fact, I'd say I'd been especially good."

Hutch sat back in the booth, exasperated, and shook a finger at him in warning, making Starsky laugh. That was one of Hutch's favorite sexual teases. "If you're especially good," Hutch would entice as he led Starsky to bed, "I'll make you the Paul Muni special later," or "I'll send down to
Chez Helene's for that special éclair you love," or "There's a surprise in the freezer for you, but only if you're especially good." Starsky was always ravenous after sex, and Hutch enjoyed feeding the appetite he'd stoked with his loving. And Starsky was always especially good as far as Hutch was concerned.

Something touched his leg under the table and he jumped. The toe of Starsky's sneakered foot trailed slowly, wickedly, up the back of Hutch's calf, and suddenly he couldn't speak, couldn't think. He swallowed, fighting to rein in a reaction so strong he couldn't mask it.

Starsky smiled smugly.

"I'm gonna get you for that," Hutch said roughly.

"I'm countin' on it, buddy," Starsky purred, all confidence. "You know I gotta have desert! But right now I'm in need of the little boys' room." Grinning, he wiped his mouth and put his napkin down.

*You outrageous little stud,* Hutch thought, amused. *You think you've got my number -- which you do. But I've got yours just as well! Just wait till we get home. I'm gonna --*

Something moved in Hutch's line of vision, something behind Starsky. The cop in him reacted automatically, instantly, focusing on the unknown. One part of his brain noted it, cataloging it, even as the bulk of his mind focused on its primary interest.

-- *peel you out of those skin tight jeans so fast your head will spin, then I'll --*

The object came into focus then drifted through the restaurant, disappearing behind two waitresses, a busboy, and a meandering hostess. Then it reappeared. A woman. Something familiar about her. She came closer, staying behind Starsky. Then Hutch saw her face clearly.

She saw him, too, and smiled hesitantly, holding one finger to her lips, asking for his silence.

Hutch stared in stunned disbelief as everything he felt comfortable and secure with suddenly tilted. Instantly, he knew his shock showed on his face. Starsky -- about to get up -- glanced over to him then, reacting to his expression, stiffened, and started to turn around instead.

Hutch blinked, pulled himself together. Realizing what his expression must look like, he schooled his face, met his partner's confused eyes, and touched his foot to Starsky's under the table. It was an old signal of theirs. *It's okay. Don't panic. Don't draw.*

Then the woman, who was still staring into Hutch's face, stood behind Starsky. She moved her arms around him, covering his eyes gently with her hands. She didn't speak.

Starsky flinched visibly, but Hutch kept his foot covering his blue Adidas so he relaxed. Starsky's left hand touched one of hers, as if that might help him identify her.
Hutch was grateful that Starsky could no longer see him. It allowed him to stare fully at the woman. Even though he tried to contain his expression, his surprise had to be evident. His mind spun and his heart rate increased.

*Fight or flight,* he thought dimly. He didn't know which one to choose. *Where did she come from? How did she find us?*

He blinked, forcing himself to get a grip. He was a cop, dammit! He could handle this!

"Who is this?" Starsky asked finally, as he touched the hands over his eyes, tracing the slender wrists. There was no jewelry to give her away.

*Can't he remember her hands?* Hutch wondered. He felt dizzy, a little shocky. He couldn't really believe this was happening. *Now? After all this time? Six months after I found the answer to everything I'd been looking for? How could this happen now?* He sucked in a harsh breath.

"Don't you know who it is, David?" she said quietly.

"No, I'm sorry, I, uh -- Hutch?"

"I'm here, partner," Hutch assured him, but even he could hear the anxiety in his tone.

"Look, Miss," Starsky said, taking hold of her wrist. Hutch could hear the impatience in his voice. "I'm sorry, but I really don't know -- " he tugged the hand away from his eyes, turned and looked up. And said nothing. Just stared.

"Hello, David," she said softly. Her hazel eyes were clouded with concern. Her smile was tenuous, worried. She really had no idea what he might say or do.

In spite of his own concerns, Hutch found himself feeling sorry for *her.*

"Rosey," Starsky finally managed to say. He was staring now in plain amazement, clearly stunned. "It's -- really *you?"

"Really me," she assured him. She didn't sit down. She still wasn't sure she was welcomed.

"What-what are you *doing* here?" Starsky blurted, asking the question that was burning a hole in Hutch. "How did you find me? I -- "

She held up a hand. "You found me, David. I was having dinner," she indicated a table for two with only one setting. "when you both walked in. I debated for a while -- I mean, this wasn't how I pictured us meeting again, but -- " She seemed to run out of words. Finally, she swallowed, and said with some difficulty, "It's *good* to see you again."

Starsky could only stare and blink. After a few seconds, he stammered, "Well, of course, yeah, it's, uh, good to see you again, too." Then he seemed to remember Hutch was there. Starsky looked troubled and muttered, "Uh, Hutch, you two haven't officially met, but this is -- Rosey. Rosey Malone."
Hutch made himself smile and held out his hand. "Hello, Rosey."

"Hutch," she greeted him, shaking his hand and nodding. "You came into the store one time, looking for David. I remember. It's nice to finally meet."

Starsky looked like he wanted to bolt. He wet his mouth, took a deep breath. "Look, uh, Rosey, why don't you sit down, and uh, we'll, uh -- That is...look, can you excuse me a minute? I was just about to hit the bathroom before you arrived, and -- well, I really need to go now." He laughed nervously.

"Sure, David, fine." She sat slowly on the corner of a vacant chair as Starsky moved away from the table with a brisk efficiency. She seemed to sag as soon as he was gone. Glancing at Hutch, she said miserably, "Well, that was a disaster."

 Unsure of how to play it, Hutch asked noncommittally, "What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "It wasn't the way I wanted our first meeting to go. I wanted to contact him by phone first, give him a chance to get used to the idea. Then see if he had any interest in meeting me. But when he walked in -- I just couldn't walk out."

"Well, I can understand that," Hutch said softly. Now that Starsky was out of sight, she seemed nervous, almost fearful.

"Hutch," she said suddenly, placing a hand on his arm, "you're his best friend. I know you know everything that happened between us. You're probably pretty unhappy that I reappeared."

Hutch fought to keep his expression neutral even as he felt a surge of surprise at her intuitive guess. Then, he realized they were thinking on totally different wavelengths. She was talking to him as Starsky's friend, assuming Hutch's disapproval would stem from the heartache Starsky had suffered when she'd left him. She had no reason to assume anything else about the relationship between her former lover and his partner.

"But," she continued hesitantly, "I've got to ask you -- please tell me -- is there another woman in his life now? If there is, I'll walk away and never look back. But I've got to know. It's been two years. I had someone check, and I know he's not married. But is there another woman?"

She seemed on the verge of tears and the grip on his arm tightened. Hutch felt his own throat close down as blood pounded at his temples. Another woman?

Somehow, he found the voice to answer her. "No, Rosey. There's no woman."

She sighed as if a huge burden had lifted from her heart.

*That's fine. Just lay it on mine,* Hutch thought, feeling the weight.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "And please believe me when I say that my intentions -- " She stopped, then laughed bitterly. "I was about to say that my intentions towards Dave are 'honorable' but that would probably sound sarcastic."
"Rosey," Hutch said, placing a hand over hers, "what happened between you and Starsky was between you. I know feelings ran deep on both sides. Whatever will happen is also between you. I -- don't have any preconceived negative feelings toward you. I mean that."

Even as he said what he knew to be the truth, he felt himself already locking part of himself away. He would have to become armored now. He would have to steel his heart for whatever might happen.

"Thanks, Hutch," she said, looking relieved. "Your opinion is so important to him. If you were against me --"

Hutch shook his head. Am I against you if I'm for myself? In their last triangle, the woman was the center. It did not go well. Hutch didn't want to relive that nightmare. Now, with Starsky as the focal point, what might happen?

She pulled away, collecting her composure. "Believe me, I'm not taking anything for granted. I can't. It's been two years. We've both been through a lot. I'd be happy if we could just be friends. I don't dare hope for anything more."

Then she turned towards the direction Starsky had gone, waiting for him to reappear.

Of course you hope, Hutch thought. How could you not? Hutch, too, stared in the same direction Starsky had gone -- the man who'd loved him nearly senseless all this long, lazy day -- and found himself hoping just as hard.

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As Starsky entered the men's room he felt like he was seeking sanctuary. He went into the nearest vacant stall and sat without removing his pants. Resting his elbows on his knees, he buried his head in his hands.

What the hell just happened? He closed his eyes, trying to escape the image of Rosey and Hutch side by side. My two blondes. That's great. Just great. She had not changed a bit, not one single bit. She was just as beautiful, just as radiant as she'd been --

-- the day she left me.

Even now, the memory of that cut sharp, hard and cruel.

She left me for another man.

Her father, her first love. Starsky hated her for it, yet admired her at the same time.

She didn't love you enough, not as much as she loved him.

Of course, it was hardly the same thing.

You weren't the one whose life was in danger. She was, she and her dad. She did the only thing she could do.
But she left me.

I loved her and she left me. I loved her. And -- goddammit -- he shuddered as the knowledge tore a hole in his heart -- I still do!

He realized he was shaking, that he was on the verge of a breakdown. How many months had it been before he'd stopped imagining her in every sandy-haired woman that had passed him? How many months before he even was tempted to date again? After Rosey, he'd stopped fooling himself. Dating was for fun, not for permanence. He'd given up any hopes of forever after Rosey.

I even lied about Kira, he admitted to himself. I lied to Hutch. I told him I loved her, but it was a flat out lie. I just didn't want him to have her. I didn't want him to win. Wasn't that a joke?

He scrubbed his face with his hands and took a deep breath. He had to get his act together. There were two people out there who were depending on him not to hurt them. He'd have to be careful.

Hutch's face when he saw her. It was like the bottom dropped out of his world. Like he just knew I was gonna give him the brush off right there in the restaurant. I know the way he thinks. No way could he believe my love for him could be as strong as my love for her.

Was it? At the moment, he honestly didn't know. He was too surprised, too stunned to be sure of anything.

Seeing her again -- it was like getting pole-axed in the balls.

He rubbed the lowest bullet scar hard with his fist, realizing that it was aching, throbbing. It hadn't done that in weeks.

Terrific. I'm havin' an anxiety attack in the fuckin' bathroom, and I haven't even peed yet.

He breathed slowly, deeply, the way Hutch had taught him, and rubbed the ache away. Hutch did it much better, but that was for home, not here.

If I don't get outta here, he's gonna come in after me, and I'm not ready for that yet. I'm not ready to see the heartache he's gonna try so hard to mask. He's probably already got his good-bye speech all written out, if I know my golden boy. Hutch, don't do that, please. Don't write me off. I'm gonna need some time to get my head together about this. I'm gonna need you to be patient. To understand --

He left the cubicle and moved to a urinal, then quickly unzipped and urinated. Moving over to the sink he washed his hands quickly, but not so fast his image couldn't ask --

-- Understand what? What does Hutch need to understand?

Starsky blinked and stared at himself, his own accuser.

I need time. I need to think, to sort this out. I need to.... Need to....
See her again? Sleep with her? Love her as fiercely as you did before? Dredge up that happily-ever-after fantasy? See if you can make it real this time? A lovely wife, a couple of kids, a nice home. Like when Dad was still alive. Mr. and Mrs. Starsky and family....

He had a sudden, sharp memory of lying in bed with her after Hutch had ordered him to "go cuddle with your lady." In the sweet euphoria of his afterglow, he'd found himself asking how she felt about kids. It was the kind of conversation he'd only ever initiated with a few special women. Helen. Terry. Rosey had laughed, accusing him of not letting her ever catch her breath, but finally she assured him that of course she hoped to have children some day. It had made him feel absurdly happy, as though a necessary piece had just fit into place. And when she had left, it had made the sense of loss that much more bleak.

But now she was back. Holding out the hope of a future he had long ago had given up.

A future he could never have with Hutch.

Is that what Hutch needs to understand? That you're gonna leave him for Rosey Malone?

He nearly shouted "NO!" but another patron entering the bathroom shocked him back to reality. He dried his hands quickly, needing to flee the bathroom as badly as he'd needed to flee the table just a few minutes before.

Like a rat in a maze, he thought grimly, I'm trapped no matter where I go.
"Rosey," Starsky said as he sat at the table, "it really is good to see you again." He glanced over at his partner, but Hutch had his cop face on now. He was shuttered. Controlled. "But, it is kinda surprising. Why are you back in town? How does your father feel about you being here?"

She sat back in the seat and looked away. Her voice was subdued. "I'm back in LA because of my father. He died two weeks ago, David."

He reacted in shock, as did Hutch. Frank Malone had been a powerful underworld figure, a brilliant strategist and a cunning opponent. He was just past middle-aged. Had his enemies finally figured out he'd turned state's evidence? Had they hunted him down in his Mexican hideout and assassinated him?

Is Rosey in danger?

Starsky was surprised by the sudden rush of protectiveness he felt.

"Being forced into 'retirement' was a bitter pill for my father," she explained. "He tried to stay busy with his investments and businesses he still had in Mexico, but it broke his spirit. He was never the same. He died of a series of heart attacks, the doctors said, but he'd lost the will to live long before that."

"Rosey, I'm sorry," Starsky said sincerely, covering her hand with his. He could see Hutch's sympathy for her clearly on his face. Hutch never could respond to anyone's grief with anything but empathy.

She nodded. "Thank you. You know Daddy -- he had to control everything, right up to the end. He left me all kinds of instructions on what to do after his death. But before he died, he was honest with me. He told me the truth about his life. And I forgave him for it. All the money he had in Mexico and all the businesses, they were all legitimate, legal. He knew I'd never keep any of that money if it had been acquired dishonestly. Even if he didn't live right himself, he and Mom raised me right.

"He left a wonderful monetary legacy for the Huichol Indian Foundation we started. And he left me more than enough money to keep me comfortable for the rest of my life. After his first heart-attack, he contacted his associates back here. He wanted to make sure that if he died -- I could come back here and make a life again. We talked a lot after that first attack." She stared at the tablecloth, clearly recalling these last critical moments with her father.

"He told me he really regretted coming between us, David. He said he could recognize a man who was..." she smiled sadly, "'worthy' of his daughter. He hoped that, once he was out of the picture, that we might -- Well, he regretted interfering in our relationship, even though, at the time, he felt justified."

Starsky nodded, and felt color rising in his face. What would have happened between us if he hadn't taken you away for your own protection? "Whatever else he might have been, Rosey, he was a good father. I'm sorry for your loss."
Having lost his own dad, Starsky did not have to imagine her pain. Then, remembering his partner's presence, he glanced at Hutch and pulled his hand away from hers. He was momentarily distracted by the contrast between Rosey's delicate, feminine hand and the memory of holding Hutch's large, strong one as they made love earlier that day.

"Thank you, David," she said, blinking some moisture from her eyes.

Hutch handed her his untouched glass of water. She smiled shyly at him and sipped at it. "I brought Daddy home to bury him next to Mom, the way he wanted. I settled all of his accounts. And I met with some of his associates, as he instructed me. They assured me that it was perfectly safe for me to live here again. There was no reason for me to fear them. My father's association with their businesses ended when he moved to Mexico, and I had never had any part of that. I'm just an ordinary citizen now, going about my life. But, once I got here, I found I didn't have a life here any longer. And I didn't know how to build one...without resolving my past."

She stared at him evenly now, and for the moment, Starsky realized, Hutch was just a witness. "I did a little detective work on my own. I found out you were still a police officer, still with the same precinct. I intended to contact you through a third party, a lawyer maybe. I never meant to confront you like this, David, and put you on the spot. I was telling Hutch that, well -- it was just happenstance that made me eat here tonight. I'd actually been avoiding the place, but -- this still has the best tostadas this side of Guadalajara." She smiled shyly and he responded in kind. "I never expected to run into you here. But once I saw you -- "

She looked away, and seemed to be trying to compose herself. "I hope I didn't interfere too much with your evening. I thought -- that is -- if you'd like to talk to me about anything -- " She rummaged in her purse nervously, searching for something and finally found it, a small card. She scribbled on the back. "This is where I'm staying. If you'd like to talk -- I would, too."

She placed the card on the table, pushed it towards him and left it.

Starsky glanced over at Hutch, but he was busy staring at a nearby potted plant as if trying to memorize its leaf pattern. Starsky felt completely at a loss for words. He couldn't move, couldn't pick up the card, couldn't say a thing. He felt as if anything he might do right now was tantamount to stepping on a land mine. But he had to say something.

He opened his mouth, took a breath, and fumbled for words, but before he could retrieve anything worthwhile, Hutch intervened.

"Look, you two need some privacy," he said reasonably. His voice was two octaves lower than normal. "Starsky, your car is here. Why don't I just catch a cab and leave you two -- ?"

That galvanized him. "You know that won't work, Hutch. We've gotta be on stakeout in less than an hour." He was shocked at how easily the lie came to his lips. But suddenly, his tightening diaphragm felt looser. He could breathe. He turned to Rosey. "We've been on these all-night stakeouts. Starts at midnight. It's left us pretty ragged. And I don't know from day to day what our schedule's gonna be." He took the card, glanced at it, recognized the name of the small guest-house hotel, and put the card in his wallet. "But I should have some time tomorrow, if you're gonna be available. I'll call you. We'll talk."
"That would be nice," she said, not very hopefully. She looked so small sitting there, so alone. He realized with a jolt that she was completely parentless now. Her mother had died two years before he'd met her. There were no siblings. With the life Frank Malone lived, there wouldn't be any other family, except the business "family."

"Starsky," Hutch said warningly.

Before Hutch could construct some other fabrication to nullify Starsky's, he interrupted tersely. "Come on, Hutch, you know we gotta be in place on time. Dobey'll have our butts in a sling if we're late. In fact, we need to get moving now if we're gonna have our reports in and get on location." He turned, took Rosey's hand. "I mean it. I'll call you tomorrow. We'll talk, okay?"

She squeezed his lightly. Her palm was damp. "Sure, David. I'll look forward to it." She looked like she was about to shatter. Smiling, she turned to Hutch. "It was nice meeting you, Hutch. I hope we get to see each other again."

"I'm sure we will," he said blandly, and stood to see her off.

"Don't sit down," Starsky growled as Hutch watched Rosey walk away. He obeyed without a word as Starsky rose and, still holding his wallet, looked around the table.

"I paid the check while you were in the bathroom," Hutch said quietly.

Starsky shoved his wallet in his pocket, and jerked his head toward the exit. "Let's go." He headed for the Torino, assuming Hutch would follow. His mind was churning, swirling. He didn't know whether to slug Hutch or hug him. And Rosey's card sat like a dead weight in his pocket.

As they got into the Torino, Starsky turned in the seat to confront his partner. "What was that, a test? How about givin' me a chance to catch my breath before you throw me at her? You're already convinced that I'm half-way out the door, aren't you?"

Hutch said nothing, but his body said volumes. He was stiff, withdrawn, his shoulders tense, his jaw clenched. He stared straight ahead. "You need to talk to her, Starsky. I knew you felt awkward with me sitting there. I was just trying to make it easier -- "

"On whom? I'm not ready to talk to her, Hutch. I'm not even sure I'm ready to think about her. I haven't even fully accepted the reality of her reappearance. Besides -- we don't really know that she wants to talk about."

"She asked me if you were seeing anyone," Hutch blurted, keeping his voice low.

That rocked Starsky and shut him up completely. She asked *Hutch* that? Then he realized, why wouldn't she? What was Hutch to him in her mind but a partner, a friend? The same thing he appeared to be to the rest of the world, with the exception of Huggy. The same thing he would always have to appear to be. "And you said -- ?"
Hutch held up a hand. "Let me rephrase. She asked me if you were seeing any other women." He turned to look at Starsky. "I told her the truth. You're not seeing any women."

"You could have told her," Starsky insisted. "You should have. Told her the truth. About us."

Hutch stared at him, his eyes etched with pain. "How could I do that without knowing how you felt about my telling her?"

"We're lovers," Starsky hissed. "I'm not ashamed of that. I know we have to be closeted about some of this stuff because of the job, but -- "

Hutch shook his head. "You said you haven't fully accepted the reality of her reappearance. Well, I have. I accepted it the minute I saw her coming up behind you. I accepted that reality, and everything it implied."

"What are you saying?" Starsky asked, amazed he was even able to get the words out. His bullet wounds ached fiercely, burning like fire. He was having trouble catching a full breath.

"The reality?" Hutch looked out the window for a second, then turned back to Starsky. He seemed tired. Sad. "We're in a public place. After an entire day of lovemaking, we still want to touch, need to touch. So we do. The only way we can in public. Under the table."

The memory of teasing Hutch with his foot came sharply to mind. "Hutch, we've always touched in public, even before -- "

Hutch cut him off, wanting to make his point. "A strange woman approaches you. It could've been any woman, even someone you've never met, or someone you hated. She can lay hands on you, kiss you, give you her phone number, sit on your lap, do whatever she wants. Not a single person will turn their head. But if I so much as held your hand, put an arm around you -- "

Starsky started to argue, but Hutch wouldn't let him.

"It's not just that. I'd spent the day making love to you. Making love. And we did it all, covered every trick in the book. I sat in that restaurant looking at you, loving you, feeling the afterglow of the incredible day we had, and felt, believed that you were mine. That's what any lover wants to believe about the person they love. You were mine. My lover. And it took one moment to shatter that illusion. She touched you, and suddenly I -- had no rights to you. I couldn't get jealous. I couldn't get defensive. As a woman, even if she'd been a stranger, she had more rights to you than I ever would. That's reality. And that's the way it'll always be. I guess -- I guess before tonight I never thought about that, never realized it. How different things are between loving a woman or loving a man. But I realize it now. It's not a happy discovery."

The truth in Hutch's words cut Starsky deeply. Typically, he found himself getting angry in response. "Is that all this is about? Our public personae? Come on, Hutch -- !"

"No," Hutch said gently, as if trying to explain something to a very dense child. "It's about the world we live in. The real world. It's about our future. The future you will now have to choose. A future with me, a future where our love will always be secret, closeted, furtive -- "
"Hutch, please -- !"

He held up his hand to finish his piece. "Or a future with her. A normal future. A real future. Marriage. Kids. Social approval. A future you've always wanted. How can I ask you not to chose that? Especially now that I understand the way it really is."

Starsky's jaw tightened and his clenched fist hit the steering wheel. "That future is a fairy tale, and you, of all people, know that!"

"Other cops, lots of cops, get married. Have good marriages, good lives. Just because it didn't work out for me -- "

"Or me either! Sure I wanted to marry Rosey -- and Terry too, before her." He hated bringing up the name of the woman he'd loved who'd died because he was a cop. "But it didn't happen. Rosey left me. You think I can just pick up the pieces and forget about that? She left me. You never left me! Not once. Not ever. You've always been there. You think I don't remember that?"

"I haven't always been there for you," Hutch said, looking away. "When Kira was between us, I tried my best to leave you then. Leave you, and take her with me."

Starsky closed his eyes, hating to think back on one of the worst times they'd gone through. "We talked that out, Hutch, and now that we're together, we know what that was all about. We just couldn't stand to have anyone get that close to the other one. 'Cause inside we knew we were in love, we just couldn't deal with it yet."

"You mean," Hutch corrected him deliberately, "I was in love with you, and I couldn't deal with it yet. The last two years, I made sure I got between you and any skirt you took a shine to. The very thought of you getting into anything serious nearly made me panic."

"Except for Rosey," Starsky reminded him. "You were a little peevish about it at first, but then you supported me completely. So, if you were already in love with me, why -- ?"

Hutch looked away, as if he were trying to remember. "I was confused; I still wasn't sure about what I was feeling. I wasn't ready to accept it. I thought maybe it was just burnout, or just familiarity, the partnership filling in all the loneliness, making up for all the past failed relationships. But when you met Rosey, you were different. I know the real thing when I see it. How could I stand in the way of your happiness? And I had to be honest and admit to myself that's what I was trying to do. If I was really your friend, your best friend, if I really loved you, then I had to want your happiness even...even over my own. That's what it means to really love someone."

Then, after Rosey left, Starsky realized, Hutch had gone through so much -- he'd nearly died from the Plague, had fallen in love with, then lost, his ballerina, Anna, then gone through that terrible time when his ex-wife Vanessa had been killed in his apartment. All those things had brought them so close together, had made it seem like it had been him and Hutch against the world. It had focused Hutch's feelings on the one reliable constant in his life -- Starsky.
"But by the time Kira showed up," Hutch continued, "I'd lost all perspective. I needed you too much, and my need wasn't being met. I couldn't think about your happiness when all the purpose seemed lost from my life and my work. I could only think about losing you, the last thing I had that had any value to me. So, I held on too tight. It wasn't healthy, I know that now, but I can't change it."

"I wouldn't want you to," Starsky said. "It's part of our past, part of who we are today."

"And just who are we today?" Hutch said solemnly. "An hour ago, I thought I knew. Now?" He shook his head.

"We're two men who've loved each other a long time," Starsky insisted, feeling absurdly angry that he had to defend their relationship. "We loved each other in the Academy even before we were partners. We've loved each other through the good times and the bad, through everything. Then-then we finally fell in love -- "

"I fell in love," Hutch insisted, cutting him off.

"You act like you're alone in this. Who the hell was that dark, curly-haired man kissing you in that hospital bed? I thought for sure it was me, but maybe -- "

"Starsky, let's be honest about that for once," Hutch said in a low tone. " You were suffering from terrible gunshot wounds, your body heavily damaged. You were in pain all the time. They were pumping you full of drugs. Your brain was rerunning the nightmare of your shooting every night, so you were totally sleep deprived. And then, I seduced you in your sleep."

Starsky stared, struck dumb by Hutch's view of what had happened between them.

"I just...just lost it," Hutch said. "Your face was twisted in pain, I couldn't wake you up, it was making me crazy to see you like that night after night, thinking about you nearly dying, knowing you were dreaming it over and over."

"Hutch," Starsky said firmly, "stop it. You're acting like you molested me. Your loving me that night pulled me from a nightmare into the warmth and security of your embrace. I responded to you because I loved you. You think I could do that, make love to you, just out of gratitude? I love you. I've loved you for a long time. I may not have gone through what you did, I might never have said to myself, 'Wow, today I fell in love with Hutch,' but that doesn't mean my feelings for you are any less."

"Maybe," Hutch conceded, "but your feelings for me are different than mine for you. If I hadn't kissed you in that hospital bed under those conditions, would you have ever felt a physical desire for me?"

Starsky rubbed a hand over his face, frustrated by the argument. "How can I answer that? How do I know what might've happened between us? I'd like to think so, but what does it matter? We're together now."
"Starsk, we've always been together," Hutch reminded him. "We're partners. Best friends. By definition that means we're together. And I want you to know that, to me, that's still the most important part. The critical essence of who we are. As for the physical relationship, that's something so new, so different for both of us, how can we be sure it's right, that it'll last, would've lasted even if -- ?" He didn't say if Rosey hadn't walked back into your life, but the sentence hung there between them anyway.

Hutch wet his mouth. "You fell in love with her the first time you saw her that day in the park."

Starsky rolled his eyes, exasperated. "I was attracted to her that day in the park -- "

Hutch shook his head. "It was more than that, right from the start. I was with you. I saw your face. It looked like mine the first time I saw Gillian...and Vanessa." His voice grew softer and he asked quietly, "At what moment in your life did you experience that feeling for me?"

Starsky started to say, When I woke up in that hospital bed and you were kissing me, loving me so much I couldn't do anything but respond. But he hesitated. Hutch would only use it score his own points. He felt confused. "You're talkin' about the past, Hutch. That was then."

Hutch nailed him with his clear, blue gaze, the penetrating one he always used on suspects. "Are you going to sit there and tell me you don't love her anymore? Are you? Or tell me you ever forgot her, even for one day?"

Starsky couldn't lie to him, and so sat there mute. When he couldn't deny the accusation, he finally said, "You're the one who told me to quit tryin' to forget her. So, don't get mad if I did what you said."

The two of them turned away from one another to try and regroup. As they sat in the car silently brooding, pedestrians passed back and forth in front of them, mindless of the quiet drama in the loudly painted vehicle.

After a moment, two elderly men tottered past the Torino, crossing the street. One was fair and tall, the other shorter and darker. They were too mismatched to be related, but it was clear their relationship went back a long time. They walked in step, arms brushing, hips bumping. As they negotiated the curb, the taller, fair one helpfully took the frailer one's arm with a touch that was confident of its place, its right to be there.

That could be us in forty years, Starsky thought. What's wrong with that future? He felt a choking lump well up in his throat, and turned to point the old men out to Hutch.

But Hutch was lost in his own vision as he stared blank-faced to the side, where a curly-headed man walked with a lovely light-haired woman. The man held a toddler on his hip as the woman pushed a new baby ahead of them in a stroller. The couple was completely involved with each other, laughing, talking, interacting with their children. They might have been the only people on the street. And Hutch stared at them with eyes that didn't blink.

Unable to say anything, Starsky started the car and peeled away from the curb.
"Starsky, get down, get down!" Hutch screamed as he fell to the ground to protect himself. He heard the machine gun chattering, firing rapidly --

He glanced under the belly of the car, trying to see Starsky, trying to see anything. Bullets slammed into the Torino, rocking it, shattering glass that showered over Hutch.

Where is he? Where -- ?

He heard the scream of tires as the assassin's car squealed around the parking lot. He rolled over, staying tight against the Torino as he pulled his Python.

"Starsky? Starsky?" He was on his feet as the police car sped forward, leaving. He raced after it firing bullet after bullet. Then the gun was empty, the car out of range, as Hutch gave up pursuit and ran around the Torino. Starsky had not answered him, not once.

Hutch felt like the red car was three miles long, that the hood kept growing, blocking his way, that his legs were trapped in molasses.

He found his partner on the ground, his head nestled incongruously, in the heavy wheel of the Torino, as if the car were trying to comfort the man who loved it so much. Starsky's eyes were open as he lay gasping, fighting to breathe.

Bullet holes stitched across Starsky's shirt. There was blood on the Torino.

Hutch stood for a moment, clinging to his gun, unable to accept what he was seeing. Why doesn't he get up? We've gotta go after those guys --

Starsky blinked once with agonizing slowness.

Hutch approached him cautiously, then knelt before him as if he were praying. There was blood everywhere. Air bubbled from the chest wounds. Starsky couldn't move, was hardly breathing.

He's going to die. The thought was like a sudden punch to his gut. Starsky's going to die.

Then his mouth engaged. "Oh god, Starsky, don't die! Please, please, don't die." Now, he was praying. Praying and terrified, too terrified to touch Starsky, afraid to come too close.

I never told him how much I love him, Hutch thought, trying to work the problem out. I never told him how I love him. I was too afraid of his rejection. Now he's going to die before I can tell him.

Hutch could hear sirens, footsteps, people running. He heard Dobey bellowing for ambulances, medical assistance. Someone put a blanket over Starsky. But none of that mattered -- not while Starsky lay dying.

"Don't leave me," Hutch begged, leaning over his partner. "I'll do anything if you just don't leave me."
Starsky struggled to speak, but he couldn't spare the air. His eyes shut; he started drifting away.

"Don't, Starsk! Don't leave me!" Hutch begged, louder this time, touching Starsky's cheek gently, but his hand was shaking. "Stay with me, buddy."

Starsky struggled to focus on Hutch's face.

_Tell him before you lose him. There's no time to waste._ Hutch moved his lips close to Starsky's ear. His voice was loud, clear. "I love you, Starsky. You know that, right? I love you so much. You can't leave me."

Starsky struggled to blink and tried to swallow. Did he hear? Did he understand?

There were people everywhere now, a whole crowd, with him and Starsky as the center. But it was as if they were alone on the tarmac.

Hutch cupped Starsky's cheek, as his voice grew louder. "I love you, Starsky. Never loved anyone else the way I love you. You believe me, don't you?"

Someone grabbed him with big, meaty hands. They were towing him away from Starsky. He turned, and realized his captain was talking to him. "Easy, son, come on now. Let the paramedics get to your partner."

Hutch blinked dazedly as Dobey physically pulled him to his feet. He grasped the captain's lapels. "You don't understand. He's dying! Starsky's dying, and I-I never told him. Never told him how I--"

"He knows, son," Dobey insisted. "Starsky's gonna be all right, but he needs the paramedics."

"Don't lie to me!" Hutch shouted. He was shaking, getting more frantic as Dobey pulled him farther away from the limp figure. "He's dying! I've gotta tell him! He can still hear me. Dammit, let go!" With sheer force, Hutch wrenched away from Dobey, and lunged at Starsky, pushing the obstructing bodies away.

"Help me with him!" Dobey yelled at the other cops milling around as Hutch leaned over Starsky.

Hutch pressed his mouth to Starsky's. Starsky gasped and drew the breath out of Hutch's body. That breath filled Starsky, and gave him needed oxygen, needed strength. Without questioning this, Hutch's tongue slid between Starsky's lips, and Hutch felt an electric shock of pleasure so sweet it was blinding. Starsky sighed, drawing more air.

Hutch felt unleashed, kissing Starsky with all the love he had inside, all the love he was capable of.

Then he was being torn away again as his brother cops obeyed their captain. Hutch couldn't match the strength of all those men. He shouted Starsky's name, reaching for him, but Starsky's body was blocked by white coats and now Hutch couldn't even see him.
"Easy, Hutch, easy!" Dobey said, trying to pull his attention away from the frantically working paramedics. "You've gotta let them at him, Hutch!"

Dimly he recognized the other men wrestling him -- their friends, Simmons, Babcock, Jamison. "He needs me!" he argued. "You've got to let me go!" Starsky would die without his touch.

Then, through the noise of the crowd and the clamor of his own shouts, Hutch heard Starsky call out for him, and everything stilled.

"Hutch!" His voice gave Hutch the strength he needed to burst free.

Starsky reached up through the throng of white coats. Like a wild man, Hutch shoved the paramedics away, as crazed as Starsky had been that day he'd thought Hutch had been shot down in the street.

"Hutch!" Starsky gasped, wide-eyed.

He gathered Starsky in his arms and held him close, keeping him safe. He bent to meet Starsky's mouth again, their lips joining, and as they did, their kiss began to miraculously heal the mortally wounded man. The holes in Starsky's chest and gut slowly closed, and his breath stopped making bloody bubbles.

Starsky brought his hand up to cradle Hutch's head, tangling his fingers in Hutch's the long strands. Hutch's fingertips slid inside Starsky's shirt, until he could touch the seeping wounds. Cautiously, he stroked them. The wounds slowly closed, healed, then disappeared.

So did the Torino, the parking lot, the crowd. Where it all went Hutch didn't know, nor did he care.

They broke for air, and Starsky sighed and smiled. He wrapped both arms around Hutch and sat up. Lowering Hutch onto his back, Starsky leaned over him, stroking his face, his eyes molten with passion.

"Ssssh," Starsky murmured. "You're all right now. I've got you." He was grinning.

Hutch felt himself yielding, surrendering himself to the man holding him. "I've wanted you for so long." He didn't need to shout anymore. "Love you so much."

"I know," Starsky said, still smiling. His gentle fingertips still traced the contours of Hutch's face.

Starsky's lips found Hutch's and he kissed him again, chastely, just lips on lips pressing light.

Hutch couldn't understand. His love didn't repulse Starsky? How could this terrible secret he had lived with for so long be so easily resolved?
Hutch realized suddenly that they were no longer on tarmac. His shirt was gone. So was Starsky's. They were on something soft and yielding, warm and safe, holding each other. That was more than enough. It was a moment he'd fantasized about for years.

Hutch had to touch, had to feel, and ran his hand lightly over his friend's jaw, down his throat, over Starsky's wounded chest. He touched the bloody bullet holes. They were closed now, but still raw, pulsing, and painful-looking. But Hutch's touch robbed them of their heat, their pain. They grew smaller, until they could barely be seen under the swirls of Starsky's chest hair. Hutch stroked them away until they were nearly invisible and he could forget how hideous they were and how they'd terrified him.

"Ssssh," Starsky soothed, as Hutch watched the wounds fade away. "I'm here, babe. I've got you." Starsky ran a fingertip over Hutch's lower lip until Hutch opened his mouth and sucked his finger suggestively. Starsky smiled and purred, his lids lowering in pleasure.

Hutch's heart pounded against his ribs. He was loving Starsky, and Starsky was permitting it, enjoying it. Hutch bit his finger gently, making Starsky close his eyes and gasp. Hutch released his hold and kissed that finger, moving his head on the pillow to reach it.

"Pillow?" Hutch thought. He looked around. He was on a soft pillow, resting against fresh sheets. "Are we in bed?" He touched his own bare chest, wondering where his shirt had gone, then realized he was nude.

Starsky was just as nude. Hutch felt disoriented.

Starsky just kept smiling, that disarming smile that made him look like a little boy with a dirty mind and an answer for everything. "Hey, blondie, you awake yet?"

"It's my turn, isn't it?" Starsky asked, which only confused Hutch further.

"Your turn?" Hutch thought, confused. "Starsky, you were shot. You were dying."

"Well, I ain't dead yet, partner," he chuckled, then ran a trail of kisses down Hutch's neck and chest.

He gasped in delight, finally awake, towed out of the nightmare by his lover's tender skill. The most beautiful man in the world was loving him, easing him out of his repetitive nightmare the way he always did -- with his tireless mouth, and magic hands.

As Starsky's lips found a small, brown nipple to play with, Hutch stared as Starsky sucked him beautifully, passionately. His cock throbbed, hard and erect, hungry for Starsky's touch.

It all came back in bits and pieces. The shooting in the parking lot. Starsky's near death. His real death. His return to life as Hutch raced into the hospital.

*My heart beating in time with yours. My heart. My soul. Stars....*
Reality intruded too suddenly. He remembered yesterday evening. He remembered Rosey Malone.

But it's not enough. Not for the real world.

It was like a shock of cold water on his arousal.

As he stared dazedly into Starsky's bottomless eyes, Starsky released his nipple to whisper, "I love you."

That was supposed to be Hutch's line. The final exorcism of the dream that plagued them both, when Starsky could be sure Hutch was really awake.

I love you. The words that solved everything.

But Hutch didn't believe that anymore.

Starsky waited for Hutch's response, but he only shut his eyes and turned away. Touching Starsky's chin, he whispered, "Don't."

Starsky moved up his body, still leaning over him. "Hutch, are you awake? Babe?"

Hutch found his tenderness unbearable. His nerves raw from the dream, he felt like he was floundering, that he had no center. He didn't know what was real anymore. Starsky loved him. Starsky loved Rosey Malone. Whatever meaning had been part of his life yesterday morning seemed gone now. Perched on the edge of sleeping and waking, Hutch couldn't mask his fear of the future, or the heartache he felt today.

"I love you," Starsky said again, more insistently. The words felt like nails crucifying him to the bed. Hutch had never felt anything like this, not when Vanessa left him, not even when Gillian died. He felt like he was drowning.

Yesterday he had been a man who'd learned that he was not too old to find the truest love of his life. Yesterday, he'd woken beside his lover and felt a joy that was fresh and clean and new. That was what waking up to Starsky's love had been like. Now it felt like a promise forever out of reach, a place he'd been allowed to visit, only to be barred from it as soon as he grew accustomed to it. In his half-awake state, still reeling from the nightmare he hadn't had in almost six weeks, Hutch knew he couldn't handle the flood of conflicting emotions -- wanting, needing, grieving.

"Hutch, please," Starsky implored, worry etched around his eyes. "Are you awake? It was just the dream. It's over now. I'm alive. I'm healthy. And I'm here for you. I love you. Come on, talk to me."

He couldn't talk, he hurt too much. Absently, his hand ran over the thatch of Starsky's unruly curls, the familiar sensation twisting his heart. He shook his head.

"You need me," Starsky said confidently. "Even when you're half asleep, I know when you need me."
He started to shake his head, ready to deny the desire that thrummed through his body. He had to get used to denial. Soon, it would be part of his life -- again.

But Starsky took sudden hold of his half-erect organ with a hand filled with warm, slick lubricant. Hutch cried out in surprise, the sweet sensation as shocking and sharp as a knife. His erection pulsed and swelled again, filling Starsky's firm knowing grip. He arched up, his body disinterested in any reality but this one. He needed Starsky, needed him more than ever.

Don't. Don't! his mind implored as Starsky stroked him, anointing him, bringing him to perfect readiness. But his mouth couldn't make him a hypocrite.

"Come on, babe," Starsky said. "I'm ready. Been ready. And you need me."

Hutch responded with a low, hungry sound as he rose from the bed, grappling Starsky in his arms. As Starsky grunted in surprise, Hutch claimed his mouth, demanding it yield. And Starsky did instantly, lovingly, giving Hutch what he needed. Whatever he needed.

Don't! Don't! Hutch ordered himself, but could not obey. He's not yours any more. But his body couldn't refuse what was both real and immediate. Starsky was here, in his bed, and so very willing.

Panting hard, aching, nearly in pain, Hutch turned his lover with quick, hurried moves. Starsky cooperated completely, rolling onto his stomach, cuddling a pillow under his head -- spreading his legs. His easy compliance gave Hutch pause, but only for a second.

"Starsky?" he whispered, not even sure of what he wanted to say.


He could see Starsky was just as excited as he was, breathing hard, waiting expectantly, eyes glittering.

Hutch swallowed hard, then claimed his compliant body. He touched Starsky's anus with a trembling hand to find it already slick.

"Told you," Starsky whispered. "I'm ready. Hutch!"

His head was pounding, the blood rushing through his body, flushing his fair skin. His balls were so tight they were killing him. He pressed his flaring glans against the tiny aperture, telling himself to go slow, to take it easy, to be patient --

But he couldn't. The need was too keen, the hunger burning him. He moved in hard, claiming the one person he needed more than anything. Mine! his inner voice cried out as his body joined with Starsky's. Mine!
He was instantly appalled and tried to slow his thrust, but Starsky cried out in passion and pushed back, giving Hutch what he needed. He grew afraid of his own desire and whispered, "Don't! Starsky, don't!"

Digging his nails in Hutch's hip, Starsky gasped, "Hutch, please! Oh, god, please -- it's good!"

Then Hutch was lost. He thrust in deep and hard, and Starsky rocked up to meet him. They were together, the way they always were, their rhythm perfectly in tune. Hutch gathered Starsky in his arms, clutching him, pinning him against his body as he took him, again, again, again. He never wanted it to end, never wanted to come, just wanted to be here in this place, loving this man, making him his.

He buried his nose in Starsky's clean, fragrant hair and listened to the soft sounds of passion his lover always made. He loved those sounds, those sweet pleasure noises, and let his hands slide over Starsky's furred chest and tweak his small nipples just to hear more. Hutch kissed his soft, bronze nape and Starsky moaned low. Then the need came on him, to claim, to own, to possess, and he bit down on Starsky's neck.

"Oh, jeezus, Hutch!" Starsky cried out, spreading his legs, pushing back to meet each demanding thrust.

*Slow down,* Hutch ordered himself, *go easy,* but he couldn't. Not now.

Starsky gripped the mattress, clawing the sheets, as he struggled to handle Hutch's need. Hutch hands stroked down Star sky's strong, dark arms, until they found his elegant hands. They entwined fingers and Starsky held on tight, clinging, needing the help.

"So good, Hutch," he called out, sounding almost in pain. "Oh, god, babe, so damned good!"

It was coming on him hard now and fast. He told himself to touch the man beneath him, give him his pleasure, but he couldn't release the grip he had on Starsky's hands, couldn't let go. He felt as if he released that hold he might fall off the world all alone.

Then suddenly Starsky rocked beneath him, bucking, crying out his name. His lithe body tightened down, holding Hutch, sucking him in, milking him. He lost it, thrusting, thrusting, blind and deaf to everything else but the sharp sweet jolts of pleasure his lover was giving him.

His balls tightened up so fast it hurt, a wonderful pain, and then the release was on him, so sudden he saw stars, lost his breath, even as he shouted Starsky's name, called out his love, swore it, begged for it again and again. It lasted so long, he trembled when it was done, shaking from head to foot, helplessly in thrall.

Starsky was still making those sounds, those quiet little sounds of pleasure.

Hutch buried his face between Starsky's shoulders and whispered, "I'm sorry, Starsk. So sorry -- "

Gasping for air while lying limply beneath him, Starsky asked wearily, "Sorry? Sorry for what?"
"I hurt you. I was so rough. I never even touched you -- "

Starsky sighed. "Hey, hey, come on, blintz, cut it out!" He took one of Hutch's hands, still gripping his, and moved it down to his belly, rubbing it there. Hutch felt something warm, viscous, sticky.

"You didn't hurt me, babe," Starsky said softly. "And yeah, it was a little rough, but it was good. You're a man, just like me. Sometimes we need that. Damn, Hutch, I came before you, it was so good for me. If you had touched me, I wouldn't'a been able to handle it."

Hutch felt confused, and hugged Starsky tighter, trying to sort it out. Starsky shifted and Hutch pulled out, then rolled to the side so that his partner could turn and embrace him, chest to chest.

"It's just the dream," Starsky reminded him. "It always makes you worry like this, makes you anxious. Remember, the therapist said that powerful, stress-reaction dreams could affect your reactions to real things if the images were strong enough. Believe me, Hutch, it was good for me." He kissed Hutch's cheek, stroked his hair. "Better every time, babe."

Hutch stared at him, still unsure. "It's not just the dream," he said decisively. "You know that. And if I wasn't such a coward, I'd admit my real fear. What I just did had all the earmarks of a good-bye fuck.

Starsky didn't say anything for a moment, just kept holding Hutch, running a hand through his hair. Finally, he said softly, "I wish you wouldn't worry about that."

Both of us so careful not to say her name, Hutch thought. As if we both understand that there's power in names.

"I wish you wouldn't pretend there was nothing for me to worry about," Hutch replied quietly. "When are you going to call her?"

Starsky didn't get defensive, and didn't deny anything either. That was enough cause for concern right there. "We just finished making love, Hutch. I don't want to talk about this now."

He glanced at the clock. "We've got to get up for work in 15 minutes. This might be the only private time we get to talk about it. Are you going to call her?" He didn't want to push Starsky on this, but he knew his partner well enough to know that given a choice, he'd never discuss this at all.

"No...maybe... I don't know...." Starsky confessed reluctantly. "I'm still not sure -- I don't know that calling her is the right thing for me to do. I'm thinking, maybe it would be better if I just left it alone."

Hutch kept his voice carefully modulated. "Pretend she's not living here? Pretend she still isn't interested in you?" He stopped himself from blurring, Pretend you're not still in love with her? He was still Starsky's best friend. He had to allow him to talk about this difficult topic without coming across as a jealous lover, even if that's what he was.
Starsky wet his mouth. "It's an option."

Hutch sucked in a deep breath. "Well, I'm not that good at pretending. If you want the truth, I'd spend all my time waiting for the other shoe to drop -- waiting to bump into her again, waiting for her to call, waiting for you to call her. Just like I can't pretend you don't still love her."

Starsky's eyes went soft. "I love you, Hutch. You believe that, don't you?"

"Yes," he said quickly, wanting to reassure. "I know you love me. But I know you love her, too, that you never stopped loving her. You loved her first. As a lover, anyway. As a potential mate. And she was the one that got away. That gives her a special claim on you. I know this has to be hard on you." He smiled tiredly, worn out by the irony of their situation. He brushed the back of his hand against the face he adored. "Starsky, I'm your lover now, but the first thing I am is your friend, your partner. I can't be those things and deny you the life you're entitled to."

"You mean the life you think I'm entitled to," Starsky corrected.

"You're going to tell me you don't still want it -- marriage, kids, the whole deal? It's what you've always wanted. Ever since I've known you."

Starsky hesitated, looking a little sad. "I want you, too, Hutch. I don't know how to resolve those wants."

As Hutch continued to run a gentle hand over Starsky's face, Starsky kissed his palm gently. "The only way you can resolve them is to call her. Talk to her. Find out how you feel, how you still feel -- how she feels."

"You almost sound like you want me to do this," Starsky protested.

Hutch felt his chest tightening. "I'm your best friend. I want whatever it is that will make you happy. And -- if that happens to be me -- then I want us both comfortable with that decision. I want that security. I can't have that without this being resolved. And if -- if it's her -- " He had to swallow to regain his voice. "Then I want to be your friend, the friend you could always rely on before this," he indicated their presence in the bed, "and wish you well, and stand behind you."

Starsky stared at Hutch, his gaze unblinking. "You could do that? If...if -- "

"We were friends first," Hutch said, with forced cheerfulness. "I never want to lose that. I want you to believe you can rely on me."

Starsky shook his head. "I don't know, Hutch. I just -- "

"Starsky, if you don't do this, if you don't call her and resolve this thing, one way or the other -- in six months you'll be filled with a lot of 'could-have-beens' and 'what-if's'. And somehow, I'll be the cause. You'll come to hate me for what I prevented you from doing. If that happens, we'll lose everything. The friendship, the partnership, and the love."
Starsky ran his hand over Hutch's blond hair. "It took us so long to find this together. Now, I can't believe I could ever stop loving you."

Hutch smiled tiredly. "Good. Then don't." There was a click and the clock radio turned on with the soft sound of familiar music. Both men groaned at the intrusion.

"Come on," Starsky said, easing out of the bed, and grabbing Hutch's hand. "Let's hit the shower."

"Together?" he said skeptically. "If we do that, we'll be late! You know what happens when we get wet together."

Starsky grinned devilishly. "That's right!"
"Here's the most recent photo of our suspect," Dobey said, handing out copies to the eight detectives sitting in his office.

Starsky took a picture for Hutch and him to share. They were already sharing a chair, Hutch in the seat, and Starsky perched on the arm. They were sharing coffee, too, which Hutch had just taken the last swallow of. The eight-by-ten photo was dim and grainy, but the distinctive features of Randy "Red" Barstow were easy enough to make out. The shock of red hair that hung to his massive shoulders topped a hulking six-foot-six frame that made the man hard to miss.

"That was taken off a surveillance camera in a check-cashing store-front business," Joshua Epstein said. Like a lot of Feds, he was a plain-looking man with a regulation hair cut and an average build. The slight-built, dark-suited federal agent turned to a large write-on board that had been moved into Dobey's office for the meeting. It was covered with schematics, photos, notes, and scrawled ideas. Epstein pointed to the photo of the unfortunate check-cashing store that Barstow had last robbed. In spite of bulletproof glass, barred windows, and a decent alarm system, Barstow had cleaned the place out, threatening to level it with several hand-grenades. He hadn't left any of the three clerks or the five unfortunate customers alive.

"He was in and out of this place in less than three minutes," Epstein continued. "As usual, he was armed to the teeth, and expert in the use of everything he had on him. He got $350,000 dollars in unmarked cash and was gone long before anyone could respond to the silent alarm. The place was on fire from the grenades by the time law enforcement arrived, so finding any evidence was out of the question." Epstein sighed.

"And no one saw him enter the business?" Starsky asked. "I mean, you can spot this guy across a crowded room. He's taller than your average bear and wider, too."

"Not to mention his neon-colored head," Hutch added, fingerling the picture.

Epstein looked tired. "For a big, ugly, funny-looking guy, he's been impossible to spot. Down at the office, they call him the Abominable RedMan. Everyone knows where he's been, but no one sees him either coming or going. We don't even know what kind of a vehicle he used in this heist."

Starsky actually felt sorry for Epstein. He was a hard-working agent who'd been after Barstow ever since the hit man had broken ties with the mob and had gone rogue. Barstow had cleaned out money-changing businesses in three states, left a trail of dead bodies, and was running wild. It was impossible to predict where he'd show up next or who would suffer for it. Epstein was in charge of the federal task force to bring the big man down, but it had been a futile task so far. They knew Barstow was headed for LA, that he'd lived here much of his life and had ties in the city. The trouble was that Barstow had so many connections in the city, there were potentially eight different places that he might hole up when he finally arrived, and even the feds had trouble staking out that many locations.

So, they'd enjoined Dobey's men. Epstein worked differently from most of the feds Starsky had had the misfortune to work with. He was appreciative of the local assistance, communicated
freely and willingly about the mission, and treated the cops as valuable assets, respecting their experience and capabilities. If he wasn't careful, Epstein might actually give the feds a good name.

"While Barstow's been zigzagging over the western states, we think, from the pattern of his strikes, that he's getting ready to come home, stash the cash, and hide out till things cool down," Epstein said. "We've got stakeout locations in the proximity of the most likely crash pads he might use. Six of the units will be covered by federal agents. We've requested that Captain Dobey provide the manpower to cover the remaining two, which are in your jurisdiction. He has graciously agreed, for which we are very grateful. However, this is a dangerous assignment, and we aren't asking that anyone get involved who doesn't wish to. So, if any of you men care to drop out, please do so now. No questions asked, no blemish on your record."

Starsky glanced at Hutch, who returned his gaze. Neither of them budged. That was just another act of love on Hutch's part, Starsky knew. It was hard for Hutch to see Starsky step into any risky situation since Gunther's hit. But he knew Starsky wasn't willing to live any other way, and he accepted that.

Dobey had handpicked this group himself, and as Starsky expected, none of the men left their seats. Dobey smiled at Epstein who grinned back at him.

"Okay, great," Epstein said, nodding. "We're going to work out rotating assignments for the stakeouts and we'll let you know as soon as the schedule is set."

As the men shifted, assuming they were about to be dismissed, Dobey spoke up. "I appreciate your willingness to work on this assignment. I want to remind you men that like most stakeouts, the greatest danger is boredom and inattention. You can't afford that on this gig. Barstow is at the top of the Most Wanted list. He's a volatile, dangerous man, an expert marksman, and frankly, he's damned crazy. We've set up the stakeout apartments farther than most from the targets since Barstow is good at spotting surveillance. Be careful! We want this guy, but not at the cost of our own."

"I couldn't agree with that more," Epstein added. "We'll have those schedules within the hour."

Dismissed, Starsky and Hutch left the office and headed for their shared desk. Starsky continued to examine the photo of the big man who was using a high-powered rifle to slaughter the hapless customers in the check-cashing business. "So, what are the odds of this guy showing up at our sight?" he asked Hutch as his partner rounded the desk and took his seat.

"Technically, one in eight," Hutch said, taking the photo from him and staring at it. "In reality, far less than that. The feds are manning the most likely sites he'll use. Our spots are long shots. This is going to be one of those endlessly boring gigs where we have to be on hyper alert even though nothing's going to happen."

"No doubt," Starsky agreed. Still, the department had to cooperate. Anything they could do to help bring this animal down was worth it. He just hoped it wouldn't go on too long. "Hey, at least we're working together," Starsky said quietly. "Eight to ten hours... alone... in the same place." He waggled his eyebrows and Hutch colored on cue, then smiled in embarrassment.
"We'll be on duty, Sergeant," Hutch reminded him sternly.

"I love my job," Starsky said teasingly, just as the phone rang. Hutch reached for it, but Starsky snatched it up first. "Starsky," he said into the receiver, still grinning at Hutch.

"David, is that you?" a soft-voice answered.

He recognized Rosey's voice instantly; it was like a sudden punch to the heart. He felt a flush of adrenaline as his heart rate increased. It must've shown on his face because suddenly Hutch looked concerned. "Oh...uh, yeah, it's me. Hi." He was totally unprepared to hear from her.

"I'm sorry to call you at work, David, but after your late night I was afraid to call you at home. I didn't think I'd reach you at all. I just planned on leaving a message."

He suddenly remembered the lie he'd told her about the late stakeout he was supposed to have been on. He frowned into the phone. "Uh...it turned out we got called off at the last minute and put back on our regular shift. You, uh, know how unpredictable police work is."

Hutch's expression shifted and Starsky realized he'd just figured out who was on the phone. He suddenly stood and said, "I'll go find us some fresh coffee." He left the squadroom before Starsky could stop him. The pot Minnie had just finished brewing sat right behind him.

Starsky sighed and eased into his chair.

"Is this a bad time?" she asked. "I could call back later."

_Say yes, he told himself. _Tell her it will always be a bad time. Tell her you can't deal with seeing her, hearing from her. Tell her to go back to the Huichol Indians and get the hell out of your life._

"No," he heard himself saying, "no. This is fine. I can talk."

_About what? About how you walked out on me after I handed you my heart?_

Suddenly, she didn't seem to know what to say either. "This...this is so much harder than I thought it would be." Her voice was so soft he could barely hear her. "I'm sorry I'm making this so awkward."

_You have no idea._

"Rosie, it's not your fault. Mine, either. I'm sorry, too."

_I'm sorry you left me. I never stopped being sorry._

"Look, David, I'll be honest," she said. Her voice had firmed up, sounding more like the strong-spirited woman he'd once loved. "I was calling to...to tell you I was sorry I'd intruded in your life last night. I never should've done that, and I regret it. I'd intended to contact you by letter, or through a third party so that you could decide how you felt and whether or not you wanted to even talk to me. I should've stuck to my plan. So I thought, today, well, I wanted you to know..."
that you don't have to feel obligated to call me, or see me. It's entirely up to you. I...I won't be bothering you again. Anyway, that was the message I'd planned to leave."

There was an extended silence on the line as the two of them sat, not speaking. He could imagine her so clearly, holding the phone the way she had when her father had called to tell her the man courting her, the man who'd made love to her all night long, was a cop, someone who was only interested in using her for his own ends. He could see her strained expression, her intense concentration, and the firmness of her resolve as she'd dialed the phone.

"Well," she finally said into the silence, "that's all I wanted to say. Whatever happens, it was wonderful seeing you again, David. Goodbye."

"Wait!" he said impulsively. "Did you...do you want to hear from me?"

She hesitated, then said honestly. "That's the only reason I contacted you." The words of love hung in the air unsaid, and he was grateful for that. "Look," she said, "don't think I imagined you were sitting here just waiting for me. I know that's not the case. I just thought...I knew that if there was a chance...any chance...that if I didn't take it, if I didn't find out for sure. Well, I had to know. I had to risk it."

There was so much unsaid between them. So much undone. He rubbed his forehead. "We should talk. Things...things are different now." His mouth felt like sandpaper. I'm in love with someone else. Someone male. What would you think of me if you knew that, Rosey?

"It's been two years," she agreed. "I'm sure a lot has changed. For both of us. I'd really like it if we could talk."

He imagined himself in her apartment, having polite conversation over coffee, discussing the different paths their lives had taken. He shook his head disbelievingly.

"I guess it's kind of unrealistic to think we could just sit down over tostados and beer and hash out old times," she said, sounding sad. "Maybe...maybe we could discuss things over the phone for a while. Maybe that would be easier."

"Maybe."

I wouldn't have to look into your eyes, wouldn't find myself remembering those eyes dilated in passion, closing in bliss as you kissed me.

His heart twisted. "I'll call you." It was the classic male lie. I'll call you...sometime before I'm 80. He couldn't leave her with an untruth, not after she'd been so honest with him. "Or...you could call me here. We'll be putting in a lot of hours...and I'm not home much." And I don't need you calling me while I'm in bed with Hutch. "They can patch you through to me if I'm available, and if I'm not, I can return your call when I get back."

"Really? You want me to? Honestly?"
Did he? He thought of saying no, please, end it now, and don't call me again. He thought of never hearing her voice again, thought of all the months where he'd answered every phone call with the vain hope that she might contact him. He wet his dry lips. "Yeah. I want you to. Really."

Hutch returned, placed a cup of coffee in front of him, then sat and opened his files.

"Okay, David," she said, her voice still subdued. She wasn't letting herself hope for too much. The wistfulness in her tone spoke of all their lost chances. "I'll call you. Tomorrow. Goodbye." The click in his ear was soft and final.

"Yeah, okay," he said to the dead phone, and hung it up. He looked up at Hutch, feeling incredibly confused and conflicted.

Hutch's eyes went soft, the way they always did when Starsky was in pain. "You okay?"

Am I okay? Starsky wondered. No. Not really. "That was Rosey," he blurted, realizing even as he did that Hutch already knew that.

Hutch nodded, still looking at Starsky as if he might need emergency aid any minute.

"We, uh," Starsky stammered, "we, that is, she's gonna call me from time to time. Try to talk things out. About the past. She's gonna call me at work." Not on our time, he wanted to convey.

"Okay," Hutch said.

Okay? What does that mean? This is a helluva time for you to become Mr. Reasonable. If they weren't in the squadroom, Starsky knew his temper would get the best of him, even if he wasn't sure why.

"Did I say something wrong?" Hutch asked sincerely. Starsky couldn't answer him. "Look, this isn't going to go away by wishing it, Starsky. You two definitely need to talk, but why you'd want to do that here is beyond me. But however you decide to handle it is up to you, partner." Hutch's expression was one of resigned acceptance.

Starsky opened his mouth, wanting to reassure Hutch about his feelings for him, about their relationship. But the room was full of other cops and at that moment Starsky couldn't shake the feeling that they were all watching him, waiting for him to do something that would reveal the truth about his relationship with Hutch. A relationship that would change the way every one of them related to him both as a cop and as a man. He closed his mouth feeling frustrated and embarrassed.

"Okay, men," Dobey announced suddenly, as he and Epstein exited Dobey's office. "Here's the roster for the Barstow stakeouts."

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She rested her hand on the phone receiver, reluctant to break even that flimsy contact with him. This is crazy, she chided herself. Why are you doing this to yourself? The chance you had with
him is gone. Accept it. Let it go. Move to San Francisco, Sante Fe, New York, the moon. She closed her eyes knowing that was no solution. Her memories would travel with her as they had these last two years, always bringing her back here, to him.

He was so honest, so real, she knew that no matter what he had become in these last two years that would not have changed. If he wanted her out of his life or in his life, he'd let her know. And if it were the former, she'd have to live with it somehow. But he'd have to tell her. He'd have to send her away. She couldn't make herself walk away first. She'd only had the strength to do that once, and then only because of her deep love for her father.

She was struck with a sudden pang of intense grief for both her father and mother. Never had she felt like such an orphan as she did this minute. Alone in the world with nothing but the fleeting memories of a man who had once loved her, she realized fully how empty her world would be if he did reject her.

Still she had to risk it. If there was any chance that he still loved her, if there was any hope that he might trust his heart to her again, she had to take it. She was walking on a high wire without a net, but if she succeeded then there might be another reason in her life to live again, to laugh, to love. Right now, there was none. She squeezed her eyes shut.

_If I could touch him just one more time...hold him...kiss him just once. If I could just make him believe in me again.... I know I could make him happy, give him the family he always wanted, the life he expected to have._

She still loved him so much it hurt.

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"Starsk," Hutch asked off-handedly, as he lay stretched out on the colorless, worn couch in the drab stakeout apartment, "do you think Dobey knows?"

It was Starsky's turn to watch. He sat perched on a folding chair in front of a powerful telescope with a camera attached to it. The camera was aimed at a correspondingly drab apartment that no one had lived in for over a year. But it was one of several mob-held apartments that Barstow had master keys to.

"Knows what?" Starsky asked distractedly, peering through the eyepiece. "I think he knows the laws of LA back and forth. I think he knows his kids' birthdays. I think some years he remembers his wedding anniversary. I think he knows every infraction we've ever -- "

"About us," Hutch interrupted mildly, knowing Starsky could go on forever with his speculations. "Do you think Dobey knows about us?"

Starsky grew quiet, glanced at him once, then went back to the eyepiece.

"I mean, after that scene in the parking lot -- " Hutch murmured.
"I'd been shot," Starsky reminded him. "I was dying. Maybe dead already. It looked like a hit by other cops. You were right there, witnessed it all, my partner and best friend. I think people understood why you were upset."

Hutch snorted. "I was a bit more than upset, buddy. I went completely, totally bonkers."

"I heard," Starsky said softly without taking his eye from the scope.

Yeah, I guess you did.

When Hutch had come around the front of the Torino, gasping from the adrenaline rush, and found Starsky on the ground, bleeding, unconscious, he believed his friend was dying. Starsky was dying, and Hutch had never told him how he felt, how he really felt. He'd been in love with Starsky and had wanted him for at least two years that he'd admit to, and possibly longer if he really examined the issue. He'd known the love and desire -- especially the desire -- was futile the minute he finally acknowledged it, and had locked it in the closet he'd kept his real heart in. They were friends. He felt blessed to have that. He would not push his luck. He locked the truth away and waited to get over it. Which he never did.

When he found Starsky on that tarmac, his life's blood pouring from multiple wounds, Hutch realized he'd willingly, passively, given up any hope of happiness over the fear of rejection. At that moment, decorum hardly seemed to matter.

He knelt in the parking lot and tried to make a dying man understand how he felt before time ran out, in the desperate hope that love could pull Starsky back from the grave. Perhaps it had.

Dobey had been there in the parking lot when Hutch fell apart. How the big man had gotten downstairs and into the lot so quickly Hutch would never know. But there he was, snapping orders, organizing emergency first aid, commanding the crowd of stunned onlookers.

As Hutch had called to Starsky, then shouted at him, swearing his love, his desire, kissing his dying friend, trying frantically to breathe life back into him, Dobey had been there. Dobey had been the one who had finally pulled Hutch off the wounded Starsky so that the paramedics could get him to the hospital. It was Dobey who had brought Hutch there. Wild-eyed, nearly incoherent, Hutch was already convinced that Starsky would die. It was Dobey who helped Hutch pull himself together during that terrible day.

"I can't even remember all that I said to him in the car," Hutch said quietly. "But I couldn't shut up. You were dying. I was losing you. And I couldn't live with it. He never said a word about it - - Still hasn't. Even when I climbed into bed with you that night after I busted Gunther. Acted like all his detectives kiss their dying partners, and swear their love."

"He lost a partner, too," Starsky reminded him. "Maybe he went a little crazy then himself."

"You think he knows?" Hutch pressed. "About us?"

"Yeah," Starsky said, just as quietly. "I think he knows. And I think he doesn't care just as long as we don't do it on his desk."
Hutch snorted another wry laugh. "I think you're right. That or have one of our famous 'lover's quarrels' in the squad room."

"We've had more than our share, I suppose," Starsky said, "even before we went to bed."

Dobey had always called their battles that, "lover's quarrels." He never said that about the other partners -- but of course, none of them were as volatile, nor were their differences as likely to escalate. There wasn't as much passion.

"Does it bother you?" Hutch asked quietly. "That Dobey knows?" When Starsky shifted and adjusted the eyepiece without answering, Hutch was sorry he asked. Still he couldn't leave it alone. "I guess things have always been different between us, right from the Academy. I guess by now it might even seem like old hat to him." Starsky leaned forward as if something in the eyepiece had claimed his attention. Hutch couldn't stop himself from pressing the issue. "Does it bother you, Starsk... about Dobey?"

"Why're you worried about Dobey all of a sudden?" Starsky asked, still focused on the eyepiece.

It was Hutch's turn not to answer. *Guess I'm wondering what he'll think if you go back to Rosey. It'd probably take some pressure off him if you did. Make his two senior detectives appear more normal, more straight.*

"Is it your turn yet?" Starsky asked plaintively, squirming in the seat as he tried to stretch the kinks out. "My back feels like a corkscrew in this flimsy excuse of a chair."

"No, it is not my turn yet," Hutch said pointedly, grateful that Starsky was changing the subject he had brought up. "Would my lord and master like his servant to bring in his recliner for the stakeout?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice," Starsky said.

"No recliners," Hutch told him, smiling, thinking about the sexual antics they'd performed in the recliner Dobey had loaned them during Starsky's recovery. "You know we get in too much trouble in recliners."

Starsky chuckled evilly. "Just hafta settle for a pastrami sandwich then, I guess. With mustard. *Not* mayonnaise!"

"I take it that's a lunch order," Hutch asked.

"Unless you wanna take your next turn early," Starsky offered. "Then I'd go for lunch."


"Yeah, and a bag of chips and some Ding-Dongs, and skip the health lecture," Starsky added.
"That won't be hard to remember," Hutch said, heading for the door. "Ding-Dongs for the ding-dong!"

"Thanks," Starsky said, focusing again on the scope.

Hutch paused with his hand on the knob facing away from his partner. He stared at the peeling gray paint on the back of the old door. "If you're thinking of seeing Rosey, today might be the best time. I mean, we're due to be relieved at four, then we're free, unless something breaks, which doesn't look likely. Dobey said when we logged in that he might have to pull Johnson and Selby off the roster tomorrow and if he does we'll probably end up back on nights. We could get tied up on that shift for quite a while." There was no response from behind him, so he added, "Just a suggestion."

"Let it rest, Hutch," Starsky said noncommittally. "That's what I'm doing. If she calls me, we can talk on the phone. Anything we have to say to each other can be said on the phone."

Hutch shifted from foot to foot. "You can't solve this on the phone, Starsk."

"Hutch -- " There was a definite warning tone in Starsky's voice. His eye never left the scope.

"I just...I just want you to know I'm okay about...about this...about this whole situation." Worried that he sounded like a jerk, he shut his mouth with a snap.

Starsky looked away from the scope and faced Hutch. "And what situation is that?"

Hutch stared at the floor, then shoved his hands in his pockets. "It's not gonna be Kira again, Starsk. No matter what. I mean that."

"Hutch -- "

"I'm okay about it. Whatever happens. That's all. I just don't want you worrying about that. About me." He couldn't make himself shut up.

"Because you're 'okay about it.'" Starsky sighed, sounding tired. "Look, Hutch, there's not going to be anything for you to be 'okay' about."

Hutch shook his head. "Don't say that. You don't even know how you feel yet. When you figure it out, it might surprise you."

"Yeah," Starsky said quietly. "Okay. I'll be sure and let you know if I have any startling revelations."

*That's nice,* Hutch thought. *I'd definitely want to know.*

Without another word, Hutch opened the door.

From behind him, he heard Starsky say quietly, "I love you, Hutch."
He nodded because he couldn't manage to say anything and left the apartment. That felt so good to hear. Every time Starsky said it Hutch feared it might be the last time. After shutting and locking the door, he moved away a few steps and waited. He should go back, apologize, and stop trying to make himself crazy and Starsky, too. He had as much right to love Starsky as Rosey did, maybe more. He had to have confidence in the strength of their love, let Starsky know he had that confidence. He leaned silently against the door marshalling his thoughts. As he placed his hand on the knob, he heard the phone ring twice. He could hear Starsky lifting it, saying his name in that blunt way he always did on the job.

There was a pause, then finally, hesitantly, "Oh, hi. Yeah. This is Dave. They patched you through okay, huh?"

Hutch nodded to himself and left to get lunch, wondering how he would manage to eat it.

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They stayed on the early shift for the next three days. The hours were tedious and boring, with frequent updates of the suspect's sightings and probable predictions of where he might show up next. The time was taxing on both men. The constant togetherness, once a comfort to them, grew strained. Starsky was distracted and Hutch grew anxious. Their nights were filled with a passion that seemed hungry, nearly frantic on both their parts.

Hutch made sure he went for lunch every day. Rosey called at the same time, and it gave him an excuse to give Starsky privacy for those calls. They didn't talk about the calls but some perversity in Hutch made him wait outside the door until he heard the call come in. Today, when he left for lunch and waited outside to hear the phone ring, he heard Starsky make the call himself. There was a subtle change in his tone of voice. Some of the hesitancy and awkwardness was gone. There was a new low pitch in his voice that Hutch was all too familiar with. He remembered when Rosey and Starsky first met, that his late-sleeping partner would rise extra early just to call her when she was still in bed. Those early-morning intimate phone calls were pivotal in the development of their brief but intense affair. No doubt Rosey remembered that when she suggested the less-threatening phone calls.

Rosey said something to make Starsky laugh, and Hutch knew he'd stayed too long. When he got to the deli, he couldn't remember what to order and had to guess.

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"I'm going to see her at 8:00," Starsky said without preamble, after Hutch disposed of the remains of their lunch.

Hutch hadn't really eaten. He'd only dismantled his food, rearranged it, crunched it up in the wax paper it had been neatly folded in, and dumped it. He nodded. "That's good. Eight."

"That'll give us time to have dinner together, you and me," Starsky said. He was sitting with his legs straddling a chair backwards, his arms crossed over the back rest, his chin propped on his arms. He was perched against the wall beside the window, where he could face Hutch while Hutch took his turn watching through the scope. He wanted to see Hutch's expression.
Hutch nodded again. "You didn't have to do that. I still remember how to eat by myself."

"You sure? You never swallowed a bite of lunch," Starsky said, nailing him with his gaze. "I mean, you played with it enough to make the Hasbro people think about developing toy plastic club sandwiches as a new item for their Christmas line-up, but that's not gonna get you through the day. We'll have dinner together. I wanna see you eat. Then I'll go deal with this, and it'll be over."

Hutch glanced away from the scope to stare disbelievingly at Starsky. "What does that mean?"

Starsky shrugged. "It means you're right. I need to see her, talk to her. Clear the air. Settle some issues. So I can put it behind me. Get over it. Get over her. Then we can go on -- you and me."

"Starsky," Hutch said patiently, "don't do this. Don't sit there and give me a pep talk on what's going to happen between you two tonight. You don't know what she's going to say to you and you don't know how it's going to make you feel. Deal with it when it happens. If you make promises now -- "

"I'm not making promises!" Starsky insisted.

"That's good. I wouldn't hold you to them if you did. Just -- be honest with yourself when you go over there. That's all you can do. Then deal with the honesty. Whatever happens -- "

"Nothing's going to happen!" Starsky said too quickly.

Hutch just smiled at him. "Oh, something will happen all right. And if you keep denying it, you're going to be very surprised when it does. Just be honest. And handle it."

"And you?" Starsky asked, his eyes etched with worry.

Hutch went back to the scope. "I'll handle it, too." *Only I won't be surprised.*

He felt Starsky's hand in his hair, and glanced at him.

"I love you, Hutch," Starsky said quietly, his voice thick.

"I know you do," Hutch assured him, taking the hand stroking his hair and kissing the back of it. "I love you, too. And I'm still your best friend in the whole world. That's not a job I can resign from."

Starsky blinked rapidly, and sucked in a breath.

"It's gonna be okay," Hutch said quietly, not sure how long he could continue to console this man for leaving him. "We'll get through it like we get through everything." But he couldn't say the word. He couldn't say, *together.*

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You don't know what she's going to say to you, Starsky remembered Hutch warning him as he stood in front of the strange apartment door, and you don't know how it's going to make you feel. Deal with it when it happens.

He lifted his hand to knock, then paused for the second time.

You don't know. You don't know.... Deal with it when it happens.

He sucked in a steadying breath. What was wrong with him, anyway? He didn't face armed felons with this much trepidation. This was just a woman, a woman he'd been intimate with once. Just another woman, one of so many --

Stop lying to yourself. She wasn't just another woman. She got under your skin the first moment you saw her. You loved her as much as you ever loved anyone. And still do. Then she left you. She's the one who got away --

He knocked on the door finally, in the hopes that the brash sound would still his own mental voice.

"Just a minute," he heard from the other side, then the snick of the lock and --

"Rosey," he said softly as she swung the door open.

The years fell away as he looked at her. He might as well have been picking her up for their second date. She was in faded blue-jeans and a soft cotton shirt. Her hazel eyes were bright, large, luminous. Her thick sandy blond hair fell in a heavy cascade over her front and down her back. It was longer now, nearly to her waist. He remembered how soft it was, how fragrant, how it felt when he buried his hands in it, when it trailed over his body --

She smiled at him shyly, nodded, and opened the door wider. "David. Hi. Glad you could come." Her voice was tight, full of tension. The comfortable, non-threatening atmosphere of their phone conversations seemed to dissolve now that they were face-to-face.

It was worse than being strangers, much worse. As he stepped inside he realized how wounded they both were by what had happened between them. They both bore scars. Did it matter anymore how they'd been inflicted?

"There's beer in the fridge," she said tentatively. "Can I get you one?"

"No, that's okay," he said lamely.

He wasn't ready for any hospitality. Though by the looks of the place, she wasn't prepared to give but so much. The apartment was nearly bare, almost devoid of furniture. There was a single couch. A lamp. Two boxes of files. Some Indian blanket pillows on the floor. They had different patterns, and were different pillows, but he had to look away from them lying innocently on the floor. He didn't want to remember how she felt in his arms while he kissed her on the floor, how powerful wanting her felt -- how terrible losing her felt.
The whole place looked like she'd just gotten here and wouldn't be staying long. There was no Indian pottery decorating the place, no candles strewn about, no sense of hominess like there'd been in her last apartment. He wondered if she'd even bothered to buy a bed, a big one like she used to have, or --

*He saw himself in that bed with her, that big king sized bed, rolling over her, moving her slim frame so easily. Not like with Hutch, whose big blond body had to be wrestled into position, and sometimes just wouldn't be. But Rosey was little, he could move her around at will, pulling her under him, centering himself, entering her so easily, so naturally, listening to her breathless cry as she took him inside --*

He blinked, shutting the image away, rattled at how easily it came to mind. "Maybe, maybe some water," he asked, as his mouth went dry.

"Sure," she said, leaving the room and stepping into a small, nearly barren kitchenette. She returned with a large glass filled with ice and water.

He downed half of it in a swallow. "Thanks."

"I didn't really think it'd be this awkward," she admitted honestly. Her voice was low, as if afraid that speaking too loudly would startle him.

"No?" he asked, surprised at the bitterness in his voice. "What did you think? That I'd been waiting for you all this time? That I'd be so happy to see you I'd -- " He clamped his mouth shut, took a breath and got a grip on his seesawing emotions. "I'm sorry, Rosey. That was uncalled for."

"No, it wasn't," she said quickly. "You have every right to be angry, to be hurt. I left you. You loved me, and I walked out on you. I didn't want to, David, try to remember that. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do." Her voice quavered on the last words, but she got herself back under control. "I'm grateful you were even willing to see me."

He nodded, and put the glass down on a small packing crate. *Let's get this over with. Then I can go home -- to Hutch.* Hutch had been cheerful and easy-going over dinner, but it had all been a sham, and Starsky knew it. This was hard enough on his big blond; he didn't need to spend hours over here rehashing old history that couldn't be changed while Hutch stewed alone.

"Why did you want to see me, Rosey?" Starsky asked. "What did you want to say?"

He realized that while her face was outwardly calm, she was wringing her hands, washing them over and over together, as if she had to manifest her nervousness in some way to keep herself together. "Well, for one thing, I wanted to say -- I'm sorry. I'm sorry I left you the way I did. I'm sorry I had to. But most importantly -- I'm sorry I hurt you."

Her voice had deepened, roughened, but he tried to ignore that. He was having enough trouble with his own voice, his own feelings. "Sure. Thanks for saying that. I've put it behind me. You should, too." *Hutch is right about you, Dave -- you're a terrible liar.*
"Do you...can you -- forgive me?" she asked in a small voice. She was not imploring. It was a straight question, asked for information. Could he? Was he capable?

He started to dissemble, then stopped himself. "No," he said simply.

She looked down at the floor, sucked in a breath, then seemed to get a grip on herself.

"I can't forgive it," he muttered, "but I can get past it. It happened. It's over." But the wounds still bleed. They'll always bleed.

She didn't look as if she believed him. "Then I'm not sure there's anything else for us to talk about."

"Say what you need to, Rosey," he encouraged her. This might be your only chance.

She hesitated, then gathered her courage. "After my father died, and I realized I'd have to come back here to bury him, I began to think -- began to hope -- that maybe, if you could ever understand, you might forgive... David, I-I -- " She shut her eyes, collected herself. Both of her hands were tightly fisted now, as she folded her arms. Trying to contain herself, to stay together.

"David," she said quietly, her voice controlled, "when I left you, I loved you. It was the last thing I said to you before I went with my father. I loved you then. I still love you."

He stood rigidly, not moving, barely breathing. Don't say anything. Don't think about this. It's almost over. In a few minutes you can leave and go home to Hutch.

When he didn't respond, she continued, "I know I hurt you terribly. Believe me, I hurt myself just as much. I didn't leave because I wanted to, but because I had to, and you know that. I knew I couldn't make a new life, couldn't start over, especially not here...without speaking to you. Without knowing -- "

She stared at him, her eyes fastened on his face, as if she couldn't get enough of looking at him. It was the same expression she'd worn before leaving with her father. She reached out tentatively and placed her hand on his arm, as if she couldn't resist one last opportunity to touch him. He could feel her hand trembling as it gently stroked up his arm onto his shoulder. Her voice was almost a whisper. "I knew I couldn't live here without finding out how you still felt about me." The fingers of her hand lightly touched his cheek, then she pulled away as if trying to rein her emotions in.

Her touched rekindled the tactile memories of their intimacy. His face tingled where her hand had made contact. He didn't move, didn't say anything. Just a few more minutes. Then it'll be over. Then you can leave, and never think about her again. He lowered his eyes, embarrassed when he couldn't even successfully lie to himself.

"David? I need to know. How do you still feel about me? Do you hate me?"

He realized his mouth was dust dry and picked up the water glass, then downed the remains. Finding his voice he said clearly, "No, Rosey. I couldn't hate you."
She seemed to sag a little as if she'd been terrified of his response. "Then, what do you feel? Apathy? Annoyance? Friendship?" She was grasping now.

_Not friendship_, he realized, that one word snagging him. _I know what friendship is all about. That's what I've got with Hutch, in spades. Friendship first, above all else. You wouldn't have a clue._

"David, do you -- could you possibly -- is there any chance that you still might...care about me? Even in some small way?" She couldn't make herself ask him, he realized, what she really wanted to know.

Still, he couldn't lie. He swallowed, wishing he'd never come here, wishing he'd never seen her, never confronted her heartache; never felt the touch of her hand. He looked around the room, wanting to escape, but his eyes kept drifting back to the pillows on the floor and the shadow of two lovers who'd once lain there together.

"Of course I care," he said, sounding irritable. "I care, all right. Too damn much for my own good."

There was a flush on her face as she stepped hesitantly toward him. Her hand reached out again, but this time didn't connect. "Last night, I-I asked Hutch. He said you weren't seeing anyone. It made me think...made me hope that maybe..."

Her mentioning Hutch's name seemed to galvanize him. He looked her straight in the eye. "Rosey, let's get this out on the table and quit dancing around it. You want to know the truth, okay, I'll give you the truth. Do I still care about you?" The lump in his throat felt like a boulder. He forced it down. "Yes, God help me, yes, I care. The truth is I still love you. I never stopped loving you. I never forgot how much I loved you not for one single goddamned day." His voice was climbing even as his throat constricted. Now his hands were balled into fists.

The words seem to strike her like blows, one after the other. Her head snapped back, but she stood her ground, her face unreadable.

"We barely knew each other a week," he continued, his voice still harsh, "but it was long enough for me to know. I loved you. I loved you and you left me. I dealt with it. I'm still dealing with it. And my life moved on. It's been two years. Two years without you. Two years remembering you, thinking about you, wanting you and trying to forget that want."

He shook his head, recalling the headlong rush of one night stands with other women, always looking, always searching, never finding. All the while, Hutch beside him, never letting on to his own feelings as he watched Starsky devour woman after woman. But all Starsky wanted was for someone to make him feel something beside that terrible loss -- And not one woman did.

"I must've gone out with a hundred women the year you left me," he muttered, unable to recall a single name, a single face. "Never the same one twice. But none of them were you. So eventually, I stopped -- "
How long had it been since he'd gone on a real, live *date*? Oh, there was the occasional one-night stand, like the police groupie they'd gotten involved with. And, of course -- he shuddered even now, remembering -- Kira. She was a sandy blond, too, wasn't she? He had tried so hard to love her, tried to convince himself he did -- It had all been wrong right from the start. He felt hollow, thinking about that.

"Hutch said you weren't seeing anyone," she said quietly.

He focused on her face, as painful as that was. "That's not what Hutch said. He said I wasn't seeing any *women.*" He watched for her reaction, but she only nodded, as if they'd both just said the same thing.

"Six months ago, Rosey, I was nearly killed," he said bluntly. Color leached out of her face, but she remained quiet. "I was shot by professional assassins hired to kill me and Hutch. They got me, but missed Hutch. They tell me my heart actually stopped for a while. The scars are still pretty raw. Hutch saved me, saved my life, worked with me all through my recovery. You start to see the world differently after you've been shot, Rosey. That close a brush with death changes your perspective about a lot of things."

He sucked in a breath, trying to quell the rage storming through him. His wounds ached, but he pressed on. "Hutch didn't exactly lie to you, Rosey, but he didn't tell the truth, either. I'm not seeing any *women.* Haven't seen any since the shooting. But there is someone in my life."

She blinked, totally confused, her brow furrowed. He could see her trying to work it out and coming up with no answers.

"There's someone in my life I love very much. Someone who saved me when I was dying. Rosey, I love *Hutch,* and he loves me."

It didn't compute. Her expression was still like someone who'd been given a complex math problem that was going to take time to figure out.

"Hutch?" she finally mouthed softly. "How could you be -- ? David, you're not -- ?" Then understanding hit, finally. Understanding, and, to Starsky's dismay, acceptance. Some surprise, but the acceptance was there.

"Hutch," she said firmly. "You and Hutch. I see." She wet her mouth, her mind working, assimilating. Trying to arrange the image of the man she thought he was with the image of the man he really was. Still, her reaction was unexpected. There seemed to be no repugnance, no disgust. Just this struggle to understand.

Then it hit, and she covered her face with her hand. "Oh, no, oh, god -- *Hutch!*"

He stiffened in anger, glad to feel that. Glad to feel anything besides the confused emotions of love and need burning a hole inside him. She would condemn them and he would leave her in a blaze of righteous anger. And it would be over.
But she only shook her head, looking distressed. "When I think of what I said to Hutch --!" She turned to him, worrily. "I didn't know! How could I know? I asked him about you, about your relationships. I confided in him! I treated him as if he didn't matter, as if his relationship with you couldn't be as significant -- David, if I had known, if I'd had any idea...." She swallowed painfully. "I would've never approached you -- and certainly not in front of Hutch -- if I'd known. I'm so sorry. Will you tell Hutch I'm sorry?"

Starsky felt all the force of his anger deflate. She was worried about hurting Hutch? He thought of Hutch's depression after the restaurant, the things her appearance had made Hutch realize. He understood suddenly that if she'd known about them, she wouldn't have even contacted him, respecting the choice he'd made. That's what she'd asked Hutch. Was there someone in his life, some woman? If there was, she would've just slipped away. And now that she knew about Hutch, is that what she would do? This wasn't the reaction he expected. He had no idea how to feel about her acceptance and understanding.

"You couldn't have known," he said softly. "We have to be pretty discreet because of the job. It's one of those things everyone probably knows but no one talks about." She was watching him, listening intently, clearly wanting to know more, to really understand. Still, the pain of loss etched around her eyes was hard to look at.

"It took us both by surprise," he said, feeling the need to explain. "Or at least it took me that way. Apparently, Hutch had -- felt that way for a while, but kept it to himself."

"Even when we were --?" she started to ask.

"Yeah," Starsky said. "You remember how he helped us get together, how supportive he was."

He hadn't been at first, Starsky recalled. He wondered now how much of that was concern that Rosey was involved in her father's criminal activity and how much was plain jealousy. Whatever it was, Hutch had finally been able to push it aside and just be Starsky's friend. He could still remember Hutch chiding him gently, "Go cuddle with your lady. Let me handle this." What must that have cost him then?

"Anyway, he never let on," Starsky continued. "Then, after the shooting, he was there for me. He saved me. My heart stopped and didn't start again till he got in the hospital. He was with me every minute through my recovery. And he saved me from the worst night terrors I've ever had. I got through it all because of his love. I don't believe I would have survived otherwise. We've been lovers since then." The word felt odd in his mouth, saying it to her. It wasn't a word he said very often. So much about their love remained unsaid, invisible.

She was listening intently, watching him, absorbing everything. She still wore that intense expression, her expressive hazel eyes boring into him. There was still no condemnation, no disgust.

He didn't know how to take that, and finally ran out of things to say.

When she realized he was done, she asked, "Are you happy, David?"
I was, he realized with a start, until I saw you again. He tried to make the words come out, tried to say, yes, Hutch and I are very happy, but he couldn't. Instead, he muttered, "You're takin' this pretty well."

She shrugged slightly. "I'm surprised, but -- I've seen a lot of things in my travels. The Indians I live with have a different attitude about these things, so I guess I've picked some of that up. And my mother always told me that love is love, no matter where you find it. And...after losing you...I came to realize those were the truest words I'd ever heard. Love is precious. Cherish it. It's entirely too easy to lose."

He had to look away, her sorrowful expression nearly overwhelming him.

"But why did you bother telling me you still loved me," she asked, her voice letting the pain be heard. "You have Hutch. You didn't need to lie to me about that. I could understand your having another lover. I expected it. I expected you to be married -- "

"Is there no one in your life, Rosey?" he asked bitterly. "In two years, hasn't there been anyone for you?" He didn't expect her to tell the truth. He counted on her lying. But he couldn't make himself disbelieve her, none-the-less.

"My father played matchmaker the entire time we were in Mexico," she said angrily, "throwing every eligible bachelor at me he could find. Landowner's sons, businessmen he knew, consultants, academics -- he nearly drove me crazy trying to marry me off." She faced him squarely. "In two years there's been no one. I hurt, David. I didn't want another man. I wanted you. I wasn't willing to settle for a substitute. So, the answer is no. In two years, there's been no one."

He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the thrum of loneliness emanating from her, feeling the love for him, the need for him. Feeling the answering call in his own heart, in his groin. A wave of desire passed over him so strongly he swayed. He thought of Hutch waiting at home for him, remembered the lost expression in those beautiful blue eyes as he left. How could he betray the man who loved him so unconditionally?

His bullet wounds throbbed, and he found himself rubbing his chest unconsciously.

"I'm happy for you, David," she said quietly, sounding defeated. "I'm happy if you're happy. But you never answered me before. Are you happy with Hutch? I could accept all this and go on with my life if I were sure -- ?"

Her pressing for that answer tore something inside him, and all his confusion and emotions surged forth in a chaotic jumble that was more anger than anything else. He spun, closed the gap between them and grabbed her roughly by the shoulders. It was everything he could do not to shake her till her teeth rattled.

"You wanna know if I'm happy with Hutch? If you'd asked me in the restaurant, I'd've told you I was the happiest man in LA, maybe the world. I was healthy again, back workin' the streets again, my partner beside me coverin' my back. My best friend in the whole world was also my lover. The one human being on the planet I knew I could trust without question loved me. Did
everything he could to make me happy. Lived for my joy. And I was full of joy. And if I thought of you -- and a day never passed when I didn't -- it was with a dull pain, the kind I get around my gunshot wounds. You were the past. Hutch was the future. I had accepted losing you, and I accepted loving Hutch and what that meant, and what it would cost me. 'Cause loving Hutch meant giving up something -- giving up dreams of a family, of children. But I accepted that because I love Hutch, and he loves me. And for the first time in two years the world seemed right again. But then -- "

His voice choked up, in pain or rage he couldn't say. He gripped her tighter, not caring if he hurt her, just needing to say what was inside him. "But then, you were there, right there, alive and real again. Holding out the dream. The fantasy. You tell me you still love me. You say there's been no one for you. And you ask me if I'm happy with Hutch? I was, damn you. Rosey, I was so happy -- "

He gasped in a breath to keep from sobbing. "You wanna know why I said I still loved you? Because I do. I wish it wasn't true. I wish I'd never seen you again. But it is true, and you're here. And, dammit, Rosey, I love you like you never left me, like you never cut my heart out and made me eat it raw. Now, what am I supposed to say to Hutch? And what am I supposed to do?"

Tears swam in her eyes as she stared at him. She touched his cheek gently and whispered, "I'm sorry, David. The last thing I wanted to do was cause you more pain."

The heat from her palm scalded him and in reflex he turned his face into it, kissing the smooth skin there. "Rosey," he breathed, "what am I gonna do?"

Then he couldn't hold it in anymore and as his own tears fell, he pulled her against him, crushing her slight frame to his brutally. He kissed her hard, taking her by surprise, making her gasp.

He plundered her mouth roughly, needing to find her taste, needing to know if it was the same. She tried not to yield, she tried to resist, pushing at him, moving her head, but he buried his hands in her hair roughly, and held her in place, waiting for her to surrender. And finally, with a soft cry, she did, opening her mouth, wrapping her arms around him as tight as she could, and meeting his tongue with hers. Her loneliness and need for him was like a tidal wave engulfing him, opening him up to everything he'd felt for her in the past, everything he'd tried -- and failed -- to forget. They were both shedding tears, for their loss, for their past helplessness in the face of outside forces larger than their love, for the pain of their separation, and for the pain that awaited them now.

Even as Starsky bore her to the floor, to the pillows that would hold her in place for him, he knew the pain was coming. For him. For her. For Hutch. But for that instance he couldn't resist the need for her that had been banked for so long. As he blanketed her body with his own and pinned her to the floor, he could hear the melancholy in Hutch's voice.

*You don't know what she's going to say to you, and you don't know how it's going to make you feel. Deal with it when it happens.*

The memory was enough to make him break the kiss.
As he did, she gasped, "David, stop, we can't do this. Your relationship --"

He knew what it was costing her to say that. He shook his head, "I still can't back off from you, Rosey. I just can't."

And Hutch's voice sang in his ear: "Oh, something will happen all right. And if you keep denying it, you're going to be very surprised when it does. Just be honest. And handle it."

He closed his eyes. I love you, Hutch. And I'm sorry. But this is the only way I can handle this now. Then he shut all the warning voices away, his own, and Hutch's, and even Rosey's, as he bent to taste her mouth again, and find the answer to his need in her body.

Her body.

He felt as if he'd only ever had two lovers: this slender wraith of a woman and the solid tower of one remarkable man. Everything about her seemed small, delicate, yet with a surprising strength and resistance. Her desire, confusion, and reluctance reverberated through her touch, her kiss, and the tension in her body. But she couldn't make herself stop touching him, not after wanting him for so long. A distant part of him realized he was reacting instinctively, just as he had that night in the hospital bed with Hutch. Someone he loved, someone he trusted, was kissing him, giving him beautiful pleasure, and his animal nature couldn't resist the allure of passion mixed with love. It was no different now.

He wondered if this was how Hutch had felt as he'd lost control of his need and taken Starsky's mouth, in defiance of society's censure, in defiance of their whole world? There had come a moment when Hutch couldn't say no to himself any longer. Would that help him understand Starsky's yielding? Would that help him forgive it?

"Wait, David, wait!" Rosey gasped, managing to pull away and put some distance between them. She shook her head. "It's not fair!" She was so distraught, it forced him to try to think, try to collect himself, as much as he didn't want to.

"Rosey..."

"First my father was hurt by our being in love. Someone who never did anything but love me." She used the heel of her hand to wipe the tears from one eye, as he brushed the others away with his thumb. "Now, it's Hutch we'll hurt. And all he's done is love you. There's never been a moment when it could just be me and you, working it out between us." She shook her head. "Let me go, David. Go home to Hutch. He saved you. I can't come between that --"

"It's too late," he said honestly. "You already have. You've brought the past right back to the now, like it never went away, like you never left. I feel like I last loved you only yesterday. Your kiss, it's the same. The feel of your hair. Your warmth. The way you smell. Like it's all been stored inside my head waiting for you to remind me." His hands touched her, emphasizing what his body made him recall.

"You weren't just an infatuation to me, Rosey. You were one of the rare women in my life I ever seriously considered marrying. I was in love with you with my whole heart, my whole self. You
think that just goes away? I thought -- I'd hoped -- it could, but when I saw you in that restaurant, I knew it never did." He towed her closer to him, but she withdrew, turning her head away in denial.

"You can't change your mind now," he told her harshly, confused, frustrated, and racked with guilt. "You came after me, you called me, pursued me -- "

She shook her head, still not looking at him. "I didn't know! I didn't know there was anyone else. How can I hurt him -- the way I was hurt when I had to leave -- ?"

He had no answers, couldn't think of any, couldn't feel anything but the terrible pain in his heart. She was too close, too real, too alive. He couldn't back off. Not now.

He rolled over her, claiming her mouth and she couldn't escape his kiss. In seconds, she was clutching him, returning his passion, her mouth open, her hunger something he could taste. He was as eager to respond to it as he'd been in that hospital bed so late at night. It tasted like love, just as Hutch's hunger had. And he was the one who could fill that hunger, who had to fill it. His hands found her breasts under her soft shirt, stroking them, pulling shudders from her.

"David...David!" she gasped. "Oh God forgive me! I love you. I can't help it! I love you so much."

He squeezed his eyes shut, hearing the echo of the words that he and Hutch used to pull each other back to reality from their terrible dreams. But this was reality, too. Her body, her need, his love and desire for her.

His palms slid beneath her clothes, moving them out of his way as he prepared to claim her. Her resistance melted away and she helped him, searching beneath his clothes for that skin-to-skin contact that was the only real thing left for them now. When her fingertips found the rigid scars still so livid on his skin she jolted in shock.

He pulled her hand away. That wasn't part of their past. That was part of his now. Hutch's fingertips would trace each one lovingly, feeling they were evidence of his life. To Rosey they would only be something he'd experienced without her. He pulled her hand down lower, to his unzipped jeans, to the part of him that was unchanged since she had touched it last. His cock rose up to meet her hand as eagerly as it always had, and she gripped it as surely as she had before, stroking it smoothly, strongly, the way she knew he liked it. He wrestled with her sweat pants until they were around her knees as he clambered awkwardly between her spread thighs. Their mouths never separated as they shared panting breaths while the rest of their bodies coordinated their dance automatically.

So familiar, yet so different. She pulled him into her with a shaking hand, her body trembling in need. He couldn't help but think of Hutch's frantic need, the way he'd penetrated him so strongly, so forcefully. He was sympathetic to that need then, but he understood it totally now. After two years of abstinence, she was far tighter than he had been under Hutch. He fought his eagerness, trying to ease in carefully, be gentle. But it was a losing battle as he lost his focus and his brain was flooded with sensations both familiar and alien. Tight and wet and small -- so different from Hutch. How powerful he felt whenever he took Hutch, to be able to claim such a strong man. But
this was different, it was right, it was natural and oh, so good. He thrust into her, disregarding the
tangle of their clothes, her grip on his arms, and her fingers yanking his hair. He could hear her
whisper his name over and over as she became lost in his passion. Somewhere inside him, his
body knew the most primal truth -- this is the way you made children. This was the only way a
man could find immortality on this earth. From this union, new life was possible. It gave a power
to his passion that was different from his loving Hutch.

His orgasm rose up through his legs and erupted through the barrel of his cock, just as she
clutched him frantically and shook with her release. But he realized, as he came, that they had
never been alone in their passion, not for a single second. As he had loved her, his other lover's
shadow had hovered over them the entire time. He squeezed his eyes shut and clutched her to
him, as if to hide her from that shadow. As he rocked her gently, consoling her about the fates
that conspired against them, she cried quietly, sorrowfully against his chest. And as the lassitude
of his orgasm settled on him heavily, he found himself as haunted and confused as he had ever
felt in his life.

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Hutch sat on the couch in his apartment, long legs sprawled out in front of him, and watched the
Creature Feature's midnight offering, Rodan. He realized with some surprise that it was at least
the fourth time he'd seen the silly thing, but the first time he'd ever watched it alone. It felt
strange, sitting here, watching the pair of fakey monsters flying over ravaged Japan, screaming at
one another, without Starsky beside him, bowl of half-eaten popcorn on his lap. But he was
desperate to do something, anything that would still the chaotic memories surging through his
brain.

As he tried to concentrate on the movie, the last two years of his life kept replaying like a private
screening in his mind.

That first day in the park...if I hadn't talked you into running there...if you hadn't seen her that
first time....

Starsky's interest in Rosey had been instant and impulsive, so sudden Hutch had no time to
school his jealous feelings. He'd finally managed to rein them in, but only after outside forces
threatened them.

It could've ended differently. If the feds hadn't interfered, Malone might've stayed, and if he had,
she and Starsky would've probably been married by now with a kid.

When Rosey left it wasn't like when Terry died. They'd both mourned that senseless loss, and let
time heal the pain. But Rosey wasn't dead, she was just gone. And Starsky looked for her in
every woman that passed him. He'd gone through the ladies like Sherman taking Atlanta, and
Hutch had had to witness it all. His own desire was a shameful secret he felt determined to keep
buried, and his own denial of it had nearly led to the end of their partnership.

Kira.
He closed his eyes, not wanting to think about her, but unable to escape the memories. She was yet another of the sandy blond Rosey-substitutes Starsky courted. But it had gotten too serious. Starsky had had less and less time for him, as he made more and more time for Kira. By that time, Hutch's unrequited love for Starsky had become a bitter wound that was slowly poisoning their friendship, eroding their partnership. Hutch had gone a little crazy, determined to get between Starsky and Kira. He succeeded in the basest way possible, only coming to his senses when Starsky nearly caught him in her bed.

He tried to remember what Kira had felt like in his arms, what making love to her had been like, but he couldn't. He could barely remember what she looked like. Since he'd become Starsky's lover, he'd stopped thinking about women as sexual partners. It was as if that part of his life had never existed.

His behavior during that time with Kira shamed him. He was never sure why Starsky forgave him except maybe because he still loved Hutch, still considered him his best friend. It was a miracle, really, that they'd patched things up. Then Starsky was shot and it all seemed so stupid, wasting all that time when suddenly time was so short, life so fragile.

But it had taught Hutch something, at least. It taught him what was really important in this life. Starsky, of course, but most especially, Starsky's friendship. It was the most valuable thing to Hutch, outweighing even his desire, even their shared passion. Because it was that friendship that had sustained them through the worst of times. It was that loving friendship that gave Starsky the will to live during his nearly fatal ordeal, and the strength to go on through his recovery. It was the power and strength of that amazing, unique friendship that kept each of them going in their bleakest hours -- after Gillian, after Terry, after their worst, most heartbreaking cases. And after having survived Kira, Hutch had vowed that never again would he allow anything to come between him and his partner, his best friend. Nothing. Ever. The friendship was inviolable.

Now that vow was being tested.

He realized with a start that the movie was nearly over. The monsters were meeting their doom, being burned alive in a volcanic conflagration. And the Japanese watching it were getting all philosophical about it. This was the part when Starsky would always tear up. Because the monsters were a pair, they were lovers, and they were dying together. No matter how many times they watched it, Starsky would get weepy and Hutch would roll his eyes in exasperation as he did.

_They're just rubber puppets_, he would tell Starsky, _and not very good ones at that. It's the silliest movie ever made. I don't know why I sit through this thing with you every time._

So, he was very surprised as he sat, alone, watching the doomed creatures call to one another, to feel a lone tear fall from his eye. He reached up, touched it, and looked at it as if it had fallen from the sky. As the Rodans fell into the lava, Hutch realized that if he didn't turn the TV off this minute he would dissolve into an uncontrollable crying jag. Suppressing an urge to shoot the TV dead, he rose from the couch, covered the distance in two strides and shut the set off.

_Watching stupid monster movies by myself_, he thought, agitated, _when I could've been reading a book, or practicing my guitar, or watching something worthwhile. I'm losing it._
He sat back on the couch in the same ungainly sprawl and stared at the now dark set. The images of the dying monsters still swam before his eyes, calling to one another in their death throes.

*Like me and Starsky on the street. Like me and Starsky during the hit.*

He squeezed his eyes shut. If he started mulling *that* over, he'd have to live through the dream tonight. Tonight. When he'd probably be sleeping alone.

He heard the knob turn and jumped, startled. When Starsky entered, it took him completely by surprise. He knew it showed on his face, and tried to school it, but it was too late. Besides, what had he ever been able to hide from this man?

"Hey," Starsky said as he let himself in. "Were you asleep? I'm sorry if I woke you."

"No," Hutch said too quickly. "I wasn't asleep. I, uh, was watching *Rodan.*" He smiled sheepishly.

"Oh, wow," Starsky said, and frowned. "That's such a *sad* movie. You watched it alone?" He said it in the same tone of voice as if it had been some intense Shakespearean tragedy with Lawrence Olivier and Katherine Hepburn.

Hutch just stared at him. "Well, my date stood me up."

Starsky flushed dark, not the kind of flush he got when he was excited, but the one he got when he was embarrassed. "I'm sorry I'm so late."

Hutch immediately felt like shit and looked away from him. "Don't apologize. You don't have curfew. In fact -- I didn't really expect you back here tonight. I thought, that is, I figured you might want to be alone."

Or not. But not with me.

Starsky moved around the room restlessly, touching plants he normally never noticed, fiddling with assorted bric-a-brac, eyes roving everywhere. He seemed a bundle of nerves to Hutch, a live wire looking for a spark.

"You usually plunk yourself so close to me you're practically in my lap," Hutch thought, trying to keep his face blank. He didn't want to say the wrong thing, pressure Starsky, or ask the questions that were burning holes in him. Instead, he really looked at his partner, taking in everything, like a good detective.

"You've showered," he realized with a knot in his stomach. "Oh, god, you've taken a shower. Your hair still has that fresh-washed sheen and the curls aren't sitting just right because you didn't take the time to blow dry your hair."

For a brief moment, Hutch thought he might actually get sick, but then he drew in a breath and calmed down.

*You knew it would happen. Stop acting so surprised. Be his friend. Be adult. You can handle this.*
"Hutch, I-I can't work this out alone," Starsky said, referring back to Hutch's last comment about Starsky's wanting to be alone. Turning, finally, to face Hutch, Starsky shoved his hands in his pockets then pulling them out again. "I'm so used to having you there, to working things out with you that I can't do it on my own anymore."

*Be his friend,* Hutch ordered himself harshly. *The friendship will last, has to last, so be his friend.*

"You don't have to work it out alone, buddy. I'm here. Talk to me."

"How can I?" Starsky asked plaintively, looking like he was barely holding it together. "How can I discuss this with you when the things I'm feeling, the things I'm doing are tearin' you apart? Tearing *us* apart."

A strange calmness came over Hutch, infusing him, firming his center. "No, not that. Nothing can tear us apart, partner. What we've got is too solid. Gunther couldn't do it. Kira couldn't do it. The job couldn't do it. This won't either."

Starsky stared at him, searching his eyes to see if he was lying.

"Maybe we'll have a rocky moment or two," Hutch admitted honestly, "but we'll come out the other side. We'll always be partners; we'll always have each other. We had that before anything else. We'll have that when -- " *The love affair is over.* He swallowed hard and made himself smile.

Starsky's eyes darted around the room again, and he started wandering some more. He looked trapped, frustrated. It was the kind of look he got before a complete explosion of nerves and temper. "Why'd you make me go over there tonight? Why'd you make me do that? I wasn't ready. I didn't have my head together."

"You had to do it," Hutch said calmly. "You had to face it, however it went. And you had to know I accepted that." Hutch paused for a moment then admitted something that had been sitting in his gut all night. "I knew when my marriage to Vanessa was over. I knew when it was time to let her go."

Starsky spun back around, looking nearly panicked. "Is that where we're at in your mind, Hutch? Are we *over*? You ready to pull the plug while the patient's still breathing?"

He didn't miss the analogy, and smiled wryly. "Starsk, if Gillian were somehow to walk through that door right now, I don't what I'd do or how I'd feel. But I loved that woman so much. If she were still alive, if she came back, I'd probably be going through a similar hell. I can't stand in your way. I can't be an obstacle to you. *I love* you. And if that's true, if the love is genuine, then that means I've got to care about your happiness -- *wherever* you might find it."

Starsky's eyes squeezed shut. Angrily, he asked, "If everyone's so fuckin' concerned about my damned happiness, then how come I'm hurtin' so bad?"
Hutch leaned over the back of the couch, resting his chin on his forearms, wishing Starsky was in reach. "Easy. Easy there, buddy. Talk to me."

Starsky stared at him. The tears were banked in there, dammed up, as if he were terrified to let the first one sneak out. "Hutch, I still love her. Just like you said. I couldn't make it go away, I couldn't pretend it wasn't there. It was tearin' me up inside it hurt so bad, to see her, be with her, talk to her -- " His voice choked up hard and he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing violently. "She-she held it all out to me. She stills loves me, wants to be with me. She's been waiting for me all this time."

Hutch nodded, keeping his face fixed with that understanding expression. Oddly enough, his outer calm affected his inner being and he felt himself becoming detached, analytical. As though the friend he was to Starsky had taken ascendancy and pushed the frightened, needy lover aside. That was good, he thought. Maybe it would help him handle this.

"Hutch, I-I made love to her -- !" Starsky blurted guiltily. His hands were balled into tight fists by his sides. "I'm sorry!" he whispered.

For some weird reason that made Hutch smile the indulgent smile he always got when Starsky got the guilts over something dumb. "I know. I could tell." He got up from the couch and approached him, running his hand through Starsky's disorganized curls. "You showered. Unless the two of you spent the evening running laps, I couldn't see any other reason."

The gentle humor didn't register, making Starsky look only more distressed. "Aren't you mad? Don't you hate me?"

"Ssssh," Hutch admonished, trying to calm him down. "No, I'm not mad. And I could never hate you. We haven't made any promises to each other. You never asked me for fidelity -- "

"No, you just gave it," Starsky interrupted. "You never cheated on me, Hutch, I know that, not the whole time -- "

"Stop," Hutch ordered firmly. "The only promise we ever made to each other was the same one we always had -- the promise of our friendship. In a relationship like ours, there's no real mechanism for permanence. I never asked you for monogamy; you never asked me for it. I'm not mad. I...I guess I expected it."

Starsky looked astounded and confused at the same time.

"It's not like you went out and had some one night stand just for the hell of it, Starsk. You love this woman. You loved her before you loved me. I understand. And I can accept it." Just like I've accepted your leaving me while you're still fighting it.

"But Hutch," Starsky argued, pulling away and making another nervous circuit of the room, "it didn't help, making love to her. I mean, yeah, it helped the immediate problem, but there were no answers there. For a few minutes I thought, if I did that, if I loved her, physically, when I was done, I'd know -- "
"Know what?" Hutch asked, having a little trouble following his agitated argument.

"I'd know what to do," Starsky said plaintively. "I'd know who I loved the most. But it didn't help. Not at all. Even while I made love to her, you were in my head and my heart. You were there. Even when I finished, I knew I still loved you. Still wanted you. I've never been through anything like this in my life, Hutch. I never loved two people so hard, both at the same time. I don't know what to do."

Hutch didn't know either. It wasn't what he expected, so he had no answers. But he knew how to comfort Starsky's pain. He'd always known how to do that. He leaned against the counter and opened his arms. Softly, he said, "Come here. Let me hold you."

Starsky hesitated for a few seconds then crossed the room, nearly falling against him, clutching him desperately. "Hutch?"

"Ssssh," he whispered, stroking Starsky's spine, his thick hair. "I've got you. Try to relax."

Starsky was trembling, nearly shaking in his arms. "Can I stay here tonight?" he asked, his voice tremulous.

Hutch felt as if someone had thrust one of those long ceremonial swords slowly through his heart, then drew it out just as deliberately. "Never ask me that. This is your home. This room, the bed, my body, everything here is yours. You know that. No matter what. No matter why. You can always stay here."

"Even after -- ?" Starsky began.

*Even after fucking her?* "Yes. Always. Forever. No matter what."

"Do you still love me?" Starsky asked, his voice so tight Hutch thought it would crack.

"I could never stop loving you," Hutch told him. "I never will." *Anymore than you could stop loving her.*

Starsky crushed him even harder until Hutch had to gasp for air. "Make love to me?" Starsky pleaded softly, timidly.

Hutch grinned, feeling as though his heart were cut in two. Half of it leaped for joy. The other half shriveled and died. "An offer I could never refuse," he whispered, kissing Starsky's forehead.

"I love you, Hutch," Starsky insisted, even as his hands frantically began searching his body.

"I know you do," Hutch assured him. "I know." Then Starsky's mouth came down on his hard, hungry, desperate, and Hutch yielded to his confusion and need.

Starsky was rock hard already, as crazed and needy as he usually was after the dream. Hutch needed to slow things down, help Starsky find some inner peace if Hutch had any hope of
finding his own. He stepped back from Starsky, disentangling them. Starsky looked disoriented and rejected at the same time.

Hutch held out his hand. "Come to bed. Then we can sleep when we're done. I'll hold you."

Starsky's face was a mask of turmoil. He stood, went to Hutch, wrapped his strong arms around him.

Hutch couldn't help but wonder if Starsky was comparing the feel of his large, male body with Rosey's small feminine one. And why wouldn't he? If images of Hutch were in his mind while he loved Rosey, then what could he do but see her while he loved Hutch? He closed his eyes, shutting that concern away.

_We're together tonight, who knows for how long? Cherish it. Remember it. It might be the last time._ He bent his head, found the mouth he loved, and kissed it with all the gentleness he had, all the longing inside him.

Starsky grew calmer in his arms. "I'm sorry, Hutch," he whispered. "I never wanna hurt you."

"Ssssh," Hutch soothed, stroking his face. "Let's just be together in this moment, here and now. Can you do that?"

Starsky nodded, looking grateful, as Hutch led him to his big brass bed.

Once he had him there, he undressed him slowly, kissing him everywhere, examining his body, memorizing every inch of it for later, for all the lonely tomorrows. He used his tongue freely, knowing Starsky loved that, tasting his freshly washed skin and storing that experience away as well. He used his teeth only to bestow the gentlest nips, the tiniest nibbles, just to excite, not to dominate, not to brand. He had to share now. She had left Starsky unmarked, and Hutch was grateful for her consideration. So, he showed the same regard. He had never needed to mark, to bruise or bite, it wasn't his way. Starsky needed to sometimes, and after the last dream Hutch had done it, but it bothered him. It wasn't like him.

This was like him, this slow, languid loving, this thorough worship of the body he craved, the complete enjoyment of the man he loved more than he had ever loved anyone.

As he adored Starsky with his mouth and hands and tongue, Starsky touched him wherever he could reach, lightly, gently, as if he couldn't believe he was still here, as if he were totally amazed that they were doing this. His finely chiseled fingers stroked Hutch's face, traced the outline of his lips, teased his ear, and petted his hair. And all the while, Starsky repeated his love, over and over, as if needing the reassurance himself.

Hutch spent a long time kissing and licking Starsky's ass, knowing how much he loved that. He traced the separating crevasse with his tongue tip, then pushed the buttocks apart with his hands. When he rimmed Starsky's anus, his lover moaned and called his name, swearing his love and sounding close to tears.
Will she give you this? Hutch's traitorous mind wondered. Can she please you all these ways? Can you teach her how to love you, how you like it best? Or do you want it differently with her? Do you love all the special things she does instead? Will you remember this when you take her, when you give her all you have?

He closed his eyes and shut the thoughts away, and worked at pleasing his lover.

"Take me, Hutch," Starsky cried out. "I can't handle that anymore! It's too good, please. Fuck me now!" He was clawing the sheets, getting close, so close.

But Hutch didn't want to fuck. He didn't want to do anything she couldn't do. He didn't want to dominate or overwhelm. He just wanted to love. And he knew in his heart he didn't have to fuck to please Starsky. Hutch knew he could pleasure him as well as any woman even without that. He was willing to compete on even ground. Twelve years of knowing this man had to give him some advantage. Gently, he turned Starsky over, found his rigid cock pulsing in time with his heart, in time with Hutch's heart as well. He took hold of it firmly, and slid his mouth around it.

Starsky cried out and bucked, protesting even as he shoved hard into the hot, wet haven of Hutch's mouth. "Please, babe, please -- !" he pleaded, but Hutch knew Starsky no longer knew what he was pleading for.

So he showed him, taking all of Starsky inside him, into his throat, licking, swallowing, sucking, loving the most beautiful part of this most beautiful man with all that he had.

*I may never see you like this again. Each time we're together could be the last. I've got to remember --*

Starsky shouted and shoved hard down Hutch's throat and then it was there, the strong jets of thick semen pulsing, flowing, filling him. Hutch drank as if Starsky's seed would give him life, give him purpose. And the act of swallowing Starsky so excited him he came unexpectedly, pulsing against the bed and Starsky's leg.

When they were done, he released Starsky after wiping the spatters from Starsky's calf. He climbed back up to the head, took Starsky in his arms and pulled the sheets around them.

"That was so good, Hutch," Starsky sighed. "It's always so good with you. So right. I love you." And then he was asleep, still clutching Hutch hard as if afraid to let go.

*You sleep,* Hutch thought, kissing his curly head as he pulled Starsky to him. He sighed, enjoying the familiar feel of Starsky's lax, satisfied body lying in his arms. *You sleep now. I'm here to keep the nightmares away. God knows the daylight ones are going to be bad enough.*
CHAPTER 4

*How long can he keep this up?* Rosey wondered, as she ran a hand over his hair.

"David," she said softly, "David, it's time to get up." He stirred only slightly, burrowing deeper into the pillows, hunching the covers up over his head.

*He's exhausted,* she thought. *These last two weeks have been so hard on him. I'd love to just let him sleep.*

But that wouldn't be fair to Hutch. And if she yielded to temptation and let him sleep, when he did wake up it would only upset him and make him feel even guiltier than he already did.

She rubbed her face, not wanting to think about that, but unable to escape it. She'd hoped so hard that there might be a chance, any chance, that he would still have feelings for her. The fact that he did was almost too good to be true. She'd promised herself, the night he'd told her of his relationship with Hutch, that she would accept any small measure of caring he could spare. And really, he was giving her far more than she ever expected. Far more than he should.

*Let him go. This is tearing him apart. When he's with you, he's racked with guilt because he's hurting Hutch. When he's with Hutch, he agonizes because he's not with you. All your love for him has ever done is hurt him. End it now. Kiss him goodbye.*

She stroked his hair again and he sighed wearily, then rolled over. Blinking sleepily, he appeared confused for a moment, then focused on her face. Then he smiled and reached for her and her resolution to leave him fled.

"Rosey," he breathed, pulling her into his arms, finding her mouth with his. "Rosey...."

"You told me to get you up before ten," she reminded him. At this instant there was only the two of them, him embracing her, his body warm with sleep in her bed. When he was looking at her like this, he was the only thing in her world. She had to be honest with herself. She'd never be able to walk away from him again.

He made a sound of regret deep in his throat and hugged her tighter. "You're wearing me out, Rosey," he teased.

*Not me,* she thought, but clamped it tight behind her teeth. *You're wearing yourself out trying to make us both happy, when that's impossible as long as we have to share you.*

"I made you coffee, and brought you some pastry," she said instead as he nestled against her neck, kissing her gently along the column of her throat. She felt goose bumps flush down her spine, and felt that deep surge of gratitude she had whenever he took her in his arms. She was so lucky to get this second chance with him. She wasn't about to quibble about the details.

He turned and glanced at the clock. With a reluctant sigh, he pulled away from her and sat up, swinging his bare legs over the edge of the bed. He drank the coffee and took a healthy bite of
the pastry. "Mmmm. Just what a guy needs to get going. Some sugar from his honey." He leaned over and planted a wet, sticky kiss on her cheek. "What'll you be doing today?"

*After spending the night without you?*

She pulled her mind away from that. The bed would still be warm where he lay, and his scent was on the sheets, the pillow. She'd curl up in his spot, soak up his warmth and fragrance, and sleep soundly, if alone.

"I'm still doing the rounds of galleries with the new pottery. I'm getting some decent offers, but nothing sounds quite right yet. I'm optimistic. I figure if the art dealers don't make me happy, I can always open another shop."

He nodded. It amazed her how attentive he was to her when she knew he was so distracted. When they were together, he worked hard at pleasing her, making her his focus, giving her all he could. She knew he had to be the same when he was with Hutch. She couldn't imagine the toll it was taking on him and it worried her. That and...

"What's the matter?" he said suddenly, lifting her chin.

She tensed, sorry that she'd let her mind wander, that he'd seen her concerns on her face. She smiled. "Nothing...just trying to remember what appointments...."

"Rosey," he said warningly. "I promised you I'd be honest about everything, and I have. That goes both ways. What's the matter?"

She looked away from him, feeling guilty. "I'm sorry. I'm just worried about you. You're being pulled in too many directions. And I'm to blame. I'm worried about the affect it might have on you...on the job. And I'm worried about Hutch, too. You depend on him at work, you need him to be there for you. If you're both distracted.... If anything happened to either of you because of me...."

"Rosey, don't," he said, pulling her into his arms. "Don't do this to yourself. If anyone's to blame, it's me. I'm sorry I'm putting you through this. But right now, it's the only way I can handle it. It won't be like this forever. I promise."

She shuddered, hearing the tension in his voice that he couldn't mask. She knew he hated it when she brought up her concerns about his safety, about Hutch's state of mind. But she couldn't help but wonder, when it stopped being like *this* where would she be? Gone out of his life? Hutch had been close to him for over a decade. How could she compete with that? Especially when she felt she had no right to.

"Don't worry, honey. Hutch and I work like a well-oiled machine, and nothing can change that. We've been doing it for too long." He pushed the hair back from her face and made her look at him. "Hey, that question I asked you over dinner. You never answered me. Can you answer me now?"

Her chest tightened with emotion. "David, it's a little early to worry about these things, isn't it?"
"C'mon Rosey, quit hedging. Just tell me. I...I need to know. One way or the other."

She sighed, unable to deny him anything. "My feelings haven't changed over the last two years. Sure, I'd love to have children some day. My family life was so strong with my parents, I'd love to give that to a child of my own."

*Is this the question that helps you decide?* she wondered. A lot of men never wanted children, didn't want the responsibility, and shied away from women who did. She tried not to think about the fact that his relationship with Hutch would more than likely preclude children. Was that a relief to him?

He grinned at her, and the sun came out in his eyes. "That's my girl. Beautiful, inside and out." He glanced at the clock and his smile faded a bit. "Will you call me today?"

She nodded. Same time every day. When Hutch left to get their lunch. Fifteen minutes before he returned.

"I think this stakeout's gonna last the rest of my career," he groused as he pulled away from her and gathered up his discarded clothes. "We might be on nights next week. Dobey keeps threatening us with it, then changes his mind. I think he's holding us out in case our target shows. He's not a night owl, so putting us on graveyard would really be a waste. If we go on nights, I'll let you know. But for now, everything's the same. Call me at lunch. And I'll see you at 6:00."

She nodded. They had dinner together every night. Lunch with Hutch. Dinner with her. Everything fair and square. She watched him take his clothes into the bathroom with him and listened as he turned the water on. They never showered together. Once he left the bed and stepped into the bathroom, he started pulling away from her, getting ready to go back to Hutch. And she had to let him go. It was only fair.

*Take every day, every moment as it comes. It's a gift, any chance to be with him. For however long it lasts. Take it, and be grateful.*

She hugged herself and listened to the shower running. When they had first met he used to sing in the shower, unless she was in there with him. But he didn't sing in the shower anymore.

When he was done washing, he'd dress in there, come out, put on his holster, and then kiss her on the cheek. He'd leave without a backward glance as if it were hard for him to do so. Yet, there was an urgency about him, once he left the shower. As if he were already on borrowed time, trying to catch up.

How long did he think he could keep this up? She didn't know, but however long it was, she'd just have to wait it out.

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"How long do you think you can keep this up?" Hutch asked softly. He was sitting in the chair beside the window where he could face Starsky as his partner peered through the scope at the target apartment. The apartment wasn't directly across the way, since the feds deemed that too
dangerous with Barstow. It was actually down one flight and over to the right, which required that they observe it at an odd angle, which was even more tiring than usual. The feds had wired several of the other apartments where Barstow was expected to squat. They had tiny cameras, microphones, the works, set up in their stakeout locations. But the two apartments Dobey's men were staking out were long shots, so they didn't have approval yet for more sophisticated equipment.

"Keep what up?" Starsky asked neutrally, one eye fastened to the eyepiece. He moved his hand to the camera, hesitated, then moved it away. "False alarm."

_No kidding_, thought Hutch. The last confirmed sighting had placed Barstow somewhere in southern California. Latest word was that he wasn't due back for at least another week. Starsky was just avoiding eye contact with him.

Hutch paused before saying anything else. He was careful these days, about what he said, what he did, how he reacted. "How long do you think you can keep trying to please both of us?"

Starsky sighed, a soft, muted sound. "You tell me. You're not happy?"

Hutch didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Starsky pulled away from the scope. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." They were both being so careful.

"I've been thinking," Hutch said.


Hutch ignored the jibe. "The two of you only had a few days together that first time." He was impressed with how blithely he was discussing this, and hoped Starsky was impressed, too. It was costing enough. "You barely got to know each other. Everything you have between you is based on those few days."

Starsky shifted uncomfortably, but he couldn't leave the scope, couldn't storm around the room, couldn't knock things over the way Hutch knew he wanted to. Starsky hated it when Hutch brought Rosey into the conversation. If Starsky had his way, she would never be mentioned. Hutch suspected he was the same when he was with her.

What Starsky wanted, for the times when they were together, was just that, for them to be _together_, for them to pretend Rosey didn't exist. He wanted Hutch to pretend that when he went away for hours every evening that he was just _out_, somewhere, doing something. He wanted Hutch not to notice that he came home freshly showered every time, his clothes subtly rearranged. He wanted Hutch not to question why he was so wired, so distraught as he climbed into Hutch's bed and made love to him. But each night had the distinct aura of farewell about it, and lately, the scent of roses clung to the air -- yellow ones.
Hutch was about at his limit, but he wasn't willing to say that. Wasn't willing to complain. Or protest. He suspected that whoever griped the most would lose and he was determined that wouldn't be him.

Maybe he wouldn't complain, but his body sure could. Last night, for the first time since Vanessa had left him, Hutch had trouble getting it up. It threw Starsky into a panic.

He wondered, not for the first time, if Starsky insisted Rosey maintain the same fantasy when he was with her. Did he make her pretend Hutch didn't exist? Did he expect her to bank her resentment at sleeping alone every night? Hutch wondered if she was as uncooperative as he was.

"You trying to make a point?" Starsky asked, focused on the scope, but Hutch could hear his tension.

"Yeah," Hutch said, sitting back in the chair, forcing his body to relax in the hopes that his mind would follow. "We've had years to build our relationship. You're giving her moments. It's not really fair. You need to get to know her better. You need to spend more time with her."

Starsky pushed the scope aside and glared at Hutch. "You're throwing me out? Is that it? You're making my decisions for me -- ?" The tendons stood out on his neck.

Hutch lowered his tone. "Of course not. Relax, will ya? I'm just trying to be fair."

"So am I," he protested, sounding miserable. "You think it's easy?"

"I know it's not," Hutch murmured, reaching over, grasping the back of Starsky's neck. "It's toughest on you. I know that. And you're trying so hard. But you can't keep going like this, trying to love us both. None of us are happy, least of all you."

Starsky's color drained as he sagged against the pressure of Hutch's comforting hand. "I don't know. I just don't -- "

"Look, I'm being selfish," Hutch insisted with a false smile. "I figure, she's good for a week with you at best. After she has to pick up after you for the fortieth time, or re-cap the toothpaste tube twice a day, or listen to hours of your off-key singing -- "

Starsky looked affronted. "Who's off-key?"

Hutch had to grin. "I figure, she'll throw in the towel and send you back to me with bows on." The grin faded. He just couldn't keep it in place. "You owe it to both of us to find out how deep your feelings run. You can't do that by visiting. And you owe it to me to find the answers, so we can move forward. In whatever direction we're going to go."

Starsky refused to cooperate. "What are you saying? Don't come home? Sleep.... Sleep somewhere else? Is that what you want?"
Hutch held onto his fraying temper with bloody fingertips. *What I want is for her to look at you and realize she doesn't really love you. What I want is for you to roll over some evening and realize she bores you. What I want is never gonna happen.*

"This is unreal," Starsky muttered to himself, while fiddling with the scope. "I got her on one hand worryin' about you -- "

Hutch snapped out of his agonizing long enough to focus on Starsky's ramblings.

" -- and you on the other hand wanting to be fair to her -- "

"Back up," Hutch ordered. "What do you mean, she's worried about me?"

"She's worried about our partnership," Starsky said impatiently. "She's worried you'll be too distracted by--by all *this*. She's worried something will happen to you, to me, while we're working, 'cause she disrupted things between us. She keeps bringing it up. And every time she does, I just get pissed, cause I'm worried about you, too, and -- "

*Isn't that nice? Everyone's worried about Hutch.*

"We promised each other after Kira we'd never let this kind of stuff interfere with the job again, didn't we?" Hutch reminded him.

Starsky nodded, not looking at him, pretending to focus the scope.

"I think we're doing pretty good, considering," Hutch said evenly. "We're on time mostly. Our reports are clear and clean. We're doing the job. I'm comfortable with our performance -- "

"Will you knock it off!" Starsky said too loudly, then clapped a hand over his mouth as if that were the only way he could control it. He got a grip on his temper, then lowered his hand and his voice. "Just stop it, Hutch. I don't know how much more of this 'reasonable and understanding' bit I can take."

*That's good. 'Cause I don't know how much I've got left in me. He didn't say anything. He couldn't.*

After a few minutes of silence, Starsky reached out his hand. Without hesitation, Hutch took it and they gripped each other, making that connection, holding on to it.

Their eyes met, saying everything.

Finally, they released their hold at the same time. The silence stretched as Starsky went back to the scope.

Hutch broke it first. He wanted this resolved, needed it resolved. Even though the resolution itself might kill him. "I think you should start staying with her. You know, either at your place or hers."
Starsky didn't answer for a long time, then finally he said, "All right. If that's what you want." His voice was ragged.

Hutch had to look away. *That's hardly what I want, but I know it's what you need.*

Quietly, as if he expected to be refused, Starsky asked, "Can I still pick you up for work in the morning?"

Hutch's heart twisted. "I'm countin' on it, partner."

"Okay."

And as simply as that, Hutch started sleeping alone.

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Hutch leaned against the interrogation room door and tried to focus on the problem at hand. But it was hard to with Starsky strutting back and forth in front of the suspect, his body coiled with tension, his ass and thighs looking sculpted in his tight, frayed jeans. This was Starsky's element, the interrogation room, and he was deep into his "bad cop" persona. To Hutch's eyes, his performance only added to his desirability. They'd been trying to pull some information out of this weasel for half an hour. The room was hot. Hutch was tired. He wasn't sleeping well.

Starsky strolled across the room again. He looked cool, collected, contained -- and entirely too well rested. Hutch pulled his gaze away from his partner and stared silently at the suspect.

"Just 'cause I was in the same cell as Barstow 10 years ago," the suspect whined, "doesn't mean I have any idea where he's at now!"

Starsky prowled up to man and leaned forward on the table, invading his space. "You know something, Jake. You know something about Barstow's plans or you wouldn't be sweating like you are."

"I know Barstow's crazy, I know that," Jake agreed. "And I know if he even hears about me sittin' in this room with you I'm a dead man. There ain't any kinda deal you can offer me, man. That guy's crazy. He'd kill me just for the fun of it."

Without giving it a single conscious thought, Hutch exploded. He pushed off the wall, covered the room in two strides, and had Jake by the collar before Starsky could even react. He hauled the small man up bodily and shoved him against the wall, aware that Jake's feet weren't touching the ground. An unquenchable rage boiled up inside him; releasing it felt incredibly good.

Hutch got nose to nose with the terrified suspect, pinning him to the wall with his larger, more powerful, body. "You seem to think you're not in just as much danger here. Think again, buddy. Barstow's killing anyone who crosses his path: women, children, innocent law-abiding citizens. Do you really think anyone cares about the life of a two-bit thief who was stupid enough to maintain ties with the FBI's Number One Most Wanted. Thanks to Barstow, we don't have the
man-power to process the accident reports we'd have to fill out if you suddenly fell and broke your neck." He shook the man hard to make his point.

Dimly he was aware of Starsky's shocked expression. This wasn't part of any scenario they'd ever worked out.

Finally, Starsky responded, grabbing hold of Hutch's arm and trying to haul him off. "Hutch, don't! Come on, ease up!"

Jake was having trouble breathing, his face bright red. He kicked at the air feebly. "Wait! Wait!" he squealed, obviously terrified. It was clear by the look in his eyes that he saw the end of his life mirrored in Hutch's unblinking stare. "Okay, I'll tell you. I'll tell you whatever I know. But you gotta protect me. You gotta keep me safe from him."

Hutch dropped the snitch abruptly and he collapsed on the floor gasping. Starsky leaned over, helped the man up and put him in a chair.

"I know where he holds up when he goes north. It's a small shack near a little town -- "

"Sit tight," Starsky said comfortingly to the man. "We'll need a stenographer. You want something to drink? You hungry?"

Jake nodded, glancing nervously at Hutch the whole time.

Starsky went to the door, and pulled the uniform outside it into the room. "Baby-sit him while we get some refreshments," he said to the cop, then grabbed Hutch by the sleeve and towed him out into the hall.

The spontaneous rage left Hutch as rapidly as it had appeared. He deflated. He pushed hair out of his eyes as Starsky hauled him around and got ready to read him the riot act. This wasn't the way they worked together and Hutch knew damned well he'd hear about it.

But before Starsky could start on him Epstein and another fed left the observation room next door and joined them in the hall.

"That was some performance, Hutchinson," Epstein said, and Hutch could hear the admiration in his voice. "You even had me convinced you were gonna off the little creep. He looked about ready to wet himself."

Starsky's eyes were moving back and forth between Hutch and Epstein, and Hutch realized Epstein's assumption that that had all been part of their act would pretty much take the sting out of Starsky's reproach.

"This could be the first good break we've had in weeks," Epstein said. "You guys have done your part. I'll have lunch brought in, and get the steno." He patted Hutch on the arm. "Good work. Dobey was right about you two. You're unconventional, but you get results."
Hutch almost flinched. The adrenalin surge left him drained. His hands were shaking. He nodded a thank you at Epstein and moved off to the squadroom, Starsky following a beat later.

Once at his desk, a gulp of bitter coffee helped him focus. He sat down, incredibly weary. A phone ringing incessantly behind him worked on his nerves like a nail file. He had an impulse to turn around, rip it from its moorings and haul it across the room. Overturning a few desks suddenly seemed like a real mood-elevator.

Then Starsky entered and just looked at him. Hutch glanced at his expression and saw something there he didn't think he could tolerate. Sympathy. Sorrow. Guilt.

_Not now. Don't feel sorry for me right now. I can't handle it._

Starsky stood by the double doors, clearly trying to find the right thing to say.

"Hutchinson!" the captain's bellow was unexpected, and made Hutch's stomach knot. He covered his face with a hand and had a nearly uncontrollably urge to hide under his desk.

Starsky, looking as startled as Hutch felt, walked toward the Captain, as if ready to intercede for his stressed-out partner.

Dobey, standing in the doorway to his office, pointed a finger in Starsky's direction. "Is your name Hutchinson?"

"Sometimes," Starsky insisted.

"Outta here," Dobey growled, jerking his thumb in the direction Starsky had been coming from.

Hutch glanced at his partner and shrugged. A worried look lingered on his face, but finally Starsky backed off.

"You," Dobey barked, pointing at Hutch. "With me. Now!"

Hutch pushed himself out of the chair and headed for his superior's office. He wondered if Epstein had called him about the interrogation, but then dismissed that. Epstein had clearly admired Hutch's results. He was busy with the snitch now. He wouldn't have bothered calling Dobey. If not that...

_What does he want? Homework's done. Filed on time. It's not our fault that hit man is a no-show. We're sitting on our asses all day on the taxpayer's dime, trying not to talk about what's really on our mind._

He entered Dobey's office, only to see the big man heading out the opposite door into the hallway.

Dobey crooked a finger at him. "Not here. Follow me."

_What now?_ Hutch wondered, trailing after his boss. "How about a clue, Cap?"
"You'll find out soon enough," Dobey insisted, as they entered an elevator.

Hutch shut his mouth and waited. He'd become pretty good at both lately.

They walked through Parker Center's lobby and out into the garage. Dobey approached his big sedan and climbed in. Clearly, Hutch was supposed to get into the passenger side. He hesitated.

*I haven't been in this car since the shooting*, he realized, a cold stone lodging in his gut. He wasn't sure he could do it, but then Dobey hit the horn one short blast, making him jump. He reached for the handle and opened the door.

*It's just a car*, he insisted, as he slid into the passenger seat and fumbled with the seat belt, just to hide his distress. *A car.... The car I used that night. The car I rammed into the assassin's car just to vent my rage. The car I used to find Jenny Brown. The car that sped me to the hospital when Starsky's heart stopped* --

"There's a couple of things we've got to talk about, Hutch," Dobey said gruffly as he pulled smoothly out of the lot, "but I didn't feel comfortable discussing them at Parker."

Hutch really didn't hear him. Instead, he found himself staring at the door he was leaning against, clinging to the seat belt strap he'd fastened, as though he might fall out. *I leaned against this window when Dobey drove me to the hospital. I think I was crying. Telling Dobey I knew Starsky was gonna die. That he was gonna die before I told him how I loved him*. He spotted a small, brownish stain that had impregnated the vinyl of the car's door, and picked at it. *Starsky's blood was on me. On my hands. My mouth* --

The car came to a halt and Hutch looked up, confused. They were at some park. There were trees, grass, a bit of beach. Hutch didn't recognize it, but it was lovely, peaceful.

"Hutch," Dobey said quietly. His tone had changed completely. It was no longer gruff, but gentle. Full of caring.

Hutch froze, every self-protective instinct on hyper alert. This was dangerous. Way too dangerous. "What's up, Cap?"

"That's what I want to know," Dobey said evenly. "Something's going on between you and your partner and I want to know what it is."

Hutch stiffened in the seat. "Like what? Our work's been good. We've been doing the job. It's boring as hell, but me and Starsk--"

"Don't run that ol' okey-doke on me, Hutch," Dobey insisted. "Save it for the folks who don't know you. Since Starsky's recovered, you two have been better than ever, working like men 10 years younger. You've been quick, smart, fast -- and happy. That's the part that's missing now. Oh, you're still together, still synchronized, but --"

Dobey paused, and Hutch felt a wave of near panic threaten to capsize him.
"Son," he said in that same quiet tone, "I remember last year all too well. I thought I was gonna lose you. You were a burned-out cop, and believe me, I've seen my share. When Starsky was shot I thought I'd lost you both, because I knew, in the condition you were in, you couldn't survive his death. No one was more surprised than I was when both of you came out shining. But the shine's dimming, Hutch. Something's going on. I didn't interfere that year you were fading away because I just didn't know what to do, couldn't figure out the cause. I can't let that happen again. I know too much now. I know you. Talk to me."

Hutch wet his mouth and realized his hands were shaking. Talk to you? The temptation was nearly overwhelming. He'd carefully avoided Huggy's place exactly for this reason. He suspected Starsky might be confiding in Huggy; in fact, he'd hoped he was. He wanted Starsky to have someone to say the things to he couldn't say to Hutch or to Rosey. Everyone needed someone to talk to.

The words were out before he realized it. "Rosey Malone's back in town." He sounded so calm it surprised him. Like it was no big deal.

Dobey sat back in the driver's seat. "I see."

Do you? Hutch remembered Starsky's confidence that Dobey knew all, that he didn't care.

Dobey's large, dark eyes scanned his face. "Is he -- ?"

"Seeing her? Yes. In fact, he's staying with her." They were just words, after all. With a little effort, you could get them out without any inflection at all.

Dobey looked upset. "He's staying with her? I thought -- "

"He started staying with her about a week ago. We both thought it would be best. He-he needs to -- " How much to say? How much to admit? " -- decide how he feels -- about her -- " That's enough. Be careful.

"What about the way he feels about you? And the way you feel about him?"

Hutch suddenly felt trapped, as if the strap he'd fastened around his body just to have something to do with his hands had grown so tight he couldn't escape if he wanted to. He felt a headache bloom behind his right eye. He stared at Dobey. "Should we really be having this conversation, Captain?"

Dobey laid a heavy hand on Hutch's shoulder. "There was a time, long ago, when you two were just another pair of detectives -- and difficult ones -- working under me. But over the years, you know damn well you both have come to mean much more. It's not my place to judge the way you live and the way you love, Hutch. That's God's job. My place is simply to be your friend -- not just your captain. I want you to know I'm here for you. Not to judge. Just to listen. Offer what advice I can. I think you need that, Hutch."
Hutch was so used to dealing with this alone he didn't know how to react. He looked away and finally blurted, "We're trying to work it out. The partnership, the friendship, that's the most critical thing. I think we can hang onto that, get through this and come out the other side."

"So, you've given up already?"

Hutch's head swiveled around, his temper right up front. "Given up? Given up what? A dream? A fantasy? Of a life lived in the shadows? Look, Cap, let's be realistic. Whatever happened between me and Starsky, whatever we shared for as long as we shared it -- a lot of it was a result of the shooting. That's over now. He's recovered. And if I did anything to contribute to that recovery, then I'm grateful. But now -- now it's time to go back to the real world, to real life. And in real life, men fall in love with women. They get married. They have children."

He forced himself to calm down, to lower his voice. This man was his friend, had become part of his and Starsky's odd little family. He didn't deserve to be shouted at in his own car because he cared. Hutch rubbed a hand over his face, sagging in the seat.

When he spoke again, even he could hear the weariness in his own voice. "I can't even put the name to what Starsky and I shared. I can't even say the words. With Rosey, he can have a real life. Marriage. A wife. A family. All the things he's always wanted. All the words anyone can say. Those are things I can't give him, could never give him. Not in a life lived in the shadows. Rosey can give him something real. She loves him. How can I deny him that?"

"Are you so sure it's what he wants?" Dobey pressed.

Hutch closed his eyes. "He's pursued it and talked about it ever since I've met him. After Vanessa, and Jeannie, and Gillian, and Abbey -- I gave up on it, threw in the towel. I knew it was someone else's dream. But he never did, not really. Just kind of put it on the shelf -- put it there in deference to me. Now, it's in reach again for him. I love him, Cap. His happiness is the only thing I want."

Dobey didn't say anything for a few moments, giving Hutch time to regroup. Finally, he said, "You talk a good line, Hutch. But, I don't know. Will you be able to dance at his wedding? Be his best man? Be the favorite uncle to his children?"

Hutch shut his eyes. He had never asked himself those questions. Worked hard never to even think about them. After a while he whispered, "I have to. I'm his best friend. His best friend in the whole world."

They sat in silence together, watching the water lap at the beach, watching the trees dance in the breeze.

"There'll be another lieutenant's test coming up in a few months," Dobey told him.

Hutch looked over at him. "So?"

"Think about it, Hutch. Things are changing for you. Maybe it's time to move on -- "
"And leave Starsky on the streets, alone?" Hutch said angrily. "No way!"

"He wouldn't be alone. I'd find him another partner. With his experience and background, he should be training rookies, anyway. Be sensible, Hutch. Starsky's a street cop. It's what he is, what he loves. You loved it once, too, but those days are gone. You only came back to the streets because Starsky did. You don't love the job, you love him."

"That hasn't changed, Cap," Hutch said brazenly. "I still love him. Whether he's living with me or Rosey Malone, I still love him. He's my partner; that makes him mine to protect, to back-up, to look out for. And, if he stays with her, marries her, then-- then," he paused, realizing he was about to fall into a stuttering fit. He swallowed, slowed down. "Well, then, all I'll have left is the partnership. If it's all right with you, I'd like to hang onto that."

"You feel that way now," Dobey said, still in that same quiet tone, "but how will you feel as the years go by? Picking him up at home. Watching her kiss him good-bye. Watching as her body changes with pregnancy."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Hutch snapped, furious. He could feel his face turning beet red.

"Because the future you want for Starsky is all well and good. But where are your dreams for your own? You talk about a shadow life. Is that what you're going to settle for -- being the second-most important person in his life? You deserve a life, too, Hutch. A life where you have your own ambitions, your own accomplishments -- and sooner or later, someone to love. It wouldn't stop you from being friends with him, from being able to support him when he needs you. But it wouldn't destroy you either. What you're planning -- being a reliable piece of furniture in Starsky's background -- that's no life for a man like you. Not with your brains, your abilities. If you're convinced you have to give him up for his own good -- and that's a greater sacrifice than I could have ever made for Edith -- then, fine. Do it. But find something for yourself. Or the shadow life you're planning on will destroy you. And if you think that won't hurt Starsky more than giving up your partnership, then you don't know him nearly as well as I thought you did."

Hutch and Dobey stared at each other for a long time, then finally, without saying anything else, Dobey turned the key in the ignition and drove them back to Parker Center.

They returned to the squad room in silence, both of them entering one behind the other. Starsky sat at their shared desk and watched the two men file in, not speaking. Dobey never even glanced at him as he went into his office and shut the door.

Finally, as Hutch sat and picked up the file he'd been working on when Dobey summoned him and pretended to study it, Starsky leaned across the desk and murmured, "What the hell was all that about? Where'd you two go, anyway?"

Hutch lowered the file and stared at the man he loved but couldn't have. The expression he wore caused Starsky to move back in surprise. "It was private," he said firmly, in a tone he knew Starsky would recognize. "Don't ask me about it again."
Then he went back to the file and proceeded to stare at it for the next two hours until their shift ended.

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Eleven thirty in the morning, Starsky thought, as he walked into the Pits alone, and I'm thinking about having a drink. Not good, Davey-boy. He sat at the darkest end of the bar, snagged a basket full of peanuts, and waited for Huggy to get off the phone.

"I don't wanna hear no more never mind," Huggy was telling the person on the other end of the line. "I need that delivery by three o'clock. Not four, and certainly not five. By three. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. That's right! Solid." He banged the phone down in annoyance and spun on Starsky, who was currently his only customer. "And I don't wanna hear no more never mind from you, either," he said, jabbing a finger in his direction.

Starsky stopped in mid-chew. "Excuse me?"

"I tol' you the last time you was in here, I haven't heard nothin' 'bout that maniac hit man, I don't know nothin' bout the man, and I ain't gonna hear nothin' 'bout him now or ever, ever. So you can just tool your narrow butt elsewhere for information on that crazy motha --"

"How 'bout slowin' down there, buddy," Starsky said quietly. "Ever think I might'a just dropped in for some food? Or a drink? Or maybe just the pleasure of your company?"


"So, where's the rest of it?" Starsky asked, with wry smile.

Huggy sobered and shook his head. "It was too cutting. You ain't up for it these days."

Starsky narrowed his eyes. Huggy was the one person he knew who he could level with. He wasn't ready to have that relationship change also. "I ain't up for it? Spill it, Bear."

Huggy shook his head and looked sheepish. "I was about to say, you've got all the pleasurable company you can stand right about now without me --"

Starsky sagged in the seat. "Oh, now you're gonna do the saints and martyr rag on me, too, huh? I'm bein' killed with kindness on every front!"

Huggy's warm eyes softened. "How you holdin' up there, old man?"

"Physically, just fine, since Hutch threw me out about a week ago."

Huggy looked at him suspiciously. "He threw you out -- ?"

Starsky shook his head. "No, of course not. He suggested it out of fairness to Rosey. I mean, I think he was right, but -- " Starsky shook his head. "Huggy, do you remember Gillian?"
It was a wonder anyone could remember any details of the disastrous chain of Hutch's love affairs, but Huggy nodded.

"She said to me once, the day she died in fact, that Hutch was so lucky, to have two people love him so much -- meanin' her and me." Starsky shook his head, remembering that day. "Now, I don't know.. But isn't this supposed to be every man's fantasy, to have two lovers?"

Huggy patted Starsky's arm. "That's why they call it a fantasy, Starsky. Reality's a whole 'nother thing."

Starsky looked at his friend, knowing the emotional stress was clear on his face. "How about that drink, Huggy?"

"One root beer comin' right up," Huggy agreed cheerily.

"That wasn't the beer I had in mind," Starsky protested as Huggy ignored him.

"Ain't'chu on duty?" Huggy asked, as he filled a mug with the sweet soda.

"Not 'til tonight," Starsky insisted. "Dobey finally switched us to nights, for this week at least."

Huggy put the root beer down in front of him. "It's eleven-thirty in the morning. I've never known you to start drinkin' so early. I'll make you some lunch. It goes well with root beer."

Starsky nodded and sipped at the soda. "Sure. Everyone else knows what's best for me, why should you be any different?"

Huggy leaned over the bar. "If you're hurtin' that bad over Hutch, why don't you just go back?"

"'Cause he's right," Starsky murmured. "When I first fell for Rosey we didn't have any time to get to know each other, find out what we were about. How can I decide what I gotta decide when I hardly know her?"

Huggy nodded. "Has it helped any, stayin' with her and not bein' with Hutch?"

"Only in that I'm gettin' more sleep," Starsky complained. "When I'm with Rosey I can barely think about anything but Hutch. But when I'm working besides Hutch, then she's constantly on my mind. I feel like I'm goin' nuts. I miss sleeping with Hutch. But when I was still leaving her alone to go back to his place -- "

Huggy patted his arm again. "I know. I know. Believe me, Starsky, I don't envy you."

"At least I got you to talk to, Hug. I don't think Hutch is talking to anyone. I think he's keeping it all inside. He's not sayin' anything to you, is he?"

Huggy shook his head. "I haven't even seen him much, tell you the truth."
"He said he was here for dinner the other night. I was kinda nagging him about getting out, doin' stuff, not just playing with his plants all the time, alone -- He was here, wasn't he? He said he met some girl -- ?"

"Yeah, he was here," Huggy said noncommittally.

Starsky stared at his friend. "He take her home with him? The girl?"

Huggy drew back. "What do you wanna hear? 'Yeah, he took her outta here,' so you can assuage some of your guilt about not sleepin' with him, or you wanna hear 'no, he didn't,' so you can be glad he hasn't found anyone else yet?"

Starsky's temper flared; he had to stop himself from raising his voice. "I-I just care about him, Hug. You think this is easy on me? Thinkin' about him being alone? Knowing it's my fault? I don't want him to be alone all the time."

Huggy just watched Starsky, his expression skeptical. "Oh, yeah? Well, how 'bout if I tol' you Hutch walked outta here that night with a little brunette dude on his arm. Just how would you feel about that?"

To his surprise, Starsky felt a hot flush of jealousy surge through him. "A guy? Hutch, did that...?"

"I didn't say he did," Huggy reminded Starsky. "I asked how'd you feel if he did."

Starsky blinked, his heart rate pounding. "I, well, uh -- if that's what Hutch really wants -- "

"Don't force yourself," Huggy warned. "Your hypocrisy just might rise up and choke you. Hutch left outta here alone the other night. Yeah, he chatted up this cute little girl, but only because she wouldn't leave him be. Not that it's any of your business. Hutch ain't ready to start seein' anyone, Starsky. Not yet anyhow. He's still waitin' on you."

Starsky ran a hand through his hair. "It always comes down to that, don't it? Waitin' on me. Waiting for something I can't do. I can't help the way I feel, Huggy. I can't help the fact that I love them both. I have dreams where we make our own little three person commune, and all live together somewhere, and everyone's happy."

"And you die of old age in six months," Huggy interjected. "Smiling, but dead, and shriveled up to boot."

Starsky laughed bitterly. "When Hutch told me to go stay with Rosey, I thought, maybe he's right, maybe in a week or so I'll feel trapped, like I have in a lotta relationships. Maybe I'll miss Hutch so much, it'll all become clear to me. But, being with her -- it's just what I thought it would be. She's fine and good, and loving -- and she puts up with all my craziness, the wild hours, the strange shifts -- "

" -- Your other lover callin' you 'bout the job," Huggy reminded him, "and showin' up at the door to take you to work -- "
Starsky flinched. "Yeah, the phone calls have happened, but so far, I've made sure Hutch never had to come get me. I figure enough's enough, they don't need to have breakfast together. But whenever they have had to talk on the phone, they're both so nice to each other I can barely stand it. Some days I wish someone would just shoot me and put me outta my misery."

"Starsky," Huggy said quietly, "you gonna marry this girl?"

Starsky felt the familiar choking sensation he got every time he even thought about that. "Truth is, I wanna, Hug. She deserves that, doesn't she? That's what you're supposed to do when you love a woman. Marry her. Make a family with her. But every time I think about it, I think, who's gonna be my best man? Hutch? How can I ask him to do that? How can I ask him to stand by me while I make vows with Rosey? I already made vows with Hutch. To serve and protect. Vows sealed in blood. His blood. My blood." He wound down and sighed heavily. "Talkin' to your bartender's supposed to help, Hug."

Huggy looked toward the front door and Starsky turned also as it swung open. Rosey walked in hesitantly, then seeing him, smiled. He felt his heart lift, just like it always did when he saw her.

"Hey, honey," he said softly, and held out his arm. She came to him, let him embrace her, and kissed him.

"If it isn't the lovely Miss Malone," Huggy said by way of greeting. "You grace my humble establishment. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She laughed lightly, grinning at the bartender. "Nice to see you, too, Huggy. I had business this morning, so David and I planned to meet here for lunch."

"And you thought I just wanted to take advantage of you," Starsky admonished his friend.

"Will wonders never cease," Huggy said sarcastically. "You actually came here for a meal. Well, before the lunch mob arrives, let me attend to that for you."

"Two specials, Hug," Starsky ordered. He nodded and went back to the kitchen. "Business meeting done so soon, Rosey?"

"Yes, and it went better than I could have hoped," she said excitedly as she slid onto the stool beside his. "David, the art dealer I met with this morning wants to agent all the Indian art I can supply. He'll agent it to some of the most exclusive Native art galleries in the city. That means I won't have to run a store myself, yet I'll be able to command much higher prices for each piece. Without the overhead of an individual shop, there'll be a better profit ratio to return to the village. Isn't that great?" She was grinning hugely, totally thrilled.

Her enthusiasm lit up his heart; it was impossible to be upset when she was like this. "That's terrific, honey. I'm proud of you. You must've struck a tough deal. Either that, or the guy took one look at you and fell in love."
"I don't think so," she assured him. "He's all agent. He never stopped fondling the pieces I brought him. I might as well have been invisible. Anyway, we made the deal. Now, all I have to do is supply him!"

Huggy returned with their meals, and for once it wasn't burgers. Starsky stared at the artfully made club sandwiches. "Well, aren't we expanding our repertoire?"

"Hey, I taught you that word," Huggy protested. "Don't go throwin' it back in my face!" He turned to Rosey. "I couldn't help overhearin' your conversation, lovely lady. Congratulations. Sounds like you made yourself a serious deal."

She nodded, still smiling. "It'll make a big difference in the small villages where I collect the art. Of course, with the volume he says he can move, I'll have to make a lot more trips back."

Starsky looked up from his plate. "So, like, what's a lot?"

She shrugged, thinking about it. "Maybe every other month, or at least every three months."

"For how long?" he asked.

"Two to three weeks should do it," she said matter-of-factly, taking a bite out of her sandwich.

Starsky thought about that. Two to three weeks out of every other month? She'll be gone, and I'll be spending eight to 12 hours alone with Hutch. I'll last two days without her before I'll be back in his bed. This won't work.

She must've put that together, too, because all of a sudden she stopped chewing and just looked at him. She put the sandwich down. "David, this is my work -- "

He nodded too quickly. "I know. I know. It's just -- a lot of traveling. But, I understand!"

It was becoming more frequent, times when they would hit this kind of impasse, where no one was willing to say what was hanging in the air between them. Rosey was determined not to act jealous or possessive in any way. Yet, Starsky knew it had to be hard on her as he went off with Hutch every day, sometimes for 12 hours or more. And because she wouldn't admit to her concerns, they couldn't talk about it, get it on the table. She'd reiterated over and over that he didn't have to promise her monogamy, not at this stage of their relationship. Yet he knew, because he knew her, that it worked on her. Knowing how much time he spent with Hutch. Alone. Intimate time. Secluded time.

Starsky blinked, trying to imagine Hutch as the "other" man and couldn't. It was too ridiculous. He could see Hutch drawing himself up with all his dignity if he even suspected....

The trouble was, he could also see how uncomfortable he and Hutch would be together as the days of Starsky's solitude stretched on and on.

"Maybe you could come with me," Rosey suggestion, toying with her sandwich, "you know, once in a while. Like a vacation."
Take a vacation, he suddenly thought, without Hutch? Of course, without Hutch, he told himself sharply. "Sure. We could do that. At least, once a year...."

They lapsed into an awkward silence, until Starsky took her chin and made her look at him. "It's your job, Rosey, what you do. I respect that. We'll make it work."

She nodded, then murmured, "I just didn't think, David, what it might mean to us. I'm so used to traveling, and --"

"It's okay," he reassured her, even though he didn't feel that confidence himself. He kissed her cheek. "We'll figure it out. Day by day."

She went back to her sandwich, picking at it. Starsky sighed. She needed a commitment from him. But that felt too much like rejecting Hutch and he just wasn't ready to do that, yet.

As he mulled his options over for the fortieth time that day, the door swung open with a bang and Hutch's voice called, "Starsky? Starsky, listen Dobey's on the warpath, he's gotten this lead about --"

Starsky spun on the barstool to face Hutch who was half in and half out of the door. Hutch had just come face to face with the fact that his partner was not alone.

Rosey had actually jumped when Hutch barged in, and now her face was suffused with color. She blinked rapidly, then, to her credit, recovered. "Hello, Hutch," she said softly, and made herself smile.

Hutch's reaction was nearly identical, which would have been amusing under any other circumstances. He released his grip on the door, forced himself to slow down, and approached her. "Hello Rosey," he said kindly. He smiled and kissed her on the cheek.

"How are you?" Rosey said softly, as if she couldn't stop herself from asking, for caring.

Hutch's smile was warm, if tinged with sadness. "I'm fine, Rosey. Really. I hope you are, too. It's nice to see you again."

That's right, Starsky realized. This was the first time they'd actually had to see each other since the meeting in the restaurant. That felt like years ago, but wasn't more than three weeks.

Seeing the two of them here together had a nearly overwhelming emotional affect on Starsky. He seesawed wildly between wanting to embrace them both and wanting to flee. He looked at Huggy, who had turned stone-faced, and for once had nothing to say. But Starsky's expression must've galvanized Huggy, because he leaned over and addressed Hutch.

"Are you here for lunch, sir, or just passing through? I'm having a run on my special of the day."

"Speaking of runs," Hutch said, all business now, "that's why I'm here." He looked at Starsky, guilt edging his eyes. "I've been calling around, trying to find you. When I saw the Torino out front -- Dobey's called us in. He's got this lead he wants us to chase down -- on Barstow -- "
"Right," Starsky said before Hutch had to scramble up any more explanations. He always sounded as if he thought no one would believe him. "I'm with you." He slid off the stool, and moved to leave with Hutch, but his partner just looked at him quizzically, then glanced at Rosey. Starsky flushed violently when he realized he hadn't even said good-bye to her, he was so eager to escape the awkward situation. He turned, took her by the shoulders and pressed a passionless kiss against her cheek. "I'll call you, Rosey. Don't know when I'll get free." He could barely make himself look at her, and felt color coursing through his face.

Ask Hutch to be my best man? When I can barely kiss the woman I love good-bye in front of him? Terrific.

He followed Hutch to the aging hulk he was currently using as transport and slid into the passenger's seat, dreading what was about to occur.

"Starsky, I'm sorry," Hutch said, even before he got the door closed. Hutch pulled away from the curb, and started driving, ostensibly, Starsky knew, so he wouldn't have to look at him. "I couldn't find you, and Dobey was screaming, and I saw the car -- "

"Hutch, it's okay! Stop apologizing. I'm sorry you had to run around after me like that. She had this business meeting and I figured she could meet me for lunch. But really, the Pits has always been our hangout. I should've considered...." He trailed off, finally out of words.

"It's not a problem, Starsk," Hutch said evenly. "I mean, we're partners. Rosey and I are going to have to get comfortable with each other sooner or later."

"Thanks for being so nice to her," Starsky said quietly, even as he wished, perversely that Hutch had acted like a total shit, so he could work up some resentment.

Hutch shrugged. "It's easy to be nice to her. She's a nice person. I hope I didn't make her too uncomfortable."

"No, no, I'm sure you didn't." The inane banter died down as they drove on. Finally, Starsky blurted, "She made some deal downtown with the moneyed art crowd. But it means a lot of travel. She'll be gone maybe every other month. For a coupla weeks at a time."

Hutch didn't say anything for an uncomfortably long moment, then finally he muttered, "Well, that's gonna be difficult, won't it?"

Not 'difficult on you,' Starsky noted. Just 'difficult.' Like on both of us? He stole a glance at his partner, knowing his worry was clear on his face and unable to do a thing about it. "You know as well as I do what's gonna happen while she's gone."

For one brief moment, Hutch tensed all over, and, without looking at Starsky, said in a low voice, "What's gonna happen, buddy, is you're gonna get reacquainted with your left hand."

His words, some of the first that showed any temperament, were like a slap, and took Starsky by surprise.
Apparently, they startled Hutch, too, because he sagged, blinking, as if trying to recover. Finally, he looked over, his eyes softening. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Look. We'll find a way to get through it. Somehow. I promise. I won't let you down."

So now it's your job to protect my virtue? Starsky thought incredulously. He was suddenly swamped with the urge to weep and turned to stare out the window to keep from doing that. How could anyone surrounded by so much love be so unhappy?
CHAPTER 5

"Starsky, get down, get down!"

He found his partner on the ground, his head nestled gently, incongruously, in the heavy wheel of the Torino.

Bullet holes stitched across Starsky's shirt.

Hutch heard sirens, people running all around. He heard Dobey bellowing for ambulances, medical assistance. Someone put a blanket over Starsky.

"Don't leave me," Hutch begged, leaning over his partner. "I'll do anything if you just don't leave me."

Tell him before you lose him. There's no time to waste. Hutch leaned down, his voice loud, clear. "I love you, Starsky. You can't leave me."

Starsky struggled to blink. He fixed his eyes on Hutch's. Did he hear? Did he understand?

Someone grabbed Hutch by the shoulders, someone with big, meaty hands. He heard Dobey's voice, and realized his captain was talking to him. "Easy, son. Let the paramedics get to your partner."

"Dammit, let go!" With sheer force, Hutch wrenched away from Dobey's grip, lunged at Starsky on the ground, pushing the obstructing bodies away.

Hutch pressed his mouth to Starsky's. Starsky gasped and drew the breath out of his body. That breath filled Starsky, inflated his lungs and gave him needed oxygen, needed strength. Without questioning this, Hutch's tongue slid between Starsky's parted lips, and he felt an electric shock of pleasure so sweet it was blinding. Starsky sighed, drawing air, drawing strength.

Then he was being torn away again as his brother cops obeyed their captain. Hutch fought but couldn't match the combined strength of all those men.

"Easy, Hutch, easy!" Dobey said, trying to pull his attention away from the frantically working paramedics. "You've gotta let them at him, Hutch!"

"You've got to let me go!" Starsky would die without his touch.

"Hutch, don't do this to yourself!" Dobey begged, pulling him farther away. "Everything's changed."

Hutch's blood ran cold. "What?"

"Somebody better call this guy's wife," one of the paramedics yelled. "We're losing him."
"NO!" Hutch shouted and nearly launched himself out of the imprisoning grip of the other cops. But they held him back. All he could see of Starsky were his legs where they rested unmoving against the ground.

"David!" a woman's voice rang out. A slender woman broke through the crowd, raced toward the paramedics. He couldn't see her clearly, but knew who she was. Could Rosey save him? If she could, Hutch would have to let her have him.

The paramedics stepped aside as she knelt beside Starsky. Hutch heard her begging him to open his eyes. She swore her love, and the pain in her voice sounded like Hutch's. Rosey, you've gotta save him. If you can, I'll let him go. I swear it. Just save him. For both of us.

One of the paramedics sat back on his heels. "I'm sorry, ma'am. We've lost him."

Rosey screamed and flung herself across his body.

Hutch exploded in rage and jerked free. "NO!" he shouted. "He can't die!" He bolted toward his partner.

Shoving the paramedics aside, he pushed past Rosey to grip Starsky's limp body. Ripping the covering blanket away, he pulled Starsky into his arms only to realize the body he was holding was nothing but a fleshless skeleton. He stared in horror at the death's head grinning up at him sightlessly. As he clutched Starsky's bony remains, the entire skeleton crumbled to dust in his arms and the wind carried the dust away.

Rosey wept. He still couldn't see her face.

Dobey's hand rested on his shoulder. "There's nothing left for you, Hutch. Face the truth. Take the lieutenant's test. It's the best thing for you to do."

Hutch opened his eyes with a gasp. His body was supine, star-fished across his bed, his arms and legs flailing like someone falling from a great height. The room was still dark, but Hutch's mind was traveling at 90-miles an hour. He sat up to catch his breath.

Starsky had never died in the dream before.

Hutch felt like someone who'd frequently dreamed of falling and finally impacted on the ground. He ached all over and was covered in sweat. His hands were trembling. It was as bad as experiencing it first hand.

Starsky! His need to connect with him was overwhelming; he lurched for the phone then stopped to think. Wait. What time is it? Part of him didn't care, but the rational side of him was finally waking up. It's 4:00 a.m. You can't call him now. Not over a dream. You're a big boy. Get up and have some milk. Shake it off.

The ringing of the phone startled him so much he almost yelled. He grabbed the receiver. "Starsk?"
It was a woman, sounding frantic. "Hutch? It's Rosey."

He was overwhelmed with irrational fear. "Where's Starsky? Is he all right? Is he?"

"I don't know what's happening to him, Hutch. I thought he was dreaming, but I can't wake him. He's gasping, like he's having a seizure. I'm scared -- "

"Put the phone to his ear! Do it now!"

He heard the sounds of the handset being manipulated against something. He tried to control the tremor in his voice as he spoke into the mouthpiece. Could he reach Starsky's subconscious through the telephone lines? "Starsky, don't die! Please, don't die." He knew he was really praying, and hoped that wouldn't scare Starsky. "Don't leave me, Starsky. Not after everything we've been through. I'll do anything if you just don't leave me."

He could hear Starsky gasp then take a deep, shuddering breath. Then another.

"Don't leave me! Stay with me, buddy. I'm here. I'll always be here for you."

Hutch put his mouth against the receiver. He was almost shouting, but knew that Starsky would have trouble hearing him as deep as he was into the nightmare. Distantly, he thought that Rosey would be able to hear him, too, but he couldn't care about that right now. "I love you, Starsky. You can't leave me. Come on, buddy. Come on back."

He heard Starsky moan softly, and wondered if he had opened his eyes yet. He could hear him panting and knew that his breathing was evening out at least. "I love you, Starsky. Never loved anyone else the way I love you. You believe me, don't you?"

If only I were there, Hutch thought painfully. He needed to kiss him, share his breath, bring him slowly back to the now. "You're still with me, Starsky. Don't give up. Hear my voice. You're alive. You're healthy. It's just a dream, babe. Come back to me. I love you, Starsky. I need you, babe. Don't leave me. Not now."

Starsky's voice was soft. "Hutch?"

He's still not awake. But he can hear me. Gotta convince him he's safe.

"You're all right, love. I've got you." Hutch murmured, wanting to comfort and reassure. "I've got you, babe. I love you. Come back to me."

For a moment there wasn't any sound at all, and Hutch wondered if Rosey had pulled the phone away. Then he heard Starsky say clearly, "Hutch? That you? What...what's going on?"

He's awake. And completely confused.

He heard Rosey say, "David, are you awake?"

There was a rattling sound, and Hutch realized Starsky had either dropped the phone or Rosey was trying to help him hold onto it as he dropped it.
"Hutch, you okay? What happened? Why are you on the phone? Why aren't you here with me?"

Hutch shut his eyes. *He's still not totally awake.* He tried to imagine Rosey's reaction to what Starsky was saying. Hutch suspected Starsky wasn't even aware she was in the room with him yet. "Starsky, wake up. You've had the nightmare again. Open your eyes. Look around the room. Get your bearings."

But Starsky wasn't quite with it. "Hutch, my chest hurts! Why aren't you home with me? I need you, babe."

He knew Starsky was going to be upset and disoriented when he realized what he was saying and who he was really with.

"Starsky, I am home. And so are you. You're home with Rosey. She's frightened and confused. Wake up now. You need to tell her what's going on."

"What?" Starsky sounded completely baffled.

"David?" Hutch could hear Rosey in the background. "David, please wake up."

Hutch rubbed a hand over his face. *Amazing. You've finally managed to get both of us in your bed at the same time.*

Suddenly, Starsky said the most lucid thing he had since this had started. "Oh, shit, it's 4:00 a.m. Damn." Hutch heard him lower the phone and half-cover it. "Honey, I'm okay. I'm awake now. It's just a bad dream -- "

"Just a bad dream!" she cried. Hutch could hear her in spite of Starsky's muffling hand. "I thought you were having a heart attack or a seizure. Why are you rubbing your chest? Let me call an ambulance!"

"Starsky! STARSKY!" Hutch shouted in an attempt to be heard.

There was another fumbling of the receiver and Starsky said, "Yeah. Hutch, look, I'm sorry -- "

"That's not important," Hutch said firmly. He used his best "partner" voice, the one Starsky usually listened to without question. "Let me talk to Rosey. You're not making any sense right now."

"Hutch wants you," Starsky mumbled, and handed off the phone.

"Rosey, are you there?" Hutch asked, hoping Starsky hadn't just dropped the receiver and wandered off to the bathroom in his dazed state.

"Uh...yes...I'm still here, but I'm worried -- "

"He's not having a heart attack," Hutch said clearly. "Listen to me. He has a reoccurring nightmare about the shooting that nearly killed him. It's extremely realistic. He feels the bullets, has trouble breathing, and struggles for air. It's always hard to wake him up. Since I was there..."
with him when it happened, it helps to anchor him in reality when he hears me. But he's still feeling the aftermath of it. His scars are aching now, inside and out. Rub his chest with something soothing like warm oil. Talk to him, try to anchor him in the here and now. If he'll let you, you should..." his voice dammed up behind his teeth. He swallowed hard and made himself say it. "If he'll let you, love him. He needs that now. And it'll help him go back to sleep without any more dreams."

There was a pause as if she were digesting everything he said. "You were totally awake when I called you. You were expecting to hear his voice. You sounded frantic, panicky. You knew exactly what to do. You were having the same dream, weren't you?"

There was nothing for him to say to that.

"Are you all right?" she asked, sounding genuinely concerned. "Going through that..."

"I am now," he said, wanting to forestall more of her sympathy. He wasn't together enough to deal with that. "It's harder for him. He was the one who was shot. What's he doing now?"

"Sitting on the edge of the bed," she said.

"Do what I told you. Help him go back to sleep. He'll be okay after that."

She hesitated, then said hesitantly, "And what about you?"

He closed his eyes. I don't know. I never had to go back to sleep alone after the dream. "I'll be fine. If I know you're taking care of him, then I'll be able to sleep. Rosey?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for calling me." That had to cost you.

"He needed you," she said simply. "I couldn't help him." Her voice sounded a little choked.

"He...he doesn't have them much anymore. Maybe he won't anymore." It sounded lame, even in his own ears.

He heard the phone fumbled, then heard Starsky's sleep-fogged voice. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure."

"You don't sound okay. You sound rough."

"It's 4:00 a.m." And I'm alone.

"Hutch," Starsky said, his voice tight, "I love you."

He squeezed his eyes shut until he saw streaks. It was what each of them said to signal to the other that the dream was over. Swallowing, he said it back softly. "I love you, too."
"Get some sleep. We got work to do tomorrow."

He nodded, then remembered Starsky couldn't see him. "Yeah. 'Night." There was a soft click on the other end of the phone.

He set the receiver on the cradle, and lay back down on the mattress. But it was useless. He'd never go back to sleep now. He rose to shower away the cold sweat still clinging to him, and wondered if Rosey would be able to help Starsky go back to sleep by loving him. Perversely, he wanted her to. He wanted Starsky to get over the shooting, get over the dreams, and if burying himself in Rosey's body was the way to do it, so be it.

As he stepped into his tub and adjusted the taps, he finally realized he was sporting a rock-hard erection himself. He shut his eyes and surrounded it with soap lather, but couldn't focus on anything but Starsky. The intimacy between them came so easily to his mind: Starsky's touch, the sure grip of his hand, the sweet wet heat of his mouth, the fiery tightness of his body.

He opened his eyes, forcing his mind away from a fantasy he could no longer afford. He forced himself to think of something else, anything else, as he stroked himself under the soothing water. He found himself suddenly thinking of Sweet Alice. He hadn't seen her in over a year; word was she'd gone down to San Diego to start over, to go straight, to give up The Life. He wondered how she was doing. He was glad she wasn't in town. If she was, he was afraid he'd be tempted to take her up on her long-standing offer of some uncomplicated comfort. He wouldn't have to talk a lot with Sweet Alice, wouldn't have to explain anything. He'd just have to show up. He thought about her gentle voice, her sweet manner, her lovely body. Thought about her touching him, stroking him...going down on him.

His erection deflated like a punctured balloon. His chest felt tight and for a minute, he had trouble drawing a breath. Then it all passed, and he just felt weary. As he used his soapy hand to simply clean himself instead, he wondered how much comfort he would find if he couldn't get it up for her, or any other lover again?

As long as part of his soul was missing, he suspected his body was simply not going to help him distract his heart. If he were being honest, he would admit that it was a relief.

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Starsky emerged from the shower feeling only marginally better. The shadows of the dream still haunted him in a way they never had before. *It's all this stress, he told himself. Being torn between two people you love. It'd make anyone crazy.*

Hearing Hutch over the phone had helped, but it had come far too late. Starsky had died in the dream there on the tarmac while the paramedics worked on him. Dimly, he'd been aware of Hutch holding him, kissing him, then being torn away. He couldn't breathe, and Hutch's breath and his touch hadn't been there to restore him. Rosey had tried to help him, but he'd died anyway. Experiencing his own death had been terrifying.

Rosey had been frightened, thinking he was having a heart attack. His attitude on waking hadn't helped. She'd wanted to massage his chest. He nearly bolted from the bed, unable to tolerate any
tactile contact. He knew without asking that Hutch had told her what to do -- first the massage, then the passion -- because that was Hutch, wanting to give him what he needed even if he couldn't do it himself. But experiencing his own death had left him so edgy, so wired, he couldn't stand to be touched -- at least not by Rosey. Her feminine hand suddenly seemed alien, all wrong. He ached to bury himself in Hutch's arms, feel the power of his hands and body, make love to him fiercely the way they always did after the dream. Knowing that Hutch had to be feeling the same things tortured him. There wasn't a day that went by that he didn't want Hutch, long to be with him, in his arms, in his bed, but he'd convinced himself he'd stop feeling that after a time. But this was different. This was a need so all-consuming, he couldn't get away from it. This wasn't something he could get over. This was something his psyche needed to heal, and if it didn't get it -- he didn't know how he'd handle it.

As he toweled his hair dry, he tried to tell himself he'd stop having the dreams eventually. Even the therapist said so.

*If you could talk to the therapist about this problem with Rosey and Hutch, he might be able to help you.*

But that was impossible. It was too dangerous to share something that volatile with anyone connected with the department. Besides, within a week of Rosey showing up, he and Hutch had talked the therapist into putting their monthly sessions on hold due to the time pressures of the Barstow case. They were both feeling way too edgy to dance around their situation in front of the shrink they already suspected knew entirely too much about them. Starsky couldn't imagine trying to summarize their problems with the therapist now.

*Yeah, first you fall in love with your male partner -- that's normal! -- and now you can't decide whether to stay with him in a clandestine affair you can never be upfront about without jeopardizing your career, or settle down with the woman you've been in love with for the past two years. Now, what kind of advice do you think he'd give you, Davey, and what kind of a report would he send your captain?*

He leaned over the sink, feeling battered and confused.

*Why does this have to be so hard? I love them both so much.*

"David," Rosey said tentatively through the bathroom door, "why don't I make us some breakfast? If you're not going to go back to sleep -- "

"Great idea, honey," he agreed. "I'll be right out." It was nearly 6:00 now. How long had he stayed under water? He might as well get ready for their shift. The thought of spending eight hours alone with Hutch after last night was like sandpaper against a raw wound.

He knotted the towel around his waist, and went out to the kitchen.

Breakfast helped. The world always seemed brighter on a full stomach, and Rosey had made his favorite -- blueberry pancakes with all the trimmings. As she refilled his coffee cup, he grabbed her wrist, made her put down the pot and pulled her onto his lap. She still had that haunted look of worry around her eyes. "That was just what the doctor ordered, sweetheart. Thanks."
"You look exhausted," she said, peering at him. "Maybe you should call in sick? I'm worried about you on the job with so little rest."

He hugged her, loving her for her caring. "I'll be all right. It's not like we're working that hard right now -- "

They were both startled by the phone. But it was nearly 7:00, around the time he was normally up anyway. He wondered if it were Hutch checking up on him, making sure he was okay.

He lifted the phone hesitantly. "Hello?"

"Hope I didn't wake you, Starsky," Captain Dobey said.

"I'm up, Captain. What's going on?" He hoped desperately that there'd been a break on this Barstow case and they could get back to doing real police work instead of wasting their time baby-sitting a dead apartment.

"I'm calling you to tell you to go back to bed. DeMoyne and Harris were supposed to finish out the week on the overnight shift, but they managed to get a very serious case of food poisoning from that all-night carryout place you've all been using. They're in pretty bad shape and will probably be out the rest of the week. I was thinking of shifting the roster anyway, but now I have no choice. I had to pull Johnson and Selby in to finish out DeMoyne and Harris's shift. They'd just had two days off and were willing to cover. I asked them to cover twelve, and I'm asking you and Hutch to spend the day catching up on your beauty rest so you can take 12 hours tonight."

Starsky stared into the phone. Twelve hours. Alone. At night. With Hutch. With almost nothing to do. After having the dream?

"Wait a minute, Cap! This is crazy. We've been cooling our heels in that place for weeks for no reason at all. Last we were told, Barstow's not even in the state!"

"I talked to Epstein before I called you. Right now, Barstow's off the radar. They're not sure where he is. One of Barstow's regular sidekicks has taken up residency in one of the apartments Epstein's got targeted. They think it's a signal that Barstow's getting ready to show. Unfortunately, the sidekick spotted the surveillance, so that setup's down the tubes. They're worried that once Barstow hears about it, he'll be less inclined to move into his better known haunts."

"This guy's a day man, Captain," Starsky continued. "He never works at night, never has. Putting me and Hutch there overnight is a total waste! You could put two rookies in there for all the action they'll see!"

"Barstow took down a popular all-night gas station last night. Killed the two attendants and cleaned out the till. Epstein thinks he's ready to change his manner of operation since he knows the FBI's after him."

"C'mon, Cap, even if he does get into town, you know the chances of him picking our place are slim to none! If Epstein thought it was a possible target, he'd have moved his own guys into it."
"Epstein's upgraded the equipment in the last 12 hours because he wants to make sure everything's covered. I want you and Hutch to cover the next three nights there. It's an easy assignment, Starsky. After that you'll be back on days and with some luck we'll get a hit from this guy, and all go back to our regular duties. But in the meantime, this is the way it is!"

"But Cap --"

"That's an order, Starsky!" Dobey roared. Clearly he was at his limit. "What the hell is it with you two, anyway? Hutch gave me the same run-around. Now, I don't want to hear a word out of either of you. Be there at 7:00 tonight for 12 hours. End of discussion!" The phone slammed down hard in Starsky's ear.

At 6:30 p.m., he picked up Hutch at Venice Place so they could ride over to the stakeout in Hutch's invisible car. He beeped the Torino's horn, letting Hutch know he was there. He wasn't up to walking up the stairs and entering the familiar apartment. He was still recovering from his disorientation after waking when he finally figured out he wasn't in Hutch's bed. For a moment, he had no idea who the woman next to him was. He hadn't even recognized his own apartment.

He'd never died before in the dream, and it was such a rattling experience, he still hadn't shaken it.

He hit the horn again, just as Hutch emerged from the doorway onto the street.

"Okay, okay!" he called, heading for his car.

As Starsky left the Torino and slid into the passenger side of the junk-mobile, Hutch groused, "Are you really in that much of a hurry to do nothing all night?"

Starsky yanked the rusting door shut, making sure the lock engaged. "I tried to get us out of it," he said. "I don't know why they don't put a couple of rookies up there. At least till Barstow's shows up in the state. But no, the feds want Dobey's finest to sleep on the city's time. Man, I hate the overnight shift."

Hutch didn't say anything as he pulled into traffic and headed across town. After a long moment of stillness, Hutch said, "You okay. After last night?"

Starsky sighed and really looked at Hutch. He saw the dark circles under his eyes, the worry and fatigue etched there. It tore at his heart, knowing he was the cause. "More or less. Never really got back to sleep. Couldn't shake the scene, y'know?"

Hutch glanced at him quickly, frowning, then went back to watching the traffic. "Weren't you able to nap at all today, when we didn't have to go in?"

He'd avoided that bed all day. Rosey had done everything she could to get him to relax, but after experiencing his own death, he couldn't bear to shut his eyes. For some reason, he didn't want to be touched, didn't want to be held, after the dream. Not by her. It had never affected him like that before, but then again, Hutch had always been there to ease him out of it, loving him before he even knew he was awake, making the transition easy, comforting. "No. I was too wired. Too
upset, I guess." He looked at Hutch again. "I never thanked you, did I? For talking me through it last night. That...that couldn't have been easy."

Hutch didn't say anything at first, just glanced over and gave a shrug. Finally, he murmured, "That's what partners are for."

*Oh, yeah. Sure. Partners.* "Rosey said you'd had the dream, too. That's why you were so awake when she called. Is that true?"

Hutch hesitated then finally nodded.

*We've never had the dream at the same time before.* He thought about all the things Hutch went through when he was having the dream. The way he thrashed, the way he cried out, the expressions of anguish and fear on his face. He thought about him going through that alone, with no one to hold him, console him. "I wasn't there for you," he said quietly.

"Little hard for you to be there for me when you're going through the same thing yourself," Hutch said, letting him off the hook.

"You managed to be there for me," he answered, "and I wasn't alone."

"Okay, fine," Hutch said patiently, clearly not wanting to dwell on it. "You owe me. I'll get my payback the next time it's your turn to buy lunch. Sushi Sam's!"

If Hutch wanted to play it by hiding behind the old banter, Starsky would have to go along with it. He owed him that much. So, on cue, he groaned. "Not Sushi Sam's! Hutch, you know I can't stand all that organic Japanese seaweed! I need my nourishment."

"Be grateful Sushi Sam's not open in the middle of the night," Hutch reminded him. "And we won't be able to eat from the Hot Dog Haven, either, unless we want to join DeMoyne and Harris in worshipping the great god of porcelain. That leaves the all-night fruit stand that's three blocks away. They've got great produce."

"Terrific. Rabbit food for the next three nights. At least I'll be regular."

He was cheered to hear Hutch chuckle as they pulled up behind the stakeout building and left the car. "Maybe if you're especially good," Hutch said, "we can call Huggy for an emergency delivery."

The banter died on Starsky's lips. Hutch realized his faux pas as soon as it was out of his mouth, and blushed red. What had once been part of their mutual sexual teasing, now was just a cold reminder of *before.*

"Starsky, I didn't mean to."

Exasperated, Starsky just grabbed his elbow and hustled him in through the back door of the building. "It's okay, Hutch. It's fine. Forget it."

*We can't even joke together anymore. Everything always comes back to what we aren't doing.*
They didn't say anything else to each other until they entered the stakeout apartment.

Starsky took two steps inside, then stopped dead in his tracks so abruptly, Hutch ran into him, and had to clutch his shoulders to keep from knocking him over. "What the hell -- ?" Starsky muttered as Hutch peered around him.

"Man, am I glad to see you," Ray Johnson sighed. The tall, ungainly black man pulled himself out of the small folding chair that sat behind the desk where now sat the camera and scope. The desk was about three feet away from the window. To the right of the desk, against a wall, perched a pre-fab shelving system that had a small black and white television on it. The television, attached to cables connected to the camera and scope, was a new addition to the surveillance. But that wasn't what had startled Starsky.

Feeling as though everything in his life was conspiring against him just for the fun of it, Starsky jerked a thumb in the direction of Johnson's redhead partner, Mike Selby. "Where the fuck did that come from?"

Hutch laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and murmured warningly, "Starsk," but he didn't care.

"Hey, give the guy a break," Johnson said, defending his partner. "He had a rough weekend with his wife and the new baby. So, I helped him bring it up here. He can't hack that sagging old couch; his back's a problem."

Starsky stared incredulously as Mike Selby snored softly, open-mouthed, cradled in the cushiony depths of a dark blue leather recliner. "Dobey know about this?"

"Not just Dobey," Johnson said with a grin, "but Epstein gave his blessing as well. I think he's embarrassed that it's taken so long, that they haven't been able to nail this guy with all the money they've spent. With the new remote," he nodded at the TV, "you can do the surveillance just fine from the recliner, if you don't nod off. You just gotta get up to take the pictures, but since there hasn't been a picture to take in days, that's hardly a priority. Epstein all but told us we're just holding down the fort to satisfy his superiors. He thinks things might break in a few days, but right now it's sit tight and relax. Thanks to Mike's recliner, at least we really can."

"He's leavin' it here?" Starsky's voice was nearly a squeak.

"Not exactly portable, is it?" Johnson said sarcastically. "Sides, he's got a new one being delivered at home later today. See what you've got to look forward to? Too bad you can't change the channels on the tube. Get some of those late night naughty shows. Epstein basically needs a documented report about every two hours. So, relax and just remember to log in your report on time and life can be good, or at least moderately comfortable. Which one of you wants to check out the technical aspect of this new equipment?"

Starsky was still staring at the sleeping Selby, so Hutch moved around him, indicating he'd handle that task. As he and Johnson ran down the equipment's simple maintenance needs, Starsky's memories haunted him.
Shortly after he'd left the hospital for Hutch's place, sleeping flat on his back became difficult. It was too great a strain on his healing muscles to rise from a supine position. So, Hutch borrowed the Dobey's recliner and Starsky found himself sleeping easily in it. Hutch could ease it upright when he had to get out of it to do his exercises, or eat a meal. Hutch slept on the couch to be near Starsky. As his recovery progressed, Starsky coaxed Hutch into the recliner with him occasionally. After all, it was wide enough for Dobey, so....

Those had been wonderful days, watching old movies curled up with Hutch in the recliner as he rejoiced in his new lease on life and love. Eventually he was well enough for them to enjoy gentle sex in it, and by the time they'd run out of excuses to keep it, they'd gotten damned inventive in it. They were both reluctant to see it go.

Dobey wasn't sure why they insisted on getting it professionally cleaned before he took it home, but he thought that was mighty nice of them.

The last thing in this world Starsky wanted to see in the next 12 hours was some goddamned fucking recliner.

"Hey, Selby," Johnson said softly, tapping his partner's cheek, "c'mon, man. Nap time's over. Sally's waiting for you to take over daddy duties. Hey, can you hear me? C'mon, partner, you're drooling on yourself. You're making us look bad!"

Selby came awake with a snort, glancing around the room. "Oh, shit! Man, sure glad you guys are here." He stretched, pushed the recliner into its sitting position and eased out of it with a hearty groan. Stretching, he warned them, "Try not to die of boredom, will ya? This is the worst gig! And hey, Starsky?"

He pulled his gaze away from the lounger and looked at Selby in confusion.

"Don't get any on it!"

"Any...?" Starsky said, his face flushing with blood.

"Any! No burrito drippings, no peanut butter, no sardine oil, no anything. And most especially," Selby grinned at him, "no precious bodily fluids. Kapeesh?"

Starsky found himself speechless.

"Don't worry about him, Mike," Hutch said, saving the moment. "He doesn't know what to do with a recliner if he can't watch football in it."

The other two detectives laughed, grabbed their gear, and left the apartment, leaving behind a silence so uncomfortable, Starsky had no idea what to do with it.

Hutch was looking at him, steely-eyed. "Snap out of it, will you? It's furniture, for crying out loud." Hutch settled into the folding chair, glancing over the terse, one-line reports from the previous shift. "You didn't get much sleep last night, and you didn't nap all day. Why don't you kill a few hours now catching up on your beauty rest. No point in both of us staring at nothing."
When Starsky didn't respond, Hutch finally turned and looked at him. There was a tension around Hutch's eyes Starsky couldn't pretend not to see. "If you insist on acting like a jerk, you can catch some zee's on the couch, but if you can get past your martyr mode, you might take advantage of a little comfort." He paused, then said more gently, "A lot of this would fall into perspective if you just got some rest, Starsk."

Starsky made himself move around the space, just to put some distance between himself and the recliner. "You know how it is, Hutch. Especially after last night. I'm always afraid to sleep right after the dream."

Hutch nodded knowingly, then looked up at him, guilelessly. His blue eyes were enormous in the apartment's dim light. Starsky knew if he kept looking into them, he'd fall inside them and drown. "Don't worry, Starsk. I always know when you're having it. I'll wake you up."

Starsky's cock nodded eagerly, and he had to turn away. *That's exactly what I'm afraid of.*

In the weeks since he'd been living with Rosey, never had his voluntary separation from Hutch seem so difficult to bear. There wasn't a single day when he didn't feel the ache of it, like an amputated limb, not a day when he didn't miss Hutch fiercely. But it was bearable, endurable, largely because of all the time they spent together on the job. But suddenly, with the mocking reminder of some of their most wonderful moments of discovery and passion taking up half their work area, Starsky felt as if the wounds weren't just fresh but sliced open and bleeding freely.

He wanted Hutch. It was a terrible, hollow hunger gnawing at his heart, a feeling he couldn't escape anymore than he could escape the expression in those sorrowful blue eyes. How the hell was he supposed to get through this night? He couldn't let himself think about the next one or the one after.

"Starsky," Hutch said softly.

Starsky knew by Hutch's very tone that he was totally aware of Starsky's state of mind. He'd always been able to read him like a book and six months of being lovers had completely broken down any remaining barriers that might've ever been there.

"Starsky, go lay down. Take a nap. It'll be okay."

Without letting himself think, he walked to the couch like a robot.

"Starsky," Hutch sounded incredibly weary. "Use the recliner. If you're comfortable, you might actually get some real sleep."

He swallowed, nodded once, then turned and did as he was told. He settled in the comfortable chair, stared at the ceiling and forced his eyes to close. His body was as stiff as a board, the tension nearly unbearable. In spite of that, Starsky found himself in a deep slumber within five minutes.

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Hutch's eyes stayed fixed on the small black and white TV screen as he waited for something, anything to appear on it. The camera was focused on the uncurtained window of the apartment their suspect might someday possible perhaps inhabit. The camera set-up meant that they didn't have to spend all their time bent over the scope, which was good. But because there was nothing to see, that meant there was nothing for Hutch to do but remember, think, and regret. The conversation with Dobey ran over and over in his mind. Even though he knew Dobey was right about his future, Hutch still couldn't imagine his life without Starsky as the primary player. The bitterness of the dream lingered, and the sense of loss was something he couldn't shake. Hutch had had low points in his life before, but he couldn't remember any as bleak as this. The sense of Starsky crumbling into dust was an image he couldn't shake.

Dobey's voice echoed in his mind.

*Everything's changed. He's not yours anymore. There's nothing left for you. Face the truth. Take the lieutenant's test. It's the best thing for you to do.*

Behind him, Starsky slept peacefully, almost unnaturally so. Normally, Starsky rustled a lot in his sleep, shifting, turning, squirming, mumbling. His level of activity asleep reflected the incredible energy he radiated while awake. But for the last four hours, he'd lain completely still, breathing regularly. His stillness indicated how incredibly exhausted he had to be.

Hutch could relate. He hoped, when it was his turn, he'd sleep just as soundly.

"Hutch," Starsky said suddenly, clearly. It startled him so much he almost jumped.

"I thought you were asleep," he said, not looking at him. Looking at Starsky lying down wasn't something he needed to do.

"I was. Slept pretty well."

"Good. I hope you're feeling better."

There was no response for a long moment, and then Starsky said quietly, "Hutch, did I die in the dream you had?"

Hutch shut his eyes, hating to think about it. Starsky's asking brought the vision of his crumbling body to the forefront of his mind. With an effort he whispered, "Yes."

"Me, too," Starsky said simply. His voice was ragged, and the pain in it tore at Hutch.

Hutch turned to say something only to be startled by the fact that Starsky wasn't in the recliner but standing directly behind him. Hutch looked up into his eyes. They were shadowed by the dim light of the apartment, making them seem almost black. Starsky rubbed absently at the scars on his chest. It had been a long time since Hutch had seen him do that, and it bothered him to know they had to be hurting again.

"You kept trying to get to me," Starsky said.
"But they wouldn't let me," Hutch finished. That's the way it's always been. Everyone in the
world keeps conspiring to keep us apart. But this is the first time they actually succeeded.

"It was so real," Starsky whispered. "When I...died --"

"Don't!" Hutch ordered, his fear and grief bordering on anger. He grabbed hold of the anger like
a lifeline to rein in his confused emotions, just as he had that day in the interrogation room.
"Don't talk about it! You'll just...it'll just...I don't think I could..." Live through it again, he
thought, his voice choked. He couldn't say another word.

Starsky's face echoed the same fear. He stood there looking bereft, lost.

A breeze wafted through the slightly open window and the air current carried Starsky's
familiar, clean, sandalwood scent to Hutch. It reminded him of the taste of Starsky's skin, the
unique flavor of his sweat, his tears, his come. The sense of taste was so vivid, his mouth
watered. That scent had come to mean so many things to Hutch during their affair -- life and
intimacy, joy and passion...hopefulness. He recalled using his mouth hungrily on Starsky after
Rosey had entered the picture, so that he could memorize his scent and taste for when he couldn't
have it anymore. He had memorized it too well; it came back to haunt him now. It was as cruel
as placing an aromatic meal just out of reach of a starving man.

Just past Starsky, Hutch could see the recliner where it sat, taunting him with memories and
images of newfound love and their first sexual adventures. Hutch had first taken Starsky in
Dobey's recliner. Starsky had sat in his lap, so he could control just how much he could handle
and for how long. Hutch could see it, the memory was so sharp: him rubbing Starsky's thighs as
Starsky lowered himself, so carefully that first time, onto Hutch's aching cock. It was good
between them right from the start, it didn't matter who was doing whom. They were like kids, so
hot, so eager to try everything, to have it all.

He shut his eyes for a moment, trying to get a grip on his emotions. But all there was to think
about were those last few nights with Starsky, when he'd started spending the evenings with
Rosey. No matter how much Starsky wanted it, Hutch had refused to fuck him. It had become
some weird point of honor with him, to compete with her on some kind of even playing field. It
was really just a game he was playing with himself, letting go of Starsky a little at time, trying to
get used to the idea of an empty bed...an empty life. And finally, that's what it had come down to.
A prolonged case of stress-induced impotence, and lost moments of passion he would never
regain.

The recliner sat there, reminding him of all that he lost, all that he gave up, all that he would
never have again.

It suddenly became too much to endure.

Before Hutch could say another thing or even realize what he was doing, he was out of the
folding chair and grappling Starsky in his arms. Starsky flowed into his embrace as though he'd
just been waiting for Hutch to make the move. Hutch had no chance to absorb what was
happening before their mouths were meshed together, kissing frantically, like two famished men
descending on a feast. The only sound was the rustle of clothing pressed together, the wet sound
of lips and tongues embracing, the rushed sound of heavy breathing, and the quiet cadence of hands gripping, holding -- searching for something that had been lost.

Distantly, very, very distantly, Hutch's mind registered an obligation to duty, a concern for his abandoned responsibility. Registered it and pushed it aside as he lifted Starsky bodily and carried him to the recliner. His every cell was screaming, every nerve ending reaching for the one thing it needed and had been denied.

Starsky said nothing, just wrapped his arms and legs around Hutch as tightly as he could, as if he feared being released.

Hutch had no concern about that. Only a sane person would realize the foolishness of what they were doing and return to their senses and obligations. Hutch's sanity had been chipped away by weeks of self-imposed civility that corroded the very essence of his primal soul. The soul that could no longer be denied.

Starsky landed on his back in the recliner with a grunt, but it was the only sound he made. As Hutch tore at his belt and Starsky grabbed at his own shirt buttons, then at Hutch's, they said nothing, as though they both feared God would overhear them and strike them dead for what they were about to do.

Gone were all Hutch's bargains with himself about fairness, about competing on equal grounds. Any veneer of civilization he might've had was suddenly ripped away, leaving behind a man focused on the only thing he could recognize -- his soul's passion.

Yet, even in their desperate, frantic hasted, they were still partners. With coordinated hands they quickly removed just enough clothing to accomplish their ends -- Starsky's shoes and pants, completely off, Hutch's pants dropped to the floor around his ankles. Shirts dangled open just enough for skin contact while heavy shoulder holsters remained, slapping against theirs sides as if to remind them of their forgotten job.

Without sharing a word or a sigh or a groan, Starsky offered up the single thing Hutch needed most, and without a second's hesitation Hutch accepted that offer. As Starsky sprawled on his back in the upright recliner and gripped its arms, Hutch pulled Starsky's bare legs around his waist. Leaning over Starsky's body, Hutch impaled him hard in one swift, deep stroke, using nothing but his own pre-come to ease the way. Starsky arched violently as his eyes rolled up and his mouth opened in a silent scream from the sudden entry. Hutch's passion escalated higher as he gripped Starsky's shoulders and slammed in deeper. Starsky locked his legs at the ankles around Hutch's waist and pulled him in, as if wanting to ensure Hutch wouldn't change his mind and withdraw.

Sweat bloomed over Hutch's face, dripping down his forehead into his eyes, then down his nose. He drew back just enough to plow his way in again as Starsky's legs clamped tightly around him, begging for more, again, harder. Starsky clawed at Hutch's arms and he obliged, moving faster, deeper, fucking him roughly, quickly, something they had never done. But it had been too long. He'd been too starved. And the meat had been dangled before him every single day.
Hutch grabbed Starsky's hair in his fist, leaned over and latched onto Starsky's mouth, his hips driving his cock relentlessly into Starsky's demanding body. He wanted to growl, "Mine! Mine!" but knew that a single sound would shatter the moment, so to keep his mouth from breaking the spell, he went after his lover's kiss. It could barely be called a kiss, with teeth and lips and tongue all fighting for sensation.

It was coming on him fast, the only way it could, and it would be fierce. He became aware of every heartbeat, every breath, every nerve-ending that connected him to Starsky, and he grabbed onto them for the precious memories he would need to sustain him later. He felt Starsky's legs tighten down harder, felt Starsky's ass clench around him, his arms stiffen, and knew he was seconds away as well.

Hutch shoved his tongue deep into Starsky's mouth, to swallow the shout that he feared would be there. But when Starsky's body jerked and his semen heated Hutch's belly, there was no accompanying cry, just a powerful tension and a prolonged shudder. Hutch's own orgasm was shattering in its intensity, but he, too, remained silent, as if locking it all away inside where he could keep it to himself, and bask in its power.

He trembled all over as Starsky's legs finally released him. Drawing back far more carefully than he'd entered, he stepped away. In another place, in another time, he'd have tended Starsky gently, cleaned him and comforted him in gratitude and respect and love. But not here, not now. His shoulder holster had slipped and the heavy gun rested awkwardly against his chest, reminding him of who he was, where he was, why he was there. He glanced over his shoulder at the abandoned surveillance set-up and shivered. Never in his career, in either of their careers, had they abandoned a post for their own needs. He should have felt ashamed, but he didn't. He could only feel the telling thrum of orgasm still rippling through him.

He looked back at Starsky, still sprawled bonelessly in the recliner, his legs spread wantonly as he gasped for air, recovering. He shifted in the chair, and adjusted his own holster, nudging uncomfortably, no doubt, into his side. Splotches of semen spattered the fur on Starsky's belly, glistening in the subdued light. Hutch knew if he didn't turn away, he'd fall to his knees and clean every drop with his tongue, then go down on Starsky until he forced a second orgasm from him. He knew this man. He knew how to keep him going all night if he wanted.

They'd already gotten away with too much. How could they have done something so reckless? He shook his head as if coming to after being unconscious, or insane.

Starsky didn't move, just watched him with hooded eyes still smoky with passion. Starsky knew how to keep him going just as easily. But Hutch had made the first move, so Starsky was giving him the choice of making another one, or walking away.

Quickly, with shaking hands, he yanked up his pants, pulled his shirt together, and hastily refastened his holster. Grabbing his jacket, he nearly ran to the door. They needed coffee. They needed food. They needed to get away from each other right now!

With one hand on the knob, he turned back, wanting to say something, anything.
Starsky rose stiffly from the chair, climbed into his pants, then pulled his handkerchief out to clean himself. Buckling and zipping up, Starsky moved to the folding chair, checking the surveillance equipment. He must've sensed Hutch's presence still in the room, because he turned. Starsky's face looked as troubled as Hutch knew his own did.

_Speak to him!_ Hutch ordered himself, but nothing could come out. As if Starsky understood, he gave a brief nod, releasing Hutch from the spot he seemed rooted in. Hutch nodded back just as briefly, then left Starsky to monitor the equipment as he went to find them something to eat and drink. It would be something plain, something to fill the body and keep it quiet. He didn't dare consider getting anything that might seem like a treat, like a gift that might tell Starsky that Hutch had found him most especially good.

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Starsky stared unseeing at the television screen that looked onto an empty, featureless apartment. His body was still reeling from Hutch's assault -- reeling and tingling and trembling. His hands shook and his legs felt like rubber. His holstered gun had tried to dig a hole in his ribs that was now tender and sore. And his ass -- He tried not to think about that as he shifted in the chair.

But the real truth was he felt great. He'd never had Hutch that way before, all instinct and passion, with all his gentleness and romance stripped down to raw need. He'd never had _anyone_ who'd been that hungry for him before. It was as scary as it was thrilling.

It had all happened so fast, had been so furious, like a smoldering brush fire suddenly blazing up out of control, he hadn't had a second to even think of Rosey.

In spite of his euphoric afterglow, he was wracked with guilt.

What was happening to him? To them? Is this what he was reducing them to? Men who disregarded their duty, who couldn't be trusted to be alone together like two over-sexed teenagers? He couldn't remember ever doing anything like this -- tuning out the job, tuning out the woman he loved.

He did love her. He knew that was true. But for those few minutes that he gave himself _willingly, wantonly, be honest!_ to Hutch, it was as if she didn't exist. Well, he might not have been thinking about her then but he damned sure was thinking about her now. He tried to imagine what he could say when the shift ended and he had to face her again. Or would his own personal code of honor fall so far that he wouldn't say anything, that he'd try to keep it a secret? Keep Hutch a secret. Like they'd had to do all this time, from the rest of the world. Hutch deserved more, so much more.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He respected Rosey too much to lie to her. His feelings for Hutch, his partner, the man who'd willingly give his life for Starsky's, was as deep and complex as his love for the woman he'd unconsciously waited for, for two years. He hadn't lied to Hutch about Rosey. He couldn't lie to Rosey about Hutch. He couldn't make himself do that.
Was that what he wanted? A confrontation over fidelity in the hopes that one of them would leave him and take the decision out of his hands? He felt a headache start up behind his eyes. Was it really possible to love two people this much, need them both this much?

Yes, he admitted to himself, it most definitely was. But it wasn't right to keep them both dancing at the end of his string. The power of Hutch's passion was overwhelming, and what it said about Hutch's unfulfilled needs broke Starsky's heart. Knowing that he was responsible for causing that reaction from Hutch both humbled him and made him intensely sad. Hutch deserved a life out of the shadows.

Starsky had to make up his mind. If he was really in love with Rosey he needed to decide to make it permanent, or end it for all their sakes. His indecision was making them all crazy and making him and Hutch foolishly reckless. He thought of what might've happened if some other cop had dropped in on their station to touch base with them, or called on the phone at the height of their rutting.

No. Things couldn't just go on like this. He had to decide.

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Rosey had been up for a few hours when she heard the Torino pull up outside. She'd slept poorly while he was gone, her nerves still affected by the disturbing scene the night before when she had been unable to pull David from his terrible nightmare. When she'd had to call Hutch --

Standing at the dining room table, she glanced over to the living room wall, at a collection of photos David had mounted there. Photos of Hutch -- Hutch looking into the camera, laughing over something David must've said to him, Hutch with one of his girlfriends from long ago, eyes focusing on the man behind the camera more intently than at the woman in his arms, Hutch with David, arms around each other, standing on top of the Torino. She'd tried hard, while staying in David's home, to ignore the presence of Hutch in photos and newspaper clippings and public commendations all over David's place. Hutch's clothes were in David's closet, his after-shave in the bathroom, intimate reminders of the man who was far more than just David's partner and lover. He was the only one who had been able to help David last night.

Rosey had sensed David pulling back from her that morning, and it tore at her. She'd felt she'd failed him some how, that she'd been unable to provide something he'd needed, something she couldn't know he would need, something she'd never understand. Every woman who'd ever loved a man wanted to be everything that man ever needed; that was normal. Her mother had warned her once, when she'd complained about her father's long absences from home, his lengthy secret meetings behind closed doors that excluded her and her mother both, that the work men did often separated them from their families. The family's job was to support their men, to be there when they needed them, to help ease the burden of their working lives. Her mom had kept a spotless home and was a great cook, and when her father was home, his love for her mother and herself was unquestionable. His devotion to Rosey's mom when she grew ill from cancer and died spoke of an undying passion and deep companionable love.

But her father had had "partners" at work, too. Men he was very involved with, men he depended on, probably, she realized now, with his life, as David did Hutch. It was a different world, that
world, where life and death skirted forever around the edges, and a single person could be the key to your safety and well-being. She couldn't imagine having a relationship like that that wasn't also the most intimate relationship of your life.

She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. She was thinking too hard. She needed to just take things one day at a time, one moment --

The door opened and he entered the apartment. She put a smile on her face and turned to put the plate of fresh fruit she'd cut up as part of his morning meal on the kitchen table.

He was standing at the door as if this wasn't the right apartment, as if he wasn't sure he belonged here or was welcome.

She put the plate down by his place setting as he approached her, almost cautiously. She tried to figure out what had changed, what was wrong. Had he been hurt? Did something bad happen during the stakeout?

"Rosey," he said softly, as he moved closer to the table. "We need to talk."

Then suddenly, she knew. She blinked, feeling both naive and wise at the same time. She knew enough. She didn't want or need details. Putting her fingers over his mouth, she shook her head. "Don't. Don't say anything."

He took hold her hand gently, kissed her fingers. "Rosey, I'm sorry, I --"

"Don't apologize," she said, her throat constricting painfully. "You're an adult. A free man. I won't be your jailer. We've made no promises to each other."

He flinched as if those words cut him. "Not in words. But when I moved in with you --"

"I didn't ask you for fidelity. I still haven't. I know, that is, Hutch said...after the dream, but you wouldn't let me...." She wasn't really sure what she was trying to say. She felt as though something were slipping away from her, something she was so close to holding on to, if only she knew how. Is this how Hutch felt that night when she and David had first made love, and he went home to talk to Hutch? She couldn't wish feelings like this on anyone.

He pulled her into his arms and held her tight. She felt him tremble as he clutched her. Was it so hard to say good-bye?

"Rosey, I love you!" He sounded choked, nearly strangled. She remembered him sounding the same way when she had to walk away from him for her father's sake.

Did he say that to Hutch just today? Did he hold Hutch like this and swear his love?

He gripped her arms suddenly and held her away from him. She took a deep breath and tried to rein in her fragile emotions. She wouldn't use tears to hold him. She'd have to be strong, like Hutch. It was only fair.
"Rosey, if...if I asked you to marry me, would you?"

She blinked dazedly. What was he talking about?

"I mean, do you think...could we make it work? Would you want to?"

She wouldn't be cruel, but she had to be honest. "You mean...you, me...and Hutch?"

He exhaled in a rush, then dropped his hands and turned away, walking back to the table. Without looking at her he said, "I want you to be my wife, Rosey. I want to have a family with you. I mean that. I've wanted it the longest time. I wanted it all the time you were gone. My feelings about that never changed. That's the truth.

"Hutch and me, we've been partners so long. They call it a marriage, the cops do. All of us say that. A cop's partner is closer than a wife, closer than a brother. Hutch and me put flesh to that marriage, and no one was more surprised than me when it happened. Today, well, it took us by surprise again. I'm not going to lie to you, any more than I'd lie to Hutch. I can't explain all my feelings, Rosey, I don't know if anyone could. But I know what love is, I know what it feels like. And I love you. I want you to be my wife. I want you to have my children. I want to live with you, and come home to you, and --"

"Forsaking all others. David, you have to promise that to get married."

His shoulders slumped and he turned away. "Hutch is my partner, Rosey. He's saved my life a hundred times on the street. We work better than any two cops in the whole city. We've been that way for years. I'm not ready to give that up. I don't know if I ever could."

Could she ask him to do that? "Hutch keeps you safe, David. I don't want that to change. But, I don't know how long I can share you with him...if we have to share your passion."

He nodded.

She moved to the table and handed him his coffee. "You're exhausted. Eat some breakfast. Get some sleep. You'll need your rest for your shift tonight."

His face darkened in a blush she pretended not to see.

She wondered how much rest she would get later after sending him off to spend the long night with Hutch.
CHAPTER 6

Sleep eluded Hutch that morning, so at 10:00 a.m. he found himself repotting some plants and killing half a six pack. It helped blunt the barrage of memories plaguing him, and by 11:00 he managed to fall into a fitful sleep that was hardly restful. It was almost a relief when Dobey called at 5:00 p.m.

"What's up, Captain?" Hutch asked groggily, one arm over his eyes.

"That's what I'd like to know," Dobey said gruffly. "Have you both forgotten that I need a daily report? I expected it at 7:00 this morning when you logged out. I know the job is tedious, but that doesn't mean we can just skip the details."

Hutch groaned silently. Neither of them had been thinking clearly after last night. They'd hadn't even said anything to each other after Hutch returned with food, and spent the evening trying not to look at one another for fear they'd be tempted to fall into the recliner again. They'd totally blanked on the report, wanting to just get out of the place as soon as they could. "I'm sorry, Captain. It's hard to remember how critical it is to report on nothing."

"I know it's just a nuisance to you two, but we've got to document everything if we hope to get any financial compensation from the FBI for all these man hours. I want that report before you go on duty tonight. Messenger it over as soon as it's ready."

"Yes, sir," Hutch said dutifully.

Dobey paused.

Hutch seriously considered slamming the phone down before Dobey said something else he didn't want to hear.

"Listen," Dobey said quietly, in that same caring tone that made Hutch want to run for his life. "They've set the dates for the lieutenant's exam and the review classes. I've put a copy of the schedule in your mailbox. At least, think about it."

Hutch closed his eyes, feeling as if his body suddenly weighed a thousand pounds, as if he were lying on a bed on Jupiter. Or maybe it was just his heart that felt that way.

"Hutch?" Dobey asked when he didn't say anything. "You can't just...keep waiting."

Forcing the words through a throat suddenly tight and dry, Hutch murmured, "Sure. I'll think about it."

"Good," Dobey said. "Get that report in, will you?"

"Yeah, sure, Captain." It occurred to him that he should at least pretend to be involved with the case. "Any new word on Barstow? Any hope things might go back to normal any time soon?" He nearly choked on the world "normal." But at least if he and Starsky were on the streets they'd have something else to focus on besides each other.
"Nothing new. He's laying low. But he won't be able to stay that way for long. It's not his way. Epstein promised he'd call me later with an update. Just do the hours, and the reports, and practice your gin rummy game."

Right, Hutch thought grimly. Gin rummy.

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Starsky was already late getting him when the phone rang. "Yeah?" Hutch said abruptly, irritated with life in general.

"It's me," Starsky said. "Look, uh, can you pick me up? I think the Torino's alternator's shot. It won't start, and I just spent half an hour trying to turn it over."

*And Rosey still doesn't have a car,* Hutch remembered. The Torino hadn't been the same since Gunther's assassins had riddled it with bullets. He wondered how long it would take Starsky to realize the car was past its prime and start looking for another one. Starsky's loyalty to that car never ceased to dismay Hutch. It was just a *car.*

For a beat Hutch considered telling Starsky to call a cab, but then thought, *Yeah, the Torino's just a car, and you're just his partner.* With sudden insight Hutch realized that Starsky's inability to let go of the car was related, if only distantly, to his inability to let go of Hutch.

"Hutch?" Starsky said when he took too long to answer. "Can you get me?" His voice sounded doubtful, as if he expected Hutch to turn him down.

Hutch finally said, "Uh, sure. Listen, call Dobey and tell him we're running late. I'll be right there, okay?"

"Yeah, okay. And...thanks."

While he was on his way over to Starsky's, he remembered Dobey asking him how he'd feel as the years went by, picking Starsky up at home, watching him kiss Rosey goodbye...watching her body change with pregnancy. For a moment Hutch felt like he couldn't breathe, but then he forced his body to relax, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. He was Starsky's partner, his best friend. If he really meant that, he'd have to find a way. Might as well start now.

By the time he drove up to Starsky's door, he'd pulled himself together so well he was determined to go up to the front door like a normal person and knock. But as he started to leave the car, Starsky emerged from his apartment, closed the door behind him without looking back, then jogged down the stairs and over to the car.

*Well, we are late,* Hutch rationalized, as he got behind the wheel again. *Now, we can sit here and try to act like two normal cops, instead of the crazed cock hounds we were last night.* "We forgot our morning reports," Hutch said quietly, as he pulled away from the curb.

Starsky's eyes grew wide in surprise, and Hutch surmised his partner had never thought of the reports at all. "Oh, shit! Dobey must've -- "
"Been right unhappy. I heard about it in Technicolor."

"I'm sorry, Hutch, I never even thought about them."

Hutch shrugged. "Neither did I. I wrote them up and sent them over by messenger. We'd better not forget them tomorrow morning." He hadn't meant to say that last. It sounded too much like acknowledging what had happened last night. Which could very well happen again, if they weren't careful.

"Did Dobey have anything to say about the stakeout from Hell?" Starsky grumbled. "Like how much longer?"

"No idea." He glanced over at Starsky. "He told me to relax and practice my gin rummy game."

Starsky blushed harder than Hutch had ever seen him. Perversely, it pleased him.

They said nothing for the rest of the trip.

Selby and Johnson bitched considerably about their timing, since Selby was needed at home to help his wife deal with their fussy baby. But it wasn't very long before the two of them were once again trapped in a room with only a television showing the most boring show on Earth, an x-rated recliner, and each other. Hutch spent 10 minutes sitting at the equipment table that faced the window, fiddling with the remote camera's controls, just to see what it would do. It gave him an opportunity to not watch Starsky.

Starsky prowled the room like a prisoner, restless, edgy, his nerves so highly strung Hutch could sense them resonating. It reminded him of the first night Starsky had gone to "talk" to Rosey and had come home full of guilt and need. After an hour, Hutch thought he'd scream if Starsky didn't settle down. The silence and Starsky's pent-up energy were excruciating, but even so, Hutch couldn't find any banal small talk to pass the time. One thing was for sure -- he'd never last 12 hours like this. He sighed and rubbed a hand over his eyes.

As if that snapped Starsky out of his own private hell, he came over to Hutch and pulled one of the folding chairs around to sit on it backwards. He'd moved the chair to the side of the equipment table, facing Hutch, with his back to the wall and the window. He was close, close enough to touch, and Hutch's senses became as keen as a hound on scent. He tensed up, unsure of what Starsky was about to do, about to say.

Finally, Starsky said quietly, "Hutch, we gotta talk."

His stomach dropped. No one started a good conversation that way.

Starsky ran a hand through his thick curls distractedly. "I mean, I need to talk to you."

About last night, Hutch supplied.
"When Rosey first came back," Starsky said in a rush, as though he needed to get it all out quickly, "you said a lot of things to me about my wanting a wife, a family, and how you didn't want to stand in the way of my having a normal life."

"I remember," Hutch said warily. He remembered, too, Starsky assuring him that was a dream he'd given up on long ago. But that was then.

"I need you to tell me the truth. The real truth. If...if I was gonna...if Rosey and I got married...how...how would you feel about that? About me."

*Could I be your best man? Dance at your wedding? Be the best uncle to your children?*

He felt cold suddenly and wished he'd worn something warmer. He stalled for time before saying something he couldn't take back. Finally, he asked honestly, "Are you asking me if I'd still be your lover?" He thought of sitting in Venice Place, waiting until Starsky could find time for him, spending nights alone.

Starsky's face fell. "Hutch, I could never ask you to do anything like that! Is...is that what you thought I was asking?" He seemed stricken.

"I...uh, I don't understand what you're asking. My feelings for you aren't going to change if you get married, become a Hare Krishna, go bald, or decide to suddenly drive a conservative car. I love you. I can't just turn that off." He hesitated, then took a deep breath and got brave. "Did you ask her today, when you went home? Did you propose?" *Is that what my unbridled passion pushed you into doing?*

Starsky shook his head. "How can I do something like that when I can't keep my hands off you? When all you have to do is touch me, and I fold like a cheap card table? I love you, too, Hutch. But I can't keep the two of you strung along like this. It's wrong. One way or another I've gotta make a choice. You're my best friend in the whole world, and my partner. I can't imagine my life without you in it. But if I'm really in love with Rosey, the only right thing to do is to marry her, make her my wife. Have a family with her."

*And that's certainly something you can't do with me.* Hutch turned back to the camera set up. He couldn't bear to look at the intensity in Starsky's eyes right now. "That's what you've always wanted," he reminded Starsky.

"Yeah." Starsky sounded morose. "That's what I've always wanted. But what I want isn't the point right now. I need to know how you'd handle it, how you'd feel about it. I've been thinking about it ever since...last night. And then today, when I had to ask you to come get me. I know that had to be really hard for you. It was hard for me to ask. Is that how it's always gonna be between us from now on? And how's that gonna affect our partnership? Our work together? The rest of our lives? You're my best friend. How could I ever get married without having you stand beside me? Could you do that? Stand up for me?"

Hutch forced himself to really think about it. Dobey had asked him and he couldn't answer then. Now Starsky was demanding to know. "I don't know, Star. In all honesty, I don't know if I could. I've been trying as hard as I can not to think about it. Maybe...maybe I just need time to
get used to it. To get over what we've been to each other the last six months." He shrugged, but didn't look at Starsky, keeping his attention on the surveillance screen. "Time heals, right? Maybe in a year or so..." I'd start getting over you, went unsaid.

Starsky seemed upset, but didn't say anything.

Something inside Hutch started to rebel. "Okay, let me ask you something." He turned to face Starsky squarely. "After what happened last night, do you think you're really ready for a 'normal' life? You need to ask yourself some tough questions, Stark. I love you, I'm in love with you. Can you sit there and tell me you don't feel the same passion for me? Or are you going to try to deny how you felt last night?"

Starsky met his gaze steadily. "I'd never deny my feelings for you, Hutch. I couldn't tell that big a lie. I still love you, you gotta know that. But I love Rosey, too. I love you both differently, but the feelings are so strong, I can't back off them. It's tearing both of you apart, and me, too. I know I gotta do something, make a decision, hurt one of you more than I ever thought I could hurt anyone I loved. That's why I gotta know -- if it's Rosey, how would you deal with it? Deal with me?" He swallowed hard and then asked the question he'd been working himself up to the whole time. "Would you leave me?"

That's what Rosey would do, Hutch realized suddenly. And he knows it. She's left him before. If he chose me, she'd leave the city. She couldn't bear to remain here where she might have to see him, be reminded of her loss. And he can't face watching her walk away again. It hurt him too much the last time; so much, that he never really got over it.

Hutch wasn't sure Starsky had ever fully recovered from Terry's death, and, it seemed to him, since Gunther had nearly killed him, Starsky's tenacious grasp on life, in spite of the odds of his recovery, was just part of a personality that could no longer bear to lose whatever was precious to him, whether it was that silly car, the partner he loved, or the woman who'd miraculously returned to him once more.

As if his Captain were standing over his shoulder, Hutch heard Dobey's admonition about the lieutenant's exam.

Suddenly, the choices were clear. Spend the years until his retirement sitting beside Starsky, watching his back and bringing him home safe every night to his wife, all the while aching for his touch. Or take the lieutenant's exam and stop being Starsky's partner. Maybe then, without the torturing presence of his body in the car 12 hours a day, being Starsky's best man, his children's uncle, might be something bearable. If they were separated at work, if their powerful working intimacy were disrupted, there was a possibility that Hutch could some day recover, maybe even take joy in life again, possibly even think about some kind of future relationship of his own. But he'd never be able to do that with the specter of Starsky haunting his home, his bed, night after night. And if he had to ride with him every day, that was the only future he could see.

He looked at Starsky's anguished face and tried to think of how to tell him.

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Anita sidled up to Huggy where he stood behind the bar. The place was crowded, noisy. They were making money, so Huggy was happy. He watched Anita approach, then nodded at her as she drew near and nudged him in the side.

His eyes asked what the problem was and, without speaking, Anita glanced over at a far corner of the dimly lit bar.

Huggy followed her gaze, then his eyes widened in surprise. "How long?" he asked.


Huggy nodded and checked his watch. Night shift hours. Was that why? He sighed.

"You're never gonna find out standing there," Anita chided. He gave her a look she promptly ignored as she shoved a pitcher of soda at him. "Take a refill with you." Then she walked down the bar to check on the patrons Huggy would be leaving if he followed her recommendation.

Recommendation, ha! You mean her marching orders.

Anita was talking up the local patrons, making them laugh, encouraging them to stick around, have another. The bar was in good hands.

Huggy took the pitcher of cola and approached the table. As he refilled the nearly empty glass, he said, "This must be my lucky night. A beautiful damsel, all alone, with her blue knight nowhere to be seen. Far be it from me to miss a golden opportunity." He slid into the seat facing her.

Rosey managed a wan smile. "Hi, Huggy."

"Starsky meeting you here?" he asked, even though he knew it was no where near time for his mid-shift break, if he even got one on this weird stakeout gig.

She shook her head. "I just needed to get out of the house. Go somewhere."

"Well, you came to the right place. How's business?"

She managed a better smile. "It's very promising. This has always been a good city for the pottery I agent. I think we'll have a great year."

"That'll be a big help to those folks you're selling that stuff for."

"Yes, it'll make a big difference for them. Even a small amount of profit can help make important changes in their community."

Tired of beating around the bush, he reached over and enfolded her small hand in his larger one. "Rosey. You look like you could use a friend. Will I do?"

She seemed startled as if she never expected him to ask that. "I...I don't know if that would be really fair. You're David's friend. And Hutch's."
At least she didn't try to act like he didn't know anything. That was promising. "That's very true. But I don't see how being your friend conflicts with that. I certainly would never reveal any confidence either of them ever gave me. And I would never do that with you, either. Keeping information is my stock in trade, after all."

She stayed silent for a while, but he knew the look of someone who desperately needed a soul to talk to. Finally, she blurted, "If...if I'd had any idea what was going on with him, I'd have never come back here. I would've never interfered with his life. I feel like I've intruded into something so strong, and now I can't get out."

"Do you want to get out?" She wouldn't be the first woman he delivered a Dear John letter for.

She sagged in the chair. "I don't have the strength to leave him again. I was only able to do it once because of my father. Part of me says I should, but the part of me that loves him just can't let go."

"And he's not letting go, either," Huggy acknowledged.

"It's hurting him so much," she said quietly. "Me and him. Him and Hutch. I never knew loving someone, really loving them, could cause so much pain to others."

"It's hurting you, too," Huggy said.

"Yes, that's true. But if I'd never left him the first time...."

"Rosey, you can 'if' about anything in the world, and probably be right. But you can't live on what-if's, you've gotta deal with what's real. And what's real is your love for Starsky."

She nodded, managing to smile a little.

"And his love for you is just as real," Huggy added. "It's a rough road ahead for the three of you. There's no way around that. But your walking away from him the last time didn't make him stop loving you. It won't this time, either. So, even if you did, him and Hutch would still have that to deal with, and without it being really resolved in Starsky's head."

"So you're telling me to just tough it out?"

Huggy shrugged. "It's not my way to 'tell' folks what to do. I find most of the time, if you talk to them, or sometimes just listen, they usually figure that out on their own."

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Hutch got up and paced around the room. He walked away from the desk and the surveillance equipment, went around the side of it and wandered the few feet over to the window. Glancing out of it, he saw the same low-rent tenement neighborhood he and Starsky had spent more time in over the years than he could remember. A few buildings to the left stood the place where they'd gone after Ralph Bellamy. Across and to the right was the building that housed the suspect's apartment, the dark, empty apartment that caused them to be trapped in this dismal
place hour after hour. Featureless tenements filled with tenants just as trapped as they were right now. He rubbed the back of his neck, aware of Starsky’s eyes watching his every move. When he didn’t return to the seat, Starsky moved over to Hutch’s seat in front of the surveillance equipment and gave it a quick check-over.

He was grateful Starsky was giving him time to answer. He had a feeling that whatever he might say next would change everything between them, one way or the other.

He tried to imagine himself in Starsky’s shoes and couldn’t. He couldn’t imagine himself loving anyone else with the same intensity with which he loved Starsky. He paused. Maybe Gillian. He thought back, reluctant to resurrect that painful memory. He’d loved Gillian so much. If Gillian could come back, would he be torn between her and Starsky? Possibly. Probably. He couldn’t say he loved them the same way, but that wasn’t what Starsky was saying either. Would it be so easy for him to choose if he were the one in the middle?

A strange calm settled over him as he watched the darkened street and the few people walking around it. Not many were willing to risk wandering this neighborhood in the dark. The one thing he could do for Starsky would be to help him. Make the decision easier. Take up some of that burden. That’s what friends -- partners -- were for. To help carry the weight. If there were any hope that time could heal this wound, then he may as well get started now.

Hutch moved back around the side of the desk and sat down in the same backwards-facing chair Starsky had been sitting in, where he could face Starsky. Having satisfied himself that all the surveillance equipment was doing its job and that nothing in the camera’s field had changed, Starsky quickly gave up any pretense of paying attention to it, and turned to look at Hutch.

Hutch couldn’t help but notice the new lines of worry that were etched around Starsky’s eyes. Impulsively, he leaned forward across the end of the desk and brushed his knuckles against Starsky’s temple. Starsky leaned into it, much like a cat would a caress, and it touched Hutch’s heart that Starsky still desired that kind of contact with him.

"I could never leave you," Hutch murmured, "at least, not like you mean. No matter what happens, Starsky, you and me, our friendship -- my love for you -- that’s forever. You’ve got to believe that. What we're going through now, that'll pass sooner or later and we'll come out the other side stronger than ever. But..." Hutch had to pause for a minute to swallow. The words lodged in his throat, as if they didn’t want to pass through and bring about the events he dreaded even though he could see no other outcome. "But that doesn’t mean things won’t change between us. They’ll have to change. We don't have to make that be an end. Just a difference."

Starsky looked anxious. "What do you mean? What kind of change? What difference?"

"Well, the most obvious one is, we can't be lovers anymore. We were lucky we got away with it for as long as we did. It was a pretty risky situation any way you look at it. But we can't continue like that. What happened last night was dangerous for us both personally and professionally. You've already said you wouldn't want to continue that if you married Rosey, and I'm glad you feel that way. I hope our relationship meant more to you than that. So that's the most obvious change. Then...you’re thinking of getting married."
Starsky looked like he was about to protest, but Hutch raised his hand to forestall whatever he might say. "I know you're just thinking right now, that you haven't made a final decision. But it makes sense for you to get married, settle down, have the children you've been waiting to have. You can't do that with me. And you've always wanted a family. But when you get married, Starsk, things will change between us. Not just because we won't be lovers anymore, but because the relationship between friends who are single and friends who are married is different.

"You'll be married. I won't. It's just natural that your focus and your energy will have to be devoted to your family. We'll spend less time together. You'll spend less time at work. We've seen it happen to other partners when one of them got married." He shrugged and tried to seem cavalier about it. "It's just the way of nature. Some things even we can't fight."

The expression on Starsky's face was so intense, Hutch wasn't sure how to read it. He realized some of these issues hadn't crossed Starsky's mind. But all Starsky said was, "You've been thinking about this a lot."

Hutch glanced away. "Yeah. Guess I have." He paused, then finally charged ahead. "I've been thinking about a lot of things. There, uh, there's going to be a lieutenant's exam coming up pretty soon. Dobey told me about it. He thinks I should go out for it. I've been thinking...he's probably right."

Starsky looked as stunned as if Hutch had thrown water in his face. "Lieutenant's exam? But...but Hutch, if you got promoted we couldn't be -- " The dawning realization must've hit him all at once, because he sat back hard in the chair, looking around as if searching for answers to something he thought he'd always known. "You don't want to be partners anymore?"

The words cut Hutch deeper than anything Starsky had ever said to him, even though they were the truth. To defray his own pain, he said softly, "I don't want to be partners with anyone else. But, Starsk... If you decide to marry Rosey, if you really want me to be your best friend, to dance at your wedding, and play with your kids. The only way I'll be able to do that is if I can pull away a little. You can't really expect me to spend all day with you and...and send you home to her every day? If we're not in each other's pocket all day, I can get some distance from all this, from my feelings for you. Put it in perspective. Get over it. And we can stay friends, stay part of each other's lives, while I build a life for myself. I...I can't live some kind of shadow existence, and if I'm with you all day, that's all I'll ever have. Because I won't be able to stop waiting...hoping that you might come back to me. That won't be good for either of us, not for our friendship, or our working relationship. Can't you understand that?"

Having managed to say the hardest thing he'd ever said to anyone, Hutch completely ran out of steam. Starsky sat there looking shell-shocked, and not saying anything while Hutch tried to fathom what was going on behind those tortured blue eyes.

Starsky shook his head in dismay, but the only thing he could say was, "You don't want to be partners anymore."

The hurt in those words nearly destroyed Hutch. It was everything he could do to keep from gathering Starsky in his arms to console him, even while his own heart was breaking.
The words kept echoing through Starsky's mind over and over. *Hutch doesn't want to be partners anymore.* Out of all the things Hutch had said, it was the only thing he could grab hold of, the only reality he could recognize.

Out of all the different scenarios and possibilities he'd come up with, that one had never occurred to him. It made him feel dense to be taken by surprise by such a logical idea. He tried to envision himself with other detectives in the car, but it was impossible. The only one who could be there was Hutch. There couldn't be anyone else. He tried to imagine going to work every day and only seeing Hutch occasionally as he worked in another department, on another floor. It was too bleak a concept for him to accept.

*Snap out of it!* he ordered himself. *Be reasonable. You wanted Hutch to accept the possibility of you marrying Rosey. He's doing that. You wanted him to stay your friend, your best friend. He's telling you that if he does this, he can still do that.*

But all that rational discussion wasn't getting him anywhere. The only thing he kept seeing was that empty car seat in the Torino, working day in and day out without the one thing that had kept him going through the years.

He suddenly realized that all this time he been trying to come up with a way to keep them both -- Rosey at home and Hutch in the car -- and this was the first time someone had finally said no. He'd loved Hutch all the years that they'd worked together, and it was that love, that profound friendship, that made the work something more than a day to get through. What would the years be like without Hutch beside him -- to no longer be able to look at problems from Hutch's different viewpoint, or laugh at his jokes, or humor his weird dietary choices, or cheer him up when he was hurt? And most important, what would the years be like without Hutch loving him as fiercely as Hutch had always loved him? Starsky had a sudden shocking memory of the night before, of Hutch taking him by storm. That was Hutch, his passion, his caring, his depth of feeling, all right there, laid out plain to see, to feel. Was he really ready to never share that again? Was he ready to sit in that car without Hutch?

Desperately, he struggled to find the words that would change Hutch's mind. "You...you can't be serious about...about the lieutenant's exam, Hutch. You hate all that paperwork and budget stuff, and all the politics, and that's all that job is, all the time!"

Hutch looked at him with that Zen expression he always got once he made up his mind about something. "I'm in love with you, Starsky," he said quietly. "I can't spend the rest of my life with you in arm's reach and never touch you. You can't ask me to do that."

"Well, no, but..." *Hutch doesn't want to be partners anymore!* It was like a neon light strobing in his brain, and he couldn't think past it, around it. "Hutch, I...I love you, too!"

Hutch nodded. "Then you have to let me go. It's the only way we can save our friendship, and that's the most important thing to both of us."
Starsky was hovering on the edge of an emotional melt-down. He struggled to get a grip on his feelings. He never could win Hutch over that way. He'd have to think his way through this. But the strobe light in his brain wasn't letting many clear thoughts get through. "No, Hutch, no. There's got to be another way. I can't imagine you not being there with me, working... Hutch, I--"

"I know it won't be easy, Starsk, but in time I think you'll realize it's the best thing for both of us. You deserve to live a normal life, have a normal family. And I...I'll need time to find myself again. Who I am, What I want. A new position will give me a different view of a lot of things. You're upset about this now, but after a while you'll see I'm right. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Starsky squeezed his eyes shut before he started to weep. He wanted to run out of the room, race down the stairs, and run as far and as fast as he could to escape the terrible pain in his heart. Like the way he'd run that day Rosey left him.

He remembered that moment with perfect clarity and how much that hurt, how much pain he'd been in. Hutch had been there for him, consoling him, comforting him, joking with him, taking him out, trying to distract him from his sorrow. And it had helped so much. Who was going to help him through this loss? Rosey couldn't even if she tried. Because she was the origin of it. Just like the last time. No, not quite like the last time.

He felt so confused and anguished he couldn't think straight.

He had a sudden mental image almost as clear as the persistent nightmare that plagued him. He was in the same park where Rosey had left him for her father. Only this time, both Hutch and Rosey were walking away from him at opposite angles. If he moved, he could stop one of them, but not both. If he didn't move, he'd lose everything. He bolted forward, frantic, racing as fast as he could, even though they kept drawing farther and farther away.

And suddenly he realized the one he was chasing was Hutch.

Rosey's image dissolved as Hutch turned and held out his arms. Oh, God, Hutch, don't leave me! Don't ever leave me!

Starsky sucked in a harsh breath, and opened his eyes. Hutch was watching him with a sorrowful expression. The pain etched on his face was suddenly so clear, Starsky couldn't understand why he hadn't seen it before. Pain you put there. Pain you can take away.

He leaned forward across the table, reaching towards Hutch's face, wanting to touch him, tell him he loved him too much to let him go. He loved him enough to let Rosey go instead. He could only have one of them, and he knew now who he had to release. The dreams of marriage, family, a "normal" life, were just not as important as the crushing emptiness he felt at the thought of losing Hutch.

He swallowed hard, struggling to find the words. His throat was so choked with emotion, he knew his voice would crack.
Hutch, seeing Starsky's hand reaching for him, drew back, as if reluctant to permit the touch. As Hutch moved out of the chair and walked away from the desk, Starsky realized Hutch was pulling away from him already, resigned to the decisions he'd made for both their good. Would he be able to convince Hutch to stay with him, now that Hutch had made his own difficult choice?

"Hutch, wait..." he started to say.

Out of the corner of his eye, Starsky saw something move on the surveillance monitor, the screen that had been steadfastly unchanging for days, the screen they'd ignored while working out their complex emotional problems. He turned, saw a flash of red hair and a figure lifting something, pointing it out the window --

"Hutch, get down!" Starsky shouted as he threw himself onto the floor. He grabbed for his gun as the surveillance monitor exploded in a spray of sparks as bullets destroyed it. The chattering sound of rapid gun fire raked the room. Bullets smashed the window to glass slivers that showered over the desk, the chairs, and Starsky's prostate body, then slammed destructively into walls, doors, furniture.

The bulk of the desk was between him and Hutch, blocking his view, but Starsky saw Hutch hit the floor as the desk splintered around them. Then the recliner took multiple hits, stuffing and leather flying everywhere. A line of bullets stitched across the sofa and the back wall.

Flattening tighter to the floor, Starsky spied their high-powered rifle perched at the side of the destroyed window. Close. Close enough? If he could get to the rifle -- The firing stopped suddenly.

"DIE, YOU FUCKIN' PIGS! I'LL KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU BASTARDS!"

Barstow's shouts echoed down the canyon of the street and around the room, but only for the briefest moment before the gunfire erupted again.

Realizing he hadn't heard anything from Hutch, Starsky turned to find him. "Hutch? Hutch!" He crawled around the side of the desk to get a clear view of his partner.

Hutch was struggling to his knees in spite of the bullets flying randomly around the room. He clutched at his throat.

"Hutch, get down!" Starsky shouted, as he started crawling on his belly over to him. "Get down!"

As Hutch collapsed suddenly, Starsky realized there was blood pouring through Hutch's fingers, blood running down the front of his shirt.

Seeing a radio that had fallen near Hutch's shoulder, Starsky grabbed it, thumbed it on. "Mayday! Mayday! Officer down! This is Zebra Three. We're pinned down here. Barstow's firing on us with automatic weapons. Where the hell is everybody?" He stopped suddenly, realizing he hadn't taken his finger off the switch, that no one could answer him until he released it.
"We copy Zebra Three," the familiar dispatcher said calmly. "Shots fired reported at your location. Backup is enroute."

"We need an ambulance, now! Hutch is down. I need a doctor in here!"

A bullet hit the old mirror hanging on the wall and the sound of the shattering glass ended any chance of him hearing the response.

"Doctor, hell, I need a fucking SWAT team!"

He dropped the radio and scooted closer to Hutch's side, but his partner was once again trying to rise. "Stay down, dammit, Hutch! Take it easy. Help's on the way." Starsky's voice was shaking. He grabbed Hutch's shoulder, making him jerk away as if in pain. When Starsky looked at his hand, it was covered in blood. "How many times did you get hit? Oh, god, Hutch!"

Hutch was moving his mouth, but nothing was coming out but blood. Starsky pulled at Hutch's hand where it gripped his throat, trying to see the severity of the wound. There were too many big veins and arteries in there, the carotid, if it was even nicked --

Hutch didn't have the strength to resist him and released his throat. Starsky couldn't believe the gaping wound that stared back at him from the middle of Hutch's neck, just below his Adam's apple. He realized it had to be the exit wound from the bullet he'd taken in the back. Something about the weird trajectory, or the way Hutch was moving when it hit caused it to travel through his body, up and out the front of his throat. Air whistled sickly out of the wound as Hutch struggled to breathe. Blood streamed out of his mouth and nose.

*Ohmigod, Hutch is dying!*

He felt momentarily paralyzed as that terrifying thought seized him. Then Hutch coughed convulsively, spraying red droplets from his mouth and the wound, covering Starsky with his blood.

Another burst of gunfire ripped through the room and Starsky forced Hutch down to the ground, making him moan in pain. "Easy, boy, easy. Help's coming." Pieces of the ceiling fell over them in a drift of plaster and dust.

Hutch rolled onto his back and started choking, blood bubbling from his mouth and throat, and Starsky realized he could be drowning in his own blood. Quickly, he rolled him onto his side while scrabbling in his pocket for his handkerchief.

"Cough it up, Hutch. Come on, you gotta cough it up. You gotta keep breathing."

Roughly, with shaking hands, he shoved the handkerchief into Hutch's mouth, trying to swab out the blood. Hutch must've realized that's what he was doing because he cooperated even as he gasped for air. Hutch's hands were shaking and sticky with blood as he clutched weakly at Starsky's arms. His color had gone pasty white, and the skin around his eyes had a sickly bluish tinge. The horrible whistling sound that squealed through the open wound tore at Starsky. It sounded like a death rattle.
"Don't die on me, Hutch, you hear me? You can't die on me, you can't!" His words were drowned in a battery of random bullet fire.

Starsky fumbled for the radio. "Where the fuck are you people?" he yelled into it.

A stray shot ricochet off a radiator, narrowly missing them.

Starsky grabbed Hutch's arm roughly. "Keep breathing, damn you! Don't you dare stop!"

Hutch looked glassy-eyed, but he met Starsky's gaze and clutched weakly at his arm, as if in agreement.

Starsky couldn't wait anymore. Barstow was going to kill them through sheer persistence if he didn't do something. Belly-crawling to the rifle, Starsky sat up, pressing into the corner of the room beside the window frame. The walls would be reinforced here because it was also the corner of the building. If he could pick his moment, he might have a chance to spot that red-headed bastard. He peeked around the edge of the window and nearly lost his eye as Barstow fired and the window frame splintered.

_That guy must have vision like a cat._

There was another short burst of fire and then sudden silence. Starsky waited a beat. Barstow had been firing hard, round after round. Did his weapon overheat? Was it jammed? If he waited much longer, Hutch would die. There's no way any medical help could get up here while Barstow was shooting up the whole neighborhood. It would take SWAT too long to set up.

He counted to five, raised the rifle and moved it into position, then quickly glanced around the window frame just enough to aim. At first he couldn't see anything, but then he saw a shadow shift in the window of Barstow's apartment. He wasn't sure what it was -- Then realized it was Barstow re-loading.

He spied Barstow's bright red hair as the gunman lifted his reloaded weapon and yelled, "If you ain't dead yet, pigs, you're gonna be!"

"Oh, no, we're not," Starsky murmured as Barstow took aim right at him. Starsky squeezed off a round, milliseconds before Barstow's finger pulled the trigger.

Barstow fell back into the apartment and everything went still. Starsky waited two beats for him to move, to indicate some life, but there was nothing coming from Barstow's place.

"Hope that parted your hair, you fucker," Starsky muttered. Hitting the floor, he scrambled back to Hutch, staying low just in case Barstow still had any fight left in him. He wasn't about to be suckered now.

The silence was eerie without the deafening rattle of gunfire. It made the sound of air whistling obscenely through Hutch's open wound even more haunting. _But at least he's alive. He's still breathing, so he's gotta be alive._
His hands hovered for a moment over Hutch, unsure of where he could touch and not cause more pain. Hutch's color looked terrible, his face pasty white against the blood spattered all over him. He seemed only semi-conscious. Then he started to cough, rolling onto his back again. Suddenly, his stomach heaved and he rolled back over before Starsky could help him and vomited blood all over the floor. The effort nearly caused Hutch to collapse right into it.

"No, no, no," Starsky said, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him back towards him. "Come on, sit up. Try and sit up. Maybe that'll help you breathe better." He hauled Hutch up onto his lap, leaning against the base of the recliner, clutching Hutch to him like a child. Hutch suddenly coughed and a goblet of coagulated blood flew from his mouth to spatter on Starsky's shirt. Then Hutch sucked in air hard.


The terrible whistling sound grew keener. Starsky realized all the damaged tissue in Hutch's throat had to be swelling closed. Hutch's eyes were glazed, and Starsky wasn't sure he was even conscious anymore.

"Wait, Hutch, wait. Come on, now. You can't leave me. Please, Hutch, don't leave me, not now, huh? Hutch, I love you, you know that, love you more than anyone in this whole world. You gotta believe that."

Hutch was fighting for breath, each inhalation harder than the last. Starsky realized Hutch was beyond hearing him. He looked up and talked to the only one left who could. "Oh, please, God, don't punish me for hurting these two people by doin' this to Hutch."

The radio beside them squawked their call name and he grabbed it, frantically. "Zebra Three here. I need a doctor now!"

"We've got one right here, Starsky," Dobey said. "What's the situation with Barstow? There's been no gunfire for two minutes. SWAT's trying to get to Barstow's apartment."

Starsky rolled his eyes. "I shot him, Captain. Don't know if he's dead, but I don't think he's playin' possum. I need that doctor!"

"This is Dr. Levy, Detective," said a new voice over the radio. "We're on our way, trying to get in safely through the rear of the building. I'm with a team of paramedics and SWAT officers. I'm a trauma specialist from Memorial."

"My partner's shot in the throat and in the back. He's breathing, but air's coming out of his throat wound and...and there's a lot of blood."

In his arms, Hutch shuddered, trying to cough again.

"Can you get him to sit up?" the doctor asked. Starsky could hear other sounds in the background like people running, voices, he could hear Dobey barking orders like crazy off in the distance.
"I've got him sitting up," Starsky said, absurdly grateful that he'd done something right.

"We're in the building and climbing the stairs. We're almost there. Is his mouth full of blood? Can you tell if his mouth and throat are obstructed?"

Starsky looked for his handkerchief but couldn't find it, then dug into Hutch's back pocket for his. He managed to get Hutch's mouth open and swabbed it with the clean cloth. He was alarmed at how much blood had accumulated since he'd done this just a few minutes before. He wiped at the blood coming from Hutch's nose. His moustache was caked with it. "I...I think his mouth is clear. There's so much blood. His color's real bad and he's coughing -- "

The front door suddenly swung open. Instinctively, Starsky dropped the radio, drew his Baretta and aimed, shielding Hutch with his body.

"Detective Starsky!" A man in hospital scrubs with a radio in one hand stood perfectly still as a crowd of people gathered behind him. "I'm Dr. Levy. Lower your weapon. I'm here to help your partner."

Starsky felt like someone let the air of him. His left hand suddenly weighed a hundred pounds as it dropped to the floor, the gun hitting with a clatter. He managed to thumb the safety back on, as the room quickly filled with Dr. Levy, paramedics, SWAT team members, and other cops.

Dobey was with them.

"Detective Starsky," Dr. Levy said firmly, "you've done a good job. You've saved your partner. Now, let the me and the paramedics have him so we can help him even more."

Starsky clung to Hutch's limp form. They wanted to take Hutch away?

"Come on, Detective Starsky," Levy said. "You've got to let me at him."

"Starsky!" Dobey barked at him, clamping a big hand on his shoulder. "Are you shot?"

Me? What are they worried about me for? Hutch is the one -- Dimly, he realized he was covered with Hutch's blood. There was no way for the them to tell that they both weren't wounded.

The paramedics were like a swarm of white-coated ants, gathering around Hutch with the doctor at their center, even while Hutch lay heavily against Starsky's chest. He felt Hutch's weight lifting, and suddenly his arms were empty. They carried him in that sitting position, and put him on the gurney with its back raised up. He could only see Hutch's legs as the medics surrounded him, and being unable to see Hutch's face nearly caused him to panic. He lunged for Hutch, but there were a hundred hands on him, holding him back. He fought them, but there were too many.

Suddenly, Dobey was directly in front of him, blocking his vision. "Starsky! Starsky! Answer me. Have you been shot? Are you hurt?"

He realized it was other cops and SWAT members restraining him, a whole army it felt like. What did Dobey want? "Me? No, nothing's wrong with me. But Hutch.... Cap, Hutch is dyin'!"
Dobey grabbed his shoulders as if to anchor him to the ground. "Starsky, the doctor has him. They emergency room is waiting for him. We're taking him there now. He's going to be all --"

Starsky lunged again. "I gotta go with him! Let me go with him to the hospital." The men just held him back.

"You can't, Starsky. They need to work on him in the ambulance, there's no room for you. I'll take you there. But you've gotta calm down."

Calm down? What's he talking about? Hutch is dying and, I never told him. He doesn't know. "Captain, I never got to tell him before Barstow started shooting! He doesn't know I changed my mind. I need to let him know --"

"Starsky!" Dobey shouted, and the sound was so intense and the order in it so clear that habit overrode panic. Starsky stopped struggling.

He swallowed, trying to get a grip on his unreasoning panic. He felt close to tears, but realized he was still on duty, that he still had responsibilities. He drew a shuddering breath and nodded. "Okay, Captain. Okay. I'm all right now."

Dobey looked him sharply in the eye and then, apparently satisfied, he nodded at the men surrounding Starsky and they released him.

"Take it easy, Dave," Dobey said gently. "Hutch's in good hands. The best. Dr. Levy was on his way to his shift at Memorial when he heard the news report. He was nearby so called the station and volunteered his services, then drove over here instead. Now, go in the bathroom and wash up."

He glanced at his hands that were spattered with droplets of blood from Hutch's coughing, and realized his face had to look the same since they they'd been in such close contact. The tiny, grungy bathroom mirror was still intact, and confirmed that he was coated in bright red blood -- his hands, face, hair, jacket. For a second, as he washed his hands, watching the fresh blood run down the sink almost made him lose it all over again, but he knew he couldn't. He had to get to the hospital. He had to be with Hutch. He scrubbed his hands and face, and with the water running and his hands covering his eyes he yielded and allowed himself a quick emotional release, sobbing once hard, then slapping himself with cold water to rein himself back in before he lost it completely.

No time for that! Gotta get to Hutch! Wait for me, Hutch. Please, God, let Hutch wait for me!

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"Huggy," Rosey said, "it's really late. I need to go home and get some sleep, and you need to start closing up."

He smiled and nodded. "You gonna be okay?" He already knew the answer was only for the moment, but he'd settle for that. This woman's problem was way too big for a simple bartender to solve.
"Sure." She patted his hand. "It always helps to share things with a friend. Thank you."

He shook his head. "When the day comes when I can't find time to talk with a pretty lady, that'll be the day they start playin' that really sad music over my box."

"Huggy!" Anita called from the bar.

He looked up sharply. She sounded worried. Was one of the regulars getting too rowdy, too much for her to handle? "Excuse me, Rosey, I'll be right back," he said, and left the booth.

As he got to the bar, he saw Anita pointing to the TV set that had a news station on. "Huggy! Look! Listen to what they're saying."

A reporter was standing on a dark street, but behind him stood a huge array of cop cars and emergency vehicles. Something big was going down. Anita turned the sound up on the set.

"...And we understand one of the undercover police officers who was on surveillance at the scene of the sniper attack has been shot. We don't know what his condition is. We do know the sniper, tentatively identified as Randy Barstow, who's been on a weeks-long killing spree, was using a high-velocity weapon and firing wildly. Initial reports are that one of the officers at the scene managed to shoot and kill Barstow, ending his deadly rampage, but not, perhaps, in time to save his own partner."

"Huggy," said Anita worryingly, "isn't that the neighborhood where Starsky and -- " she glanced to the side, and Huggy followed her gaze.

Rosey was standing beside him, her face white. "That's the neighborhood David and Hutch are working in! Which one of them -- ?"

She stopped before he could say anything. Over the reporter's shoulder, they could see a group of paramedics wheeling a gurney to a waiting ambulance. There were so many paramedics, it was impossible to figure out who might be on the cart.

"Every day that he's been out there," Rosey said, her voice strained, "I've worried about him. He's been distracted. I was afraid all our problems would -- " she couldn't continue as they loaded the injured person into the ambulance and shut the doors.

Anita reached over the bar and grabbed Huggy's sleeve. "I'll close up; don't worry about the bar. You'd better get her to the hospital before she needs a doctor herself."

Glancing at Rosey's pasty complexion, Huggy agreed. "Come on, Rosey. Let's go to Memorial." He'd have them there in record time. It was a trip Huggy was all too familiar with.

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Starsky paced nervously in the waiting room. He'd lost all track of time. He couldn't believe he was trapped in this do-nothing, see-nothing, know-nothing place while Hutch fought for his life somewhere else without him, maybe dying. No, he thought desperately. *He can't be dying. Hutch*
would never leave me -- Then he stopped. Hutch had planned to leave him, to leave the partnership. For Starsky's own good. That was the last thought in Hutch's head before he'd been shot. Starsky hadn't even had a chance to tell him that he couldn't live with that, that just the threat of it was enough to make everything in his life suddenly clearer. But Hutch didn't know that. Hutch thought that leaving Starsky was the best gift Hutch could give him. Thoughts like that could make a person give up, just fade away when their life was in the balance. If he could only get to Hutch and tell him --

A large obstacle was suddenly in his path, forcing him to look up.

"Here, son," Dobey said gravely, "drink this."

It was a cup of hospital-brewed coffee. It might as well have been an art object from an alien culture for all it meant to Starsky right then. He took the cup just to please Dobey and tried to start pacing again.

"Wait a minute, Starsky," Dobey said, putting a hand on his chest. "You and I need to talk. Now, I've held Epstein and his people off for a while, citing the unknown condition of your partner and your mental state right now, but I can't hold them off forever. Sooner or later you're going to have to give a statement, and my guess is it'll be sooner."

Starsky tried to force himself to care about the things Dobey was saying to him.

"So, you'd better tell me first," Dobey continued. "What happened in there, Starsky? How the hell did Barstow get the drop on you? Why didn't you see him before he started firing?"

Reality came crushing in on Starsky, and the weight of it forced him to collapse into a nearby chair. He took a big swallow of the tepid brew, then put it on a table. Leaning his elbows on his knees, he held his head. Yeah. He'd better talk to Dobey before the feds got a hold of him.

"We weren't paying attention to the monitor," Starsky said honestly.

Dobey frowned. "Come on, Starsky. You've been a cop too long. You and Hutch can pay attention to a monitor, play pinochle, and argue about the latest Dodgers game all at the same time. What do you mean you weren't paying attention to the monitor? There wasn't anything else to do in that place."

"Hutch and I--" he paused trying to figure out what to say, how to say it. "We...we got into an argument about some personal stuff." He knew that wouldn't be enough for Dobey, never mind the feds. Suddenly, he remembered something, and a wave of anger passed over him.

He looked up at Dobey, seeing the surprise register over the abrupt change in his attitude. "It was your idea for Hutch to take the lieutenant's exam! He told me that. He told me he wanted to end the partnership. We were arguing."

Without missing a beat, Dobey said, "What made him bring that up? It wasn't just my mentioning it to him, because whenever I did, he just tuned me out. So something had to have
changed that made him make a decision he wasn't willing to just a few hours before. What happened?"

*You think Dobey knows?* Hutch had asked him just a few weeks before.

*I think he knows,* Starsky admitted, *but as long as we don't do it on his desk, I don't think he cares.* Starsky had a feeling that Dobey cared a whole lot right now.

"I was talking to him about Rosey," Starsky admitted. "I was talking about what would happen...if I married her."

Dobey nodded, as though that sentence said so much more than that.

"Then Hutch told me you wanted him to take the lieutenant's exam. But that...that would mean the end of our partnership."

"That had never occurred to you?" Dobey asked bluntly. "You thought you could keep them both right where you wanted them? Rosey at home, Hutch at work? Is that really the kind of life you wanted for Hutch?"

Starsky dropped his head into his hands again, feeling like the top of it was about to come off. "I couldn't see past my own hurt, Captain. I just knew I didn't want anything to change. I wanted Hutch with me, my partner, the only partner I've ever cared about."

Dobey moved closer to him and spoke in a lower tone, even though they were the only two people in the waiting room. "I've known a lot of partners in my time, Starsky. Had a few good ones myself. And I've known a lot of married couples as well. And I'll tell you that I've never seen another human being love anyone the way that man loves you."

Starsky closed his eyes, feeling a mantle of grief surround him. "You think I don't love him the same? You think, because Rosey came back and my feelings for her were still there, that I don't love Hutch?" Dobey didn't answer that, and that was answer enough. Starsky decided to be completely honest. "When Hutch said he'd decided to take the lieutenant's exam, I nearly panicked. I just hadn't thought that he'd end the partnership. I couldn't deal with it. The thought of losing the partnership, it was more than I could handle. I always knew I was going to have to make a decision, a real decision between the two of them sooner or later. And when Hutch sounded so sure, like he'd made up his mind for good, I knew I couldn't lose him like that."

Dobey looked puzzled. "Did you tell him?"

Starsky lurched out of the seat and started pacing again. "I never got the chance! Just before I could say anything, I saw Barstow's image in the monitor, and the next thing we knew it was Pearl Harbor day."

"So, this discussion pulled your attention away so much," Dobey continued, "that by the time you saw Barstow -- "
"It was too late. He had the drop on us. He must've caught Hutch with the first round. I hit the ground and yelled at Hutch, but I think he'd already been shot. Once it started, it happened so fast --"

He stopped moving, reliving everything in painful detail. "What do you want me to tell Epstein?" He was prepared to tell the entire truth. What was the point of hiding anything now?

Dobey sighed. "Everything in the apartment's been destroyed by gunfire. They're not going to get anything usable out of the VCR or anything else up there. From the way things looked in Barstow's apartment, it seemed like he'd only been in there a couple of minutes before he spotted the camera and went on the attack. Epstein himself told you guys to relax and take it easy, since the possibility of Barstow getting into the city without being spotted seemed so slim."

Dobey shrugged. "Tell Epstein the truth -- you and Hutch got involved in shop talk about Hutch taking the lieutenant's exam and Barstow got the drop on you. He doesn't need all the other details. How much can he say? You stopped Barstow with one bullet right between the eyes and no civilian casualties."

Starsky looked at Dobey, dismayed. "If I'd been paying attention, Hutch wouldn't be in emergency surgery now!"

Dobey's gaze was steely. "You're damned right about that. Whatever happens to Hutch in there, ultimately, will be because you let your emotional life override your professional one. You'll have to carry that one forever, Starsky."

Starsky hung his head, aching inside.

Dobey wasn't finished with him. "And if -- when Hutch recovers, I still want him to take the lieutenant's exam. Now, more than ever!"

"What -- !"

"I blame myself. I should've never let your partnership continue after I realized what you'd come to mean to each other. I knew it wasn't safe. But you both worked so hard for you to recover after Gunther's hit, I didn't feel like I could do that. But, now, I'm telling you, Hutch should take the lieutenant's exam -- and you should take whatever leave you need to get enough college credits so you can take it, too. It's time for you both to move on. Your experience and expertise can be used better elsewhere. There are other ways to be partners than on the streets."

Starsky shook his head. "I can't think about any of that right now, Cap. Not with Hutch lying in there -- Fightin' to live. His throat -- "

Dobey put a hand on his shoulder, comfortingly. But before he could say anything, the waiting room doors opened. Huggy entered, and with him was Rosey.

"Rosey?" Starsky said, confused. "What are you doing here? How did you -- ?"
"It was on the news," Huggy explained. "All except which one of you got hurt. They told us in admittance. Is Hutch -- ?"

Rosey looked pale and seemed almost afraid to approach him. He realized his clothes were full of blood, that there still had to be traces of it all over him. "David, are you alright?" She couldn't seem to make the correlation between his apparently healthy condition and his outward appearance.

He took her hands in his and kissed them. "I'm fine. I don't have a scratch. But Hutch...Hutch got shot really bad, because of me. I don't know if he's gonna make it."

"I can't believe this," Huggy moaned, sitting heavily in a chair. "How bad is bad?"

"We really don't know," Captain Dobey said. "We know he was shot in the back -- "

Rosey gasped, her eyes wide.

"And there's another wound in his throat," Starsky told them. "They haven't told us a thing since they got him here. We've just been waiting."

"Oh, David!" Rosey whispered. "I'm so sorry!" Her eyes filled with tears, and in spite of the blood covering him, she embraced him.

Starsky surrounded her with his arms, gripping her tight. Her comfort was nearly enough to unravel him completely. He buried his face in her hair. "I don't know what I'm gonna do if I lose him," he said.

He heard Captain Dobey say quietly, "Come on, Huggy. Let me buy you some coffee." And the two men left Starsky and Rosey in private.

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"Huggy, are you all right?" Dobey asked as they left the waiting room for a bank of vending machines nearby. "You look a little rocky."

"I think I've just hit my death-bed-vigil limit," Huggy said, looking morose. "Those two have burned up more lives than a passel of cats and I feel like I've been right on hand to watch each one of 'em pass on. I just can't believe we're back here in the same damned hospital in the same situation that we were less than a year ago. I think those two need some serious career counseling, Captain. They can't keep going on like this."

Dobey almost smiled. They were lucky to have a friend like Huggy. "Right now, they've got more to sort out than just their careers," Dobey said.

Huggy looked at him suspiciously as Dobey handed him the small cup of vending-machine coffee. "What do you mean?"
"Come on, Huggy. I was here with you last year, remember? I'm the one who took Hutch to the hospital, just like I took Starsky tonight. I'm not blind or deaf, and I live in the same world you do. And John Blaine was one of my best friends. Don't make me spell it out."

Huggy nodded. "I dig. That lady in there's got a lot on her plate, too. They're all really good people. It don't seem right they've had to handle so much pain. I'm worried as hell about Hutch. But I'm worried, too, about what's gonna happen to Starsky if Hutch don't make it. I remember how crazy Hutch got last year."

"Starsky's blaming himself for this, too," Dobey told him. "And he's not wrong."

Huggy frowned. "I guess they're gonna need their friends now more than ever."

"I'll drink to that," Captain Dobey said, touching his paper cup to Huggy's.

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"Come on, David," Rosey said softly, urging him to move. "It's late. You've been up all night." She guided him over to a nearby couch and pulled him down onto it. "It could be hours before we know anything. You should try to get some rest."

How could he rest while Hutch was somewhere in this hospital struggling to survive? He shook his head. "Listen to me, honey. We've gotta talk."

She sat close to him as he held her hands tight. It was a comfort having her here. But as much as he loved her, he knew he had to be honest. "What happened to Hutch tonight was my fault. We...we were talking about what would happen if you and I got married."

Rosey looked near to tears. "You talked about that with him tonight? Was he upset?"

"No. He was...resigned, I guess. I think he'd already figured that was going to happen. He'd made all these plans. He said he was gonna take the lieutenant's exam." He could tell by her expression that she didn't understand the significance of that.

"If Hutch became a lieutenant," he explained, "then we couldn't be partners. It'd mean we wouldn't work together anymore. We'd still be friends, still see each other at Parker Center, but we'd be working with different people in different departments. And I...I couldn't handle that idea. In my head I guess I thought..."

"Somewhere inside, you thought you wouldn't have to give him up?" Rosey suggested. She didn't seem upset, but somber.

He held her gaze. "Rosey, I love you, I swear I do. I waited for you to come back to me, and held you in my heart all that time. You mean more to me than anyone on the planet...except Hutch. Tonight, when Hutch told me he was gonna take that test, go for a different job...when he told me he was leaving me to preserve our friendship... The thought of not having Hutch with me every day was more than I could face. And I felt really stupid that that's what it took for me to really figure it out."
She never let go of his hands, but she took a deep shuddering breath and nodded. "What did Hutch say when you told him that?"

Starsky shook his head, barely able to get the words out. "I never got to tell him. Barstow started firing on us before I said anything."

"Oh, David!" She hugged him and started crying and finally, he let himself cry, too. But who he was crying for -- himself, Rosey, or Hutch -- he honestly couldn't say.

Finally, she pulled away and composed herself. "I'm sorry, David, that I came back and complicated your life like this."

"Don't, Rosey," he said. "Don't say you're sorry. The time we've had together, I'll remember it forever. You'll always have a place in my heart."

She nodded. "I have to tell you something."

He looked at her, waiting.

"Tonight, I went to the Pits while you were working. I just couldn't stay alone in your place another night." She smiled ruefully. "I don't think you have any idea how many pictures of Hutch you have. I started to feel like everywhere I turned, he was staring at me, asking me why I'd come back here to ruin his life. That first night I saw you in the restaurant, just before Hutch spotted me -- he looked so happy, so radiant. I didn't put it together 'til later, but he looked like a man in love. He hasn't looked like that since. The few times I've seen him, he's looked shadowed. Haunted."

She paused, as if trying to collect her thoughts. "I couldn't stop thinking about it tonight, when you talked about getting married. Especially when he had to come to the house to get you. I couldn't figure out how Hutch could handle that, working with you every day, bringing you back to me. Yet, I wanted him to, because I knew there was no one in the world who could keep you safer. I knew Hutch would die for you. But, how could I ask anyone to do that, protect the person I loved so I could be with them when they couldn't? And how could Hutch bear to do it? I couldn't stop thinking about it." She ran a hand over her face, and sighed heavily.

"And then, tonight, when I saw that news report and had no idea who had been hurt, you or Hutch. The reporters said the police officer shot might have been killed; no one knew. I was so afraid, so sick inside. I didn't know how I could bear losing you. But losing Hutch was too terrible to think about. Who would protect you the way Hutch would? No one. Not like him. So, if Hutch died, or was disabled, and you went back to work without him -- every day I'd be waiting for that phone call. Every day I'd be watching the door, terrified, that what had happened to Hutch tonight might happen to you."

She looked intently into his eyes, her expression anguished. "Before I even arrived here, David, I realized I'd never survive as the wife of a cop. I couldn't face that terrible possibility day in and day out. I'm ashamed to tell you that. But I can't lie to you. I love you, David, more than I've ever loved any man except my father. But I came to understand tonight that I can't possibly love you as much as Hutch does."
Starsky took Rosey into his arms, hugging her tight, wishing with all his heart their lives could've ended up differently. "Oh, sweetheart...."

She hugged him back hard, then pushed gently away. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she struggled to find a smile for him. "You always did love Casablanca. You finally got to play Bogie."

He swallowed hard and kissed her, knowing it was goodbye.

He heard a throat-clearing cough and realized Dobey and Huggy were reentering the waiting room. But before Dobey could say anything to them, the trauma surgeon Dr. Levy came in. He was holding an x-ray folder.

Starsky was on his feet before he realized it. "Dr. Levy? How's Hutch? Is he okay?"

Levy looked grim. His clothes were bloody and Starsky realized that Hutch's blood covered both of them. "Your partner's in a lot of trouble, Sergeant Starsky." He walked over to an opaque white plate on the wall and switched it on. Removing one of the x-rays from the folder, he clipped it to the plate so they could see it. "Amazingly, Sergeant Hutchinson was only shot once by a high-velocity weapon. Be grateful it wasn't a hollow point. That would've killed him instantly." He pointed to the murky shadows on the picture. "The bullet entered his back by the shoulder and ricocheted off his shoulder blade, causing a hairline fracture. The ricocheted bullet, after bouncing off the bone, traveled up through his body. This slowed it down some as it traveled through the muscles of his neck. It managed to miss the vital organs and major blood vessels, and exited through the front of his throat."

Starsky stared at the gray and white x-ray, trying to make sense out of what the doctor was telling him. It just looked like a mess of smoke and shadows to him, like a jumble of ghosts wrestling on a black mat.

"As soon as your partner was shot," Levy continued, "he began inhaling and swallowing his own blood. All the tissues around the wound began swelling, and that, along with the inhaled blood, severely hampered his breathing."

"He vomited up a lot of blood while we were still being fired on," Starsky remembered.

Levy nodded. "He vomited more while we were treating him. We've sedated him pretty heavily so we could intubate him, put him on a ventilator, and provide a clear airway for him. We've had to insert chest tubes to re-inflate his lungs. I won't lie to you. His lungs are full of blood, he's in shock, and he's had a severe trauma. He's going to have to combat the severity of the bullet wounds, continual difficulty breathing, pneumonia, and shock. It's a complicated injury. It could be a complicated recovery."

"Can I see him?" Starsky asked.

The doctor shook his head. "He'll be in ICU in about an hour. But I don't think it would be a good idea for you see him. He'll be on a respirator, he'll be sedated. He won't be able to communicate -- "
"But I can communicate with him," Starsky said. "Look, Doc, less than a year ago I was in this same hospital, close to death. In fact, I had a cardiac arrest. And they'd just about given up on me when Hutch rushed into the hospital -- and my heart started up again. It's not scientific, but I know I could feel Hutch's presence when he was near me, hear what he was saying, even in my coma. The first time I came out of my coma it was because Hutch was in the room, talking to me. If I don't go see Hutch, if I don't talk to him -- he'll be alone. He could give up. I'm the closest person in the world to him! You gotta let me see him, talk to him -- !"

Dobey was suddenly holding onto Starsky's arm, pulling him back, and Starsky realized he was sounding frantic. "Easy, Starsky," Dobey murmured to him, then addressed the doctor. "Dr. Levy, Starsky has Hutch's Power of Attorney, as Hutch holds his. They've been partners for a long time. They're closer than brothers. I was here when Starsky was shot last year. I believe it's in Hutch's best interest to let Starsky see him if at all possible."

The doctor nodded. "All right. I believe in the therapy of human contact. But, Sergeant Starsky, you need to be prepared for Sergeant Hutchinson's condition. His color is bad, he's hooked up to a lot of equipment, and he'll only be semi-conscious, if that. He's got to stay sedated so he doesn't fight the ventilator tube. He's coughing a lot and respiratory technicians will be trying to aspirate his lungs. It's not pretty."

Starsky nodded. "It wasn't pretty when I was shot. Hutch was there for me. I won't get in the way."

Levy nodded. "I'll let the staff know." He glanced over where Rosey stood apart from Dobey and Starsky. Huggy was standing beside her, his arm around her for emotional support. "Is this Sergeant Hutchinson's wife?"

Before Starsky could say anything, Rosey gave a wan smile. "No, Doctor. I'm just a...friend."

When the doctor left, Starsky turned and took her in his arms, holding her tight. She returned the hug hard, then stepped back. Her eyes were glistening. "Rosey," he said through a tight throat.

She put her fingers over his lips, and shook her head. "Go see Hutch. Tell him I'm praying for him. Tell him to live a long time. Tell him that I wish you happiness. I...I'm going home, now."

To pack, he understood. She'd be leaving. Whatever happened, she wouldn't be able to stay. It felt like an ice pick in his heart. But he knew he had to let her go. He kissed her forehead. "I'll always love you, Rosey," he whispered. "Believe that."

She nodded, a tear sliding down her face. "I do. I love you, too." Giving him a quick kiss on his cheek, she turned and left the waiting room.

Starsky could barely believe that once again he was watching this woman walk away from him. For a moment he thought he wouldn't be able to breathe, the pain was so overwhelming. But then a technician entered as Rosey left.

"Are you Detective Starsky?" the technician asked. Starsky nodded, as the doors closed behind Rosey, blocking her retreating form. "Dr. Levy says you can come see Mr. Hutchinson now."
CHAPTER 7

Starsky stood outside the ICU observation window. It wasn't the same room he had been in after Gunther's shooting, not even the same room Hutch had nearly died in during the Plague, but it was close enough as made no difference. He stood tensely in front of the window, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. His hands were closed fists, his whole body wound up tight. He wanted to do something, anything, not just stand here passively while a crew of nurses and technicians did things to his partner that he didn't understand.

Hutch's eyes were shut, a respiratory tube taped into his mouth. The tube led to a ventilator that clicked off breaths with mechanical regularity. Even from here Starsky could tell Hutch's lungs weren't working well. There were bandages around his chest, covering the tubes inserted there that helped inflate his lungs. His skin had a sickly pallor, his lips nearly blue. The throat wound wasn't visible any longer, hidden under bandages. There were tubes snaking from various bags and bottles all around the room, all of them leading to Hutch's body. Fluids and drugs and whole blood going into him. A catheter taking urine out of him.

Hutch's body suddenly convulsed hard and Starsky realized he was coughing violently, his body wracked with heaving spasms as his lungs struggled to eject the foreign matter suffocating him. One of the technicians shoved another tube down the ventilator tube, and Starsky could see dark stuff being suctioned out. Hutch's struggles were terrible to watch as he thrashed and coughed and fought. With a sickening jolt Starsky realized that Hutch's hands were tied down. The cords in Hutch's arms strained against his bonds, his hands either balling into fists or spreading out wide as if reaching for something, anything that could help him. His struggles stopped all at once, and the sudden cessation of movement was as frightening as the convulsive coughing.

Starsky felt Dobey and Huggy gripping his shoulders, holding his arms, and realized his own hands were pressed flat against the glass, as if he were trying to climb through it.

"Easy, Starsky," Huggy crooned gently, as he and Dobey pulled Starsky away from the window.

He nodded. If he didn't get his act together, they'd never let him in there. And he needed to get in there. Needed to touch Hutch, needed to tell him --

This is what it was like for you, Hutch, wasn't it? Standing behind this glass and watching me trying to die while you held this big important thing inside you. The thing you might never get a chance to say. Did you feel like it was killing you, like a big rock inside your heart that wouldn't let it beat right until you finally got to tell me?

He choked up and thought for a moment that he was going to lose it. But then one of the nurses left the ICU unit, and signaled to him.

"Sergeant Starsky? You can come in now."

Inside the room it was eerily quiet, with only the soft, rhythmic hissing and chuckling of the respirator for background music. The respiratory tech, a round-faced young man in his twenties, saw Starsky had entered, and stepped away from Hutch so that Starsky could move closer. Starsky stopped him for a minute. The nameplate on his scrubs said Weaver.
"Why -- why is he tied down like that?" Starsky asked.

"He's sedated, but he drifts in and out. When the coughing gets bad, if he wakes up too much, he'll try to pull the tube out of his throat."

"Can he hear me?"

The tech shrugged. "Maybe. Hard to say how aware he might be. Look, I'm gonna get some coffee, I'll be right back. If he starts coughing, just hit the buzzer. I'll only be a few doors away."

Starsky nodded as the tech stepped out of the room. Even though Dobey and Huggy were right outside the glass, he was alone with Hutch for the first time since the shooting. Alone with Hutch. It was just a few days ago that being alone with Hutch was something he longed for as much as he dreaded it. Even now, Hutch's body radiated life and a powerful sexuality. Starsky had a sudden flashback of Hutch manhandling him into the chair and taking him by storm. He shivered as he watched that powerful man reduced to being tied to his bed so complete strangers could do what they wanted with him.

For his own good, Starsky reminded himself. To save his life.

That life that was so precious. That life that was tied into Starsky's by bonds so powerful, even he couldn't deny them anymore.

Starsky tried to ignore the scary array of technology, but it was hard to, since a forest of equipment surrounded Hutch. He moved closer, stepping cautiously, trying to get near Hutch without disturbing anything. There was a chair near the head of the bed, and slowly, carefully, he sat and tried to decide what to say. For a long moment, he remained silent. How could he explain his feelings to Hutch while Hutch wasn't really conscious? Would Hutch even hear him? If he could, would he believe him?

"Hutch, it's me. Starsky." He reached over to where Hutch's right hand was tied to the bedrail. Covering it, he was startled by its chill and realized the blue color around Hutch's eyes and lips was also around his fingernails. He surrounded Hutch's hand, trying to warm it. "I'm here for you. You gotta believe that. I'm not going anywhere. From now on, it's just you and me. I love you, Hutch. Can you hear me? I love you."

Talk is cheap, he thought. Gotta prove myself...my heart.

Impulsively, Starsky said, "Hutch, marry me, huh? You said yourself that I always wanted to settle down, get married. And you're right, I wanna get married to you. I need you to live, so we can do all those things newlyweds get to do -- go on a honeymoon to Hawaii, or maybe Niagara Falls. Buy a house together. Pick out curtains. Come on, Hutch, I know you're dying to have a place with a really big greenhouse. Someplace where we wouldn't...wouldn't have to keep driving back and forth between two different apartments. We need to be together, you and me, in our own home. Living our lives together, for whatever time we've got left. You gotta believe that, Hutch. You gotta come back to me, so we can have that life together."
Hutch's eyes fluttered slowly, his eyes roving sightlessly around the room, opening and closing sleepily. His hand opened, reaching, and Starsky slipped his fingers against Hutch's palm. Hutch grasped his hand hard.

Starsky moved into Hutch's line of vision, hoping Hutch could see him. "Easy, boy, easy," he soothed as Hutch struggled feebly, pulling at his bonds. "You're gonna be okay. You just gotta relax and get better. I love you, Hutch. You gotta get well, so I can love you as hard as you deserve for as long as you can stand -- "

He watched the groggy fluttering of Hutch's eyelids, praying Hutch was aware of him somehow.

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"Hutch, get down!" Starsky screamed.

Hutch turned, recognizing Starsky's call. But his mind was still focused outside of himself, on Starsky, on their conflict. Yet, even distracted, he knew his priorities.

*Get down? Where's Starsky?*

He reached for his Python, ready to protect his partner, then realized Starsky was flat against the tarmac of the police station garage, shouting at him.

"*Hutch, get down, get down!*" Starsky kept yelling.

Before Hutch could free his weapon, he felt the bullet hit him in the back, tearing its way through his flesh, then exiting his throat. The pain was stunning, spreading down his spine, across his shoulders and into his chest and neck. There was so much pain it was hard to figure out how many times he'd been hit. He fell to his knees as blood filled his mouth, his nose. He coughed as it seeped into his lungs. His throat was swelling shut and he found himself struggling for air. He tried to call to Starsky, but his voice wouldn't work and his throat was so tight, he could hardly swallow, hardly force air in.

*I'm going to drown,* he thought suddenly, *on my own blood.*

He clutched at his throat in spite of the pain to slow down the loss of blood, and saw air bubble out from between his fingers. That was bad, he knew, when air came out of a place that had no business leaking air.

Dimly, he heard Starsky calling to him, but was no longer sure where Starsky was. "Hutch, it's me. Starsky." The rest was lost in a maze of rhythmic background sounds Hutch couldn't recognize. It sounded like Starsky was talking to him from the end of a long tunnel, his voice echoing eerily. They weren't in the garage anymore, but Hutch couldn't tell where they were.

"...You just gotta relax and get better," he thought Starsky said. His voice sounded a little clearer, but still so far away. "*I love you, Hutch. You gotta get well, so I can love you as hard as you deserve for as long as you can stand -- *"
No, that couldn't be right. He had to be dreaming. Starsky loved him, Hutch knew that, but he was going to marry Rosey. Hutch needed to let him go. That would be best, for Starsky's future, and for Hutch, too. To just let go. To go....

"Don't leave me, Hutch," Starsky begged. His voice sounded choked, as if he were crying. Hutch tried to imagine Starsky crying but couldn't figure out why. "I'll do anything if you just don't leave me."

Hutch wanted to speak, but there was something shoved down deep into his throat. *I have to leave. It's the best thing to do, for me to leave, so you can be free.*

Hutch felt Starsky's breath close to his ear, heard him murmuring. He sounded desperate. Hutch couldn't figure out why. "I love you, Hutch. You know that, right? I love you so much. You can't leave me."

Hutch struggled to blink, and tried to swallow but couldn't. He needed to understand what was happening, what he was being told.

Hutch felt Starsky's breath on his face as Starsky said, "I love you, Hutch. I'll never love anyone else the way I love you. Not ever. You gotta believe me, Hutch."

Before Hutch could decide how he felt about that, he felt Starsky's lips brush his cheek. A drop of moisture fell onto his face, but a warm hand brushed it away. The touch of those gentle fingers tingled against his skin, reminding him of other dreams and other, wonderful awakenings.

*Wake me up, Starsky. Love me awake. I hurt. I'm afraid. And I'm losing you. Make this dream end, babe, please.*

"I'm here, Hutch," Starsky's comforting voice promised. "I'm waiting for you. I'll wait forever. I'm never gonna leave you, not ever again. I love you. You've got to believe that."

Hutch heard the words and clung to them. If Starsky would only stay with him. If he would only stay....

Suddenly, the air dammed up in his throat, and he was overwhelmed with the need to breathe --

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Hutch started that convulsive coughing again, thrashing wildly in the bed, but before Starsky could hit the call button, Weaver was there, moving him deftly to the side so he could tend to Hutch. The deep wracking coughs and the violent reaction of Hutch's body was almost more than Starsky could bear. But he wasn't about to leave. Not until they threw him out.

When Hutch stopped coughing and sagged back in the bed, drained and exhausted, Weaver looked at Starsky. "There's not going to be a lot of change for a while. You might want to go on home for a few hours, get some sleep. He won't be awake for maybe 20-hours, or longer."
Starsky shook his head. "He needs to know I'm here, that I'm not leaving. If I can't stay in the room, I'll stay outside. But I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay," Weaver said, and went back to checking Hutch's ventilator, making sure his airway was clear.

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"I guess we gotta be glad Starsky killed that guy," Huggy said to Dobey, who grunted his agreement. "I'd hate to think of him out there on the streets looking for the responsible party in the state he's in now."

"Think we'll be able to get him out of here for a while?" Dobey asked.

Huggy just snorted a laugh. "Forget that. I'm goin' back to the Pits and put some food together, then go over to Starsky's place and find him a change of clothes. He won't be leaving."

Dobey sighed. "No, I guess not." He gave Huggy a crooked smile. In this place, they were comrades in arms. If Huggy had been another cop, Huggy knew, Dobey couldn't have felt any closer to him than when they shared space in this corridor. "I think I'll call Edith and let her know what's going on. She'll want to be here at some point."

"Tell her not to bother worrying about your meals," Huggy said. "I've got that covered, Captain."

Dobey just smiled sadly and patted Huggy on the back. They both knew the routine all too well.

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The hours slid by in an exhausting monotony. Starsky knew if he were this tired, Hutch had to be drained. He worried about that, knowing what fatigue could do to you when you were trying to recover from something serious. Starsky caught catnaps in the hospital waiting room, but only if Huggy or Dobey or Dobey's wife, Edith, were willing to either stay with Hutch when the ICU staff would allow them, or keep watch outside his window. It was important to Starsky that people who loved Hutch surrounded him. Other cops were coming by, too, as they always did -- offering to donate blood, bringing food, giving whatever support they could. Under other circumstances, Starsky would've been relieved to have this much community around him, but right now, there was only person on the planet for him, and that person wasn't doing well.

It was around 5:00 the following evening when Dr. Levy told Starsky they were ready to take out the ventilator tube. "He's expressed a decent amount of the blood in his lungs, and he's struggling against the tube more. We don't want to keep him sedated any longer, and his fighting the tube is wearing him down. He'll have to wear an oxygen mask to help him get enough air in. His lungs are still compromised, and he'll develop pneumonia. There's no way around that. He's still going to be in ICU, but he'll be more awake, more aware. He'll probably be able to understand you now, and respond. But he still won't be able to speak. His vocal chords will still be paralyzed, which is just as well, since the effort to talk would probably be more than his lungs can handle."
Starsky nodded, taking all the information in. He'd get Dobey to update Hutch's family in Minnesota. Dobey had dutifully called them earlier and given them the grim report. They'd discussed coming out, but Dobey encouraged them to wait a little bit, until Hutch was more stabilized. He knew how hard it would be on Hutch's parents to see him like this.

"He'll still be in a lot of pain, won't he?" Starsky asked.

The doctor nodded. "We'll be managing the pain, so he won't be super-alert, if that's what you're wondering. He'll still need lots of rest, lots of sleep, to help him heal. And we'll be starting respiratory therapy with him to help him clear his lungs." He smiled a little then. "He's doing pretty well, though, Detective Starsky. He's strong, and he's a fighter."

Starsky flushed with pride. "Yeah, he is that."

The doctor looked at him with concern. "Listen, Detective, I know it's really none of my business, but I talked to your doctor yesterday, and he told me what had happened to you a year ago. Apparently, you came very close to death. It's amazing you've recovered as well as you have."

Starsky waited, sensing this was leading to something.

"Detective Hutchinson has a good chance for a complete recovery, though, like your own injuries, it'll take time. As a doctor, I have to tell you that this was an extremely close call. Considering Detective Hutchinson's injury and you're own, as his doctor, I'd like to suggest the two of you consider some other line of work. Something a little less dangerous. As you get older, it's going to be a lot harder to recover from close calls like this. It seems to me you've given as much as any two men could be asked to. I'd hate to see either of you back in this ICU again."

Starsky smiled grimly. "Our captain's singin' the same song, Doc. Hutch and me, we've been partners for a really long time. It's hard to think of us doing something else. But, I'll tell you, I'm not ready to sit another vigil for him like this, and I know he's not up for doing the same thing for me. I think, when he's well enough, we're gonna be looking at some different options."

Dr. Levy gave Starsky a reassuring smile. "Good. I'm glad to hear that. You'll want to be there when we remove the tube?"

Starsky nodded.

It was a less eventful procedure than he'd expected. Hutch coughed a few times when it came out, but the convulsive coughing spells seemed to have subsided. It was a tremendous relief to Starsky to see them untie Hutch's hands once was the tube was removed. The ICU room was so much quieter once the respirator was turned off. Hutch's breathing, however, was noisy, because of the congestion still in his lungs.

After the doctor and the nurses and the techs had their way with Hutch, they let Starsky have a little time alone with him. He felt strangely nervous, aware that this would be the first time since the shooting that Hutch would be truly aware of him, if groggy. Suppose Hutch turned away
from him? Suppose Hutch let him know he didn't want him there? He was absurdly grateful that Hutch still couldn't speak, couldn't order him to leave.

Hutch's bed was on a slight incline, his head raised. He still looked incredibly pale against the stark white sheets, but a little of the blue coloring around his eyes had subsided. Hutch's eyelids were fluttering, as if he were struggling to stay awake after the exhausting experience of having the tube removed.

"Hey," Starsky said softly.

Hutch blinked drowsily, looking around the room as if not quite aware.

Starsky stroked his cheek. "Hutch, it's me."

Hutch's eyes turned to him, his head moving slightly in the same direction. Even that slight motion obviously caused him pain, and he winced and held still. He seemed puzzled to see Starsky.

"Am I glad to see you," Starsky said, smiling. "It's been pretty lonely in here, talkin' to you while you slept. But I took advantage of the fact that you couldn't argue with me. Do you remember anything I said?"

Hutch still had that puzzled expression, like he wasn't sure he knew who Starsky was, or maybe why he was there.

"Yeah, I figured you weren't payin' any attention," Starsky said, "but that's okay. I'll just keep reminding you. I've figured it all out. When they finally spring you from this joint -- and the doc says you might be outta here in a week if you do everything you're supposed to, your breathing exercises and all that -- we'll go spend some time at the beach 'til you're really well. I got us this little beach house all lined up already. The fresh air will be great for your lungs. And then, when you're totally well, you and me are gonna go to San Francisco. I found this place up there, this non-denominational church, where a real minister will marry us, just like anyone else. I mean, it's not a legal ceremony, but we can still take the vows before God and witnesses. They'll even do a mixed-services thing -- a canopy for my part, and the Christian stuff for you. Then, we can spend the weekend in San Francisco -- go dancing together, that kinda stuff -- and from there we can head over to Hawaii for a real honeymoon. Two weeks in Paradise. Doesn't that sound great, Hutch?"

Hutch was blinking sleepily, but his eyes never left Starsky's face. The bewildered expression didn't change either.

"Hutch, you can't talk yet, so don't even try, just..." he took hold of Hutch's hand, "squeeze my hand. Do you understand what I'm sayin'?"

Hutch didn't respond at first, then finally tried to nod slightly, but that hurt too much. He frowned, as an afterthought, as if trying to say no.
"I knew I was rushing things. You're probably so mixed up. Do you remember what happened to you? In the stakeout apartment?"

Hutch looked around the room, as if taking in his environment for the first time.

"You were shot, babe. We...we were talkin' and I wasn't paying attention to the monitor. Barstow got the drop on us, and he shot you. The bullet hit your back, bounced off your shoulder blade, and," he had to swallow to be able to go on, "it exited out the front of your throat. That's why it's so hard for you to breathe, and why your throat hurts. That's why you can't talk. You took in a lot of blood. You've been in ICU around 24-hours. It's been pretty rough for you."

Hutch's brow furrowed as if he were struggling to remember. He squeezed Starsky's hand and looked questioningly at him.

"Barstow's dead, Hutch. I shot him from the window. Through all of this, I think that's the only thing I did right."

Hutch's eyes starting roaming again, as if he were trying to look through the ICU window.

"Dobey's here," Starsky told him. "You probably heard him talkin' to you. And Huggy, of course. Edith's been by a lot. Half the precinct's been through here at one time or other."

Hutch closed his eyes, as if weary. When he opened them again, he looked thoughtful. He released Starsky's hand and rubbed the palm with his finger.

It was Starsky's turn to look confused. Hutch kept doing it over and over, rubbing a spot in the center of Starsky's palm, until Starsky finally realized Hutch was trying to communicate with him. And then he realized Hutch was trying to finger-write on his palm. Starsky watched the effort more intensely.

"'R'? Is that the letter 'r'?

"O'. R-o...Rosey? Are you asking about Rosey, Hutch?" Starsky felt that lump in his throat grow again. It felt like a semi-permanent condition by now, like he was always half on the verge of tears. "Rosey's gone. She left this morning." He still remembered that last phone call. Her loss was an ache inside, but one he was resigned to. He didn't regret his decision. He just wasn't sure Hutch would believe him anymore. "She's not coming back. Not ever."

Hutch closed his eyes, then turned away from Starsky, which alarmed him.

"Don't tune me out, Hutch!" But within seconds, Starsky realized Hutch had gone back to sleep.

_He doesn't believe me. Doesn't believe in me. And why should he, after all we've gone through these last weeks?_
Hutch's body went slack with sleep, and Starsky took the opportunity to brush some wispy blond strands out of his face.

_I know I've got to prove myself to you. Prove my feelings._

He sighed and sat by Hutch's side and waited for him to wake up again.

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"Hutch, get down! Get down!"

No, Hutch thought, _I can't. I can't go through this again._

He felt the bullet hit him in the back, felt the terrible pain as the pellet ripped through his body and out his throat. Blood bubbled through his fingers and he fell to his knees.

_I can't...not again._

He struggled to breath but it was agony. He just wanted to stop hurting.

_I should've never told him how much I loved him,_ Hutch thought sadly. _I should've never said anything. I was too afraid of his rejection, but losing him this way, now that I know what it could've been like, it's even worse._

He wanted to stop fighting, to stop struggling to breathe. He wanted it all to end. He wanted to die, to just fade away, and let all the pain go, the physical pain and the ache in his soul.

"Hutch, don't leave me."

It sounded like Starsky's voice, but Hutch told himself it was all part of the dream they kept having. The terrible dream of loss they had always turned into something beautiful. But that was before.

"Hutch, please...I'll do anything if you just don't leave me."

Hutch's mouth moved, he struggled to speak, but he couldn't spare the air. The effort exhausted him. He started drifting away. Everything would be easier if he just drifted away.

"Hutch, come on. Don't leave me, now." Someone touched his cheek gently, but that hand was shaking. "Stay with me, buddy."

That almost made Hutch smile. _Buddy. We're still buddies. Always that...._  

He tried to open his eyes, struggled to focus on the face so close to his, but he was losing the battle.

_Starsky?_
Hutch felt lips close to his ear; the voice was loud now, clear. "I love you, Hutch. You know that, right? I love you so much. Don't leave me. Not now, when we're so close."

Hutch felt Starsky's hand cupping his cheek. "I love you, Hutch. Never loved anyone else the way I love you. You believe me, don't you?"

Hutch blinked dazedly, trying to separate dream from whatever reality he was trapped in now. Weren't they supposed to be in the police garage? His hands registered the crisp sheets, the blanket covering him. Were they in bed? If they were in bed, why was he so uncomfortable? He was covered by clothes, and blankets, and bandages.

And Starsky looked so worried. He wasn't in bed, either, but sitting beside it. And he was completely dressed. Hutch frowned.

*It's time to wake me up, Starsky. I hate this dream. I know it's a dream because Rosey's not here. But I need to wake up.*

Hutch felt his eyes tear up against his will, felt a warm drop of liquid slide down his face as he mourned the nights when Starsky would rouse him from his nightmares with love.

"Oh, Hutch, don't!" Starsky murmured, then leaned over and pressed his mouth to Hutch's cheek, where the tear fell. "Don't cry, babe. I'm right here beside you. And I'm not leaving you, not ever. Everything's gonna be okay. You're gonna get well, and we're gonna be happy again. I swear it, Hutch. So help me, God."

Then Starsky kissed him again, gently, on the lips. Dimly, Hutch was aware that they weren't home, that he must be in the hospital, that people had to be around, watching them. But Starsky didn't seem to care. He kissed Hutch again, so tenderly it nearly broke Hutch's heart. He closed his eyes, gasped, and drew the very breath from Starsky's mouth. That breath filled him as he tasted Starsky's sweet, familiar flavor. He felt more aware suddenly, and moved his hand up to touch Starsky's hair, as though needing more proof that this was no dream. Starsky kissed his palm, then put it back gently against the bed. Hutch realized that arm was bound to a board, that intravenous lines were going into it. He became more aware of pain, but the awareness seemed more important, so he clung to it. The gentle contact with Starsky seemed to give him strength.

"Hey, you really awake now?" Starsky said, smiling. "Or are you just ready to kiss any cute curly-headed guy who happens to sit down here? I need to know so I can warn Huggy."

"Starsk." He struggled to make the sound, but it was harsh and grating to his own ears, barely more than a whisper.

"Shhhh," Starsky admonished, "don't try to talk. You're a few days away yet from havin' the last word."

Hutch swallowed and that was an experience he would've been happy to not repeat any time soon. While he wanted more awareness, his body was quickly protesting the barrage of pain. But he had so much to find out, so much he wanted to know.
"You want some ice chips, Hutch, to wet your mouth?" Starsky asked, reaching for a cup. "Your mouth has to be real dry, especially from the oxygen. They only took the oxygen mask off you an hour or so ago -- "

"Starsk, where's...Rosey?"

Starsky looked weary, and a little sad. He toyed with the ice, then spooned a few chips into Hutch's mouth. Starsky was right, his mouth was incredibly dry and the ice chips felt wonderful. Starsky toyed with the ice chips some more. "I'm gonna have to go over this with you every time you wake up, huh? Okay. I can do that. You're entitled. Hutch, you remember what we were talking about just before you got shot?"

He frowned. The memories seemed out of reach.

"You were telling me you decided to take the lieutenant's test. You told me you needed to end the partnership, so I could be free to marry Rosey."

He closed his eyes. He remembered that. He wished he didn't. But he couldn't take those words back. They were the right words, anyway. Starsky needed to be free.

"Hey, don't go to sleep now," Starsky chided him, touching his face to get his attention.

Hutch didn't need to hear anymore. He remembered. He'd told Starsky he was taking the lieutenant's exam. That it was time they ended the partnership. Because Starsky needed to be free. And the only chance they had for maintaining some kind of lasting friendship was for Hutch to take charge of his own life -- even if it meant he'd be living it alone. Hutch tried to evade Starsky's touch, but it hurt too much to turn his head.

"It's coming back, isn't it?" Starsky guessed. "You're remembering what we said, how it went down."

Don't cry, Hutch ordered himself, but the chronic pain and the medications wore down his defenses. His eyes filled against his will.

"Hutch, listen," Starsky said, sounding a little choked himself. "I know what you're thinking. You're remembering everything that happened right up to the moment when you got hit. But what you don't know is what I was thinking, what I was going through in my head. I want you to listen real careful, okay?"

Hutch blinked the tears away and looked at Starsky. He wasn't really up for another good-bye speech, but considering his condition there wasn't much he could do to stop it.

"When you told me you wanted to end the partnership," Starsky said softly, "I...I had a lotta trouble accepting that. I mean, up to then, you'd been right by my side, working so hard to be the best friend you'd always been to me. Because you'd been so strong, and were there for me through everything, all my confusion, all my mixed up feelings, I just didn't expect that you'd ever have to pull back, for your own good. You were right, too. It was only fair that you did that, that you made some kind of plans for your own life. But it took me by surprise and...I couldn't
handle it! I never once thought about living my life without you by my side, my partner, my best friend."

Hutch heard Starsky swallow.

"And at that moment, realizing you were doing the only thing you could for your own well-being -- I knew I couldn't let you go. I knew right then it wasn't worth it -- Rosey, the fairy-tale marriage, the picket-fence fantasy -- it was all an empty pipe dream if you weren't part of it. Right then and there I knew I could walk away from it -- had to walk away from it -- just to keep you in my life. I knew I loved you more than anything, 'cause I just couldn't let you go."

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut. This is because I took a bullet. It's just a reaction to my nearly getting killed. In two weeks, he'll be sorry --

"Don't turn away from me!" Starsky demanded, sounding angry. "I know what you're thinking. You've gotta understand, this had nothing to do with you being shot. I went through all of that, made that decision about how I felt, before the first shot was fired. You've got to believe me! And...and when you were hit, all I could think was...if I lost you, I'd lose everything...and you'd never know how I really felt. I can't remember ever being that scared."

The words struck a chord in Hutch. He remembered being that scared himself. He remembered bargaining with God and the devil both just to have one more chance to tell Starsky how he felt. He stared at his partner. Did they both have to live through that same moment to realize their true feelings?

Starsky turned his attention back to the ice chips. "And the worst part of it is, I was so wrapped up in my own misery, my own sense of loss, that I completely stopped paying attention to the monitor and all the equipment. If I'd been doing my job, I'd have seen Barstow enter the apartment. He wouldn't have gotten the drop on us. You...you wouldn't have -- "

Hutch saw Starsky's eyes squeeze shut as he battled his inner demons. Hutch remembered his own misgivings when Gunther's hit went down. If I'd been paying closer attention.... If I'd reacted sooner....

He slid his free hand through the bars of the bed's restraint system and took Starsky's hand in his. Starsky gripped it as if he'd fall out of the chair if he didn't hold on with all his strength. He wouldn't look at Hutch for a long time, so they just sat like that, quietly, holding hands. Finally, Starsky let out a heavy sigh and seemed to get hold of himself.

"Look, Hutch, I know the words I'm sayin' to you are just that -- words. Actions speak louder, right? And I'm a man of action!" Starsky smiled wanly, but some of the sauciness was back in his eyes. "I know I've got to win your heart back. Gotta prove myself -- prove my feelings." He pulled Hutch's hand up and brushed his cheek against the back of it, then kissed the knuckles. "So, that's what I'm gonna do. And what a perfect opportunity with you here, stuck in this bed, nearly speechless. You won't even be able to argue with me, or throw me out, or yell, or anything." He grinned, but then his eyes softened. "I'm gonna take good care of you, Hutch. I'm gonna get you well, get you outta here, and then I'm gonna marry you. And we're gonna buy a house together and live happily ever after. We're entitled. And I'm gonna make it come true."
Happily ever after? Hutch thought, feeling sleep steal over him. That only happens in dreams.

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Hutch moaned, swimming up from awareness and wishing he wasn't. His head was fogged with confused memories, dream fragments, but his body was in so much discomfort, he didn't know which was worse, sleeping or waking.

"Hey, there, son, how are you doing?"

He heard a familiar bass rumble and saw Dobey sitting beside his bed. His captain looked entirely too cheerful.

"Good to see you with us. We've all been really worried about you."

Hutch shifted in the bed, but that hurt too much.

"Want to sit up a little?" Dobey asked. "Change position?"

Hutch didn't know. He felt like he had just been born, incapable of making the simplest decisions, and hurting too much to even care about them.

"Let's try this," Dobey suggested helpfully, and cranked the bed up just a little.

To Hutch's surprise, it did feel more comfortable. He sighed and nodded at his captain, but that hurt like hell, reminding him of what had happened to him. He gingerly moved his head a little from side to side, but that was just as painful. He grimaced.

"Want some ice?" Dobey asked, reaching for a cup. "Starsky said your mouth would be dry, and that the doctor said you could have ice chips if you wanted."

That had felt so good before, Hutch wanted to nod yes, but had learned his lesson about that, so he waved his hand in what he'd hoped was an affirmative gesture. Dobey smiled, and fed him a small spoonful. Amazing how something so simple could bring such pleasure. Hutch closed his eyes and relished the cool, clean taste of the ice melting on his tongue.

Once his mouth was moistened, he tried to speak, tried to ask where Starsky was, but his voice wasn't much better than before.

"Starsky had to go down to the station to give his statement," Dobey explained. "Believe me, he didn't want to, but the feds were tired of waiting on him. I don't think he'll be too long. He insisted Huggy or I stay with you while he was gone."

Starsky's statement. Hutch groaned internally. He couldn't imagine what he'd say to the feds. They'd both been too distracted to do their jobs. He tried to remember something and couldn't. "Barstow?" he whispered.

Dobey shook his head. "Starsky took him out, Hutch. One shot. Right between the eyes. We still can't figure out how he did it without getting killed. The SWAT team members were stunned and
a little deflated. They all assumed they'd have to do it. It was a one-in-a-million shot." Dobey smiled ruefully. "But he was pretty damned motivated and we both know that Starsky, motivated, is a formidable man. If he had any hope of saving your life, he had to stop Barstow, and he didn't have much time to do it in. So he did what an army of cops hadn't been able to do up to that point."

Hutch felt suffused with pride. He remembered how impotent he'd felt firing after the fleeing black and white filled with Gunther's assassins and not getting in a single good hit. One shot. He remembered Starsky saying it was the only thing he'd done right, and knew his partner was taking no pride in it.

"Hutch," Dobey said quietly.

Hutch gave him his full attention. He couldn't imagine what Dobey had been going through between Barstow's assault, one of his detectives nearly getting killed, another of his detectives getting crazed -- never mind having to deal with two seasoned male detectives falling in love with one another then going through a romantic crisis about it. As bad as he felt for himself, he couldn't help feeling bad for Dobey, too.

"Starsky told me you decided to take the lieutenant's exam after all. I know that couldn't have been easy. I want you to know that I'll support you in that decision. It's the right thing for you to do. I told Starsky that. He was mad as a hornet, but he needed to hear it. You've both paid your dues. It's time to move on. Starsky, too."

Hutch wished more than anything right now that he had his voice. He was still confused from the medications, but he did remember Starsky telling him that Rosey had left. Dobey would know what had really happened. He reached out for the captain's sleeve. Softly, he whispered, "What happened with Rosey? Why did she leave?"

The captain looked away. "Starsky said that when you told him about the lieutenant's exam, he couldn't handle it. He decided right then he was making a mistake. He was about to tell you that just before you got hit. Suddenly, getting married, having a family -- it just wasn't important to him anymore. When Huggy brought Rosey to the hospital, Starsky told her as soon as she got here. They talked for a long time. Then, she left."

That was the same thing Starsky had told him. But somehow, he was having trouble accepting it.

"You're not sure how you feel about that, are you?" Dobey asked.

Hutch looked at him and frowned.

"I, uh, feel kind of awkward trying to give you any advice about this, Hutch," Dobey admitted. "Your career, sure, I can advise you about this, but I'm out of my depth here. I don't really understand your relationship; it's just not part of my experience. But I know when someone's been hurt, really hurt, by someone they love, healing those kinds of fractures can take as long as healing the body. Take your time, Hutch. Don't let him charm you into anything you're not sure of. Be sure of how you feel, before you make any commitments."
Dobey paused, and looked around the room. "I don't know that I'd admit this to anyone else, but when we were young, Edith and I, we had our problems. I, uh, well, you know how foolish young men can be. I did some very stupid things. I was lucky that she forgave me, but I had to earn that forgiveness. She made me earn it. And earning it made me finally understand how precious she was and how lucky I was to have her."

Hutch thought about that and saw wisdom in it. But all the mental activity was wearing him out, and he felt his eyes grow heavy.

"You go on to sleep, son," Dobey said. "I'll be right here. You won't be alone."

No, that was one thing Hutch was comfortable with. They both were lucky to have such good friends to depend on.

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"Detective Starsky," Joshua Epstein said warmly, holding out his hand for Starsky to shake. "I appreciate you making time to give us your statement. I know you'd much rather be with your partner during his recovery."

Starsky shook Epstein's hand with more than a little guilt. His screw up on the Barstow stakeout could have career repercussions for Epstein. The agent had never treated him or Hutch with anything less than genuine respect. Of all the feds he'd ever worked with, this was the first one he actually liked.

"Why don't you just have a seat there," Epstein said, indicating a comfortable armchair in the conference room at Parker they were using. There was another federal agent with them, one of Epstein's associates on the Barstow case. Another of the strong, silent, button-down types, this guy was just there to witness the statement and run the tape recorder, so basically stayed quietly out of the way.

"We can get this formality over with," Epstein continued, "and you can get back to your partner. By the way, I've been told Detective Hutchinson is on the mend, that he should be all right. I sure hope that's true."

No thanks to me. Starsky found his voice. "Hutch is doing great. He's a real fighter."

There was a sudden quiet knock on the door, and the other agent went and opened it. Starsky was startled by the appearance of Chief Danson, and immediately stood.

"Agent Epstein, Agent Hinz," Danson said in greeting to the two feds. Then he turned to Starsky. "Detective Starsky." He held out his hand. "It's good to see you. Captain Dobey has been giving me daily reports about Detective Hutchinson. I'm very happy to hear he's progressing so well. I'll be over to see him as soon as he's out of ICU."

Starsky nodded and shook the chief's hand. It wasn't often he had to deal with the man and was surprised to see him here. He wondered if he were about to be suspended for dereliction of duty.
He wouldn't be able to argue about it if he were. "Thank you, sir. I'll tell Hutch you were asking for him."

Danson turned back to Epstein. "If you have no objections, Agent, I'd like to be present for Detective Starsky's statement. Captain Dobey isn't available, and I'd like someone here to represent the best interests of the department."

Starsky's heart sank. Maybe he was about to be fired.

"No problem, sir," Epstein assured him. "Please, take a seat." As he did, Epstein turned to Starsky. "We're tapping your statement Detective Starsky. Is that all right with you?"

Starsky nodded, then remembered to say, "Yes, of course."

They went through the formalities then, having Starsky state his name, his rank, and his association with the Barstow case. Starsky took out his notepad and referred to specific dates and assignments, as he needed to.

But when it came time to explain exactly what had happened, he didn't need his notes. He looked Epstein in the eye and said what Dobey had suggested, which was simply the truth without all the personal details: he had gotten lax during the stakeout due to the continuing inactivity, and during an extended discussion regarding Hutch's future career options, Barstow had gotten the drop on them.

Epstein nodded, expressionlessly. "Okay, Detective Starsky. I know this will be difficult, but can you try to retrace exactly what happened once Barstow started shooting."

Starsky closed his eyes, wanting more than anything not to relive that again. But he went through it step-by-step just as he remembered it. The bullets flying, the apartment shattering around them, Hutch hit and endangering himself as he fought to breathe. Starsky's desperate attempt to save Hutch that ended with him killing Barstow.

There was silence in the room when he finished.

"I'm not sure you're aware of it, Detective," Epstein said, "but you stopped Barstow with one clean shot, in the middle of a furious fire-fight. The head of the SWAT team was impressed. So was everyone else."

Starsky swallowed. "Nothing to be impressed about. Barstow was reloading and I got lucky. Hutch was dying. I had to stop Barstow, and a bullet was the only thing that was going to do it. I knew if he killed me, Hutch was as good as dead. I had to do it and do it right. I've never taken pride in killing a man, even an animal like Barstow."

"Maybe not," Epstein conceded, "but in spite of your lapse on the stakeout, you ended the crime spree of one of the most violent criminals we've been up against in years. And," he turned to the chief and addressed him, "while I appreciate Detective Starsky's candor in admitting his lack of attentiveness, I have to take some responsibility for that as well. Every bit of information we had indicated that the chances of Barstow heading for that hide-out was the most remote possibility."
The officers manning that station were aware of that. I'd encouraged that lax attitude myself." He turned back to Starsky. "I feel like I owe you an apology, and your partner more than that."

Starsky started to shake his head to argue with the man, but Epstein continued talking, forestalling Starsky.

"Also," Epstein said, "I want to tell you that we screwed up, too. One of our agents failed to recognize an old associate of Barstow's who came to check out the neighborhood before Barstow claimed the apartment. He realized it after the shooting. In spite of all the research, the briefings, human error was largely responsible for Barstow showing up without warning at your assigned station. I'm sorry for that, too."

Starsky swallowed. He couldn't believe this. He screws up big time and everyone else is ready to take the fall for it. "You don't owe anyone an apology, Agent Epstein," he said. "I know what my job is. And if I'd been doing it, Hutch would be here giving a statement with me instead of lying in bed in the ICU."

The chief cleared his throat. "Well, Detective Starsky, it's going to be a little hard to put a letter of commendation and a letter of reprimand in your file at the same time. Your record, and that of your partner, speaks for itself. If Agent Epstein is satisfied with the way things went down, I'm not about to second guess him." He smiled a little. "I'd expect you to shoulder the blame for this, Starsky. I seem to remember when Hutch gave his statement about the Gunther shooting; he insisted that had he been paying more attention, you wouldn't have been shot." The chief hesitated, as if remembering. "So, to make amends, Hutch went out and brought down one of the largest crime syndicates in the country." He shook his head. "You know, Starsky, the odds were against you coming back on active duty after that. But Dobey told me Hutch would never work with anyone else, so he'd make sure you'd pass the review board. As I am sure you will make him."

Starsky couldn't look at him. I was dead wrong, and no one's gonna make me do any penance for it. God's gonna get me for this.

The men around him continued to make congratulatory noises, and eventually Epstein, his associate, and their tape-recorder left the conference room leaving him alone with the chief.

Maybe this was all a front for the feds, Starsky thought. Maybe he's gonna suspend now, or tell me I'm canned.

"So, Hutch is thinking about the lieutenant's exam, is he?" the chief said.

"Yeah," Starsky answered simply.

"I'm a little surprised. I figured you two would be partners until you retired."

Starsky shrugged. "That's what I thought, too."

The chief rubbed his chin. "What about you, Starsky? No interest in promotion?"
He looked Danson in the eye. "I don't have a college degree, sir. Hutch does."

The chief nodded. "Well, pretty soon every cop in LA is going to need a degree, including you, just to be qualified to serve. Once you had yours, you'd be just as eligible for lieutenancy as Hutch."

Starsky wasn't sure where this was going.

"Starsky," the chief said, "I've learned over the years that when something works, you don't change it. If you both decide to go out for promotion, I think it would be in the best interest of the department to find some way to make sure you two could still work together. Whether that's on a special task force or unique police unit, I don't know yet. Talk to Hutch about it when he's well. If you're both interested, we can talk about your careers in depth when he returns to active duty. I'll discuss it with Captain Dobey, as well. I'd like to keep you under his command. A winning team shouldn't be disrupted."

Starsky sat there dumbfounded. He screws up the Barstow case, let's Hutch get shot, finishes Barstow off with a lucky bullet, and everyone thought he was a hero.

The chief stood up to leave. He patted Starsky on the shoulder. "I'll tell you, Starsky, I lost a good partner a long time ago myself. It's something you never get over. I'm glad Hutch is going to make it." With that, he left the room.

Starsky sat there for another ten minutes trying to figure out how it turned out that they were once again heroes, and were practically guaranteed their partnership for as long as they wanted it. He finally gave up and left Parker to go back to the hospital.

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The next time Hutch woke up, it was for medical treatments. A respiratory therapist was there to make him start his breathing therapy, and it was time for more blood tests. The therapy wrung him out, even though breathing into that device seemed like such a small thing to do. The only thing about the ordeal that he enjoyed was they let him actually drink some liquid.

It wasn't until the medical staff finally left him alone that he realized Huggy was standing off to one side, a quiet observer. He acknowledged Huggy's presence with a slight wave. It was all he had the energy to do.

Huggy walked over to his bedside and sat down, his eyes shining. "Sure is good to see those baby blues open and aware again, bro,' Huggy said softly. "I'd ask how you're feelin', but that seems pretty obvious, 'specially after the way they worked you over just now. If you need to go to sleep, don't mind me. I'm just keepin' the seat warm 'til Starsky gets back. Seems Captain Dobey had to go to the office himself to talk to the feds."

Hutch remembered Dobey telling him about Starsky having to give his statement, and he felt cheered that his brain was starting to function more normally. He remembered something else. He tried swallowing -- not the most comfortable experience -- and whispered, "Hug -- what happened with Rosey?"
Huggy shuffled his feet a little, then looked at him somberly. "I guess a lot of things happened with her. She was in the Pits talking to me when the action went down. We saw the report on the news and I brought her over here. At the time, we didn't know which one of you had been hit. She was pretty upset."

Hutch frowned. He wondered what Rosey would be doing in the Pits without Starsky. Something about that seemed odd to him.

As if Huggy could interpret his thoughts, he said, "She needed to get out of Starsky's place for a while, so she came down and sat by herself, to think. You know there isn't a square foot in that apartment that doesn't have a piece of you in it, and I think it was starting to get to her. We talked about it for a while, but I don't think her mind was any better settled than when she came in. Then the news report came on, and we drove over here."

Huggy looked around the room as if remembering the car ride. "We were both really shook. The report made it sound like whoever had been shot might be dead already. It was while we were in the car, not knowing what had happened, that she began to understand what a cop's life could be like. I don't think she had any real idea before."

Hutch closed his eyes then whispered, "So she left him."

"That's not the way I heard it," Huggy said. "She took a cab on out of here not too long after I brought her. But I did end up taking her to the airport, to go back home to her father's place, near the Indians she works with. It was kind of amazing how little stuff she had with her; like she knew when she first came back that she probably wouldn't be staying. But she told me that Starsky was real honest with her. Said he loved her a lot, but he needed to be with you. She knew he was hurting because you'd been shot, but he was real clear that he'd made his decision before you got hit."

"She told me part of her had been waiting for him to say that ever since she found out about you. And coming as it did after all that emotional turmoil, it was pretty overwhelming for her. Rosey said...she said she didn't think she had it in her to be a cop's wife. But she also said that if Starsky hadn't sent her away, she would've tried her best to handle it. She said that the most important thing to her was that he be happy. And knowing he'd be with you, that you'd always be by his side, she knew he would be and could stand to walk away for good. She was hurtin' real bad, Hutch, but she was bein' brave, too, you know?"

Hutch knew all about that kind of bravery, but realized he would've never been able to pack up his bags and physically depart. The closest he could come was simply taking another job. And that decision had taken everything he had. He couldn't imagine how empty Rosey had to be feeling, having actually left L.A. And he didn't know how he should feel about all that had happened. He was more confused than ever.

He glanced around the room, wanting to focus on anything else, when he spotted something attached to the bed rails. He blinked and stared at it. It was a single red rose, with one of those little plastic water reservoirs attached to its cut stem. It was taped to the bedrail with adhesive tape. He reached out and touched its petals, which were cool and silky. The rose was fresh.
"They wouldn't let him bring in a dozen roses," Huggy explained. "No room for that stuff in ICU. So he snuck in this single bud, hoping they would leave it there where you could see it. If he could've, he'd have filled up this whole room with flowers. He says you need green things around you to help you heal, that the place is too sterile, too mechanical, to make you feel like getting better."

Hutch couldn't get over the tactile sensation of the rose petals. It was the only bit of natural life in this stark medical environment. Starsky knew him so well.

"If ain't figured it out, blondie," Huggy said, with some of the old humor in his voice, "our boy Starsky's courtin' you. He intends to do whatever he has to, to convince you that for him, you're the only one. And if I was you, my blond brother, I'd let him."

Hutch looked up at Huggy in surprise.

"I remember too well," Huggy said, "what you were like after Starsky got hit. Dobey and I, we were both really worried about you. But that night when we set the sprinklers off, I'm not sure what Dobey was thinkin', but I knew I was watchin' a man in love -- you. I just had no way of knowin' when Starsky would finally wise up to what was goin' on right next to him. Don't know exactly when he did, either, but the whole time he was recovering, you were right there with your big heart wide open, giving him everything you were, everything you had. You made it real easy for him, Hutch. Sometimes, if we wanna appreciate the best things in life, it's good to work for 'em. You dig what I'm saying?"

Hutch frowned, wishing he were clear-headed.

"I mean, you both need this. Starsky needs to take time courtin' you for his own therapy. He needs to make that connection with you again, as a partner in every sense of the word. And you need to be courted -- so you can be absolutely sure of him, and not spend the rest of your days questioning how he really feels. I know you, Hutch. You'll be looking over your shoulder at every pretty thing that smiles at him, never quite believing that it's you he could really be happy with."

Hutch squirmed, uncomfortable with Huggy's apt analysis.

"So, don't try to stop him," Huggy advised. "Not that I think you could. He's been like a man possessed since you got in here, making all kinds of plans, reservations, arrangements. Sorta the way you did when he got shot, you know, how you worked out his health regimen, made sure he got all his therapy when he needed it, fusssed over his diet? Well, Starsky's never gonna be into any kind of health scene, though I'm sure he'll be keeping a tight schedule over your recovery. His way, rather, is to take you away from the scene of the crime and start building a new life with you. And since he's not totally convinced he hasn't already lost your heart, he's gonna be working hard at this. It'll be good for him. And you, too, I think."

My heart. Hutch tried to analyze how he really did feel about everything, but knew he was still too disoriented to make any decisions. Part of him had said goodbye to Starsky in the stakeout apartment, when he told Starsky about taking the lieutenant's exam. He'd become resigned to his course of action, and had been at peace with it. Too many things had happened to him since then
to be sure of anything, never mind his heart. And he couldn't deny Huggy's words. He honestly didn't know if he'd ever feel secure of Starsky's feelings again.

But he knew his partner. If anyone could convince him, it would be Starsky. Huggy was right. He would just have to let him.
CHAPTER 8

Hutch stood beside the sliding glass doors of their rented beach house and watched the ocean as the tide came in. It was a wonderful little bungalow, just the kind of thing that would appeal to him. Small, neat, simple. Tiny kitchen just big enough to make a few plain meals. Tidy living room with a little television, where Starsky currently sat, watching a grainy image with the sound down. One bedroom with two double beds, like any good hotel.

It had been almost four weeks since he'd been shot. Hutch had been out of the hospital about two weeks now. He was now well enough for them to take a trip together. He was off most of his medications, and was finally starting to feel more like himself. His shoulder still ached and his wounds itched as they healed, but it was tolerable, especially in comparison to that first week in the hospital. His lung capacity was still not back to normal, but his exercise regimen would improve that in time. It would be a while before he could return to active duty, but it looked like he would be able to...if he wanted to.

The stack of books he'd checked out of Parker to help him study for the lieutenant's exam sat quietly beckoning him. Next to them sat a shorter stack of college catalogs that Starsky had been browsing as he tried to decide what to do about getting his degree.

*So much in our lives has changed,* he thought ruefully. *Where are we going? Will we be going together?* And the much more important question rose up to challenge him: *Do I want us to go together?* He still did not know.

Shore birds wheeled and called over the rising tide as they scavenged for food. He watched their airborne grace wistfully. He felt old, physically handicapped, and as much as he understood that this was a normal reaction to the shooting, it was still hard to live with. He remembered Starsky getting depressed about the rate of his recovery after the Gunther shooting, and recalled how he prodded and poked his partner until he pushed him past his endurance to make another milestone. Of course, it helped that Starsky would talk about what was going on inside him. Hutch was finding that hard to do.

The weeks he and Starsky had lived apart had taken their toll. Hutch found himself holding back his fears, his concerns, even his joys, as if sharing them with Starsky would only burden his partner unnecessarily. That had never been their way before, and it bothered Hutch that he had retreated so far from their working rapport, but he couldn't seem to help it.

And Starsky couldn't seem to figure out how to help him get past it. As Huggy had predicted, he'd been courting Hutch tirelessly from those long, pain-filled days in the hospital, to the exhausting first days at home. He catered to Hutch's every need, much as Hutch had done with him after Gunther. But Hutch wasn't Starsky, and the constant attention only made him withdraw further. Starsky didn't let it faze him. He was obviously too happy to have Hutch alive and mending to let Hutch's despondency affect him. He'd weathered Hutch's moods before, Hutch remembered.

Starsky seemed so determined to weather this one out that he was giving Hutch all the room he needed emotionally and physically. While they still spent all their time together during Hutch's recovery, they weren't sleeping together. They had not once made love. They touched
companionably. Held hands. Hugged. Even kissed at times, as friendly ex-lovers might. But there was no passion in it. Just comfort and love and reassurance. That was enough for Hutch right now.

He wasn't sure if it was enough for Starsky, but he wasn't well enough to worry about that. And Starsky wasn't pushing him. Starsky had slept on the couch in Hutch's apartment while he was on the mend. When they got to the beach house, Starsky let Hutch have the bed closest to the sliding glass doors that also led out onto the beach, and took the farther bed. He never complained, not once, didn't wheedle, didn't pout. Nor did he try to seduce. Starsky knew better than anyone when Hutch needed space, and he definitely needed it now.

In some ways, it was good for them both. Without their passion interfering, they had time to talk, to rediscover that aspect of their friendship that had always been the bedrock of their relationship. Unlike those times when they'd had to pass hours in boring police tasks and Starsky would keep up some inane prattle that both irritated and distracted Hutch, these days Starsky was quiet. Pensive. Waiting. He anticipated Hutch's needs and fulfilled them, whether it was for a meal, or a pain pill, or just some quiet companionship. When Hutch was feeling well enough, they went out to dinner on evenings that seemed a lot like dates.

Hutch began to wonder if the passion was gone, if they'd burned it up during their six-month romance before Rosey's reappearance. He wondered if he had any passion left inside him for anything at all. Most days it took enough energy just to get through his exercises. Starsky blamed his ennui on the medications, and no doubt, there was truth in that. If so, he expected to feel some change over the next few days as his prescriptions ran out. He was looking forward to being completely Hutch again, even if he wasn't sure what that might mean.

A cooling ocean breeze wafted through the open glass door, making his loose-fitting shirt flap around him and the lightweight drawstring pants cling to his thighs. His hair, much too long now, blew around his face. He pushed it out of his eyes, as he carefully drew in a breath as deeply as he could. It smelled great and felt rejuvenating.

"You're beautiful standing there like that," Starsky said softly from the couch. "The sun's highlighting your body and making it gleam. Your hair looks like some kind of halo."

Hutch turned in surprise, the words sounding poignant. He touched his throat wound self-consciously, then dropped his hand. The setting sun cast colors over the simple room, and made Starsky's burnished skin almost golden. The gray-blue flicker of the TV made him seem otherworldly, and turned his eyes into obsidian.

Starsky didn't move off the couch. He wouldn't pressure Hutch in anyway, though occasionally, he couldn't seem to help making some intimate comment like this one to let Hutch know his feelings.

At moments like this, Hutch felt like they were on a first date, and was never quite sure how to act. He smiled, feeling bashful, and said quietly, "Thanks."

Starsky just smiled back, never taking his eyes off Hutch.
"Uh, what are you watching?" Hutch asked just to make conversation.

Starsky shrugged. "On the TV? Nothing. I've just been watching you."

Hutch turned around completely, his back to the ocean, so he could face Starsky. "The sun's going down. It's really nice out. Maybe we should take a walk along the beach."

As confused as Hutch felt about their relationship, the one thing he was sure of was that he still craved Starsky's companionship. When he wasn't there, Hutch was lonely; he missed him. But when they were together, Hutch couldn't be sure of how he felt, or what he wanted. He hoped this time alone together, without doctors, or work interfering, or anything to deal with but themselves, would help him sort out the myriad emotions he was going through.

"A walk would be nice," Starsky agreed, without moving from the couch. "Then we can have some dinner. There's that cold pasta and vegetable salad in there and some ripe fruit. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Hutch smiled. It has to be love, he thought. What else would keep Starsky from whining about the lack of red meat and the high percentage of vegetables and fruit they were eating? Hutch couldn't handle heavy foods; his stomach was still dealing with the repercussions of ingesting all that blood. "Yeah, that sounds like a fine dinner. Maybe I can even brave a half-glass of wine."

Starsky gave him that endearing crooked grin and leaned over to shut the TV off. Just before he did, something on the screen distracted him. There was a flicker of blue shadow against his face, then suddenly, Starsky's expression changed radically. He turned to Hutch, his eyes wide in alarm.

"Hutch, get down!" Starsky shouted.

Before Hutch had a chance to react, to try and understand what Starsky was warning him about, he felt the bullet hit him in the back, tearing its way through his body, then exiting his throat. The pain was shocking, spreading down his spine, across his shoulders, and into his chest and neck. There was so much pain it was hard to figure out how many times he'd been hit. He fell to his knees as blood filled his mouth, his nose. He coughed as it seeped into his lungs. His throat was swelling shut and he found himself struggling for air. He tried to call to Starsky, but his voice wouldn't work and his throat was so tight, he could hardly swallow, hardly force air in.

No, no, no! he thought desperately. This can't be happening here and now. It's over. I can't go through this again!

Blood was everywhere, all over him, pouring down his throat. I'm going to drown, he thought, on my own blood.

He clutched at his throat in spite of the pain to slow down the loss of blood, and saw air bubble out from between his fingers. That was bad, he knew, when air came out of a place that had no business leaking air.
Dimly, he heard Starsky calling to him, but was no longer sure where Starsky was. Weren't they at the beach house? How could this be happening here?

"Easy, Hutch, easy, I've got you!" Starsky's voice seemed to be coming from far away, from the end of a long tunnel. Then Starsky touched him. Starsky had crawled over to him, and was gathering up his broken, bleeding body into his arms. He pulled Hutch up into his lap, forcing him to sit up. Hutch groaned in pain, but suddenly he could breathe easier. Weakly, Hutch clutched at Starsky's shirt, the pain racking him, the terrible blood loss covering them both. Dimly, he thought, if he were going to die, at least it would be in Starsky's arms. As though Starsky sensed his thoughts, he hugged him tighter to his body, cradling his head against his shoulder.

"Ah, Hutch," Starsky crooned, "I love you so much. Never loved anyone the way I love you. You've got to believe that. Believe in my love, Hutch, and come back to me. Come on, Hutch, come on back to me."

Starsky's fingers stroked Hutch's face, wiping away his tears of pain. Then those long, slender fingers traveled over his jaw, onto his neck, gently, so gently, moving over his wound. Starsky didn't flinch at the blood pouring out of Hutch's throat or the spray of red droplets that exploded from the wound when he coughed. Starsky just continued stroking the terrible injury as tenderly as he could, and as he did, the bleeding slowed and then stopped as if by magic.

"Easy, Hutch," Starsky murmured. "Take a deep breath. You can do it. I know it's hard, but you can do it. Real deep breath. Come on."

Those incredible fingers continued their loving massage, and as they did, Hutch could feel the wound closing on its own. He shuddered and drew closer to Starsky's warmth and pulled in a shaky breath.

"You can do better than that," Starsky urged, his hand trailing down from the healing wound to roam over Hutch's chest. Starsky's fingers rubbed a comforting pattern over Hutch's ribs, and immediately he felt less congested. "Deep breath now. For me."

His throat wasn't swollen anymore, and his chest didn't hurt. He sucked in a deep lungful of clean air, and it felt liberating. As his lungs expanded to their limit, he felt a dull ache, but it was tolerable. It was nothing compared to the agony of the bullet wound.

"That's good, that's good," Starsky said encouragingly. The hand that had been stroking his chest moved so that Starsky could embrace Hutch tightly with both arms. Hutch felt Starsky's warm mouth brush his temple, then his eyes, and his cheek. "Hutch, I love you so much. So very much. Wake up and tell me you're okay, huh?"

Hutch opened his eyes, disoriented. He thought he'd been awake. His arms wrapped around Starsky in return, hugging him hard, as he tried to figure out what was happening, where they were. He didn't think he could bear it if he was still in the hospital. The scent and sounds of the ocean had been so real.
Blinking, he found himself peering out through sliding glass doors that opened onto a small deck. Beyond the deck was an empty beach. The ocean beyond that was gentle, lapping at the shore, making a lulling, rhythmic sound that was almost hypnotic. Hutch was afraid to believe what he was seeing. He reached up to touch his throat. The wound was still there, but closed and definitely healing. He swallowed and it didn't hurt.

Starsky rubbed his back comfortingly, and Hutch realized he was in bed, sitting across Starsky's outstretched legs, wrapped securely in his arms. His head nestled comfortably against Starsky's shoulder. It felt good. It felt safe. His breathing evened out and he stopped the panicked panting he hadn't even realized he'd been doing.

"Hutch, you awake?" Starsky asked, never slowing his comforting strokes.

Hutch realized that Starsky wasn't trying to seduce him, the way he used to when he had dreams about the Gunther shooting. He was just giving him simple comfort, the way he might a child, or a really sick person. Was he still that sick?

"Hutch?" Starsky said again.

"I'm awake," he finally said. His voice sounded funny, harsh, but much better than when he was in the hospital. "Where are we?"

"We're at the beach house," Starsky said softly. "We've been here two days. You've been finishing up your medications, remember, and you're not taking that pill that helped you sleep anymore. I should've known you might have bad dreams, being in a strange place and giving up those drugs. I'm sorry you had to go through that again, babe." He brushed his lips against the side of Hutch's face in a passionless kiss.

Memories of their arriving at the little beach house began to coalesce in Hutch's mind and he started becoming more awake and aware. He was in the double bed next to the sliding glass doors, so he could watch the ocean as he fell asleep. And Starsky had been sleeping in the other bed, next to his. They both wore simple, loose-fitting cotton shirts and thin, draw-string pants. Hutch's shirt was open where Starsky had parted the buttons to stroke his chest. Starsky's shirt was still buttoned, but not to the top. Hutch could see a thatch of dark hair teasing its way out.

Hutch realized that this was more body contact than they'd allowed themselves to have in a very long time, but he was still reacting from the intense affects of the dream. This isn't the way it used to be, he knew. He remembered how Starsky used to rouse him with passion, and would willingly give Hutch his body to help him shed the terrible dream images. This gentle comforting was nice, but it made it harder to give up the painful, realistic dream scenes.

"Starsk," he said cautiously, his mind still sleep-fogged, "why didn't you kiss me?"

"I kissed you, Hutch," Starsky said, and pressed his lips to his cheek as if to remind him.

"Not like that," Hutch said. "I mean, why didn't you really kiss me. The way you used to when I was having the dream."
He felt Starsky gulp and then take a deep breath. "I, uh, I haven't had the impression that you would want me to do that. Especially when you weren't completely aware of what was happening."

Hutch thought about that for a minute. Starsky was right, of course, but somehow, the reappearance of the terrible dream seem to have its own set of rules about how they behaved.

"I...had the dream a lot in the hospital," Hutch said. "Or maybe it wasn't the dream but reality. I'm not sure. I remember, though, hearing you talking to me, telling me you loved me, that you'd never leave me, begging me to get well. And I kept waiting for you to kiss me awake, to pull me out of the dream and stop all the pain. I'd feel you kiss my cheek, touch my face, but I kept waiting for the kiss that would take it all away."

"That was probably while you were still semi-conscious," Starsky said. "That must've been terrifying...and disappointing. I'm sorry I couldn't take it all away. Believe me, if I could have, I would've. Whenever your eyes starting moving under your lids I was afraid you were having bad dreams, but you were so badly hurt, all I could do was talk, kiss your cheek, and let you know I was there. I couldn't climb in bed with you and hold you in my arms, like I'm doing now." He hugged Hutch harder to his chest, and Hutch returned the hug.

Hutch pulled back slightly to look at Starsky. Realizing he'd been sitting with all his weight on Starsky's legs, he shifted so that the bed took his weight, and his legs only draped over Starsky's thighs. Starsky squirmed to get more comfortable, but never took his gaze from Hutch's. His eyes reflected the moonlight shining in through the glass doors. The silvery glow made Starsky's eyes look like violet crystals. Starsky's concern radiated through his worried expression, and touched Hutch in a way little else could.

"You could kiss me now," Hutch whispered.

"Do you want me to?" Starsky asked sounding surprised.

"Yes," Hutch said. And tilted his head to the side to make it easy for him.

When Starsky's lips met his, the kiss was surprisingly gentle, almost hesitant. It was a simple kiss, lips on lips, as though it were their very first. In some ways, it was. They kissed slowly, pulled apart, kissed again, soft, smooth, closed-mouth touches, intimate in their simplicity. Starsky's hands started to rub Hutch's arms, then stopped, as if he were afraid he was taking improper liberties. It was such a touching gesture; it nearly broke Hutch's heart. In response, he stroked Starsky's hair, and Starsky mirrored that, running his fingers through Hutch's over-long strands.

In spite of their chaste kisses, Hutch felt Starsky's arousal bloom against his thigh through the thin cloth of their pants. Starsky drew away from the kiss, and tried to pull out of Hutch's arms.

"Starsk?" Hutch asked, confused.

Starsky shook his head, clearly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Hutch. It's been so long. I just can't control it."
"Then don't," Hutch said, and touched his mouth to Starsky's again.

"It...doesn't bother you?" Starsky asked.

Hutch smiled. "No, of course not." He brushed his fingers against Starsky's cheek. "If it didn't happen, I'd be worried. It makes me feel good to know you still want me."

"Want you?" Starsky laughed ruefully. "That's one way of putting it."

Hutch kissed him again. "Is it going to be too difficult for you...if this is all we do?"

"I can handle it if you can," Starsky assured him, returning the kiss.

"Starsky, right now it's all I can handle," Hutch said honestly.

His partner just smiled and kissed him tenderly again. "We oughta be in the front seat of the Torino," Starsky murmured. "In the drive-in. Or maybe watchin' the submarine races. That's where you're supposed to go necking."

Hutch smiled, finding Starsky's easy acceptance and his humor infectious. He was really enjoying this. It didn't matter if he couldn't get hard. This simple gesture between them was helping to re-establish their connection. It was like the first awkward steps of a convalescent. _That's what our love affair is, Hutch thought. A damaged thing trying to recover._ Recovery could be slow, he knew. Could Starsky bear the pace? Hutch would have to trust Starsky to be honest with him, to let him know.

They continued to kiss, petting each other's hair, hugging tight. Hutch could feel the heat radiating from Starsky's body, feel his arousal throbbing insistently against his leg. Starsky's breath hitched in little gasps as they kissed. It was impossibly romantic, Hutch thought, and Starsky's willingness to curb his passion said more to him than hours of frantic loving ever could.

"We can neck in the Torino tomorrow night," Hutch whispered against Starsky's mouth.

"Yeah?" Starsky said breathlessly. "That sounds nice. 'Course, we could get in trouble in the Torino. I might try to take advantage of you once I've got you in my car."

Hutch smiled. "You can try. I'm not above slapping your face if you go too far."

Starsky suddenly got serious. "It's your party, Hutch. Your rules. As little or as much as you want. I love you. I'll do anything to make you happy."

The plaintive words nearly made Hutch weep. But he couldn't make himself say what he knew Starsky most longed to hear. He had not professed his love since he'd been shot, and he still couldn't make himself say it. Hutch tried to find his voice. "Anything? That could get complicated."

"Anything," Starsky said with heartbreaking sincerity. "You just ask, and it's yours. I won't go any farther than you want. I swear. But I'll give you the moon if you ask for it."
Hutch leaned his forehead against Starsky's, and the two of them just sat there for a moment, holding on to each other. "I might want the moon," Hutch confessed.

"Yeah?" Starsky said, stealing a quick kiss. "Try me."

Hutch drew back slightly to watch Starsky's expression in the silvery moonlight. "Will you sleep with me?"

Starsky's face lit up and Hutch realized he didn't understand what Hutch was asking. "If you think that's the moon, let's go for the sun -- "

"Sleep with me," Hutch said to clarify, "without making love? Can you sleep with me, if all we do is kiss? Like this?"

The disappointment hit Starsky, but he schooled his expression. "I'd love to sleep with you, Hutch. No bargains. No strings. Let me share your bed. I swear you won't regret it."

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut, then they kissed again and again. The kisses continued on and on, sweet and loving, as Hutch felt Starsky rein in his blazing passion. He never would have known his partner could exercise such amazing self-control, and it stirred him. At one point, when their kissing grew torrid, if still chaste, Hutch felt a small tingling in his groin. It only lasted a moment, but it cheered him anyway. For a while after the shooting he thought he might be dead down there. Still, even if he had been capable of complete arousal, he would not have traded this experience for anything.

He felt the fatigue of his interrupted sleep begin to steal over him and sagged in Starsky's arms.

"Hey, you're beat," Starsky said, recognizing the signs. "Come on, lay down. I'm right here, beside you."

The two of them stretched out, side by side. Hutch was closest to the glass doors, and he rolled onto his side to see where the moon had moved to while they'd been busy making out. He tried to remember the last time he'd been content with such simple foreplay with nothing following, and couldn't. Even in high school, he'd been sexually aggressive. He doubted Starsky could recall the last time he'd remained so virtuous either.

Starsky rubbed Hutch's back comfortably through his shirt. Hutch could feel the incredible tension in Starsky's body and marveled at his control. "You feeling okay?" Starsky asked. His voice sounded a bit strained. "Think you can sleep?"

Hutch couldn't have been more relaxed if he'd had two orgasms. "Yeah. I'm fine. I'll be able to sleep." He wondered how Starsky would be able to, lying beside him with his hard-on demanding attention it wasn't going to get.

Starsky squeezed his shoulder. "I gotta use the john, Hutch. But I'll be right back."

Worried that Starsky had decided he couldn't handle it, Hutch grasped his hand. "You'll come back to bed? You'll sleep with me?"
Starsky's smile was wider than Hutch could remember it being in a long time. "You'll have to kick me out to keep me away. You relax. I won't be long."

It only occurred to Hutch after Starsky had closed the bathroom door that Starsky probably needed the privacy to relieve his aching erection, not his bladder. He thought about that through his sleepiness, and felt a stir of jealousy that Starsky would hide from him like that. Of course, Hutch had set up the limitations. He couldn't very well expect Starsky to jerk off in front of him when all they'd been doing was simple, close-mouthed kisses. Realizing there was a lot about their relationship that was still nebulous and confusing to him, he decided Starsky deserved his privacy and the chance to decompress. But he couldn't close his eyes until Starsky returned and climbed back into bed with him.

Hutch rolled over, pulling Starsky against him, slinging an arm and a leg over him to afford maximum contact. It felt comforting and safe, not sexual, and he knew he'd sleep dreamlessly with Starsky protecting him.

Starsky purred a little in his throat as they snuggled together, and his nearly boneless lassitude told Hutch he'd been right about Starsky's bathroom sojourn. He decided to tease his partner a little.

"That didn't take long," Hutch murmured against Starsky's throat. "You didn't used to be so quick on the trigger."

He felt the body lying against him tense a little, then relax. "You mad?" Starsky asked softly, understanding completely what Hutch was referring to.

Hutch laughed lightly. "Just cause I can't get off, doesn't mean you're not allowed to. What kind of a bastard would I be if I denied you some relief?"

Starsky's expression relaxed, and he hugged Hutch tighter. "I love you, Hutch. With all my heart."

Hutch sighed, and brushed his lips against Starsky's jaw. "I'm glad," he said, then fell asleep seconds later.

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When they woke in the morning, Hutch was wrapped around Starsky's body like a blanket. Starsky's morning erection was impossible to ignore, as much as they both tried to. Hutch couldn't help himself; even though he knew he was making things worse for Starsky, he couldn't keep away from his mouth. Hutch woke him with gentle but demanding kisses, still chaste, still close-mouthed, and Starsky yielded willingly to his need, giving Hutch exactly what he wanted, never asking for more. Hutch ached for the touch of Starsky's mouth against his, and wondered at the strange fixation he'd developed.

They kissed for long minutes, all the while Starsky's erection bobbed, soaking the front of his pants. Hutch knew the kindest thing he could do was to let Starsky go so he could take care of himself in the bathroom, but he kept putting it off until Starsky was panting and squirming in
need. The kindest thing Hutch really could do, he knew, was reach into Starsky's pants and take care of the problem himself. But there was still too much between them unresolved. That seemed to cross some line in Hutch's mind he wasn't ready to cross.

Pulling out of their intense kisses, he pushed back in the bed. He couldn't deny Starsky any longer. He couldn't be that cruel.

"Go on," he rasped roughly, nodding toward the bathroom. "Go take care of it."

Starsky shook his head. "I'm okay. It can wait --"

"I can't," Hutch admitted. "It's driving me crazy. Go on. I'll put the coffee on. Start some breakfast."

Starsky's eyes bore into him, looking for answers. "Okay. But let me make breakfast. You need to rest."

Hutch shook his head. "Not this morning. I feel like cooking." He stroked Starsky's bristly jaw, falling into his blue-violet gaze. The passion banked in there nearly shattered him. "I want to feed you. Let me do that for you." It was the only way he felt he could make up for his lack of desire. I'll fill your belly since I can't fill your body, or let you fill mine.

"Okay," Starsky said, his breath coming short. "If that's what you want." Without another word, he slid out of bed, padding silently to the small bathroom they shared. The door closed with a snick and Hutch found himself staring at it, as if his eyes could bore through the wood and watch Starsky give himself what Hutch couldn't. You mean wouldn't, he reminded himself. Just because his cock didn't work didn't mean his hands didn't, or his mouth. He could've brought Starsky off with two strokes, he knew. So, why didn't he? He didn't know. Nor did he know why the thought of Starsky jerking off behind that door, without him, made him upset.

Before his chaotic thoughts drove him crazy, he got out of bed, made it quickly -- Less of a temptation that way -- straightened Starsky's, then pulled on jeans and a t-shirt. As he started getting the coffee ready, he heard Starsky leave the bathroom and go into the bedroom to dress. Even in this, they were thinking on the same wavelength.

We need to get out of the house, Hutch decided as the coffee brewed. Pulling eggs and bacon and bread out of the fridge, he thought, If we stay here all day, I won't be able to leave him alone. That's not fair. I don't even know why I suddenly need this from him. I don't even understand my own feelings. He put a cast iron stove on the pan and set the flame low before laying the bacon in it. We could go explore that little town nearby. There are places to shop there. Starsky will like that. We can have a nice lunch in a restaurant. Public places would be safe, give them a chance to cool off, clear their minds. Maybe later this evening, we can go to a movie. He buttered a pan and got it ready for the eggs.

I guess now we're courting each other, Hutch thought with some amusement as he heard Starsky come up behind him.
"Smells good enough to eat," Starsky murmured, squeezing his shoulders, and placing a gentle kiss on his cheek.

As Starsky moved away to set the kitchen table, Hutch realized he hadn't been talking about the bacon, and blushed to his roots.

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It was off-season in the little coastal town, but only by a few weeks, so most of the seasonal businesses were still open, offering tantalizing sales before they closed down. Getting out of the house had been smart, Starsky thought, as he sucked up root beer through a straw. He was only human and didn't know how much more of Hutch's restrained ardor he could take. Part of him was prepared to live with it forever, if that's what Hutch wanted. Starsky owed him, after all he'd put Hutch through, and he wasn't about to forget that. But part of him, the very human part, couldn't help but hope that this was a new beginning for them. He'd wanted to court Hutch, and he had been doing just that. And now Hutch was accepting the courting, on his own terms. Starsky was both exhilarated and incredibly frustrated.

_That's what your hand is for_, he reminded himself sternly. He found himself reminiscing back to some of his early sexual conquests, to the time when "good girls" didn't do those kinds of things, even with boys they loved. He'd been the king of the front seat conquest, and proud of it. It was a rare girl who could hold him off indefinitely.

But this wasn't some high school romance. This was the most important relationship of his life. Hutch was telling him he was willing to try to rekindle the feelings between them, feelings Starsky had somehow walked away from for the illusion of normalcy and social acceptance. But Hutch was also telling him he couldn't guarantee that the flame was still there in his heart. Starsky would have to be patient. And more importantly, he'd have to let Hutch set the pace. That would be the hardest part. But he was determined to do it. It didn't matter if he grew hair on his palm or went blind from masturbating. All he had to do was imagine Hutch touching him and he came like rocket anyway.

They were walking down Main Street, browsing some of the antique stores and used bookshops. They'd each picked up a few things to read, and Hutch had spent some time lingering over some old furniture that appealed to him. Now, they were just strolling, Starsky working on his soda, while Hutch browsed the local paper. Hutch was so intent on the paper that several times Starsky had to take his elbow to guide him around obstacles in his path.

Finally, Starsky spied a public bench and steered Hutch to it, urging him to sit before he tripped over something and set his recovery back. Starsky sat a few feet away from him on the bench, watching the light traffic go by and the few people who, like them, were strolling from store to store.

Hutch turned a page of the paper. "I was thinking we might go to the movies tonight," he said.

Starsky turned to him, surprised. Hutch wasn't a big movie buff, preferring weird artsy films from foreign countries that Starsky never could understand, even when they had subtitles. He'd be surprised if this small town had those kinds of movies, except maybe at the height of the
season when the moneyed crowd showed up. This time of year, there would probably be only a few local theatres with fairly pedestrian fare.

"You know me," Starsky said amiably. "I'm always ready to see a movie. Anything decent playing?"

He couldn't see Hutch's face behind the open paper -- he never did manage to teach Hutch how to fold a newspaper to read it conveniently -- but he could clearly hear the smile in his voice when Hutch said, "I'm thinking we should go see this double feature at the Rivoli. Two monster movies."

Starsky's eyebrows rose. Hutch wanted to go see two *monster* movies? Normally, Starsky would have to wheedle for hours to get him to go to one with him, even a classy one like *Alien*. "You sure? I don't mind if we go see something else, something you'd prefer."

"No," said Hutch, still sounding amused. "No, I think this sounds like something we shouldn't miss. The first one is 'Cannibal Girls,' and the second is a British film called, 'Raw Meat.'"

Starsky blinked dazedly at the wall of newsprint separating him and Hutch. "Are you running a fever again? Maybe I should take your temperature. You might need to go back on those antibiotics, Hutch. 'Cannibal Girls' and 'Raw Meat'?" His voice nearly ended on a squeak of consternation.

"No, I feel fine, Starsk. I just think the films sound intriguing. It says here that 'Cannibal Girls' had no written script; it was completely improvised by the actors as they followed a rough outline of the story. Sounds fascinating, doesn't it? And 'Raw Meat' is a British film with a fairly decent cast. I think they just gave it a sensational title when it came over here to market it better. Donald Pleasance is in it, and he's a good actor. Says it's about some secret subterranean dwellers in the British subway system. More of a suspense film than a monster movie. I think we should go."

Starsky began to fear that Hutch's mental state was more impaired than he'd first thought. This didn't sound like his partner at all. These were more the kind of films Starsky was always dying to see. Hutch might go with him, but he'd complain and bitch the whole way, even if he ended up enjoying himself, just to maintain his veneer of sophisticated filmgoer.

Deciding that he might as well give in and take advantage of Hutch's willingness to indulge in his kind of film, Starsky shrugged, and said, "Yeah, sounds great, Hutch. We should go. Where's this double feature playing anyway?"

Starsky took a long pull off the soda as Hutch said casually, "At the Rivoli, like I said." There was a pause and then he added, "It's the local drive-in."

Starsky was so startled he inhaled soda up into his nose, then coughed and sneezed it out again all over his shirt and jeans. The carbonation burned like crazy, and Hutch had to pound him on the back to help him clear his sinuses.
Starsky's palms started sweating as soon as they pulled into a space at the back of drive-in's lot. Hutch had picked out the spot, way in the back, in a dark corner. It was the kind of space they'd pick for a stakeout. The car was almost invisible here. They were both wearing dark clothes, as if by some unspoken agreement they wanted to blend into the black upholstery of the car and become invisible. Of course, Hutch's hair made that almost impossible, but it was so long now, that if viewed from the back, it could possibly be mistaken for a woman's.

Shortly after Starsky got the speaker settled on the car door, the screen flickered to life, and they sat through a collection of cartoons that helped tame the rowdy children the local married couples had brought with them. By the time the main features started, the kids would fall asleep in the back seat and the harried parents would have a few hours of quiet togetherness at a modest price.

As the cartoons played, a few classic Looney Tunes from Warner Brothers, Hutch slouched low in the passenger seat, noisily crunching the popcorn they'd bought. That was weird all by itself. Normally, Starsky was the popcorn eater. Hutch insisted that eating popcorn during a film was nearly sacrilege. You were supposed to just sit there watching it, paying attention, admiring the art and craft of it, even sitting through the world's most tedious credits as though anyone could remember all the obscure names of the gaffers and stunt men and film editors. Starsky didn't know how to enjoy a film without a big tub of buttered popcorn. It brought back memories of ten-cent matinees that showed endless monster movies on Saturday that all the neighborhood kids would sit through until the evening adult features came on. It gave their hard-working parents a needed break from them, and kept them cool and occupied during relentlessly hot summer days. That was in Brooklyn, when he was young. Once he started living with his aunt and uncle in LA, movies were a little more civilized. But once he hit 16, well, then there were the drive-ins.

Which brought him right back to his own front seat, where Hutch rummaged in a dwindling tub of buttered popcorn and laughed, enjoying the inane cartoons, while Starsky's palms sweated helplessly.

He was rubbing them on his thighs again to dry them off, when Hutch said, "How come you're not eating any popcorn, Starsk? You feeling all right?"

He swallowed, praying his voice wouldn't crack. He felt like he was 16, on his first date with Mary Lou Schimmerhorn, the girl with the biggest boobs in high school. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just not hungry...for popcorn." He could've bit his tongue for that last remark. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the sly look on Hutch's face. He was enjoying this way too much.

_You set up the scene, buddy_, Starsky thought at him. _But you're gonna have to make the first move. And every one after that. I'll give you whatever you want, but I'm not guessing. You're gonna have to tell me._ He rubbed his palms on his thighs again.

They were maybe a half hour into "Cannibal Girls", and Starsky had finally started to relax a little. Hutch stayed on his side of the car, still working on the popcorn, if slowly, and actually seemed to be watching the silly film with the same intense concentration he would've given something by Fellini. The girls in it were young, slender, and busty, and there wasn't a one of
them that would ever be called on to make another film after this ridiculous improvisational mess. Maybe Hutch was digging the girls, Starsky thought, a little disappointedly. They were certainly easy on the eyes, not that he cared. He remembered that after they'd become lovers, after the Gunther hit, Hutch seemed to lose all interest in women, much to Starsky's dismay. He no longer followed a long set of legs, never stared after a gorgeous woman, and LA sure was ripe with them. Starsky hadn't lost his roving eye, but Hutch was tolerant of it. Starsky hadn't been interested in doing more than look, but a beautiful woman could still turn his head after he and Hutch hit the sheets.

So maybe Hutch had found that interest again. Funny, but Starsky could've cared less about the girls on the screen, even when they took their clothes off. His mind kept wandering; he tried to remember what Hutch looked like nude, then tried to jerk his mind away from that before he threw another rod. He was so engrossed in his own mental conflicts that he jumped when Hutch spoke.

"You sure you don't want some popcorn, Starsky?" he asked solicitously.

Starsky's mind was so tied in knots he couldn't even answer.

"Dinner was a long time ago," Hutch said, as he dug around in the tub. "And I've just hit this spot where the butter landed just right, coating every kernel. It's still warm down here, too. Come on, try some." He pulled up some of the corn and held it out to Starsky, clearly intending to feed it to him.

Starsky could see butter glistening on the ends of Hutch's broad fingertips as he held the morsel near his mouth. The urge to reach out and lick those fingertips clean was nearly overwhelming.

"Come on, Starsk," Hutch cajoled quietly, his voice low and raspy, impossibly sexy. "Try some. Do it for me."

_Dirty pool_, Starsky thought, and helplessly opened his mouth. He stopped breathing as Hutch pushed the corn between his lips. Starsky took the salty, slick pieces into his mouth, chewed them twice then swallowed.

"Want more?" Hutch said, and Starsky knew damned well he wasn't talking about popcorn anymore.

He started to tremble and fought to control it. "Whatever you wanna give me," he said, wanting Hutch to know he wouldn't go back on the word he'd given him the night before.

Hutch swallowed, and Starsky saw the still tender wound on his throat bob. Reaching into the tub, Hutch brought out a heavily buttered piece and held it out. Starsky opened his mouth and waited. Hutch rubbed the slippery kernel against Starsky's lower lip until Starsky couldn't stand it anymore and reached for the food with his tongue. Hutch placed it there reverently, his own mouth open, as Starsky took it from him. Slowly, carefully, so he wouldn't startle Hutch and make him pull away, Starsky encaised the tip of Hutch's fingers in his mouth and ran his tongue over them, cleaning them of the butter clinging to them. He sucked them gently, washing them with his tongue, and Hutch pushed them in farther, asking for more. They sat there for long
minutes, with Starsky tonguing and sucking on Hutch's hand while Hutch watched his every move, as if fascinated by something he'd never seen before.

"Does that taste good?" Hutch asked roughly, as if they were still talking about the popcorn.

"You taste good," Starsky rasped back, as Hutch pulled his hand back. "You always did. Every part of you. Any part you ever let me have."

Hutch seemed to withdraw for a moment and Starsky felt his whole body throb with disappointment and longing. I can wait, he told himself. Until you're ready, I can wait. Forever if I have to.

Hutch pulled some napkins from under the popcorn tub and cleaned his hand thoroughly, then reached up to wipe the butter off Starsky's mouth. Once he was done, Hutch carefully sat the nearly empty tub on the floor behind the front seat. At this moment, Starsky wouldn't have cared if he'd tossed the whole mess all over his back seat, runny butter and all. He sat, as tense as a cat, waiting for whatever might or might not happen. It was Hutch's party.

"Come here," Hutch said once he'd finished putting away the tub. He sat with his back against the passenger door, watching Starsky with eyes that bore into him.

Starsky found it impossible to move.

Hutch reached over, grabbed the lapel of his black leather jacket. "I said, come here," he repeated, towing on the leather, urging Starsky to move closer towards him on the bench seat. Hutch stared into his eyes, seeming puzzled. "What's the matter?"

Starsky had to wet his mouth. "I don't know what you want from me. I don't know what to do."

Hutch smiled. "You'll figure it out." And leaned in to kiss him.

Oh, god, Starsky groaned to himself. Hutch's lips met his, slightly wet, warm, and so inviting. He forced himself to keep his mouth closed and kiss Hutch back lightly, somehow trying to convey his pent-up passion without going farther than Hutch wanted.

They made out on the front seat like teenagers, and it was one of the hottest things Starsky had ever done. Hutch couldn't seem to stop kissing him, and moved from his mouth, to his cheek, to his eyes, to his ears -- which nearly did him in -- then back to his mouth as if rediscovering him all over again. Starsky panted for air, and clutched Hutch's leather jacket at the same time Hutch gripped his. The two jackets creaked and groaned as they kissed, making the sounds neither of them seemed able to utter.

Suddenly, Hutch pulled back and Starsky thought for sure he'd faint if Hutch's mouth didn't come back to his. Hutch had that fierce look on his face again, the one that made him look like he was angry when what it really meant was that he was hot. Starsky loved that look and had feared that after the night of their runaway passion in the stakeout apartment, that he'd never see it again.

"Are you hard?" Hutch demanded suddenly.
Starsky didn't even consider lying. "Like a fuckin' phone pole."

Hutch's eyes sparkled dangerously. "I'm glad. I like making you hard."

Starsky's stomach clenched, and his cock jumped in his tight jeans. He couldn't help himself; he had to ask. "Are you? Hard?"

Hutch shook his head, but he didn't seem to really care about that. He seemed totally focused on Starsky's reactions. "We're making out in a public place," he told Starsky, "like a couple of kids. We could get busted. Don't you care?"

He shook his head. Right now he'd go down on Hutch's in Macy's window if he'd let him. He brushed his knuckles against Hutch's cheek. "I love you," he whispered, and found his mouth kissed again, harder this time, more insistently.

Then, suddenly, Hutch's tongue brushed against his lips. Starsky shuddered all over and opened his mouth, letting Hutch do whatever he wanted. Hutch's tongue toyed with Starsky's lips, running over them as if still tasting butter there. Then finally, when Starsky thought he couldn't bear it any longer, Hutch's tongue snaked into his mouth and took possession of it. It was impossible for Starsky to hold back his groan. Hutch's tongue stroked along Starsky's inviting it to play and then things got serious.

Hutch buried his fingers in Starsky's hair and held his head so he could kiss him just the way he wanted to. Their tongues wrestled wetly while Starsky fought the urge he had to fondle Hutch, touch him intimately, start taking his clothes off. They were in the front seat of the Torino in a public place, and if they got caught kissing, they'd be in plenty of trouble without adding lewd acts to the charges. But as Hutch kept kissing him aggressively, it became harder for Starsky to be passive. He allowed himself to slide his hands up under Hutch's jacket and roam over the soft fabric of his tee shirt. He didn't dare touch below the waist, though. Though the thought of Hutch slamming him for taking liberties suddenly seemed incredibly hot.

His erection was killing him. It wasn't so bad last night in the loose cotton pants, but he'd worn his tightest jeans on impulse. Hutch used to love his ass, and he hoped the jeans would remind him of his former desire. But the constricting material now felt like a steel cock-cage restraining him uncomfortably while his hard-on tried to drill its way through his zipper. Several steamy kisses later, he couldn't stand it anymore, and shifted in the seat, wrestling with himself through the fabric to make his cock more comfortable. But that was a joke. The only way he could get more comfortable now was if he took it out and put it in Hutch's hand. And that wasn't happening.

"It's really hurting now, isn't it?" Hutch murmured against his cheek.

_He knows me too damned well, _Starsky thought. "No, it's okay. I'm fine."

Hutch kissed him again, then looked at him worriedly. "Not in those pants you're not. You must be strangling in them."
Starsky swallowed hard. He couldn't stand talking about it like this. It was too reminiscent of the intimacy they used to have. He'd rather just ignore it and wait for it to go away.

Suddenly, Hutch shucked out of his jacket, and tucked it around Starsky's lap. "Go on. No one can see now. Take it out. Take care of it. You'll feel better."

Starsky looked at him, stupefied. "Right here?"

"I think it would be safer here than standing outside next to the car," Hutch said, with a smirk, "but that's up to you. Go on. I mean it. Take care of it." His eyes grew soft then, with that look of hazy passion that Starsky yearned to see. "'Cause I can't stop kissing you. And there's a whole other movie yet to see."

*Please don't stop kissing me,* Starsky thought, as he fumbled under Hutch's jacket for his zipper. He had to battle to get it down, and he was convinced that everyone in the drive in had to know what he was doing even though there wasn't another car near them for three rows.

Hutch watched his every move as if trying to learn some new complicated dance. When Starsky finally got the zipper down and released himself, his whole body sagged in relief. Hutch wet his mouth, and that nearly did Starsky in right there.

Suddenly, Hutch reached into his back pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Opening it up, he handed it to Starsky. "Here. You'll need this. That's my best jacket. I don't need the lining ruined."

The Hutch-normalcy of that comment nearly made Starsky burst into laughter. He took the handkerchief and covered himself with it under the leather.

His erection was raging, aching for some relief. As soon as he took hold of himself under the coat, Hutch moved in on him for an especially powerful kiss, his tongue shoving hard into Starsky's mouth, taking possession of it, of him. Hutch was breathing hard, too, so Starsky knew that even if he couldn't get a hard-on, kissing him was getting him excited. Hutch gripped his shoulders roughly, pushing him back against the seat as they kissed, then wrapped his arms around him as tight as he could. It felt incredible to have Hutch's strength encasing him, and Starsky couldn't hold back a groan of passion.

Hutch's mouth left his for a second, leaving him gasping. "Do it. Right now," he ordered. "Right here." Then his mouth captured Starsky's again, and all he could do was yield.

Hutch's kisses were so torrid that it only took a few strokes before his entire body shook with release. He held the handkerchief tight over his sensitive cockhead and captured the semen that felt like it was exploding from his body. As his hips jerked in the seat, Hutch grew more passionate, kissing his mouth raw, gripping him with arms of steel. It was amazingly exciting, and even with the windows open, they were steaming up the windshield. Starsky could barely breathe, and when he was finished coming, he could only sag back against the seat bonelessly.
Hutch pulled away, grinning wolfishly. "So quick on the trigger," he admonished playfully. His face was flushed, with bright spots of color on his cheeks. He looked so beautiful Starsky could barely stand it.

"That's what you do to me, and you know it," he gasped. He was so grateful for the relief, he wanted to weep.

"I'm glad," Hutch whispered, petting his cheek. "You wearing underwear?"

Touch me and find out, Starsky begged silently, but Hutch's hands never went near the jacket. "No."

"You should be ashamed," Hutch scolded, but his breathing picked up a little, which thrilled Starsky. "Gonna make it through the next movie?"

"Or die tryin','" Starsky confessed. That made Hutch laugh. Starsky wiped himself with the handkerchief, and tossed the come-filled fabric into the back seat. Hutch pulled out more napkins he'd taken from the concession stand when he'd bought the popcorn.

"I hope this'll be enough to get us through both features," Hutch said, his eyes sparkling dangerously.

Starsky's mind reeled. He wants me to get off again...and again? He wet his mouth, trembling with anticipation, and felt his cock stirring already. This is worse than high school, he decided. Lots worse. But I can handle it. I've got to.

Hutch moved closer to him again, clearly ready to kiss him some more. On impulse, Starsky blurted, "Marry me, Hutch." His voice was ragged, but his heart was beating double time, it was so filled with love for this man. "I mean it. Marry me, and make an honest man out of me, will ya?"

The words stopped Hutch cold. He looked perplexed and drew back a little. "Starsky, I don't get this marriage thing. What's the point? It's not like it's legal or binding or anything."

"It'd be binding to me," Starsky said, wanting so hard to convince Hutch. "You're the one who kept talking about how I deserved a 'normal' life with marriage and all that. And you're right. I've always wanted it. I still want it. Only now I want it with you. I don't want to settle for a life in the shadows. People build their own closets. I want to marry you. Profess my love in front of witnesses. Forsaking all others, 'Til death do us part. I want to shatter the glass with you. Alla that stuff. Then I want us to make a life together, a real life. Get a house -- "

"Have a couple of kids?" Hutch said pointedly.

"Who says we can't have kids?" Starsky argued. "We've already got two -- Kiko and Molly! Who says we won't find others to share our lives with if that's what we want to do? LA's a really progressive place, and we've both got good jobs, good incomes. You and me, Hutch, we've done anything we ever set our minds to doing. If we decide to build a family, it'll happen."
Hutch drew back, as if retreating from Starsky's argument. "This is a pipe-dream, Starsky. We could never be that open about our relationship at work and you know it. We don't have to build a closet. Everyone's built it for us."

Starsky shook his head and moved closer to him, careful not to dislodge the jacket hiding his exposure. "If we both end up lieutenants, Hutch, we'll have a lot more authority. After what we've gone through in the last year, we can write our own ticket. When I gave my statement while you were in the hospital, the chief talked to me about it. He thinks our partnership is too valuable to the department to let it go to waste. The chief thinks he can find some innovative way for us to keep working together even after we become lieutenants, like putting us on a special task force. We're better at everything together, and everyone knows it. Dobey already knows about us, Hutch. He'd still be our superior even if we get promoted. And he's got too much seniority for anyone to put him in a corner about this."

He found Hutch watching him with a hopeful expression.

"Look, Hutch, I'm not saying we should start making out in the hallways at Parker. But a lot of cops share housing together to save money, and no one thinks anything about it. Remember when we bought that investment property together? Nobody raised an eyebrow. And frankly, I don't think anyone will say anything to us even if we wear wedding bands in public."

"You'd go that far?" Hutch said incredulously.

Starsky nodded. "I'm not hiding my feelings for you anymore, Hutch. I'm not living a shadow existence with you. We deserve better. We deserve a real life together. And we're gonna have it."

Hutch's expression softened. "You almost make me believe it."

Starsky touched Hutch's mouth tenderly. "Believe it, Hutch. Believe in me, in the way that I love you."

Hutch made a small sound of longing then moved back into Starsky's arms, taking possession of him again, meshing their mouths together. Starsky felt his erection bloom under Hutch's jacket, and reached for the wad of napkins to be safe. As joyful as he felt from Hutch's kisses, he knew it was going to be the longest double feature of his life.

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They lay together in bed later that night, and held onto each other as the moon rose over the water. Starsky was exhausted. He'd had to jerk off two more times as Donald Pleasance chased a deranged subhuman troglodyte through the London underground while Hutch kissed him to his soul. They didn't say anything to each other on the way home, and even when they got in the house, they just showered separately, changed into their sleepwear, and got ready for bed. For a few minutes Starsky thought Hutch might not want to sleep with him, but Hutch took his hand and pulled him into his bed.

Suddenly, Hutch broke their silence. "Starsk, suppose I never fully recover."
Starsky read between the lines with no problem. *Suppose I can never get it up again.* "That's what 'in sickness and in health' covers, remember? Besides, you'll recover. You're too strong not to. You're still replacing the blood you lost, and I know damned well that you need a full tank to raise that monster!" Starsky grinned, and got a small smile in answer. "Remember, it took a while before I was fully functional again. You waited. I can wait, too."

Hutch shook his head. "It's not just that. I mean, I can't figure out how I feel about anything. About you. About us. I'm not even sure...if I'm still in love with you. I know I love you, but that's not the same."

"You had a terrible trauma. It makes you reevaluate a lot of things. Some things get real clear. Others get all confused. You need time, Hutch, that's all. And I can wait. I know your love for me is still there. But I've got to earn it this time. I can do that. I can wait for as long as it takes."

"Suppose it takes forever?" Hutch looked anguished as he asked the question.

Starsky sighed. "Is this a test? Fine. Spending forever side-by-side with you is no test at all. I'm too busy bein' grateful that we've got a 'forever' to look forward to. I love you, Hutch. Love isn't supposed to come with limits, or specific demands. Just let me love you the way I'm doing, and we'll let nature take its course...whatever that happens to be."

Hutch looked puzzled as he stared into Starsky's eyes. Then he leaned in to kiss him gently, close-mouthed, a simple gesture of friendship and love. Then Hutch rolled over and Starsky spooned around him and they watched the moon over the water until sleep took them.

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Starsky woke up abruptly the next morning with a painful erection and his arms full of Hutch. Hutch was half-way on top of him and was already kissing him feverishly. *He's gonna kill me if he keeps this up,* Starsky thought with a helpless groan. Hutch swallowed the sound and plunged into Starsky's mouth, heedless of morning breath or any other obstacles. Starsky shifted and Hutch must've interpreted that as an attempt to evade him, because he rolled completely on top of him, pinning him to the bed. Helplessly in thrall, Starsky felt his hips surging uncontrollably as he tried to strop himself against Hutch's belly. Then he realized Hutch wasn't hard, so he forced himself to stop. He couldn't stop trembling though, especially when he realized Hutch had opened all the buttons on Starsky's shirt and exposed his chest. Suddenly, that seemed like the most licentious thing they'd ever done.

"Still think you can wait?" Hutch growled into his mouth, as if challenging him.

Gasping, Starsky said, "I can wait. It ain't even half-past forever yet."

Hutch took his mouth ruthlessly, his tongue plunging in deep, drinking from Starsky as his hands roved the sides of Starsky's chest. Hutch's hips moved slowly over his groin, deliberately teasing. Starsky thought he might actually faint, he felt so light-headed.

"You want me?" Hutch demanded to know, then kissed Starsky again before he could answer.
When he could catch his breath, Starsky said, "I'm burning up with wanting for you. I'm dying with it. Look at me. That's all I am, all I'm about anymore -- wanting you. But I can wait. I swear it, Hutch. You're worth waiting for." He realized he was clutching at Hutch's lightweight shirt, gripping it in both fists to keep some kind of tenuous control over himself.

"I want you to want me," Hutch admitted. "I love it that you do." He rolled his groin over Starsky's raging hard-on, tantalizing him beyond his controls.

"Oh, god, Hutch," he gasped helplessly. "Lemme go to the bathroom, huh?"

"No," Hutch panted back at him, clutching him harder. He slid his hands down Starsky's arms and grabbed his wrists, pinning him to the bed.

Starsky thought for a minute he might actually come, but he fought the feeling down. "Hutch, please, have some mercy, willya? Let me go, just for a minute."

"No! Don't go. I don't...I can't be separated from you right now. I feel like...it's important that we stay together."

Starsky got a grip on his raging hormones, and tried to crank his desire down to a simmer. "Okay! Okay. I'm here. I won't leave." He didn't know how much longer he could last. And he didn't know how Hutch would feel about it if he came all over him. The thin cotton pants they were both wearing would hardly hold back the flood he was capable of after all this foreplay. He was so confused, so fogged with desire he didn't know what to do. Hutch kept rolling his hips and kissing his mouth, his face, his eyes.

When Hutch slid his mouth down to Starsky's throat, he thought he might go nova, it felt so good. Hutch kissed him lightly there, then touched his skin with his tongue, drawing out a flush of goosebumps and a passionate shudder Starsky didn't even attempt to hide. You want me to want you? You're doin' a damn good job of keeping me interested.

Hutch's teeth touched Starsky's shoulder and he bit down gently. Unable to control the surge of desire that elicited, Starsky ground his hips hard against Hutch's quiescent groin and gasped out his name in helpless need.

"Do it here," Hutch whispered in his ear.

"Huh?"

"Like in the drive-in."

Starsky's eyes widened in surprise. He was suddenly a lot more alert. Every hair on his body lifted. "Uh...where's your jacket?" he said inanely.

"No jacket. This time, let me see you." Hutch's whisper grew softer, as if he could barely get the words out.

"Hutch?"
"Show me, Starsk. Show me how bad you want me. Let me watch you." Hutch's eyes were fever-bright.

They'd never done anything like this before and Starsky wasn't sure he could. *Helluva time for you to get shy!* He hesitated, then finally said,"Okay. If that's what you want." He began to reach for himself, but Hutch stopped him.

"No, not like that. I want to watch you. I want to really see you. Stand up." Hutch's breathing was erratic, Starsky realized. He didn't know if Hutch's cock was responding at all, but he knew damned well the rest of his body was wired.

Starsky pulled away from Hutch's arms with some reluctance, but finally stood a few feet from the bed where Hutch would have a good view. Hutch moved back in the bed so that he could sit up against the headboard. Starsky realized he was fully dressed in his nightwear: drawstring pants tied securely, nightshirt buttoned to the throat. Hutch clearly woke up conflicted this morning, if he felt he had to be so well armored.

Starsky felt the early morning sunlight streaking across his body, warming his chest where his shirt lay open. Even so, a flush of goosebumps rose along his arms. His cock leaked pre-come through his thin pants, making him shudder. He took hold of himself through the cloth and rubbed his cock, trying to soothe the ache. Hutch's eyes visibly dilate.

"Not like that," Hutch said, eyes roving him hungrily. "Starsk, undress for me, please?"

Only the fact that he was gripping himself kept him from coming right then. *He wants me to strip for him? Oh, jeezus!* Hutch's skin was flushed, he was panting lightly, and his nipples were hardened peaks pushing against the fabric of his nightshirt. Without moving his eyes, Starsky could see nothing was happening below Hutch's waist, but clearly, he was physically excited. *Give the man what he wants,* Starsky told himself. Releasing his erection, Starsky slowly removed his shirt, rolling his shoulders out of it and letting it drop to the floor behind him.

Hutch wet his lips, his eyes boring into Starsky, barely blinking. It was almost too much to bear, to have Hutch staring at him like this, as though he were a steak on the hoof. At the same time, it was wonderfully exciting. *Want me, Hutch. Want to touch me, want to taste me. I'm waiting here for you, needing you, wanting you so much.* With careful, deliberate moves Starsky untied the drawstring at his waist, loosened the waistband of the pants and let the loose fabric slither down his hips. The soft cotton whispered down his legs, pooling around his ankles. He stepped out of them, and pushed them away. Nude, he stood before Hutch, offering himself, middle-aged cop with a decent bod, a great tan, and a roadwork of scars.

Hutch's eyes couldn't remain still, moving all over him, gazing hungrily. His scrutiny excited Starsky nearly past his own endurance. His own respiration was strained, and his cock, tantalized at its freedom, and at being observed by the man he loved, stood at strict attention, bobbing against his belly, dripping wetly over his crown.

Hutch swallowed, and Starsky wondered if his mouth was watering. That made him remember all the times Hutch had gone down on him, his incredible mouth bringing him to earth-shattering
climaxes. He yanked his mind away from that image abruptly. He couldn't afford that kind of fantasy right now; he was too close.

"Go on," Hutch urged, his voice rough. "Touch yourself."

Desperately trying to pull his attention away from the man he loved, Starsky gripped himself hard at the base of his cock with his right hand, trying to rein in the orgasm that boiled so near the surface. If Hutch wanted to watch him, if it excited him to do that, Starsky wanted to make the show worthwhile. Then, with his left hand, he stroked the very tip of his cockhead, rubbing the fluid there all around, making his glans slick with pre-come. The sensations rocketed through him, nearly making his legs buckle.

When Hutch groaned softly, Starsky nearly lost it all together.

He began fisting himself slowly, drawing it out, making it last. His orgasm held at bay, at least for the moment, he slid his right hand down to cup his balls and roll them gently. That made shivers shoot up his spine and into his cock. It felt great, but it would've felt so much better if Hutch had been doing it to him.

Hutch barely blinked as Starsky displayed himself, just stared silently, completely rapt. He kept swallowing convulsively, making Starsky shudder.

*You want me,* Starsky realized. *You want me so bad it's killing you, but you're afraid, too. That's okay, Hutch. You'll get over that in time. And I can wait for you.*

The friction of his hand was almost distracting now, not as pleasing. The fluid from his cock wasn't nearly enough to keep him lubricated.

With the same kind of mind-reading ability they'd always had on the streets, Hutch reached back to the nearest nightstand and pulled something out of the drawer. He never took his eyes off Starsky; he never needed to. He knew exactly where it was, removed it, then brought it in front of him. It was a pristine tube of lubricant; Starsky could see that from where he was standing. Again, without changing the focus of his attention, Hutch removed the cap and handed the tube out to Starsky.

*You knew that was there because you put it there,* Starsky realized with a jolt. *You must've done that before I woke up. When did you start planning this? Last night? What else have you got in mind for me? And am I gonna have to do it all by myself?*

He realized his hand was shaking almost uncontrollably with both excitement and anticipation. It was a miracle his legs were holding him upright. "Hutch...I...it's...." He swallowed and tried to regain his voice. "Please, can you put it on me?"

Hutch started at the statement, then focused on Starsky's eyes. He must've seen the incredible need banked in there, because without a word he got to his knees and leaned closer to him. Taking the tube, Hutch squeezed it from the bottom, laying a trail of lube across the head of Starsky's cock, and down the shaft. He didn't touch him, but just the fact that Hutch was putting lube on him was tremendously exciting.
The lube was cool, and the sensation of it against his heated, sensitized skin was electrifying. It started to melt, to drip down around his cock, so he spread it quickly over his length. It made his dark cock glisten in the sunlight. And it felt wonderful. He started stroking himself, long, slow strokes, just the way he liked it, and felt every nerve in his body respond. He was panting hard now, but so was Hutch.

"You ever do this before?" Hutch asked suddenly.


Hutch had to grin as he rolled his eyes. "Not alone. This way. In front of someone."

"Oh." He could feel every square inch of his hand as he stroked himself steadily. He didn't want to rush this. He wanted to make sure Hutch got everything he needed out of it. "No, Hutch. I never did this in front of anyone before. But I'll do it for you anytime you want."

Hutch's breath hitched in his chest, and his mouth dropped open as if he couldn't get enough air in.

Starsky was aching to have Hutch touch him. He indicated his cock and said softly, "I need more lube, babe. Will you...?"

Hutch leaned forward to comply, once again pushing out a thick line of lubricant from the tube along Starsky's length, without ever touching Starsky directly.

Starsky throbbed with disappointment.

"What are you waiting for?" Hutch said suddenly. "You didn't take nearly this long last night."

His eyes glittered wickedly as he reminded Starsky of his repeat performances in the Torino.

"You weren't watching me last night," Starsky said huskily. "I want to be sure you get your fill, see everything you want, get everything out of this you can. I'm not doing this for me, Hutch. I'm doin' it for you."

Hutch swallowed hard again, his jaw clenching. "You bastard," he murmured low, but the words had no heat in them. "Go on. Do it now. I want to watch you get off for me."

Starsky closed his eyes and quivered. Opening them, he had to ask, "Is it good for you, Hutch? What I'm doin'? Is it turnin' you on?"

"Yes," Hutch whispered, as if he were afraid to admit it too loud. "Come on, Starsky. Now!"

It was a direct order and he found his body had to obey. With a groan, his cock jerked hard, his balls tightened, and he came hard, shooting all over the foot of the bed. He felt like he hadn't come in a year, which was nuts, especially after last night.

Hutch watched him as if what he'd just done was some incredible magic trick performed just for him. Then all of a sudden he gasped, shuddering, and fell back across the headboard, as if shot.
Alarmed, Starsky shook off his post-orgasmic lassitude and climbed back in the bed, clambering over to where Hutch lay. "Hutch? Hutch, you okay?"

Hutch was breathing hard, as if he'd run a mile. Or just come. He blinked dazedly, then reached up to touch Starsky's cheek gently. "That was incredible. I felt like we came together." He looked down at himself in confusion. His groin appeared unchanged, as quiescent as it had been. But clearly something had happened inside Hutch, something good. His eyes came back to Starsky's. "Goddamn, you're incredible," he swore, slinging his arms around Starsky's neck and towing him down to the bed with him as he kissed him frantically.

Reluctantly, Starsky tried to pull out of the embrace, which only confused Hutch. "Easy, babe," Starsky soothed. "I'm covered in lube and come; it'll get it all over you. Let me go wash up. I'll be right back."

"No," Hutch said, pushing him down in the bed, onto his back. "You stay here. I'll take care of it."

Starsky stared at him in confusion as Hutch went off to the bathroom, returning quickly with a towel and warm washcloth. He proceeded to wash Starsky from his throat to his navel, cleaning off each spatter of come from his hairy chest. Then, to Starsky's dismay, Hutch tenderly washed his genitals. It was the first time he'd touched him this intimately since they'd stopped being lovers. If he hadn't just come moments before, Starsky knew the familiar contact would be enough to get him off again. He groaned in delight as Hutch bathed his testicles, his perineum, then carefully washed his cock. He dried him there with just as much care, until Starsky was weak-kneed.

_He can do it now because I'm safe after coming. He doesn't have to worry about me growing hard in his hand, or wanting something from him he doesn't think he can give yet._ That was okay, Starsky thought. Whatever Hutch wanted to do was okay with him.

"Feel good?" Hutch murmured, smiling.

"Good doesn't even touch it," Starsky confessed. He eyed Hutch's still-complete attire, and said, "I guess I better get dressed -- "

But Hutch shook his head. "No, don't get dressed." He reached for the cover sheet and drew it half-way up Starsky's chest. "I love looking at you. Starsky, you're beautiful!" He sound choked for a minute, then ran a hand over Starsky's chest. "I want to keep you here just like this, just to hold you, look at you -- Is that too crazy?"

"If that's what you want, that's fine with me," Starsky admitted. His eyes were growing heavy and he felt like his body weighed a million pounds, that he was sinking into the center of the bed.

"You're so tired," Hutch said, smiling. He lay down beside Starsky and pulled his bare body against his clothed one. Spooning around him, Hutch murmured in his ear, "You sleep. I'll just stay here and hold you, okay?"
As Hutch's arms snaked around him, Starsky wrapped his arms over them. He purred agreement and then fell dead asleep.

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When Starsky woke up alone in the double bed, he was almost relieved. He stretched under the sheets and looked out the sliding glass doors. The sun was up high and bright. Mid-afternoon, he assumed. It was warm, with a pleasant breeze wafting through the bedroom.

"You're finally awake, huh?" Hutch asked, coming in from the kitchen.

"I'm surprised myself," Starsky confessed. "You're trying to turn me into a shrunken old husk."

"Oh, there's a lot more life left in you yet," Hutch teased, grinning, handing him a glass of orange juice.

"I was afraid you were gonna say that," Starsky mock-groused. Hutch was bright-eyed, looking happy, and his joy filled Starsky's heart.

"I packed a picnic lunch," Hutch said. "Or early supper, however you look at it."

"Or extremely late breakfast," Starsky chided.

"I thought maybe we could go sit on the beach for a while," Hutch said.

Starsky nodded. He noted Hutch was still dressed in his form-covering nightwear. "Want to hand me my pants?" he asked, indicating his drawstring pants Hutch had picked up from the floor and thrown over a chair.

"We're gonna be on the beach, Starsk," Hutch said, tossing him something else. "Wear those."

Starsky peered at the small red Speedos he'd brought to swim in. "What are you wearing?" he asked bluntly.

"You know I burn too much," Hutch said, wandering back into the kitchen. "I'll be comfortable in these. It means I won't have to be covered in two pounds of sunscreen."

Starsky sighed. Whatever you say, babe. It's your party. I just hope I can survive it.

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Hutch sat on their beach blanket with his arms wrapped around his knees. It was a perfect California day. Bright sun, not too hot, and just enough breeze. Starsky had devoured their picnic like a starving man, which had pleased Hutch enormously. He'd always loved feeding Starsky, especially after sex had made him ravenous. I just wish the sex we were having was more mutual, Hutch thought. Then he reconsidered.

There was no denying that Starsky's magnificent display had affected him profoundly. He'd felt drained after it, as though he'd come, not Starsky. He wasn't sure he could explain that, unless it
was that phenomena Masters and Johnson had once called the "dry orgasm." Something
definitely was happening south of his navel, he just wasn't sure what it was. It was enough that it
felt good, though. He definitely felt sated right now, which was probably a tremendous relief to
his partner.

He glanced over at Starsky, who was stretched out on his back, eyes closed, a towel behind his
head for a pillow, with a cold bottle of beer in his left hand. His body gleamed from the
sunscreen Hutch had insisted on rubbing on him, and he was barely covered by the leaves-
nothing-to-the-imagination Speedo bathing suit. Hutch was once again grateful for the private
beach that came with the rental house. He would have had to fence Starsky off to keep him safe
from nearby females.

Starsky let out a discreet burp. He looked sinfully satisfied. "That was a great meal, Hutch."

"Tell the truth, Stark. That's really why you want to marry me. Because I can cook."

Starsky eyed him warily, as if surprised he was willingly bringing up the topic. "No, that's not it.
Huggy can cook, too. I'm not proposin' to him, am I?"

Hutch nodded, conceding the point. "Well, it can't be my body, at least not the way it is right
now."

"I like your body just fine," Starsky insisted, "just the way it is right now. You're not a circus
pony, Hutch, who has to perform every night or get sent to the glue factory."

That made Hutch laugh, it was such a classic Starsky statement.

"I told you why I wanna marry you. I'm in love with you. I want to make a life with you."

Hutch frowned. He had a sudden memory of Starsky saying to him, "That's what you're supposed
to do with a woman you love." Just before I was hit. He'd lost some of those memories after the
shooting. It wasn't unusual after such an intense trauma. Starsky no longer remembered the ping-
pong game they'd been playing before he'd been shot.

"You know, Stark," Hutch said quietly, not looking at him, "I don't remember everything that
happened before the shooting."

Starsky paused, then said, "When you started waking up, I had to keep going over it with you
again and again. You had trouble holding on to it."

Hutch nodded. "I remember we were talking about the future of our partnership. I remember
telling you I wanted to take the lieutenant's exam. I don't remember everything you said, but I
remember thinking the best thing I could do was to back out of your life, so that you could be
happy -- with Rosey. That was one of the few things I'd remember whenever I'd wake up. That
the best thing I could do for you was leave you."

Looking out over the ocean, Hutch struggled to piece together his fractured memories.
"Maybe...maybe that's why I'm having so much trouble reconnecting with you now. Because that
memory is so strong. Maybe part of me is still trying to leave...for your own good." He rolled that around in his mind, finding an odd comfort in it. It wasn't unusual for trauma victims to latch onto prominent memories and have trouble putting them in perspective. Bringing it to the forefront of his mind, facing the origin of that one insidious thought, might be what he needed to purge it. To try to find the memories he wanted to have -- the memories of loving this man and of believing that they could have a life together.

He turned to Starsky to get his input and was startled to find that Starsky was no longer lying relaxed beside him. Instead, he was sitting, hunched over, his back to Hutch. The beer was forgotten, spilling onto the sand. The muscles in Starsky's back rippled with tension. His head was bowed.

"Starsk, you okay?" Hutch asked. He'd been so involved in his own introspection that he hadn't given a thought to what was going through Starsky's head. "Come on, talk to me, huh?"

He touched Starsky's shoulder, only to have him pull away. Starsky's shoulders shook a moment, and a startling thought occurred to Hutch. Is he crying?

Starsky didn't cry easily. Hutch did, too often he thought, but Starsky never made him feel like less of a man for it. But Starsky always hid his tears, even from Hutch if he could.

He moved around in front of Starsky and found his face contorted painfully. His heart lurched, and he gathered Starsky in his arms. "Starsk, what is it? Something I said? Please, tell me."

He felt Starsky swallow as if he were shoving a boulder down his throat. All he could do was shake his head.

Hutch rocked him in his arms, but Starsky wouldn't yield, wouldn't embrace him in return. "Come on, partner. Talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

Starsky shook his head, then finally reached up, like a drowning man, and clutched Hutch's shirt. "I was so scared. When I was in the ICU, watchin' over you. I kept worrying that the last thought in your head before the bullet hit was that leaving me was the best thing you could do for me. You could've died thinkin' that! You could've just given up." He shuddered hard, and Hutch thought he saw a tear fall to the blanket. Starsky was fighting his body's need to grieve with everything he had.

"I didn't die, Starsk," Hutch said with a wry smile. "You wouldn't let me. You stayed by my side, talking to me, pester me to life, making sure I didn't wallow in my own morbid thoughts."

It was the wrong thing to say. Starsky shoved himself away, his grief transmuting into anger. Anger at himself. "Don't you remember?" he shouted. "I put that thought in your head. Me. Talking about marrying Rosey the night after you nailed me to the chair. The night after you showed me who I really wanted. I was still so fuckin' stupid I couldn't get it. I talked about marriage and kids and 'normal' lives while my ass still ached from you claiming me. I wanted you and I was too much of a coward to face it.
"But you weren't. You were brave enough to let me go. That's how much you loved me. And I...I was so worried about what I was gonna lose, that I stopped paying attention to everything but my own little drama. You got shot because all I could think about was what I would have to give up. You were nearly killed, you suffered all that pain in your recovery, all because I couldn't get my head straight about loving you. Because I let my emotions override my duty, my responsibility. Even Dobey called me on it, and he was right to do it. I'll carry that forever, the memory of just how badly I failed you."

Starsky sucked in a ragged breath like a sob. "I gotta lot of nerve asking you to marry me. I don't deserve your love, Hutch. I didn't deserve it before, and I sure don't deserve it now."

Then, as if drained by his confession, Starsky turned his face away and cried silently.

Hutch gathered Starsky in his arms and held him while he wept. "Go on," he urged gently. "Let it all out. It's been eating you up inside all this time. Let it go."

Starsky went limp in his arms after a few minutes and they just sat there on the beach for long minutes with nothing but the call of the gulls overhead to disturb them.

When Hutch thought Starsky might finally be ready to hear what he had to say, he said quietly, "My getting shot was just as much my fault as it was yours. I was the one who took the first watch, and when we started discussing our situation, I walked away from the monitor. You took my place, but it was my watch. Hell, Starsky, we were in just as much danger the night before when I...when I lost control. We were both damned lucky Barstow didn't hit us then. We'd have both been killed, and Barstow would've gotten away. And Dobey would've had some time explaining that scene to Epstein." He kissed the side of Starsky's face and felt Starsky's arms weakly go around him.

"The brain goes through a lot of changes during a trauma," Hutch said. "You of all people should know that. The dreams we've both had for months after your shooting were rough enough. The shrinks told us to expect those kinds of problems."

Starsky pulled away slightly. "Talk all you want, Hutch. It doesn't change the fact that if I'd been paying attention, I could've saved you from being shot. Or that I was talking about marrying someone else, while doing everything I could to keep you by my side. And Rosey...I broke that woman's heart, all because I was trying to have it all. I don't deserve your love or anyone else's. The fact that you can't reconnect with me about that, that you can't find that feeling inside you.... That's God's punishment for me. I brought it on myself. And I'm getting off easy at that. I've got no rights to you, Hutch. But I swear to God, it doesn't matter if you never feel that way again. I'll love you for the rest of my life, and do everything I can to make you happy. It's what you deserve."

"Oh, you crazy bastard," Hutch swore, and pulled Starsky to him, holding him tight. "When you got shot I was convinced that if I'd only reacted faster, I could've saved you. It tortured my every waking thought, tortured my dreams. And you suffered for months. You never blamed me. Not once. The thought never crossed your mind. You've got to believe me, Starsk. It never occurred to me to hold you responsible for what happened. We both screwed up -- like the good partners we are. We take the glory together. This time, we took the fall, too."
He moved back and took Starsky's face between his hands, forcing Starsky to look at him. His thick eyelashes were clotted with tears, and his expression was still anguished. Hutch felt as if his heart would break in two. The pain there was like a knife in his soul. "Forgive yourself, Starsky. Then forgive me, too. We've got to get past this, if we hope to ever have any kind of life together."

"I swear, Hutch, I love you with all my heart," Starsky said brokenly.

Hutch felt a bubble of emotion crest inside him and burst. He felt himself flooded with the feelings he'd held in secret for this man for so long. He felt all of this as though it were the first time dawning on him, ever. But he didn't dare profess his love now. Starsky would assume he was doing it out of pity for his grief.

Starsky said he was willing to wait. Hutch decided it would be best to let him wait a little longer. But he knew now that he wouldn't have to wait forever.

He hugged Starsky tight again. "We're gonna be okay, love," he whispered. "I promise you, we're gonna be okay."
When they finally returned to the beach house, Hutch's mind was in turmoil. He could see that the depression still weighed heavily on Starsky's shoulders. *We came here to help me heal,* he thought, *but you're the one who's broken.*

He carried the picnic basket to the kitchen, his mind working furiously. Starsky stood, staring at the ocean, as if he couldn't figure out what to do with himself. "Hey, Starsk, why don't you take a hot shower? It'll make you feel better."

Starsky nodded too easily and went into the bathroom. Soon, Hutch heard the water running.

He looked at the way he was dressed. *I'm been keeping myself closed off from him deliberately. Why else would I be wearing all these clothes? I haven't even wanted to let him see me.* He was still confused over his feelings.

His eyes wandered toward the bathroom. *He needs you now. Give him something, some part of yourself.*

Hutch shed his shirt and walked towards the bathroom. He entered the small room quietly, and dropped his pants as he'd done so many times before showering with Starsky. *Staying clothed kept everything hidden, so I didn't have to see my impotence, and especially so Starsky didn't have to see it. Like if he never saw it, then it wasn't real, it was just my choice not to participate in our lovemaking. Hutchinson, you're a total head case! He doesn't give a damn about any of that; he never did.*

He shucked off his concerns about his inadequacy along with his clothes, and, pushing the shower curtain aside, he stepped into the tub.

Starsky turned, clearly startled.

"Mind if I join you?" Hutch said blithely, smiling, forcing his mind away from the part of him that remained uninvolved with the proceedings. He held his arms out, waiting.

Starsky hesitated for a moment, then moved into them. They hugged tight, holding onto one another under the spray.

Hutch pulled back a little. "Hey, you missed a spot," he said playfully, grabbing the soap and a washcloth. Starsky managed a wan smile, but didn't try to stop him. Hutch leaned in for a quick kiss, then began soaping up his partner's lithe form. Starsky held onto Hutch's wet shoulders as he lathered up Starsky's neck, then his shoulders and arms. He watched a trail of suds drip low over Starsky's well-defined chest and abs, and followed them with the washcloth, covering him in soap. He scrubbed his back, making Starsky lean against him, and giving them another excuse to embrace.

Starsky turned his face up, and Hutch found himself drawn to that mouth. It opened under his lips like a flower, and he drank from it, loving the feel, the taste of it. He sighed as their kisses escalated.
You still haven't touched him below the waist. And he won't touch you till you ask him to. They continued to kiss, one sweet joining after another, and as they did Hutch stroked the soapy cloth down the beautiful curve of Starsky's spine, then used it to spread soap over the globes of his ass.

Starsky gasped into his mouth and moved closer to Hutch, his kisses growing more fervent. Hutch deliberately slowed his hand, moving the cloth more provocatively, wanting to please, and tease, and excite. He felt his own blood stirring, and tried not to care if his body responded. It was enough to please Starsky. More than enough. He moved the cloth down the crack of his ass, and Starsky lurched as Hutch purposefully soaped his anus. He felt his lover's beautiful body tremble, and took joy in the fact that he was pleasing him. He teased Starsky's anus again and again, then brought the cloth over his hip and swabbed it over his semi-erect cock, then down over his balls, then behind them.

Starsky clung to him, gripping his shoulders, then moaned low. The sound curled around Hutch's belly, and he felt his balls constrict. He ignored it. It didn't matter if he ever got it up. He could please his lover; that's all that mattered.

He worked up a thick lather over Starsky's genitals, then dropped the cloth to be able to use his hands directly.

"Hutch!" Starsky cried out, as he gathered Starsky's growing erection in his palms.

"Gotta make sure you're clean," he whispered, feeling his own hands shake as he took Starsky's excitement into them for the first time in so long.

Starsky shifted from foot to foot as if he couldn't bear the pleasure. His erection grew with every slick stroke, and when Hutch slid his hand over Starsky's ass and toyed with his anus again, he groaned throatily.

"I love it when you make that sound," Hutch confessed. He fingered Starsky's ass and gently pulled on his balls, and Starsky gave it to him again.

"You're killing me," Starsky complained half-heartedly.

"That's funny," Hutch said. "You feel really alive to me." He squeezed Starsky's cock, then held it tight as he leaned in for an urgent kiss. The sudden need to fuck nearly overwhelmed him, to slam Starsky up against the tiles and shove his way deep inside him again and again. His balls tightened more as his tongue did what his body wanted to. He felt a stirring at his groin, but nothing further. He forced it from his mind. It wasn't important. Only Starsky's pleasure was.

Starsky was devouring his mouth, wrapping both arms around his neck as if to stop him from leaving. Their teeth clicked as their tongues embraced every way they could.

Hutch had to pull back to catch his breath. Starsky tried to follow his mouth, he was so hungry for him. That thrilled Hutch. He pushed Starsky back gently. "Easy...easy...." He had to catch his own breath. "Come on. Let's rinse off..."
"You didn't wash," Starsky reminded him. Then he leaned over quickly to retrieve the cloth Hutch had dropped. "My turn," he said, soaping it up. And then he waited.

For me to refuse him, Hutch realized. He smiled at Starsky and nodded, and the sun came out in Starsky's expression. That's all it takes?

Starsky gently bathed Hutch's neck and shoulders, being especially tender around the still healing wound below his Adam's apple. Then he lathered up Hutch's arms and even washed his hands, soaping every individual finger.

"I ever tell you about how much I love your hands?" Starsky asked. His voice was subdued, and still had a trace of tears in it.

"Not lately," Hutch said. But he remembered so many times when Starsky, writhing in passion, told Hutch explicitly how much he loved his hands and what they were doing to him.

"They're so big, yet so handsome," Starsky said, washing the backs of Hutch's knuckles. "Musician's hands. Doctor's hands, when they're nursing me. Boxer's hands; whenever we're in a brawl. Marksman's hands, when you handle that Magnum. I'm always aware of your hands, Hutch. When we're in the car and you're drumming your fingers on the doorframe, when we're on a case and you're grabbing some reluctant snitch by the collar. Your hands are always so expressive. Especially, when they're lover's hands. When you're putting them on me, so careful, so gentle, or urgent, even rough with your need. Beautiful hands." He turned them over and kissed the palms.

Hutch felt his blood turn to vapor. "Starsk...."

He dropped Hutch's hands and went back to washing his torso. "It's hard to say whether I love your hands more, or your mouth. Or this big gorgeous frame of yours. It always makes me feel so strong when you're loving me, that I can handle a man like you."

He's seducing me, Hutch realized. He wants something and he's going after it. The thought tantalized him.

When Starsky finished soaping Hutch's chest and back, he slid the washcloth lower then paused, looking up at Hutch.

Asking permission, Hutch thought. He nodded, unable to speak for the moment. Then finally said, "Please."

Without taking his eyes off Hutch, Starsky slid the washcloth over his rear, down one side, up the other, then slowly and deliberately down the crack. It was Hutch's turn to shiver under Starsky's touch. To keep himself focused, he held onto Starsky's steady gaze, which was smoky with passion. I don't need to watch what I'm doing, Starsky's eyes said. I know you that well. Starsky washed him thoroughly, intimately, and Hutch felt it down to the soles of his feet. Then he brought the cloth around, lathered Hutch's hips and thighs, and cleaned his belly. Bringing the washcloth up between his legs, he gently swabbed his perineum. The sensation rocked Hutch. Then Starsky turned his attention to Hutch's balls, which were growing tighter by the moment.
He was gentle and so careful, knowing just how much pressure would please, how much would hurt. Hutch had to grab hold of Starsky's shoulders to keep his balance, and the tender teasing wrung a deep groan from him. Starsky's eyes sparkled. Finally, he brought the cloth up against Hutch's groin. With care and devotion, he washed Hutch's flaccid cock, cleaning carefully under his foreskin, washing his pubic area until he was thoroughly lathered. Then he dropped the cloth and took Hutch's cock in both hands and stroked.

Hutch was shocked at how good it felt.

"You like that?" Starsky asked.

"God, yes!" Hutch realized he had been treating his unresponsive cock as though it no longer belonged to him.

"You don't have to get hard to feel pleasure, Hutch," Starsky said.

Hutch knew it was just a tease, knew he couldn't ejaculate like this, but he couldn't deny the enjoyment Starsky was giving him. He'd always loved having Starsky's hands wrapped around him. It was wonderful even now.

"I love making love to you," Starsky told him, "no matter how little or how far we go. It doesn't have to be all or nothing. There's pleasure enough just in the play."

Hutch's knees were buckling as Starsky proved what he said, stroking Hutch's cock, his groin, rolling his balls in his palm, rubbing his fingers up under his perineum. He couldn't take much more.

He gripped Starsky's biceps, harder than he intended. "I want you in bed. Now."

Starsky smiled, then adjusted the shower spray so they could rinse off every bit of soap. Hutch wasn't sure if he'd ever been this clean.

The tussled lovingly with the towels, drying each other off in bits and spurts until Hutch grew impatient. "Come on," he urged, taking Starsky's arm and starting to lead him to the bedroom.

Starsky held back a second. "Wait." He took Hutch's hand, urged him to sit on the toilet seat. "Let me do this."

Confused, Hutch started to protest, then saw the first aid cream in Starsky's hand.

"Remember, they said to put this on after showering, when everything was soft, that it would reduce the scarring," Starsky reminded him. He tipped Hutch's chin up and rubbed some over the throat wound, then kissed him quickly before rubbing more on the wound on his back. Hutch suddenly felt like that small attention from Starsky was as healing as anything the medical staff had ever done for him. Unable to express himself, he wrapped his arms around Starsky's torso and hugged him, pressing his head against Starsky's sternum.
Then, before he could get too emotional, he moved off the seat, and towed Starsky into the bedroom, playfully wrestling him onto the bed. The urge to fuck was on him again, and he tried not to let it frustrate him. He lowered himself onto Starsky, thrust a leg between his, and found the mouth he loved. They kissed for long moments, both of them grinding against each other. Starsky's hard-on rubbed languidly against Hutch's limp cock, but the sensations were pleasant, and his balls were definitely responding.

He took joy in the erotic dance Starsky performed under him, his every motion testimony to his excitement -- excitement Hutch was giving him. Hutch wanted to tease him into a fever, make him come again and again, exhaust him with passion. If he couldn't fuck, he could still drive Starsky wild, still make him sing with pleasure and cry out when he came. He wanted that almost as much as he wanted to fuck.

Gasping for air, Starsky pushed away from Hutch, as if he needed to catch his breath.

"Hutch," he rasped, "you're making me crazy!"

"You can handle it," he reminded Starsky.

Starsky's eyes grew hazy. He smiled. "Hutch, I...I want something."

Hutch remembered Starsky's eloquence in the shower. He'd been so seductive; Hutch knew it was going somewhere. He couldn't wait to find out.

"I've given you everything you've wanted from me," Starsky reminded him. "I want something now. I want to make you feel good. Like in the shower, only more so. That's all I want. A chance to please you."

Unstated was the obvious: *It doesn't matter to me if you never get it up again. I know I can give you pleasure.*

Hutch hesitated. He realized suddenly that his need to control what they did and how far they went, even when and how Starsky came, was all compensation for his inability to perform. Starsky wanted him to give up that control for a while, to let him lead. He wanted Hutch to be passive. Hutch wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Tired of waiting?" he asked Starsky.

Starsky smiled crookedly. "Hell, no. This is the most fun waiting I've ever had."

Hutch found his mouth going dry. He felt inexplicably nervous. "What did you have in mind?"

Starsky held his gaze steadily. "Just kissing you, like we've been doing. Only...letting me kiss you...however and wherever I wanted to. If you'll let me." Starsky was still letting him lead, letting him make the decision.

Hutch was uneasy. There was a comforting security in setting the limits, controlling when and what they did. "Starsk, I don't know how far I..."
"Then stop me whenever you want. I can take no for an answer better than anyone you've ever known."

How could he refuse? It was such a small request. Starsky had done everything he wanted, no matter how outrageous. They were partners. It was only fair.

Hutch shivered, suddenly feeling very vulnerable. Unable to articulate his insecurities, he just nodded.

Starsky smiled, then moved up for a kiss. Always eager to taste his mouth, Hutch relaxed into the kiss, as Starsky's tongue reminded him of how much he enjoyed this. One kiss led to another, and another, and Hutch let himself fall into the pleasure of it, the sweet, wet intimacy of it. He was completely relaxed when Starsky urged him to roll over, and followed his body as Hutch lay on his back, with Starsky now on top of him.

It felt wonderful being blanketed by his lover, feeling the soft, crisp texture of Starsky's body hair against his smooth skin. Once on top, Starsky was able to use his hands to stroke Hutch's arms, his sides, pet his face, stroke his hair. Hutch felt like he was being indulged, pampered, flooded with pleasure. He threaded his fingers through Starsky's dense hair, loving the feel of it against his hand, as his other palm swept up and down Starsky's spine, then stroked low over his ass.

Starsky pulled away just enough to say, "I'm gonna kiss you all over, every inch of your big, beautiful body."

Hutch gasped as Starsky lovingly kissed his cheeks, his eyelids, his brow, his jaw, then traveled down over an ear, kissing the shell, then snaking his tongue-tip inside the canal. The sensation rocketed down Hutch's spine and he groaned. Starsky took the lobe into his mouth, tonguing it, then nibbling on it gently. The teasing touch made Hutch squirm. He felt sweat bloom over his chest and abdomen.

Starsky's mouth kept moving, mapping out the long column of Hutch's neck, kissing, licking, nipping, moving carefully around the wound but not ignoring it. Hutch found himself gripping the bed sheets to control the urge to tackle Starsky to the bed and-- Fuck him. Fuck him through the mattress. Oh, god, to be able to fuck him!

Starsky kissed the broad expanse of Hutch's chest, and the sensation of his soft lips against Hutch freshly washed skin was intoxicating. Then Starsky found Hutch's nipple and he was lost, drowning in sensation, the pleasure jolting his balls, which drew up hard. He sucked it avidly, making it wet and hot, nipping it once or twice as if to get Hutch's attention. Unable to stop himself, Hutch buried a hand in Starsky's hair as if to hold his head there. He moaned and tossed in delight.

When Starsky latched onto to the other nipple, Hutch felt his whole body throb. Was it possible for an impotent man to enjoy sex this much? He forgot the question as soon as Starsky bit him again, making him thrash.
But Starsky clearly had miles to go yet. He kissed Hutch's rib cage, tickling him deliberately, making him laugh and writhe, then spent a long time finding out just how sensitive Hutch's navel was -- very. He kissed his way down Hutch's sides, trailed his mouth and tongue to the juncture of hip and thigh, but very deliberately avoided his groin. Hutch forced his mind away from it, losing himself in the pleasure of the moment. Starsky's mouth traveled down both thighs, taking his time, running his tongue along the sensitive inner thigh, making Hutch splay wide in shameless abandon. When Starsky's mouth found the backs of his knees, Hutch thought he'd go in orbit, but it was just as bad when he traveled down his calves and shins, then over the arch of his foot. He couldn't tolerate having Starsky play with the soles of his feet. He was just too ticklish for that. It didn't matter since Starsky clearly wasn't interested in amusing him anymore. He was getting serious.

Hutch realized Starsky was rock hard, pre-come dripping liberally from his crown. But he never touched himself, so focused was he on Hutch's pleasure. Taking Hutch's knee, Starsky urged him to roll over on his stomach, and Hutch didn't argue. Slowly, Starsky kissed his way up Hutch's legs again, tormenting him wonderfully, then tenderly kissed and licked his way all over Hutch's ass, until Hutch was clutching the pillow and moaning fitfully.

When Starsky parted the cheeks of his ass, Hutch froze. "No!"

Starsky stopped, but didn't take his hands away. All he asked was, "Why?"

The truth was: too much intimacy. But Hutch couldn't very well say that. It was hardly the first time they'd done it.

"Afraid you'll like it too much?" Starsky asked bluntly.

Hutch couldn't find his voice. He just lay still, trembling with pleasure and a little fear.

"Afraid you'll love it?" Starsky challenged, his voice soft.

Hutch groaned, confused, excited, and frustrated all at once.

"I want you to love it, Hutch," Starsky told him. "I'm gonna make you love it."

Then Hutch felt it happening. Starsky's mouth kissed down the crack of his ass, then his tongue snaked out, leaving a slick, seductive trail to his anus. He lurched, he cried out, but he couldn't make himself pull away. Then Starsky's tongue found him and made love to the most sensitive, intimate part of him. He groaned aloud and spread his legs like a five-dollar whore, clutching the mattress, burying his face in the pillow so he couldn't see anything, so he couldn't be distracted from the most incredibly sexual sensations centering on his anus. Starsky held him open and rimmed him as if he'd been starving to do it. His thumbs teased and stroked Hutch's perineum, damp with sweat and saliva, and that additional sensation made him wild.

Hutch's need to fuck was overwhelming, frustrating him beyond belief, even as he forced himself to accept this incredible, sublime pleasure.
"You loving it yet, Hutch?" Starsky asked, coming up for air. His voice was rough, and Hutch could hear him panting.

He could only moan in answer, but it must've been enough because Starsky's mouth was on him again, making him buck, making him cry out helplessly. He felt that incredible tongue pierce him and that made him insane.

Soon, Hutch was babbling incoherent sounds and words, clawing at the bed, writhing in an agony of delight. He knew he couldn't come and that sent tremors of fear down his spine. How long could Starsky keep this up? Hours? He couldn't handle much more.

Then suddenly, it stopped, and Hutch sagged limply in the bed, gasping for air like a winded racehorse. He was soaked with sweat, shaking all over. He pulled his face out of the pillow, and found Starsky wiping his own face on one of the bath towels. His lungs were heaving like a bellows, his muscled chest and abdomen taut and sheened with sweat, his cock rising proudly against his belly. He was as beautiful as Hutch had ever seen him.

Hutch suddenly wanted nothing more than for Starsky to put that magnificent cock in him. If he couldn't fuck, he damned well could be fucked. But before he had a chance to say anything about it, Starsky took Hutch's knee and rolled him back onto his back. It was only then that Hutch discovered he was semi-erect. He stared at it in wonder, as if he'd never seen it before. Starsky had him so sensitized, so excited, he couldn't separate all the various pleasures he was feeling.

Starsky leaned over him, blowing a gentle stream of air over his nodding cock. "Gorgeous," he said softly. Then he leaned over and kissed it, moving his mouth up and down its expanded length. The sensitive organ twitched and the shocks of pleasure it sent up and down Hutch's legs were unmistakable. Starsky kissed all over Hutch's groin, tender, sweet kisses designed to tease and tantalize, then moved his mouth over his tightening balls.

Hutch had to shut his eyes as Starsky started to tease him there, kissing then licking his testicles over and over, loving them with his mouth. It was making Hutch wild. Starsky finally moved his mouth back over to Hutch's cock minutes before Hutch thought he'd be reduced to begging. He ran the tip of his tongue wetly over Hutch's soft glans, running it under Hutch's foreskin. In spite of its semi-soft state, his cock was throbbing. Then Starsky took the whole thing in his mouth, sucking gently, teasing it with his tongue.

Hutch shouted and thrashed, unable to bear the tender sensations. Starsky held his hips down and used his mouth to remind Hutch's cock how wonderful sex with him could be. It grew a little harder, but that almost didn't matter, because Hutch couldn't take the onslaught of endless pleasure.

Desperate for relief, he cried out, "Starsky, please! Oh, god, please, fuck me!"

Starsky released his cock and looked up at Hutch. He shook his head no, startling Hutch out of his fog of passion.

"What? Why not?" he asked, baffled.
Starsky smiled, and wiped a bit of saliva from the corner of his mouth. "Because I'm saving myself for marriage."

Hutch blinked, unable to make the words take on a form that made sense. "Starsky, come on. Quit fooling around. I want you -- "

"No," Starsky said firmly. "On our wedding night. Not before. It'll give you something to look forward to."

Hutch felt the blood rush to his face. "I never agreed that we'd get married."

"I know. But I'm not fucking you until we do."

Hutch had to stop himself from spluttering in rage and frustration. "Starsky, that's emotional blackmail!"

Starsky grinned. "No, Hutch. That's romance. I want everything to be special for our wedding night. So I'm saving that. I told you before, I don't mind waiting."

Hutch sat up abruptly, grappling Starsky by the shoulders, pinning him quickly to the bed. He loomed over Starsky, then crawled on top of him. Rubbing his semi-erect cock against Starsky's painfully hard one, he watched his lover's eyes roll up in frustrated need. "You don't want to wait," Hutch growled at him. "You want to fuck. I know you. You live for it."

Starsky shook his head while Hutch tormented him. "I can wait. I keep telling you that."

"But you want it. I know you do. You want to fuck me!"

Starsky's eyes fastened on Hutch's. He said very clearly, "No, Hutch. I want you to fuck me."

Hutch recoiled. He thought that had to be the cruelest thing Starsky had ever said to him.

"I want you to want me as much as you did that night in the stakeout apartment," Starsky said. "I want to feel all that passion, that rage of need that overcomes every civilized thought in your head. I want you to take me and make me yours like you did that night. Brand me. Claim me. And fuck me as hard as you can."

Hutch thought he would weep. "Don't you think I want to?"

"What's stopping you?"

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut and moved off Starsky, turning his back on him and sitting up. "You son of a bitch. How could you say that to me?"

Starsky reached out and grabbed his wrist, pulled on his hand. "Haven't you learned anything? We've been making love all week long, and it's been good for you the whole time, even when we were only kissing. There's a million ways to make love, Hutch. It doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful." He pulled Hutch's hand to his mouth, kissed the back of it, then turned it over and
kissed the palm. He stared at Hutch intently, then kissed his fingertips. "Fuck me, Hutch. Right now. Make me yours." He drew two of Hutch's fingers deep into his mouth and sucked them.

Hutch drew in a shuddery breath as he watched his fingers disappearing into Starsky's mouth, just as his cock had a few moments before. And suddenly his fingers felt as sensitized as his cock once did. Starsky's mouth was tight and hot and wonderfully wet, and Hutch found himself shaking with need. He pulled his fingers out of Starsky's mouth then shoved him back down on the bed.

His voice nearly cracked as he loomed over him, "You wanna be fucked? Fine. I'll fuck you."

Starsky gasped and he smiled. "Make me yours, Hutch. Go on!" Starsky somehow found the tube of lubricant tangled among the sheets, no doubt where he'd put it earlier, and shoved it into Hutch's hand.

Hutch felt himself losing it, and leaned over to take Starsky's mouth roughly, using the power of his kiss to anchor him to the here and now. Starsky kissed him back in kind and soon they were trying to crawl down each other's throats, their passion boundless and evenly matched. Impatient and burning with need, Hutch left a bruising trail of kisses and bites down the length of Starsky's torso. He'd always tried to be a gentle lover, and it always bothered him to be rough. But he was too hot to hold himself back right now. He was too close to having what he so desperately wanted.

Skimming his tongue around Starsky's groin, Hutch deliberately didn't touch his cock, knowing he had to be impossibly close. Starsky's body thrashed with every new contact with Hutch's mouth.

Hurriedly, Hutch pulled Starsky's legs apart, climbing between them. Starsky watched his every move, his eyes glazed with desire. He looked so incredibly wanton, so ready to be fucked, that Hutch felt himself harden more just at the sight of him. But not enough.

Hutch uncapped the tube of lubricant, making sure Starsky could see him doing it. "You must be two seconds away from coming, as hard as you are," he said with incredible calm.

Starsky swallowed, but couldn't make himself answer.

"The minute I touch you, you're gonna go off like a rocket," Hutch said. "So we're gonna get that over with first. Then I get to play. And however long it takes you to recover is your problem."

Starsky blinked in surprise, but remained silent.

Hutch took hold of Starsky's left hand and squeezed a glob of lubricant into it. Starsky stared at it, confused. "I love watching you make yourself come for me," he reminded him. "So do it. Now. Here."

Without hesitation, Starsky clutched the head of his cock with the lube-filled hand and stroked himself twice, then arched his back and shouted. He ejaculated hard into his own hand, and
Hutch watched the pearly come drip over Starsky's hard column. His mouth watered, but he wouldn't let himself get distracted.

"Was it good for you?" Starsky said hoarsely, still clutching himself and panting.

Hutch grabbed the towel Starsky had used before, and cleaned Starsky's hand, his cock, and his groin. "The best." Hutch used the lube again; only this time he coated his own fingers with it. Starsky watched him with lidded eyes. Hutch knew his post-coital lassitude was creeping over him, but he knew, too, that Starsky was the most passionate person he'd ever met.

Hutch took hold of Starsky's ankle and pulled his leg up, draping it over his shoulder. Starsky's eyes opened wider and he swallowed. "I've been wanting to fuck you ever since we were in the shower," Hutch confessed. "It's been burning inside me the whole time we've been in bed. I can't remember ever wanting something as much as I want this."

"Take me, Hutch," Starsky urged. "I'm all yours, babe."

Hutch reached down and slid his fingers down over Starsky's perineum into the valley of his ass. He rubbed the lube everywhere he touched, then rimmed Starsky's anus with it, making it slick. Starsky gasped and drew his other leg up. Hutch pushed his thighs apart wider, wanting him to feel as vulnerable as possible. Starsky's cock lolled against his belly, as semi-erect as Hutch's was. Hutch collected more lube, deposited it against Starsky's anus, then used some more on his other hand, and gently massaged Starsky's balls.

"Oh, damn," Starsky sighed.

Starsky's ass was relaxed and pliant after his orgasm. Hutch rubbed the ring of muscle over and over, feeling it yield to his fingers.

"That's so good," Starsky said.

Hutch felt his own cock twitch encouragingly as he continued to play with Starsky's ass. Soon, his lover was breathing hard, tossing his head, moaning softly in pleasure. Finally, Hutch couldn't wait any longer and slid both fingers inside right up to the knuckle. Starsky tightened down and bucked, clutching at Hutch's arm. Hutch continued massaging Starsky's balls, waiting for the spasm to pass. He felt the incredible strength of Starsky's ass as it clamped around his fingers, felt the intense heat of his lover's body.

Barely able to speak, Hutch whispered, "Starsky, I'm sorry. I know I rushed you."

Starsky's body suddenly relaxed, and he grinned as he exhaled a heavy breath. "It's okay, Hutch. It was good. I wanted to feel you and I do. I love it when you're in me. Go on and fuck, Hutch. I'm yours, babe."

The words excited Hutch so much, his organ hardened further. He tried to ignore it as an extraneous artifact having nothing to do with what was happening to them. He didn't need it to fuck Starsky; it just wasn't that important any more. He moved his hand inside his lover, and Starsky writhed and moaned. Hutch fucked him slow with languid strokes designed to bring
Starsky's cock up, make him hard. He deliberately toyed with Starsky's prostate, loving the way that made him cry out in ecstasy. When Starsky was nearly fully erect and panting like crazy, Hutch squeezed more lube onto his hand and inserted a third finger.

Starsky shouted at the sensation and clawed Hutch's chest. He thrust himself against Hutch's hand, clamping down on it, trying to take it in deeper. Hutch kept massaging his balls, pulling on them gently while fucking his ass until Starsky was sobbing with pleasure and his cock was rock hard.

"Look at you," Hutch said to him in amazement. "Look how you love being fucked."

"By you, Hutch," Starsky rasped out. "Only you! Oh, goddamn, it's so good!"

"Can you still wait?" Hutch asked. "How long can you wait now?"

"Forever! Oh, jeezus, Hutch, fuck me forever!"

Starsky was so full of lube there was no resistant at all to Hutch's hand. He twisted and turned his fingers, riding Starsky's prostate, torturing his hole, stretching it, impaling it, and Starsky let him know he loved every second of it.

Hutch's need to fuck was heightened painfully. He loved what he was doing to this man, loved the way Starsky arched and called his name. Wanting to up the ante even more, Hutch leaned down and ran his tongue over the tip of Starsky's cock, making him choke back a scream. Actually having the taste of Starsky in his mouth again made Hutch dizzy with desire; the flavor was sharp and keen and every bit as good as he remembered. He wanted more.

When Starsky incoherently begged him to stop, he knew he couldn't possibly, and fucked Starsky with a slow, maddening rhythm while teasing his cock with his tongue. The way Starsky rode his hand, tightening and relaxing around it, told Hutch how good it was for him. Needing even more, Hutch slid his hand out, then pushed back in with a fourth finger. At the same time, he took Starsky's cock down his throat.

This time Starsky did yell, arching wildly and grabbing frantically at Hutch's hair. Only the fact that he'd come so hard before kept Starsky from coming again, Hutch knew. This was heaven, Hutch thought, sucking and fucking this man into a frenzy. He was barely aware that it wasn't his cock buried deep in Starsky's body.

Then a sudden surge below his navel made him pause. The sensation was so distracting, that he pulled away from Starsky, leaving him panting and trembling. He stared down at himself in wonder. "Starsk?" he said softly, as if afraid bringing too much attention to it would make it disappear.

Gasping, Starsky leaned up on one elbow and looked at Hutch's face, then following his gaze lower. "Holy shit," he murmured, as they both watched Hutch's cock lengthening to nearly its maximum size.

Before Hutch could fully react, Starsky was moving over to him purposefully.
"God, look at you," Starsky said, his voice hushed. "You're beautiful, Hutch. Incredible." And before Hutch could even think, Starsky went down on him, enveloping his hardening erection deep into his mouth.

Hutch threw his head back and moaned in shock as that warm wetness surrounded him. Starsky's tongue started its sensuous play all along his growing length. Hutch collapsed back on the bed, helpless in Starsky's mouth, his rocketing emotions frayed beyond belief.

Starsky pulled off for a minute, staring at Hutch's cock as if he'd never seen it before. "You're gettin' bigger in my mouth. Harder. Can you feel it?" Before Hutch could answer, Starsky went down on him again, making him cry out in an almost painful pleasure.

Can I feel it? he thought in amazement. Sensations jolted down the backs of his legs to his feet, then up again into his spine. Starsky's mouth and tongue devoured him, loved him, worshipped his expanding length. He felt that talented tongue slipping under his receding foreskin, felt it toy with his slit, then circle his crown over and over. He twisted in the bed, then grabbed handfuls of Starsky's hair as if hanging on for dear life. His balls tightened up achingly hard, his cock grew firmer, then a bubble of pre-come surged up his length and erupted into Starsky's mouth. His lover moaned as if the taste of it was food for his soul.

I need to come! It was the only coherent thought Hutch was capable of now. His hips humped up again and again, but Starsky rode him like an expert, using his mouth as if devouring Hutch were his only purpose in life. Make me come, Starsk. Oh, god help me, I need to come! He realized he was moaning hoarsely, nearly incoherent with need.

Starsky pulled off again, nearly making him sob. "Look how big you are, Hutch. How hard. I love havin' you in my mouth like this, making you so excited." Starsky took him all the way inside this time, deep down his throat.

Hutch cried out. He couldn't think anymore, couldn't make his brain work. All he could do was react, feel, enjoy. His urgency to come was becoming the focus of his world, all he could remember, think about, desire. He forced himself to try to tell Starsky what he needed. "Starsky, please!"

Starsky was purring around his cock, as if this part of Hutch was the center of his world, as if it were the most sensuous delight he ever wanted. As his mouth made love to Hutch, his hands stroked his thighs, toyed with his sac, teased his perineum, even toyed with his anus. All of it designed to make Hutch harder, totally erect, but none of it was enough to get him off. But Starsky had made him come a million times with his mouth. He knew what it took. Why wasn't he...?

"So big," Starsky murmured, pulling off Hutch's length. "Feel it, Hutch?"

He groaned helplessly. "Starsk, do it. Come on. I need -- "

" -- To fuck," Starsky reminded him.
The words were like a cattle prod against his balls. He lurched and his cock throbbed even harder, bobbing in Starsky's hand.

Starsky ran his tongue up and down Hutch's entire erection, teasing, tantalizing, bringing him no relief at all. "You've been wanting it since we were in the shower," Starsky reminded him.

The memory of that need surged up in him, exciting him wildly, desperately.

"You still want it," Starsky prodded. "It's burning you up inside. The need to fuck. Come on, Hutch. Now you can have it all. I'm here for you. Wanting you -- "

Hutch rose up in the bed, unable to think, unable to speak. He was shaking violently, breathing loud and harsh. He knew only one thing: he wanted this man.

Grasping Starsky under the arms, he shoved him up higher in the bed, then covered him with his body, frantically searching for his mouth.

"Oh, yes!" Starsky cried, just before Hutch's lips claimed him.

The kiss was rough, hurried, needy. Hutch plundered Starsky's mouth wildly, needing the most intimate contact with him. Starsky obviously needed it, too; he clawed at Hutch's back, as if he couldn't get close enough. Their mouths battled fiercely as Hutch reached down blindly and grabbed Starsky's leg, hooking his arm under Starsky's knee to hold it up. Before Hutch could aim himself, Starsky's hand was there, guiding Hutch's cock to his center. Starsky was still slick from the lube Hutch had used on him before, so once Starsky placed him, Hutch couldn't stop himself from plunging in with all the strength in his legs.

Starsky moaned into Hutch's mouth, and clamped down tight around Hutch's length. It only excited Hutch more as blindly, frantically, he began to pump hard. Starsky surged up against him, taking everything he could give and riding it out. His cries and moans were ones of deep, intense pleasure. Hutch loved those sounds and moved harder to make him sing out more. Starsky didn't disappoint him. He clutched Hutch's ass as if holding him in place, and tightened around him maddeningly as Hutch got up on his knees and pounded hard into Starsky's body. It was sublime, the most perfect experience, and all of it was for him. He clutched Starsky's body to him, felt his own body grow slick with sweat as Starsky rode his rhythmic, powerful fucking.

He remembered all those nights of terrible dreams, when Starsky had pulled him from the painful scenes with passion, giving himself to Hutch with all the openness and love he had. He remembered doing the same for Starsky, and knew this moment was much like that. The separation and doubt, the long period of discord, needed to be purged. Like the dreams, it needed to be conquered by the power of their passion, the power that had defeated even death.

"So good," Starsky purred when he pulled out of their kiss to gasp for air. "Do it, you son of a bitch. Fuck me. Fuck me hard! Make me yours, Hutch, all yours!"


He felt himself growing harder, and then it was there, on the edge.

Starsky shouted suddenly and Hutch felt warmth spreading between them as Starsky's ass tightened around him convulsively and his body writhed wildly in its orgasm.

Hutch cried out in helpless need and thrust hard, burying himself as deep in Starsky as he could as he came explosively. He felt as if he were pouring his life into this man, binding them with his essence, the physical manifestation of his profound desire, his need, his ever-deepening love. Unlike that moment of fierce possession in the stakeout apartment, this moment was mutual in its impact. Hutch was not only claiming, but being claimed. He recognized that and took great joy in it.

As their orgasms crested and slowly subsided, the two men clutched each other and kissed again, more gently this time. This was a celebration of their togetherness, their renewed passion, and they each knew it. Trembling, Hutch released Starsky's leg as he felt himself slip out of Starsky's body. He mourned the lost connection, but knew with confidence that Starsky was his to claim any time and any way he wanted.

Starsky was shaking in his arms, kissing him back, still moaning weakly.

Finding his voice somewhere, Hutch whispered against Starsky's lips, "I love you. I swear I do. I love you so much."

Starsky hugged him, but seemed too overcome to say anything. All he could do was return his kisses, putting all his feelings and emotions into them, welcoming Hutch back to him and rejoicing in his return.

"I'll love you forever, Starsk," Hutch promised. The madness of his lust had receded, and he was regaining himself again. He felt drained and jubilant all at the same time. They'd been through the fire together, and could never be torn apart again. Hutch knew there was a way he could relate that to Starsky, a way Starsky would truly believe.

"I love you, Starsky, and I want to marry you. Will you marry me?"

Starsky started laughing low, the sound coming from deep in his chest, and Hutch knew it was his way of staving off tears. But they fell soon anyway, tears of joy, as he kept on laughing and murmured, "Yes, yes, yes," around the kisses they continued to share long into the night.
EPILOG

"This is the Pits. Huggy Bear here," he said into the phone.

"Hello, Huggy, how are you?" a feminine voice replied.

He smiled wistfully. Rosey's voice sounded clear, stronger than the last time they'd spoken.
"Hello, my fair lady. How are things in Sante Fe?"

"I'm settling in all right. I've got a nice gallery, and the agent running it and I get along really well. We're getting off to a strong start."

"That sounds great," he assured her. "But I asked how you were doing. I know with your dedication and business sense that you can do nothing but succeed with your pottery."

There was a slight pause as she, no doubt, considered how much to tell him. "I'm doing okay. I'm...dealing with everything. I mean, it's going to take time to get over him. I'm trying to give myself that time."

"You seeing anyone yet?" Huggy pushed gently.

"No," she admitted without apology. "It's too soon. I'm just dealing with each day as it comes. But, I think, if there's any hope of my finding someone else to share my life with, then this is a good place to do that. There are a lot of people in my field, and yet, it's a small community. But it's too early for me to think about that. Besides, if that's going to happen, well, then it will. It isn't exactly something you can arrange for. God knows my father tried hard enough."

"I hear you," Huggy said in agreement. "But you've got to remember, too, that it can only happen if you're open to it happening. You've got to let your heart recover, and be ready to let someone else in."

"I know," she agreed quietly. "I'm working on that."

"Good," Huggy said agreeably. "You keep doin' that."

There was another pause. Huggy knew why she was really calling, but he didn't want to anticipate or put words in her mouth. Finally, she asked, "How's Hutch doing?"

Huggy sighed. "Really well. He's still healing, still having some therapy, but it doesn't look like there'll be any problem with his returning to active duty."

"I'm glad. Relieved, really. I've felt so guilty over him getting hurt. And...David? Is he all right?"

The quiet yearning in her voice was heartbreaking. "He's doing fine. He's taking classes, going for his degree. He and Hutch are probably going to be taking the lieutenant's exam. If they can get promoted, it'll get them off the streets and put them in an administrative track. They know it's time for them to cut back on the dangerous stuff."
He knew that wasn't all she wanted to know. "Huggy, is he happy? I just worry, you know. It would help if I knew if he were really happy."

_I only hope it'll help you let go of his memory_, Huggy thought. "He's happy, honey. He and Hutch, they're both really happy. Things are good with them. You can stop worrying about that."

There was another pause that said too much. Finally, she said, "That's what I needed to know. I knew you'd tell me. I appreciate it, Huggy. You've been a good friend to me, and to them, too. I miss you! If you ever find yourself in Sante Fe, you know you've always got a place to stay here."

"I won't forget," he promised her. "You never know where my travels are apt to take me. That's a part of the country I've always loved. I'll be sure to let you know if I'm headed out there." He waited for a moment, then said, "I wish you the best of luck, Rosey. I can't think of anyone who deserves it more."

"Thanks, Huggy. I'll consider that a good luck blessing. You take care. Bye, now."

"Bye, Rosey."

The click of the phone had the sound of finality to it. Huggy suspected he wouldn't be hearing from her again.

"Haven't you left yet?" Anita said, coming in from the back room. "You're going to miss your flight to San Francisco!"

Huggy hefted his bag. "The cab just pulled up a minute ago. I'm going, already. You've got the keys, and the delivery schedule -- "

"And the work roster, and every other damned thing I need to run this sorry-ass place," she said scoldingly. "It's not rocket science, Huggy. Now, get out of here or you're gonna be late. And here!"

She shoved a bag of something in his hand. He looked at it, perplexed, then realized what it was. "Rice?" he said.

"I knew you wouldn't remember! Fine best man you're gonna make. Throw some at the happy couple for me. Now get out of here."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Anita, you're a hopeless romantic, but your secret is safe with me!"

"Go on!" she said, shoving him toward the door. "Get!"

"I'll kiss both grooms for you, too," Huggy said as he dropped the bag of rice into his pocket and grabbed his suitcase. He dashed out to catch the cab without looking back.

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As Starsky showed the bellboy where to stash their luggage, he was aware of Hutch wandering around their large hotel suite, looking everything over. The only word Starsky could think of to describe the place was plush. Everything, from the furniture, to the padded headboard of the massive king-sized bed, to the dense carpeting, was white trimmed with gold. There were gold-framed mirrors everywhere, and fancy lamps with crystal drops.

Hutch went into the bathroom and shut the door while Starsky dealt with the bellboy. Starsky guessed he was probably making a necessary pit stop. He was out a few minutes later, wearing a sly smile. Starsky wondered if the bathroom had gold fixtures, or some other lavish extras. It was supposed to have a Jacuzzi, Starsky had made sure of that. Hutch continued to stroll around the suite, finally moving over to the huge window overlooking the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge and settled there.

He looked like a leading man from a 1940's movie, Starsky thought, with his golden hair and gorgeous looks, as he stood tall and handsome against the backdrop of the scenic view. His black tuxedo stood out in sharp contrast to the white-on-white room. He took Starsky's breath away.

Dragging his attention back to the task at hand, Starsky smiled and handed the bellboy a five as he finally finished unloading their luggage from the cart. They had enough stuff to set up housekeeping, never mind spend two weeks in Hawaii. They'd be lucky if they didn't go over their weight allotment on the plane.

Impatient to finally have Hutch all to himself, Starsky went over to the door and held it open for the bellboy to leave. The young man was dazzlingly attractive, as most of the young men in San Francisco seemed to be.

"Thank you, sir," the bellboy said quietly, looking Starsky in the eye. "If there's anything you need, be sure to ask for Jason."

Starsky blinked in surprise. Was every guy in Frisco on the make? "Right. Jason. I got it."

"You won't forget?" Jason murmured as he stepped outside the room. His eyes made a blatant sweep of Starsky's body.

"Simmer down, son," Starsky advised. "I've got all I can handle right in this room." He shut the door on the boy's disappointed expression. Placing the safety lock on the door as an afterthought, he sauntered over to where Hutch was standing. "Y'know, I think I look really hot in this tux!"

Hutch smiled knowingly. "Bellboy flirt with you?"

"How'd you know?" Starsky asked, surprised.

"Well, he couldn't take his eyes off you in the elevator," Hutch said. "And the guy behind the desk was flirting so hard with me when I signed us in I thought I was going to have to make a commitment to do a threesome just to get the room key." They both laughed.

"I'm not surprised that you were breakin' hearts downstairs," Starsky said. "You look damned hot in that tux!"
"Of course I do! Isn't that why you insisted we go formal?" Hutch grinned at him saucily. Then his eyes grew soft. "Y'know, I'm almost afraid to say anything for fear of jinxing it," he said quietly, then glanced around surreptitiously, "but I think we're finally alone."

"You think?" Starsky said, scanning the richly appointed room. Hutch had refused to allow Starsky to reserve the honeymoon suite, but he did allow him to get one of the higher priced suites. Considering how extravagant this place looked, Starsky was suddenly glad they skipped the dubious pleasures of a heart-shaped bed.

Hutch corralled Starsky gently with his arms. "I think it's just you and me, schweetheart." They shared a gentle kiss, then hugged each other.

"Feel like a married man yet?" Starsky asked.

"More like a nervous virgin," Hutch said, laughing. "Was it my imagination or did I stutter my way through the vows?"

"No, that was me," Starsky assured him.

"The hell it was. You didn't even need prompting. You already knew them all by heart: from this day forward, forsaking all others, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part--"

"We might as well have taken those vows in the Academy, Hutch," Starsky reminded him. "We've been living it ever since. 'Cept for the 'til death do us part, part. We've fought that one to a draw. I think even Death accepts the fact that it can't separate us."

Giving Starsky a hearty squeeze, Hutch leaned down for a kiss and they lingered over it until a knock at the door interrupted them.

"I knew it wouldn't last," Starsky moaned.

"Let me get it," Hutch said. "If it's our little bellboy I'll put on my jealous lover face and discourage him."

"Don't scare the kid," Starsky warned. "We'll need him to carry our luggage downstairs on Monday when we leave for Hawaii."

But it wasn't Jason. It was a deliveryman with an iced bucket of champagne and a gift basket that nearly dwarfed them both.

Hutch read the card on the ice bucket. "The champagne is from Huggy. 'A little bubbly to ease the wedding night jitters,'" he read. "Cute."

Starsky was poking around the cellophane-wrapped basket. "There's cookies, chocolate, fruit, cheese, some fancy instant coffee, all kinda good stuff." Starsky dug through the basket until he found the card. "It's from the Dobeys. 'To Starsky and Hutch: Partners in every sense of the word.' Didn't we just leave all these people at the restaurant less than an hour ago?"
Hutch was smiling. "Yeah, and they're still taking care of us. We're rich in friends, Starsk."
Hutch took two chilled glasses out of the ice bucket, uncorked the champagne bottle, and filled
the glasses. Starsky opened up one of the classy chocolate boxes from the Dobey's basket and
popped a fancy truffle into Hutch's mouth. He made an appreciative sound as he ate it.

"It was really great of the captain and Edith to come up for the wedding," Hutch said around the
mouthful. "I wasn't sure if he was going to be comfortable doing that."

"He looked pretty comfortable to me," Starsky said. "Especially once he saw the buffet at the
restaurant! He was smiling so much you'd have thought it was one of his kids tyin' the knot.
Though he looked a little green around the gills when I told him my criminology professor
wanted me to give a seminar on using informants in police work."

Hutch nodded, remembering. "When you told him you would only do it if Huggy agreed to be a
guest speaker, I thought he was going to choke on his prime rib!"

Starsky grinned. "Huggy made a spiffy best man, didn't he? Though I think I'll be finding rice in
my shorts for the rest of the night."

Hutch handed a champagne flute to Starsky. "I thought I was going to lose my nerve completely
when Edith starting crying!" They both smiled at the memory.

"To my one and only," Starsky said, raising his glass to Hutch.

Hutch got a funny look on his face, then, in a husky voice said, "To my true love."

They tasted the champagne, and the bubbles tickled Starsky's nose. "Hey, this is really good!
Huggy went all out." But Hutch was staring into his champagne glass and it didn't look as if he
were counting the bubbles.

Starsky put a hand on his wrist. "Something's on your mind. Wanna share?"

Hutch's eyes looked into his with an odd wistfulness. "I'm sorry, Starsk. I should be counting my
blessings. We're together, we're in love, we're happy..."

"We're married," Starsky reminded him.

Hutch nodded, and his expression became even more poignant. "We're married. And I'm happy
about that, really I am -- "

"But -- " Starsky added, worriedly.

Hutch shook his head. "No buts. It's just -- I found myself thinking about Rosey today, Starsk."

Starsky's stomach knotted. He was swamped with a rush of guilt and sorrow he couldn't keep off
his face.

"I'm sorry," Hutch said. "I shouldn't have said anything -- "
"Don't hold back from me, Hutch. We've made a lifetime commitment today. That means we've got to share everything: the good and the bad, the doubts and the sure things. Tell me what you were thinking."

"I found myself thinking that because I lived, I'd stolen what should've been hers," Hutch confessed. "I couldn't get her off my mind."

Starsky's heart felt heavy as he thought of Rosey again. He recalled too easily the sight of her walking away from him when they were in the hospital.

"Hutch," Starsky said quietly, "I told Rosey how I felt about you, about us, before we knew for sure whether or not you were going to live. She left the hospital before we heard. I wasn't hedging my bets. I wasn't thinking, well, if Hutch doesn't make it, I've got this lady here as back-up. I couldn't have married Rosey if you hadn't lived. It wouldn't have been fair to her, to know she would've always been second best to you, to your memory. If I had lost you, you would've still held my heart. I don't know if I would've ever gotten over losing you. But I wasn't asking her to stay 'til I found out. Rosey wouldn't have been standing next to me today if you hadn't lived. I wouldn't have been standing there at all."

Hutch shut his eyes as if those words filled a place inside him that had been empty until now. "Okay. Okay. Still, she and I love the same man. I have some idea of what she's feeling, and I'm sorry for her." He took a deep breath and let it out.

"I am too, Hutch, believe me. The only thing that woman ever did wrong was fall in love with me. She didn't deserve to have things play out the way they did."

Hutch held his eyes, as if he had more to confess. "Just before the ceremony, she was so much on my mind that I said something about her to Huggy. He's been talking to her. He knows where she is, says she's doing all right."

"I hope hearing that made you feel better, Hutch," Starsky said. "I pray she's doing well, and hope with all my heart that she'll find someone to love her the way she deserves. I'm glad Huggy's in touch with her, and if you need to know more, you ask him. But I don't need to know where she's living or what she's doing. Remembering how I hurt her is a penance I'll carry forever. That's all the weight I can handle."

Hutch shook his head. "I'm sorry, Starsk. I didn't mean to put you through this. Especially today."

"Put me through? Hutch, what about what I put you through? Is the reason that Rosey's on your mind is because you're concerned that she might come back to LA, that we might bump into each other...that if I saw her I'd put you through all that heartache again?"

Hutch looked away with a guilty expression.

Starsky took his chin and made Hutch face him. "I don't know how to make you believe in me, trust me again, so I guess we're just gonna have to take it one day at a time. But I swear, Hutch, no matter what I might still feel for Rosey, if she moved next door to us, if I had to see her
coming and going every day, it wouldn't change anything. I know where my heart is now. It's in your hands. No one else's. It'll never be anywhere else again. So help me, God."

Hutch's smile was tenuous, even as he hugged Starsky hard against him. With a slight quaver to his voice, Hutch said, "Sometimes I think I'm afraid to be happy. Maybe I just can't believe that we're really here, that we've really done this -- " He held up Starsky's left hand and held it beside his own to stare at their matching gold wedding bands.

" -- That we're going to live happily ever after? Why not, Hutch? We've been through hell together and we've come out the other side. We deserve to be happy. We earned it, through our own blood, sweat, and tears."

Hutch grabbed him suddenly, clutching hard. "God, I love you! It scares me sometimes, you know?"

Starsky pulled back, stroked Hutch's cheek with his hand. "Don't be afraid. Not of loving me. I belong to you, now and forever."

Hutch reached for Starsky's mouth and Starsky met his lips eagerly. Their kiss lingered as they savored each other. When they finally separated, Hutch whispered, "Kissing you is still one of my greatest joys. More intoxicating than champagne. Sweeter than chocolate."

"You silver-tongued devil! Come here," Starsky gasped, grabbing Hutch by the nape of his neck and pulling him into another kiss. Their tongues toyed with each other wetly, their teeth clicking as they enjoyed the taste.

"You are hot in that tux, Starsh," Hutch murmured against his lips.

"You think so? Really?"

"Uh-huh. But not nearly as hot as you are out of it."

As they continued to kiss, Hutch reached up to undo Starsky's tie and pull it off his neck. As he worked to unfasten the pearl buttons buried in the Starsky's frilly shirt, Starsky managed to undo Hutch's cummerbund, then pulled Hutch's shirt out of his trousers and started unbuttoning it from the bottom up. Pausing just long enough for each of them to shed their jackets and hang them carefully over nearby chairs, they returned to each other's arms, picking up where they'd abruptly left off.

After a few more minutes of torrid kissing, Starsky stepped back a little as if to catch his breath. "Hey, isn't this the point where you're supposed to go into the bathroom and put on some frilly nightie you bought just for tonight?"

Hutch frowned. "I knew there was something I forgot to pack."

Starsky chuckled as Hutch moved in for another kiss. Easing Hutch's shirt off his shoulders, he let it fall to the ground. Then he kissed the still-pink scar beneath Hutch's Adam's apple. Hutch closed his eyes, gripping Starsky's shoulders.
"Please tell me you've forgiven yourself," Hutch whispered.

"As much as I can," Starsky admitted. He moved his lips higher, covering Hutch's long throat with soft, loving kisses. "As much as you ever did."

Hutch took Starsky's face in his large hands and made him look up at him. "Neither of us have had bad dreams since that night in the beach house. That was weeks ago. It's behind us, Starsky. We've got to leave it there."

Starsky nodded, understanding that Hutch wasn't just talking about the shooting, but also their mixed feelings about Rosey and all that they'd been through. "I love you," Starsky whispered, then waited for Hutch's mouth to claim him again. Hutch didn't disappoint him.

Beneath the tuxedo trousers, he felt Hutch hardening, and his heart thudded with joy. It was a sensation he would never again take for granted. Reaching for Hutch's length through the pants, he grasped the growing erection just to feel it expand. Hutch made a low sound, and Starsky's balls tightened.

"It's our wedding night," he reminded Hutch.

Hutch smiled. "The night you've been saving yourself for."

"That's right."

It hadn't been easy. There had been times when Hutch had tried to ambush him, impatient with desire. But Starsky had held out. Not that the waiting was bad. Hutch's edgy passion often resulted in a tumultuous round of lovemaking that was just as satisfying, if in different ways.

"Tonight, you're mine," Starsky reminded him solemnly.

"Like I wasn't yours yesterday?" Hutch teased.

"Not in the same way. Tonight you're not just my partner in every sense of the word, but you're also my mate. My spouse. And tonight I'm gonna take what's mine."

Starsky felt a shudder run through Hutch's frame and that made him smile. Hutch's erection jumped in his hand and grew more substantial.

"I've always been yours, Starsky," Hutch reminded him. "For as long as I can remember. Today just made it official."

Starsky raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Even though that wedding wasn't legal, wasn't really binding?" He was gently reminding Hutch of some of the reservations he'd expressed when they were at the beach house.

Hutch's eyes grew misty. "Laws change at the whim of society. We, of all people, know how often the law fails. But when you looked into my eyes this afternoon and said your vows, I knew you meant them from the bottom of your heart. And when I repeated them, they were the truest
things I'd ever said. It's funny, I didn't feel that way when I said them with Vanessa. But today, I knew it was the real thing. It was binding all right."

Starsky sighed and moved in for another kiss, needing it bad. He rubbed Hutch's erection through his trousers, keeping the tension slow and sensuous. Hutch's hands roamed his body, sliding up under his open shirt. Their lips never separated as Hutch divested him of the shirt, then continued running his palms all over Starsky's bare skin. Hutch brushed his knuckles against Starsky's nipples, which were already hard and sensitive. That made Starsky groan, and he pulled away slightly before he lost his focus. Hutch had that affect on him; he could make him crazy with just the simplest touch. But not tonight. Tonight, Starsky had to keep a clear head.

Placing both hands at Hutch's waist he took a deep breath, reining in his passion. Hutch tried to move in for another kiss, but Starsky dodged it. Hutch looked confused, and taunted him by pinching his nipples, making Starsky's cock jump hard.

Starsky smiled. "Don't try to distract me, big boy. I got plans for you."

Hutch blushed and returned the smile. "Yeah, I bet you do."

"You don't know the half of it, babe," Starsky warned, and eased onto his knees.

Hutch eyes glowed softly in the lamplight, the clear blue color reflecting the cut crystal refractions of the lamps. "Hey, weren't you supposed to do that when you proposed? Little late for that now, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Besides, I've still got plenty of things to propose to you. More propositions that you can keep count of. This is just the first of many."

He ran his fingers under Hutch's waistband, unfastened the top button, then pulled the zipper down. Expecting to find Hutch's cock underneath a layer of conservative cotton cloth, Starsky was dismayed to discover that beneath Hutch's formal black trousers was a brilliant shock of red fabric. He stared, confused, then pulled the trousers away, sliding them down Hutch's legs. Hutch was wearing a skimpy bright red satin bikini, the kind of underwear Starsky normally wore. Hutch usually favored the comfort of what Starsky called "old man boxers," but right now, his true love was standing before him in incredibly sexy briefs, which barely restrained his erect cock and heavy, tight balls. Starsky's mouth watered. He glanced up at Hutch, too startled to speak.

"I may have forgotten the nightie," Hutch said wryly, "but I did find something that I thought would make our wedding night special." Hutch stepped back and out of the trousers from where they'd pooled around his ankles, then removed his shoes and socks.

Starsky was unable to take his eyes off the blond god now standing, nearly nude, before him. The red briefs looked incredible against Hutch's fair skin. The tiny bit of fabric could barely restrain him, and that was so erotic, Starsky felt a flush of goosebumps run down his spine.

Hutch was grinning, obviously enjoying Starsky's stunned expression. "You'll be gentle with me on this, our wedding night, won't you?"
Starsky shook his head. "Not a chance," he said huskily, making Hutch laugh.

Sliding his hands up the back of Hutch's thighs, Starsky pulled him closer to where he knelt. Hutch cooperated, burying his fingers in Starsky's hair the way Starsky knew he loved to do. Starsky loved it, too, feeling those big hands hanging onto his head, sometimes guiding him, sometimes urging him, but usually just hanging on as if for dear life. That's all Hutch was doing now, gently stroking his hair, running his fingers through it.

Trailing his palms up and down Hutch's legs, Starsky leaned in to plant a light kiss just below his navel and above his waistband. Hutch sighed, and Starsky saw his cock bob in the ever-tightening briefs. He placed a few more gentle kisses along Hutch's abdomen, then over his hips. Hutch was watching him through lowered lids, his expression blissful. When Starsky slid his hands over Hutch's rear, Hutch's legs and buttocks flexed, and a drop of moisture stained the sexy briefs. Starsky loved Hutch's ass, petting it over and over, slowly, teasingly, as he leaned forward and lapped at the small spot of pre-come darkening the briefs. Hutch gasped as Starsky's tongue teased at the satin. Hutch's eyes were just slits now, but he wasn't closing them. He was obviously enjoying the show too much. Starsky planned for him to enjoy it even more.

He ran his tongue wetly up and down Hutch's erection, soaking the bikinis so that Hutch could feel the contact even more. He then licked up along the waistband, making Hutch suck his abdomen in. His mouth returned again to the fabric-covered cock, licking, kissing the excited organ, making it jump and twitch and drip. He could taste the pre-come through the briefs and that was an incredible sensation. But there was so much more he wanted to do. He ran his tongue down over Hutch's heavy balls, licking them through the fabric, running his tongue tip against the elastic leg bands. Hutch spread his legs wider to accommodate him.

Starsky lapped at the soft skin inside Hutch's thighs, making him moan in helpless desire. As he used his mouth to enflame Hutch, his hands never stopped fondling Hutch's ass. It was making Hutch crazy. Starsky could tell by the way Hutch's hands clenched and released his head, gripped and pulled at his hair, stroked and petted him with sweating palms and trembling arms.

Starsky's mouth had to return to Hutch's cock; he loved it too much to stay away long. He sucked the crown through the briefs and Hutch shuddered and moaned, thrusting his hips, begging silently for more. So Starsky gave him more. He slid his hands under the top band of the briefs and pulled them down, exposing Hutch's ass as he continued sucking on Hutch's glans through the fabric. Starsky's hands took rough possession of Hutch's rear as his mouth teased and tormented Hutch through the red briefs. He clutched the globes of Hutch's ass, then rubbed them hard, running his fingers down the cleft, all the way down to his perineum. He wanted there to be no question in Hutch's mind as to his intentions. He was claiming Hutch tonight. He was going to make Hutch his.

Hutch was gasping, making small sounds of surprise and delight as Starsky toyed roughly with his ass and gently with his cock. Hutch's strong legs tensed and flexed, reacting to every new sensation. Finally, his legs quivering, Hutch cried out, "Please!" then bit his lip as if to stop himself from begging.
Starsky was grateful. He needed to be sure Hutch wanted this and now he was. Staring into Hutch's glazed eyes, Starsky slowly, deliberately lowered the briefs to the top of his thighs, freeing his erection. Carefully, he lifted Hutch's heavy testicles out of the binding of the fabric. Hutch moaned at the freedom, and his hands reached for the briefs to slide them down his legs.

Starsky stopped him. "No. Leave them there." He fingered the silky fabric where they bunched up against Hutch's upper thighs.

Hutch hesitated. "Starsky?"

"Leave 'em." It was an order, and Hutch acquiesced, removing his hands and returning them to Starsky's hair. As a reward, Starsky gripped Hutch's cock and took it into his mouth, sucking it deep inside him.

Hutch lurched, nearly losing his footing, and he clutched Starsky's hair frantically, holding on tight. That felt good to Starsky, as excited as he was, and he moaned. He slid his left hand into Hutch's cleft and stroked the sensitive skin there, teasing, warning, as he sucked Hutch rhythmically, thoroughly, servicing him like a pro.

Hutch began sweating and shaking so Starsky knew he was making it good, really good, for his mate. Moving his right hand under the briefs, he cradled the tight testicles in the fabric, rubbing and rolling them so they could feel the sensuous material slipping and sliding over them. Hutch was trying to hold still, but it was getting harder and harder for him to do that as he reacted to the gentle fondling of his balls and the intense sucking of his cock, while Starsky's teasing, tormenting fingers roamed his ass and his crack.

Starsky slid his finger, wet with Hutch's sweat, slowly down the valley between Hutch's buttocks until he found the tight center of his body. As his finger rimmed the muscle, tenderly assaulting it, he was surprised a second time. Hutch's anus was already slick with lubricant. Unable to mask his expression, he pulled away and blurted, "When -- ?" then remembered Hutch's side trip to the bathroom when they first arrived. "You mean -- ?"

Hutch nodded with a wicked smirk. "I wanted to be ready for anything you had in mind."

A wave of desire swamped Starsky. His eyes held Hutch's and he read the intense love banked there, the willingness to yield, the hunger for Starsky that Hutch had had for so long. Starsky, realizing how very much he was loved, felt humbled. He remembered how Hutch had willingly released him to find his own heart, even when that meant Starsky would leave to love another. He remembered Dobey saying to him that he'd never seen anyone love someone the way Hutch loved him.

Starsky swallowed hard, the emotions nearly overwhelming him. "I...I'm not sure I'm ready for you, babe."

"Sure you are," Hutch told him. "You've been ready all this time. Just keeping me simmering on a slow boil. I'm yours tonight, and forever more. Any way you want me."
Starsky swayed on his knees and moaned, then took Hutch's cock back into his mouth, determined to love this man as well as he deserved. Hutch sighed as Starsky sucked him, then lurched as Starsky's finger returned to stroke his anus. But Starsky wouldn't let him evade it, rubbing the tightening muscle, taking his time, while his mouth made wonderful love to Hutch's cock.

"Oh, god, Starsky, I can't! I can't!" Hutch gasped. He was jolting back and forth, thrusting his cock into Starsky's mouth then pushing his ass back against his tormenting fingers. At the same time Hutch rolled his hips from side to side in reaction to the hand riding his balls. "You gotta stop. Stop, or I'm gonna come."

Starsky would've grinned if his mouth weren't full. Grasping Hutch's tight testicles within the confines of the briefs, he took Hutch's erection all the way down his throat, piercing his anus at the same instant. Hutch's whole body went rigid as he pulled Starsky's hair, shouting, "YES!" He ejaculated with a rush, flooding Starsky's mouth.

Starsky groaned and closed his eyes, taking the wonderful surge of bittersweet come and swallowing it gratefully. He penetrated Hutch deeper, found his prostate and stroked it. Hutch made a strangled sound and his cock jumped in Starsky's mouth, releasing another spurt of semen. Starsky's tongue rubbed the spewing cock, pulling all the sweetness out. Hutch moaned like a man in pain or in ecstasy, it was hard to tell which.

Finally, Starsky drained the last drop and Hutch's legs trembled, threatening to fail him. Starsky released his hold on Hutch so that he could grip his hips and keep him on his feet. Kissing Hutch's over-sensitized cock made him hiss.

"Oh, god, oh god," Hutch gasped.

Starsky rose and took Hutch in his arms. His mouth found Hutch's and they merged, Hutch finding the strength to return the kiss, mingling and savoring their flavors. Hutch was still moaning softly, still shaking.

"Can't...can't stand up anymore," Hutch whispered.

"I've got you," Starsky assured him, then carefully walked him over to the huge bed and eased him onto the plush white quilted bedspread. The red bikinis were still tangled around his thighs.

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Hutch collapsed against the silky texture of the luxurious quilt, more than willing to let the expansive bed take his weight. He sprawled, ungainly, arms and legs akimbo, his lax muscles refusing to do anything to support him. Desperately trying to catch his breath, Hutch glanced at Starsky and caught him staring at the red briefs still binding his legs. He looked down at himself and saw that the bikinis were lifting his balls up as if offering them to Starsky. The expression on Starsky's face was pure appetite, and the hard-on pushing against his black pants was unmistakable.
Hutch grinned happily. "If I'd had *any* idea a change of underwear would have *that* kind of affect on you, I'd have dumped my boxers months ago."

Starsky shook his head as if to snap out of it, then laughed, pulling the pants down Hutch's legs, freeing him. Holding the damp briefs in his hand, Starsky shook his head. "You could give a man a heart attack wearing something like this without warning him."

Hutch smiled lazily. "I don't think you were the one in danger of having a fatal attack there, buddy. You nearly killed me! And you're not even undressed yet." Forcing himself to work through the lassitude of his afterglow, Hutch sat up. He hooked his fingers into Starsky's waistband and hauled him onto the bed with him, scooting back to make room. *This isn't a bed, he thought, looking around at the massive mattress, this is an adult playground!*

As Hutch fumbled with the top button of Starsky's pants, he was surprised to hear Starsky ask, "Was it good for you, Hutch?"

He was stunned that Starsky felt the need to ask. Then he recognized the look of insecurity on Starsky's face. No doubt Hutch's own hesitancy, his talk about Rosey, put that doubt in Starsky's heart. He concerns melted in the face of Starsky's openhearted worry. "It's always wonderful with you, Starsh," Hutch said. "You make me fall more in love with you every day. Never doubt that."

They were both on their knees. Hutch's declaration brought them together for a sweet kiss, a sharing of emotion more than passion. Hutch pulled away first. It was impossible to ignore Starsky's rock hard cock pulsing against him. "You must be aching."

Starsky tried to sound casual as he said, "Who, me?" but his voice cracked, ruining it. They laughed together. "You're pressed up against me inch for inch," Starsky said, in better control of his voice, "all that golden skin of yours totally naked. We're alone and it's our wedding night. Why should I be excited?"

Hutch rubbed his semi-erect cock against Starsky's taut hard-on. "No reason. Want me to put the briefs back on?"

Starsky growled and shoved Hutch down on the bed, crawling on top of him, pressing him down against the mattress. "Not unless you want me to cause you some grievous bodily harm!" He buried his face between Hutch's neck and shoulder, nipping at the tender skin there, sending rockets of sensation through Hutch's body.

Embracing Starsky, Hutch enjoyed letting Starsky overtake him. He hugged him hard as Starsky devoured his throat and shoulders. Starsky's hands were everywhere, so Hutch let his own hands wander, enjoying the feel of his lover's strongly muscled back and the animal-sleek curve of his spine. He stroked the ass he adored, realizing again that Starsky was still half dressed.

Shifting, he rolled them over in the bed. "Doing it in a tuxedo just seems a little too kinky for me," he complained, reaching again for Starsky's waistband.
Breathing hard, Starsky said, "This is a helluva time to find out you're only interested in the missionary position."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Hutch assured him as he unfastened the pants. "I'm just weird enough to want my husband completely naked when we make love. It's a quirk of mine."

"Your husband, huh?" Starsky said, his eyes sparkling.

"We're married, aren't we? Hey, you know we never discussed which one of us is changing his name. Or are we going for the hyphenated-surname thing? I always thought that was a lot for the kids to have to carry."

Starsky laughed delightedly just as Hutch wrestled his zipper down. The relief that brought Starsky was evident by his groan as his cock surged free. Starsky's own tiny briefs were a vivid blue. Hutch couldn't imagine anyone else going to the trouble of buying underwear that matched his eyes.

Sliding down in the bed, Hutch unlaced Starsky's shoes and dropped them over the side, stripped off his socks, then towed the trousers down his legs.

He took a moment to enjoy the sight of his bronzed-skinned lover. The slash of color across his groin just accented his beauty. "You're magnificent," he whispered. Hutch had the overwhelming urge to climb on top of Starsky and forcibly take his cock into his body. He restrained himself, but slowly clambered up Starsky's body on all fours anyway.

Straddling the prone figure on hands and knees, Hutch leaned down to kiss him quickly, just a closed mouth tease.

"What are you up to?" Starsky asked. He was breathing hard.

"No good, my love, absolutely no good." He placed a kiss on Starsky's collarbone, then another on his breastbone, then one on each nipple.

"Hutch...." Starsky said warningly.

Hutch grinned. "Tell the truth. You're two seconds away from coming, aren't you?"

Starsky had the look of a man desperately wanting to deny the truth. "Well...maybe three."

Hutch nodded. "It's my wedding night. You've been saving yourself and depriving me. Teasing me. For weeks. Your performance has to be up to all that foreplay. Therefore, I'm going to have my way with you now, and you're going to lie there and take it. If you're a good boy, I'll even let you have a little nap. Then, after we've taken the edge off and you've had some rest, I expect you to nail me through the mattress all night long."

Starsky's whole body flushed and his cock jumped, nearly escaping the tiny briefs. "Jeezus, Hutch, talk about giving a guy performance anxiety."
"You've brought this on yourself," Hutch told him. "Take it like a man." He settled carefully between Starsky's legs and went down on him in a move calculated to have the maximum affect in the minimal time.

Starsky tensed and grabbed fistsfuls of Hutch's hair. He gasped Hutch's name, thrusting hard into his mouth. Hutch loved Starsky this way, seconds from countdown, intense in his need, desperate for the release only Hutch could give him. He grabbed hold of Starsky's ass to hold him in place and sucked him mercilessly, right down to the root. Starsky shook like a tree in a hurricane. As Hutch concentrated lips and tongue on his flaring glans, Starsky groaned low and came hard.

Who needs champagne? Hutch thought, greedily taking every drop. He trembled as Starsky's cock went lax in his mouth, and hungrily placed gentle kisses along its length. Starsky's body suddenly went limp, his hands releasing Hutch's hair.

Hutch glanced up to see his partner sprawled bonelessly across the bed, mouth open, already asleep.

He had to grin. "Congratulations, Hutchinson," he said quietly as he moved up in the bed to cradle his love in his arms. "World record time from orgasm to unconsciousness! We must be married." Chuckling happily, he cuddled Starsky close, watching the stars appear through the big bay window.

An hour later, Hutch was still content, lying close by Starsky's side, contemplating the course of events that brought them here. Life was so good right now he found himself in much the same reverie he'd been experiencing just before Rosey abruptly walked back into Starsky's life. In spite of all they'd been through, Hutch was once more a man who'd rediscovered the joy of living, the righteousness of working, and the wonder of loving -- even though he had giving up all hope of ever having that again. There was a part of him that would always be tempted to glance over his shoulder, to wait for the bad news to come walking up behind him, but he'd have to learn to ignore that part. Starsky's unflagging devotion and his blatant need for him could not be denied. He remembered how hard it had seemed to repair the damage done after Kira. But they had. They would survive this, too, and survive it well.

He nuzzled Starsky's curls, inhaling the subtle smell of his shampoo, relishing the quiet moment as his love lay sleeping in his arms.

Ten minutes later, he thought Starsky was starting to wake when he shifted restlessly and sighed. Leaning up on one elbow, Hutch stared into his face, wanting to see those incredible eyes open before anything else.

But Starsky didn't open his eyes. Instead, he frowned in his sleep and shifted again. He made a small sound, like a groan, then swung an arm randomly, then shifted again. His eyes were moving rapidly under his lids. When his mouth opened and he began to pant, still with that distressed expression on his face, Hutch's stomach lurched.

No. Not here. Not now. It's over! It had been so long since either of them had had the disturbing night terrors, he'd been convinced, as he'd told Starsky, that they were finally over them. But Starsky shifted again restlessly and let out another moan, louder this time. There was no
mistaking the symptoms of the dream. He wasn't curling up fetal-like or clutching his chest as he'd often done during the worst nightmares, but his expression told Hutch he was suffering through a bad dream.

Cautiously, Hutch pressed his lips against Starsky's cheek, the side of his face, then his jaw. His eyes grew wet; he blinked it away. He couldn't take the time to indulge his own anxiety right now. He had to help Starsky. Stroking the scars on Starsky's chest, Hutch tried to take way the remembered pain.

Quietly, he murmured, "I love you, Starsky. Never loved anyone else the way I love you. And I'll never leave you, not ever, in this life. Believe me, my love."

Starsky exhaled heavily and rolled against Hutch in his sleep. His frown changed, looking more confused now than distressed.

Hutch kept planting small kisses against Starsky's forehead, his eyes, his cheeks. He tasted salty moisture, but just kept repeating his loving mantra, waiting for Starsky to regain consciousness. "I'll never leave you," Hutch repeated. "And I'll never love anyone else, not ever in this life. I'm here, Starsky. I'm here." He rubbed his hand soothingly over and over the faded scars on Starsky's chest, hoping that, in the dream, he was healing them, and healing Starsky's heart as well.

Still sleeping, Starsky pressed against Hutch, then brought a hand up to cradle Hutch's head. Burying his fingers in Hutch's long hair, Starsky gripped it as if trying to anchor himself in reality. Hutch wrapped his arms around Starsky tightly, holding him close, wishing he could protect him from the disturbing dreams that had invaded the joy of their wedding night.

As Hutch stroked the scars on Starsky's back, Starsky turned his face up, silently asking for the kiss that would pull him from the nightmare. Hutch remembered how much he had needed that healing kiss himself when they were reconciling in the beach house. How drawn he'd been to the comfort of Starsky's mouth, the sweetness and intensity of his giving, loving kiss.

It was easy to return that gift. When he touched his mouth to his sleeping lover's lips, Starsky surged against him, his mouth responding even though he was still trapped in the dream. Starsky's arms clutched at Hutch clumsily, his hands grabbing him as if he were fighting gravity, struggling to keep from falling. Hutch held him tighter, wanting to convey all the security that the strength of his body could.

He murmured against Starsky's lips, "I love you. I'll never leave you. Not ever. I promise."

Slowly, Starsky's kisses changed from a desperate, fear-driven response, to gradual awareness and growing passion.

"I've got you, babe," Hutch assured him. "Nothing can hurt you, not while I'm here. I love you, Starsky."

Starsky moaned, whispered his name, then said it again, louder. He sounded confused.
"I'm here. I'm here. I won't let you go," Hutch said.

Starsky shuddered. Hutch felt the brush of his lashes against his face as Starsky's eyes fluttered sleepily.

Hutch waited for Starsky to tell him he loved him. That was the signal that meant the dream was over. But Starsky didn't say that. Instead, he pulled out of their kiss and peered at Hutch through half-lidded eyes, as though he couldn't imagine what Hutch was doing there with him.

"Hey," Hutch said quietly, "it's me. It's okay. Are you awake?"

Starsky nodded, then shook his head no. He blinked a few times then looked around the room. Hutch realized the unfamiliar surroundings would only be adding to his disorientation.

"Tell me what's going on," Hutch urged. "What's happening to you?"

Starsky closed his eyes and pressed closer to Hutch, almost as if he were trying to hide.

"You walked away," Starsky said, half-groaning. "You left me. We were all there: Dobey, and Edith, and Huggy and...and..." He paused as if trying to remember, then hesitated as if wanting to leave something out. "And you walked away. You didn't look at me or say anything, you just left."

"In the police garage?" He tried to imagine how that must've felt for Starsky, for Hutch to walk away while Starsky believed himself to be mortally injured.

"No. At the wedding," Starsky said, completely confusing him. "We were here, getting married, everything just like it was, except...except..." He frowned, as if trying to organize all the conflicting thoughts. He looked away from Hutch, distressed. Again he seemed reluctant to speak, but finally said, "Except Rosey was there, standing beside Huggy. She didn't say anything, she just stood there looking sad as you walked away. And I suddenly knew that I'd lost both of you -- that I was alone."

Hutch felt flooded with guilt, convinced that his bringing up her name had planted the distorted images in Starsky's subconscious. He hugged Starsky hard, burying a hand in his hair.

"I couldn't get you to come back, or turn around and look at me, or anything," Starsky complained, sounding almost angry, as if still trapped in those memories.

"It was just a dream," Hutch reminded him. "It was just a jumble of memories from all the things we've been through recently." He pulled away a little. "Look at me, Starsky, really look at me. I need to be sure you're awake."

Starsky blinked dazedly, but did as Hutch asked.

"I will never leave you, do you hear me? Hear it and remember it. I will never, ever leave you. You're mine, now and forever, just like we said this afternoon."
Starsky sagged against Hutch, as if only now recalling the real wedding ceremony. "Shouldn't I be saying that to you? You never left me in the first place. I left you."

"You came back," Hutch reminded him, cupping his face with his hand. "I don't need to be your first love; I only want to be your last." Hutch sighed and hugged him hard. "Starsky, I love you." Those were the words that solved everything, weren't they?

Evidently, they were. Starsky pulled back from the embrace to be able to see Hutch's face. Entwined with him in the smallest possible space on the massive bed, Starsky spoke his heart. "I love you, too, Hutch. So much." His eyes held the truth of it. They were soft, full of love, longing, and concern. They were the eyes of a man who'd only learned recently what he really and truly wanted, and now held it here in his arms.

Hutch let himself fall into the promise in those eyes, and felt a rush of joy that seemed brand new yet well-tested. And he knew that from now on, this was what waking up to Starsky's love would be like. No doubts, no need for assurance -- this was love, for now and ever.

Their mouths met in mutual desire, each of them needing that physical comfort. But Hutch knew Starsky needed more than that. And Hutch wanted to affirm not only their love, but also their life, the life each of them had fought Death for and won.

He stroked Starsky's body, slowly, sensuously, wanting to remove the taint of the dream and make their reality his only focus. He own heart rate increased and he began breathing harder, as he mapped Starsky's body with his hands. The tension in Starsky's back and shoulders told him how anxious his lover still was. Hutch didn't worry about that. He paid attention, instead, to the surprising softness of Starsky's skin, the rough texture of the body hair that coated his chest and abdomen, and the restless motion of his muscles as he moved and shifted, responding to Hutch's petting. The scars he felt along Starsky's chest and back were now just bookmarks of a certain time and place; nothing more important than that.

Starsky tentatively touched the fading scar at the base of Hutch's throat, then stroked it more purposefully. Hutch wondered if Starsky was thinking the same thing he was. *This is where we've been, but it doesn't have to be where we're going.* The women in their lives had left scars, too. Those couldn't be seen, but they were deep nonetheless. Hutch would always love Gillian, and Abbey would forever hold a place of tender memories. Terry would always be a part of Starsky; Rosey would, too. Starsky would never stop loving her anymore than Hutch would stop loving Gillian. That love, like their body scars, was a healing place in their hearts that would never let them forget. But they would get past that and move on, together.

Hutch felt an inner peace he had not known in a long time. He wanted Starsky to feel it, too.

His hands grew more urgent, and Starsky responded to the sensual caresses. Hutch nuzzled Starsky's face, finding his ear under a riot of dense curls and teased the lobe with his tongue, then licked it slowly, tracing the shell, the sensitive skin behind it, even probing inside, knowing that would drive Starsky crazy. It drove Hutch crazy, too. The taste of Starsky's skin brought memories of so many nights of comfort and wonderful passion. They had so many memories yet to make.
Starsky called his name with that tense urgency that made Hutch's blood boil. Starsky's hands were wandering over him tentatively, fingertips skimming his sides, his shoulders, his back. Hutch's own hands were spread wide, covering as much of Starsky as he could, needing to feel every inch, every bit of him living and breathing and loving. Starsky adored his hands, especially their size, so Hutch wanted them to seem even bigger as they stroked and petted Starsky into a fever.

"Hutch...Hutch..." Starsky murmured, turning and moving under Hutch's hands as if trying to help Hutch find every inch of him. As Starsky rolled onto his back Hutch moved with him, stroking his chest, his softly furred skin, brushing his knuckles against Starsky's small sensitive nipples then stroking flat-palmed down his taut abdomen.

They were kissing again, not frantically, but languidly. Sweet, tender, close-mouthed kisses like they'd shared in the bed in the beach house. It was their wedding night, and they were new lovers again, rediscovering each other. Hutch knew that it would always be like this for them whenever they'd go through hardship. They'd rebuild every time, coming together new and fresh, starting over from the beginning. It was exciting to know their love would be renewed over and over and never grow stale.

Hutch fumbled under the pillow, looking for the tube he'd put there while Starsky slept. He drew it out, then flipped off the cover. Starsky was too busy loving him to be aware as Hutch filled his own hand with the lubricant and warmed it. He was counting on the element of surprise as he collected Starsky's nodding cock in his slippery palm.

Starsky tensed all over, tossing his head as he dug his nails into Hutch's ass. "Damn it! That's incredible."

He stroked Starsky slowly, hoping not to bring him up too fast. He wanted this to last, wanted them both to remember it forever. Starsky hardened against his palm as Hutch fisted his semi-erect organ slowly. Grabbing a handful of his hair, Starsky didn't let that maneuver distract him from Hutch's mouth. You always did have an oral fixation, Hutch thought, inwardly smiling as he met Starsky's kiss with equal fervor.

The increasing activity south of his navel meant that Starsky would no longer be satisfied with sleepy close-mouthed kisses. His tongue demanded entrance, and Hutch had no choice but to give it to him. It was, after all, their wedding night.

Starsky moved into Hutch's mouth aggressively, nipping Hutch's lower lip, exploring his teeth, sliding their tongues together. They were both making soft sounds of pleasure. Hutch's hand tightened around Starsky's now rigid cock, and his stroke grew more demanding. Starsky's hips, always ready to dance, pumped up into Hutch's fist, loving the rhythm.

Starsky pulled out of the kiss with a gasp, peering down the length of their bodies to watch Hutch stroke him. Hutch could see how excited that was making him. Starsky was breathing hard, sheened with sweat, his hips on automatic pilot. Starsky's eyes glittered as he watched Hutch please him. And Hutch loved doing it.
He thought of the times he'd made Starsky bring himself off. Starsky would never know how hot that had been to Hutch. Starsky was so beautiful when he came, his entire body responding to the act. When they were making love together Hutch would get lost in his own passion and had trouble focusing on that moment when Starsky orgasmed. Watching Starsky do it to himself had been a sublime erotic act in and of itself. Thinking of that, he shifted in the bed to get a better grip on Starsky's hardness and rubbed his slick palm over and over the tip of Starsky's glans. The sound his lover made was wrenching, agony and delight all in one. Hutch grinned, pleased with the reaction.

"Know what?" Starsky gasped.

Hutch was amazed that he was able to articulate at this point. "No, what?"

Starsky's eyes, surprisingly alert, captured his gaze. "I think I've had enough waiting."

Hutch felt a flush of color rush through him. His cock nodded so hard it slapped his stomach. "Oh, yeah?" he said, breathlessly, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Yeah," Starsky said in a firm voice. He groped around Hutch's arm, snagging the lube from where it lay near Hutch's hand.

Hutch couldn't wipe the grin off his face. "You won't need that. I'm ready for you."

"We'll need it," Starsky warned. "Trust me."

Hutch wasn't very successful in swallowing his groan of anticipation.

Starsky sat up and glanced around, finding the towel he'd used before. Tugging Hutch's wrist, he pulled Hutch's hand off his cock, and wiped his fingers clean. Then he kissed the palm. "Your hands, Hutch.... God, I love your hands."

"I ever tell you how much I love yours?" Hutch asked. He turned his palm around and grasped Starsky's fingers, rubbing them. "They're slender and elegant, yet amazingly strong. Beautiful hands. Lover's hands. When you put them on my body, I can't help but respond. One touch and I'm yours. They're magician's hands." He pulled the fingers to his mouth, kissing the knuckles.

Starsky touched Hutch's cheek, then got on his knees. He stroked both palms down Hutch's body, then over his arms, and down his sides. Hutch was already at a fever pitch, and the loving touch was just bringing him higher.

"Starsky, please," he groaned, wondering if Starsky would tease him for hours, just for the sheer joy of it.

"That's all I want, Hutch," Starsky assured him, "to please you." Taking hold of Hutch's knee, Starsky urged him to roll over.

Hutch was amazed at his reaction to that. As he turned onto his stomach, his balls tightened, his body tensed, and a line of goosebumps trailed down his spine. "Starsky?" he whispered.
Clutching a pillow under his chin, he looked back over his shoulder, not wanting to miss anything.

"I'm here, babe," Starsky assured him as he spread Hutch's legs wider. He rubbed his palm over Hutch's ass, as if gentling a skittish horse. "Come on, relax." Starsky stroked down Hutch's ass, trailing his palms over the backs of his thighs.

Glancing around the room, Starsky must've spied something that intrigued him because he suddenly got off the bed and grabbed something from a long, low couch nearby. "I'm not goin' anywhere," he said, before Hutch could even comment. He held something white with gold trim, something plush and rectangular --

*Couch pillow,* Hutch realized, as Starsky prodded him to lift his hips. He did so and Starsky placed the cushion strategically under Hutch's groin. As he settled over it gingerly, what he felt startled him. "Starsky, what is that?"

"Velvet, I think. Crushed velvet, maybe. How's it feel?"

Terrifying, Hutch thought as incredible softness and plush comfort surrounded his aching cock. The urge to strop against the luxurious pillow was almost compulsive. "Starsky, I don't know if..."

"Shhhh," Starsky soothed. "You comfortable?"

"Oh, yeah," Hutch said.

"Good." He rubbed Hutch's spine, again with that gentling action as if wanting to help Hutch relax. But the anticipation was too great, and Hutch knew he was more anxious than he'd been the first time they ever did it.

Starsky climbed back between Hutch's legs and settled over his body, letting Hutch take his weight. The warmth of Starsky's body and the exotic sensation of his body hair rubbing against Hutch's smooth skin was like an electric current running through Hutch's blood. He shuddered all over.

"You need some champagne?" Starsky asked out of the blue.

"What?" Hutch asked, baffled. He became aware of Starsky's lubed cock rubbing gently against his perineum, nudging his balls. The contact was intimate, erotic, and threatening all at once.

"For the wedding night jitters," Starsky reminded him. "You're shaking like a leaf, and your whole body's rigid."

"It's all this waiting," Hutch told him. "The anticipation's killing me."

Starsky rubbed his hands down Hutch's thighs, then up over his ass, and then down the front of his legs. He placed a kiss against Hutch's spine between his shoulder blades. "Oh, yeah?" Starsky said softly. Suddenly, Hutch felt a dollop of lube rubbed over his anus. His entire ass clenched in
response but Starsky ignored it, just used his fingers to rub the gel in and around Hutch's tight portal until it began to relax in spite of his tension. The probing, tormenting fingers excited Hutch wonderfully. His legs spread wider, inviting Starsky to take whatever he wanted. Starsky's hand never penetrated Hutch, he just teased the edge, reminding him how good it could be -- would be -- once Starsky claimed him.

Moving on automatic pilot, Hutch rubbed his cock against the velvet pillow. The sensation of Starsky teasing his ass and the pillow comforting his erection soon reduced him to a moaning, humping man who desperately needed to be fucked.

Starsky was still lying over him, and the weight of him felt wonderful. Being blanketed by his lover made him feel incredibly desired and cared for. Watching my back in the best way of all, Hutch thought.

"Hutch," Starsky said, still placing loving kisses along his neck and shoulders, "all those nights when I held out on you -- some of it was to make up for those nights...when you had to sleep alone."

Hutch slowed, suddenly aware of the confessional tone in Starsky's voice.

"I wanted you to have me on your terms, anyway you wanted," Starsky continued. "I felt like...if I'd taken you, I was just givin' myself something I didn't deserve. Those nights when you lost your patience and took me by storm, those nights I felt like I was making it up to you a little...not that anything really could."

"Starsky," Hutch said, his heart throbbing with love. But Starsky's hand never let up its tormenting contact with his anus. His teasing was making Hutch's toes curl, making his balls tighten up painfully. It was impossible for him to think of a single thing to say.

"I know that doesn't make much sense," Starsky said, "but that's the way I felt about it. Just wanted to give myself to you as much as I could. I wanted you to be sure of me, be sure I was yours. And as the days passed, I could see you beginning to believe in me again. Maybe not quite like before, but getting there. I wanted you to know about that, about why I did it. Some of it was for romance, like I said. But some of it was just payback. Marriage has to be the most equal of partnerships. And I wanted us to go into it with all of that past behind us." He paused for a minute, kissing Hutch's spine a few more times. "I gotta tell you, though, Hutch, if you thought my holding out was hard on you, you can't even imagine what it was like on me. I'm just tellin' you this so that you'll understand my need for you tonight, well, it's pretty intense."

"It's okay," Hutch breathed. He was so excited he could barely talk. His body was so sensitized, he was afraid any sexual contact would make him go off. "Starsk, I'm ready. And I want you just as bad."

"That's good," Starsky said, shifting over his back, "cause I can't wait anymore."

Hutch's eyes widened and he held perfectly still as Starsky's hand left him. Starsky moved his hips subtly, then Hutch realized Starsky had taken hold of his own cock. He felt the blunt probe of Starsky's glans against his ass, felt Starsky moving, centering it blind.
"Jeezus, just touching you like this...." Starsky gasped against his ear. "Ah, Hutch, I love you. And now you're really mine."

Starsky entered him hard, clearly unable to hold back any longer. Without giving Hutch a chance to catch his breath, he buried himself to the hilt. Hutch moaned, half in pain, half in wonder, and lay helpless, unable to move or react. The penetration was the most exquisite, intense, overwhelming sensation he had ever felt.

Starsky drew back sharply, like a sword yanked from the sheath, and Hutch gulped air, struggling to handle it. That's what Starsky needed -- for him to handle it.

"You're mine, now, Hutch," Starsky growled and bit his shoulder as he plunged in again. "Mine!"

"Yes!" Hutch cried, shoving back against him, wanting to feel every bit of it, every harsh, beautiful second. Starsky was taking him in the truest sense of the word, and he loved it. He wanted Starsky to know that.

Starsky knew. He pinned Hutch's upper arms against the bed to make sure he didn't move, and thrust hard and deep, again, again, again. Hutch rose to meet him, wanting it, loving the sharp slap of their flesh, the soft bumping of Starsky's balls hitting his ass, and the amazing, electric sensation of smooth velvet rubbing against his own cock.

"Everything," Hutch managed to rasp as Starsky just kept going, over and over, on and on, pounding into him. "Give me everything!"

Starsky groaned and shifted slightly and suddenly Starsky's heavy cock was hitting his prostate with unerring accuracy. That upped the ante as the pleasure and pain coalesced into a battery of sensations flooding his body, all of them wonderful, terrifying, addicting. He was being assaulted from without and within. He felt like he was the center of an aggressive orgy, a helpless victim of passion, and all he could do was yield. So he did.

Suddenly Starsky released his arms to wrap his arms tight around Hutch's chest. Rocking back sharply onto his knees, Starsky grunted, pulling Hutch up with him. Now, they were both kneeling, Hutch's back pressed tight against Starsky's front. He felt disoriented, his cock bobbing in the air, the velvet contact lost. But Starsky's cock was still hilt-deep in his ass as Starsky sat back on his heels, hauling Hutch with him. He pulled Hutch down hard in his lap, driving his cock in even deeper.

Hutch cried out, gripping Starsky's arms where they wrapped around him.

Starsky's hands slid down Hutch's chest, one of them moving under Hutch's balls and gathering them in his palm, rolling them, owning them. His other hand gripped Hutch's erection. Hutch tensed around Starsky's cock, making him hiss.

"Oh, yeah," Starsky purred against his ear. "That's good, real good."
When Starsky stroked Hutch's inflamed cock, Hutch was startled to feel Starsky's hand was full of lube. The slickness and Starsky's grip was more intense than the velvet pillow, and Starsky's wicked teasing of his balls alone was nearly enough to make him come. He struggled to rock forward, away from Starsky's lap to thrust into his hand. Starsky fisted his cock and he lurched back, impaling himself again, then rocked forward for the next stroke.

Which is apparently exactly what Starsky had in mind. "That's right, baby, come on,"

Realizing he had some control over his own pleasure, Hutch took advantage of it, moving back and forth deliberately. He felt like he was fucking himself coming and going. He was drunk on the intensity, dizzy with passion. He couldn't grab enough air, couldn't sort one incredible sensation from another. Dropping his arms, he reached low to grip Starsky's thighs. Hutch hoped his lover was enjoying all this work, because he sure was.

The orgasm began climbing up his spine from the soles of his feet. He moved faster, harder, to a beat only the two of them could hear. Starsky was urging him on, telling him how hot he was, what an incredible lover he was, singing to him words of lust and passion that made Hutch wild.

"I need to come!" he gasped finally, growing desperate.

"I know," Starsky said. "Let it happen. I want to feel it."

"You, too?" Hutch asked, worriedly.


Nothing could've stopped it. He clamped the yell down behind his teeth as his body went nova, tightening impossibly around the swollen shaft inside him as he spewed semen across the bed and Starsky's pumping hand. He felt the orgasm rocketing down his spine, into his feet, out through the tips of his fingers.

Starsky groaned but somehow held still as he stroked every last spasm out of Hutch. "Beautiful. My god, Hutch, you are one incredible, beautiful fuck."

Hutch was gasping, his body slick with sweat. His genitals ached and even the air blowing against them felt like too much sensation now. And he still sat on Starsky's lap while Starsky's cock, fully erect, pierced his body, just waiting for him to recover. "Starsky!" he whispered, shaking his head, not sure of what he was trying to say.

"You're magnificent," Starsky said, kissing his neck. "And you're mine." He reached back somehow without dislodging himself and grabbed the towel. Tenderly, he wiped the sweat from Hutch's face and chest, and carefully cleaned Hutch's cock and balls, even though it made him jump and tighten down -- or maybe because it did. Hutch wasn't thinking very clearly. He couldn't. Not with this demanding erection intruding into his trembling, sated body.
"Okay," Starsky whispered, "lay back down. Easy now." He helped Hutch settle against the bed. Hutch's arms felt like rubber and he was sure his whole body had the consistency of a deflated balloon. An intensely satisfied one, though. If Starsky would just give him a few minutes to recover....

"Don't go to sleep," Starsky said, rubbing his shoulders and spine with the towel, wiping the sweat from him.

"I let you sleep," Hutch complained.

"That was your big mistake," Starsky said. He settled back over Hutch's body, blanketing him again. He was breathing hard, making Hutch realize how excited he still was. "God, Hutch, you're so hot. Specially on the inside." Starsky shifted, making Hutch aware of the cock still possessing him. Hutch groaned. "I wish I had the words, Hutch. I wish I could tell you how amazing it is to take you, to own you, to make you mine. To have a man like you give me so much.... I swear, Hutch, I'll never take it for granted." He pressed his lips to Hutch's nape. "I'm not too heavy, am I?"

Hutch shook his head, unable to speak, or move, or do anything but lie still and be possessed by the man he loved. Dimly, he became aware that his cock was once again nestled against the velvet pillow. And it was stirring, just a little. That anything at all was happening down there was pretty amazing, considering that Hutch was half-dead.

Starsky was still talking, but Hutch wasn't paying much attention. Then Starsky's hands started moving and Hutch realized he'd better pay attention if he wanted to live through this. Starsky was petting him, sweet and gentle, and moving his hips just enough to keep his cock interested and make sure Hutch couldn't forget who was driving. Starsky groped around the bed one-handed, then found the battered tube of lubricant. Hutch shut his eyes. He wasn't ready. He didn't think he'd ever be ready.

"Told you we were gonna need this, didn't I?" Starsky muttered.

Hutch felt Starsky withdraw halfway, then felt the cool gel touch him as Starsky coated himself. When he slid back into Hutch, the cooling lubricant felt wonderful and he sighed.

"Good boy," Starsky whispered. "Feeling better?"

Hutch laughed. If he felt any better he'd be in orbit.

Starsky stroked his hair, then ran his hands over his sides as he settled over his back again. "I'm glad you're feeling good, 'cause we got hours ahead of us before we'll sleep. I'd almost forgotten how good this was, Hutch, taking you, making you mine. But we're here now, and I'm feelin' like I never did this before, like I could last for days." He kissed Hutch's nape, which made Hutch shudder beneath him, knowing Starsky could feel it. "Of course, we can't really fuck for days," Starsky added, sounding almost sad. "We might miss our plane. But we do have all night. And that's what you asked for, so it's the least I can do."

Hutch wondered whatever possessed him to say something so crazy.
Starsky was busy stroking the sides of Hutch's ass, but Hutch could feel the subtle change coming over his lover. Starsky had held off enough to control himself. He was ready, while Hutch had no idea if he'd ever be ready again. "God, Hutch, I need you so bad," Starsky whispered, his voice shaky.

Hutch swallowed, and somehow found enough air to say, "Then take me, love. I'm here for you."

Starsky groaned, and his hips starting pumping more seriously.

The reaction on Hutch was incendiary. The heavy cock pummeled his swollen, sensitive tissues making him shift and rock to find a more comfortable position. This made his cock strope the velvet pillow, and to his amazement, his sated organ responded enthusiastically. He moaned helplessly as he rubbed off on the seductive softness, and this only made Starsky pick up the pace.

"Yes, baby, yes," Starsky purred. "Come on, now, dance with me, Hutch." Starsky slowed his thrusting, but moved deeper into Hutch's incredibly sensitive ass. His balls tightened and his ass clenched in reaction, making everything that much more intense.

_This can't be happening_, he thought, as his body flushed in pleasure and his cock grew harder. "Starsky!" he gasped.

"I'm right here, Hutch," Starsky assured him, moving in deeper, harder, still slow and deliberate. "I've got it right here for you. All you want. As long as you want it."

"Yes...yes..." Hutch gasped, feeling himself moving in sync with Starsky. He felt like his cock was fucking even while he was being fucked, and it was incredible. He gripped handfuls of the heavy quilt, even as his knees found purchase in it, so he could get some leverage to thrust.

Starsky moaned as Hutch's hips answered the driving rhythm of his cock. Sliding his hands under Hutch, Starsky found his taut nipples. He pinched them roughly, pulling them, giving Hutch something else to react to, something else to love. It made him drive his cock harder against the pillow. Starsky's reaction was to grab Hutch's hips and ride him expertly.

Hutch rolled his hips and Starsky's cock found his prostate. That stopped any real thinking on Hutch's part. He suddenly became a sweating, rutting animal, fucking and being fucked, in a powerful rhythm that grew more and more intense. He felt as if he could last forever and right now he wanted to.

One of Starsky's hands released his nipple, sliding under him until he found his tightened sac. Starsky rolled it with an expert touch, which made Hutch cry out in sublime pleasure.

"You got something for me in there," Starsky hissed at him, toying with his balls, "and I want it. Give it to me, Hutch." He was playing Hutch like the finely tuned instrument he was, and Hutch knew he could deny Starsky nothing. "Pillow feels good, doesn't it? You should be wrapped in velvet, Hutch, every day. You should have nothing touch your beautiful skin but soft velvet, rubbing against you until you're so hot you can't hang on to it anymore. Your cock feels like velvet, babe, did you know that? Soft velvet against my lips, soft velvet over steel."
Dimly, Hutch was aware that Starsky was talking him into an orgasm, and was astounded to feel his body responding like a trained seal. The hand gently manipulating his balls was taking him so high he knew the end was inevitable. He didn't feel an answering urgency in Starsky's maddening, rhythmic thrusting.

"I wanna suck you, Hutch," Starsky suddenly said. "I need to feel that velvet and steel in my mouth."

It was too much. The sensations in his body, on his nipple and his balls, the sweet, sexy voice in his ears, coalesced into a wonderful, terrible tightening and then a sharp, shocking release. Hutch sighed, unable to find the strength to shout out.

His body clamped down around Starsky, making him hiss in pleasure and slow down. Hutch ejaculated all over the pillow, the feeling incredibly erotic. He shook all over, but in spite of this, his second release, he suddenly felt hyper-alert, aware that Starsky eventually had to be getting close. He couldn't imagine what that would mean for him.

As the last spasm left Hutch's body, Starsky pulled out sharply, making him lurch. Before he could move, Starsky had hold of his leg, towing him over onto his back. He lay there sprawled helplessly, as if he had no control over his own limbs. Starsky would have to do everything. He was wrecked. Fucked out. There was nothing left.

"God, look at you," Starsky said, panting, as he tossed the velvet pillow out of their way. "You never looked so beautiful, Hutch, I swear it. And you're still hard!"

Dazedly, Hutch stared down at himself and saw it was true. Apparently, his brain was all fucked out, but his body was still ready to play.

"I gotta have you, Hutch," Starsky said, sounding desperate, and before Hutch could do anything, Starsky went down on him, taking his cock all the way down his throat. This time, Hutch did yell as Starsky sucked on his over-stimulated cock. He thrust hard into Starsky's mouth. He was barely able to tolerate the contact yet was sure he could never get enough. His hands latched onto a mass of dark hair and he shoved Starsky's head down roughly, but that only made him suck Hutch harder, purring around his mass. Hutch yelled his name, nearly insane from the electric sensations.

Just as the point that Hutch thought he might actually faint from the power of Starsky's mouth, his lover released him. Desperately, Hutch gasped for air, realizing this slight pause would be his only chance. Starsky fumbled for the lubricant, nearly emptying it onto his impossibly hard erection. Hutch watched, mesmerized. Starsky was panting like a racehorse, his body glowing with sweat and excitement, the muscles in his arms standing out from all his work, his chest and abs hard, rippling with his exertion. Hutch couldn't get enough of the sight of him. Alive, thriving, throbbing with raw sexuality and power, Starsky never looked more beautiful.

Starsky looked up at Hutch, saw him staring at him. His indigo eyes glittered wickedly, and the expression on his face was determined. He licked his lips, and lifted Hutch's leg to settle it over his shoulder.
"Yes," Hutch rasped. "I want to watch you. I want to see you nail me to the bed. Go on."

Starsky chuckled. "Your wish is my command." He settled the other leg over his left shoulder, then positioned himself. "I better tell you this now, 'cause I don't know if I'll be able to say much once we get goin'." He looked up at Hutch again, his expression surprisingly soft. "I love you with all my heart, Hutch."

Hutch wanted to cry from joy, but managed to just grin and say, "Love you, too."

"You're mine, Hutch," Starsky swore, as he entered Hutch slowly, giving him a moment to adjust.

Hutch lurched. His tissues were so swollen and sensitive, the penetration nearly did him in. He moaned, as Starsky leaned over him to drive in deeper. Starsky held onto his legs, keeping them high, bent over his own body to get in even deeper yet.

"Mine, Hutch, mine..." Starsky murmured, withdrawing then driving in again.

Hutch reached out frantically, barely able to handle the intensity of Starsky's fucking. He latched onto Starsky's forearms and clung there, needing the anchor. Starsky slid in and out of him, methodically, wickedly, lighting him up inside, tearing him up, and amazingly, making him love it like never before. He couldn't move much in this position, but he was too exhausted to anyway. And he wanted Starsky to use him anyway he wanted to, until he was finally satisfied.

Starsky closed his eyes, his expression suffused with pleasure as he fucked strongly, beautifully. He kept murmuring Hutch's name, kept saying, "Mine," over and over, softly, a hypnotic background song to the most intense sexual experience Hutch had ever had.

"Yours," Hutch gasped out, wanting to reassure and provoke at the same time. He wanted Starsky wild, savage, totally uninhibited. "Only yours."

Starsky groaned out loud and began driving feverishly into Hutch's body.

Hutch was incoherent, unable to do anything by cry out at the fierce impact. The bed began to complain, but neither of them cared. Hutch knew his own peak was approaching, that it was the very last thing he'd be able to do. He was already stretched beyond his limits. After this, there'd be nothing left at all.

Starsky growled low and fucked faster, harder, his cock suddenly swelling more. Somehow, he remembered Hutch's needs, and grabbed Hutch's cock roughly, stroking him brusquely, the friction abrasive and shocking but somehow unbelievably good.

Hutch could barely endure it, but it was impossible to evade as Starsky pinned him in place with his body and hands and used him. Suddenly, Starsky's whole body went rigid.

"Oh, god, Hutch, YES!" Starsky shouted, and pounded in one, two, three times. He squeezed Hutch's cock and fist ed it rapidly.
Hutch clawed his arms in reaction, and arched. He didn't have much left, but what was there exploded, ejaculating a small stream onto his belly. But the orgasm was as intense as any he'd ever had, and somehow, he and Starsky had managed to come together.

Starsky clung to his legs as he finished coming, kissing the sides of Hutch's knees, and began to sag. Hutch somehow managed to slide his legs off Starsky's shoulders. They thudded onto the bed as Starsky pitched face forward onto Hutch's chest. He moaned helplessly, as Hutch wrapped his arms around Starsky and rolled him onto his side. Starsky was shaking all over, trembling uncontrollably.

Hutch somehow found the strength to stroke Starsky's back, kiss his forehead, murmur words of love against his face. Starsky seemed comatose.

After a few moments, Starsky's lids fluttered. "Did someone shoot me?" he muttered drowsily.

"There was definitely more than one gun fired in this room," Hutch chided as Starsky hoisted himself up on his elbows. "But I think we were both hit."

Starsky was staring at his own body as if he couldn't believe what it had done. "That was unbelievable. I guess that's what happens when you hold out for weeks. Has some advantages." He grinned crookedly.

"If you think for one minute," Hutch warned, "that I'm ever going to let you say no to me again, forget it. I'm lucky I survived my wedding night." He kissed Starsky's forehead. "But it was very special, that's for sure." He forced himself to sit up and winced.

Starsky noticed. "You stay there. I'm gonna get the Jacuzzi set up. I think we both need it." He stumbled from the bed, barely able to walk on his shaky legs.

Hutch grinned, feeling wonderfully responsible.

He could hear water running when Starsky returned. Gimping over to the Dobey's basket, Starsky pulled some goodies out, then filled the flutes with the remainder of the cold champagne. He managed to juggle everything precariously and carry it over to the bed with him. Handing Hutch a flute of sparkling champagne, he said, "Breakfast in bed. We spare no expense." He dropped a box of chocolate covered strawberries onto Hutch's belly, then climbed into bed on the other side.

Hutch glanced out at the night sky outside their window. "Breakfast?"

"You looked at the time? It's close enough. Don't quibble. Try this. You need the energy."

Hutch chuckled and let Starsky feed him a strawberry. "Mmm. That's really good."

"We have more." Starsky sipped at his champagne. "And for some reason, I'm starving."

Hutch smiled. "And considering how especially good you were, chocolate strawberries and champagne in bed is the least you deserve." He held up his glass to Starsky, as if in a toast.
Starsky grinned at him.

Hutch shifted gingerly in the bed, and balanced the strawberries on the bed between them. They devoured the dish, and Starsky went back to the basket for exotic cookies, and some small individual wrapped cheeses.

Feeling a bit restored, Hutch decided to tease Starsky. His lover was still shaky on his pins as he went back to the bathroom to check on the water level in the Jacuzzi. Hutch waited until he was nearby again, rummaging for more treats. "You know, I'm feeling very married."

Starsky smiled, clearly pleased. "Oh, yeah. How come?"

Hutch grinned back at him. "Well, before you took your monkey gland pills and tried to kill me, you remember when I went down on you? You came in fifteen seconds and fell dead asleep instantly. I knew then that you were true husband material."

Starsky looked at him through narrowed eyes. "That was your own fault. Between the red bikini underwear and that mouth of yours, I didn't stand a chance. But I'd like to see the average American husband make up for it the way I did. I mean, if you still need some convincing, I think I could manage to take you through the hoops one more time...."

"Touché," Hutch said, not having the heart to continue chiding. He was too much in love, way too satisfied, and quite a bit too sore. Shifting again, he said, "That's quite all right. I'll be lucky if I recover enough to sit all the way to Hawaii!"

Shamelessly, Starsky giggled. He'd abandoned the basket and was fooling around with something that had been on the floor, making Hutch curious.

"What are you doing?" Hutch asked.

Starsky looked a little chagrined. "Trying to sponge the come off this pillow! You think they'll charge us for it?"

Hutch laughed and took the pillow out of his hands, tossing it away. "Who cares? Maybe we should just pack it in our luggage and pay for it when we leave. A memento of our wedding night. Besides, I wouldn't mind seeing your reaction to getting off on that thing. The way your mind works scares me sometimes."

"Come on," Starsky urged, pulling at his hands. "The tub's ready and we both need the therapy."

Hutch somehow found the strength to get to his feet, even though he staggered a bit. He felt thoroughly drained, but that, after all, is exactly what Starsky wanted.

Starsky took his arm and steadied him as he climbed into the steaming hot water. It felt like heaven on his battered, sated body. Hutch thought they'd both be lucky if they didn't fall asleep and drown in it.
Starsky slid in with him. It was a bit of tight fit, but then neither of them was about to complain about the close quarters. They rested against each other in the bubbling, massaging jets and enjoyed it.

Starsky ran a hand down Hutch's chest. "You still haven't gained all the weight you lost from the shooting."

Hutch took Starsky's hand in his and kissed it. "Well, I'll hardly be able to do that if you keep fucking it off me, or if we go out dancing here as much as you have planned."

"I'll fatten you up in Hawaii," Starsky announced, hugging Hutch and pressing a kiss in his hair. "The food there is great. We'll eat out every night."

Hutch had a sudden, poignant memory of a similar conversation he'd had with Starsky -- the conversation that led them to the restaurant where Rosey had found them. Hutch took Starsky's chin and kissed his mouth gently. "No, let's not," he said solemnly. "Let's never leave our room. We can take the phone off the hook, run up an enormous room service bill, and do nothing but hide out, eat, and make crazy, bed-wrecking love for two solid weeks. I don't want to have to share you with another living soul."

Starsky looked like he was about to fall into Hutch's gaze, like a man totally besotted and completely in love. His expression lit up Hutch's heart. "That sounds wonderful. But, what about those nights when I'm especially good. How'll I get my reward? You know how hungry I get."

"I'll have all the resources of a tropical paradise at my disposal. I'll make you the most delicious surprises you've ever seen when you're especially good. And I know for a fact, Starsky, that you're going to be especially good every night for the rest of our lives."

Starsky grinned. "Count on it!"