

Summary: Starsky receives a psychic reading from Joe Collandra, and the two detectives are asked to go undercover as a gay couple to bring down a mob boss.

Categories: Slash

Genre: Episode Related

Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

UNEXPECTED

By

Mystic Whim

“Kiss me and you will see how important I am.” ~ Sylvia Plath

Chapter 1

Starsky poured himself a cup of coffee in the Parker Center squad room, inhaling deeply of the aromatic brew. He was exhausted. He noticed the wall calendar hadn't yet been flipped to the new month, and other papers on the bulletin board looked dog-eared. The walls needed a fresh coat of paint, and the cabinets needed a dusting. Somehow this seemed to add to the ragged atmosphere, as if the squad room itself was worn out, too. God, he needed a vacation. He leaned into the file cabinet, letting the cabinet hold him up. Hutch came up behind him, clapping a tired hand on his shoulder.

“Everyone's being called into the conference room,” Hutch yawned. “Garcia thinks they're going to announce new hires.”

Starsky's head shot up. “No kidding?”

Hutch shrugged. “Hope so. This overtime is killing me. Hell, we worked 72 hours last week.” He sagged onto a desk, crushing the heel of his hand into his eye. “Do you realize we have four benched with long term injuries? Not to mention losing Franklin and Bridges to retirement.”

Starsky handed his mug to Hutch. “Five injured,” he sighed. “Metz broke his leg last night breaking up a bar fight.”

“Just great.” Hutch rolled his eyes. “We better be getting some help soon. I need a break.” He took a large swig of the coffee and passed the mug back to his friend. “We need to get in there.”

Downing the remains of the coffee in one hearty chug, Starsky dropped the cup on his desk on the way out. They made their way to the conference room and grabbed seats in the back of the room. Dobey stood at the front with two male and one female officer standing to his left.

Starsky felt a slap of recognition when he looked at the petite, blonde girl flanking his boss. He grabbed Hutch's sleeve. “Rebel!” he exclaimed under his breath.

Hutch mumbled, “Wha... No, can't be. From the academy?” He studied the woman's face across the room.

“Hutch, I'm telling you, that's Rebel.” Starsky insisted. “Her hair is longer, but that's her. Geez, I thought she was with the 7th. Why would they let her go?”

Smiling broadly, Hutch replied. “I have no idea, but I'm damn glad she's here.”

Capt. Dobey concluded his introductions of the three new hires. "...And last but not least, Det. Sgt. Rebecca Dane. She has been a great asset to the 7th Precinct. We're happy to have her join our ranks. Now let's give a hand to our new members of Metro!" The crowd applauded vigorously, all grateful for the additional help.

Starsky nudged Hutch, and they made their way to the front to seek their old friend. By the time they got to the front, however, Dobby and his new charges had already left. "Let's check Dobby's office," Starsky suggested.

As the two peeked through Dobby's open doorway, their Captain waved them in. "Oh good! Come in, come in. I want to introduce you."

"Starsky!" The young woman jumped up from her chair and leapt into Starsky's warm embrace. He picked her up off her feet and twirled her around.

"Rebel! How great to see you!" he exclaimed, giving her a noisy kiss on the cheek. "How's your mom?"

"She's as spunky as ever," she replied.

Hutch cleared his throat and Rebel turned. "Oh my God! Hutch!" she cried, throwing herself into his arms. He kissed her cheek as well. "I can't believe you're both here!"

"Well, I see you've already met Det. Dane," Dobby chuckled. He continued the introductions. "And these are Detectives Schumann and Partridge," he indicated the two men seated beside her. Starsky and Hutch greeted the two men and welcomed them to Parker Center. The two men excused themselves to report to Human Resources.

Dobby turned back to the lady in the room. "Rebel, huh? I hope this nickname of yours isn't a warning of what I can expect from you, Detective?"

"Oh, no sir!" she assured him. "It's a shortening of my first name and middle initial, Rebecca L."

Starsky laughed and leaned forward conspiratorially. "Don't let her kid ya, Cap'n. The name suits her to a T."

Rebel stomped down hard on Starsky's foot, and through gritted teeth complained, "Now Dave, let's not give *my new boss* the wrong impression!" She was smiling broadly, with deep dimples, but her green eyes were shooting daggers at her old friend.

"No, no," Starsky defended in a pained voice. "I meant the name suits her, like a cute nickname for a cute gal...Not that she's rebellious or anything."

Rebecca rolled her eyes and looked back to Capt. Dobby sheepishly. "Um, Captain..."

Capt. Dobby held up a hand. "Don't worry, Dane," he chuckled. "If you're old friends with these two troublemakers, I have no doubt your nickname is well earned. But they also happened to be the very best men in this precinct, so you're in good company. Plus, your glowing record from the 7th Precinct speaks loud and clear. I can overlook a bit of rebellious behavior." He winked, eliciting a smile from Rebel. "Schumann and Partridge are going to keep HR busy for at least an

hour, so there's no point sending you down there now. Starsky, Hutch, why don't you boys take our new detective out for breakfast. My treat." He passed a bill to Starsky.

"Ya hear that? Cap's buying!" Starsky tucked the bill in his shirt and the three headed quickly for the door. "Thanks, Boss!" He scooted them out before the man changed his mind.

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Starsky and Hutch slid into opposite sides of the booth, with Rebel sliding in beside Starsky. They quickly placed their orders and chatted happily. Starsky was delighted with the unexpected reunion.

"Rebel, the 7th is supposed to be a great precinct. Why leave?" Hutch asked her.

"Great if you're a guy," Rebel muttered. She dropped her toast onto the plate with a sigh. "I don't know. I just felt like I wasn't going anywhere there. And being the only woman in the precinct made me feel kinda invisible, you know? I'd see the guys around me getting promoted, and I kept getting put off... I heard Dobe has a reputation for being fair."

Starsky nodded. "Cap's a good guy. He's fair. You'll never hear a bad word against him. And we have several women at Parker, so you aren't alone. And me and Hutch have your back." He winked. "I think you'll be happy here."

She smiled. "Good to hear."

"Do you know who your partner is?" Hutch asked.

"Yeah, Tom Carlson." She looked back and forth between them, seemingly worried for their reaction.

Starsky nodded his approval. "Good! Tom's a good cop." He turned to Hutch. "Hey, you trained him, didn't you?"

Hutch nodded. "I did. And he is good. He's kinda by-the-book, but not overboard. He's hardworking, and he'll be a good partner."

"That's a relief," Rebel declared. She smiled at her old friends. "I can't tell you how excited I am to work with you guys again. I miss the old days." Her eyes lit up with affection. "When we were at the academy, I had such hope for the future. I really thought I had found the perfect job."

"I think we all felt like that," Hutch answered, nostalgia heavy in his voice. "We were so innocent back then." He looked knowingly to Starsky.

"I'm glad you're partners!" she declared. "You always seemed to be two peas in a pod." She shook her head. "I never did understand why they called you and Colby the Three Corsicans. With you two, I get it. You guys always seemed to have a sixth sense. But Colby...? He was nothing like you."

Hutch laughed. "That's right! You never did get along with him, did you!"

Starsky felt his jaw clench. He forced the bad memories down of Colby and his deceptions. "You always did have good instincts, Rebel."

Her eye widened. "You know, I heard Colby's on death row. I heard he was working as a hitman!"

Starsky dropped his gaze to the tabletop.

"What's wrong?" Rebel questioned.

Starsky saw that Hutch had looked away as well. He looked to Rebel and saw the confusion in her expression. "Rebel, we're the ones that busted Colby." He watched her reaction carefully.

"No!" she exclaimed, smacking a flat hand on the table. "You're kidding me!" She shook her head. "Geez, I knew that guy was no good. I mean, I didn't know he'd come to *that*, but I knew he'd come to some kind of bad end. He just really rubbed me the wrong way."

"I remember you bickering all the time," Hutch chuckled. "You always got under his skin."

Starsky couldn't resist yanking her chain a little. "I wondered if there wasn't a bit of sexual tension going on between you two..." He elicited a snicker from Hutch.

"Oh God, no!" She shivered at the thought. "Don't even joke about such a thing! The only reason I even tolerated that conceited narcissist, is because he latched himself onto you guys."

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Tom Carlson walked up behind Hutch and placed a hand on his shoulder. "The wife's at her sister's," he said conspiratorially. "Feel like hitting the Pits and shooting a little pool?"

Hutch smiled. "Paycheck burning a hole in your pocket, Tom?"

"It is, it is," the man confirmed. "Christ, I haven't had a night out with the boys in three weeks!"

"With the boys, huh?" Rebel came up behind her partner and nudged him. "You ditching me, Partner?"

"Hell no!" Tom declared. "You're kind of an honorary one-of-the-boys. Besides, I gotta see how good you are at pool."

"What I lack in skill I make up for in consistency."

"She's consistently bad," Starsky muttered to Tom.

Rebel looked sheepish. "That may be true," she confessed. "I never was any good at the game. But I have been practicing. And I've improved! A little."

Hutch threw an arm around Rebel's shoulders. "Tell you what, kiddo. I'll partner with you. We'll give them a run for their money."

Starsky was annoyed. "Come on, Hutch. I was all ready to help Tommy part with his cash. Don't pull out on me now!"

“Winner buys a pitcher,” Tom announced. “If we can’t get rich, we can at least get lit.”

The four met up at the Pits, and immediately commandeered a pool table. Starsky and Hutch played better than Rebel or Tom, so the reshuffle of their partners allowed for a better match up in their play. They were enjoying the constant flow of beer, and having fun with their friends. Starsky was getting a refill on their pitcher, and Hutch joined him to get more quarters for the pool table. A drunken opponent came up to Hutch, and asked, “Hey man, is that little blonde really your fiancé, or is she just trying to give me a brush off?” Starsky raised an eyebrow, amused at this turn of events.

Hutch whirled around and got right in the man’s face, his most intimidating glare serving to push the man backwards a step. “Yeah, why? What’d you do to her?” He demanded from the stranger.

“Nothing, man! Back off! I was just askin’! Sheesh!” The drunk scurried off, steering very clear of the pool table and Tom and Rebel.

“Well that’s some news, there buddy,” Starsky laughed. “I guess congratulations are in order!”

“We better check on her,” Hutch said. They returned to their table, and Hutch raised the pitcher to Rebel. “There’s my lovely bride to be!”

“Oh, sorry, Hutch,” she grinned. “I tried to shake him off me, but he wasn’t taking the hint.”

Tom placed a platter of nachos on their table, liberally sprinkled with pepper slices. “What do you say, partner? You want to challenge the table?”

“You want to play with me, Tom? Those guys look pretty good...”

“You’re every bit as good as they are,” Tom assured her, and the two proceeded to play, and to beat their challengers.

Starsky waved Tom over and asked him, “Tom, did you really believe Rebel was as good as the two who challenged you?”

Tom looked over his shoulder, apparently assured that his partner wasn’t within earshot. “Hell no,” he laughed. “But the bald one was staring at Rebel for the last half hour, and I hoped he would either let her win, or be too distracted to play well.”

Starsky chuckled. “Well played, Tommy!”

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Starsky sat on the floor, loading film into his Nikon camera. He aimed the lens at Rebel, who was busy trying to play Heart and Soul on the piano. Tom stepped over Starsky as he popped the top on his beer and plopped down on Hutch’s couch. Beside Tom, Hutch played an unfamiliar tune on his guitar.

Tom turned to Hutch. “Hey, do you remember that Neil Young song you played for me, after I shot my first perp? You were trying to help me settle down...”

Hutch thought for a second then nodded. He started plucking at the strings. “This one?”

Tom smiled. "Yeah. Play that."

Hutch started playing Heart of Gold. To everyone's surprise, Tom pulled out a harmonica and proceeded to play a duet with Hutch. His harmonica playing was terrific, impressing the group. Starsky snapped a few photos, then joined in singing with Hutch as Tom continued to play along.

After the completion of the tune, Starsky clapped for his friends. "Tom! I didn't know you could play like that! You're really good!"

Tom appeared to be a little embarrassed. "Thanks Starsky. I don't usually play in public."

"Well you can play with me any time," Hutch backhanded him lightly against his arm. Tom smiled in return.

Rebel came in and sat on the floor next to Starsky. "How long you been playing?"

Tom slipped the instrument into his shirt pocket. "My grandfather taught me when I was a kid. I used to play with him all the time. Played with my dad, too. But when my grandfather died, I stopped. Just didn't have the heart for it anymore."

"What made you pick it up again?" Hutch asked.

Tom shrugged. "You did. I was pretty shook up that night. I'd never shot anyone before. Then you pulled out your guitar, and started singing. It made me feel better. Brought back a lot of memories for me. Good memories. I realized how much I missed playing. I wrote my dad, and asked him to send it to me. I've been brushing up ever since."

Hutch smiled. "What else do you play?"

"Do you know any Dylan?"

"Will this work?" Hutch began playing Blowing in the Wind. Tom pulled out the harmonica again and joined right in, as Hutch sang.

Starsky nudged Rebel. She shook her head vehemently. "I can't sing," she admitted. "Not at all." He tried to coax her but she adamantly refused.

After finishing their duet, Hutch handed his guitar to Starsky. "Imagine," he directed him. Starsky obeyed, playing the John Lennon tune.

Tom listened intently as Starsky played. Then he held up his hand. "Please, Starsky. Play that again." This time, Tom played along. He played extremely well, though he had never attempted the song before. Hutch sang, his voice strong and beautiful.

The men continued to play and sing, long into the night, with Rebel happily giving them audience. After Tom and Rebel said their goodbyes, Hutch curled up and sat in his greenhouse window, playing more guitar. Starsky came over with a beer, and saw his partner sitting in the dark, playing before the window. Hutch was silhouetted against the back lit window. The image of him strumming inspired Starsky, and he retrieved his camera. He snapped several pictures.

Grabbing his tripod, he set up the camera, and framed the shot. Then he joined Hutch in the window. He sat listening to his friend sing, the camera clicking off a shot from across the room.

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Crossing the street at the crosswalk, Starsky headed for his favorite hot dog vender. As his foot hit the sidewalk, he heard a voice call out, “Dave Starsky!”

Starsky turned and spotted the familiar face. “Joe!” he exclaimed. “How ya doing?” He was pleased to see the psychic who had assisted them with a kidnapping case.

Joe “Collandra” Collins approached Starsky, hand extended for a hearty shake. He shook Starsky’s hand with his right, his left hand clutching Starsky’s forearm. “Good to see you, again!”

Joe froze, still gripping Starsky’s hand in both of his. His eyes squeezed shut. “Joy,” he murmured.

“Hey, Joe,” Starsky asked with concern. “Are you okay?”

“Joy,” Joe repeated louder. “Love. A kiss that blows you away.” He ducked his head, as if listening to something Starsky couldn’t hear. Perspiration beaded his forehead. “Unexpected. An old friend. The love of a lifetime.” He opened his eyes and stared at Starsky’s hand. “Holy cow,” he laughed. “That hasn’t happened in a long time!”

“Was that about me?” Starsky asked, shocked. “What just happened?”

“Starsky, you just made my day!” Joe chuckled. “It’s been years since I was overwhelmed with *good* news. It’s a welcome change of pace, I’ll tell you!” He shook his head as if to clear it.

“Wow, that was powerful!”

“Wait, Joe, are you telling me I’m gonna fall in love?”

“Head over heels, my friend. And you’re going to be happy. Congratulations!”

“Joe, don’t leave me hanging here! Who is she?”

Joe clapped him on the back. “Sorry, Starsky. I didn’t get her identity. Just that she’s an old friend. Hey, I hope you’ll invite me to the wedding!”

“Sure. Sure I will. Joe, you want to go grab a hot dog or something? My treat.”

“No, I’ve gotta get back to the café. You and Hutch ought to stop by sometime for lunch. Haven’t seen you in a while. I’ll even get you the friends and family discount.”

“We’ll do that. Thanks a lot, Joe. I appreciate your insights.”

Joe smiled. “Thank you, Starsky. You made my day!”

Starsky watched the talented psychic walk away. “Well what do you know about that!” he said to himself. As the man disappeared around the corner, Starsky turned on his heels and hurried back to Parker Center, completely forgetting the hot dog vender.

Chapter 2

“So let me get this straight,” Hutch said. “You ran into Joe Collandra on the street out front, and he had a psychic revelation that you were going to discover the love of your life?”

“That’s what he said!” Starsky confirmed. “He said I’d find joy. I’d be happy.”

Hutch looked doubtful to Starsky. “Are you sure you’re not reading into it? You know his information can often be vague. Remember the ‘pretty dead horses grazing in the sun?’”

“Yeah, I know,” Starsky sighed. “And he didn’t tell me who she is. I just know she’ll have a kiss that blows me away. And she’s an old friend.”

“Tell me exactly what he said,” Hutch coaxed. “Word for word.”

Starsky repeated his conversation with Joe verbatim, anxious to hear his friend’s opinion. Hutch shook his head. “Wow. That’s really something. You know, I can’t recall a single vision he’s had that didn’t pan out.”

“I know. I thought of that, too.”

Hutch laid his hand on top of Starsky’s and gave his hand a squeeze. “That’s great news, Starsk. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. But I still have to figure out who she is.”

Hutch looked across the room with a thoughtful expression, in the direction of their old academy classmate. “I find it interesting that this happens shortly after Rebel comes back into our lives.”

Starsky felt a pang of unease. “Rebel? I’ve never really thought of her like that. She’s more your type. I’ve always thought of her like a little sister.”

“Joe did say it would be an old friend. And it would be unexpected. She does fit the criteria.”

“So does every gal I’ve ever been friends with,” Starsky complained. “I wish Joe had given me more clues.”

“You could always kiss her,” Hutch grinned.

Starsky smiled. “I can’t very well just go up and plant one on her. This is Rebel we’re talking about. I’ve never had that kind of a relationship with her.”

Hutch laughed. “Guess you’re just going to have to use the old Starsky charm on her.”

“What’ve I got to lose?” Starsky mused, watching his old friend from across the squad room.

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Starsky was walking down the hall at Parker Center, when he saw Rebel walking toward him. She gave him a big smile and called, “Hiya Starsky!”

He walked up to her and asked, “Rebel, could I speak to you a moment? Privately?”

“Of course. What’ up?”

He directed her into a small conference room on the right, closing the door behind them. He noticed a book she had tucked under her arm, and pointed to it. “Whatcha reading?”

She looked at the cover and set it on a table. Shrugging, she replied, “Oh, it’s an old classic. I love a good love story.”

“You know, Rebel, we’ve known each other for a long time, and you’re someone I’ve come to really care about. I was wondering if we could have dinner some time, if we could go on a date?” He gave her a bright smile. “Maybe we could start our own love story.”

The expression on her face told Starsky she had not expected this. “Oh Dave,” she said quietly. She took his face in her hands and said, “You know I adore you, don’t you?” She leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on his lips.

Starsky knew by the sad look in her eyes, and the tone of her voice, that this was a rejection. But this was an opportunity he was not going to waste. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in snugly, kissing her with more passion than she had originally intended. She made a small noise, as if she was going to try to speak, but the noise swiftly turned into an airy moan, as she responded to his kiss.

When the kiss ended, Rebel pulled back from him, out of his embrace. Her hand instinctively raised to cover her lips. “Christ, that got away from me quickly,” she murmured.

Starsky placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, asking, “Rebel, you okay?”

“No,” she replied quietly. She reached up and put her hand over his. “Oh Dave, I’m so sorry, but I can’t go out with you.” She quickly pulled out her wallet, and slipped a photo from it, handing it to Starsky. “I’m seeing someone.”

He looked at the photo, seeing her standing beside a man in an Air Force uniform. She was gazing up at him with loving eyes, a look that was also returned in his.

“That’s Tyler. He’s been stationed in Germany, but he’s returning to the states in the fall. We’re talking about getting married, and announcing our engagement when he comes home.”

Starsky handed the photo back to her. “I’m sorry, Rebel. I had no idea.”

“The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you,” she sounded upset. “I adore you, and you’re a friend that I cherish...”

He took her by the shoulders and smiled at her. “You didn’t hurt me,” he assured her. “I’m happy for you. Can I give you a hug?”

She looked relieved, and quickly nodded her assent. He hugged her tightly. “We’re okay,” he told her. She smiled, then picked up her book and turned to go.

Before she opened the door, she turned back to him and said, “You know, you’re a really good kisser, Dave.” She then gave him a friendly wink and slipped out the door.

Starsky waited a few minutes before leaving the room.

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Hutch tossed the folder onto the desk, rocking back in his chair. “Well, it’s a start,” he sighed. “We’ll get some good insights from Huggy’s cousin. The meet is set for six, then we can call it a night.”

Starsky rubbed at his tired eyes. “Good. We can cut out a little early tonight.”

“If you want, we can swing by the Pits and catch up with Rebel and Tom. Might give you a chance to ask Rebel out.”

Starsky grinned to himself. “Already did. She shot me down.”

Hutch looked surprised. “She shot you down, huh? You going to keep up the pursuit?”

Shaking his head, Starsky said, “No, I’m done.”

Hutch sat forward, bringing his front chair legs back into contact with the floor. “Done! Starsk, she very well could be the key to your happiness. You can’t give up until you at least give her a damn kiss!”

“I did.”

“You did? Hell, you work fast! Don’t keep me in suspense, buddy. What’s the verdict?”

He shook his head. “Like kissing my little sister,” he confessed.

Hutch reached over and squeezed his arm. “I’m sorry, pal.” Starsky appreciated the sincerity he saw in his eyes.

“It’s okay,” Starsky told him. “I’m actually kind of relieved. I like having Rebel for a friend. I didn’t really want that to change. Dating her didn’t feel right.”

“What about Kelly? She fits the prediction...”

Starsky held up both hands in surrender, cutting off Hutch’s words. “No more, Hutch. I’m done. It’s just gonna have to happen naturally. Just about any girl I’ve ever known could fit the prediction! I’m not going to run around kissing a bunch of frogs, hoping one of them will turn into a wife. Life’s too short.”

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Starsky looked up to see Dobey walking into his office, followed by two men in suits. Curious, Starsky looked over to his partner, who cocked an eyebrow to confirm his interest. “I smell Feds,” Starsky murmured under his breath.

Hutch got up and poured himself a cup of coffee. He sat beside Starsky and put the cup on the desk. Starsky reached over and grabbed the cup and took a long drink. “Any buzz on the street that would bring the Feds in here?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Hutch replied.

A short time later, their captain appeared in his doorway. “Starsky, Hutchinson. My office, please.”

Starsky caught Hutch’s look, then followed him into the office. There they found the two men seated in front of Dobey’s desk.

Dobey waved them in. “Come in, fellas. I’d like to introduce Federal Agents Littleton and White.” Littleton wore dark rimmed glasses, and a black suit with a black tie. White wore a grey suit with a blue and grey striped tie. They had very short hair, and hard eyes. “Take a seat,” Dobey instructed.

Hutch grabbed two chairs that had been pushed against the wall, and pushed one in Starsky’s direction. They seated themselves beside the two agents. Dobey continued, “Are you two familiar with Philip Scranton?”

“Yeah, isn’t Scranton the one who ran the bookies and money laundering on the southeast side? He disappeared about nine years back after his brother Peter was killed. They were a ruthless pair.”

“I heard he was still running the southeast side, but was laying real low,” Starsky added. “There’s rumors that he’s been adding prostitution to his game, and drug smuggling.”

Littleton nodded. “He’s been flying under the radar for several years now. We’ve made numerous attempts to infiltrate his organization, without much success. He’s been branching out. We think it was Scranton’s goons who took out Frankie Gatz a few months ago. Scranton has been expanding into the territory once controlled by Gatz.”

“We’ve come here because of your precinct’s reputation with undercover work. We wanted to see if you could offer any insights into Scranton’s organization, and how to infiltrate it.”

Dobey handed Starsky and Hutch each a file. “This outlines the past several undercover teams and their results.”

Starsky flipped through the investigation summaries. “It says here that Scranton has been running the shots from the red light district. He into prostitution now?”

“Yes,” White confirmed. “Specifically gay prostitution. Scranton has encased himself within the gay community in the district. He only hires gay men, and the only way to gain access to him is through that network of businesses. We think he’s set up shop at The Gym on 23rd.”

“Why aren’t you sending an undercover team into The Gym?” Dobey questioned.

“They have,” Hutch noted, flipping through the pages of the report. “Three or four times. Look like they don’t get past their defenses.”

“That’s right,” White sighed. “And we’re not even sure how they’re being made.”

Littleton pushed his glasses further up his nose. “That’s why we’re here. We’ve heard of your success with these types of investigations in the past. We’re hoping you’ll agree to assist us in this.”

Starsky caught Hutch’s eye. He had reservations, and could see Hutch did as well. He didn’t trust the Feds to not take over their investigation, and not to handcuff the methods they use. He was rather enjoying seeing them come to him and Hutch, asking for help. “If we were to help,” Starsky began, “we’d need your assurances that we’re in charge of the undercover assignment. Can you assure us that we would be calling the shots, and the FBI isn’t going to interfere, even if our methods seem... unconventional?”

“We’re actually hoping for unconventional,” White told him. “Conventional hasn’t worked for us. We’re fresh out of ideas.”

“Look, fellas,” Littleton spoke up. “We really want to get Scranton off the streets. This guy may personally be responsible for the deaths of 16 men, including two of my agents. I don’t care what it takes. I’ll give you free rein, whatever it takes. I have the authority. Just help me bring this son of a bitch down.”

Hutch was still scanning the reports. He shook his head. “It says here you sent a team of two women into The Gym.”

“Yes, Wilton and Havers,” White confirmed. “They’re two of my best agents.”

Hutch’s brow furrowed. “You can’t send women into a place like The Gym. They’d stand out like a sore thumb. That place caters to an all-male crowd. It’s set up for clandestine rendezvous for men, a no-tell motel for an afternoon quickie before returning to work, stuff like that. It’s not the type of place a lesbian couple would seek out. Your team would be made before they even took a seat.”

“That’s exactly what happened,” White told him.

Hutch tossed the folder on the desk. “You need to get intel on the gay community in the district. This is a culture that’s completely foreign to you. Scranton is using your ignorance of the gay community to filter you out. And you need to find out how these bars work, that Scranton is hiding out in. You need to find out more about the gay businesses in Gatz territory, because Scranton is going to target those joints first. And you need men undercover that are willing to do what it takes to establish credibility in these communities.”

“Yes! You’re exactly right!” White exclaimed excitedly.

“Hutch, do you think you and Starsky can get this kind of intel?” Dobe asked.

“We still have some connections that we used before,” Starsky nodded. “I’m sure we can. And I have detailed notes in my case file from the Blaine investigation.”

“You realize we’d have to go under as lovers,” Hutch pointed out. “And if successful, this could very likely be a long term assignment.”

Starsky caught Hutch's eyes, and locked onto his gaze. He said nothing as he silently considered all the pros and cons of taking this assignment. Having the Feds come to them, hat in hand, and ask for their help was huge. Plus, they were giving them control over the investigation. And bringing down Scranton would be another feather in their caps. But to do this, they would have to go undercover as lovers. To be convincing, they'd have to go to lengths that other professionals had been unwilling to do. Could they carry this off? He was getting no read off of Hutch at all. Starsky wondered if Hutch's poker face was because of the other men in the room, or if Hutch was unwilling to influence his decision.

The silence in the room prompted Littleton. "Of course, while you are working on the investigation, your pay will be supplemented by the Bureau. We will pay the difference to bring your salary up to that of our agents. You will be set up in a comfortable residence, and with suitable employment for your established identities. I'm confident you will find the accommodations to be a step up from what your police budget could provide. And you will receive the additional compensation from your place of employment while undercover. Our goal is to make you as comfortable as possible, so you are able to focus on the job at hand. You will have the complete support from the Bureau. You will have complete control over the assignment and will report to me. Or your Captain can report your progress to me. All I ask is that you keep me informed on every step, either way."

Dobey spoke, his voice sounding fatherly. "I know this is asking a lot. I wouldn't be offering this assignment if I didn't have complete confidence in you two. You're my best men. I want Scranton stopped. I guarantee you'll have the full support of this department. I understand this assignment is going to be awkward, but we're all professionals here. I promise you, I will not tolerate any disrespect from this office, or the Bureau's. And we'll throw all our resources behind you. That said, the choice is yours. If you decline the offer, I won't hold it against you, and it will stay in this office. No one would know."

"I would know," Starsky said. "I got into police work to stop people like Scranton. What kind of cop would I be if I walked away because things got awkward?" He took a deep breath. "I'm in." He looked to Hutch, who still wore his poker face.

"I'm in." Hutch replied.

Chapter 3

Hutch nudged his partner. "Take a look at the artwork."

They followed Scranton into the bar, and made their way to the bartender on duty. Hutch had ordered their drinks, then turned his back to the bar, and was surveying their surroundings. Starsky saw that Scranton was at a booth across the room, sliding in across from a tall, well-dressed man with long wavy hair. He then let his eyes absorb the artwork that his partner had pointed out. The first thing he saw was a black and white photo that looked like an old-time football team photo. However, all of the players were stark naked. He scanned other photos, mostly black and white, all sport related, all men, all nudes. Scranton was known for seeking shelter in gay bars, knowing cops would give themselves away in the unfamiliar and intimidating territory. "Got it." Starsky acknowledged.

"Follow my lead," Hutch said quietly. As the bartender returned with their beverages, Hutch paid and handed Starsky his drink, then escorted him to a table that offered them a clear view of Scranton.

Starsky felt completely out of his element, and felt irritated because he knew that's exactly what Scranton would count on. It's why no other undercover team had ever gotten close to him. "You want to dance?" he asked lamely.

"This is not the kind of joint you go to for dance or romance," Hutch informed him. "This is the kind of place you go to for a quick rendezvous. Secrecy. Privacy. A sort of No-Tell Motel. I wouldn't be surprised if there was prostitution in the upstairs floors." He gave Starsky a hard look. "You'll have to decide right now how far you are willing to go. A few dances and playing kiss and tickle are not going to fly here."

Puzzled, Starsky met Hutch's eyes. Hutch was definitely in. That was clear in his expression. But he also held a certain confidence, a knowledge, that was beyond him. Hutch knew what he was doing, and how he was going to proceed. And by asking the question, he was indicting he was going to go forward, with or without him. "I'm in," Starsky confirmed. He surrendered his trust to his partner. "What do I need to know?"

Hutch held his eyes a few moments longer, apparently evaluating Starsky's level of commitment. He seemed satisfied, replying, "Nothing. You won't see a lot of PDA in here. That's reserved for a back room or a patio. I'm sure we'll find out about that soon. That's Scranton's usual move. I'll lead. You can act territorial if challenged, but that would be reined in otherwise." He paused. "Just trust me to take care of you."

"Take care...?" Starsky began, but he cut off in mid-sentence when he caught a flick in Hutch's eye. In his peripheral vision, he was aware of Scranton getting up and heading to a back exit. He looked Hutch in the eye. Hutch's slowed blink told him to cool his jets, be patient.

"Finish your drink," Hutch advised.

Starsky took his time, matching his drinking speed to Hutch. Finally, Hutch slid his glass away and got up, turning to walk toward the back of the bar, followed by a casual Starsky. They followed Scranton's path, and exited to the rear patio.

The cool breeze of the outdoor patio smacked Starsky in face, as did the reality of his situation. He reminded himself that this was Hutch and what was the worst that could happen? He pushed aside his nervousness and decided to enjoy a moment's pleasure. Out of the corner of his eye, he was aware of Scranton and the long-haired man across the patio.

"Let's go over here," Hutch quietly indicated.

"Hey..." Starsky said softly, but even he heard a nervousness in his voice. Hutch must have picked up on it as well, because he suddenly stepped in close and pulled Starsky into a heated kiss. Starsky was so startled that he didn't know what else to do but throw himself into it, matching Hutch's passion and enthusiasm.

Hutch never broke the kiss, pushing Starsky backwards until his back was pressed into the wall. A flush of tingles swept from Starsky's hair to his toes, joined by a wave of heated stimulation. When Hutch's tongue thrust deep into his mouth, Starsky felt a more powerful surge of need sweep through him, straight to his groin. A feral urge seized him, awakening him with a wild freedom and a ravenous hunger. This was pure, and joyful. He was hard, aching for more, and surrendering control. As the kiss dwindled to a close, Starsky's heart grieved its end.

Hutch pulled back slightly, just enough to roughly pull Starsky's shirt open, as Starsky deftly opened Hutch's, the bare flesh strumming something primal inside him. Starsky realized he was breathing hard, shocked at how impactful Hutch's kisses had been, how the feel of his body was resonating with his desire, with his own body. Hutch's body was calling to him, his senses whirling in response.

Hutch pulled back, pulling a necktie from his pocket. He quickly wound it around Starsky's wrist, then grabbed his other wrist and wound it around it as well. He forced Starsky's hands above his head, and hooked the binding on the wall mounted light fixture over their heads. Stuffing the loose end of the tie into Starsky's palm and pressing his hand closed over it, Hutch gruffly whispered, "It's not tied. Let go and you're free." Then he proceeded to kiss Starsky's ear, whispering, "I will make you feel good." He kissed down his throat, down his chest. Hutch knelt before his partner, locking eyes with him, now reaching for Starsky's belt.

Starsky felt Hutch's hands unbuckling him, and he probably would have felt fear overcome him, if he hadn't been staring into Hutch's eyes. He was mesmerized by the expressiveness of those eyes, penetrating blue, commanding his attention, his senses, his will. Starsky could read so much in those eyes before him; passion, intense desire, love. He couldn't shake the awareness that this was real and true, that this wasn't artificial. He was grateful for the low watt bulb overhead, that he could clearly see this moment, burning this experience into his mind and heart. Hutch never broke the gaze, as he kissed Starsky's penis, snaking his tongue around the head, taking him in his mouth and down his throat to the hilt. Starsky gasped, completely engulfed in pleasure, Hutch working him with his mouth and tongue and throat. His senses were alight, his heart beating loudly to his ears. Starsky felt a moan deep down inside him, but it emerged as a

primal growl, and seemed to affect Hutch, encouraging him. Hutch squeezed his ass, and surprised Starsky with how large his hand felt. He felt the tension building, the rest of the world fading away and dimming. Hutch pulled even closer, Starsky fully down his throat. Burying his nose into the hair low on Starsky's abdomen, and began to draw sideways figure eights, just above his shaft with the tip of his nose. Starsky was overcome; Hutch's movements were working his shaft deep in his throat. "Oh damn," he barely whispered. He felt Hutch's hand, caressing his balls, just before he began to stoke Starsky's perineum. The intensity exploded inside him, pleasure washing over every nerve and cell. He was barely aware of Hutch's mouth releasing him, as he stood up, reaching over his head to release his hands from their binding.

Hutch held him again with his gaze, though his eyes were now a clear blue, full of gentle caring. He unwound the bindings from Starsky's hands, not dropping his gaze. Starsky found his voice, "Kiss me again." Hutch obliged, a soft, sweet kiss. Starsky was flying, soaring with the kiss until it ended, reality crashing back to life in his ears as Hutch pulled back. They both re-buttoned their shirts, Starsky zipping his jeans and buckling his belt.

Hutch had placed a warm hand on his shoulder, cocking his head slightly toward the door. Starsky followed him back to the bar, and they found their drinks had been refilled in their absence. He gulped a refreshing swig, vaguely aware of Scranton watching them from his booth. They talked quietly for a while, until Hutch suggested they head out. Hutch threw some bills on the bar to cover their drinks and a generous tip. As they walked out to the car, Starsky tossed his keys to his partner. "You drive."

Starsky stared out the passenger side window. Images kept flashing through his mind from their sexual encounter. Hutch grabbing him and kissing him. Hutch binding his wrists. The emotion blazing deep blue in Hutch's eyes. Hutch staring into his soul as he kissed the head of Starsky's penis. Hutch taking him down his throat.

"Hutch, can I ask you something?" He waited for Hutch to nod his assent. "Can you tell me what you're not telling me?"

The question seemed to hit a nerve, as Starsky watched Hutch push back slightly, as though the words hit him unexpectedly. Hutch looked over at him, looking like he was about to say something then thought better of it. He pressed his lips together, and maneuvered the car into the left lane, turning off the main road and heading in the direction of the ocean. Starsky was not surprised. Hutch often sought out the calming effects of the waves when his life was turbulent.

After parking the car in the lot, Hutch strode over to a park bench near the edge of a cliff, overlooking the crashing waves of the ocean below. Rather than take a seat upon the bench, Hutch sat on the ground directly in front of it, resting his back against the edge of the seat. When Starsky took a seat on the bench close to him, Hutch leaned his shoulder against Starsky's leg.

Starsky intended to wait him out, but Hutch had yet to find his voice. "Hutch, do you love me?" he asked simply.

"Starsk, you know I love you. I love you like a brother. More than a brother."

“You know that’s not what I mean,” Starsky cut him off. “You want to play with words? Okay, how about I ask you more directly. Was that real for you? Do you want me? Are you sexually attracted to me?” He nudged gently against Hutch’s shoulder with his leg. “Are you in love with me?”

Pulling up his left knee, he rested his arm on it. He seemed resigned, as he turned his sad eyes to Starsky. “Yes.” He waited before continuing. “Yes, I love you. Yes, I want you. Hell yes, I’m attracted to you.”

“And I get the sense that this wasn’t your first rodeo.”

“Not even close.”

Starsky dragged a hand down his face. He badly wanted to be alone, to give himself time to sort all this out, but he knew leaving at this point would send the wrong message to Hutch. He wished his brain would slow down and quit bombarding his thoughts with questions and revelations. He struggled to focus. He finally said, “This is important. This is big. Why didn’t I know this?”

Hutch didn’t look at him. “I was afraid,” he replied.

“Well that sucks,” Starsky stated. “I take it this isn’t a new revelation. You’ve kept this from me for a long time.”

“I’ve been aware of my sexuality since I was a kid. No, it’s not a new revelation.”

“And how long have you had these feeling for me?”

“Pretty much since we met.”

“Damn, Hutch.” Starsky shook his head in an attempt to clear it. “What the hell were you afraid of?”

Hutch shrugged. “Rage. Rejection. Revulsion. Take your pick.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I might just accept you?”

“Starsk, you forget that we’ve talked about homosexuality. I was there when you found out about John Blaine. You were pretty pissed when you found out.”

Angry, Starsky blurted, “Yeah, but you get away with a lot of shit that pisses me off when anybody else does it!”

Hutch chuckled at that, and finally looked at Starsky with a grin. Starsky thought it looked like a sad grin, but it was a start. “Ok, I was a prick about John. I’m sorry. I want to do better. Can we stop judging me by what I said before, and you can get mad all you want about stupid shit I say going forward?”

Hutch laughed again. “Yeah, we can do that.” He reached up and grabbed Starsky’s sleeve, pulling him down to sit beside him on the ground.

“There’s more, Starsk.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Hutch continued. “When I was in high school, I was best friends with Alec. We were real close. After graduation, we started to get closer, exploring our sexuality. One day my dad comes home early and catches me and Alec in bed. He blew up, beating the hell out of me, and Alec. He threw me out, disowned me. And left me with a shiner and a cracked rib.”

“Geez Hutch! Richard did that to you?”

Nodding, Hutch added, “I should have been in a hospital. Alec and I jumped in his car and took off for Bay City. We didn’t have much money, and blew through most of that just getting here. We were mostly living out of his car, scrounging for food and money, begging, shoplifting. It didn’t take long before he got fed up with everything, and he left. His family wired him gas money, so he returned to Minnesota. I didn’t have the option to go home again, so I stayed on. But with no car to sleep in, I was on the streets. I had to do something to survive.”

“What’d you do?”

Hutch looked at Starsky, sadly. “I started turning tricks, hooking, for men. I ended up working for a pimp. A fairly good one, I know now. I had a place to stay, food in my belly, a client base that gave me a relatively consistent income.”

“How’d you break out of that?”

“My sister Karen drove here out of the blue from Minnesota, and picked me up from my street corner. She got into it with my parents, and threatened to walk out on them if they didn’t do something to help me.”

Starsky was relieved. “I knew I liked that girl.”

“She took me to a hotel, got me a shower and decent clothes, even cut my hair. She got my mother on the phone, and swore I was going to die on the streets of Bay City if they didn’t do something immediately. My folks presented me with a deal. They said they would take me back, put me through college, everything. One condition: I was to never see Alec again. They didn’t realize Alec was long gone already. I took their offer. Karen stayed on for a while, helped me get an apartment, enrolled me into UCBC, and provided my mother’s credit card to pay for furniture, food, clothes, books. Then she left me the car and took a bus back to Minnesota.

Starsky shook his head. “Shit, Hutch. I can’t even imagine Richard raising a hand to you. And I can’t fathom your mother going along with this.”

“My dad was out of his mind angry. We never did get our relationship back to where it was. Never will, I guess. We’re civil to each other. Sometimes we even act like the past never happened. But it always hangs over us like a black cloud. Every time I see him I wonder if he’ll bring it up. So far he never has. I think he and my mom prefer to pretend it never happened. I guess they believe they ‘cured me’ by taking Alec out of the picture.”

“And your sister?”

“Karen loves me, but she doesn’t accept my homosexuality. She wants to fix me. Or save me. She’s got some strong religious beliefs that tell her I’m going to hell. We get along fine, as long as we don’t talk about my sex life. If I bring up that I’m seeing some guy, she changes the subject or excuses herself. So as long as I maintain the illusion that I’m straight, she’s fine.” He shook his head and laughed. “You should have seen her when I told her Van and I were getting married. She was thrilled! I guess she figured she didn’t have to worry about my eternal damnation anymore. I know for a fact that she used to pray for me every night, that I’d turn away from my sinful ways. I wonder if she still does.”

Starsky wondered about Hutch’s wife. “What’s the story about Van?”

“What do you mean? Why was I married? I did love her, Starsk. I’m bisexual. I’m probably attracted to men more often than women, but I do feel attracted to women as well. Van knew I was bi. In fact, she was jealous as hell of you.”

Starsky was shocked. “Me? What for?”

“She saw you as a very real threat. She knew I loved you. I never told her that, but she knew. Couple that with all the demands of the job, and it really did a number on her jealousies. That was a huge contribution to the downfall of our marriage. She was convinced that I would dump her like a hot potato, if you ever crooked a finger at me.”

“Is that true?”

Hutch shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. You’re straight. It was never going to happen. But there was no convincing her otherwise. She told me that she often saw you looking at me, and she could see in your eyes, the same things she saw in my eyes when I’d look at you.”

Starsky grew thoughtful. “Maybe she wasn’t wrong. I always tune into you, watch you, and try to get a feel for where you’re at, what you’re doing, how you are. It’s habit from the job. You know what I mean. And I do love you. Maybe sometimes it shows.”

“She thought she saw more. She believed there was desire there. I’d assure her it was impossible, that you’re never going to feel sexual desire for me.”

Starsky smiled. “I think you proved yourself wrong there. You sure as hell had me feeling desire today. Even your kiss. And I don’t usually get turned on to that degree by a kiss.”

Hutch turned to look at him more directly. “Is that right?” He smiled. “Thank you.” He slid his hand into Starsky’s, interlacing their fingers. “I’m really surprised at how calmly you’re taking all this, that you still let me touch you, that you’re not freaking out.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Starsky chuckled. “I am freaking out. But it’s not all bad. I found out I really like kissing you. I found out you give damn good head. And I learned more about you. I now get why you’re such a softie when it comes to prostitutes. I’m impressed by how good you turned out, in spite of how you grew up. And I’m flattered and honored by your feelings for me.”

“Are you going to want to continue working on this case with me?”

“Oh hell yeah!” Starsky exclaimed. “No reservations at all. I was afraid I couldn’t handle it, and I’d jeopardize our cover. Now I know I can do this. I’m looking forward to it.” Starsky gave Hutch’s hand an affectionate squeeze. “I’m gonna need you to give me some pointers. Maybe we could practice? I want to look like I know what I’m doing.”

“Wait,” Hutch laughed. “You want me to give you pointers on sex?”

“Well yeah. I want you to show me how to really please you. Like you pleased me. Maybe you could show me that little thing you did with your nose.”

Starsky watched the amusement vanish from Hutch’s face. The blond stared at him in disbelief. “Starsk, I don’t think that’s necessary. To do that thing I did with my nose would mean you’d have to deep throat me! I appreciate your enthusiasm, I really do. But we don’t have to make you appear as experienced as me. A hand job would be just as plausible. And we can limit the physical stuff to only when needed.”

“I disagree. I knew right away that this wasn’t your first time with a man. Your confidence, your lack of hesitation, your techniques. Hell, you did stuff I’ve never seen a woman do! You belonged in that world. I won’t have that same credibility. I’ll stand out. This is how Scranton has always stayed a step ahead of us, isn’t it? He’s surrounded himself with this community that’s hard to break into. And I’m going into it clueless.”

Hutch rubbed his forehead, looking like he was fighting a headache. “What do you propose?”

“Let’s talk to Dobey. Tell him we’ve got a foot in the door. We need an apartment, jobs, identities. And we go completely under. Full absorption. We live what we’re trying to project.”

Starsky watched Hutch loudly sigh in resignation. “Alright,” Hutch replied. “God, I’m going to regret this. I’m going to need your help, too, you know. You’re talking about living in a fantasy I’ve had my entire adult life. I’ll struggle with what’s real and what isn’t. And when this assignment ends, I’m going to need your understanding. And patience. It’s going to be hard to let go of.”

Getting to his feet, Starsky stated, “We’ll get through this, Hutch.” He extended his hand to help Hutch to his feet. “Together.”

Hutch rose to his feet. He glanced around and seemed to be satisfied that they were alone. “Do you mind if I kiss you?” He asked.

Still holding Hutch by the hand, he pulled his partner closer, giving his consent. Hutch kissed him slowly, sweetly. Starsky felt goosebumps sweep from his collar down to his wrists, and his stomach did a little flip. He clutched his hand more firmly.

“Thank you,” Hutch whispered, then pulled Starsky into a tight hug.

Chapter 4

Starsky threw his keys on the table and sank into his couch. He felt like his head was spinning. So far, all the events of the day had been bombarding his brain, and he couldn't focus on any one thing. There was a lot he wanted to discuss with Hutch, and things he wanted to ask, but he wasn't ready. He didn't want to send a wrong message. Now that he was home, he felt the reality sink in.

He propped his elbow on his knees and dropped his face in his hands. In his mind's eye, he saw his partner's face, as they talked in the bar. He was determined, confident, in his element. His eyes held challenge. Starsky had known Hutch was going to go forward with the investigation, even if Starsky backed out. That bothered him somewhat. He guessed this had a mysterious importance to him, that he didn't understand until Hutch explained his sexuality.

Hutch's kiss was the next image to hit him. He thought of Hutch pulling him into the kiss. The memory caused sweat to break out on Starsky's brow, and his hands shook. When he recalled the kiss, he felt Hutch's lips, so warm and soft and hungry, against his. The desire swept over him anew, the heat, the excitement. He had never felt a kiss impact him like that. And when Hutch's tongue reached deep, he felt the desire rush through him down to his toes. The kiss had blown him away. An unexpected kiss. From an old friend.

Starsky had asked Hutch to kiss him again, hoping to test his reactions when he wasn't anticipating a sexual release. He again felt the heat and the excitement, but this time he felt something in addition. He felt a comforting love fill his heart and overflow to his senses. The kiss still had the power to knock his socks off. Tears stung Starsky's eyes. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing them away.

He had told Hutch that he liked kissing him, and that kisses didn't usually affect him to that degree. But if he had explained in depth how much the kisses had affected him, he knew he'd be committing to something he wasn't sure he understood. Starsky needed time, and clarity.

Images hit him again, of Hutch binding his wrists, of Hutch kissing his penis, of Hutch taking him down his throat. Starsky's throat tightened, as he felt wetness burn at his eyes again. This wasn't how he thought his life would go. He felt himself clinging to an image of what he expected for his future.

A memory of Hutch's arms around him, when he last kissed him, enfolded Starsky now. He felt his partner's heat warm him, and immediately felt comforted. The tightness in his throat lessened, and his eyesight lost the dampness that had crept up on him.

He recalled Hutch confessing to his bisexuality, and his love and desire. Anger built up in Starsky's chest as he remembered the tinge of betrayal in Hutch's voice, when his friend revealed that he'd never opened up to Starsky because he was aware of how he felt about homosexuality. Starsky's reactions to John Blaine's secrets had been knee-jerk, and he'd spoken openly about it with Hutch, knowing Hutch wouldn't judge him as he tried to make sense of it all. Starsky was furious that he had in turn slapped Hutch, and his sexual identity, with all kinds

of judgement. And Hutch had taken it in stride, never calling him out on his prejudice or ignorance, never calling him out on the hurt he had inflicted.

Starsky's opinions on homosexuality had changed over time, once his knee-jerk reactions had faded, but he hadn't shared much on that, since it happened gradually, and it wasn't accompanied by a tragic event like Blaine's murder. Starsky hated how he must have made Hutch feel. He wondered if there had been anyone in Hutch's life that loved him and accepted him fully, if there had been anyone who didn't make him feel like shit about who he loved. "I should've been the one!" he growled, as he picked up a glass that had been left on his coffee table and whipped it against the wall in a furious pitch. The glass shattered the silence in his apartment, bringing him back to the moment. His anger somewhat dissipated, he felt grief rise up, stinging his eyes again. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, trying to regain control.

An image of Hutch once again came to him, the blue eyes full of love and want. He imagined the feel of Hutch's touch against his cheek, the warmth of his body against his. The image was soothing, and nurtured his troubled spirit.

"Damn, Hutch. What are you doing to me?"

~*~

Starsky awoke on the couch, the sunlight harsh upon his eyes. He sat up, rubbing at his eyes, trying to clear his vision and his mind. His face felt raw from the sobs that had claimed him in the night. The exhaustion was heavy in his limbs. "Shit, I'm a mess," he mumbled as he headed for the bathroom.

Before leaving the bathroom, he glanced at his image in the mirror. He looked like he'd been through the ringer. He splashed some cool water in his face, and felt a little more human, even if his features didn't show it.

He went into the kitchen and started the coffee maker. Leaning against the counter, he patiently waited for the brewing to finish, and poured a strong cup to bring him back to life. When the caffeine finally started to kick in, an idea pushed him to open the phone book on the counter and search through the yellow page ads. Grabbing the phone, he dialed the number of a florist he had used before.

"Hello. I'd like to place an order for delivery..." He placed the order for a plant to be delivered to Hutch. He asked for the assistance of the kind woman on the phone, for a recommendation of a flowing plant of some kind, for a special occasion. After several suggestions, he finally settled on an orchid. When the florist asked if he'd like to include a card, he told her what to write on the card.

Satisfied with his order, he hung up the phone and returned to the bathroom to grab a shower. Afterward, he finally felt more like himself. And he was determined to get answers.

He snatched his keys off the coffee table and left the apartment.

~*~

Taking a deep breath to settle his nerves, Starsky pushed open the door to Joe's Café. He was relieved to find the café empty. He spotted Joe behind the counter, wiping everything down. When Joe saw Starsky, he walked up saying, "Hey, Starsky! Good to see you again! What can I get you? Got a special on blueberry pancakes. Can I tempt you?" He shook Starsky's hand firmly.

"No thanks, Joe," Starsky smiled. "Just some coffee, please."

Joe placed a cup in front of him and brought over the pitcher of coffee. As he poured, he smiled and asked, "So did you come in to tell me you're getting married?"

Starsky shook his head. "I wish I could, but I think I need more information. Any chance I could ask you to try again, to see if you can help me identify this old friend?"

"I'll give it a shot, but you know how this works. I don't have any control over what comes through. There's no guarantee I'll get any more than I did last time." He flipped his towel over his shoulder and came around the counter to take a seat beside Starsky. He clasped Starsky's hand and closed his eyes.

"Joy. I feel a strong sense of joy." In spite of his intense concentration, Joe's face lit up. "Love. A deep, powerful love. I see a kiss that blows you away. I hear you say you never expected this." Joe stopped to wipe a drop of perspiration that was rolling down his forehead. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I hear old friend. Old friend. Love of a lifetime. I see blonde hair, glowing in the sunlight. Shoulder length." Suddenly Joe's head shot up, a startled expression on his face. He let go of Starsky's hand and stood up. "Sorry, Starsky," he muttered. "That's all I got."

"What is it, Joe? What did you see?"

"That was it. Just what I told you." Joe quickly walked back around the counter. "How about some pie. You want some pie?"

Starsky stood, placing both hands on the counter top. "Joe!" he cried. "I know you saw something else. Come on! I need to know! This is my life we're talking about!"

Joe grabbed his towel and threw it at the cash register. "Don't you get it, Starsky? I don't want to be the messenger! Everyone hates the messenger!"

Holding up one hand, palm out, he pleaded, "Joe, please. Just answer me one question, yes or no."

Looking wary, and reluctant, Joe nodded.

"Is it Hutch?"

Joe opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. He nodded. "Yeah," he confessed.

Starsky slapped his hand down on the counter and leapt right over, rushing up to throw his arms around Joe, who looked afraid that Starsky might hit him. Starsky squeezed Joe in a hearty hug. "Thanks, Joe. Thanks for telling me."

“You’re not mad? Wait, is this good news?” His voice sounded hopeful to Starsky.

He stepped back from hugging Joe, seriously considering how he felt about Joe’s revelations. He smiled broadly. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so.” He shook his hand. “Thanks again, pal. I appreciate it.” Starsky turned to leave, throwing some bills next to his abandoned coffee cup. A thought occurred to him. “Um, Joe, can we keep this between us?”

“Of course, Starsky.” Joe smiled and gave him a wave. “Go be happy.”

~*~

Hutch was nearly ready for work when he heard the ring of his doorbell. He slipped his jacket on before answering, zipping it enough to cover his holstered weapon.

Opening the door, he found a teenage boy standing there with what appeared to be a tall plant wrapped in paper decorated with little flowers all over. He wore a baseball cap and jacket that advertised a familiar florist in town. Hutch assumed the kid was looking for one of his neighbors. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Um, yeah,” the kid replied. “I’ve got a delivery for a...” He looked at the attached envelope. “...a Kent Hutchinson.”

Hutch was confused. “I’m Ken Hutchison.”

The kid looked at the envelope again. “Oh yeah! Ken. This is for you.” He tipped his hat, then turned to go.

“Just a sec,” Hutch stopped him. He took the plant and set it down, then pulled out his wallet. He passed some bills to the kid. “Thank you.”

“Thanks, mister!” The kid tipped his hat again and left.

Hutch turned back to the paper-wrapped plant and took off the flowery paper. It was a large and healthy orchid. The scent was light but strong. He grabbed the discarded paper and looked for that little envelope the boy had read. He pulled it open and read the card.

Thinking of you

S.

Surprise registered on his face. He read it again, and smiled.

~*~

Starsky drove back to the cliff’s bench overlooking the ocean. He wanted some time alone, to sort through his warring emotions. Sitting there watching the waves crash on the rocks, the water seemed as turbulent as his psyche. One minute he was throwing things in anger, the next crying in is sleep, and now leaping happily over Joe’s counter. He felt all over the place.

Even after sitting alone for hours at the cliff edge, he felt no closer to settling his soul. He got up from the bench, stiff and cold. He needed desperately to talk to someone, yet didn’t dare talk to

Hutch. Starsky climbed back into his car and headed back towards downtown Bay City. He didn't know where he was heading, but he felt drawn away from the quiet oceanside, and back to the hustle of his city.

~*~

Starsky's eyes sought out a familiar face in the seedy brothel. Finally, he caught her eye.

"Well hi there, Sexy!" Sweet Alice drawled in her slow, Southern style. "Where's that handsome friend of yours?"

"He's not with me this time. I'm flying solo today. Sweet Alice, I'd like to spend some time with you. Any chance you'd have some time for me?" He pulled out his wallet.

Alice shook a finger back and forth like a pendulum, and indicated the man standing behind Starsky. He turned around to her pimp, and asked how much for a full day. The amount was slightly more than what he had in his wallet. He pulled out the last of his cash and asked, "How much time will this get me?"

The man took the money greedily, and said, "24 hours. You just earned yourself a quantity discount." His grin looked creepy to Starsky, but he smiled back appreciatively.

Starsky held out his arm for Sweet Alice to take. "Sweetheart, is there someplace private we can go?"

"Right this way, Honey." She directed him to a back room where they could be alone. She closed the door and turned to face him. Stepping very close, she placed her hands on his chest. "Dave Starsky, what can I do for you? I'm hoping y'all are here for pleasure, but I suppose you're here for business." Before he could answer she stepped closer, pressing her body into his.

He gathered her hands together and encased them within his own hands. "Not business, but not pleasure either," he smiled. "I need a friend. A friend that'll be straight with me, discreet, and one who'll keep my confidence."

Alice whispered to him, "Honey Pie, I would have taken a day off for you. Y'all didn't have to pay me to talk to you."

"But this way I can give you an easy day," he defended. "You want to put on some sweats? Put your feet up?"

Her eyes grew large. "I would love to get out of these heels!" She directed him to sit on a couch, and she sat beside him, reaching down to unfasten her shoes.

"Let me get that," Starsky offered. She slid over as he pulled her feet onto his lap. He carefully unfastened her shoes, and slipped them gently off her feet. As soon as her feet were free, he proceeded to massage her feet, one by one, from her toes all the way up her calf.

She moaned in delight. "Oh yes! Sugar, you have magic hands!" As the massage came to an end, Alice admitted, "That's a first for me. No one has ever given me a foot massage."

“You deserve to be pampered,” Starsky told her sincerely. “You know if you ever want to leave this life, I would help you start over. You don’t have to do this.” He continued to caress her feet.

“We both know that’s not gonna happen,” she softly sighed. She looked into his eyes, and held his gaze. “You look tired, Dave. And sad.”

He nodded. “I am.”

“Why don’t you tell me what brought you to me.”

“I have this friend,” he began. Alice shook her head accusingly, but Starsky smiled and held up a finger. “Hear me out. This friend is a guy, and he kissed me recently. I really responded to this kiss.”

“To the kiss, or to the guy?” she asked.

“Both,” he replied.

“You did more than kiss.”

He nodded. “Yeah, we did.”

“You love this man.”

“I do,” Starsky confirmed. “I love him more than I’ve ever loved anyone. I’d die for him.”

“I know you’re straight,” she said thoughtfully. “This must’ve really freaked you out.”

Starsky grinned. “I just told you I had sex with another guy, and the first thing you say is you know I’m straight? Anyone else would have assumed I’m gay. Or AC/DC.”

“Oh, Honey, a lady knows. At least a lady in my profession. We study people. We pick up on things. We learn a lot from your eyes. What you look at, how long you look, what makes your eyes soft, what makes your eyes sparkle, what makes your eyes horny. Your face speaks to me, too. And your posture. And the way you touch.”

“I wish I had your ability to read people,” he told her. “It would be helpful in my profession.”

“I can tell you a cop that you work with...what’s his name? Short dark hair, scar on his jaw...”

“Sullivan?” Starsky didn’t care much for him. He wasn’t a very good cop. And he didn’t trust him.

“Sullivan. Yes. Now that man is gay. If he’s married, that is one unhappy wife.”

“They just filed for divorce,” Starsky mused.

“And then there’s your partner...” Her words commanded Starsky’s complete attention now. “Handsome Hutch. He’s bi, and he owns it. But he’s more interested in men. And he carries a heck of a torch for you.”

Starsky was shocked. “He told you that?”

“He didn’t have to. I see it in his eyes. I love those eyes,” she said sadly. “But I see where his eyes go, and what makes his eyes sparkle. When he looks at you, I can see he loves you, and he wants you bad.” She suddenly looked up. “Wait. Were you talking about Hutch? With the kiss? Oh, Honeychild, of course you are! Now I get it. Yeah, this makes sense.”

Her words inspired hope in him. “It makes sense?”

“Well sure. Look, take your gender out of it. You and Ken are just two people, two people who have a true connection of heart and soul. It’s beautiful. Y’all are friends that have been through hell together, and you bonded to each other. You know each other so intimately. And intimacy breeds attraction. Two people can be intimate together, and love each other, without it having anything to do with what gender you are. If y’all had been opposite sex, you not only wouldn’t be surprised that you fell for each other, you’d celebrate it.”

“But how can I feel sexual attraction to another guy? Like you said, I’m straight. I’ve never had any attraction to any other man. Is this real? Or am I just reacting like this because it’s exciting?”

“Forbidden fruit can be very appealing. But it doesn’t last.” She looked thoughtful. “Do something for me. Think about your sexual experience with Ken. Really think about it. Every detail. Put yourself back there.”

Starsky sat forward, closing his eyes. He rested his elbows on his knees and brought his hands together and to his lips, his chin resting on his thumbs. He lost himself in the memory. He felt Hutch grab him by the shirt and push him back against the wall. He inhaled and remembered a hint of Hutch’s smell, a mixture of mint and sandlewood, gin and that musky smell of Hutch. He remembered the feel of the man’s mouth against his, the thrill of his tongue deep in his mouth. The feel of his large warm hands against his skin. He imagined the look in Hutch’s eyes, the feel of his kiss upon his penis, the wet heat of his mouth and throat. He remembered the feelings that overwhelmed him...

“Dave.”

Starsky looked to Alice. “Hm?”

She quietly gasped and put her hand to her heart. “I was going to ask you if you remembered this with your heart or with your groin, but I can see for myself.”

A single tear slipped down Starsky’s face. “I love him, Alice.”

She came to him and wrapped her arms around him. “I know you do, Sweetie,” she whispered. “I saw it in your eyes.”

He clung to her, burying his face in her shoulder, and he cried against her hair. She cooed soothing words in her soft Southern voice, comforting him. After a few minutes he pulled back from her, and she slipped a Kleenex into his hand. “I’m sorry,” he told her. “I hate getting soapy.”

“Nonsense. You have a loving heart. That’s nothing to be sorry for.” She brushed a damp curl away from his eye, and held his face. “Dave, does Ken know how you feel?”

He shook his head. "I didn't want to talk about it until I had a better grasp on things. He told me he's in love with me. I don't want to give him hope if I can't follow through."

"Aw, Honey, you're gonna make him very happy. Just follow your heart."

"What if I can't do this?" He asked, hearing the fear in his own voice. "Can I give up on who I thought I was? Give up women? Give up getting married and having kids? Can I give up my family? God knows my brother will reject me when he finds out. I have no idea how my mom will react." He bowed his head, then he looked into her eyes again. "I find myself clinging to what I've always known and believed, like a lifeline."

"Of course you do," she replied. "It's comfortable and safe. It's a direction for you."

He shook his head. "But I don't even think it makes me all that happy."

Alice gently wiped the wetness from his face. "Do you hear yourself, Honey? I think you just answered your own questions."

Starsky glanced away from her and grinned. He looked back, still smiling, and said, "I guess I did, didn't I." He took a deep breath and laughed lightly. "I'm so glad I came here."

She ran a hand through his hair, affectionately. "You already had all the answers, Hon. I didn't do anything."

He took her hand and wrapped it in both of his. "Do you want to get out of here? I mean, can you leave?"

"I'm on your dime," she reminded him. "I can go where you go."

"Do you wanna grab some dinner? Maybe a little dancing? I feel like celebrating."

"I would love that," she grinned. "Let me change into something a little more street legal." She stopped, reminding him, "Wait. You spent all your money on me, remember?"

"Nah, that's just what I had in my wallet. I thought it was safer to let your boss think I had given him all my cash," he grinned. "Go ahead and get ready. Do you want me to wait outside?"

"No." She touched his cheek. Alice proceeded to strip in front of him, providing him quite a visual show.

"You're a beautiful woman, Alice." Starsky said with admiration.

She watched him a moment, then turned to get dressed when she seemed sure that he wouldn't come to her. She changed into a simple outfit of navy slacks with a navy and aquamarine sweater. A chain with a small sapphire heart completed the look. Starsky noticed the colors made her blue eyes really stand out.

"You know," he looked her up and down, "you look prettier in this outfit than you did in that one." He nodded in the direction of the risqué garment, still laying across the foot of her bed.

Alice smiled. "That's like my uniform. It creates an image, sets an expectation."

“I will be the envy of every man on the dance floor,” he smiled. He offered his arm again, and escorted her out of the brothel.

Chapter 5

“Hutch, where’s your partner?” Dobby questioned gruffly. “I haven’t seen him all day.”

“I don’t know, Cap’n. I haven’t seen him either.” Hutch was getting concerned about Starsky’s unplanned absence.

“Is he alright?” he asked Hutch.

Hutch hesitated. He closed the door to his boss’s office. “Captain, Starsky’s alright. He just needs some time. I think he’s a little freaked out.” He debated on what to tell him. “We were tailing Scranton when he ducked into a gay bar. We ended being put into a situation where we had to...play the role of lovers. We had to go further than we were prepared for. We appear to have pulled it off successfully, because we were never made by Scranton, or his men. But you can imagine how awkward this is, and how upsetting it is to him.”

Dobby grew quiet. “Yes, I can imagine. Some men are just not cut out for this sort of assignment, no matter how good a cop. I think we may have to prepare for the fact that he may not be willing to continue. I’ll line up some potential replacements. Do you have any preferences on who to replace him with?”

“No,” Hutch said firmly. “No replacements. Starsky will be back. He would’ve told me if he couldn’t handle this. Even if he dropped out, I wouldn’t want to replace him. I’d rather work solo, if it came down to that. Not every man who regulars a gay bar is part of a couple. I’m sure I’d do just fine.”

He seemed to be weighing Hutch’s words. “Alright then. I’ll trust your judgement in this. You have gotten further than any team so far. Keep me posted. And find your partner. This disappearance concerns me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hutch quickly left the office and headed out of Parker Center. He had no idea where to look for Starsky. He’d start with his apartment, but beyond that, he wasn’t sure where he would turn. There weren’t many people Starsky would trust to talk to.

He stepped into Starsky’s apartment, rapping his knuckles on the open door. “Starsk?” He could tell the place was empty, even before checking around. He closed the door and looked around as a cop, rather than a friend. He checked the coffee table, looking at the TV guide, and a photography magazine left out. He walked past that, spotting something glittering in the carpet. Kneeling down, he inspected the shards of glass, noticing how widespread the fall of the debris. This wasn’t an accidental breakage. This glass had been thrown. The pattern of glass shards all seemed to radiate from a central point, and Hutch started there. He searched the wall, and found a mark where the glass struck. It had hit with a pretty good force behind it. What he wasn’t sure of, is whether it had been thrown as a weapon, or thrown in anger. He turned around and faced the rest of the room, sweeping from right to left, seeking any sign of a struggle. He saw none. In his mind’s eye, he could see Starsky stand up and pitch the glass at the wall in a fury. Hutch’s shoulders slumped. He couldn’t be sure, but he was disappointed at the possibility.

He continued down the hall and into the bedroom. The bed was made and looked fresh. Hutch wondered if Starsky had slept here. He doubted that he had. If Starsky had not cleaned up the glass, he probably wouldn't have made the bed. Returning down the hall, he looked into the bathroom. The clothes he had worn were discarded in the corner, under a barely damp towel. This seemed to back up his suspicion that Starsky had not slept in his bed. He wondered if Starsky had been up all night, or if he had fallen asleep on the couch.

Hutch took a look around the kitchen. The only dish he saw was the lone coffee cup, next to the open phonebook. He glanced over the open book, and immediately recognized the ad for the floral shop. He smiled for the first time since arriving. No matter what discontent the man had been suffering, he still took the time to send him flowers, and let him know he was thinking about him. Hutch was touched.

Looking around again, Hutch decided he would straighten up the apartment. He thought Starsky didn't need to come back to the glass mess, when he was trying to sort out his world. Hutch felt guilty, throwing so much at him at once, even though he had never planned to tell the man his secrets at all. It wasn't how he wanted this to go down, but he was also relieved to have it out in the open. Starsky had reacted far better than he could have hoped at the time. He was pretty calm, considering. The fact that the apartment showed more anger and upset than Starsky displayed in person was not a surprise, though disappointing. He could understand Starsky being upset by all the lies and secrecy. Hutch resolved to try to make this easier on him if he was able. To this end, he pulled out Starsky's vacuum and started to clean. He started a load of laundry. He even found some supplies in the kitchen that he could use to patch the mark in the wall. By the time he was done, the place was back in shape. Hutch found a notebook, and tore off a sheet. He wrote "Call me" on the paper, and folded it in half like a tent so it stood up by itself, and dropped it on the coffee table.

~*~

Starsky and Alice returned to the brothel after a rich meal and a fun night of dancing at the club. Alice had approached him and placed her hands on his chest. "Will you let me give you a proper thank you?"

He started to take her hands, to enfold them in his own. Alice must have picked up on the rejection of her advances, because she slid her hands out of his and stepped back from him a few feet. She stripped before him again, this time finishing with undressing him as well. He didn't stop her.

When she completed her tasks, Starsky picked up the tshirt he had worn under his shirt, and placed it over her head. He dressed her in the shirt, which was too big on her, and hung on her like a dress. He retrieved the panties she had just taken off, and handed them to her. She pulled them back on, then turned in a circle, modeling the outfit for him. "You prefer this?" she asked in disbelief.

Starsky sensed that she was trying, in the only way she knew how, to show him appreciation for taking her out and treating her with kindness. Her actions saddened him. He thought of leaving,

but he knew her pimp would put her back to work the second he left, and he had wanted to give her a night off from having to have sex with strangers.

He scooped her up in his arms, and carried her to the bed. After placing her tenderly on the bed, he climbed in beside her and spooned into her, holding her arms firmly in place. He whispered in her ear, "You don't owe me anything. This is your day off." She had pulled his hand free and brought it to her lips and kissed it. He released her and pulled away from her. His intention was to roll over and go to sleep. Alice again reached for his hand, and pulled his arm back around her. She hung on tightly, making it clear she wanted his arms around her, and she was unlikely to take no for an answer. "You want me to hold you? All night?" he asked amused. She nodded. He sensed a vulnerability in her actions, and his heart went out to her.

Starsky awoke in Alice's bed, naked, spooned tightly against her. He rose high enough to look at his bedpartner. She looked angelically sweet and young. He pulled some stray hairs away from her face, and wondered how an all-American girl like her, ended up in such a crappy life as this. He placed a light kiss in her hair, careful not to disturb her, and nuzzled back into her. He'd let her sleep in.

Starsky awoke late in the morning, feeling refreshed and happy. He said his goodbyes to Alice and kissed her on the forehead. He was about to leave, when Alice put a hand on his arm. "Sweetie, do you realize that you were so concerned yesterday, worried if you could give up women, but you turned down a naked and willing woman twice in the same night?"

Starsky shook his head. "Sweet Alice, I didn't want to use you for sex, like everyone else in your world. I wanted to be different, to offer you friendship and caring, I don't need your body. I needed a friend."

Alice smacked his arm. "Dave, you're missing the point. You asked me, 'Can I give up women?' I offered myself to you several times, and you turned me down. Now I undressed you, and I slept with you pressed up against my body. I know you were interested. I have eyes. And I know you were turned on when you spooned into me. But you never accepted my offers. When you care about someone, you have no trouble. You had no trouble because you cared about me. You'll have no trouble being faithful to Hutch, because you love him."

"You were testing me?" he replied incredulously.

"It's not a test when you know it will turn out."

"Alice," he embraced her, picking her up and spinning her around. "Thank you, Sweetheart."

"Any time, Sugar. Give my love to Handsome Hutch."

~*~

Starsky left the brothel and headed for his car. Parking near the brothel was scarce and unsafe. He had dropped off Alice at the door and had parked his car in a parking garage a few blocks away. For a short cut, he now cut through a park that was currently hosting an art fair. Starsky took his time walking through, enjoying the exhibits of art, photography, jewelry and textiles.

He stopped at a photography booth, and enjoyed the display of black and white silhouettes. The idea reminded him of some photos he had previously shot, and inspired him to process the forgotten roll of film at his first opportunity. Walking away, the booth next door caught his attention. It was a jewelry booth, and the artist had a unique style that he found appealing. Starsky picked up a ring and examined it. The ring was rustic and masculine. After talking with the jeweler, he placed an order, and indicated an inscription. He gave the artist a check for a down payment, making arrangements to pick up his order at the man's store.

Happily, he headed for home.

~*~

Starsky entered his apartment and was immediately struck with the sense that someone had been there since he left. The room looked different, though he couldn't put his finger on it right away. He took off his jacket and walked through his living room, noticing the faint smell of lemon furniture polish. He intended to tread carefully around the glass, when he discovered that the glass was gone. Starsky smiled, knowing Hutch had been here. Now the feeling he had upon entering made sense. The room looked cleaner than he left it. He looked into the kitchen and saw Hutch had washed his dishes and coffee pot. Surveying the rest of his apartment, he found his bathroom had been tidied as well. Stepping into his bedroom, he smiled to see a laundry basket full of clean clothes, and to find Hutch asleep in his bed.

He knelt beside the bed, and moved Hutch's hair back from his face. Cupping his face, Starsky placed a soft kiss upon Hutch's lips. Kissing him again, he felt Hutch stir, and felt the man's arms wrap around him. "Good morning, Goldilocks," he whispered against Hutch's lips before slipping his tongue into his mouth to dance with his. Hutch gripped him tighter, kissing him more intently.

"Starsk, where've you been?" he asked, fully awake now. He sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"I had to sort some stuff out," he replied.

"Dobey was ready to yank you from the Scranton case. He wants to see you in the office today."

"Let me grab a shower, and I'll head in with you. What'd you tell him? About me?"

Hutch stood up, retrieving his clothes from the end of the bed. He pulled on his jeans. "I told him the truth. I said we were tailing Scranton when he ducked into a gay bar, and that we ended being put into a situation where we had to play lovers. I told him we had to go further than we were prepared for. I also said you were upset about it, and told him you needed time to work it out."

Starsky nodded. "Yeah, that pretty much sums it up. What did he say?"

"He figured you were done with the case. Wanted me to help him pick a replacement for you. I told him I wouldn't work with a replacement, and if you dropped out I would go solo."

"I'm back," Starsky informed him. "And you're stuck with me." He winked at Hutch.

Hutch ignore the wink. “Littleton and White lined up a rental house for us. They’ve already moved Rebel in, next door. She’s going to live there 24/7, Tom will stay most nights, but his schedule will be more flexible because he has a family. Rebel and Tom will be our primary back up. There’s a couple Feds that will be working with Rebel and Tom. They’ll fill in the nights Tom is off, too. Our place will be wired, bugs in the main living areas. We’re supposed to move in, in about a week.”

“Ok, got it. Let me get cleaned up and we’ll go in. It’s early yet. We’ve got plenty of time.” He headed for the shower. “Start the coffee, will ya?”

After his shower, he joined Hutch in the kitchen. Hutch seemed to be examining him from head to toe, with a concerned expression on his face. Finally, he asked, “Starsk, are you alright?”

Starsky smiled over his coffee, taking a sip. “I’m fine.”

“You’re fine,” Hutch repeated. “That’s it? Buddy, you’ve been AWOL for days. I left you a note to call me. Either you didn’t bother, or you didn’t see it.”

“Didn’t see it,” he confessed. “I had a lot to work out. I needed to talk to someone, to try to get my head on straight again.”

“You could’ve talked to me,” Hutch said quietly.

“I wasn’t ready to talk to you.” He saw a sad look in Hutch’s eyes, and he reached out and squeezed Hutch’s hand. “Hutch, I’m not upset about your being bi. I feel bad you had to lie about it, but I get why you did.”

“And the broken glass?”

“Okay, it took some time to get to where I’m at now. But the glass wasn’t about what you think. I was more angry with myself at the time. I told you we’d work through this. I meant that.”

“Starsky, are you going to be okay with the fact that I’m in love with you?”

He looked at Hutch’s eyes, and his heart went out to him. Hutch’s eyes were a deep topaz blue, and looked vulnerable and completely open to Starsky. He sensed that anything he said to Hutch now, would dictate how Hutch would relate to him going forward. If he said anything that implied any kind of rejection or repulsion, Hutch would close off from him, probably for good.

“I love you. I’m proud of the fact you love me, Hutch,” he began. “This is all new territory to me, so I’m going to take it a step at a time. I’m trying to be open to anything here. I can see now that adding a physical element to our relationship isn’t as big a stretch as I once thought. We love each other. I can express that physically, sexually, with you. I think the case happening right now is both an opportunity, and a bad break, all at the same time. It’s an opportunity because it’s forcing us to face this. It’s pushing us into exploring things that we may not’ve otherwise. But it also sucks because it’s pushing us to do stuff publicly, and under an ugly situation. I need you to trust me. Trust that if I can’t handle something, it isn’t a rejection of you. It may be that I can’t handle how it’s playing out. I want to explore the physical stuff with you privately, before we

drag it into Scranton's world. I don't want either of us feeling like the only reason something is happening is because we're forced."

Hutch rubbed at his eyes. "Wait, what are you saying? Are you telling me that you're okay with being physical with me for the case, or are you telling me you're open to introducing sex into our relationship?"

Starsky put down his coffee and knelt beside his friend. "I'm talking about both."

He ran his hands through his hair. "One thing at a time. Please." He held Starsky's gaze. "You're okay with the assignment, with the whole gay act, with having to be physical to convince Scranton we're legit. You can handle it. Correct?" With Starsky's nod, he continued. "You said before that we need to do full absorption in this undercover setup. That implies that you don't want to *appear* to be a gay couple. You want to *be* a gay couple. Correct?"

"Correct."

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. "Technically, Starsk, you can't be part of a gay couple. You're not gay. But I get what you mean." He shook his head as if to clear it. "Okay, this is going to be difficult for me. You understand why. I'm not going to be pretending with you. If I touch you, if I kiss you, anything I do intimately with you...it's all real. I don't have the strength, or the know-how, to pull myself out of it."

Starsky took Hutch's hand in his own. "I know that."

"And that brings us to our relationship," Hutch squeezed Starsky's hand. "You can't be in a gay relationship with me. You aren't gay. So when you talk about you and I introducing sex into our relationship, it means you would be pretending. Going through the motions. And despite the fact that I want you..." His voice seemed to fail him for a moment. He cleared his throat. "Being intimate with you is still going to be very difficult for me, because you will never feel what I feel."

"I don't believe that. Do you believe that I love you? That I love you as much as you love me?"

"Yes."

"Okay, we're in agreement. We love each other. Let's start with that." He brought their entwined hands to his lips and kissed Hutch's hand. "Anything I do with you that's physical, it's going to be based on that love. Do you believe that?"

"Yes."

"Okay, good. So let's be clear. There's no pretending. There's no act. You can trust that anything that happens between you and me from this point forward is real, true, honest. Regardless of whether we're alone or working. I don't want this being difficult for you. I don't want this hurting you. Let's just take it a step at a time, and celebrate the fact that we have love, and we're together."

Hutch stared at him. "But Starsk, you can't feel desire for me."

“You know I felt desire for you!” Starsky exclaimed.

“I knew how to get your body to respond. That’s not real desire, that’s just biology. That’s knowing what buttons to push to get a response.”

“I disagree. I think I felt desire like that, because it was you. Because I love you.” Hutch turned his face away. Starsky wasn’t sure if it was because of his skepticism, or if he was struggling with his emotions. Starsky turned his face back to him with the touch of a finger. “Take it a step at a time. Let’s see how this goes. Give me a chance, Hutch.” He leaned in to kiss the man, but stopped just before making contact. He paused there, teasingly close, waiting.

Hutch grabbed him and pulled him into the kiss. His kiss was hungry, and Starsky smiled at his enthusiasm. “We have to go,” he whispered against Hutch’s lips. “Dobey, remember?”

Pulling back, Hutch replied, “Damn it. NOW you want to go back to work.”

Starsky grinned.

Chapter 6

Starsky finished unpacking the kitchen at the rental house, and loaded the dishes into the dishwasher. He looked around the room, satisfied with the look. The table had a rich green houseplant in the center, giving it a fresh homey feel. The cabinets were stocked with food, the freezer stocked with some frozen pizzas, and the coffee maker was plugged in and ready to go, right next to the blender Hutch would use for his morning smoothies.

He stepped from the kitchen into the dining area. There was a bay window that overlooked the backyard, and Hutch's plants looked very happy there in their new home. There was a couch and loveseat and a large flat ottoman served dual purpose as a coffee table, with a large serving tray for a place to sit glasses and such. Some of Hutch's plants spilled into this room, too, and helped make up for the fact that walls were still cold and bare. Starsky pulled a half empty box from the closet, and dug out the bulky afghan and pillows his mom had made. Draping the blanket over one corner of the couch, and tossing the pillows into place, he smiled. Now it looked like a couch you wanted to flop down on. Grabbing the now empty box, he tossed it into the stacked pile of empties near the front door.

He felt lighthearted. The house was nicer than he expected. This was far better than their usual undercover place. It was a definite step up from the BCPD budget. Rebel and Tom were set up in the house next door the week prior, to avoid having them move in at the same time. This gave him more time to prepare for the move. They didn't bring much with them, besides the plants. Some dishes, clothes, and enough personal items to make the place look lived in. The place felt good to Starsky. He was going to enjoy their time here.

Starsky headed back to the kitchen. There, he pulled out a bottle of wine he had stashed in the fridge, and uncorked it. He also pulled out a platter of cheese that he had prepared, and added a healthy grouping of crackers. He poured two glasses, and placed the wine bottle into a terra cotta wine cooler, and brought it, along with the cheese platter, out to the patio, laying a napkin over the cheese platter to protect it. Pulling a small box from his pocket, he tucked it between the wine and the cheese. He slipped back into the house and went back to the kitchen.

Dropping his towel onto the counter, he grabbed the two wine glasses and made his way to the bedroom, stepping up to Hutch.

Hutch was unpacking their clothes into the dressers. The bed had been made, and their guns found a new home in their closet shelf. "Hey, babe. Almost done?"

"Yeah, this is the last of it." He slid the drawer closed.

Starsky held one of the glasses out to him. Hutch looked up, looking pleasantly surprised. "Thanks." He took a sip, then looked at Starsky with a curious expression. "What's this? This isn't the wine I brought."

"Do you like it?"

"It's good," Hutch replied. "I like it. It's sweet. What is this? German?" He took another sip. "Mosel?"

“Very good!” Starsky nodded, impressed. “Keep going...”

“It’s a Riesling,” he swirled in the glass and inhaled. “Sweet. Fruity. Too sweet for a Kabinett. But it’s not an Auslese...” he took an additional sip. “Spätlese,” he concluded.

“How do you do that?” Starsky marveled.

“I once dated a guy that imported wines. It’s really not that hard to do. It just takes practice.”

“I doubt it’s that easy,” he commented. He didn’t miss the fact that Hutch mentioned dating a guy. Starsky was pleased that he was feeling comfortable enough to talk about the past that he was long practiced at concealing. “Come with me,” Starsky directed, grabbing Hutch’s hand and leading him outside to their patio.

“A little snack,” Starsky declared, pulling the cloth napkin off his cheese platter. He enjoyed the pleased look on Hutch’s face.

“Hey, this looks good!” Hutch smiled. He picked up a cracker and cheese, and popped the bite into his mouth. He then grabbed another.

Starsky realized that this was the first genuine smile he’d seen from Hutch all day. They each took a seat at the patio table, and Starsky commented, “I think we hit the jackpot with this place, don’t you? It’s a few steps above the undercover joints we’ve had before.”

“Yeah,” Hutch agreed, but the smile completely disappeared. “We’ll have no trouble getting used to this.”

Starsky knew what was weighing on Hutch. His partner was still worried about the effects of this assignment on his heart. He didn’t trust that Starsky could return his feelings, and felt that the sexual aspect would disappear when the case concluded and the sex was no longer necessary to maintain their cover. Starsky reached out and squeezed his hand. He gently reminded in a quiet voice, “We agreed. Just take this a step at a time. Give this a chance.”

“You’re asking a lot,” Hutch replied sternly. But his expression softened, and he looked at Starsky. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” He clinked his glass lightly against Starsky’s. “You’re making a hell of lot more sacrifices than I am.”

“It’s not a sacrifice to touch you, Hutch,” he answered quietly. “I love you more than anybody. This is another way to express it. That’s special, and I’m grateful for the opportunity.” Starsky reached over and picked up the box he had left on the table earlier. “I got you something.” He removed the larger ring from the box.



Hutch took the ring from him, and examined it. It was a rustic and masculine style. The band was silver with a ring of rose gold running through the center. The silver had been oxidized to a dark charcoal grey, and yellow gold glittered around it as an accent. Starsky watched him carefully. Hutch turned the ring around in his fingers, then held it up. "There's an inscription," he said. He looked to Starsky. "It says 'me and thee.'" Hutch's voice sounded hoarse, as if he struggled with emotion. "Why did you do this? This is beautiful. It looks like a custom wedding band."

"It is." Starsky explained, "I wanted something special. This is just for us." He paused to collect his thoughts. He took the ring from his partner's hand and held it up. "If you and I had come to this point naturally, on our own, this is what I would have done. I would have liked the symbolism; I would have liked the commitment it represented. But then I realized something. Circumstances may have pushed us in unexpected directions, but it didn't force anything on us. You and I have a special relationship and an unbreakable commitment. It doesn't follow any rules or labels or expectations. I'd give my life for you. I love you. I trust you. And I know you feel the same. This ring represents that. When all this is over, we'll figure this out. We'll get through this and we'll work through how we feel. And this ring will still be here, representing the bond between us." Starsky slipped the ring onto Hutch's finger.

Hutch's eyes looked misty. He swallowed hard, and took the box from Starsky and pulled the remaining ring from its cushions. He slid the ring onto Starsky's finger, then pulled him into an embrace. He tilted Starsky's face up and kissed him, thoroughly. Starsky felt the man's arm come across his back, and the other slide underneath his knees. Hutch pulled him into his lap, and lifted him in his arms as he rose to his feet. Starsky was carried into the house and straight to the bedroom.

~*~

Tom tossed the headset onto the table and shook his head. "This stuff's not hooked up yet," he complained. "I thought they were going to get the team in there yesterday and get this running."

Rebel dropped the binoculars into her lap and stared through the window into the neighboring yard. "Holy shit!" she exclaimed under her breath. She had just witnessed her old friends huddled together talking under the patio umbrella. She watched as they exchanged rings and kissed, and as Hutch carried Starsky into the house. This didn't look like an act to her. She knew these men. The look in Hutch's eyes, the way they kissed, the way he held Starsky as he carried him... It all spoke of love. Real love.

"What's wrong?" Tom asked, coming to her side. "You see someone out there?"

"No, it's not that," she replied. "Just a little surprised. It looks like Starsky and Hutch are all-in on this assignment. They're really taking it seriously."

"I'd expect nothing less," Tom stated. "That's why they're such good cops. They don't do anything halfway."

"It's so surreal, to be watching them – they're very old friends of mine – and to see them behaving as a couple. I feel like I'm intruding, like I'm spying on them. It just feels wrong, to have to watch them like this."

“I’m pretty sure that’s why we were chosen to back them up,” Tom reasoned. “I expect Dobeey picked us because we’re friends. I’m sure he trusts us to use discretion. And he probably knows we’d defend them, if there’s talk at work.”

“If anyone says anything, or tries to give them shit, they’re going to have to go through me,” Rebel exclaimed.

“Through *us*,” Tom assured her.

~*~

Hutch carried Starsky to the bed, and laid him down upon it. Hutch knelt beside the bed, and laid his head on Starsky’s chest.

Starsky touched Hutch’s hair soothingly. “Hutch,” he whispered. “Look at me.” Hutch did not respond. “Hutch?” He felt Hutch’s arms hold him tighter. “Hutch.” Hutch finally released his hold and sat on the edge of the bed, facing away from Starsky.

Starsky sat up and wrapped his arms around Hutch from behind, holding him tightly. “Why do you pull away from me?” Hutch’s head slowly fell back against Starsky’s shoulder, and Starsky nuzzled his cheek against his partner’s affectionately.

“I want to love you,” Hutch whispered. “I can’t do this.”

Kissing Hutch’s neck, Starsky kissed and licked and nibbled his neck and ear, all while blindly unbuttoning Hutch’s shirt. He could feel the man’s heart pounding through the thin fabric. He slipped his hand inside the now open shirt, caressing his chest and belly.

Hutch stood and turned around to face Starsky, taking his hands in his, Hutch sat back on the bed facing him, holding his hands firmly. “Please stop,” he pleaded softly.

Starsky saw something haunted in Hutch’s eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, but Hutch hushed him.

“Listen to me.” He stared so intently that Starsky wondered if he could see into his soul. “I can’t do this right now,” Hutch whispered. He entwined the fingers of their left hands, the new rings clicking against each other. He shook their hands once, drawing Starsky’s gaze to the rings resting side by side. “Not after this,” his voice cracked. Hutch bowed his head down, touching his forehead to their entwined hands. After a few long breaths, he looked up. “I want to make love *with you*. Not have sex with you. Not make love *to you*. I need to feel you love me back. I need you, so bad I can’t think. I need you to feel what I feel. Desire. Need. Passion. Please, Starsk. Please understand.”

Starsky pulled him into a tight embrace. He felt Hutch finally relax in his arms. He rubbed Hutch’s arms, and felt him finally pull back. Starsky cupped his face and said, “Kiss me, babe.” Hutch obliged, kissing gently at first. Starsky felt the goosebumps skitter from his neck down his arms. He clutched Hutch tighter, which appeared to encourage Hutch, because he began to kiss more intently. Starsky felt a heat swarm over him. He touched Hutch’s cheek, slipping his hand into his hair. Hutch seemed to be kissing with more passion, his tongue reaching deeper, and

Starsky shivered in response. A rush of excitement cascaded over him, leaving every nerve tingling in anticipation.

Pulling back from Hutch's kiss, Starsky held the man's face in his hands. "Look at me, Hutch. Look at my eyes. Tell me you don't see desire!" Starsky opened his heart. Left himself vulnerable and exposed to Hutch. He knew the desire he felt was too strong to be hidden. He knew the heat of skin had to be hot against Hutch's hands.

Hutch's eyes searched his. He felt Hutch's hand stroke his face, felt his thumb caress his lips. Starsky kissed his thumb, letting his tongue skitter against the accessible skin. Hutch pulled him in, kissing with insistence, pushing Starsky backwards into the bed. He felt Hutch's groin crush into his own, igniting a desire that was foreign to Starsky. Feeling nearly drunk on Hutch's kisses, and drowning in the sensations from their bodies crushing together, he surrendered to the overwhelming excitement. In a swift forceful shove, he toppled Hutch onto his back and straddled his partner. He pulled off his own shirt and tossed it aside then helped Hutch be rid of his shirt as well. He kissed his partner, one hand unfastening the man's fly. Starsky took his time, kissing down the tan chest before him. Hutch helped him remove the rest of his clothing. Starsky resumed kissing his chest, sucking a sensitive nipple, feeling Hutch squirm beneath him. Continuing the kisses down his belly, he ran his hands over Hutch's bare thighs, between his legs. As he caressed Hutch's balls, he kissed and licked his way up his rigid shaft. Starsky was lost in his explorations, taking Hutch into his mouth, he sucked as his tongue swirled against the velvety head. He took as much of him into his mouth that he could fit, his tongue running along the vein, his free hand stroking the shaft below. Starsky pushed further down, not knowing what to expect, and felt Hutch easily slide down his throat. Hutch moaned, hoarsely calling Starsky's name. Feeling emboldened, Starsky worked Hutch in his throat. Giving Hutch's ass a firm squeeze, he increased his speed, attempting to match a rhythm that he enjoyed himself. He could feel Hutch responding beneath him, felt his legs begin to tremble. Hutch was growing larger in his mouth, his tension building. He saw Hutch grip the sheets in his fists just before his body went rigid. Starsky marveled that he could feel the pulsing in his mouth, could taste him, felt Hutch's hand tenderly stroke his face. He wanted to climb back up Hutch's body and kiss him once more, but instead he collapsed, curled up against Hutch's hip, catching his breath and giving his aching jaw a moment to recover. He nuzzled against Hutch's hip, feeling enveloped in emotion. He felt Hutch attempting to coax him up, but he didn't want to release his waist. He knew Hutch would want to give him pleasure in return, but he didn't want to break the feeling that enfolded him just yet. Starsky took Hutch's hand and brought it to his lips. Kissing it gently, he said, "I don't think I've ever felt anything like this. I've never felt so close to anyone, or so happy."

"Come here," Hutch urged. Starsky moved up to Hutch's chest and held him, his ear pressed to Hutch's heart. Hutch asked, "Are you okay?"

Starsky realized Hutch might think he was somehow upset. He moved up and kissed Hutch. "Sorry, my jaw's still a little sore," he grinned.

"Why won't you let me touch you?"

Shaking his head, Starsky declined. “No. I’m all wrapped up in you right now. I’m not ready to let that go.”

“I love you,” Hutch whispered

“Did I do okay?” Starsky asked.

Hutch laughed. “You know you did okay. More than okay.” He reached out and smoothed a damp curl away from Starsky’s face. “How did this happen, Starsk? How could you want me like that?”

Starsky shook his head. “I don’t know, Hutch. All I know is when you kiss me, you knock me off my feet. When you touch me, I lose my head.”

Hutch drew him into another kiss. When the kiss ended, Hutch cupped his face again, staring into his eyes. “I do see desire in your eyes. I could drown in your eyes.”

“Hutch, you wanted to love me. I want that too. I want to bottom for you.”

“That’s what you want? Well that’s unexpected. No, Starsk. Not tonight. That requires some planning. It’s not like sex with a woman. Your body doesn’t produce lubrication during sex like a woman’s does. We’d need supplies, lubricant.” He placed a tender kiss on Starsky’s forehead. “We’ll get there.”

“Check out the drawer over there. The nightstand,” Starsky directed.

Hutch pulled open the nightstand drawer, and pulled out a tube. “Lubricant? Massage oil? And what’s this? A blindfold? Restraints?” He held up a pair of restraints and a blindfold, looking to Starsky with an eyebrow raised.

With smiling eyes, Starsky replied, “You tied my hands... I thought maybe that was a something that turned you on.”

“And the feather?” He held up a long fluffy blue feather.

“Call it an impulse buy.”

Hutch dropped everything back in the drawer except the oil and the lube. “I appreciate the effort, but I’m not going to tie you up. Or blindfold you. It was a fantasy, when we were younger, but it kinda killed the fun when I found you tied up for real. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Maybe we can put the fun back in it.”

Hutch gazed at him for a long moment. “Why you on the bottom?” he asked. “Is that how you imagine us together? Or is that what you think I need?”

Starsky propped himself up on his elbow and faced his partner. “I want to know what it feels like to have you inside me.”

Taking in a sharp breath, Hutch asked, “You know it can be painful.”

“I’m not worried. I know you’ll do what you can.”

“We don’t have to do this tonight,” Hutch said quietly. “We have all the time in the world. There are so many ways we can make each other feel good.” He opened the bottle of massage oil and poured some in his hand. “Lie back.”

Starsky lay back again, and Hutch climbed over him, straddling him. He began to spread oil evenly over Starsky’s chest and shoulders, down his arms, over his belly. He then started to massage in earnest. Beginning with his stomach, he gently progressed to his chest. Each time he finished an area, he would lay a kiss there before moving on to the next. He had massaged his stomach to his chest, his neck to his shoulders, down his left arm, then down his right. He ended by laying the last kiss on Starsky’s ring. He then moved down to his legs, massaging one then the other, one foot then the other, placing a kiss on each foot. “Roll over,” he directed.

Hutch continued his ministrations in the same manner down Starsky’s back, starting at his neck, moving all the way down to his feet. He then moved up his legs, straddling his thighs, and began to massage his backside, using great thoroughness in this area. Starsky moaned his approval. Hutch’s hands had left him feeling completely renewed, and the attention and touch was leaving him thoroughly aroused.

Hutch climbed between his legs, pushing them apart, and slid the full length of his body down between them. He wasn’t sure what Hutch was going to do next, until he felt the light touch of Hutch’s tongue dance across his anus. Starsky gasped, and grabbed the rails of the headboard, as if this new and intimate sensation would throw him of the bed if he didn’t hold on for dear life. Hutch continued, slowly, his tongue swirling and dancing, dipping and penetrating. Starsky’s whole body was trembling in anticipation. He buried his face in his arms, crying out, “Oh God, Hutch, please!”

Hutch moved over him, without losing contact, his finger now continuing the work his tongue had begun. When his finger withdrew, Starsky moaned again, “Please...don’t stop.” Hutch’s finger returned, this time slick with lube, repeating the circling actions of before. He felt the touch push against his entrance, and enter him. His body fought against the penetrating finger, as Hutch climbed up and nuzzled his face against his.

“Breathe, babe. Try to relax. Breathe.” Hutch’s words murmured in his ear, the tone soothing. He felt himself obediently calm to his voice, his body relax against him. “That’s it. Easy does it.” He felt Hutch’s hand withdraw, but before he could protest, the fingers were back, touching. He was entered again, this time it felt larger, like two, sliding inside him. He was able to make himself relax against his body’s rebellion, and the sensation quickly changed from the tight pain. His fingers moved inside him easily now, preparing him, opening him. His hand pulled away, and Hutch blanketed him, whispering, “Do you still want me?”

“I need you,” Starsky answered, feeling Hutch’s arms tighten around him. Hutch helped him get into position, and felt him at his entrance, pressing into him, finally penetrating his body. Pain shot through him, and his body slightly bucked against Hutch. He heard Hutch’s whispers in his ear again, reminding him to breathe, deep breaths, relax. Starsky inhaled deeply, feeling his body respond, Hutch unmoving inside him. The pain released him, and he felt an awareness descend upon him of Hutch completely surrounding him and inside of him, in his heart, engulfed by his

body and his love. He wanted to speak, but could only manage his name. "Hutch..." Hutch began to move inside him, moving slowly, carefully, deliberately. He pulled back slowly, withdrawing from Starsky's body, then entered him again, slowly descending into his body again. "Hutch. I'm not gonna break here. You can move. Gimme what you've got." But Hutch continued with his slow pace. "Hutch..." Starsky began again, when a sudden wave of pleasure radiated through his body. Starsky gasped. "Damn! What the hell did you do?" Hutch began to move with purpose now, each stroke of his body eliciting another wave of pleasure through Starsky. He realized that Hutch had been on a search, for an angle or spot, seeking this way to please him. Now his every move was purposefully working to bring him pleasure. His hand, so large and warm, stroking his phallus, his body moving to pleasure him inside. Starsky was overwhelmed. The pace was increasing speed, the pleasure increasing his excitement, the tension quickly building. He was losing awareness of everything but the pleasure and Hutch, pushed higher and higher on a tidal wave rush, to touch the edge of Heaven. He reached the pinnacle, the explosion coursing through his every cell, aware of nothing but bliss. He felt Hutch suddenly grab him and tense, and knew that he was joining him in orgasm, sharing this thrill, buried deep inside him. He felt himself falling back to Earth wrapped snugly in Hutch's arms, when Hutch pulled him down to the bed, turning his body carefully, until he ended up on his side, Hutch still spooned tightly against him, their bodies still joined. He was aware his heart pounding in his chest, and Hutch's pounding against his back. The thrilling pulses were swiftly fading, replaced by a rush of love and affection welling up from within. He wondered if Hutch felt the same, when he felt the man's kisses in his hair, upon his neck, down his shoulder.

Hutch gently pulled out, and Starsky immediately turned in his arms to face him, burying his face in Hutch's chest. Hutch kissed the top of his head, whispering into his curls, "Are you alright?" Starsky couldn't answer. He clung to Hutch silently, struggling to find words, knowing words would fail him. Hutch pulled back from him and caressed his cheek, studying his face with a worried expression. "Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head once in reply, and stared into Hutch's eyes. He felt tears well up in his own eyes, the emotion overtaking him. He dropped his eyes to Hutch's lips. "Kiss me."

Hutch pulled him into a kiss, intense in its emotion, clutched tightly in his arms. In a ragged whisper he pleaded, "Tell me what I can do."

Starsky wrapped his arms tightly around Hutch, inhaling his scent, drinking in his caring. "You didn't hurt me. You shocked me." He looked into Hutch's eyes. "I thought I knew love and sex. I've never known anything like this. Everything fades to nothing, compared to you."

Hutch kissed him again, with a tenderness that reached down and wrapped its roots around Starsky's heart. Starsky smiled, looking at those sweet lips, and confessed, "Your kiss, Hutch..." He looked into his eyes. "It blows me away."

Hutch smiled at the compliment, then stopped. The smile disappeared, and Starsky saw the dawning in his eyes. "Wait..." he looked hesitant. "Collandra?" Starsky nodded slowly. Hutch lay back on the bed, running a hand into his hair. "Oh my God. Starsk, are you kidding me? Don't mess with me. Are you kidding me?"

“Your kiss... It blows me away. I never expected this... from my old friend.”

“When did you realize this? Just now?”

Starsky shook his head. “I knew the first time you kissed me. At The Gym.” He sat up, cross-legged, on the bed. He took Hutch’s right hand in his. “I went back to talk to Joe. Asked him to read me again. He gave me a lot of the same info, mentioned blond hair, shoulder length. Then he kinda freaked out and ended the reading. He wouldn’t tell me any more. I asked him to answer me one question, yes or no. Was it you...?”

Hutch sat up and pulled Starsky into his arms, his eyes glistening. “I’ve known all along you were the love of my life.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “I never dreamed I would be yours.”

“My love.” Starsky smiled and ran his thumb over Hutch’s lips. “The love of a lifetime.”

Hutch kissed him.

~*~

Rebel wandered out to her patio and placed the coffee pot on the table. She poured herself a large mugful, and sat down to enjoy the beautiful morning sun. A noise next door caught her attention, and she turned to see Hutch come out through the sliding door. He was bare-chested and barefoot, wearing only cotton beach pants, tied in front with a drawstring.

“Good morning, neighbor!” she called to him. He waved and walked toward her. She smiled, watching him approach, admiring his natural good looks. She had always had great appreciation for her two handsome friends. She leaned up against the fence, sipping at her coffee, enjoying the view.

“Hi Rebel,” he smiled, taking the coffee mug from her hands and taking a big gulp. “Ah, you’re a lifesaver!”

She grinned at his boldness. “I was just enjoying this beautiful morning. Absolutely perfect, isn’t it?” She looked around the yard.

“You’re right,” he smiled. “Perfect!”

Rebel looked at his smile and nearly took a double take. He always struck her as a downright beautiful man, but he was absolutely gorgeous this morning. The man was radiant. “Wow, Hutch. There’s something different about you.”

He took another gulp of her coffee and passed the cup back to her. “Me? How so?”

She took a sip, looking at his eyes. “This place must really agree with you.” She handed him back the mug. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so happy.”

Hutch smiled at her. “I am happy.” He downed the rest of the coffee and handed her back the mug. He touched her on the arm. “Thanks for the coffee.” He turned to walk back to the house.

“Hutch?” She waited for him to turn back to her. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you look like a man in love.”

Hutch's smile broadened. He looked down at the grass, then looked back to Rebel, eyes twinkling. "Do I?" He paused a moment, then winked at her. He turned to walk back to the house.

Rebel watched him walk away, lifting the mug to her lips. "Sonofagun," she whispered. She tried to take a sip from the mug, frowning at the now empty container.

~*~

Starsky opened the front door, finding Tom standing there, holding a large flat package. "Hey Starsky. I picked up that portrait you asked for."

Excited, Starsky took the package from Tom. "Thanks, Tom! I appreciate it. You want to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks. Rebel's expecting me. She wants me to hook up her stereo before the team gets here to wire you guys up."

"Okay, I won't keep you then. Say hi to your partner." Tom headed next door. "Thanks again!" he called after him.

Starsky took his package to the bedroom, grabbing his hammer and nails from the hall closet. He laid the package and tools on the bed, then carefully unwrapped the frame. He smiled at the final result. It was an enlargement of a photo he had taken. The photo was a silhouetted shot of Hutch sitting in his greenhouse window, playing the guitar and singing to Starsky. The photo had a simple beauty to it, catching an intimate moment. Starsky had it matted in white and framed in a classic black frame, allowing the photo and its tender subject to really stand out.

Centering the photo over the headboard, he hung the photo over their bed.

Hutch finally returned from his run, and headed to the bedroom to grab a robe for a shower. He stopped at the doorway, struck by the photo. "What's this?" he asked Starsky, indicating the photo. He slowly stepped up to the foot of the bed. "Who took this?"

"I did. Well, with the help of a delayed timer."

"Starsk, this looks so... romantic," he whispered, pulling him into his arms.

"The love was always there," Starsky smiled. He slipped his hand into Hutch's hair, pulling him into a sweet kiss.

Chapter 7

Starsky sat beside Hutch at the bar. He was wearing skin tight black jeans, his black shirt casually unbuttoned nearly to his naval, black leather jacket. In contrast, Hutch wore all white, his gauzy shirt unbuttoned halfway, his golden tan making the white seem to glow.

The Gym seemed a completely different place on a Friday night than it did during a week day. The place was packed full of men, the music loud, drinks kept flowing. He noticed two bouncers protecting the front entrance, and two protecting the back. Numerous bartenders handled the bar. Near the back was an area for dancing, though Starsky noticed there was a lot more groping than he would expect in a heterosexual bar.

He had excused himself to visit the men's room, but found upon his return that a man was standing beside Hutch's barstool, with his hand upon Hutch's shoulder. Hutch appeared to be speaking dismissively with the man, and had shrugged the hand off his shoulder, but the man quickly replaced it. Hutch was angry.

Starsky quickly felt the anger and jealousy rise up inside him. He saw the bartender, in his peripheral vision, come from around the bar, heading in Hutch's direction, to come to his aid, and probably to prevent a potential fight. He caught the bartender's eye, and raised his hand slightly to signal he had this. The bartender nodded, and slowed his pace, hanging back in case he was needed.

He slipped in beside Hutch, on the opposite side from the unwelcome guest. He remembered Hutch's words that he could act possessive if threatened, and took this to heart. He slid a hand down Hutch's right knee, pulling the barstool toward him at the same time. As the chair was turned away from the man, Starsky slipped between Hutch's legs, sliding his hands suggestively up his thighs. His eyes held a determined possessiveness, as he grinned hungrily and asked Hutch in a deep throaty voice, "Didya miss me?"

Hutch grinned at this unfamiliar display of possessiveness from Starsky. He slid his hands up the back of Starsky's thighs, giving his ass a nice squeeze, pulling Starsky tightly against his groin. The blue of Hutch's eyes darkened noticeably, as he replied, "I did."

During Starsky's greeting to Hutch, the unwanted visitor's hand had been removed, but he had not left. He still hung uncomfortably close to Hutch, as if awaiting another opportunity to pursue. This did not sit well with Starsky, who faced the man directly. He glared at the man, anger and threat flashing darkly in his eyes. "Excuse us," he growled at him.

The man stared back at Starsky, silently. He did not move. Starsky felt the adrenaline surge up within, the fight response firmly activated. But the man suddenly turned and walked out the bar. Starsky saw the bartender go to the door to witness his exit, returning when he seemed satisfied the man was not returning.

Starsky wrapped his arms around Hutch's neck, kissing him hungrily, though briefly, before pulling back and resuming his previous seat in the stool beside Hutch. This time, he left a hand resting possessively on Hutch's thigh.

Hutch grinned lecherously. “You know you’re damn sexy when you’re jealous.”

Starsky chuckled and downed the last of his drink. The adrenaline was still coursing through his body, and he felt recklessly wild because of it. He wondered if it still showed in his eyes.

The bartender slid a small tray to them. It contained refills for their drinks, with what appeared to be a room key tucked between them. “On the house,” the bartender told them. “I’m sorry the gentleman displayed a lack of manners. His behavior was inconsistent with the expected etiquette of this establishment.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind of you,” Hutch replied.

Starsky asked, “Where would we find the door that belongs to that key?”

“There’s a red door near the exit to the back patio. It leads to the upstairs rooms. Enjoy your visit.” The man gave a wink and a nod to Starsky.

They casually finished their drinks, and Starsky slipped the room key into his jacket pocket, leaving a very hefty tip in its place. Hutch led the way to the red door, Starsky following a step behind. He saw a hand reach out to Hutch, stopping him, and Starsky warily came up beside Hutch, protectively putting his arm around his waist.

The man who stopped Hutch had slicked back hair and wore a great deal of makeup, his mascara-laden lashes fluttering at Hutch. “Oooh, Honey, take care of this one,” he looked Starsky up and down, appreciatively. “He’s a keeper. He had all of us hyperventilating over here when he got all territorial over you. Mm mm mm.”

Hutch chuckled and looked to Starsky. “See, I told you. You get damned sexy when you’re jealous.”

Starsky smiled, a little embarrassed. He held out his hand to the stranger. The other man shook his hand, but only his fingertips, his hand wrapped around Starsky’s. “When you’re dating a guy as gorgeous as this,” Starsky nodded in Hutch’s direction, “it keeps you on your toes.”

“I hear ya, Sugar! I hear ya!” He looked to Hutch and instructed with a harmless wink, “You ever get tired of this one, Honey, you send him my way.”

Hutch caught Starsky’s eye. Speaking directly to Starsky, he said, “Oh, I’ll never tire of this one.” He then pulled Starsky into him, giving him a brief but hungry kiss. The stranger’s friends all started to pretend cough, murmuring “get a room” under their coughs. Hutch’s eyes twinkled as he said, “Now they have the right idea. Shall we?” He put his arm around Starsky, escorting him away from the group and toward the red door.

The red door opened to a carpeted stairwell, and to a long hallway with numbered doorways. The upstairs resembled an old time hotel, with sconces on the walls, and floral patterned carpeting. They located the room number indicated on the key, and entered their complimentary room. It was surprisingly nice, with a queen size bed, thick velvet drapes, and a nightstand with a basket of various oils, lubes and condoms. It appeared clean and well kept. “Looks nice,” Starsky observed.

“So do you,” Hutch purred, wrapping his arms around Starsky from behind.

He unbuttoned the few fastened buttons on Starsky’s shirt, then ran his hands over Starsky’s chest and belly. His hands snuggling up into fists gripping the hair on Starsky’s chest and on his belly, not tight enough to pull the hair with pain, but snug enough to tug enticingly.

Starsky leaned back into him, inhaling deeply. He knew, while the place looked private, it likely was not. He mentally pushed down his reservations and let his senses rule. He turned around in Hutch’s arms and put his arms around his neck. “When that guy put his hand on you, it did something to me,” he growled, sounding angrier than he meant to.

Hutch kissed Starsky’s neck, trailing a path up to his ear, where he dipped his tongue in, whispering into the wetness, “I don’t want to talk about him.” Shivers travelled all the way to Starsky’s toes.

He brought his hands down from around Hutch’s neck and started to unbutton the buttons. Hutch surprised him by grabbing the hem of his shirt and pulling it up over his head on one swoop, tossing the shirt across the room. His eyes glowed a deep blue, looking full of want. Starsky forgot to breathe for a moment. “Ken,” he blurted, breathlessly.

Hutch took a step closer, and Starsky could feel his hot breath on his skin. Hutch grabbed his own belt and undid the buckle and unzipped the fly in one swift move. Just as swiftly, he grabbed Starsky’s shirt and peeled it off his shoulders, and down his arms. Starsky was about to take the shirt the rest of the way off, freeing his wrists, when Hutch pushed him backwards onto the bed.

In that instant, Starsky realized his arms were now pinned at his sides, caught in the fabric of his shirt, and he was unable to move. “I’m trapped,” he declared, opening his hands outward in a request for help.

Hutch loomed over him, his hands on either side of his arms, and he inhaled deeply, as if drinking in his partner’s scent. “I know,” he responded, his eyes hungry. Starsky could see the predator in his eyes, and felt a rush at being his prey. Hutch grabbed him and slid him further onto the bed in a show of strength and determination, Starsky’s hands even more tightly fixed at his sides.

Hutch shed the rest of his clothes, staring intently at Starsky as he did so. Starsky could see the dare in his eyes, daring him to move, the readiness to pounce if he did. Then he turned his attention to Starsky’s jeans. He worked more slowly, peeling the tight garment down his body, as if savoring the move. He climbed back up Starsky’s body, between his legs, gliding his body against Starsky’s. When their erections collided, Starsky gasped, feeling overwhelmed by Hutch’s skilled teasing. Through gritted teeth, Starsky asked, “You’ve got me at your mercy. What are you going to do with me?”

He kissed the other side of Starsky’s neck this time, dipping his tongue into his other ear. He whispered to him, “I’m going to make you want me.”

Starsky laughed. "I already want you, babe. You're killing me. Please!" He writhed under him. Hutch kissed down his neck to his chest. He began to suck and kiss Starsky's nipples. Starsky strained against his makeshift restraints, growling loudly, as he squelched the desire to yell Hutch's name. As if in response, Hutch reached between his legs, and stroked his perineum, all while he kissed Starsky's navel, dipping his tongue into the tight space. Starsky felt the stimulation shoot directly to his groin. "Damn you! Bastard!" he laughed.

Hutch grinned lecherously. "Music to my ears," he winked. He kissed Starsky's balls, sucking one then the other into his mouth, lavishing with his tongue. He circled Starsky's anus with the tip of his finger.

"Ken!" he growled through clenched teeth. "Can't take it!"

Climbing back up his body, Hutch wrapped his large hand around both their erections. "You'll take it," he ordered. "And you'll hold on. Hold on until I tell you you can let go."

"I can't," Starsky panted. "I'm close."

"You can," he quietly demanded. "Not yet."

Hutch increased the pace. Starsky was trembling under the strain, and he felt Hutch began to tremble as well. The desire was so intense that Starsky was staring into Hutch's eyes, seeing nothing but the deep blue, hanging on to the exquisite torture.

"Now," Hutch commanded. Starsky was overtaken by the powerful orgasm, the burst of thrill screaming through him as it rocked his body. He felt Hutch crumple into him, panting, also spent. Hutch finally wrapped his arms around him, dragging him off the bed onto his chest. Starsky, free at last, whipped off the shirt and threw it across the room. He collapsed onto Hutch, his heart exploding in his chest. He could hear Hutch's heart pounding just as wildly as his own. Hutch began to laugh. "Damn! You have amazing control!"

Starsky started to laugh, too. "What're you doing to me? 'Hold on until I tell you to let go.' What the hell was that? I swear, you have a sadistic streak." He took Hutch's hand, entwining their fingers.

"I never thought you'd do it," Hutch laughed. He pulled Starsky into a kiss. "God, I love you."

"You'd better. I'm all yours, babe." He kissed Hutch's hand. "I need a drink. Let's get outta here."

Leaving the room, Starsky led the way. He deliberately went the wrong way when he exited, heading away from the exit. Hutch followed without question. Unexpectedly, two men came around the corner in front of them and stopped at the end of the hall, blocking their way. Starsky could see an office behind the men, Scranton visible through the office window. "Can I help you, sir?" One of the men called to Starsky.

Starsky smiled. "No thanks. Just heading back to the bar," he said cheerfully, as he attempted to walk past the two men.

One of the men held up a hand, halting Starsky. "I'm sorry sir. The offices are that way. The exit to the bar is behind you."

"What? Oh! Thanks!" Starsky said. "I must've got turned around." He turned to go back the other way, nudging Hutch to follow.

~*~

Walking through their front door, Hutch said, "Rebel, Tom, backyard." Starsky followed him to the sliding door, and out to the backyard. They made their way to the fence separating their property from Rebel's. Tom and Rebel joined them.

"Okay, so we're wired then," Hutch stated. "Where are they?"

"Livingroom, dining room, kitchen," Tom confirmed. "We're in the dark out here, the bathroom, the bedroom."

"I want to test this," Hutch told them. "You got a radio?" Rebel pulled out her radio, and Tom handed Hutch his. "Get your ears on." Rebel put moved the headset from around her neck to over her ears. She gave him the thumbs up.

Starsky and Hutch walked through the house, testing if Rebel could hear them or not.

"I checked the live areas pretty extensively. You can't so much as drop a toothpick without me knowing," Rebel warned them. "White wanted the bathroom and the bedrooms lit up, too, but I talked him out of it. You guys have to have some privacy. Plus, if Scranton comes here, he's not likely to chat you up in those areas. It's a waste of surveillance."

Starsky handed her back the radio. "Thanks."

Tom looked to Hutch. "How'd it go at the bar tonight? Was this your first time out there at night?"

"Yeah, I was about to call it in. We made a little progress. We got onto the second floor, and ran across Scranton's office. It's well guarded, though."

"Wow," Rebel exclaimed. "How'd you manage that?"

"Right place right time," Starsky answered evasively, though truthfully.

"When do you start your undercover personas?" Tom asked.

"I start at the photo studio Tuesday," Starsky relayed. "Hutch starts at the park district next Monday."

"What do they have you doing with the part district, Hutch?" Rebel asked him.

"I'll be running a day camp for kids for the summer," Hutch explained. "They thought my background with Big Brothers, along with my lifeguard experience, would lend well to this."

“That reminds me,” Starsky snapped his fingers. He turned to Rebel and Tom. “Would you guys come in and pose for me? I need some couple shots, like engagement photos. I just need a couple, so it wouldn’t take too long.”

“You think we can pose for an engagement shot?” Rebel was surprised.

“Sure, why not? We put a fake rock on your finger, poof, you’re a couple. I’ll make it look romantic.”

“Ok by me,” Tom said. “Just don’t show it to my wife.”

Starsky smiled. “Great! Now I just need some kids.”

“You want a toddler?” Rebel offered. “I have a cousin with a little boy. I’m sure she’d do it.”

“That’d be perfect. I’ll shoot some of Hutch, too. Then I’ll have a good sampling to hang on the wall.”

“Me?” Hutch sounded surprised. “You don’t want me.”

“I definitely want you,” Starsky grinned. “I’ll make you look like a movie star.”

“Great,” Hutch grumbled. “I love to look shallow and narcissistic.”

“What names are you working under?” Tom inquired.

“Dave Stark and Ken Hodges,” Hutch replied. “For long term undercover cases, the Feds like to keep it close to your real name, in case there are slip ups.”

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Starsky stood back and surveyed the wall of photos. The studio gave him the north wall of the shop to display sample photos, and he finally had enough to fill it up. True to his word, he made Hutch the center of the wall. His handsome features photographed easily, making the alluring blond man look like a professional model. Tom and Rebel made a believable engaged couple, with the help of a fake engagement ring.

Starsky laughed when he saw the photo of Rebel’s cousin’s little boy. He had been a difficult shoot. Rebel brought him with her, and the boy stared crying for his mother. None of them had been able to get him to stop crying. Starsky tried to clown it up with a little rubber duck that seemed to catch the boy’s eye, but even that wasn’t enough to get him to smile. On a flash of inspiration, Starsky held up the duck, squeaking it loudly to capture his attention, then quickly pretended to chomp the duck’s head off. The boy squealed in delight, laughing heartily. Starsky had popped the duck on his head, and continued to fire off several awesome shots. The final result was a beautiful portrait of a little boy with a giant smile and laughing eyes.

He felt a surge of pride, looking over his work. Starsky had always enjoyed photography, and he had always wondered if he had enough skill to make a living at it. This was a fun way to test the possibility without putting himself at risk. He was enjoying the assignment immensely.

His 2:00 appointment walked in alone, looking like she was about to burst into tears. She was 16 years old, and her mother wanted a Sweet 16 photo in a dress to share with her relatives. The poor girl was an absolute tomboy, and hated the dress her mother had chosen. To make matters worse, her mother had sent her to have her hair done up, and the girl felt overdone. There was nothing wrong with the dress. It was simple and elegant, and looked like it would suit the girl's coloring well. She just hated the idea of a dress at all. And her red hair, which the girl preferred to wear pulled back in a ponytail, looked lovely in the feminine curls and braids. The look was alien to the girl, and she couldn't see anything of herself in it.

"Look at this thing," she complained, holding the hanger under her chin. "It looks like an old lady dress."

Starsky shook his head. Playing a little devil's advocate, he commiserated with her. "That's not the sort of dress I would've picked for a girl your age," he said. "Geez, in that thing, you'll look way older. About the only thing going for it is that the color will make your eyes look spectacular."

The girl looked up. "My eyes?"

"Oh yeah. Take a look." He brought her over a mirror. "Hold the dress up next to your face. See how the green makes your eyes glow? That'll look great on film."

The girl's expression changed. "Wow, it does make my eyes look cool."

"And I'm with you. The hairstyle is pretty formal. I wouldn't let my daughter do that. A kid your age should be in a baseball cap and jeans. You know, I'm a dad. I'd be afraid I'd have to beat the guys off with a stick if my little girl came in dressed like that, and with her hair all done up."

She looked at the dress again. "Does it look awful? And the hair? Will I look like a clown?"

"No, it's not awful," Starsky said, overlooking everything critically. "I think I can do something with it. If you don't mind looking like a model. I don't think I can make you look like a teenager, with this. But it will be pretty. If that's okay with you."

She sighed. "I guess I could give it a chance." Starsky directed her to a changing room. When she finally emerged in the dress, Starsky stopped and stared at her. She looked amazing.

"You're staring," the girl complained, looking embarrassed. "I do look like a clown!"

"No." Starsky took her by the hand and stood her in front of the full length mirror. "Look. Ginny, you're beautiful! You don't look like a young girl; you look like a woman. A striking woman. You're gonna break some hearts, sweetheart."

She looked at the mirror, and turned to him, eyes sparkling. "Do you really think so?"

He laughed. "Come on, kiddo. You look like a model. Let's get you on film."

The girl had been a fun shoot. Once she saw herself looking great in the hair and the dress, she lit up. The camera loved her, and she hammed it up one moment and flirted with the lense the next.

No matter what she did, she looked lovely. To finish off the shoot, Starsky suggested she make some silly faces, just for fun. Starsky couldn't wait to see how it all came out.

After processing the film, Starsky laid the photos out side by side on the table. His boss walked up beside him, whistling softly. "Wow, she's a fox," Charlie said.

"Down boy," Starsky grinned. "She's sixteen."

"Sixteen?!" Charlie exclaimed. "Holy shit! They didn't look like that when I was sixteen!"

"You'd never believe it to look at these," Starsky mused, "but this kid is a real tomboy."

Charlie closely examined the photos. "Dave, I know you're just doing this temporarily, but I gotta tell you, you're one of the best photographers I've ever worked with. You have a real eye for this." He looked up at his wall of photos. "I can't believe you just threw together photos of your friends. You have the soul of an artist."

Starsky smiled. "Thanks, Charlie!"

Chapter 8

Starsky and Hutch entered The Gym to find Scranton standing over the bartender, who was sitting on a stool behind the bar. There was a blood stained towel in Scranton's hand that he was pressing to the man's forehead. At the end of the bar, there was a hinged swinging panel that the bartender could use as a door to come from behind the bar. Hutch slipped behind the bar and walked up to the two men. "Let me take a look," he said to Scranton.

Scranton pulled the towel away to reveal a large gash in the man's forehead. "Do you have a clean towel?" Hutch asked. Scranton grabbed a clean towel from a cabinet and handed one to Hutch. Folding the towel into a square, he pressed it to the man's wound. "You're going to need stitches," he told the bartender.

The bartender gave a fearful look to Scranton, who pointed out, "It's pretty much stopped bleeding. Maybe that won't be necessary?"

Hutch shook his head. "No way. That's too deep. It's definitely going to need stitches. What happened?"

The bartender explained, "I was putting cases of booze on a shelf in the back and one slipped. The corner got me right in the head. Hey look, I'm sure it's going to be fine. I don't need stitches." He started to get up when he caught sight of the bloody towel in Scranton's hand. "Is that from me?" he asked, color completely draining from his face.

Hutch grabbed the man by the arms and eased him back onto the stool. "Easy does it," he said calmly. "Not too crazy about the sight of blood, huh?"

The man's voice was shaky. "It doesn't usually bother me, as long as it's not mine."

"Dave, can you bring the car around to the front door?" Hutch addressed Starsky. "He's going to need a doctor." Starsky nodded and was out the door in a flash.

"Are you a doctor?" Scranton asked Hutch.

"No," Hutch replied. "I've had EMT training though. And I know this wound is beyond my skill. Dave and I can take him to the hospital. They'll have him fixed up in no time."

"Hospital?" The bartender looked pale again.

Starsky came back in and held the swinging panel open for the men to come through. "Car's right out front."

"I don't know about this," the bartender protested. "I don't want some big scar."

Starsky chuckled. "Scars aren't so bad." He nodded to Hutch. "He loves my scars."

"You have scars?" the bartender asked.

"Lots of scars," Starsky assured him. "I'll show you sometime."

Hutch escorted the man through the swinging door, his arm snugly around him in case he was still woozy. Once through the door, Starsky joined him on the other side, and the two safely brought him outside and into the back seat of Starsky's car. Hutch got in the back with him, and Starsky drove. "What's your name?" Hutch asked him.

"I'm Tony. Listen, it's really nice of you guys to do this. I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"I'm Ken," Hutch told him. "And this is Dave. And it's no trouble. We just want to see you get the help you need."

In the hospital's emergency room, Tony confessed to Starsky and Hutch that he was afraid of needles, and was afraid of the stitches and scars. He turned to Starsky. "You said you have scars?"

Starsky unbuttoned his shirt, dropping it down off his shoulders. The scars there were quite visible. "Yeah, I've got a few," he smiled. "Five, actually. A souvenir of my tour in Nam."

Tony was amazed. "And they don't bother you?" he asked of Hutch.

"I love his scars," Hutch admitted. "They're symbolic. They tell me he's been through a lot. And he's strong. A survivor. And... I think they're sexy." He winked at Starsky, as he re-buttoned his shirt.

"After seeing your scars," he pointed to his forehead, "this is really nothing, huh?"

"Piece of cake," Starsky told him. "You got this."

The doctor came into the room, "Alrighty. Let's get you stitched up," he said to Tony. "You ready?"

Tony looked at Starsky and nodded. "I'm ready."

~*~

Friday night at The Gym was crowded. Starsky was seated at a booth, with his feet stretched out the length of it, Hutch sitting across from him. Scranton stopped by their booth and thanked them for bringing his bartender to the hospital earlier in the week. He left them some drink coupons for their efforts.

The man who had commented to Hutch about hyperventilating over Starsky stopped by as well. He slipped into the booth next to Hutch, making eyes at Starsky. He was heavily made up again, his lashes looking far longer than nature provided. "Sugar, are you tired of this one yet?" he asked Hutch. "I'll be happy to take him off your hands."

Hutch laughed and shook his head. "It's not gonna happen," he chuckled. "Seriously, would you get tired of him?"

"Oh, no no no," He confirmed. "He's just hot sex on toast, isn't he? Mm mm mm." He scooted to the edge of the seat, as if preparing to leave. "I should mosey along. My cheating ex is here

tonight, and I plan on flirting with every single man in this bar, just to make him eat his heart out. You two boys enjoy your evening, and be sure to come visit if you get bored.”

Chuckling, Hutch noted, “He’s a character.”

“I should help him out,” Starsky grinned. “Should I ask him to dance? Make his ex a bit jealous?”

Hutch laughed. “Actually, I think it’s a great idea. We both should. You go first. I’ll cut in during the next slow song.”

Starsky jumped up and went off in search of Eyelashes. He found him at the end of the bar, with a small group of friends. He leaned in close and asked where his ex was. Eyelashes indicated he was seated further down the bar, chatting flirtatiously with a man in a suit. Starsky patted Eyelashes on the shoulder and said, “I’ll be right back.” He walked over the juke box and made a few selections, then walked back past the ex, seated at the bar.

Accidentally on purpose, Starsky bumped into the ex. He apologized for his clumsiness then strutted right up to Eyelashes, as Wild Thing started play. He could feel the ex watching him. He turned up the charm as he asked Eyelashes to dance. The rest of the group loudly approved, practically shoving the man into Starsky’s arms. He whisked him to the dance floor, and did his best to look like he was quite smitten with his dance partner.

By the time the next song started, they were having a blast. Do You Think I’m Sexy was a favorite of Starsky’s and he flaunted his assets well as it played. Now it wasn’t only Eyelashes’ group that was cheering them on. During their dance to You Sexy Thing, the dance floor was packed, and Starsky realized he was getting gropes from others on the dance floor as well. Amused by the experience, he brought Eyelashes back to his seat and ordered them each drinks. It wasn’t long before Hutch appeared. Eyelashes looked disappointed at first, believing Hutch was reclaiming his date, but when Hutch asked him to dance as Marvin Gaye’s Let’s Get It On began, his face lit up. Hutch played doting and romantic beautifully. Starsky watched, feeling a pang of jealousy himself, seeing Hutch gazing into another man’s eyes. He laughed at his own silliness, knowing this was all for the benefit of the ex, and shook off his unexpected emotions.

Eyelashes’ friends were a lively group, and obviously cared a great deal for their friend. Starsky was glad they had helped the man, and helped lift his spirits after his heart had been broken. While Hutch and Eyelashes danced to Sinatra’s Fly Me to the Moon, the ex got up to leave. One of the group nudged Starsky to point it out to him. To Starsky’s amusement, the guy left alone.

When the song ended, Eyelashes rushed back and threw himself into Starsky’s arms. “Oh you DOLL!” he exclaimed. “I’d kiss you, but I don’t want Blondie’s wrath coming down on me!” He shook Starsky’s hand heartily. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. I owe you, big time!” He spun around and faced Hutch. “And YOU! You romantic dream! You guys are the BEST! I swear, I will never flirt with your man again! Okay, that’s a lie. But I will be indebted to you forever! Please, I want to introduce you to my friends, but I don’t know your names...”

Hutch pulled Starsky into his arms. “I’m Ken, and this is Dave.”

“I’m Keith,” Eyelashes told him, “but no one call me that. My friends call me Keeter.” He proceeded to introduce all the members of his group.

A short time later, Tony flagged Starsky over to the bar. “Hey, Dave, I saw what you did for Keeter. He’s a great guy. I really appreciate you helping him out like that.”

“I didn’t realize you two knew each other,” Starsky said.

“Everyone knows Keeter,” Tony smiled. “He practically grew up here. He’s my boss’s nephew. Scranton’s been like a father to him since his folks threw him out.”

“His parents threw him out?”

“Yeah, when he told them he was gay. Scranton was the only family that would have anything to do with him. Such a shame. He’s a great kid. He’s got a big heart.”

~*~

Starsky and Hutch continued to visit the bar once a week for a quick afternoon rendezvous, and every Friday night. They were on friendly terms with many of the employees and the patrons, and settled into their new routine. Though it was only Wednesday, Hutch had an exhausting day with the kids at camp, and suggested going out for dinner and grabbing a drink before heading home.

“Two margaritas, coming up,” Starsky handed one to Hutch. “Thought it would go down good after those enchiladas. They were great, weren’t they?”

“Delicious!” Hutch confirmed. “We have to go back there again. They’re better than Manuel’s.”

A handsome young man with stylishly tousled hair, slid into the booth beside Hutch. He gave the men a broad smile, his remarkable grey eyes twinkling. He looked strongly familiar to Starsky, though he couldn’t place where he knew him from. “Hello,” he said to the man.

The stranger’s smile broadened, showing his deep dimples. In a smooth deep voice he asked Hutch, “Sugar, are you tired of this one yet? I’ll be happy to take him off your hands.”

“Keeter?” Hutch’s jaw dropped. The man looked completely different without his garish makeup, and without the slicked back hair. He had also dropped his flamboyant gestures and voice. Without makeup, he was far more attractive, and considerably more masculine.

“Holy shit!” Starsky exclaimed. “Man, what happened to you?”

Keeter laughed at their surprise. “I thought it was time for a makeover. Or makeunder. Whatever. I needed a change.”

“It suits you,” Hutch told him.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve gone au naturel. I guess I just want people to accept me for who I am.” He glanced over to his group of friends at the end of the bar. “I’ve gotten a real positive response from my friends. And I’ve even got a date on Friday! I hope you guys are here. I’d love to introduce you.”

“We’ll be glad to meet him!” Starsky exclaimed. “We want to be sure he’s good enough for you, Keeter.” He winked at him.

Keeter stood up. “I’d better get back. Stop over, if you like!” He waved as he turned back to join his friends.

“I really like that kid,” Starsky grinned.

A commotion at the front entrance caught their attention. Starsky looked up to see at least three men with rifles at the entrance, weapons pointed at the heads of the bouncers. He grabbed Hutch’s arm. “Get down!” he shouted.

Hutch grabbed the table and flipped it on its side, shielding them within the booth. Starsky pushed out his edge of the table so he could see the group at the end of the bar. “Keeter, get down!” he called to him. Their friend grabbed his pals and got down on their hands and knees, facing Starsky and Hutch, afraid and looking for direction.

Evaluating their situation, Starsky noticed the two booths closest to the entrance were empty. Some patrons had been seated at the bar and were now being held captive, along with the men that had been close to the door. There was one more booth along their wall, and the four who were in the booth were crammed in under the table. Starsky called to them, telling them to flip their table as they had. They quickly followed suit. The two bouncers up front had been attacked and beaten by the men with the guns, and one was now unconscious on the floor. They were hitting the second, all the while shouting homophobic rhetoric and insults.

“I’m gonna try and get them out of here,” Starsky said of the patrons around them. “If we slide these tables out, I think we can provide cover for the four next to us to get behind the bar. Then we can get them out the back.”

“Good. Go for it,” Hutch nodded. They moved in unison, sliding the table out. They waved the four beside them to do the same, and they slid theirs further out toward the bar. They created a shielded path from the booths nearly to the bar,

Starsky waved them on, crouched behind the upturned table, scurrying for the cover of the bar. Now all the back patrons were away from the immediate area of the gunmen. “Let’s go.” Starsky said to Hutch, and followed the others to the bar. When he joined them, he turned around to find that Hutch had remained behind. Starsky frowned. He realized Hutch was going to stay to try to help those by the door.

He rushed over to Keeter. “Anyone have a key to the red door?” A friend of Keeter’s held up a key. Starsky grabbed it. “Perfect. Keeter take this. You and your friends go upstairs. See if you can find a phone. Call 911. Go!” They took off running for the locked door. Starsky led the rest of the group to the exit out the patio. He instructed the bouncers to push the benches to the gate, so everyone could easily climb up and over the privacy fence around the patio. “Help everyone over! Get ‘em out of here!” The bouncers did as they were told.

Starsky made his way back to the bar to re-assess the situation. He heard Hutch addressing the gunmen from the middle of the room. Looking over bar, he could see Hutch standing with his arms outstretched in surrender. "You don't want to do this," Hutch was calmly telling them.

Suddenly, the red door opened and Scranton and his men came out, all armed with guns. Starsky whipped around and grabbed Scranton, shoving him back, along with his men, back into the doorway. "What the hell do you think you're doing!" He hissed. "You're gonna get my partner killed!" He yanked a rifle from one of the other men. "Get back! Give me five minutes, God damn it! Then you can have a fucking bloodbath if you want! But let me get him out of there!"

Keeter and his friends came from behind Scranton. Starsky turned to him. "Keeter, get them and get out of here, now!" He gestured for the back door. "Scranton, can I get behind the bar from here?" Scranton pulled him into the red doorway, showing him a door that led straight behind the bar. Starsky flipped off the light in the stairway, then ducked down and slipped through the doorway.

Starsky heard Keeter's voice and cringed. The young man walked right into the fray with a handgun brandished before him. He sternly ordered one of the gunman to let the patrons go. Starsky's stomach dropped to his shoes. The gunman turned on him. He walked straight up to him shouting, "Oh yeah, ya little faggot? Ya gonna shoot me? Go ahead, queer! Shoot me! DO IT!" Keeter froze, unable to pull the trigger. The man ripped the gun out of his hand and hit him across the face with it. Keeter staggered and fell into the booth. The man continued to hit him until he finally collapsed into a heap on the floor. "Damn pansy!" he spit at him and stormed back toward the entrance.

Starsky slipped back through the door, and back out into the bar. He spotted Tony with Scanton's men. "Tony! Come help me get Keeter!" He laid the gun on the floor by the red door. The two men crouched down and ran around the bar to where Keeter lay crumpled on the ground. One of the tables had been pushed out of the way, leaving the man exposed. Starsky whispered to Tony, "I'm going to grab him. When I do, grab me and pull me back."

He crawled quickly to the man and grabbed him by the shirt. Tony yanked Starsky by the ankles, pulling them both to the safety of coverage behind the bar. Starsky checked him over, and found his hand covered in blood. "What the hell? Was he shot?" Looking back to where he dragged him from, he saw a wide smear of blood on the floor tile. He quickly checked the man for injuries. "He's been stabbed," he told Tony. Starsky's heart sank. There was a lot of blood. "We've got to get him out of here." He grabbed the towel off Tony's shoulder and folded it into a square, pressing it into the man's belly. "Quick, go hold the door." As Tony ran for the exit to the patio, Starsky picked up Keeter, still pressing the towel into his wound. He ran after Tony and out the door. "Get over!" he yelled, and Tony obeyed, climbing over the privacy fence, Starsky climbed to the top and handed Keeter down to Tony, who sank to his knees under the weight. Starsky jumped to the ground and picked Keeter back up and ran him to the next building, behind The Gym.

The building was a coffee shop, and Starsky ran in the front door shouting, "Call 911! He's been stabbed!" The kid behind the counter picked up the phone and did as he was told. Starsky had

laid Keeter on a table, pressing the cloth into his side. He looked to Tony. "This is bad." He leaned close to Keeter's face. "Hang in there, buddy. Help is coming."

A pair of paramedics walked through the front door with a gurney. "John!" Starsky cried. "Thank God." He turned him aside and whispered, "I'm undercover." John nodded once. Starsky showed him Keeter's wound. "He's breathing, he's got a pulse, but he's lost a lot of blood." John asked questions about what happened, getting the patient onto the gurney. John and his partner loaded Keeter into the ambulance, and Starsky directed Tony to get in with him. He looked to John. "John, please. Take good care of him. Get him through this."

John nodded. "I'll do all I can. Aren't you coming?"

"I gotta go get Ken," Starsky said, as he shut the ambulance door.

~*~

Starsky ran back into the bar and retrieved the gun he had taken from Scranton's man. Scranton held up his hand, fingers spread, and Starsky understood that he was giving him five minutes. He nodded and slipped through the door leading behind the bar.

Hutch was talking to the gunman, trying to convince him to let the bouncer go. "He's not one of us," Hutch tried to reason. "He's not gay. The guy is just trying to make a living for his wife and kid. Let him go."

The gunman got in the bouncer's face. "That right? You're not one of these fairies?"

The bouncer swallowed hard and replied, "Don't tell my boss. I need the job."

Nodding to the door, the gunman said, "Get out of here." The man ran out quickly.

Starsky wiped the sweat from his forehead and tried to catch his breath. He was relieved to hear Hutch still talking and relieved he got one more innocent out of harm's way. He knew Hutch had lied about the bouncer being married; Starsky had been introduced to the man's partner. He hoped Hutch would keep talking to help him get his bearings on where the guns were. To the best he could figure, the one was right in front of the entrance, another at the bar's edge. The last one was the one talking to Hutch.

"Hey, you by the bar," Hutch called out. "You don't need to hold that rifle right in his face. We know you've got the power. Just tell us what you're going to do with us."

Starsky heard the man take a few steps forward in Hutch's direction. That was good. It sounded like he was no longer holding the patron with the gun at his face.

"You keep your mouth shut," he yelled to Hutch, "or I'll rope you to the back of my pickup and take you for a ride!"

The other two men laughed, and Starsky could tell one was right in front of him. The other was by Hutch. The one by Hutch said "I'll bet he's with that one. He's awful worried about you pointing a gun at him. What if I take a shot at him, huh? Whatcha gonna do?" He laughed evilly.

Starsky popped up from behind the bar, his gun pointed at one of the gunmen. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," he said.

Hutch jumped up then and grabbed the rifle of the surprised man beside him, slamming the butt of the rifle right into the man's belly, dropping him to his knees. Hutch then pointed the gun right at the last remaining gunman, who dropped his weapon and raised his hands. Starsky disarmed his gunman as well.

Scranton and his men came from around the bar. He directed the two men to get the gunmen out of there. Scranton then approached Starsky and asked, "Are Tony and Keeter on the patio?"

"No," Starsky informed him. "Keeter was hurt. Bad. He's on his way to Memorial. Tony is with him."

"How bad?" Scranton demanded, as his face dramatically paled. "I thought he was knocked out!"

"The guy didn't just punch him in the gut. He stabbed him."

Scranton's eyes went ice cold. He grabbed one of his men, and took him aside, speaking quietly.

Grabbing the bar's phone, Starsky called 911. He described the situation and instructed them to send police immediately. "...They are now disarmed. I'm going to stay on the line until you arrive... No. We've already called you once and nobody responded. I want to stay on the line and you can keep me posted on where they are and how long it will take for them to get here. I'm not hanging up until a cop walks in this door. ...Yes, that's right... Thank you."

A few minutes later Hutch signaled to Starsky that the police had arrived, and he ended his call with the 911 dispatcher. They both spoke with the officers, as did Scranton, Tony, and the remaining employees and patrons.

As the situation was turned over to the authorities, Starsky went up to Hutch and wrapped his arms around him. "You scared the shit out of me," he admitted.

Hutch squeezed him. "I had a hard time pinpointing you tonight."

"I was all over," he exhaled deeply, "just trying to get everyone out. I *thought* I had Keeter out." He looked at Hutch restlessly. "Hey, I really want to get to the hospital and see how he's doing. Can we head over?"

"Sure. Fill me in on what happened with him on the way."

~*~

Starsky gripped the payphone as he waited to get through. "Minnie, it's Starsky. Put me through to Captain Dobey... Captain! Starsky. I want you to check into something. There was a 911 call from The Gym tonight. Armed gunman came in and held several civilians at gunpoint, and they had a gun on Hutch, too. Cap, none of the uni's showed up. No! Nothing! I want to know what the hell happened! A man was stabbed! It just as easily could've been Hutch! Yeah, it's serious! No! I'm not gonna calm down! We were on our own in there! Okay. Okay." He covered the

phone and spoke to Hutch. "He's checking with 911 dispatch." A moment later, he spoke into the phone again. "They did. So who the hell was dispatched? Okay. Thanks, Cap." He hung up the phone. "He said they got two calls from The Gym before mine. He's not sure yet who was dispatched, or what happened. He's checking into it."

"Starsk, it's The Gym. It's a gay bar. They're not responding, and they're not going to. The same reasons that Scranton finds safety hiding behind that bar are also the reasons they are vulnerable to attacks from anti-gay groups."

"Not everyone's like that, Hutch. There's gotta be good cops out there that'll respond. They can't all be like that! We're not like that!"

"The only people we're going to be able to count on are each other," Hutch reminded him.

~*~

At the hospital, Starsky saw John and his paramedic partner leaving the emergency room.

"John!" Starsky called out to him. "How is he?"

John walked up. "Hi. He's hanging in there. They're just wheeling him down to surgery. Hey listen, the other guy you were with asked me how I knew you. I didn't know what to say, so I just said we were old friends. Is that okay?"

"That's great, John, thanks. And thanks for taking good care of him. I knew I could count on you."

"That other guy said you were at The Gym. What the hell are you doing there? That place is dangerous. Every few weeks or so they have trouble at that place."

"Working, John. You know how it goes."

John nodded. "Be careful. I don't want to be picking up either of you."

They said their goodbyes to John and caught up with Tony in the waiting room. "Ken! Dave! Man, am I glad to see you. And in one piece! How'd it go at the bar?"

"It's over now," Hutch told him. "The bouncers are okay, just bruised up pretty good. The only other one hurt was Keeter."

"They're operating on him now," Tony said sadly. "Poor kid. I wish he'd just left when Dave told him. He wouldn't be in this mess. He came back after he got his friends out the door."

Scranton walked in to the waiting room, flanked by two of his men. He came directly up to Starsky, Hutch and Tony, and inquired after Keeter. Then he placed a hand on Starsky's shoulder. "I want to thank you three for all you did tonight. Tony, I appreciate you staying with Keeter and making sure he wasn't alone. And for helping Dave get him to safety. Ken, I hear you put yourself on the line, trying to get things calmed down, and get people out of there. And Dave, thank you for risking your life to get Keeter to a doctor, and for all you did to get my customers out of there. There's no telling what would've happened if you all hadn't been there." He addressed Starsky directly. "Dave, you really handled yourself like a pro. The way you got Keeter out, the way you handled a gun, your command of the situation. What do you do for a living, if you don't mind my asking?"

“I’m a studio photographer,” he replied with a grin.

Scranton laughed. “Now I know you didn’t learn how to command a crisis like that from snapping pics of snotty nosed rugrats.”

“He’s a vet,” Tony volunteered. “He was in Nam. He showed me his battle scars when he took me to get stitches.”

“Ah, that explains it,” Scranton nodded in understanding. “Thank you for your service.” He offered a handshake to Starsky. He looked to Hutch. “And how about you? Where do you work, Ken?”

“I work for the Park District, running the summer camp for kids.”

“And were you in the service too? You don’t learn courage like that singing around a camp fire.”

Hutch smiled. “No. I was on my own at a young age. I had to survive on the streets. You learn to how to take care of yourself. Plus, this one kinda wears off on me.” He winked at Starsky.

Scranton took a seat, Starsky and Hutch seated across from him, and Tony beside him. “In my organization, we are a family,” Scranton told them. “I demand loyalty, and I reward my employees with excellent pay and top notch benefits. I’d really like to have you both join my team. I own a lot of businesses, and I’m sure I can find a good fit for you, doing a job that satisfies you, and getting paid well for doing it. I want you two to work for me. Dave, I would really like to see you head up my personal security team. I think you’d be a natural fit, and fill a real need. And Ken, I can see you on that team as well, or we can talk about other positions that you might find more suitable. Bottom line, I want people I can trust, and people who have heart. Let’s make this happen. What do you say? I guarantee you’ll see a big step up in pay from whatever you’re making now.”

Starsky grinned. “I would definitely be interested. I’d like to talk more in depth about this, and find out more before I commit. But yeah, I like the sound of this.”

“I’d like to hear more,” Hutch said. “Your offer is intriguing. I haven’t felt fulfilled where I am. But I’m not so sure a security detail is really my thing.”

“That’s great,” Scranton clapped his hands together. “I’m sure we can find a good fit for you. We’ll talk.” He shook their hands.

Chapter 9

Starsky and Hutch went to the cafeteria to get some coffee as they waited for news on Keeter. The lights were off in half the room, the place kept open only for people like them, looking for a late cup of coffee. Starsky slumped over his cup, rubbing his forehead. "I hate this waiting. I just want to hear he's going to be alright."

Hutch put down his cup. "You're really upset. You've become pretty attached to this kid, haven't you."

"Yeah, I have," he admitted.

"Starsk," Hutch began in a quiet voice, "can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Hutch took Starsky's hand and held it. "Look at me. Should I be feeling jealous right now?"

Starsky saw the sincere concern written all over Hutch's face and his mouth dropped open. "What? No!" He covered their hands with his free hand. "You know you're the only man for me." He gave him a pointed look. "You're the only *one* for me."

"Why is this affecting you so deeply?"

He sat back. "I don't know. I think it's because he reminds me of you."

Hutch grinned. "I don't remember ever wearing that much makeup."

Laughing, Starsky shook his head. "It's not his looks, exactly. It's just something about him. I see in his eyes that same naïve look you had, when we first met. I see in his smile that same innocence you had when we were young, and not so cynical. And then you pile on the fact that his family threw him out, and his lover treated him like shit... It just reminded me of you; what you went through." He looked into Hutch's eyes. "I wasn't there for you. I couldn't support you. I couldn't help... I was a lousy friend for you. You couldn't even talk to me... But I could be there for this kid... I could help this kid..."

Hutch opened his mouth as if to speak, but closed it. Starsky thought his eyes looked damp. "Why would you say that? You're not a lousy friend."

"You said you couldn't tell me your secrets, because we'd talked about homosexuality, and about John Blaine; that you knew I'd be pissed, 'cause I was pissed about John."

Hutch turned away, and Starsky could see the muscles tense and flex in his jaw. He looked back and said, "I never should have said that to you. I'm sorry. I was angry and bitter... I was hurting because I wanted you, and I loved you, and it felt like this case was rubbing my face in it." He pulled Starsky's hand to his lips and kissed his ring. He then pulled his hand to his chest and held it there. "I know you as well as I know myself. You have always been a good friend to me. I knew! I knew back then that I could have told you about my homosexuality, and you would have understood. I knew you would have gotten behind me, you would have supported me. I have no doubt. None."

“If that were true, you would’ve told me.” Starsky shook his head sadly. “Has there ever been anyone that knew you, knew your secrets, and accepted you? I wanted to be *that* friend to you. I wanted you to know you could trust me not to let you down.”

His voice was hoarse. “You never let me down.” Hutch’s eyes looked pleading to Starsky. “I was afraid. I wasn’t afraid you’d reject me if I told you I was gay. I was afraid of something I couldn’t ask you. Something I couldn’t fish around and find out. I was afraid sometime I’d slip up, and you’d see the desire in my eyes, you’d see how much I wanted you, you’d see how much I loved you, and you wouldn’t be able to handle it. You’d withdraw from me. Not because you were disgusted by homosexuality, but because you couldn’t return my feelings, and because we weren’t on the same plane any longer.”

“To answer the question you couldn’t ask,” Starsky replied, “I would’ve handled it. I wouldn’t have withdrawn. We would’ve worked it out.”

“I’m touched by your response to Keeter. But you’ve never failed me. It’s not that I never let you provide that kind of support to me; it’s that I always trusted that you were there if I needed you. I didn’t need to see it, to know it’s in your heart. You’ve always been *that* friend, the only friend, that would accept me, that would never let me down.”

“Shut up and kiss me, damn it,” Starsky grinned at him.

Hutch complied.

~*~

The surgeon approached Scranton, Tony, Starsky and Hutch. He introduced himself, and shook each of their hands. He told them, “Keith has made it through surgery and is currently in recovery. He’s stable at this point. He’s also very lucky. He lost a lot of blood. It’s a good thing he got here as quickly as he did, or we wouldn’t be having this conversation. It’s late, so I expect he’ll be in recovery until morning, then we’ll move him to the ICU. We’ll keep a close watch on him, but barring any infection or unexpected complications, I expect he’ll make a full recovery.”

Tony and Scranton decided to stay at the hospital, so Starsky and Hutch said their goodbyes and headed home.

~*~

In the morning, Hutch went for his morning run, and stopped to call the station from a payphone. He filled in his captain about Scranton’s job offers, and updated him on the condition of their injured friend. Dobey put him on hold for a moment as an emergency call came through for him. When he came back on the line, he had interesting news. “Hutch, I just got a call from Rebel and Tom. They are at the scene of a fatal accident on Coral Ridge. Turns out it was the men that held you all hostage at The Gym. The men had a friend pick them up after they made bail this morning, and they crashed on the way home. Ended up at the bottom of the canyon. None survived. You don’t happen to know where we might find Scranton this morning, do you?”

“Last we saw of him, he was going to stay at the hospital with Keeter. He’s the young man’s uncle. As far as I know, he’s still there.”

“So he might have a rock solid alibi.”

“Doesn’t mean he wasn’t calling the shots on it, though,” Hutch replied.

~*~

Hutch sat back in his couch and exhaled deeply. Scranton smiled. “You don’t have to make a decision now, Ken. You can take time to think about it.”

“Mr. Scranton, you’ve outlined so many options, I don’t know where to start.” Hutch was glad this interview had taken place in his own living room, bugs hard at work recording everything his guest had revealed. Scranton had broken down so many of his businesses and illegal dealings, many of which the FBI had not been aware of. This conversation will be legal gold. “There are numerous positions that could be a good fit for me.”

“Maybe I’ve gone about this the wrong way,” Scranton grinned. “I wanted you to be aware of the size and diversity of my organization, and what it could potentially offer you. Maybe we should have started with you, and what you’re looking for, and where your skills lay.”

Hutch thought for a moment. “You once said your organization is a family, and that you treat your employees well. In my experience, prostitutes are often treated more as slaves than employees. Is that the case here?”

Scranton scratched at his jaw. “I’ve got to admit; I haven’t had much chance to evaluate or restructure within the prostitution ring. It’s a relatively new acquisition, one we took over from Frankie Gatz.”

“Is it your intention to treat the prostitutes with the same care as your other employees?” Hutch inquired.

“Before I answer that,” Scranton grinned, “can I ask why you’re asking?”

Hutch leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, hands folded in front of him. “When I was a kid, I was on the streets. I know firsthand how these hookers live and work. And how they die. I see a lot of room for improvement.”

Scranton’s eyes widened. “You hooked! I wouldn’t have guessed.” He shook his head, confused. “But you can’t want back in...?”

“No.” He locked cold, hardened eyes on Scranton. “I scratched and crawled out of that hell on my hands and knees, and I fought my way off the streets.”

“So what do you propose?”

“Treat your prostitutes with the same care you give your other employees. Better pay, better conditions, regular medical care, require condoms, crack down on substance abuse. Tackle it as an investment. You’ll have a higher quality of hookers, you’ll be able to demand higher rates. They will be healthier, which will increase your value to the clientele. Less down time. Turnover will go down. You’ll never have a problem filling slots in your stable. You’ll only have a problem determining who to say yes to.”

“You’ve given this some thought,” Scranton noted. “Your ideas are interesting. I started to research into this issue when I acquired the prostitutes from Gatz, but I hadn’t gotten very far with application. I’ve also thought about bringing prostitution into The Gym. That’s why we

started renovating the upper floors. Your ideas could work here. Some of your ideas are similar to what they are doing in Nevada with legalized brothels. It's actually been pretty successful so far, because of many of the issues you've touched on. It's also had success in Amsterdam. I'm definitely interested. At least on a trial basis, to see if it can be as profitable here as it is in legalized settings. Are you interested in taking over the restructuring?"

"I am."

Scranton slapped his hand down on his thigh. "Well okay then! It's settled. You will need an office. I can set you up down the hall from me. I'll work on getting some men to assist you. We'll start reviewing all the details next week, going over the assets, the current structure. Oh, with Dave now in charge of security, he is insisting that everyone in the offices be armed, and be trained to handle a firearm. We'll have to arrange to get you a gun, and set you up for classes."

"Not necessary. I already have a gun. I'm licensed, and I already shoot with Dave every week at the gun club." Hutch grinned. "I'm a pretty good shot."

"Why am I not surprised," Scranton laughed. "He does treat this job like a military action. Best thing I ever did was hire that man." Hutch noted that he looked at him with scrutiny. "I suspect I'll be saying the same thing about you, one of these days." He stood and shook hands with Hutch.

Hutch saw the man to the door, then returned to the couch and flopped down on it, exhausted from the lengthy discussion he had just concluded.

A few minutes later, Starsky came in the front door. "Hey, I saw Scranton on the driveway. He said you settled on a job."

Hutch sat up. "Yeah, I'm going to be restructuring the prostitution."

"Something tells me those hookers will have it better than they ever did." He winked at Hutch.

~*~

Starsky walked in the bar with Hutch and was delighted to see Keeter seated at a booth with a couple friends. It had been a couple weeks since the young man was released from the hospital, and other than the fact that he looked too thin, he looked to be recovering well. "Keeter! Good to see you!" he called to him.

They approached his table and Keeter made a struggling move to get up and greet Starsky. Hutch held up a hand to stop him. "Don't get up. He'll come to you," he told him.

Sliding into the booth beside him, Starsky gave him a gentle embrace. "You're looking good. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling good! I mean, it still hurts like hell to move...breathe...cough..." he smiled. "But at least I'm here to tell about it. And they gave me some powerful pain killers. So I'm doing okay."

"You're not drinking while taking those pain killers, are you?" Hutch asked with concern in his voice.

Keeter laughed. "Heavens, no. Tony would never allow that. This is straight orange juice."

His two friends excused themselves and Hutch slid into the booth across from Starsky and Keeter. Starsky shook his head, saying, "I can't tell you how good it is to see you. You gave me quite a scare."

"Uncle Phil told me you guys were at the hospital until you heard from the doctor. That was real nice of you. And Dave, Tony told me how you crawled out to get me, right in front of the gunmen, and how you carried me all the way to the coffee shop to get me help. The paramedics told him I would've died if you had hesitated even five minutes. You saved my life."

Starsky's face sobered. "When I saw how much you were bleeding, I knew there was no time to waste. I'm just glad we could get you help in time. And I couldn't have done it without Tony's help."

"Thank you, Dave. And thank you, Ken. I am lucky to know you guys."

"You're the one who tried to come to my aid, Keeter. And the aid of the others being held captive. That makes you our hero," Hutch told him.

Keeter's face turned bright red. "Oh please! Don't say that! I'm so embarrassed. I just froze when he turned on me. Hero my ass."

"You tried," Hutch declared in a soothing voice. "And that took real courage. Don't put yourself down because you couldn't bring yourself down to their level. It's not the shooting of a gun that makes a hero. It's the fact that you pushed yourself to act, in spite of your fear. You stood up to them. You tried to help. It was brave, and it meant the world to those of us who were in danger."

"I was stupid to grab that gun. I've never even held a gun before."

"We're all going to the gun club every week for target practice," Starsky told him. "You're welcome to join us. I'll be happy to teach you how to handle a gun and how to shoot."

"No thanks, Dave. I'll leave the guns to you guys. I don't think I'm cut out for it."

Starsky smiled. "That's fine. You leave security to me. I'll make this the safest bar in Bay City, when I get through with it." He winked at him.

~*~

"Hi Starsky," Rebel called softly to him.

He headed over to the fence and his old friend. "Hiya Rebel! What are you doing out so late?" He took the wine glass from her hand and took a sip, handing the glass back to her.

"Oh, Tom just left. I've been cooped up in there all day, and just wanted to enjoy a glass of wine and some fresh air."

"It's kinda cool out here. You warm enough?"

Rebel smiled. "I'm good. I like it like this. I turned off the air and opened all the windows."

"Yeah, I love crisp nights. Reminds me of when I was a kid."

"Starsk, how are you doing with this assignment? It's been months now. Are you holding up okay?"

Starsky smiled at her. “To be honest, I’m doing great!” He took her wine glass again and took another sip of her drink. “I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed an undercover assignment like I have this one. I know it’s winding down now, but I’ll be a little sorry to see it go.”

She took back her wine glass and took a healthy swig. “You know, I’ve noticed that. You seem really happy.” She handed the glass back to him. As he took a swallow, she added, “Really happy. Like a man in love.”

Starsky choked a little on the wine. Her comment caught him off guard. He coughed, saying, “Sorry, went down the wrong pipe. What were you saying?”

“You’re obviously stalling,” she grinned. “Wait right here.” She disappeared into the house and came back with the wine bottle, and another glass. As she was pouring, she asked, “Did I give you enough time to come up with a good response?” She topped off his glass as well.

He laughed, and gave her his most charming smile. “I’m sorry. I forgot the question.”

She put down the wine bottle and took a sip. “It wasn’t a question. It was an observation. I said you look very happy. Like a man in love.”

“Do I?”

She burst out laughing. “Oh that’s rich,” she chuckled. “That’s exactly what Hutch said when I made the same remark to him.”

Starsky reached down and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. “I am happy. Happier than I’ve ever been.” He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed the back of her hand. “And I’m head over heels in love with Hutch.”

“Aw, Sweetie! I’m so happy for you!” she declared, wrapping her arms around him and giving him a big noisy smooch on the cheek. Then she smacked his arm, demanding, “How come I have to drag this out of you? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Ow!” he laughed. “Easy! If it makes you feel any better, you’re the only one who knows.” He felt Hutch’s arms come around him from behind. He leaned back into him, and Hutch gave him a loving kiss.

“Sound like you told her,” Hutch observed with a smile.

“I didn’t tell her anything she didn’t already know.”

“Oh, I know. She’s known from the start.”

Rebel crooked her finger at Hutch. “Come here and give me a hug, Lovebird.” She squeezed him tightly over the fence. “I’m so happy for you two!” She gave him the same noisy smooch on the cheek.

Hutch reached down and grabbed her, sweeping her off her feet and over the fence. “Come on! Let’s celebrate!”

“Wait, Hutch! The wine is over the fence!” she pointed to the bottle on the ground.

“Leave it. We’ve got plenty,” Starsky smiled. He went in to get the wine, and soon they each had a full glass.

“To love!” Rebel toasted.

Starsky and Hutch clinked her glass. “To love!” they replied in unison.

~*~

Starsky walked into the bar, hand in hand with Hutch. It was another crowded Friday night, and the crowd was thick and rowdy. The music was blaring, and several couples were utilizing the dance floor. The end of week celebratory crowd matched their mood.

Hutch went to the bar to get their drinks while Starsky found them a booth. Hutch placed Starsky’s drink in front of him, then turned his face toward him, and gave him a steamy kiss. All of Starsky’s senses sprang to life.

“Wow,” Starsky grinned. “You’re awfully affectionate tonight. I thought PDA was avoided here, unless you were challenged.”

“I’m too happy to follow any damn rules,” he laughed. “Besides, that rule is strictly adhered to during the daytime hours. Friday or Saturday nights are a different story.” Hutch grabbed his hand and held it, as he slipped into the booth beside him, delivering yet another kiss, this time slow and savoring.

“You are the best damn kisser,” Starsky smiled, feeling a deep happiness enfold him. Hutch looked a little embarrassed by the compliment, ducking his head shyly. But Starsky could see the twinkle in his eye before he did, and knew he appreciated the words.

“You inspire me,” Hutch smiled before taking a sip of his drink.

Hutch set down his glass, then turned to stare into Starsky’s eyes. Starsky felt Hutch touch his cheek; a lingering caress, as his eyes studied his features. He felt like he was drowning in his loving gaze, oblivious to everything but those sweet blue eyes.

“Damn. I was going to flirt with you two...” Keeter’s voice broke their reverie as the young man slipped into the other side of the booth. “But it takes all the fun out of it when you’re so all lovey dovey over there!”

“Hi Keeter!” Starsky greeted him. “How’re you doing?”

“Well, other than the fact that I’m jealous as hell,” he mocked, “I’m feeling really good! I wasn’t feeling any pain today. But it’s getting real crowded now. Every time I get bumped into or jostled, I get a jolt. It’s time for me to head out, but I just had to pop in and say hello. You two look so adorable tonight, all wrapped up in each other’s arms and giving each other those lovesick looks. Warms my heart!” He covered their entwined hands and gave them an affectionate squeeze. “Carry on, Romeos!” With that, he slipped away into the crowd and disappeared.

Hutch smiled. “I like that kid. He never overstays his welcome.” He winked at Starsky and kissed him again.

“What’s gotten into you tonight? I’ve never seen you like this; at least not in public. Not that I’m complaining, mind you. I’m rather enjoying this.”

Hutch's smile faded. "It feels like everything is winding down to a close," he said quietly. "I don't know how much time we have left to enjoy this."

"What do you mean? There are other gay bars. And we can look for a new home together. You and me aren't coming to a close. I'm planning on spending the rest of my life with you. Aren't you?" Starsky felt a pang of worry whisk through him. Hutch's negativity felt like a warning.

He must have sensed Starsky's concern because he grabbed him and kissed him passionately. When the kiss ended, Hutch whispered against his lips, "I will spend forever with you. I'm yours, Dave. All yours."

Starsky was reeling from the powerful kiss. "Damn. I can't think when you kiss me like that. You don't know what your kisses do to me!"

Hutch grinned. "I know they turn your eyes a dark blue."

"Your eyes are darker, too." Starsky touched his forehead to Hutch's. "Please tell me you're not worrying about what happens to us when we finish."

"No. Not about us." He nuzzled into Starsky's cheek. "I am not ready to let this go. I love the freedom we have right now. I love being openly affectionate with you. I love wearing your ring. I love dancing with you. Holding hands with you. I love telling our friends about us." He smiled. "I guess that's kind of silly. Certainly not practical in the real world."

"It's not silly." Starsky wrapped his arms around his neck. "Hey, we'll talk about it. We may not be able to do everything as openly as we'd like, but we can figure out what we can do."

"I want to dance with my partner."

"Lead the way."

Hutch shook his head and tightened his grip. "Not yet. I want a slow song. I want you in my arms."

Starsky laughed. "I am in your arms."

"Do you see the pattern I'm going for?"

A Frank Sinatra tune began, and Starsky nudged his partner. "There ya go, Blue Eyes. Let's dance to some Ol' Blue Eyes."

"Now you're talking." He led Starsky by the hand to the dance floor and pulled him into a snug embrace. The slow romantic tunes continued for a few dances, so the two were able to prolong their tender whirl on the dance floor. After that, the tempo picked up, and the tunes took a more festive turn.

"I'm ready for a break," Starsky announced. "And a drink."

A sudden explosion of gunfire erupted at the front door, followed by a rush of chaos. Starsky grabbed Hutch's arm, slipping his berretta from his holster. Hutch also took out his gun. "Get DOWN!" he shouted. People around them were rushing for the doors, but more gunmen came through the back patio door as well. "GET DOWN!" he tried again.

More shots rang out. They were shooting up the bar, hitting bottles, mirrors, booths. Anyone that got in their way was also shot. At least two civilians were down near the entrance. As a shot whizzed past Starsky's head. "They're pros," he called to Hutch. "Looks like some of Gatz old gang." He took a shot at another gunman and saw him drop. He saw Hutch drop another. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw two moving in their direction from the patio doors. "Two o'clock!" he yelled to Hutch. Then he saw Hutch shoot a man to his left that he didn't see coming.

"We're sitting ducks here!" Hutch shouted. "And they're still coming in!" They both kept firing, trying to get patrons to stay low and out of the lines of fire.

"Hey!" Starsky cried. Two bar patrons were huddled, standing, right behind Hutch. He pointed to them. They were frozen to the spot, too afraid to move. Hutch saw them and ran to the pair. He tried to pull them down but they were locked in place. He stood in front of them, as he fired again at the shooters. Starsky spotted a gunman raising his weapon to draw on them, and he took a shot at the man. His gun did not go off, his ammunition spent. Realizing that Hutch's body was shielding the patrons from the shooter, he threw himself at the three of them, hoping to shield Hutch, and hoping his momentum would bring them all to the floor, and out of the site of the gunman. He heard the shot and felt white hot pain rip into his arm. The pain radiated out from the wound, throbbing and tingling and burning. He gritted his teeth, growling at the pain. He felt the four of them finally hit the floor in a thud. Hutch pulled his gun from his hand and slapped his own into Starsky's palm.

"Take him down!" Hutch ordered.

Starsky rolled on his side, and dropped the one nearest them, and the one behind him. He pulled up on his knees and surveyed the bar. His team had come down from the second floor and took down the remaining shooters. The threat appeared to be over. Starsky headed back to Hutch, and stopped in his tracks. Hutch was flat on his back, blood all over the front of his shirt. The two men he had shielded were beside him, one with his hand on Hutch's shoulder with care.

"No no no no no!" Starsky cried, rushing to Hutch's side. Hutch looked at him, and locked eyes on him. Starsky could see the resignation in his gaze. "Hey buddy," he quietly said to his partner. "If you didn't want to dance anymore, you coulda just sat it out." He grabbed one of the men beside Hutch and said, "Go call 911. Tell them you have numerous gunshot victims, and the shooters have been taken out. For God's sake, don't end the call until paramedics come through that door!" The man ran off.

He turned back to Hutch, and saw his eyes start to roll upward. "Hey hey hey," he murmured. "You stay with me now. Help is on the way."

"We both know they aren't coming here, babe," Hutch said.

Starsky had his hand pressed to Hutch's wound. "You kidding? After I raised holy hell last time? They'll be here in a blink," he grinned.

Tony came running over and knelt beside Starsky. "Oh shit," he murmured. He looked to Starsky. "You're hit too!"

"Tony, grab me some clean towels, will you?" Starsky asked. Tony was gone in a flash. He returned a moment later with a stack of bar towels.

Starsky folded one and pressed it to Hutch's chest. As he did so, Tony wrapped a towel around Starsky's arm, tying it firmly in place. Starsky nodded his thanks. Then he grabbed a few, and looked like he was going to put them under Hutch's head, to pillow him.

He shook his head. "Don't touch him, Tony. That bullet could be lodged near his spine. If you move him, you could paralyze him...or worse."

"Dave," Hutch coughed out his name. Starsky leaned close to his lips, as his voice had gotten very weak. "I love you, Starsk," Hutch whispered. "You've made me so happy. My life began when you stepped into my arms."

A tear streaked down Starsky's face. He whispered back, "No you don't, Hutch. You're not saying goodbye. I need us to grow old together, in each other's arms." He kissed Hutch's forehead. "Fight for us, babe. Fight for me, damn it!" He pulled back to see Hutch's face, and saw a faint smile on his lips. "Look at my eyes!" Starsky ordered in a loud voice. "You stick with me here!" He saw Hutch struggle to stay focused. His eyes stayed on him, though. Starsky grinned at him lovingly. "That's it. I could drown in those eyes. Don't look away..." He kept talking, trying to keep Hutch focused on him.

The paramedics arrived, and were brought straight to Hutch. To Starsky's relief, John knelt down beside him. "Tell me Ken's age, height, weight, any allergies..." Starsky rattled off the specs, never releasing Hutch's gaze. John put his hand on Starsky's shoulder. "Okay Dave. I've got him now. Let me help him." Starsky felt Tony's hand on his chest and back, gently steering him back away from Hutch, to give the paramedics room to work. When they finally had him far enough back, and Starsky's view of Hutch's face was blocked, he gasped at the pain that seared his heart. He grabbed his injured arm, cradling it, staring blankly at the men trying to help Hutch. A deep cold seemed to descend upon him.

Tony said, "The cops are here. I'm going to go talk to them. I'll be back."

Starsky stared after Hutch but couldn't see his face through the men working on him. He felt a soft hand on his shoulder. A familiar woman's voice spoke to him. "Sir, I'm Officer Dane. What's your name, sir?" He slowly looked up, feeling confused, and realized there was a woman in front of him, wearing a police uniform. "Sir, I'm Office Dane. What's your name?"

"Dave," he replied automatically. "Dave Stark." His vision was blurred. He blinked to clear it and tried to focus on her face. He felt tears sting his cheeks and wondered if he was crying. His vision cleared and he finally recognized his friend Rebel. Relief swept over him to see a friendly face. He wondered why she was in uniform.

She smiled. "Hi Mr. Stark. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's my partner..." he began.

Rebel took Starsky by his good arm. "Mr. Stark, you're hurt, too. Let me see that arm."

He tried to hold up his arm, but he was trembling. The more he tried to move, the more his hands shook. Tom walked up right then, also wearing a police uniform.

"Mr. Stark, this is my partner, Officer Carlson. Tom, he has a gunshot wound in his right arm, and he's shaking pretty badly. He seems a little out of it. Would you mind getting a blanket for

him?” Tom was only gone momentarily before returning with a paramedic and a blanket. Starsky felt Rebel push him into a chair, and his legs were swept up onto a table.

“Mr. Stark, you look rather pale. Are you feeling all right? Any nausea?” Tom asked.

Starsky felt the warm blanket wrap around him, and instantly felt some improvement. “Thanks,” he said to Tom. “I’m okay. Officer Carlson, I need to go with my partner to the hospital.”

“We’ll see to that, sir. But you have to get patched up first.”

Rebel added, “Can’t have you bleeding all over the ambulance, now, can we?” She directed the paramedic to attend to Starsky’s arm. Rebel gave his left hand a firm squeeze. “He’s in good hands,” she spoke quietly to Starsky only. “They’ll take good care of Hutch.” Starsky took a deep shaky breath.

The paramedic had his arm bandaged up, and started shining a light in his eyes. “Seems a little shocky,” the paramedic told Rebel and Tom. “Keep his feet elevated. I’ll have them bring a gurney.” He felt for Starsky’s pulse.

“He won’t get on a gurney if it means he can’t go with his partner,” Rebel told him.

“If he collapses, there won’t be a choice,” the paramedic warned her.

Tom knelt next to Starsky. “Mr. Stark, can you tell us how many gunmen you saw?”

“They were coming in pairs. There were two to start. Then two in the back. Two more in the front. Two more in the back. Then the last two in the front door. Ten total. It was like waves. These were pros. This wasn’t any anti-gay group. They were shooting up the place, the room. They only shot patrons when they got in their way. They were trying to destroy the place. They also seemed like they were looking for someone. The owner, maybe.” He looked to Rebel. “I’d seen a couple of them before. Gatz’ men.” His voice was very quiet but Rebel nodded her understanding. “How many customers were hit?” he asked Tom.

“Looks like six, including you two. One dead. One unconscious. Two non-life threatening. All of the shooters are dead.”

Starsky looked back to Hutch and saw them lift him on a board. They placed the board on a gurney. Hutch’s eyes were closed now, and he looked pale. “They’re taking him. I have to go with him.” He saw Rebel look to the paramedic, who nodded reluctantly.

“Come, Mr. Stark. We’ll get you on that ambulance,” Rebel said. Starsky felt Rebel and Tom flank him and guide him after the gurney bearing Hutch.

Hutch’s gurney was loaded first, then Rebel helped Starsky in and got him seated. John secured Hutch, then turned to Rebel. “You coming, too?” he asked.

“Can I?” she asked.

“There’s a seat next to Dave.”

Rebel called after Tom. “I’ll meet you there, Tom.” The ambulance doors closed. Rebel wrapped her arm around Starsky. “You okay, hon?”

Starsky shook his head. "He tried to say goodbye..." His voice broke. He felt Rebel's arms around him and she pulled him close. He buried his face in her shoulder and felt the tears come to his eyes again.

"Starsky, honey, he's fighter. He's strong. He's not gonna leave you, if he has anything to say about it."

Starsky pulled back. He took a deep breath, and wiped the tears from his eyes. "I'm glad you're here, Rebel. To be honest, I'm not thinking too straight." He looked at her and asked, "Why are you in uniform?"

"Huggy got word to Dobby that something was going down. Word on the street was to stay away from The Gym. We tried to get ahold of you, but you were already there. So Tom and I got our uniforms and headed over. We were going to go in and get you out, even if we had to arrest you. We got the call about the shooting as soon as we got in the car."

"Were you the only cops who responded?"

"Hell no. Didn't you see all the black and whites? There was a big meeting at work, and Dobby went ballistic. Told everybody that he'd better not find out we were declining to take calls at gay bars, or he'd have us fired. He suspended Trainer and Holloway, pending investigation. They got the call during the last shootout there, and never went on the call."

"It was good to see a familiar face here," Starsky told her. "Thanks."

John spoke up. "Starsky, he's awake. How ya doing, Hutch? You're in an ambulance. We'll have you at Memorial in no time." Starsky rushed to his side.

"Starsky?"

"Right here, babe." He caressed Hutch's cheek. "I love you."

"Love you, too."

Starsky kissed his forehead. "Keep fighting."

"You know I will."

Starsky's eyes held Hutch's. Starsky felt his own courage and faith recharge, seeing Hutch responsive, and he hoped Hutch felt the same. As if in answer, Hutch said, "I've got this."

Starsky laughed. "Yeah. I'll be waiting for you."

"We're here," John told him.

Starsky gave Hutch another quick kiss, then returned to his seat. He reached for Rebel's hand, hanging on tightly.

Chapter 10

Starsky sat alongside Hutch's hospital bed, his arm in a sling, his free arm laying upon the bed beside his partner. He had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, refusing to take the pain meds offered to him, to stay alert for news of Hutch's condition. He felt a light touch upon his shoulder, and jumped, startled fear bringing him to instant readiness. His eyes first went to Hutch, but saw no change in his partner. His eyes then turned to see an older couple standing beside him, the woman's hand resting lightly on his shoulder. He recognized Richard and Kathryn Hutchinson, and rose to greet them.

Kathryn smiled weakly, and said, "Hello David." She embraced him. "Thanks again for calling us. How's he doing?" She looked pale and fragile to Starsky, her face etched with worry for her son. Her long grey hair was French braided into an elegant braided knot, her simple and stylish clothes made her look far younger than her years.

He ran his free hand through his hair. "I'm not real sure, Kathryn. He hasn't woken up from the surgery yet. The doc said it could be a while. The bullet missed his heart, thank God. But it sounds like they had a heck of a time getting it out and getting him stitched back up. They seemed optimistic, but said the next few days would tell. They worry about any internal bleeding, and any infection." He extended his free hand to the man standing beside her, awkwardly shaking with his left hand. "Hi, Richard. Thanks for getting here so fast."

"Hi Dave. We came out on the family jet." Richard Hutchinson was a large man, taller than Hutch, and with the muscular build of a lumberjack from years of hard work on the ranch. In spite of his intimidating size, he was a quiet and easy going man. It was far easier for Starsky to imagine him pulling a young Hutch onto his bouncing knee, than to imagine him raising his fist to his teenage son. Richard asked, "Were you there? Do you know what happened?"

Starsky's hand subconsciously went to his sling. "Yeah, I was there. We were undercover in a bar downtown. Some guys showed up with guns and started shooting the place up. Hutch was protecting some civilians behind him when he got hit. If it hadn't been for him, innocent bystanders could've been killed." There was pride in his voice.

Kathryn showed obvious distress, wringing her hands. Richard put his hands on her shoulders and spoke soothingly to her. "Why don't you sit down?" he suggested. He directed her to a chair beside the bed. She sat down across the bed from Starsky, reaching through the raised guard rails to lay a comforting hand over her son's.

"It's easier, when we're two thousand miles away, to pretend that he's safe, that he's not putting his life on the line." She looked to Hutch's face, studying it. "Seeing him asleep like this just puts me back in time, watching him take a nap when he was a little boy." She touched his hair, moving it off his forehead. She smiled. "His hair was too long, then, too. He hated having his hair cut. We just gave up trying to force him. He was such a stubborn little boy." Tears were brimming in her eyes.

"I took him to my barber when it was time for school pictures," Richard added. "Boy, he was mad as a hornet!" He chuckled at the memory.

Starsky smiled, thoroughly enjoying the talk of Hutch as a little boy. He stroked Hutch's right hand with his thumb.

Kathryn folded Hutch's left hand in her own. "Remember that first grade picture? He had that crazy little cowlick in his hair, and it stuck up all funny and wouldn't lay down. And he was missing his front tooth. Gosh, he hates that picture! But it's always been one of my favorites."

"I like that one, too," Richard confessed.

Kathryn looked down at Hutch's hand and grew serious. In a confused tone, she asked, "Why is Ken wearing a wedding ring?" She looked up to Richard, then to Starsky, for answers. Her eyes fell to Starsky's left hand, seeing the matching band on his finger. Her mouth fell open, a small gasp indicated her understanding.

Richard's eyes went from Hutch's ring to his wife's face. "What?"

"The rings! They match!" She stammered, pointing to Starsky's hand.

"What is the meaning of this?" Richard demanded, anger in his voice.

Starsky could tell he already knew what the rings meant. He looked to Kathryn. "I love him, Kathryn," he said simply. He was proud to say it aloud, proud to acknowledge it publicly. It hurt to see the devastation in Kathryn's eyes, but he still held onto the joy in his own heart, declaring his love to the other people Hutch loved. If they didn't accept it, it was their problem, not his.

"Get the hell away from my son!" Richard bellowed. He took the few steps to Starsky's side in an instant, grabbing the man by his shirt and hauling him away from the bed and rammed him up against the wall. "You keep your God damned hands off my son, you little faggot!"

"Richard!" Kathryn cried out with alarm. "Stop! He's hurt!"

Starsky looked at Richard's face, and his stomach did a little flip. Glaring at him with fiery blue rage, were Hutch's eyes in Richard's face.

Very calmly, Starsky replied, "I'm not leaving, Richard."

"You'll leave if I tell you to," Richard snarled, "Or I'll---"

A booming voice came from the doorway. "Release that man!" Captain Dobey came up and slapped a hand down on Richard's shoulder. Richard's response was to push even closer to Starsky, nearly nose to nose. Dobey's voice was insistent. "NOW! Release him! Or do we need to charge you with assault and battery on an officer of the law?" Finally, Richard let go of Starsky but remained in his face.

Starsky remained steadfast. "Captain Dobey, meet Richard Hutchinson," Starsky calmly stated. "Hutch's dad."

Dobey took a milder approach. "Ah yes, Mr. Hutchinson. We met several years ago. I can see we're all a little stressed here. Let's say we go for a walk, and talk about your son." Richard let Dobey take the lead, and the two men walked out, followed closely by Kathryn.

Starsky sank back into his chair, thoroughly rung out now. He rested his free arm on the bed's guard rail, dropping his forehead against his arm. He took several deep breaths, trying to stop the pounding of his heart, and the pounding in his head.

The image of Richard's eyes full of hate loomed in his mind's eye. They were so much like Hutch's. He had seen that fierce blue glare before, when Hutch turned his fury on a perp in the streets, or when trying to intimidate during an interrogation. Starsky had always thought it was a glare that Hutch had developed over years of police work. This was the first time he considered if the glare was learned from the treatment of his father.

Suddenly he felt the touch of a tender hand on his sleeve. He looked up to see Kathryn hovering over him. "Are you alright?" she inquired, looking over his slung arm with concern.

Starsky gave her a feeble smile. "I'm alright, Kathryn. Thank you." He reached back through the guard rail and enfolded Hutch's hand in his own.

Kathryn spoke quietly. "We're going to go get something to eat. Can I bring you something?"

"No, thank you. One of the nurses said she'd bring me a tray later. But I appreciate the offer." He gave her a genuine smile. He looked back to Hutch's face, giving her the opportunity to rejoin her husband.

There was the soft touch of her hand in his curls, then a motherly kiss on the top of his head. In the short moment it took for Starsky to turn back to see her, she was already slipping out the door. Her kind gesture touched him, standing out in vivid contrast to her husband's fury.

~*~

Karen Hutchinson Beale walked toward the hospital entrance. She had long blonde hair, worn down, and a natural golden tan. She was tall and classically elegant, a trait she inherited from her mother, and could make any clothing look attractive and stylish. She slowed her pace, seeing her parents walking toward her, and waved to catch their attention. Her father looked angry, her mother looked distraught.

"How's Kenny?" she asked, feeling the worry for her brother well up inside her.

"He's resting. He's still in intensive care," her mother informed her. "We're going to go get a bite to eat, and to cool off." Kathryn gave a faint nod in Richard's direction.

"Please tell me you didn't get into a fight with Kenny," she pleaded.

"Not with Ken," her mother replied. "He's still asleep."

"With that little queer he calls a partner!" Richard exclaimed.

"What the hell?" Karen sighed. "Are you talking about Dave Starsky? What've you got against him?"

"Richard, calm down," Kathryn patted at his arm. "Remember your blood pressure. Karen, Dave told us that he and Ken are... a couple."

"A couple! An *abomination!*" Richard raised his voice.

"Alright! I get the picture!" Karen declared, waving her hand dismissively. "Do we know how Ken is doing?"

"Honey, he came through surgery and is resting. They'll have to keep a close eye on him for a few days. They're worried about any infections or internal bleeding. Right now he's stable."

Karen looked at her father, who appeared to be still furious. "I'm going on up," she sighed.

"Why don't you come to eat with us?" Her mother suggested. "We're going to that little Italian place across the street from the hotel. Do you know the one?"

"Yes, I know the one. Give me a few minutes to check in on him. I'll meet you there."

"We'll just have some drinks until you get there," her mother offered.

Karen left her parents and continued to the hospital doors. "Time to take a stand," she muttered to herself.

~*~

Starsky said goodbye to Captain Dobey, just as Karen walked into Hutch's room. "Karen!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know you were coming! Good to see you!"

"Hi Dave," she smiled, giving him a hug. "I had one of the ranch pilots fly me out. How's Kenny?"

Starsky rattled off everything he had been told by the doctors. "They just gave him some more meds. The nurse said she thought he could sleep for a while."

Karen touched the strap of his sling. "And you, Dave? How are you doing?"

"This? This is nothing," Starsky assured her. "Just a through and through. They stitched me up and gave me some happy pills. I'm fine."

Karen shook her head. "You look tired, Dave. And worried."

Starsky hesitated before speaking. "I am worried. You know how it is with doctors. I keep waiting for someone to tell me he's going to be fine, but they don't actually say that. And I can't look in his eyes and see for myself. The waiting, the not knowing, is a bitch."

She wrapped her arms around him and held him. Starsky felt his emotions rise to the surface and he struggled to maintain his composure. Karen's embrace felt so familiar, so similar to her brother's, that he had the sense that Hutch was holding him. He squeezed her and then pulled back, afraid he would break down if he stayed in her embrace. "Thanks," he managed.

"Dave, let's get out of here for a little while. Let's go get something to eat. My treat. Come on, you have to eat something."

He looked to Hutch, to see if there was any sign of him awakening. He lay there so still.

She touched his shoulder. "You aren't going to be any good to him if you don't take care of yourself. Come on, we'll be back in about an hour. Promise."

"Okay, Karen. Let me leave word at the nurses' station where we're going."

~*~

Walking into the restaurant, Starsky's gaze fell upon Richard and Kathryn seated at a nearby table. "Uh oh," he murmured, stopping in his tracks.

Karen's arm slipped through his good arm, and she gripped him firmly. "Come with me, Dave. I know what I'm doing. Just ride the storm."

"This is not gonna be good," he muttered.

She smiled at him. In a quiet voice she said, "I have an ace up my sleeve. Make that a pair of aces."

Richard's voice rang out. "What the hell is he doing here?!"

Karen spoke firmly to her father. "Daddy, Dave is my guest. And you're going to play nice. You'll treat him with respect." She waved to the chair between her mother and hers. "Sit here, Dave. Daddy, I have a few things to say, so hold off until I've finished."

"I will not sit here with this--!" Richard began.

"Dad! You'll not speak to Dave like that, and I'll tell you why," she began. "For one, you made a deal a long time ago, that you would take Kenny back into the family if he cut Alec out of his life. He did that. Now you have to continue to hold up your end of the bargain. Ken and Dave are a package deal. And they need to be a part of this family."

"I will not have a son of mine--!"

"You have no choice! Who Ken loves is none of your business. For crying out loud, he's not a boy any longer! And why hate Dave? He didn't make Ken gay. I've known he was gay since we were kids. He's always been gay. So what are you going to do? Are you going to cut him out of the family again? Well if you do, keep this in mind... You will be cutting me out as well. If Ken is not good enough for this family, then neither am I."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Richard questioned.

"Daddy, Ken spends every day of his life helping people. He puts his life on the line every single day, trying to protect others. He's tried to make this world a better place. I'm proud of him! And if he's not good enough for you, then neither am I, because I sure as hell can't hold a candle to him."

To Starsky's surprise, Richard appeared to calm down somewhat. It seemed that Karen had struck a familiar chord, that the senior Hutchinsons were also proud of their son.

Karen continued. "Now you've been grooming me since I was a teenager, to take over your ranch someday. And you've groomed my husband, too. It's all we've ever planned to do. But I promise you, Dad, if you continue to fight Ken on this, if you reject him or Dave, Mike and I will quit right now, and you can kiss your retirement plan goodbye!"

Kathryn looked panicked. "Honey, don't say that."

"I mean it, Mom. We'll pack up right now and move to Louisiana, go where his family is. At least his family knows how to love and accept each other. And I don't want *my children* growing up surrounded by hate. I want *my children* to grow up knowing and loving their uncle Ken." She said it with finality in her voice, a determination in her eyes.

Starsky raised an eyebrow, and glanced at Karen. He knew Karen had no children, so this statement hung in the air, waiting for someone to question it. The table was dead silent. Richard and Kathryn sat there frozen, mouths hanging open.

“Oh my God,” Kathryn whispered. “You’re pregnant!”

“I am,” Karen said, still defiant. “With twins.”

Starsky was the first to react. He started to laugh. “Well, congratulations!” he exclaimed, pulling her into a hug. “How far along?”

“Four and a half months,” she hung onto him tightly.

Kathryn was the next to jump up and throw her arms around her daughter, squealing with delight. “You’re gonna have a baby! Babies!”

“Hold it, hold it!” Karen held up both her hands and commanded the table again. “We need to get this settled, here and now. Is Ken still a member of this family?”

“Of course he is!” Kathryn declared, returning to her seat.

“Dad?”

Richard looked at her, defeated. He nodded.

Karen pushed, “And you will accept Dave, and treat him with respect, as a true member of this family?”

“Of course!” Kathryn chirped, nudging Richard.

Richard said nothing.

Karen frowned. “Dad, do you know how Dave got shot? Why he’s in that sling?” Kathryn and Richard glanced at each other, both looking uncertain.

“I talked to the nurse when I first got to the hospital, before I went in to see Ken. She told me that Dave was shot jumping in front of Ken, trying to shield him from the shooter. The nurse said that the bullet went through his arm, all the way through, before going into Ken. She said if he hadn’t done that, the bullet could’ve gone into his heart, and he wouldn’t have survived that.”

Kathryn turned and hugged Starsky. “Thank you.”

“Dad, you know that’s not the first time Dave has saved Ken’s life.”

Richard looked down. He was silent for a long time. Finally, he looked at Starsky, the anger absent from his eyes. “I appreciate all you’ve done, and sacrificed, for my son,” he began. “And I’m sorry for reacting the way I did. I shouldn’t have thrown you into the wall. Or called you names. But I’m not going to lie to you and pretend that I’m happy with this.”

Starsky nodded to Richard, acknowledging his apology.

“Daddy, I didn’t ask you to jump on the gay bandwagon. Nor did I ask you to abandon your faith. I asked if you would accept Dave as a member of this family, and treat him with respect. He deserves that. He’s earned that.”

Richard looked at his wife, who looked at him expectantly. His eyes travelled to his daughter, who looked at him defiantly. He took a deep breath. He then looked at Starsky. "I will try." He looked again to Karen. "Cut me some slack. This isn't easy for me. This goes against what I believe, and I don't like it. But I'll try." When Karen smiled triumphantly, he added, "And quit holding my future grandchildren hostage! I'll try my best."

At the end of the meal, as they all got up to leave, Richard approached Starsky. He extended his hand, and Starsky shook it. "Thanks for what you did for Ken."

"You don't have to thank me, Richard. I love Ken."

~*~

Starsky climbed into the passenger seat of Karen's car. He didn't say anything about their meal until she had pulled onto the road back to the hospital. "Karen, what's gotten into you?"

She grinned. "From what I understand, a couple of fetuses."

"No, I mean with your father! You were giving ultimatums, blackmailing, threatening..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she laughed. "But I gave them grandchildren to look forward to. I'll bet that's all they can talk about."

He shook his head. "I can't believe you stood up to Richard. I get the impression nobody does that."

"You did," she pointed out. "When Mom and I were in the ladies' room, she told me Dad slammed you against the wall and was all in your face. She said you barely even reacted. You just looked at him and said you weren't leaving. Mom thought he was gonna drop from apoplexy, he was so mad."

"Why? Because I wouldn't leave Ken? Or because I wouldn't let him intimidate me?"

"Both! But I think mostly because he couldn't ruffle your feathers. That never happens. It's Dad's way or the highway." She smiled. "I guess the times they are a changing."

"Speaking of changing," Starsky began, "haven't you had a change of heart? I understood that you had some strong moral objections to homosexuality. But I didn't see any of that today."

"That's how I was raised, yes. But when I was in college, I tried to learn more about homosexuality, because of Ken. I took some classes, read up on the subject, talked to some preachers and professors. And the more I learned, the more disillusioned I became with my religious conditioning. I grew away from my church. I no longer belong to my parent's parish. Mike and I go to a different church on the other side of town now. I've felt much happier with the switch."

"You really put yourself out there for us. It meant a lot to me, and it will to your brother, too. Thank you."

Karen seemed thoughtful. "When Dad threw Ken out, I was so young, and I was still under Dad's thumb. I wasn't much of a sister to Ken. I regret that. Life is too short. We should be nicer to each other." She glanced to Starsky. "I work with Dad. I know how his mind works. I was

pretty sure I could make a difference today, and take a stand for my brother. I just hope it helped. Dad can be pretty bull headed.”

“Even if your dad never comes around, you’ve made it clear to us, and to your folks, that you are an ally. That’s huge, Karen. Do you have any idea how many people have stood by him or accepted him in his lifetime? People who’ve known about his sexuality?” Starsky held up a single finger. “I know of one.”

“Don’t forget to count yourself there.”

Starsky looked out the passenger window. After a moment he said, “I can’t.”

Karen looked confused. “What do you mean you can’t? Of course you can.”

Starsky turned back to her. “No. I can’t. I didn’t know he was bi. I didn’t know how he felt about me. And I sure as hell didn’t show him any acceptance.”

“I guess I wasn’t the only one who had a change of heart,” she grinned. “But you know now, and you accept him.” She held up two fingers. “I count two.”

Chapter 11

Hutch opened his eyes, and blinked against the bright whiteness. As he did so, he felt the constriction of the elastic mask tugging lightly against his cheeks, and the crisp oxygen being pumped into him. He tried to take a deep inhale, but his lungs resisted, weak, continuing the regular pattern of inhale and exhale that were dictated by the mask. He didn't push it, sensing the awareness of pain if he did. His eyes now adjusted to the light, he looked around, glancing to his left. There his eyes fell upon Starsky. He was seated next to his bed, his left arm curled on the mattress, his chin resting on his arm. His sparkling blue eyes were glowing with happiness.

Hutch just soaked in the sight of that beloved face. Starsky didn't speak, but his eyes told him everything he needed to know. Everything is okay. We're together. Nothing else matters.

Holding Starsky's gaze, Hutch tried to smile for him. He felt so weak, but thought he managed a faint smile. He must have succeeded, because Starsky's face broke into a beautiful grin. Starsky moved over him, Starsky's hands gently held his face, and he kissed Hutch on the forehead. Hutch closed his eyes and relaxed. Starsky's hand wrapped around his left hand, and Hutch gave it a light squeeze. The hand started to slip away, but Hutch squeezed harder, and the hand remained. This time when he relaxed, the hand stayed put. He felt cocooned in care, loved and protected by the man beside him, and he lay comfortable and untroubled in his hands. In peace, he let his body do the work, building strength to recover.

~*~

Starsky looked up see Karen's return, and his jaw dropped. She entered the hospital room in much more comfortable clothes. Her hair was down; she wore no makeup. Her outfit consisted of jeans, a maternity top and sneakers. The professional clothes she had worn the previous night were designed in such a way as to disguise her growing tummy. She now looked obviously pregnant, and her face glowed.

She touched her brother's hand. "Kenny hasn't woken up yet?" The concern was thick in her voice.

"He did wake up for a little while," he told her. "He looked good. His eyes looked clear, and he smiled. He didn't talk, though. He was just resting for a while, then he fell back to sleep." He put his arm around her. "Karen! You look fantastic!" he told her sincerely.

She smiled. "Aw, thanks, Starsky. I've been on cloud nine since I found out. I don't even mind the morning sickness. I'm just so happy!"

"It shows," he gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I can't believe I didn't see it yesterday!"

"Oh, my clothes were designed to camouflage my belly. I work with a bunch of men, and it's a constant struggle to get them to take me seriously. I'd rather keep my condition hidden from them, for as long as possible. I'm not sure how they'll all react to the boss being preggers. The way things are going, though, I don't think I'll be able to keep it hidden much longer."

He chuckled. "Your mom's gonna flip when she sees you."

She grinned. "I'm hoping Dad is the one who flips. I want him to be excited about these babies. Maybe if he's excited, it'll give him incentive to play nice with you. I don't trust that he'd give up this easily. He's very stubborn."

"I've dealt with far worse than your father, Karen. I'll deal with it. You just sit down, put your feet up, and enjoy your pregnancy."

She smiled at him, and pulled a chair close to the bed. She reclaimed Hutch's hand. "Oh, I heard about this ring," she commented. "It's very pretty. I like the rustic look." She looked up at him. "Does this mean you got married?"

"No, we can't. It's only symbolic."

She took Starsky's left hand as well. Running her thumbs over each of the rings simultaneously, she looked thoughtful. After a moment she spoke quietly. "A friend of mine was talking about her upcoming wedding. She said that the wedding or ceremony isn't creating or establishing a relationship. It's a celebration of something that already exists. It's a celebration of a bond that has already been formed; a gift that has already been given by God." She looked up and smiled at Starsky.

Starsky was touched. "Thank you, Karen."

Hutch lifted his sister's hand, making it clear he had heard what she said.

"Kenny," she got up and stood over her brother. "You're awake. How're you doing?"

Hutch pushed the oxygen mask up off his face. "Hiya Kar-bear." His eyes twinkled, in spite his medical condition. "When did you get such liberal ideas about marriage? I doubt Rev. Summers would appreciate you equating a homosexual relationship to a marriage. "

"Babe, we have an ally in your sister," Starsky grinned.

"I'm surprised you told her," Hutch said.

Starsky ran a hand through his curls. "Um, yeah. About that... I sorta outed us to your entire family."

Hutch laughed, but instantly cringed and brought his hand to his bandaged chest. "Ow. Don't make me laugh. Did you really tell my whole family about us?" He sounded amused.

"I did. I told your folks, anyway. They told Karen. You mad?"

"Not at all," Hutch assured him. "Just sorry I missed it. I see you're still in one piece. Does that mean they took it fairly well? Or is my dad now in the hospital, too?" He winked at his partner.

Starsky felt nervous, telling him the truth. "Your dad isn't in the hospital, but he didn't take it too well."

"He threw Starsky into the wall," Karen told him. Starsky clamped a hand down on her shoulder to discourage further comment, as Hutch's eyes turned ice cold.

"Relax Hutch. He didn't hurt me. Didn't even ruffle my feathers. Which, by the way, really pissed him off," he chuckled.

Hutch's expression softened a little. "How about Mom?"

Starsky's grin spread to a crooked smile. "I think your mom likes me!"

"My mom has always liked you," he smiled tiredly. He closed his eyes and moved the oxygen mask over his face again without strapping it in place, holding it there. Just as he drew a shallow breath, a nurse came into the room.

"Ah! You're awake!" she chirped. She took his temperature and checked his blood pressure. "Tell you what... Your oxygen levels are doing well. I'm going to change that mask out for a cannula. You'll have an easier time talking." She replaced the mask for a tube that ran under his nose. She checked his bandages and the drainage tubes that ran to a hissing machine behind the bed. After giving him his meds, she left the room, telling Starsky, "He'll probably be ready for a nap real soon." He nodded his reply.

Karen put her hand on Starsky's shoulder. "I'm going to head out. He looks tired. I'll come back in a while, when my parents come." He patted her hand, and she slipped out of the room.

Starsky returned to Hutch's bed. He did look tired. "Why don't you get some rest? I'll be here when you wake up." He stroked Hutch's forehead, then leaned down to kiss him. To his surprise, Hutch wrapped his arms around his neck and pulled him in for a bigger kiss. "That was nice," he grinned.

"I'm sorry I scared you."

"You came though, so all is forgiven," Starsky smiled. He gave him another long, lingering kiss.

"Take your goddamn hands off my son, you pervert!" Richard shouted before he grabbed Starsky and again shoved him into the wall. This time Starsky hit hard, smacking his head against the wall.

Starsky tried to shake off the blow, but he felt lightheaded. And the pain shooting through his arm was blinding him. He did not fight back. "I love your son, Richard," was all he said. A sharp punch landed right in his stomach, doubling him over.

He looked up to Richard, unable to straighten. His eyes had a stranglehold on his heart, they looked so much like Hutch's. He locked onto his eyes. "That make you feel better, Richard? Go ahead. Hit me again, old man. You're not getting rid of me." Another fist slammed into his belly. Starsky gasped for breath. In a rough voice, he said, "I love Ken. I'm not going anywhere."

Richard grabbed Starsky by the arms and shoved him back against the wall again. The pain in Starsky's arm forced a growl through his gritted teeth. "That all ya got?" he grunted. "Try again, old man. There's not enough fight in the world to keep me from Ken." Another fist slammed into his stomach, knocking the wind from him and doubling him over again, and he felt his legs weaken beneath him.

Unfamiliar male hands dragged Richard off of him. A nurse rushed to his side, but he leaned into the wall, afraid he would slide down to the floor. She grabbed his left arm, supporting him, asking him questions that he couldn't yet answer. The nurse pulled his arm over her shoulder, and she pulled his body into hers, gliding him into the nearby chair. Soon a cool washcloth was wiping his face. He closed his eyes, still trying to regain his breath. The pain in his arm was as fresh as new. In a strangled voice, he said, "I'm okay," as he took the cloth from her. "Thanks."

He turned to see Richard on the opposite side of the room, with two security guards keeping him in place. The man was obviously still seeing red, his face looking like he wanted to charge right back to Starsky.

Starsky stood, nearly falling into the bed on unsteady legs, and grabbed Hutch's hand. He took a final stand. "I love Ken and I'm not leaving," he said again to Richard. Richard lunged toward him again, but was easily stopped by the two security officers.

Looking back to Hutch, he saw the anger in his lover's eyes. "I'm sorry," he soundlessly mouthed to him.

Hutch raised the nurses' call button, and waved it in the air. The nurse put her hand on his arm and said, "I'm here, Ken."

In a voice void of emotion, Hutch said to her, "I want my father out of here. We'll press charges. I want him out, and I want an emergency restraining order due to our medical issues. I don't want him anywhere near either one of us."

Starsky squeezed his hand. "No. You don't have to do that, babe. I'm fine. Just had the wind knocked out of me for a sec. Look, everyone's upset. Your dad hasn't even seen you awake yet. Let's just take a minute and calm down..."

"You're not fine," the nurse said, trying to turn him back to face her. Starsky didn't listen.

Kathryn's voice drifted through the room. "What's going on? Richard? What did you do?" When she caught sight of Starsky, she gasped. "David! You're hurt!"

The nurse guided Starsky back into the chair. "Ken, please push that call button again," she instructed calmly. She unstrapped Starsky's sling and raised his arm until it was above his heart, supporting his arm. "Dave, you need a doctor."

"I'm fine," he stressed again. "Really!"

Another nurse came in. The nurse with Starsky told her, "Get Dr. Jamison, now." The second nurse quickly scooted from the room.

Starsky was confused why they were fussing over him. He felt something light tapping him on the thigh. He looked down to see blood drops on his jeans. "Oh shit." He glanced up to see his sleeve was red with blood. The attack from Richard had re-opened his wounds.

Dr. Jamison entered the room, followed by the nurse with a wheelchair. "Hello Dave," he said as he looked at the raised arm. "Looks like you could use some help. Nurse, let's get Dave into this wheelchair." He looked at Richard and back to Starsky. "Is this the man who hit you?" Starsky nodded. "Get him out of here." The security guards quickly followed his order. He now looked to Hutch. "Are you okay, Ken?" When Hutch nodded, he told him, "I'm going to get Dave patched back up. I'd like you to get some rest while we're gone, okay?"

"Sure, Doc. But can you tell my mom where they're taking my dad? She's gotta be worried."

"I'm not worried," Kathryn spoke up. "Your father got himself into this mess, he can get himself out. If it's okay, I'd like to go with Dave and keep him company while he gets stitched up."

Startled, Starsky looked to Hutch, who looked just as startled, then looked back to Kathryn. "I'd like that very much, Kathryn."

"You're a member of this family now, Dave. You might as well call me Mom." She took his good hand and walked abreast of him, holding hands with him, as they wheeled him out of the room.

~*~

Karen walked down the row of cells at the police station, stopping at the one containing her father. She sighed and leaned against the bars, looking at the man who had just spent the night in prison. "Daddy, what did you do?"

"Karen! Thank God."

"Not so fast. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't turn around and leave you here right now."

"What kind of a way is that for a daughter to talk to her father!"

"Dad! I made it pretty clear how I expected this family to treat Starsky! And you couldn't be nice to him for twenty-four hours?"

"He was kissing my son!" he shouted.

"Fine. I'm outta here," Karen replied, turning to leave.

"Honey, wait! Come on. I told you it's hard for me. You said you didn't expect me to jump on the gay bandwagon. How do you expect me to react to him molesting my son!"

"He kissed him! For Christ's sake, Dad! Of course he's going to kiss him! They're in love! And I told you I expected you to treat him with respect! Like a member of this family!" She shook her head in exasperation. "Well, it's a damn good thing you didn't walk in on him giving him a blow job, or you might have killed him!"

"Watch your mouth!" he shouted, pointing a finger at her.

"Oh yeah, Dad? You're gonna criticize my language? And you're sitting here behind bars for what? For beating up a man who kissed his boyfriend? An unarmed, injured man, who had just been shot? A man who didn't provoke you? A man who never lifted a finger to defend himself? A COP? And you're so morally upstanding that I should listen to you."

"Hey, he did provoke me! He said 'hit me again, old man!'"

"You were already hitting him at that point! You attacked him from behind, he didn't even know you were there! He just kept telling you that you could hit him all you want but you weren't going to get him to leave. That's not provoking, Dad. Not in a legal sense. Not when you were already hitting him at that point. You beat on an innocent, injured man for kissing someone he loved. A man that you knew wouldn't hit you, because you are the father of the man he loves. That's low, Dad. And for what? Why would it make any difference to you if he kissed Ken? He loves Ken."

"He's ruined my son!" Richard growled.

“Bullshit!” Karen exclaimed. “Ken is not ‘ruined!’ He’s a good man! And you think Starsky made Ken gay? Gimme a break. You beat Ken up and threw him out when he was 17 for being gay! That was long before he ever met Starsky.” She grabbed a chair and brought it over in front of his cell, sitting down to face him. “So why is it you really hate Starsky? You used to like him. You and Mom came out here to visit him after he was gunned down. You seemed to like him just fine then.”

Richard bowed his head. “Yeah, we did like him.”

“You know what I think?” she asked. “I think you are angry that he stands up to you. That you can’t intimidate him, and that infuriates you.”

He shook his head, but wouldn’t look at her. He didn’t argue the point.

“And why do you care if Kenny is gay? What difference does it make who he loves?”

“It’s a sin!” Richard defended.

“Like you are completely without sin, right Dad? Shall we examine your life, to see if you hold up to your own scrutiny? Let’s see…”

“Alright, that’s enough!”

“Dad, you need to let this go. Let Ken be. Let him love whoever he wants. Be happy that he’s happy! He’s your son! Why can’t you just accept him?” A tear streaked down her cheek. “If one of my babies grows up to be gay, are you going to disown them too?”

“Karen, no one is getting disowned.”

“Look at you, Dad! Hasn’t this all gone too far? You’re in jail! You committed assault and battery on a cop! Do you realize that’s a felony? You could spend 16 months to 3 years in jail!”

“What do you want me to say, Karen? I can’t undo what’s been done.”

“You can start by apologizing to Starsky. And Ken. AND MEAN IT. While you’re at it, you better apologize to Mom, too. It’s time to drop all the anger and judgement, and support each other as a family. Accept Ken as he is, and accept the man he’s chosen to love. He’s your son, damn it! And if you have strong moral objections to something, then apply it to yourself and keep it to yourself, and let others live their own lives. Look, Dad, we’re done. You can rot in jail for all we care at this point. We’re done. We’re *all* done. We’re not putting up with this behavior any longer. You’re either a part of this family, or you aren’t. Make a choice.”

“You’re so much like your mother,” Richard whispered.

“Not entirely, Dad. Mom wouldn’t come down here.”

He bowed his head. “You win, Karen. You’re right.” He looked up at her. “Will you get me out of here now? Please?”

~*~

Starsky was seated on the edge of Hutch’s bed when he looked up to see Karen’s return. “Hey! You’re back! How’d it go?”

She sank into a chair and put her feet up on another. “As well as could be expected, I guess.”

Hutch asked, “Did you bail him out?”

“Yeah, he’s out,” she sighed. “He’s here.”

Hutch looked angry. “He’s here? In violation of the restraining order?”

Karen shook her head. “It hasn’t been served yet. He knows it’s coming. He asked if he could speak with Starsky. He’s out in the main waiting room.”

“Absolutely not!” Hutch snarled. “Damn! I have never felt so helpless as I do in his bed! What I wouldn’t give, to be able to out there and do to him what he did to Starsky!”

Starsky reached back and patted Hutch on the leg. “Easy there, tiger. I’m fine, remember? Doc sewed me back up. No lasting effects. Besides, I’d kinda like to hear what he has to say.”

“No way!” Hutch insisted. “And have him turn you into a human punching bag again? Forget it!”

Karen spoke up. “He also asked to speak to you, Kenny. And Mom.”

“Fuck him!” Hutch growled.

“I’ll speak to him,” Kathryn offered, standing up. Crossly, she added, “I’d like to give him a piece of my mind.”

“Not alone, Mom!” Hutch cried, alarmed.

“I’m going with her,” Starsky declared. “Relax. I’m not gonna let him hurt anyone. And he’s not going to do anything in a crowded waiting room.” He walked up to Kathryn and put his arm around her. “You sure you want to do this?”

Kathryn nodded.

“Starsky -- “ Hutch called after him, but they calmly left the room.

They found Richard seated on a couch in a fairly secluded area of the large waiting room. He was turned so that he could see out a window, and he looked worried. “Richard,” Starsky said quietly.

He stood up. “Starsky. Kathryn.” He gestured for them to sit down.

“Kathryn wants to speak to you privately. Ken is worried about her safety, so I’m going to be just over here.” In a threatening tone, he added, “If I see so much as see you looking at her cross-eyed, I’ll be all over you. I won’t hold back. Do I make myself clear?”

“Very,” Richard replied contritely.

Starsky escorted her to a chair beside the couch. He patted her hand and smiled at her. “Call if you need me.”

He walked over to the coffee pot near the nurses’ station, keeping an eye peeled on the couple on the couch, and poured himself a cup of the strong brew. The coffee tasted like it had been brewed yesterday and left on the warmer to cook to a thin sludge, but it still tasted better than the coffee

at the station. He drank it down quickly, then poured the last of the pot into his cup. He busied himself with making a new pot, all the while tuned into Hutch's parents.

In this area of the waiting room, he was close enough to hear their voices, but not close enough to discern their words, which suited his needs. He had no desire to hear what they talked about; only to assure that Kathryn was not at any risk. As they talked, he watched Kathryn's body language go from angry to despair, critical to resigned. A couple times he heard her laugh. After an hour or so, he saw them stand, and Richard embraced her. As he kissed her on the top of the head, Starsky could see flashes of Hutch in Richard, his tenderness, his gentleness, the loving way he held her. It was hard to feel anger for someone who reminded him so much of the man he loved.

After the embrace, Kathryn looked to Starsky. He took his cue and returned to their area of the waiting room. Richard was holding Kathryn's hand, and Starsky felt some relief that they had at least gotten past the rough patch. She smiled at his return. "David, are you still willing to talk to Richard?" she asked.

He placed a soft hand on her shoulder, and smiled affectionately at her. "I don't know, Mom. What do you think?" He watched for any negative reaction from Richard from his peripheral vision. He wasn't sure how the man would react to him calling her 'Mom.' But he seemed to take the term in stride.

"I think you should, if you are up to it, son."

"I trust your opinion," he grinned at her before turning to her husband, "...so Richard, you have yourself a meeting."

Kathryn asked, "Would you like me to wait over here?" as she gestured toward where Starsky had been seated.

"No, Mom, you go back to Ken. He's gonna be worried sick about you. I'm a tough cookie. I'll be fine with Richard." He winked at her. She smiled and headed back in the direction of the ICU.

Starsky took Kathryn's former seat and looked Richard in the eye. "Okay Richard. Why did you want to see me?"

"Starsky, I want to apologize..." Richard began, but Starsky cut him off.

"Save your apology, Richard. I don't need it. The person you need to apologize to is your son."

Richard blinked in surprise. "Yes, you're right. I do need to apologize to Ken. And I will, if he'll let me. But I owe you an apology too. And not just for hitting you. I've been taking out my frustrations on you, and blaming you, for things that aren't your fault." He shook his head sadly. "Karen said something to me about you, and I think she may be right. She said that I get so angry with you because I can't intimidate you or control you. I think there may be some truth in that. You do get under my skin."

Starsky grinned. "You're not the first person to tell me that."

He chuckled nervously. "I wanted you to get away from Ken, and I wanted him to go back to being normal..."

Starsky's demeanor darkened. "There's nothing wrong with your son."

"Please, hear me out. That's how I felt. I know it's wrong. But a parent has certain dreams and expectations for their children. And homosexuality wasn't part of that. When Alec came along, I thought it was a phase. Life went on, Ken got married... I thought that was all in the past. Then all of a sudden it slams me in the face again. You slammed me in the face, with your wedding rings, and your declarations of love. I know you pretty well, Starsky. And I know you're unshakeable. And that scared me. I wanted to fix this. I wanted to put everything back in its place. And I knew I had no control over you. It made me see red."

"Hutch doesn't need *fixing*," Starsky ground out.

"No, I meant fixing the situation. I wanted everything to go back to the way it was, and I was aware I had no control over that."

Starsky gave him a cold stare. "You meant Hutch needs fixing, too."

"I did feel that way, yes. I wanted a better life for my son. I didn't want him to have to struggle against society, I didn't want him to get hurt. I didn't want him to be different. I wanted to set him on the right path. I wanted to fix him. You're right. But I was angry, and I felt that way when I was angry. I'm seeing things a bit clearer now. And I know I was wrong."

"You say you didn't want him to get hurt. Don't you realize that you've hurt him more than anything strangers could do to him? You've rejected who he is! Damn it! You're his father! You should love him unconditionally!"

Richard met his gaze, and for the first time, Starsky saw pain in his eyes. "I didn't mean to hurt my son. I was a fool. And I didn't know how to stop being a fool. I let my emotions take over. I lashed out at everything; a life I couldn't control, a son I couldn't change, dreams that crumbled away, a man that seemed to stand in my way. I'm sorry for how I've treated Ken. I've made mistakes. I don't know how to fix them. But I want very much to try."

Starsky stared at Richard. He believed the man was sincere. "Talk to Ken," Starsky told him, "if he'll let you. I'll stand by what he decides."

"I am sorry I hit you, Dave. I'm ashamed of my behavior. I won't hit you again."

"I don't need your apologies, Richard. As far as I'm concerned, the fight between us is over. This division with you and Hutch, though, is another matter. You need to make this right. I will not tolerate anyone hurting him, in any way. And if you do, I will come at you with everything I've got. Do we understand each other?" Richard gave him a single nod in reply.

The two men stood up. Richard extended his left hand to Starsky. Starsky looked at it a moment, then looked Richard in the eye. He took his hand and shook it. "Come with me," he told him.

Starsky led the way to Hutch's room but stopped shy of going in. He waited until he caught Kathryn's eye, and gestured for her to come out. She did so, snagging Karen along the way, and leaving Hutch in the room alone. Starsky walked in followed by Richard. Hutch's face looked relieved when he saw Starsky, but when he saw Richard behind him, his face hardened.

"What the hell is he doing here?" he demanded.

Starsky held up a finger to Richard, to tell him to hang on a moment. Then Starsky walked up and whispered to Hutch, "Hear him out. As a favor to me. I'll stand by whatever you decide."

Hutch grabbed Starsky's shirt, and pulled him in for a kiss. Starsky touched his forehead to Hutch's for a moment. Hutch looked up and nodded, to let Starsky know he'd listen to his father. Starsky put the call button into Hutch's hand, just in case, and walked out of the room, leaving Richard and Hutch to talk.

He joined Karen and Kathryn outside Hutch's room. "How about I buy my two favorite gals some lunch in the cafeteria?"

Chapter 12

As the three approached the room after a leisurely lunch, they were surprised to hear laughter in the air. Starsky saw Richard sitting on the edge of Hutch's bed, and both men were all smiles. He was amazed to see how much the two men looked alike. The laughing eyes were just the same, right down to the exact same color, and both smiles were identical, right down to the creases that framed them. Hutch looked a little pale though, as if the pain was wearing on him. Starsky took Hutch's hand. "You doing okay?"

Hutch looked at him, his eyes twinkling. "I'm okay. I'm sore, though. It's hard to laugh."

Starsky looked to Richard. "Okay if we kick everyone out? He's looking tired."

The family gathered their belongings and said their goodbyes, planning on returning later that evening. Hutch settled back and closed his eyes.

"How'd it go with your dad? You seemed on good terms when we walked in."

"We had a good talk." Hutch relayed the things they discussed, much of it very similar to the discussion Richard had with Starsky. "I also got him to agree to anger management counseling. Then he also suggested joining a support group for families with gay members. He thought it might help him adjust and accept things better, to be able to talk to people that understand what he's going through."

"That sounds like a great idea."

"He had a lot of nice things to say about you," Hutch told him. "He said he's gained a lot of respect for you." Hutch grinned. "And it really irritated the hell out of him that he couldn't get you to fight back. And every time he hit you, you stood up to him again. He hated it. But he was impressed by it."

"Did he say how he felt about you?"

"He said he loves me. He said he was proud of me. Proud of the kind of man I've become. Proud of my work." He looked at Starsky with misty eyes. "He's never said that to me before. He said he regrets that he's been treating me like I need to be fixed. He said I'm a fine man, and he respects my choices."

Starsky squeezed his hand.

"Oh, he finally concedes that you didn't recruit me into gaydom. That I was gay long before I met you." Hutch chuckled. "Then I told him that you were straight when I seduced you. He nudged me and said that no one is safe from the Hutchinson charm." He winked at Starsky.

Starsky laughed, thinking it was a big change if Richard was starting to joke about this. "Hutch, have you considered dropping the charges against him?"

"I thought about it, but I wanted to see how you felt about it, first. You're the one he hit."

"I wasn't so keen on pressing charges from the start," Starsky reminded. "I know he was in a rage, but there were extenuating circumstances. I thought we were all stressed out from the shooting, then he finds out about us. It seemed we just needed some time to cool off. I don't feel comfortable charging him with a felony."

“Yeah, but I do feel more comfortable with him agreeing to anger management.”

Starsky nodded. “We can call and have the charges dropped.”

Hutch tugged Starsky’s hand toward his chest, pulling Starsky over him. “Help me sit up,” he requested.

Starsky pressed the controller that raised the head of the bed, bringing it to its highest point. “How’s that?”

“Not enough,” Hutch said. “I can’t lift my upper body.”

“What are you trying to do?”

Hutch looked at him. “I want to move over, so you can join me.”

Starsky smiled. “Hang on.” He scooted to the door, and flagged down a nurse to ask for her help.

“We can take care of this,” she said confidently. The nurse went to the far side of the bed and pulled out the sheet. She twisted the sheet around her hand near his chest level, and around her other hand near his hip. “I’m going to move you now. I’ll do my best not to hurt you, okay?” When Hutch nodded, she pulled. He slid smoothly toward her, leaving nearly half the bed empty. “Did I hurt you?”

“Not at all,” Hutch grinned. “Thank you.” He patted the mattress and Starsky climbed on the bed, resting on his right side, curled against Hutch.

The nurse pulled up the guard rail, to keep Starsky from falling out, as Hutch lowered the head of the bed to a more comfortable height. He had his left arm draped over Hutch’s waist, his left leg draped over Hutch’s left. Starsky sighed happily as he snuggled up to Hutch, eyes closed. The bed shook slightly as the rail on Hutch’s side was also raised. The nurse also slipped Starsky’s shoes and socks off and set them aside. Starsky felt a light blanket draped over them, and tucked around them both, just before all the lights turned off. As he felt peace and contentment pour over him, Starsky instantly drifted off to sleep.

~*~

Starsky awoke and stretched like a cat, feeling refreshed and invigorated.

“Hey there,” Hutch murmured.

He grinned. “Hey. You been up long?”

“A little while,” Hutch admitted. “I was enjoying watching you sleep.”

“I slept good. I must be missing sleeping with you.”

Hutch smiled. “I miss you, too. But I suspect you’re just missing a real bed. You’ve been mostly sleeping in a chair for days.”

“I can sleep on anything. You know that. What I miss is being able to curl up with you.” The look in Hutch’s eyes warmed Starsky’s heart. He gave Hutch a light hug, afraid to cause him pain. He felt Hutch’s hand bury into his curls. “I could stay right here until they release you.”

“I’d like that.”

Starsky grew serious. “I hate to bring this up, but I’m thinking I should get some work in. I ought to stop by The Gym and update Scranton.”

“It hasn’t even been a week yet,” Hutch spoke as he played with Starsky’s curls. “You could put it off. No one’s going to expect you to jump right back to work after taking a bullet.”

“I’m anxious to end it,” he admitted. “I want to get what we need and bring him down.”

“You were really enjoying this assignment. Now you’re anxious to end it? Is this because of me?”

“It kinda took the fun out of it, to see you laying on the floor, bleeding, with a bullet in your chest. If I don’t get back on the horse and go back there, I may never be able to walk in there again.”

Karen voice startled them both. “Kenny?” she whispered. “You awake?”

“Come on in, Karen,” Hutch replied. “We’re awake. Go ahead and turn on the lights.”

The lights clicked on, and Karen gasped. Starsky turned to see her whirl around, blocking Richard with her hands on his chest. Starsky quickly grabbed the bedrail, pulling himself up to a sitting position, then slid off the bed. He took a barefoot step in Richard’s direction, wanting to keep distance between Richard and the bed. Realizing that Karen was trying to protect him, he quickly and carefully pushed himself between Karen and her father, so the pregnant woman would be out of the way of danger.

Richard had been standing with his hands up, palms outward, as if in surrender. Karen must have been afraid of Richard’s reaction to seeing him and Hutch in bed together, and reacted to her fear instead of any actual danger. Starsky realized Richard was not about to attack, and instantly backed down. “Richard? Are we good?” he asked.

Richard slowly dropped his left hand, and offered it to Starsky to shake. “David,” he said, “we’re good.”

Starsky shook his hand and gave him a grin. “Come on in.” When he turned back to Hutch, he was surprised to see him sitting on the edge of the bed, his cannula off. “Hey! How’d you do this?”

Hutch looked a little breathless but otherwise fine. “Quickly,” he grinned sheepishly. “Like ripping off a band-aid.”

Dropping the guard rail, Starsky gave him more room, and sat beside him. “You okay?”

“I’m okay,” he laughed lightly. “I wasn’t as bad as I feared. I feel more human sitting up.”

“What were you trying to do? Give me backup?” Starsky laughed. “You’re supposed to be healing, and resting.”

“Can’t help myself. It’s instinctive. Besides, if I don’t back you up, who will?” He smiled at Starsky, and gave his leg a squeeze.

Starsky addressed the Hutchinsons. “We were just talking about me going back to work. We’ve been deep undercover for months, and don’t want to lose any of the ground we’ve gained.”

Karen pulled up a chair. “I was going to ask about that,” she began. “I’d like to stay on, and give you a hand for a while.”

“No. No, absolutely not.” Hutch shook his head adamantly. “Karen, that’s a really sweet offer, but it’s far too dangerous. I can’t let you.”

“I’ve gotta agree with Hutch,” Starsky added. “We appreciate the offer, but we can’t accept. Even when he gets released, we are still both basically undercover. And we’re dealing with some dangerous men. We’ll get along alright. We’ve done this drill before. And if we need any help we can get some help through the department. We don’t want to put people we care about at risk.”

~*~

Walking into The Gym was difficult. Starsky arrived at a time he knew would be quiet, unready for a bustling crowd. The room was still showing signs of great damage, with bullet holes everywhere, broken light fixtures, even the jukebox hadn’t been spared. While all the glass and such had been swept up, most of the damage had not been erased. The place seemed empty, and Starsky guessed the bartender was stocking the bar for the evening crowd. Before he went up to see Scranton, he walked deliberately to the dance floor.

He stopped at the place where Hutch had fallen. The floor had been mopped up, but he could still see the traces of stain where his blood had pooled. He felt a sense of grief descend upon him, and he used his energy to push it down. Inhaling deeply, he steeled himself against the visual image of the stain and coolly took the reins of his emotions.

“Dave!” a friendly voice called, and Starsky turned to see Tony emerge with a case of beer in his arms. “Damn! Am I glad to see you! How the hell are you? How’s Ken?”

Starsky smiled and walked to the bar. “I’m good, Tony. Ken is stable, and getting a little better every day. It’ll be a long recovery, but we’ll get through it.”

“Mr. Scranton has been worried about you guys. He’s stopped by the hospital a few times, but they don’t tell you much. He hoped to run into you, but he never saw you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I missed him,” Starsky lied. He was actually quite glad that he hadn’t run into him there. He had enough to deal with without having to worry about his cover. “I’ve been at Ken’s bedside the whole time. And they don’t allow a lot of visitors in ICU.”

“Yeah yeah,” Tony replied. “They said only immediate family.”

“Ken and I have a power of attorney set up for each of us, so we are able to make medical decisions for each other. If we hadn’t set it up that way, I would’ve been kicked out too.” The thought of that was unsettling to Starsky. “Looks like you’ve cleaned up a lot. But there’s still lot to do, huh?”

Tony nodded. “The contractor is coming in tomorrow. He’s got workers that will come in and do the repairs, then a designer is coming in to redecorate. Same theme, just updated, with new colors and light fixtures and stuff. They’re gonna start renovating the third floor, too. Oh, and

they're finally putting in those cameras that you wanted, so your team can monitor the bar from upstairs."

"Oh, that's great! Hey, is Mr. Scranton upstairs? I'd like to give him the scoop on Ken."

"He sure is. Go on up. He'll be real glad to see you."

Starsky walked down the familiar hallway to Scranton's office, wishing he never had to set foot in this place again. He wanted scum like this out of his city, but the only way that was going to happen, was if he made it happen, and he had to make it happen alone now. He pulled his Dave Stark persona around him like a suit of armor, and rapped on the door to Scranton's office.

"Come in," came through the closed door.

He opened the door and smiled at his boss. "Hi Mr. Scranton. I heard you missed me."

"Dave!" Scranton cried, springing to his feet. "Good to see you, man! How are you?" He came around his desk and embraced Starsky. "Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"No, no thank you. I'm fine." He patted his sling. "The bullet went clear through, and didn't do that much damage. Kinda nicked the artery, but it was a small nick. They don't think there's any nerve damage. I was pretty lucky they used small caliber weapons. The doc tells me with physical therapy I should be 100% in about a year."

Scranton grew serious. "And how about Ken?"

"Well, he took a bullet to the chest. Thank God it was a small caliber. It could've been a lot worse. He was in surgery for about three hours, and didn't wake up for a day and a half. They had him on a ventilator for about a day, and he's had a drainage tube in his chest. They changed the ventilator for on oxygen mask when he started breathing on his own, and now to a tube that runs under his nose. All they'd tell me is he was stable, and that the bullet missed his heart by a hair. They are watching him like a hawk for infection. He'll probably be in ICU for a couple weeks, and in the hospital for about a month. We've got a long road ahead of us."

Scranton listened intently. "I'm sorry you both went through this. Hey, Tony said the same bullet that shot you is the same one that shot Ken. Is that right?"

Starsky nodded. "Yeah. The doc told me if he had taken that bullet without me there, it probably would've killed him."

He spoke to him in a fatherly tone. "I want you to know that your hospital bills will be taken care of. Let me know if Ken will need a nurse when he gets out, and I'll take care of that, too. I don't want either of you worrying about anything. Just get better, and come back when you are able."

"Thanks, Mr. Scranton. I'll probably come back as soon as Ken is out of ICU. I might be part time for a while, if that's okay."

Scranton looked surprised that he would ask. "Of course, of course! Whatever you need!" Then he added, "I heard from the team that the two of you took out eight of the ten shooters. That's amazing. It was a war zone in here, and it's a miracle that more weren't killed. You've been a real godsend to me. Thank you, Dave."

“Don’t thank me, Mr. Scranton. That’s my job. I’m just sorry we lost one. I’ll review some new defensive tactics with the team when I come back, and we’ll work on ways to improve response time. I’ll have them running like a well-oiled machine in no time.”

“I wish I had a dozen more just like you,” he chuckled. He held out his hand to shake Starsky’s, then quickly switched hands so he could shake left-handed, due to Starsky’s injured right arm. “I’m sure you’re anxious to get back to your partner, so I won’t keep you. I’m just glad you came by. Now you let me know if there’s anything you need, and I’ll do everything I can, okay?”

“Thanks, Mr. Scranton.”

~*~

Starsky opened the front door to the rental house and entered for the first time in several days. “Rebel,” he said to the air, “I need a shower. I’ll meet you out back in about 20 minutes.” He dropped his keys on the table by the door and peeled the jacket off and tossed it on the back of a chair. Then he headed straight for the shower. He’d been allowed to use the showers at the hospital normally reserved for the staff, thanks to a kind head nurse, but there was nothing like having your own shower, with your own towels and products.

Twenty minutes later, he had pulled on his most comfortable clothes and headed outside, feeling like a new man. Rebel was already at the fence, waiting for him. “Hey neighbor! Long time no see!” she called to him.

He walked straight into her arms and held her for a long moment. “Rebel, this has been the longest week of my life,” he complained.

“Aw, honey, I know it has. But I hear Hutch’s doing better.”

He pulled out of her hug. “He is! He’s moving better, and they’re talking about moving him out of ICU next week, and putting him in a regular room.”

“That’s awesome!”

He proceeded to fill her in on the details of Hutch’s progress, and updated her on his visit with Scranton. “This war developing between Scranton and Gatz old gang is bad news. This is added pressure for us to bring Scranton down now, before this escalates further. You know Scranton will retaliate. This could be a real bloodbath.”

“Dobey says we have enough evidence to bring Scranton and his gang down, but the case against him personally is still shaky. We need more, to insure he won’t walk. A good DA could get him off. We need something solid; something that will stick.”

“I’ll get it,” Starsky declared, his voice full of promise. “I would be surprised if he doesn’t come to me to help plan his retaliation. When he does, we’ll have him.”

“Starsky, are you doing okay? You were pretty shaken up, the last time I saw you.”

“I’m okay, Rebel. Just wrung out. I could sleep for a month.”

“Why don’t you go lay down? Catch some Z’s. I’ll call to wake you up if you like.”

“I can’t. I’ve got to go update the Captain on how Hutch is doing, and about Scranton...”

“Go to bed,” she commanded. “I’ll call Dobey. I’ll tell him what you told me. And I’ll call you in an hour. An hour is nothing. Now go.”

He gave her a big smile. “Anyone ever tell you, you can be real demanding?”

Rebel gave him an irritated look. “Oh right. This is the first time I’ve heard that. Now get to bed.”

“Your wish is my command. Thanks, Rebel.” He walked to the door, then looked back. “You’ll call me in an hour?”

Rebel said nothing, just pointed to the door.

~*~

Starsky took his hand as Hutch spoke to his family. “I need to talk to you about something important,” he began. “I’m going to have to ask that you return home.” Kathryn looked stricken.

“We both appreciate your coming in,” Starsky added. “But we have a huge concern about your safety.”

Hutch continued. “You know we were working undercover when we were shot. Technically we are still undercover. This is an ongoing case. Every minute that you stay here increases the danger you are in. That’s a risk I’m not willing to take. I have to get you out of here, as soon as possible, to keep you safe.”

Starsky explained, “I went back in to talk to the target of our investigation, and found out he’s been coming here, to the hospital, to try to find out how Hutch is doing, and has been looking to run into me here. If he were to see me with any one of you, that could put you in serious danger. It could also put us in danger, if you inadvertently drop our cover. Just calling me Starsky once could be all it takes.”

“We were aware, even before we were shot, that this investigation is coming to a head,” Hutch said. “Once we move in, everything will hit the fan, and we don’t want you getting caught in the crossfire.”

Kathryn leaned forward and patted Hutch’s knee. “We understand, Ken. We’ll clear out. We’re just worried about you. You’ll keep us posted on how you’re doing, won’t you?”

Starsky assured her, “I will make sure you know how he’s doing. Captain Dobey will help, too. He’ll call when I can’t.”

“I called Robbie at the ranch this morning,” Hutch told them. “He flew out to pick you up. He’s at the airport now, prepping for the return trip.”

Kathryn rose and hugged her son. “It’s hard to leave,” she admitted. “You’re not even out of Intensive Care yet.”

Hutch gave her a big smile. “I’m gonna be fine, Mom. Starsky will take good care of me. And as soon as the danger is past, we’ll have you all come out again. You’ll be able to stay as long as you like.”

~*~

Scranton slammed the door to his office, and gripped the telephone receiver tightly in his hand. “What the hell are you talking about! That’s impossible! ...Listen, Fitz, I checked out each of those men personally. They’re hand-picked. I can vouch for all of them. There’s no cop on my security team, I assure you. ... There were twelve of us at that meeting! Who does he think is a cop? ...Well that’s not much of a description. How am I supposed to know which one? I’m gonna need proof, Fitz. You tell him to get me proof!” He slammed the phone down and raked his hand through his hair.

Chapter 13

Keeter entered Scranton's office and slipped off his backpack. "Hi, Uncle Phil. Do you mind if I borrow the copier? I've got notes for a class I need to copy for the rest of my study group."

"Of course not, Keeter. Go ahead. I was just gonna head out and grab a bite to eat. You want to join me?"

"No thanks. This is going to take me a while, and we're meeting at the student union in an hour." He grinned and added, "But if you bring me a hamburger, I wouldn't complain."

Scranton smiled affectionately at him. "You got it, kiddo." He left the room.

Keeter sorted out his papers and started running them through the copier, collating them as he went along, placing stacks on all open surfaces nearby. He ran out of room beside the copier and went to place a final stack on top of the fax machine when the machine started to whir and whine. To his surprise, a copy of a newspaper article was spitting out, with a familiar face on it. His jaw dropped when he saw the photo of Dave Starsky in his police uniform, looking back at him. Hands shaking, Keeter quickly slapped the article in the copier, before returning the original back to the fax machine. He gathered up his copies, and hurried from the room.

~*~

Starsky took his beer and went to take a seat. The Gym was starting to get a few customers coming in early for the evening crowd. He was seated at a booth, going over some of his notes for the defensive tactics that he was beginning to implement, when Keeter approached him.

"Hey sexy!" Keeter called cheerfully.

"Keeter! Take a seat!" Starsky offered. "I thought I'd have a beer before heading out. Join me!"

Keeter said, "Oh, I can't stay. I have a study group at the college. But I did want to tell you about this new Mexican restaurant that opened up. I remembered that you like authentic enchiladas, and I hear these are outstanding."

"Oh yeah? Where at?"

Whipping out a piece of paper, Keeter folded it in half and started writing. "I'll jot down the address for you." He passed the paper to Starsky. "Do you know where that is?"

Starsky looked at the paper. The hair on his arms stood on end when he read the note.

Read this paper - NOW!!

Opening the folded paper, Starsky saw an old familiar news article from when he was gunned down in the Parker Center parking lot, several years prior. There was a large photo of him in his dress uniform within the article. Starsky felt the rush of adrenaline flood his veins. Utilizing the best poker face he had, he replied to Keeter's question, "Yeah, I know where this is. Thanks, Keeter! I'll check it out." He slipped the paper into his inside jacket pocket.

"Great!" Keeter said cheerfully. "Let me know what you think." He smiled, but Starsky thought his eyes looked pained. "I better run. Maybe I'll see you later tonight?"

"Sounds good! See ya later!"

~*~

Starsky drank down a large gulp of his beer. As he did so, he felt for his hospital pager in his pocket, and blindly felt for the test button on it. The test button set off the beeper sound. Starsky pulled it from his pocket as he approached the bar. “Hey Tony, do you mind if I use your phone? The hospital is paging me.”

“Sure!” Tony grabbed the phone and handed him the receiver. “What’s the number?”

Starsky looked at the pager screen, where it said ‘TEST,’ and pretended to read off the hospital phone number that he knew by heart. “555-7479.” Starsky listened for the nurse to answer. “Yes, this is David Stark. I just received a page. It’s regarding Ken Hodges... The family code? Oh yeah, um, Rosebud.”

The hospital required passwords before they would provide any patient info over the phone. He provided the code that was prearranged, and the nurse provided him with the prearranged response. There was no way to know if his call was being heard by any of Scranton’s people, so he had to be careful. “...An infection? ...104 sounds high... I’ll be right there.” He handed the phone back to Tony. “I’ve gotta go. Ken’s not doing so good.”

“You go, Dave. Keep us posted.”

“Will do, Tony. Thanks.” He quickly exited the bar. Once his car was a block away, he pulled out the Mars light and slapped it on the roof. He grabbed the radio. “This is Det. Sgt. Dave Starsky. Put me through to Captain Dobey. It’s an emergency!”

“Captain Dobey.”

“Cap’n, this is Starsky. We’ve been made. You gotta get everyone you got over to the hospital right now. Hutch is a sitting duck!”

“Hold on, Starsky,” he said as he put Starsky on hold. He came back a short time later. “I’ve got a call out for all available. I’ll meet you there.”

“Thanks, Cap’n.” Starsky threw the radio down and switched on the siren.

~*~

Rebel and Tom were drying dishes when their police radio crackled to life. “All available units report to Memorial General ICU. See Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson...”

“Let’s go,” Tom tossed his dishrag on the counter, grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. Rebel was on his heels.

They jumped into Tom’s car, and Rebel grabbed the radio. “Dispatch, this is Zebra 5 responding. We’re less than five minutes from Memorial.”

~*~

Scranton returned to his office and put a paper bag of food in the small refrigerator beside his file cabinet, then took a seat at his desk. He shuffled through the little pink telephone message forms from his assistant. One caught his attention, and he dialed the number provided.

“Fitz? It’s Phil. I got your message. What did you find out from Jacobsen? ...No, I didn’t see it. Hang on.”

He put down the phone and checked his fax. His eyes scanned the article that had been sent to him, and felt the fury consume him. A photo jumped out at him of Dave, dressed in a police uniform. Another photo showed him in plain clothes beside his partner, Ken. The article described how he had been gunned down in the line of duty, yet survived, and how his partner had brought down the man responsible. A final photo showed Ken receiving a commendation for bringing down James Gunther. Scranton lashed out, crashing his fist into a framed photo on the wall.

He snatched up the phone again. “Fitz! Yeah, I got it. Yeah, I know him. And I know his partner, too. They’re both working for me. ...No, don’t do anything. I want to handle this personally. ...I’ll take out the motherfuckers! ...No, I said I’ll take care of this myself! I’ll rip them to shreds for screwing with me.” He slammed the phone down.

Scranton pulled open his desk drawer and pulled out a switchblade. He bounced the knife his hand, loving the weight and feel of it. He pressed the release, taking pleasure in seeing the gleaming blade snap in place. The knife had been a gift from his brother; a gift that he treasured. This weapon had served him very well in the past. This time it was personal. He would utilize it now to avenge the betrayal inflicted by the two cops. He was going to enjoy this.

~*~

Hutch lay in his hospital bed resting. A noise alerted him and he opened his eyes slowly, adjusting to the dim lighting of his room. Standing over his bed was Phil Scranton wearing a business suit. Hutch blinked his eyes disbelievingly at the unexpected, scowling visitor.

Scranton pulled a switchblade from his pocket and flipped out the blade. “Detective Kenneth Hutchinson,” he sneered. “I wish I had the time to carve your heart right out of your chest, but I’m going to have to settle for slitting your throat. Should make a pretty picture for that partner of yours to find.” He examined the shining blade. “Then I’ll do the same to him.” He leaned over and grabbed the guardrail, lowering it for better accessibility.

As he leaned down, Hutch grabbed his tie with his left hand, yanking the man’s head down, while lifting his right hand from under the edge of the sheet, to point his Magnum right in the man’s face. “I’m not that easy to kill, asshole,” Hutch growled.

“Drop the knife, Scranton,” Starsky said, pointing his own gun at Scranton’s right temple. Rebel and Tom also appeared, guns drawn, behind Starsky. Scranton dropped the knife. Starsky kicked it away.

Starsky took his time, slapping the cuffs on him, reciting his rights. When Scranton was turned around to face him, hands cuffed behind his back, he spit in Starsky’s face.

Dragging his hand down his face, wiping away the spittle, Starsky smiled. “It’s been a real pleasure taking you down, Phil.” He turned back to Tom. “Detective Carlson, would you be so kind as to show our guest to the finest suite the Parker Center has to offer?”

“I’d be glad to, Detective Starsky,” Tom said with amusement in his tone. “Would that be the cell with the leaking toilet?”

Starsky grinned, "That would be the one." Tom and Rebel escorted the prisoner out.

~*~

Starsky and Hutch provided their statements and dictated their reports. The next several hours were a blur of police and Feds shuffling through the hospital room. The attack from Scranton, and his subsequent arrest, triggered a massive joint move of the BCPD and the FBI, to move in on all the members of the Scranton gang. Dobey remained at the hospital, providing updates to Starsky and Hutch, as the teams moved in on their prey.

Captain Dobey walked in and put his arm around Starsky's shoulder. "Damn fine job," he said to him and Hutch. "I'm proud of you boys. Not only did you show us some excellent police work, you made us shine in the eyes of the FBI."

"Wow. Ya hear that, Hutch?" Starsky raised his eyebrows.

Hutch gave his boss a nod. "Thanks Cap." He moved his holstered gun and placed it on his side table. "Sir, can we talk to you...off the record?"

Dobey looked at him with evident curiosity. "Why off the record?"

Hutch reached for Starsky, pulling him to sit on the bed beside him. "We want to talk to you about a private matter."

"I'm listening."

Starsky continued for him. "Cap'n, since working on this case, Hutch and me, well, we stopped playing a role a long time ago."

Hutch added, "We really are a couple. Starsky and me."

"A couple!" Dobey exclaimed. "You two?"

"We're head over heels, Cap'n," Starsky smiled at Hutch. They both looked at their boss, awaiting his reaction.

Dobey started to laugh. Starsky and Hutch looked at each other, confused. Starsky took Hutch's hand. "Cap'n, this is no joke," he said very seriously.

"I'm sorry," Dobey chuckled. "I know you're serious. It's just that I thought you were a couple a long time ago."

Hutch was shocked. "You did?"

"Oh, come on, Hutch!" Dobey exclaimed. "The guy wrote his name on your hospital window *with red lipstick* when you had the plague! You two haven't been typical partners from the start. I mean I wasn't sure, but I had my suspicions."

Starsky shrugged to Hutch. "Well, that was anticlimactic."

Hutch chuckled as he asked, "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"I figured it was a secret. Don't ask, don't tell."

"So now what?" Hutch inquired. "Are you going to split our partnership?"

“Hell no,” Dobey huffed. “Not unless I have to. It depends on you two. If you plan on keeping things the way they are, I’m not changing anything. But if you plan on being open about your relationship, I’ll have to split you up. The commissioner will force me to. They don’t allow any couples to be partners.”

“We plan on being open,” Starsky declared.

“I’m not going to do anything until it’s dictated from upstairs,” Dobey told them. “But once they get ahold of this, my hands will be tied. Now we do have options. You’re both injured and can’t be on the streets. We can find other positions in the department for you where your relationship won’t be a concern.”

“We’ll just have to take it day by day,” Hutch replied. “I do plan on returning to the street eventually. And I want it to be with Starsky as my partner. But I’m not willing to live the rest of my life in a closet either.”

“Nothing has to be decided today,” Dobey advised. “Take your time. I’d prefer you didn’t act openly. Not because I disapprove, but because I don’t have any desire to split up my best team. But I’ll respect your decision either way. And I appreciate your telling me what’s going on. I’ll support you in any way I can, but there are a lot of things that will be out of my hands.”

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Hutch was seated at his desk, struggling through a report that Dobey had requested. Starsky watched him from the coffee maker as he sipped his steaming cup of coffee. Hutch had only been back a couple weeks, and the workload appeared to be tiring for his partner. He walked over to their desks and set his coffee down, but continued walking on around behind Hutch. Slipping his hands onto his partner’s shoulders, he began to massage the stressed muscles of his shoulders and neck.

Hutch let his head fall back, melting into Starsky. “Mmmm. Feels good, babe.” With no one in the squad room, Hutch nuzzled Starsky’s hand and kissed it.

Starsky smiled. He leaned over and kissed Hutch’s neck, then kissed his lips. As he did so, a group of four cops walked in, returning from a court appearance.

“Oh, here we go again,” one joked. “Come on Starsky. Head for the showers, will ya? Make it a cold one.”

Starsky grinned. “What’s the matter, Henderson? You jealous?” Henderson just laughed and waved him off, then grabbed his partner and headed to the locker room to change out of their court clothes, leaving two other cops behind.

Starsky overheard Gibson, one of the remaining cops, whisper to his partner, “What’s the story with those two, huh?” His partner looked over at Starsky and Hutch, then back to Gibson, and shrugged. Starsky snatched up his forgotten coffee up, and drank down the remaining brew.

As he walked to the coffee pot, he asked Hutch, “I’m going for a refill. You want some?” When Hutch answered in the affirmative, he grabbed another cup and proceeded to pour.

Gibson approached Starsky and asked in a conspiratorial whisper, “Hey Starsky. What gives? Are you gay?”

His partner smacked Gibson lightly on the arm. "Don't ask him that shit, Gibs!" he warned, then walked out of the room.

Starsky chuckled. "What difference does it make, Gibson? Either way, you're not my type."

Gibson look annoyed. "Just answer the question."

Innocently, Starsky turned back to him and replied, "I can't give you a straight answer to that." He winked at the other man, and heard Hutch chuckling behind him.

"I like that one, Starsk," Hutch grinned. "I'll have to remember that."

Gibson came up to Starsky. "Why don't you answer the question? Are you gay?"

Starsky handed Hutch his coffee, and set his own on the desk. He turned back to Gibson and replied jokingly, "I'm not. But my boyfriend is."

Gibson was not pleased. "I don't appreciate you answering my question with a bunch of jokes."

Sitting on the edge of his desk, Starsky replied, "Why the hell do you ask? It's a personal question, don't ya think? Do I go around asking you who you sleep with?" He picked up his cup and took a sip. "I don't usually feel inclined to answer questions if I think you're just being nosy, or if you're being a homophobic dick."

Gibson ran a hand through his hair, looking frustrated. "Look, I'm sorry, alright? I wasn't trying to be nosy or be a dick. I'm just trying to understand something."

Using his foot, Starsky pushed a chair in Gibson's direction. "Have a seat," he offered. "Why don't you tell me what this is all about."

The man sat down, looking at the floor, grasping his hands together. "All I've ever wanted to be was a cop," he began. "This job means a lot to me. I want to be good at this job."

"You *are* a good cop," Starsky replied. "But what's that got to do with my sex life?"

Gibson looked at him. "Everyone's talking about how you brought down Scranton. Shit, the FBI came to you guys because they couldn't get 'em on their own. And they say you brought them down by going undercover as gay." He shook his head. "I don't know if I could do that. And it makes me wonder if I'm cut out for this. Then I see you guys kissing on each other... And you're not undercover anymore. Makes me wonder if this changed you, you know?"

"What's going on with me and Hutch has been going on for a long time," Starsky answered thoughtfully. "It didn't just happen because of this case."

"Were you straight before this case?"

"Me? Yeah," Starsky replied.

"How did you do it? I mean, wasn't it difficult to pretend something that went against the way you are? They say you went deep undercover. That you lived as a couple. How'd you swing that, if you're straight?"

Hutch spoke up. "I think your partner makes a big difference in this. If you have a partner that you really trust and respect, that's key."

Starsky agreed. “Yeah, I couldn’t have done this with just anyone. Hutch made it easier. I mean, I already loved the guy. We’ve been best friends for over half our lives. Bringing something physical into it wasn’t that big of a stretch from where we were. I could make him feel good, and he could make me feel good. I trusted him, and knew he wasn’t going to do anything to freak me out.”

Gibson seemed to be contemplating their words. After a moment he asked, “And now? Did this case change you?”

“Are you asking if the assignment made us gay?” Hutch inquired.

“You guys were always real close, I know.” Gibson responded. “You’d be hanging on each other and stuff. But now you’re like an actual couple. You kiss on each other, and you’re wearing wedding rings...”

“Like I said,” Starsky replied, “what happened with me and Hutch is something that’s been going on for a long time. We would’ve gotten where we are now, with or without the case. Maybe it made things happen faster, I don’t know. But the case didn’t make me gay. Playing the role of a gay man didn’t make me gay. Being in the company of gay men didn’t make me gay.”

“Nope,” Hutch added with a mischievous grin, taking Starsky’s hand. “Falling in love with me made him gay.”

Starsky laughed. “Your kinda screwing up my point here. I was trying to make the point that going undercover as gay isn’t going to make him gay.”

Gibson grinned. “It’s okay, I get it. But I’m still not so sure I could do what you did. It makes me question if I’m cut out for this job.”

“I just looked at it like this,” Starsky reasoned. “Hutch is my best friend, and I love the guy. I can do this; I can give him pleasure. And I can trust him to do this with me. It could be nice, to share pleasure with a friend. You know, it’s Hutch; how bad could it be?”

Gibson thought about it. “I guess it’s more a matter of perspective. If I went into an assignment thinking I can’t do it, then I can’t. But if I put my own spin on it, that make it easier for me to accept, then there is a better chance for success. I appreciate you talking with me about this. I was concerned that if I had an assignment like yours, I wouldn’t have been able to do it, and it made me question my ability to do a good job.”

“You’re a good cop,” Hutch assured him. “You’re a solid performer on the streets. You’re honest, and you care. A lot will come with more experience. And with undercover, you’re going to be given training. We didn’t go into this cold. We trained with Captain Dobey, and with the Feds, and we were given case files from other agents that had worked the case before us. Plus, you have support while under. Just keep in mind that you may not be cut out for every assignment. You find out what you can, and you trust your gut. If you have doubts about your ability to carry it off, it’s best to step down. One little fuckup could very easily destroy the success of the assignment, or get you killed.”

Thanks, Hutch. Starsky.” He shook their hands and left their company.

“I really thought that was going to go differently when that started,” Starsky mused.

“Have you noticed? I’ve been back a couple weeks, and we haven’t been holding back, and no one seems to really care.”

“Yeah, I have noticed that,” Starsky said. “No one’s given us any grief. Why is that?”

“Maybe they don’t care if we’re gay?”

Dobey’s voice startled them both. “They don’t.”

“Didn’t hear you come in, Cap,” Starsky replied. “What do you mean, they don’t care?”

“They don’t. We had a lot of meetings while you guys were out. Mainly because of your phone calls, about no one showing up at The Gym when 911 calls came in. We had a lot of diversity training. We also had one-on-one counseling. A lot of the gay bashing had been instigated by Trainer and Holloway, and when they were let go, that put an end to the majority of it. The diversity training seems to have taken care of the rest.”

Hutch looked at Starsky. “If they don’t care, does that mean no one’s reporting us to the commissioner?”

“There’s no guarantee that the commissioner won’t hear about it eventually,” Dobby warned. “but at least this will buy you some time. Maybe he won’t ever hear about it. In any case, he’s not going to hear it from me.”

Chapter 14

Starsky took a seat in the ritzy restaurant across from Hutch. He smiled at him, appreciating how great he looked all dressed in black. "I like that suit on you. When you wear black, your hair glows, and your eyes look even bluer."

Hutch smiled. "My eyes are bluer because of your influence." Starsky grinned in response, knowing he meant that it was desire darkening his eyes, not the color of his suit. "You look pretty tempting yourself. I like the charcoal on you." He looked around the room. "Have you ever been here before?"

"No," Starsky replied, picking up his menu. "Dobey recommended it. Said they had terrific steaks."

"You haven't said yet. Why are we celebrating?"

Starsky smiled broadly. "We have lots to celebrate. We're happy, we're in love, you're back at work..."

Hutch smiled, his eyes soft. "You're right, we do. But I know you're up to something."

Chuckling, Starsky admitted, "I might have some surprises up my sleeve. But that'll have to wait." He absorbed himself into reading the menu.

Hutch was also lost in concentration when the waiter approached their table. "Hello, welcome to Michael's. I'll be your waiter this evening. My name is Keith. May I get you a drink?"

"Yes," Hutch replied absently. "I'll have—" He stopped abruptly, looking up to see a familiar face.

The young man smiled at him, thumbed in Starsky's direction, and said, "You ever get tired of this one, Honey, you send him my way."

Starsky's head shot up. "Keeter!" He jumped to his feet, and reached to embrace him. He stopped short of putting his arms around him, suddenly realizing that the young man might not want anything to do with him after arresting his uncle. "I, uh..." he dropped his arms, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm...I'm sorry..."

Keeter took all question out of it, stepping into Starsky's arms, hugging him tightly. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you guys," he said, not letting go.

"Me too, kiddo," Starsky hugged him back, patting him affectionately on the back.

Keeter finally pulled back, his eyes damp. "I really thought I would never see you again. I knew when I saw that article, you probably wouldn't survive the night."

"You saved my life that night," Starsky told him. "Hutch's, too."

Uncertainty in his expression, he asked, "Hutch?"

Now standing, Hutch said, "That would be me."

Keeter turned to hug Hutch as well. "God, that's right. I don't know your real names. I just saw that article for a minute before I ran down to give it to Dave."

“Ken Hutchinson. Hutch,” he said, still hugging him tightly. He released Keeter and turned him to Starsky. “This is my partner, Dave Starsky.”

“Keeter, can you join us?” Starsky asked excitedly.

“I can’t,” he answered, shaking his head. “I’m still new here. And I just started my shift, so I’m not due for a break. Besides, my cousin owns this place, and if he knew who you were, I’m pretty sure I’d be in a lot of trouble.”

Starsky and Hutch took the hint and took their seats. They proceeded to place their orders, and Keeter returned shortly with their drinks. “Hey,” he whispered. Are you guys really gay? Or was that part of the deception?”

“Starsky’s my partner,” Hutch explained. “On the force, in my life, in my heart.”

Keeter smiled. “This is my new hang out,” he told them, sliding a card onto the table. “I’m there on weekends. It’s not the same as The Gym, but it’s a gay bar, and it has a good vibe. And Tony is there! He plea bargained, and got off with immunity. He’s been working there since.”

Starsky pocketed the card, patting his pocket. “We’ll stop by,” he promised.

“I’d really like to get to know you guys better,” Keeter smiled. “I’m not sure what’s true and what’s not anymore.”

“I’m surprised you would even talk to me,” Starsky replied, sadness in his voice.

Keeter laughed. “What, are you kidding? Aside from the fact that I like you both, you guys saved me that night. I was being pulled into my uncle’s business world. It was only a matter of time before I was in up to my neck. That’s not the life I wanted, but I wasn’t in a position to walk away, either. I’m free now, and I couldn’t be happier. Tony’s happier, too. We didn’t want to be in that life. We sort of ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

When Keeter left their table, Starsky looked to Hutch. “Can you believe that? All this time I’ve been swamped with guilt about that kid. He saved our lives and we repaid him by bringing down his father figure.”

“I’m not so sure Phil was the loving father figure you think he was. I doubt he’s capable of that. Think about it. Why would you bring a sensitive kid like that into the mob?”

Scratching his jaw, Starsky replied, “You have a point. I do think Phil cared about him, as much as he was able. Maybe he thought he could protect him by keeping him close. But you’re right. If you love him, you don’t expose him to that kind of danger.”

~*~

As they drove home from the restaurant, Hutch was driving. Starsky smiled to himself and told Hutch, “Take a left at this light.”

When Hutch turned to look at him, he had a puzzled look on his face. “Here?”

“Here.”

“Where am I going, Starsk?”

“It’s a good night for a drive, don’t ya think?” Starsky replied mysteriously. He sat quietly for a few blocks. “Turn right at the next corner.” Hutch complied, this time without question. “Left, then slow. That’s it. Pull over right there.”

Hutch looked at the unfamiliar house. “Who lives here?”

“Come on,” Starsky urged. They walked up to the front door, and Starsky raised his hand as if to knock, but then opened his fist and revealed a set of keys. He handed them to Hutch.

Baffled, Hutch took the keys. “What’s this?”

Starsky smiled. “Welcome home.”

Hutch’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“I bought this house. For us. Go on, open it.”

Hutch opened the door, and Starsky followed him in. Hutch walked around the empty room, amazed. “It’s set up kind of like the rental house!”

“I noticed that too. Except it has a few extras. Go look off the dining room.” Looking through the windows of the dining room, Hutch found a greenhouse. His smile warmed Starsky’s heart.

“There’s three bedrooms, two baths; so it’s bigger than the rental. Oh! And there’s a 2-1/2 car garage. There’s a park at the end of the street, too, perfect for your morning runs.”

“How did you afford this?” Hutch asked.

“I’m a first time home buyer. Plus, I’m a vet. So there were special loans and down payments I qualified for. The mortgage is going to be less than what we’ve been paying on two apartments.” He walked him from room to room, giving him the tour.

“Starsk, I’m speechless. I don’t know what to say.”

“Do you like it?”

Hutch laughed. “Like it? I love it! I can’t believe you did this! This place is perfect.”

“It’s in both our names. Had it been any other house, I would’ve asked you first. But this one was so similar to the rental; and I know how much you liked that place. I figured I’d be safe, surprising you.”

“I can’t believe you bought us a house.” He wrapped his arms around Starsky and held him tightly. Then he caressed his cheek, and kissed him tenderly. “Thank you,” he said softly.

Starsky looked into those eyes and felt the power Hutch had over his heart. “I’d give you the world, if I could. I love you, Hutch.”

Still caressing his cheek, Hutch replied, “And I love you. You’ve given me everything. Every dream, every wish, every joy.”

Starsky slipped his arms around Hutch’s neck. “Shut up and kiss me, Hutchinson,”

~ The End ~