



**And  
There  
Was  
Light  
by  
Sandra**



Title: And There Was Light

Author: Sandra

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Categories: First Time, Post SR, Hurt Hutch, Hutch angst, Starsky angst

Summary: Yet another close call will finally open Starsky and Hutch's eyes to the mutual love they share.

Disclaimers: I don't own Starsky & Hutch, but this story's all mine, written only for others' enjoyment and my own. I'm making no profits.

Notes: People will find some parts of this story distracting and difficult to follow, because of all the flashbacks and my tendency to tell the same events from different characters' POV. I know that I should have deleted more, but after deleting about 15 pages of the final product, I chose to leave the rest as it is. I'm aware of the fact that many parts of this story are unnecessary and redundant, and they'll hinder the reading, but it was a conscious decision on my part.

Warnings: Corny, soapy, sappy. So, saccharine loathers beware!

Feedback: [Yes, please.](#)



## And There Was Light

by Sandra

Ken Hutchinson rolled his eyes and looked out at the street. He couldn't stop wondering how he had been such a fool and had fallen headfirst into Starsky's all too obvious ambush. After so many years of knowing the man, even better than he knew himself, he should know by now that David Starsky didn't bet on something he wasn't 100% certain he was going to win. Frustrated, he rolled down the window a little bit. The wind that drifted through the slight opening moved his bangs and teased his blond strands.

Starsky's endless chuckles finally got on his nerves.

"Oh, shut up, Starsky!" he exploded.

As expected, Starsky's mirth only increased.

"Well, now. We gotta find a drugstore right away, before you change your mind. I want ya to get rid of that mustache as soon as possible."

Hutch bit his lower lip and shook his head. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he sighed, in defeat.

"You've got no idea, partner!" Starsky replied as he took a left turn. "I've had to endure that dreary sight for two years now. And when I realized you wouldn't shave it on your own..."

"I should've known you planned this. It's the only way you could possibly eat 10 hot dogs with mustard and ketchup at 8:30 AM. That's too much, even for you. You must have fasted all weekend!"

Starsky looked at Hutch for a brief moment and waggled his eyebrows playfully.

"Oh, damn!" Hutch cursed under his breath.

There was a short silence. Finally, the blond took a deep breath. "Oh, well! If it'll make you happy... let's get this over with! It'll grow again," it suddenly dawned on him, and he glanced at Starsky to gauge his reaction. It was immediate.

"Hey, wait a sec...!" Starsky began.

"The bet was I'd shave my mustache if you could eat 10 hot dogs in a row with mustard and ketchup," Hutch interrupted him. "You won and I'm a man of my word, so I'll shave my mustache. But I never said I'd *keep on* shaving it. So, your victory will be a short lived one, buddy, since in a few weeks I'll have grown another one." Hutch smiled evilly from ear to ear.

Starsky mumbled angrily to himself. "You should'a been a lawyer!" he grumbled.

"You don't mean that," Hutch said.

"Sure I do!"

Hutch shrugged. "If I had been a lawyer, we'd never have met."

"Of course we would have! You'd have ended up defending the flakes I'd arrest. That's how we'd have met."

Hutch punched Starsky's shoulder. "That's offensive, ya know? But still, it's comforting to know we'd have met anyway."

"Sure! Kismet, buddy. There's no escaping fate," Starsky nodded emphatically.

"You really think so?" Hutch asked after a moment of silence. "Do you really think that no matter the professions we had chosen, we'd have met eventually?" His voice had dropped, as it usually did whenever he was talking about something that interested him or meant a lot to him.

Starsky smiled knowing, just by the sound of Hutch's voice, when a lighthearted conversation between the two of them turned into something else. To a stranger it would go unnoticed, but not to him. It was an indicator of how deeply connected they were, how attuned to each other's thoughts and moods they had become. And it was no wonder. They had gone through so much together... But it was far more than that. From the moment they had met, something had clicked within them. As if something that was destined to happen had finally taken place. Starsky considered the day he had met Hutch to be his second birth. His birth to the esteem and affection of the most extraordinary, incredible man in the whole world.

With a small shake, he turned his attention back to his partner. "Yeah, I guess so. I can't picture my life without you, that's why I want to believe that no matter the professions we had chosen, our paths would have met in time. I always felt it was sorta destined to happen."

Hutch smiled sweetly, very moved by Starsky's words. "Yeah, me too," he agreed in a very soft voice. "But that would raise a lot of questions. Predestination and all that stuff. I mean, if our destinies are somehow written from birth, there's nothing we can do to change them. So, what about free will?"

"Oh, I believe in free will. We create our own destinies, we make our own choices. But that's not incompatible with the idea of some important events being written beforehand. Such as meeting the best friend anyone could ever have," Starsky cast him a fond smile.

Hutch blushed furiously and looked down.

"Ditto, buddy," he managed to say after a while, lovingly squeezing Starsky's upper arm. Feeling his face was quite flushed, Hutch rolled down the Torino's passenger window all the way. Almost immediately, a violent gust of wind entered the car.

"Whoa! Shit!" Hutch exclaimed, rolling up half the window quickly. "It's worse than yesterday." He tried to comb his messed up hair with his fingers.

"Yeah," Starsky nodded, scratching his nose. "This is the windiest May I remember. Downed trees, broken branches, even billboards. Forecast said it'll be over in a couple days, though."

"I hope so," Hutch commented, adding the final touches on his hair.

"Look, a drugstore!" Starsky pointed out a shop on the opposite sidewalk.

"What?" Hutch asked. "Do you want me to shave right now?"

"That's right. Did you think I'd forget? I'm not letting you off the hook. And you're gonna shave right in front of me, ya hear? I wanna make sure you do it right."

"Okay, okay!" Hutch conceded.

Starsky prepared to make a U-turn, but Hutch placed his hand on his forearm, effectively stopping him.

"Don't be lazy! Park right here. It won't hurt ya to cross the street and walk a few feet. You've got to burn all the cholesterol and calories you just ingested."

"Procrastination'll get you nowhere. So, you'd better enjoy your last moments with all that silly hair on your face," Starsky couldn't help a little ribbing, but he complied with Hutch's request.

The two men exited the car and immediately zipped up their leather jackets. It was May's third week and the temperature was nice, but the savage wind made it uncomfortable to walk with one's jackets open. They stuck their hands in their pockets and crossed the street.

"Hey, Hutch!"

The blond stopped in his tracks and looked at his friend, who was pointing at the billboard above their heads. The wind was making it shake.

"Wanna see it?" he asked.

Hutch followed Starsky's gaze and looked up at the huge picture of 'Empire Strikes Back.'

"Again, Starsk? You've seen it twice already. With me."

"Well, yeah, but you have to admit the movie's a thrill. I mean, the special effects are the most amazing thing I've ever seen. And it's got a script to boot!"

With an exaggerated display of patience, Hutch grabbed Starsky's arm and pulled him closer.

"I'll let you in on a little secret, buddy," he dropped his voice, "Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father." He dragged him along. "C'mon!"

Starsky made a grimace and followed Hutch.

"Killjoy!"

The two men entered the drugstore and held the door open for an old lady who was just leaving. The old woman smiled at them gratefully and left. Hutch walked up to the counter, with Starsky close behind. A pretty light-haired, green-eyed girl greeted them from the other side of the counter.

"Good morning, gentlemen! What can I do for you?" her smile was inviting, and the two men immediately recognized the flirting signs she was exhibiting, being the expert womanizers they were... or had been up until several months ago. But their former flirtatious come back wasn't there. It had ended when they realized their true love walked daily beside them. Each had prayed that the other would never notice the lack of enthusiasm they portrayed whenever an attractive girl made her moves. But if the other had noticed, he'd never commented on it. They attributed it to the extreme physical and psychological trauma that Starsky's shooting had affected on the both of them. They each had needed a thoroughly long time to heal. They had come to depend on each other so completely, they filled each other's lives so absolutely, that they didn't seem to need anything or anyone else.

Eventually, after Starsky's full recovery, they returned to their job as cops, they hung out with Huggy at The Pits... but somehow, everything had changed forever. Everything had taken on a different meaning. They didn't devour life as they used to. Life itself had a different texture, a different pace. They took things slowly, enjoying every single minute together and milking it to the fullest. A smile, a laugh, a brush of their hands, a look... there was no other joy like those. They had always relished and enjoyed those moments before, but now, they didn't take them for granted anymore.

Neither of them knew when they had opened their eyes to the fact that they not only loved each other, but were IN love with each other. That love had always been intense, passionate and exclusive, except in dealings with the opposite sex, where neither of them intruded.

But something had crept into their perfectly balanced relationship. An increasing rocking of the boat the two of them shared, had almost thrown them both overboard. And they were so close to their "problem" that they had lost all perspective in what was happening between them.

Hutch's reaction had manifested in the form of an almost constant state of irritation, frustration with his job and a gradual withdrawal from physical contact. One that Starsky hadn't questioned, but had seemed to welcome. Still, each one of them was the other's whole world. They just couldn't stay away from each other. They were nothing without each other.

And so, the situation continued, building up until it exploded with Kira. They had "fought for" and even dated the same woman before without any problems, but this time was the proverbial last straw.

The incident was so blatant, this time they had no choice but to see the truth. Hutch realized he had gone to bed with Kira, not because his hormones had raged more than usual, but because it was the only way he had to be intimate with Starsky: by touching and making love to the body Starsky had loved before. The fact that Starsky had consequently broken up with the girl had been a blessed by-product of his shameful action. He felt dirty and unworthy for what he had done, and he was consumed by guilt for not being the least repentant for his actions. He had Starsky all to himself once again.

As the days passed and the magnitude of what he had done settled in, he realized he couldn't go on like this. He couldn't destroy every chance at happiness his friend found, just because he was in love with Starsky. It was time to accept the fact that his love would never be returned that way, and learn to live with it, knowing that one day that special girl would show up, taking the love of his life away from him forever.

Hutch was an expert at bottling up his emotions when he set his heart and his mind to it. He forced himself to accept the heartbreaking reality and managed to go on, trying to make up to Starsky for his unforgivable behavior. He couldn't believe it when Starsky still wanted him as a friend, and he thanked all the gods above for being granted a second chance. Starsky's friendship was so absolute, all-encompassing and with a childlike honesty, that he felt more honored than he could express. Yes, being the closest friend of such an extraordinary human being was infinitely better than risking everything for the highly improbable possibility of gaining a lover. He had no right to ask for more. He already had far more than he deserved.

And so, Hutch contented himself with what he had and he went on living... or existing. And just when things were going smoothly once again and their relationship seemed to have survived its hardest test, everything was nearly taken away from them when Gunther's hitmen almost took Starsky's life.

Hutch still didn't know how he had managed to survive those first few hours and days. Something made him hold on to a ray of hope that deep inside, he knew was merely wishful thinking. Logically, Starsky couldn't survive. Death would be a merciful release from the mortal wounds he had suffered.

But Hutch knew better now. His entire being knew that Starsky was going to die; but a part of him, a part so secret and hidden he wasn't even aware of its existence, had known Starsky was going to survive. Otherwise, he would have died with Starsky the moment his heart stopped beating. They were one heart and one soul, and they were linked as such. They only happened to inhabit two separate bodies. If one of them had gone, the other would have followed. It was as simple as that.

When, against all odds, Starsky had beaten even the most optimistic medical opinion, Hutch took it upon himself to make certain that Starsky kept on astounding the medical profession. When he was released from the hospital, he moved into Starsky's apartment, and they began their slow, but steady, healing. The department granted them both a 6 month leave, with pay, that could be prolonged by another 6 months, if they needed it.

They secluded themselves in Starsky's place, only exiting their temporary exile for regular visits to the hospital so the doctors could run tests on Starsky and check on his progress. Only Huggy and Dobey came round to visit them to bring them food and presents from everybody in the precinct. Hutch became Starsky's physical therapist, nurse, counselor, psychologist; his friend, his mother, his brother, his comfort and occasionally, his shoulder to cry on whenever pain, frustration, anger and plain hopelessness took their toll.

Hutch considered that time to be both the best and the worst of his life. The worst for obvious reasons, and the best because during that time, their relationship blossomed as never before. They came to depend on each other not only physically, but emotionally as well. And it was good. So good! They had no privacy, nor did they need it. They were simply there for each other, day and night.

In the beginning, when one needed his own space, Hutch left the apartment to take a refreshing, invigorating stroll. Invariably, by the time he was back, Starsky greeted him with a smile on his pale face and a heartfelt hug. As weeks went by, their need for individual space and time on their own gradually diminished. The perfect balance they had always had, reasserted itself in a whole new area: sharing a common ground.

Their intimacy grew to an unprecedented level. At first, Hutch took care of Starsky's most basic needs. That had been the most trying time of all. Starsky often exploded in fits of helpless anger at himself, and in tears of frustration at feeling so weak and powerless. He was ashamed of depending on Hutch for everything.

There was no respite from Hutch's endless tasks, some of them so undignified and humiliating that Starsky felt like screaming at seeing his friend assisting him without complaint. It was sheer torment for him.

Until one day, when Hutch was dressing Starsky's surgical wounds and carefully changing the bandages, Starsky looked away in humiliation and asked how Hutch could put up with such disgusting and denigrating tasks. In a soft and barely controlled voice, Hutch had hissed he didn't know what kept him from punching Starsky's stupid nose. He had looked into Starsky's eyes and spoken the words that Starsky seemed to have forgotten. 'If it was me lying there, would you consider it disgusting or undignified? Would you, buddy?' Starsky's eyes had filled with tears then and he had looked down in shame.

'I'm sorry. It's just that... Look at me, Hutch. Look at my body. Who's gonna want to touch me now? How can *you* bear to touch me? Who's gonna love me now?'

Hutch's heart had cried out inside, *'I do!! I love you with all my soul, Starsk. If only you'd love me the same way I love you, I'd show you just how beautiful you are.'*

Hutch had brought up his hand and turned Starsky's face to him and held his elusive gaze by sheer force of will.

'Oh, Starsky,' he had whispered, 'Scars can't stop true love. Give some credit to that special someone. One day, you'll meet that person, and she'll worship your body the way you deserve. These wounds will heal and they won't look...'

'They're so ugly, Hutch... I'm so fucking ugly!' Starsky had moaned, biting his lower lip.

Hutch pursed his lips, feeling helpless. It hurt him no end to see that proud, self-assured man so totally broken. He knew very well what Starsky was going through. He would feel the same if he was in Starsky's place. But that didn't alter the fact that in Hutch's eyes, Starsky was just as handsome and attractive as the day they had met. Even more. He didn't know how that could be possible, but to Hutch, Starsky grew more and more beautiful with each passing day. He cursed Gunther for the umpteenth time. He had not only wreaked havoc on his partner's body, he had wreaked havoc on his mind and completely destroyed his self-esteem and sense of self-worth. It was Hutch's duty as his closest friend (and the person who loved him from afar) to try and give them back to him.

Not really knowing what he was doing, Hutch tenderly settled his fingertips on one of Starsky's sutured wounds. Starsky started and looked down at the big, gentle hand caressing the healing gash. Hutch's long, slender fingers slid over it lovingly, then moved on to the next. The soft fingertips seemed to dance on Starsky's skin, giving more love and tenderness than he could remember ever receiving.

'Hutch,' he murmured, 'What are you doin?'

'I'm touching you, Starsk,' Hutch's voice was so sweet and so deep, it raised goosebumps on both their bodies. Hutch raised his other arm and began stroking Starsky's back, until he found the entry wounds. They were subjected to the same loving treatment as the ones on his chest.

'Oh, God!' Starsky groaned, about to break down.

Hutch was completely enraptured, looking down at his hands finally doing what he had wanted to do for so long. But still, he felt it wasn't enough. For either of them. Starsky needed more. Following his heart, Hutch slowly bent down and softly brushed his lips to one of the sutured wounds. His face felt flushed, as if all the love he had kept hidden deep within had boiled and rushed to the surface. He pressed a sweet, tiny kiss on it. Hutch felt the soft tickle of Starsky's velvety chest hair brushing his nose and his mustache. He smiled, feeling in seventh heaven. Instinctively he took a deep breath, inhaling Starsky's clean, unique scent.

Starsky broke down then, seeking comfort in Hutch's arms. The blond wrapped him in long arms and held him for all he was worth.

Emotionally exhausted, Starsky collapsed on the bed. Hutch followed him and kept him warm and safe still wrapped in the cozy circle of his arms. Starsky returned the embrace and buried his face in Hutch's chest, sobbing quietly.

'It's okay, buddy. I'm here. I'll always be here for you. Let it go. Shhhhh, let it go. I care. You're beautiful. I care...,' Hutch crooned, as if to a child. He caressed Starsky's back, arms, face and head, unable to stop. He rocked the trembling body, buried his hands in the thick curls and massaged Starsky's scalp, alleviating the physical and emotional pressure on the treasure he cradled in his arms. He could feel his friend cuddling up to him in need, rubbing his face all over his shirt. He buried his face in the dark curls and pressed a kiss on the beloved head.

Starsky let out a strangled groan and seemed to melt into Hutch. His hands began a shy, hesitant stroking all over Hutch's back and this time, it was the blond who cuddled up to Starsky's body, desperately drinking from the much needed caress.

And so they comforted each other until they fell asleep in each other's arms. They woke up the morning after, refreshed and feeling at peace. They had almost forgotten how good it felt to depend on each other this way. They realized the prolonged physical contact was the balm to their raw, desperate need to reassure each other of their real, living presence. Especially after the trauma they had endured. Neither of them questioned the contact. They needed it and it felt good and right; so from that night on, they began sleeping in Starsky's bed, clinging to each other for dear life.

Hutch touched heaven every single night for the next few weeks. It felt so good to hold on to Starsky's body and have Starsky holding on to him... It was every dream of perfection he had ever had. It was warm, and comforting, and beautiful, and sweet. He had never felt like this with anybody else. So full to bursting, so complete. It was home, it was his reason to be. His destiny.

But as weeks went by and Starsky's recovery became a reality, Hutch's shaky state of mind began demanding that he put some distance between them, lest he betray himself at any moment. And when he suggested returning to the couch so his partner could have his bed all to himself once again, Starsky didn't complain too much.

The long rehabilitation process began soon after. It was an arduous, frustrating and extremely painful task, but the two partners' instinctive understanding of each other took over once more, astounding the medical profession for the second time. Their unique, almost telepathic communication was a source of unlimited strength and mutual support, and together they beat the odds once again. Hutch pushed Starsky to his limit, but never beyond his breaking point, as if he instinctively knew his partner's limits. Always encouraging him, always there for him. Lending a supportive hand, a comforting caress when the pain was too much, and a massive bearhug when a corner in his recovery was turned and left behind. And it worked both ways. Starsky's steady improvement seemed to bring his usually moody partner back to life. The two men appeared to bond at a spiritual level. The doctors would swear Starsky was pushing himself to his limit more

to make Hutch proud of him, than for his own sake. Their intimate rapport was a perfect example of reciprocity and selflessness that the doctors and nurses had never encountered before. The rehab doctor believed it was Hutch's prompting, cajoling and caring coaxing, more so than the therapy, that was making Starsky heal so quickly.

Five months later, Starsky was pronounced fit to return to light duty. And two months after that, Starsky was back on the streets beside his joyful partner. Hutch had returned to his apartment in Venice Place by then. It was an unspoken mutual agreement that the two men never really discussed, but just accepted as inevitable.

The hardest time of Hutch's life was getting used to living on his own again. He felt empty and more lonely than he had ever felt in his entire life. Even more than when at home as a little boy feeling unloved and ignored by his always busy parents. So deprived of love and caring that his need of them was overwhelming. So deprived, that he ended up clinging to the first person who had paid him some serious attention. Unfortunately, it was the worst person he could have chosen: Vanessa.

But he learned his lesson. The hard way, but he learned. He withdrew into himself after their divorce, swearing that he would never let himself become vulnerable that way with anybody again. He would never trust another human being with his soul, his hopes and his dreams. There was nothing interesting about him anyway; nothing inside him worth sharing. Only pain, sadness and failure. And just when he resigned himself to a barren, sterile life, Heaven had smiled down at him.

He doubted that Starsky would ever know what meeting him had meant to Hutch. What those honest and sweet blue eyes had done for him. They had saved his life; nothing more, nothing less. Those eyes had melted the unbreakable armor he had built around his badly battered heart and opened it to love and caring again. To trust and entrust another human being again with his heart and soul; knowing they would always be cherished, respected and kept safe, even above Starsky's own heart and soul.

So very often he had been tempted to open up all the way and show his friend the real depth of his emotional wounds and scars. Tell him about everything. But Hutch felt he was so fucked up inside, Starsky would be disgusted by the extent of his need of comfort and basic human touch. However, he didn't need to say anything. Starsky was intuitive and intelligent enough to understand what Hutch said and hinted at, but more than anything, what Hutch *didn't* say and hint. He had always respected Hutch's need to hold back a part of himself, trusting that one day, his best friend would be ready to share it with him. And that was a present that Hutch wanted desperately to give.

Only it was impossible now. How to tell your best friend, your straight male friend, that you're in love with him? That you want to share your body with him? To kiss him, caress him and find comfort, happiness and love in each other's arms, in each other's lips?

Somehow, Hutch managed to survive the silence of his apartment, the coldness of his bed and the aching emptiness in his heart. They still had each other. They were closer now than they had ever been, if that was possible. It would have to be enough.

But if he were honest with himself, he had to accept the truth. He was in love with Starsky. He could never be in love with anyone else. He couldn't go on using women the way he realized he had been doing for the last few months before his partner's shooting. It wasn't fair to them. They deserved someone who was sincere about his feelings for them.

And so, Hutch's flirting with women and therefore, Hutch's sexual life, ended right then and there. It posed no problem whatsoever for him. All desire for them died within him. Oh, he could still appreciate the beauty and femininity of a woman. The same way he could appreciate the beauty of a rose, a sunrise, a work of art or a song, but that was as far as it went.

Only in the privacy of his bedroom did he allow free rein to his desire for the one person he could never have. That was the only outlet he allowed to his physical desire. And when everything was over, he cleaned himself, curled into a fetal position in his bed, -feeling pathetic, alone and empty - and cried himself to sleep.

One of those nights, when the pain was too raw and he felt so torn up inside that even breathing hurt, he got up and played some soft classical music on his stereo. There was something very strange about classical music. It soothed and comforted his feelings, reducing them to a soft, bearable ache that often lulled him to sleep. At the same time, it made him more aware than ever of his state of absolute loneliness. It also got him in touch with the immense, immeasurable depth of his love for his friend. Classical music both hurt him and healed him, creating an eerie balance within him. That night, as he listened to Nimrod, from Edward Elgar's Enigma Variations, his face flooded with tears, he absently picked up a notebook and began scribbling with a pencil. When the piece was over and Hutch came back from the lonely place he had retreated to, his eyes opened wide as he realized he had poured out his heart and soul. He felt somewhat better afterward and decided to keep on doing it whenever love hurt too much. In six months, he filled dozens of pages.

And here he was today. Deserving a few Oscars for his impeccable performance as David Starsky's best buddy, when a volcano of selfless love and infinite pain burned inside him.

What hurt him the most was knowing he was wasting his life. One day, he would be old - if the streets didn't kill him first - and he would look back and see an old man he didn't recognize who had thrown away his only chance at happiness. But, what if he risked telling Starsky and when he looked back in a few decades, he saw a lonely old man, who'd been abandoned by his best friend after telling him he was in love with him? What option was preferable? A lonely home life with Starsky, who filled all the other areas of his existence, or absolute loneliness without even Starsky's friendship to make his life worthwhile?

Yes, Starsky's friendship would have to be enough. It would be! He was determined to make it enough.

Hutch smiled warmly at the pretty clerk, careful of not looking personally interested in her, not giving her any chance at a misunderstanding.

"I want a disposable razor and the smallest can of shaving cream you have, please," he asked.

Starsky leaned on the counter on his right elbow in his usual self-confident way.

"Yeah, that's exactly what he wants," he nodded, smiling from ear to ear. "By the way, do ya have some scissors, too?" he looked at his partner with a shrug. "You'll have to 'manually' trim your mustache before shaving it."

Hutch stared at him and if he had grown another head. "You can't be serious about me shaving my mustache in here!?" he exclaimed.

"Sure I am!" Starsky addressed the now gaping clerk, casting her a conspiratorial look. "Do you have a washroom here, honey? Ya see, my buddy here just lost a bet, and he's gotta shave this painful walrus mustache as a punishment for ever doubting my eating abilities," he displayed his old irresistible charm, but in a friendly, brotherly manner. He didn't want the pretty girl to get the wrong impression. But he wanted her complicity on this. He wanted the three of them to enjoy his childish prank. The big boy was back full force!

The young woman dove into the game headfirst.

"Well, certainly, gentlemen! One moment, please." With a small chuckle, she turned about and began rummaging in drawers and shelves, looking for the items Hutch had asked. The two partners took the opportunity to banter some more. Starsky rubbed his hands briskly, apparently very pleased with himself.

"At long last! The day has come! I was tired of walking around with a partner who looks older and uglier than I am. It makes me stand out too much! It was nice at first, but it's annoying now."

Hutch arched his eyebrows. "I don't believe this! You always resented the fact that I'm five months younger than you. The least you could do, is show a bit of gratitude for the favor I unknowingly did you. But I guess

you did, by implicitly admitting I'm more handsome than you without my mustache." He smiled and stood up straight, pretending to be cocky.

"Ha-ha! Very funny, Blondie. You've always been good with words. That's got to be the only thing girls find irresistible about you. Always so articulate and refined!"

"I'm impressed, Gordo. You just used two words that have more than two syllables, and in one phrase! Take it easy now. I can see the smoke coming out of your ears."

Starsky stuck out his tongue at Hutch, who immediately reached out to smack the other's head, but Starsky was faster, and ducked. Hutch found his fingers entangled in his partner's curls instead. Not wanting to pull at Starsky's hair unintentionally, his fingers softly closed around a few curls, turning his intended smack into a soft, gentle caress across Starsky's scalp.

The completely unexpected fondle elicited a helpless gasp from Starsky. The small electric current the touch generated, transmitted itself along Hutch's arm. Starsky's head jerked upwards and their eyes met.

The nakedness of their feelings was absolute for a millisecond. They froze on the spot. They felt like they were falling into one another's souls. And it was so warm to be there! They felt so welcomed, so...

"Here you are!" the clerk's cheerful voice brought them back with a start. The two men turned their heads to the source of the voice, desperately trying to regain their composure; praying that the other did not see what both had been unable to hide.

Hutch took the items the girl handed him, feeling his heart hammering wildly inside his ribcage. He took a deep breath and rolled his eyes, pretending to be exasperated by his partner's outrageous behavior.

The young woman smiled at him and pointed at a place behind their backs and to their right. "There's a small washroom behind that door. Be my guest."

"Thank you," Hutch replied, turning about.

"Be careful not to shave too close! We don't want you to slash your pretty face. This lovely lady's gonna have to decide which one of us is handsomer. And it'd be a pity if she chose me because you had ruined your face with cuts. I wanna win fairly!" Starsky goaded.

Hutch managed to open the door without dropping all the items that he carried in both hands, and he held it open with his backside as he half-turned to answer his show-off partner.

"Watch it, Starsk. One of these days you're gonna trip over your own ego and break your neck."

Starsky tsked at him with a patronizing expression that for once, couldn't hide what lay behind it. The two men knew how much it had cost Hutch to rebuild Starsky's self-confidence after the shooting. And they were still only halfway there. Proof of it was the shirt Starsky was wearing beneath his leather jacket. Only the neck button was open, whereas one year ago, he would have worn it unbuttoned almost down to his navel. It broke Hutch's heart. If only he could kiss and caress that gorgeous, masculine chest all over, and cover it with love! He would make certain that Starsky's self-esteem skyrocketed in a matter of seconds. But an understanding, loving smile was all he could offer. He bit his lower lip in sudden frustration. His fingertips itched with the memory of that evening months ago, when he had caressed Starsky's sutured wounds and kissed them one by one. He had been allowed to touch heaven for those glorious moments, only to be thrown back to his lonely, barren life afterwards. His lips tingled helplessly with the never forgotten memory of Starsky's silky skin and velvety chest hair, as he had brushed them with his mouth. He closed his eyes, almost in physical pain.

All of a sudden, the memory of Starsky's soft, clean scent assaulted his nostrils, just as it had that evening. The memory was so real it caught him off balance, and Hutch's proverbial clumsiness when he was nervous or in a shaky state of mind, reasserted itself. The scissors and the can of shaving cream slipped from his

grasp and fell to the floor. With a shy, embarrassed smile, Hutch bent down and picked them up. Letting the door go, it closed behind him, and when he straightened up and turned around to enter the washroom, he bumped his nose against the closed door. But this time, he had safely stuck the scissors and the shaving cream under his right armpit. Opening the door once again, he entered the washroom without looking back. He didn't have to. He already knew the smug smile his partner was sporting and the condescending look he was more than likely sharing with the clerk. He wasn't about to give them the chance to laugh at him to his face. Besides, he needed some time on his own now, to build up his shattered defenses. He couldn't afford another slip like the one he'd just fallen into. He put the items on the sink and placed his hands on each side of it, to prevent them from shaking. Taking long, deep, calming breaths he looked up again, staring at his reflection in the mirror. With a sad, self-depreciating smile at the pathetic image he saw, he unwrapped the razor.

"Don't you love farce? My fault I feel..." he began singing softly with a little sneer at himself.

Meanwhile, Starsky and the clerk had indeed looked at each other when the washroom's door closed behind Hutch, and they exchanged an amused little smile that in Starsky's case, quickly turned into an infinitely loving one. Hutch's sudden outbreaks of clumsiness and occasional stammering had always left him on the verge of complete meltdown. They made his partner look so heartbreakingly vulnerable, so exposed to others' often cruel and merciless judgment... He always felt an overwhelming urge of protectiveness towards Hutch every time the tall blond was caught up in one of his 'shyness seizures', as Starsky privately called them. That's why he turned to the clerk now, with an angelic little smile on his face.

"Ain't he amazing?" he commented nonchalantly, with a small shrug.

The young woman was staring at him with a curiously intense look and, not really knowing why, Starsky instinctively looked away. He had never been shy about showing his feelings for his partner in public, but what he felt for Hutch was too important to him, too precious and beautiful for it to be dissected or misinterpreted by people who couldn't understand. He felt an irrational impulse to protect his most cherished, treasured secret, even from her harmless prying eyes.

The girl smiled to herself then. "Love is blind, they say," she replied, in a very sweet voice.

Starsky's head jerked back and he stared at her pointedly.

"I mean, when we care about someone, anything they say and do looks adorable in our eyes. We see something in them that usually goes unnoticed by others." Her eyes were kind and gentle, and if she had seen something unusual in Starsky's demeanor towards Hutch, there was no judgment whatsoever in her attitude. At least, outwardly.

Starsky's stare softened and he looked down with a curt nod. "Yeah, that's true, all right," he muttered, almost to himself.

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, Starsky began slowly pacing the drugstore, wishing Hutch would hurry up and exit the washroom, so they could leave there as quickly as possible. He couldn't understand what was happening to him. He felt naked in front of that girl. He felt as if, somehow, she had looked inside him and seen what he had successfully hid from everyone he knew, Hutch included. And it unsettled him. Not because he was ashamed of his feelings. He would never be ashamed of the only thing in his life that made him worthy to call himself a human being. His love for Hutch was the purest, most selfless, beautiful thing he had ever felt for anyone before. The mere thought of his blond angel brought a blissful weakness all over his body, as if millions of fragrant flowers were blossoming in his heart. He felt special and blessed, and as light as a feather. Like a newborn, innocent and full of hopes and dreams.

But he also had to be realistic. His love for Hutch would have to remain his secret forever. His partner must never know. He couldn't take the chance on Hutch finding out and withdrawing from him. Granted, there

was always the possibility of Hutch returning his feelings. But the possibility of Hutch not being 100% straight was more or less the same possibility Orson Welles had of losing 100 pounds overnight.

What unsettled Starsky was the fact that his perfectly constructed façade had slipped enough for a stranger to see through it. And if a stranger had been able to see his love for Hutch, that meant his partner could find out at any moment, if he hadn't already. Just a few minutes ago, when he had been caught with his guard down...

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, feeling the beginnings of a headache. He had to leave here, he needed some fresh air. The atmosphere in the drugstore was suffocating him. He slowly turned to the clerk. The young woman was putting the items on a small shelf behind the cash register back in order, with her back to him. She had clearly sensed Starsky's discomfort and she was giving him some space to regain his composure. Starsky appreciated her kind gesture, but still, he had to leave, if only for a little while. His churning feelings were too close to the surface and it would take a while to bring them back under control.

"Honey, I'm going out for a while. If my partner comes out before I'm back, please tell him I'm waiting for him outside, okay?" he smiled at her fondly.

"All right," she nodded with a shy little smile, obviously intended as an apology for her unintentional intrusion upon Starsky's privacy.

Starsky smiled softly back, silently absolving her for her uncanny perceptiveness and with deceptively confident steps, he exited the shop.

Once outside, the violent gust of wind that greeted him quickly reminded Starsky of the raging storm within his breast. A raging storm of love that was becoming increasingly difficult to hold back. And he'd better get a grip on his emotions, or he could lose Hutch forever. The prospect was so utterly terrifying that Starsky shivered both inside and out. No, he wouldn't allow that to happen!! He would try as hard as he could, for his very life stood in the balance.

Walking on shaky legs, Starsky leaned on a tree trunk and rubbed his eyes in an attempt at clearing his head and his thoughts. He only succeeded in seeing things more clearly than ever.

Ahhhh, Hutch! He had loved the tall, lanky blond since the moment they had first met. There was something about him. He was like a lost waif, in desperate need of comfort and affection. And always finding the wrong people to give all his love to. From his parents, whose affectionate, loving personalities could freeze hell, to Vanessa and an endless string of women who had broken his heart or thoroughly disappointed him. The sterile environment, devoid of any human touch that Hutch had been raised in was a brutal contrast to the gentle, sweet and oh-so-sensitive human being he had grown into. An indomitable passion; an endless hunger for answers, truth and justice; his insatiable curiosity; and his pragmatic and often pessimistic side. No wonder, considering where he came from, these were Kenneth Hutchinson's trademarks. His gentle compassion, infinite caring and his huge loving heart were Starsky's most precious treasures. Starsky had been drawn to Hutch right from the start. He had sensed a kindred spirit in that big, blond, blue-eyed man, apparently cold and imperturbable on the outside, who hid a universe of pain, love and wonder inside him. Starsky had taken it upon himself to take care of and protect that warm, extremely vulnerable soul with his every bit of strength. And the torrent of gratitude and selfless love he had received in return were like nothing David Starsky had ever encountered in his life before.

They had been inseparable since... forever. It was as if Hutch had always been a part of his life, even during his childhood. As many children did after the death of a loved one, like his father's, Starsky withdrew into himself, finding comfort in countless childish fantasies that always involved an imaginary friend, someone special, caring and perfect, who was always there for him, listening to his problems, sharing his sorrows and offering him all the love and understanding his starved heart and mind so had needed. And years later, when Hutch entered his life, everything fell into place. The friend Starsky had dreamed of ever since he could remember had suddenly come alive. He was finally complete. They became an extension of each other, their

existences became so interwoven that Starsky had forgotten long ago where he ended and Hutch began. They had truly become one.

And fool that he was, it had taken him years to realize that the friendship of a lifetime was also the love of a lifetime. He had been doubly blessed with both, the two of them rolled into one beautiful beyond measure, perfect package.

And Kira had to happen so that he could finally open his eyes. Although, to be honest, things had begun to change months before. Gradually, they had started to drift apart from each other, not touching as often and freely as they used to. Hutch's moods became more and more edgy. His irritability and his increasing frustration with his job and his life created a strain in their perfect partnership. But still, they always ended up seeking each other out. Despite everything, they were each other's haven; only they could soothe each other's progressive restlessness. Until the major conflict both of them seemed to be heading for, exploded at last with Kira.

Albeit the most painful experience Starsky could remember, and one that shamed him no end, he had to admit one thing: that disaster succeeded in making the blinders he had on, finally come off. The truth revealed itself to him (or rather, it smacked him on the face) when he saw Hutch coming out of one dark room, full of truths never before acknowledged. He desired his partner; he desired the body beneath that buttoned shirt. The shock was so devastating, it was all he could do to start crying out: 'betrayal!' in his reeling mind. But what betrayal was he really referring to? Hutch's or the irreversible betrayal of his feelings for his partner? In that split second, he realized nothing would ever be the same between them, at least from his end, and he cursed himself for soiling a pure, innocent, platonic friendship, the most beautiful relationship in his whole world; and he cursed Hutch for being so damn beautiful and perfect that he had left Starsky with no choice but to fall absolutely, hopelessly and forever in love with him. The ensuing fight was as barren and useless as any fight between them could be. Nothing was ever going to change.

Also, there was no question they would forgive each other. There was no choice, for either of them. They were stuck with each other, until the end of time. It was part of what they were. It was *what* they were.

And just when he had thought he was beginning to come to terms with his feelings, and reconcile himself with the fact that his love for Hutch would have to stay hidden deep within his heart for as long as he lived, his heart stopped beating, courtesy of Gunther's hitmen. He had decided by then he'd rather have his partner beside him in every way but in bed, than not have him at all. He accepted the fact that girls would come and go, until one day, one caring, loving, sweet-eyed girl would come to stay and become second Mrs. Hutchinson. And that day, he would die inside. But he would die happy, for his friend would have finally found the happiness he so much deserved and he had been so repeatedly denied. And also that day, he would give the biggest performance of his life as Hutch's bursting-with-joy best man.

Those thoughts and assumptions were brutally brought to a halt, or at least postponed to a later date, after his shooting. Love had no choice but to be put aside, in the light of sheer survival. And Hutch had been beside him every step of the way.

If Starsky hadn't been given enough proof of Hutch's love, devotion and selfless dedication to him and their friendship, he had a chance to see it all now, in the days, weeks and months following his release from the hospital. Hutch had placed Starsky's wellbeing, happiness and even his very life before his own hundreds of times. No one, not even his own mother or his Auntie Rosie, had ever treated him so solicitously, so respectfully; always allowing him his own space, never intruding, but hovering close enough so that he never found himself alone. Hutch was there to attend his every need, from getting him up from bed in the morning to putting him back in it at night.

He had never felt so helpless. He was a burden to Hutch. The first few days, he wasn't even strong enough to go to the bathroom by himself. He couldn't wash himself, couldn't even comb his hair. The stitches, the surgical wounds and the strain on his chest and back muscles, sent him into spasms of searing pain that filled his eyes with tears every time he attempted the slightest effort. And Hutch was always there, with a sweet smile on his face, his gentle hands and soft voice soothing the pain away. He always knew how to approach

him. He knew when to be light and teasing and he knew when to hold him and caress his aching body. Their level of communicating without words had always been uncanny, but during that recovery time, it reached truly telepathic proportions.

Every small improvement was enthusiastically celebrated. Hutch's respect for his dignity was a gift for which he would never thank him enough. And his patience. How much shit Hutch had put up with! Starsky would never forget that evening, when Hutch had been dressing his wounds and, unable to stand it anymore, he had asked his best friend how he could tolerate performing such denigrating tasks. It was humiliating, for the both of them. He could hardly bear to look down at his horribly scarred body, the surgical wounds so gory-looking, some of them even purulent... and yet, Hutch's hands seemed to dance on his ugly body, treating him with so much tenderness and compassion, as if he was the blond's most precious treasure.

He would never forget Hutch's reproachful and angry look when he had glared at him and said the words Starsky seemed to have forgotten. What would he do if it had been Hutch instead? Starsky had looked down in shame and silently acknowledged the truth Hutch had spoken. Starsky would have tended the wounds on his beloved's body as if they were the most beautiful thing on Earth. And to him they would be!

It was me&thee. As it had always been and it always would be. To have and to hold, to protect and to cherish. In sickness and in health. But even so, it hurt to see his partner renouncing his life and his freedom, secluding himself with an injured man in his apartment and becoming his nurse, his shrink, his mother... It was unfair to Hutch to take care of even the bodily needs of a big lug like him, with a body mangled and ruined...

But then, Hutch did something that Starsky would never forget for as long as he lived. He had reached out and touched his sutured wounds with... *reverence*. He had watched, mesmerized, how those pianist hands and those soft, gentle fingertips slid over one scar, then moved on to the next... and then the next. Starsky was so shocked out of his skin that he forgot to beg Hutch to stop. His breathing became erratic, his heart started flip-flopping in his chest non-stop. He felt enveloped in a sweet bubble of warmth and love, far away from the real world, far away from any pain. Just his body and Hutch's hands sliding all over it, including his back. He suddenly realized his beloved's left hand was touching his back, until it stopped when it found the entry wounds. Then, it began detailing loving circles all around and over them. He was sandwiched between Hutch's hands, which were working their magic of infinite love and caring on him. Healing his soul and soothing his shattered heart.

He didn't know how he was holding on, but what destroyed him completely was the sight of his blond beauty bending slowly forward and brushing his lips all over one scar, and then planting a baby soft, passionately devoted kiss there. Starsky almost blacked out. He vaguely remembered moaning in a blissfully painful blending of anguish and gratitude. He wanted to beg Hutch to stop, to stop soiling himself... But only strangled sounds came out of his throat. He looked down and watched the love of his life smiling dreamily, his perfect nose buried in his chest hair, sniffing at his skin, his full, gorgeous lips kissing and kissing, blue eyes peacefully closed, and his beautiful hands never stopping their roaming caresses.

Starsky couldn't stop shuddering. He was drowning; drowning in the awesome beauty of his feelings for his partner; lost in the childish fantasy of a world where they were free to love, where he could allow himself to be loved by this perfect man, where he was worthy. His tingling skin absorbed every delicate kiss and caress, starved for them. Knowing this would be his first and last chance to savor what it felt like to be physically loved by the person he loved more than his own life, by this man who was his very life.

His trembling arms raised of their own volition and encircled Hutch. Breaking down at last, Starsky sought comfort in Hutch's protective strength as he collapsed on the bed. Hutch followed him down and cradled him to that golden chest while he was racked with violent sobs.

Starsky ached inside. To have his beloved touching him, caressing him, kissing him even, and knowing it was just friendship that made him act so. So close and yet so far. But still, Starsky was so grateful to have this! It was everything... and it wasn't nearly enough. He felt guilty for wanting more. He clung to Hutch's back and buried his face in his shirt, wanting to disappear in that warm, welcoming chest. Hutch's words

made him moan and he pressed closer against the other man. The devoted kiss on the top of his head and the soothing fingertips massaging his scalp, easing the tension, almost made him pass out. He had to give back at least a part of what he was receiving. He had to convey his infinite gratitude for Hutch's patience with his uncontrollable outbursts of frustration and anger. It wasn't Hutch's fault. He was only trying to help, and he was succeeding in making his life bearable. He was the only thing in his world that made life worth living.

His fingers grabbed Hutch's shirt and they began a slow, shy caressing all over the broad, powerful back. He felt Hutch shiver and press himself back against his body. There was such need in Hutch's reaction, that Starsky could almost believe his blond wanted this just as much as he did. And for a second, he allowed himself to believe in that impossible dream. He practically crawled up Hutch's body and cuddled up to it, rocked and tenderly brought to sleep by the sweetest voice and the gentlest hands; so soothing and comforting he was able to stop thinking and start relaxing for the first time in months. He let go and fell asleep in his beloved's arms - as Hutch fell asleep in his.

When they woke up the following morning, neither could remember ever sleeping so soundly or waking up so refreshed. Everything seemed to shine around and inside them. Looking at each other with a blush, they had no choice but to admit it had been their sleeping in each other's arms what had made their exhausted bodies rest as they had never done before. Logically, they should keep on sleeping together.

And so, the happiest weeks in Starsky's life began. Both the happiest and the most trying. He felt guilty for forcing Hutch to seclude himself in his apartment with him and take care of practically all his needs. So often Starsky cursed himself; but then, he remembered Hutch's words: What if he had been wounded instead of Starsky? There was only one answer to that question. Then, Starsky would swallow his anger and frustration and continue on.

As days went by, everything settled down. Whenever the tension began building up and they felt one of them was about to explode, Hutch left the apartment to take in some fresh air and be by himself for a few hours, leaving Starsky the place to himself so he could claim his own space and get a grip as well. And when Hutch returned home, they greeted each other with a wide smile and a big hug, and they started where they had left off. As weeks went on, the perfect partnership they had always shared reasserted itself. They adapted to each other's moods and needs in the perfect harmony that made them who they were. There was no need for privacy from each other. There had never been, really. There was nothing they couldn't share with each other, no need to give the other some 'space'. They made each other happy and kept focused just by being together. They balanced one another. It was good and soul-filling, every minute moment of it. From waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night.

Huggy and Dobey came to visit them quite often. Huggy to bring them food and supplies, and Dobey to transmit all the love and best wishes from his family and all their friends in the precinct. Dobey recommended they were granted six months of paid leave, which could be extended to six more months, in case they needed it. Luckily, the chief agreed.

It was good to receive visits from people they cared so much about, but the truth was they were almost totally self-sufficient. They filled each other's lives so completely that Starsky sometimes irrationally wished it took him longer to recover, so this home-like bliss could last forever. But he quickly rejected the idea. Both of them were two active, energetic men, and this enforced cabin fever would get on their nerves sooner or later.

But, oh, sweet Lord! It was so beautiful to go to bed every single night, knowing the body of the man he loved was going to lie down beside him. Their bedding ritual was endearing, now that he thought about it. They would always get in bed quite formally, each of them on his side of the bed, then wish each other goodnight and go to sleep. And sometime during the night, the warmth of their bodies drew them instinctively together, and the morning found them deep in each other's arms. Starsky wrapped around Hutch, Hutch wrapped around Starsky, or just cuddling like two teddy bears. After several days in a row of waking up thus, they had looked at each other and burst out laughing, officially dispensing their silly formalities. From there on, whenever they get in bed, they comfortably wrapped their arms around each other right from the start, already knowing how they were going to wake up the morning after.

How many blissful hours Starsky had lain awake in his cozy bed, reveling in the contact of Hutch's body all alongside his own; thanking God for being granted at least this little glimpse at the perfection they could achieve together, if only... if only. Every cell in his body tingled with the sweet, overwhelming presence of his partner's body wrapped around his own like a human blanket. He felt like dying from love, peace and pleasure. Not sexual pleasure; he still was too weak and too strongly medicated to respond physically; but his body never felt so alive! For the first time in his life, he was able to place sex in its right perspective. It was important, yes, but this - being nestled together - this was everything. Just lying there in each other's arms, pressed so close, was more than enough. This was the purest form of communication, from body to body; just vibrating, breathing, being together.

Sex wasn't necessary. After all, it had been months since the last time he had indulged in the act, and he had to admit he didn't miss it. The only person in the world with whom he would ever be able to entertain the notion, was completely unavailable and always would be. Without Hutch, all desire for sex was gone. But he was a man, he was alive, and his body became electrified every time that big blond body brushed against his own. He could almost feel his cells healing faster, just from the ecstatic joy that touching Hutch made him feel. The doctors admitted he was indeed healing more quickly than they had expected. How could he not?, being so lovingly and reverently tended?

He revelled in Hutch's intoxicating scent, in the feel of his strong hands clasping him close, in the instinctive caresses he placed upon his body even in his sleep. And he helplessly hugged back, his fingertips shyly memorizing the form of the beautiful body that would never be his.

But when he started regaining his strength back and scaling back his medication, Starsky began getting nervous, afraid of being betrayed by his own body. And as always, Hutch was so attuned to him, it was almost as if he had felt Starsky's need for some distance between them again. He suggested returning to sleep on the couch now that Starsky was getting stronger, so his partner could have his bed back. Starsky simply nodded in agreement, his heart shattering inside. It was over. For good.

Resigning himself to a reality he couldn't change, Starsky mentally prepared himself for the upcoming strenuous rehabilitation program that awaited him. Being looked after so devotedly had accelerated his recovery, to the point all the doctors were amazed. None of them would have bet a dime on Starsky's returning to the streets. But the two detectives, together, had beaten the odds once more.

At first, the pain was so excruciating he had almost given up. But Hutch wouldn't allow it. The blond knew his partner even better than he knew himself, and he knew how far his encouragement, bribing, and downright blackmail would go. They were a sight to see. Starsky noticed the way the doctors, nurses and even the other rehab patients looked at them. Their rapport was so strong it crackled around them like a living thing. Starsky pushed himself to his physical and psychological limit because he knew Hutch was counting on him. And he would *never* let Hutch down.

His golden friend had always been beside him, holding his hand, patting his back, touching him at the right moments and hugging him enthusiastically with every conquered little victory.

Starsky knew only too well that in his full recovery also lay Hutch's, which was why he was trying so hard. They were healing together. He hadn't been the only one who had been shot at that day. Hutch had taken Starsky's bullets as well, only in his heart and his soul. But Hutch refused any professional help to get over the deep psychological trauma he had suffered, of seeing his best friend shot down before his horrified, helpless eyes. Starsky's full healing was all Hutch needed. If Starsky got well, Hutch also would. If he didn't, Hutch would follow him, whatever that meant.

That was why the doctors had allowed Hutch everywhere Starsky went. The two of them needed this and were in this together. They witnessed Starsky's responses and how he blossomed every time his partner was near. Hutch was responsible for Starsky's miraculous healing, and if he was motivating Starsky that strongly, it was only logical to keep the blond man close to his friend. Hutch became Starsky's coach, in a way. The rehab doctor had no choice but to accept Hutch's hovering presence, grudgingly in the beginning, and wholeheartedly after a few days of watching how much Starsky had progressed, thanks to his partner's

unwavering support. He even permitted Hutch to be taught how to handle the tools and machines Starsky was using and how to tell when his partner was doing it correctly. And in those moments, Starsky's progress accelerated at the speed of light. No one had ever seen anything like it.

And the miracle held true. Five months later, Starsky was back in the precinct, fit to return to light duty. And Hutch returned to his apartment in Venice Place.

Starsky would never forget his first night alone after Hutch's departure. He had wandered around his empty apartment, hearing the echo of past conversations, gentle laughter, shared secrets, comforted crying, whispered confessions of vulnerability, fits of anger and fear being soothed, passionate promises of neverending support. Hutch filled every corner of his apartment. He always had, but now... Wherever Starsky looked, he was reminded of something Hutch had said or done, something he had handled or simply touched. Damn it, he could even smell Hutch's scent all over the place!

Starsky collapsed on the couch and buried his face in his hands. He had no right to ask for more, to even wish for more. He had to get used to living alone again. He wrapped his arms around his suddenly chilled body and began rocking himself like a child. Sometime later, physically and emotionally exhausted, he lay down and fell asleep, whispering the beloved name over and over.

The second night was just as painful. And the third. And the fourth. By the fifth night he thought he was going crazy. The loud, oppressive silence all around and inside him was driving him mad. Desperate, he turned on the radio. The soft, soothing classical music that filled his living room froze him on the spot. He remembered one night a couple weeks ago, when Hutch had been unable to fall asleep on the couch and he had turned on the radio. He had thoughtfully turned down the volume, so that it wouldn't filter through the wall and awaken his partner, but Starsky was lying in his bed wide awake too, incapable of falling asleep without the warmth of his partner's body beside him. He wondered if he would ever be able to fall asleep in his bed again. But knowing he was listening to the same music Hutch was hearing on the other side of the wall connected him with his beloved somehow, and holding on to that pathetic knowledge, he grabbed the pillow and closed his eyes, cradling those beautifully melancholic sounds close to his heart.

Starsky had never been fond of classical music. He thought classical music was a high class thing. There had always been an illogical resentment inside him towards the privileged, upper class. Maybe that was why Hutch had tried to hide where he came from in the beginning. But Starsky had seen it nonetheless. Some things were just impossible to hide. And the day Starsky found out about Hutch's pedigree, he learned a lesson on prejudices. If the upper class could produce such a wonderful human being, maybe he should reconsider some of the facts of life, such as his stubborn dislike of classical music; that was mostly a pose anyway. How can you truly dislike something you've always refused to give a try at? So, little by little and with Hutch's guidance, he was introduced to small, lovely pieces of classical music. He became a Beethoven and Mozart maniac. After all, music is music, no matter the century it has been written. Music speaks a universal language and appeals to people in the same way, by speaking to their hearts. Even so, it remained their little secret. Nobody at the precinct knew of his newly refined tastes in music. After all, he had a 'reputation' to maintain.

One of his fondest memories was something that had happened almost two years ago, on Hutch's birthday. They had spent the whole day at his partner's place, sharing, just being together and enjoying each other's company. They didn't need anything or anyone else to feel complete. After sunset, Starsky had picked up his guitar and told Hutch he had a very special present for him. He formally settled his partner on the couch and sat down on a chair right in front of him. Hutch's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when Starsky impeccably played the most famous fragment of the Aranjuez Concerto. The deep emotion in Starsky's playing filled Hutch's eyes with tears and when the music ended, he just blinked, not daring to breathe lest he break the wondrous spell. At last, Hutch inched forward and clasped Starsky in a crushing hug. They clung to each other for a very long time, until Hutch moved back and, trying to hide the tears in his eyes, he laughed shyly and asked Starsky if he was allowed to play along with the maestro. With a flourish, Starsky picked up his guitar again, and when Hutch returned from his bedroom with his own guitar, they encored the Aranjuez Concerto, their fingers finding the same eerie harmony they shared in everything else they did together.

At moments like this, Starsky cursed his almost eidetic memory. Every tiny little memory triggered another one. And that memory triggered another, each of them more beautiful than the last. Returning to the present with a violent shake of his head, Starsky recognized the piece being played on the radio. It was Mozart's Ave Verum Corpus. His eyes watered when he remembered that Mozart had composed that particular piece a few weeks before his untimely death at a young 36.

Starsky's eyes opened wide when the fact that he was also 36 dawned on him. At least, Mozart had left a legacy of sheer beauty that would be remembered for as long as man walked on the face of the Earth. What would he leave behind when he died? A wasted lifetime of unacknowledged truths that had slowly rotted inside him and hurt him more than a thousand lies. The love of a lifetime that had never been given a chance to live.

Closing his hand into a fist, Starsky hit the couch's armrest and buried his face in one of the cushions. Hutch's soft scent filled his nostrils then, and he realized his partner must have used that cushion as a pillow at some time during the many nights he had slept on the couch. Pressing his face convulsively against the small cushion, he cried himself to sleep again.

Days passed and weeks went by. And life went on. And Starsky resigned himself to his fate. Especially because he had no choice in the matter. He still had Hutch. They had one another as never before. It would have to be enough. He thanked God he still was alive and healthy enough to back up his partner in the streets. It was the miracle they had prayed so much for. Their wish had been granted and he didn't want to push his luck by adding an attachment to it.

Sometimes, he ached to touch Hutch, hold his hand, kiss his cheeks and his beautiful face all over, and more. When those feelings came upon him, he bit his lips and looked away, praying for the moment of weakness to pass. Occasionally, at night, he was swept away on an irrational wave of optimism and he seriously considered telling Hutch the truth and trusting his partner with their fate. But he quickly got his sanity back. He couldn't take the chance. If Hutch didn't feel the same, their relationship would change forever. There's no way you can tell your best friend that you're in love with him and expect things to remain the same. If Hutch didn't share his feelings, whenever he looked at him he would be reminded of the fact that Starsky desired him, that he wanted to make love with him. And Hutch would suffer because he couldn't give him that. Knowing the blondie the way he did, he would undoubtedly blame himself for not being able to grant Starsky's wish. That knowledge could create a rift in their relationship, maybe it would erode it irreversibly. Maybe Hutch would instinctively choose to stay away from him, to not give him false hope... Starsky shivered at the idea of Hutch pulling away from him. He would die if that happened! No! Hutch could *never* know! Never!!

Shaking his head and renewing his vow to not allow himself to slip again, Starky blinked his moist eyes and looked around him. He was still leaning on the tree. The wind was blowing wildly now. Fallen leaves, small branches and dirt rolled down the sidewalk. He took a deep breath and rubbed his face to get rid of the moisture gathered in his eyes. All of a sudden, the wind began blowing so violently he was physically thrown back. If it hadn't been for the tree trunk, he would have fallen backward. Jeeezus, it was getting dangerous now! He fought the impulse to seek refuge in the Torino. He would wait for Hutch and they would reach the safety of his car together. Besides, he couldn't wait to see a shaved Hutch coming out of the drugstore. Ahhh, how he had missed that lovely, smooth face! It had been a lifetime since he had last seen it. This was going to be the first time he would see Hutch without his mustache since he had fallen in love with him. Or rather, since he had *realized* he was in love with him. He could have been in love with his partner from day one, for all he knew.

Starsky sighed and smiled softly, with the sweet hope and innocence of a child. He felt full and pure. And he owed all these feelings to his beautiful Hutch. It didn't matter if his cherished dream never came true. He would love Hutch until his last breath for making him a better person, for enriching his life to a point he felt his chest was going to burst with the selfless love he cradled inside. He already was the richest man on Earth. He would never forget how lucky he was. He would never take that unlikely miracle for granted again.

Hutch looked at his reflection in the mirror after drying his face with the towel. He arched his eyebrows in genuine surprise. Well!! There he was again. Ken Hutchinson without his mustache! He breathed deeply. He looked younger, he had to admit it. He even looked fairer. He touched his shaven upper lip, feeling a strange sensation. It felt cold, as if an invisible breeze was blowing on his skin and making it cold. He knew it was a natural reaction after shaving a part of his body that had been covered with hair for two years. He would get used to it after a few days.

Hutch sighed. He had to admit he looked good without his mustache. But what was it to him? Shaving his mustache wouldn't make Starsky fall madly in love with him. Nothing he ever said or did would make Starsky fall in love with him. He looked down in hopeless resignation and shook his head. He carefully picked up all the hair he had cut and let it fall on several layers of toilet paper he had strategically placed on the sink, and threw it down the toilet. Next, he flushed it. After washing his hands, he opened the small sample of aftershave the young woman had given him and spread it all over his face. Finally, he threw all the disposable items and wrappers into a small waste-paper basket beside the sink. Picking up the can and the scissors and casting a final look at himself in the mirror to make certain the mask was firmly in place, he took a deep breath and opened the door.

The clerk looked up at him from behind the counter, and her eyes opened wide in appreciation of Hutch's new look. The blond man didn't have to ask, just by her reaction he guessed what her opinion of his new appearance was. He walked up to the counter and placed the scissors and the can on it.

"Thank you for letting me use your facilities."

"You're most welcome," the young woman replied, putting the scissors away.

"How much is it?"

"\$3.45, please," was the answer. "Do you want me to put the can of shaving cream in a bag?"

"Yes, please. I haven't emptied it," Hutch said, while searching for the right coins in his left palm.

The woman complied and handed the small plastic bag to Hutch with her left hand while taking the bills and coins Hutch was handing her with the right one. She noticed the big, handsome man was furtively looking around him, obviously looking for his partner.

"Your friend asked me to tell you he's waiting for you outside", she answered the unvoiced question.

"Oh, t-thank you," Hutch blurted out with a small blush.

She smiled at him and looked down at her hand, verifying the exact change. When Hutch turned to go, she spoke again without looking up.

"And tell him I think it's a tie."

"Excuse me?" Hutch asked, completely at a loss.

"Your partner said I'd be the one to judge which one of you was the more handsome," she smiled mischievously, finally raising her eyes.

"Oh, right!" Hutch remembered all of a sudden.

"Well, tell him I think you've improved remarkably after shaving your mustache..."

Hutch's flushed cheeks reddened even more.

"...but my verdict's still a tie," she smiled openly then.

After a few seconds of looking at her, not knowing how to react, Hutch smiled back, just as widely, but with a hint of deep-seated sadness that seemed to have become an integral part of his personality for quite some time now.

"Thank you. I'll tell him." With a friendly salute, Hutch turned about and headed for the door.

"Keep the faith!" the girl exclaimed out of the blue.

Hutch froze on the spot and turned his head, his features suddenly tensed.

"What do you mean?" he asked, more harshly than he intended.

The young woman shrugged shyly, a bit taken aback. It seemed her own words had taken her by surprise.

"I don't know. It just felt the right thing to say," she smiled softly.

Hutch stared at her for a little while and his shoulders finally slouched. He made an ironic grimace that felt wrong on his lovely, smooth features, and nodded sharply. He saluted her again, with true warmth this time, and left the drugstore.

The violence of the wind startled Hutch. His hair whipped his face and he used his hand to move it aside, but with little use. His eyes searched the sidewalk, looking for his partner. He found him leaning against a tree, 50 feet away from him. Starsky had already seen him coming out of the shop and he was straightening up, a huge smile on his face. The sheer joy on Starsky's face at the sight of him made Hutch's heart swell within his chest. He understood then it didn't matter if he never got the chance to love Starsky physically; what the two of them had was beyond miraculous. It was the most beautiful thing two people could ever be blessed with. He thanked God with all his heart for it, and he swore to cherish and protect it until the day he died. Sacrificing his love life for it seemed a small price to pay in comparison to all the things they had shared and still could share and do for each other in the future, God willing. They had perfection already. He would gladly resign himself to his fate. It was infinitely more, and better, than most people ever found.

Starsky took a few steps forward and stood in the middle of the sidewalk, apparently studying Hutch's new look from afar. He was smiling from ear to ear, dark curls savagely agitated by the wild wind that was blowing dangerously now. As he walked to meet him, Hutch's face almost broke with his own happy smile.

A quick gleam of white light coming from above drew Hutch's attention. He looked up and saw how the Empire Strikes Back billboard they had studied earlier was shaking badly under its rusty hinges. He frowned suspiciously, in instinctive foreboding.

Right then, all hell broke loose. The billboard's precarious anchorage gave way and the huge, heavy steel and plywood began its slow, inexorable fall to the ground. Hutch's heart almost stopped when he realized Starsky was standing right below the falling monster. His worst nightmare was coming alive again and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He ran toward his partner and started yelling at the top of his voice.

"STARSKY!!! STARSKY, LOOK OUT!!!"

Starsky had literally 'sensed' Hutch coming out of the drugstore. He had stopped wondering long ago how he could discern when Hutch was about to show up, how his partner was feeling and what was going on in that beautiful mind. It was something that started almost since they had first met, and only established itself through the years.

The sight of his newly shaven partner took his breath away. And this time, it wasn't because of the wind. Oh, gawd! What an adorable, sweet face!! It looked so young, even boyish! He felt like taking it between his hands and covering it with kisses!

Oh, damn! There he went again! Just when he had resigned himself to a lifetime of chastity and abstinence, his feelings were betraying him again. But, what was wrong with wanting to love Hutch physically? Why couldn't he have it all? Why couldn't he be happy with what he had and stop mourning for what he *couldn't* have? Just because he was a human being, and human beings couldn't help striving for more. If human beings had merely contented themselves with what they had, they would still live in caves and wear bearskins. He could learn to live with what he couldn't have, but he would never stop longing for it. It was in his nature.

A smile came unbidden to his lips. This was the real Hutch, not the dark caricature he had become after growing that weird mustache. His Hutch was back. If only for that, the blond deserved the bearhug Starsky was about to reward him with.

He was so deep within his own dreamworld, that Hutch's sudden cry and the sight of his friend running like a madman toward him puzzled Starsky for a precious second. But almost immediately, he entered cop mode. Something was wrong and Hutch was trying to draw his attention.

A screeching noise coming from above made him look up, and he froze on the spot when he saw the billboard collapsing on him. He could only watch in mesmerized fascination the huge thing's slow fall, incapable of jumping aside or even trying the slightest attempt at moving away. He was paralyzed, rooted to the ground by an invisible force he couldn't fight, witnessing his own death. In that split second, he understood what was going to happen next.

Time seemed to stand still for a moment, and then, it started moving again, but as if in slow motion. Hutch's mind suddenly filled with thousands of memories. Memories of him and Starsky. He saw himself, lying on Huggy's bed, clinging to his partner for dear life, knowing that in those gentle hands and soothing words lay his only hope of survival: *'Hold on to me. It's okay, I'm right here.'* He saw himself, looking at Gillian's dead body, finally breaking down, and being immediately enveloped in strong arms, desperate to take his pain away. Pinned under his car for two days, praying for merciful death to come looking for him, and being suddenly snatched away from its cold, unfeeling grasp by Starsky's loving hands, cradling his pounding head. He remembered lying in a sterilized hospital bed, every intake of breath hurting more than his body and his soul could stand, and waking up to one single word: 'STARSK,' written on the thick glass that kept him apart from a world he didn't belong to anymore; opening his eyes to a gloved and masked Starsky sitting beside him and holding his hot, trembling hands... And then, the memories shifted. He saw Starsky, slowly fading away after being poisoned by Vic Bellamy, shooting the creep on that roof to save his partner's life, knowing he had signed his death sentence with that one action; Starsky, shattered into a billion tiny pieces after Terry's death; Starsky, lying in a hospital bed, his torn body just barely hanging on, after Gunther's hitmen had almost succeeded in their assassination attempt... Tears, laughter, love, friendship, sharing... Small moments, big moments, meaningful moments all of them. A lifetime of caring and fulfillment.

So much love! So many memories! Me and thee. As it had always been and it always would be. It couldn't end like this! He wouldn't let it end like this! Not his Starsky! Not a life without Starsky! Not again! Never again!!

"STARSKYYYYYYYYY!!!!!!" With a final superhuman effort, Hutch forced his leg muscles to their physical limit, and when he was only 10 feet away from his partner, he jumped like a panther and pushed him to safety with his last bit of strength. That was the last thing he knew before everything went dark.

Starsky landed heavily on the ground, the breath knocked out of his lungs with the impact. He lay gasping on the ground, catching his breath, wincing with the pain in his backside and his scraped palms.

When the confusion and the shock began receding, and the memory of what had just happened returned, he jumped to his feet, to the sight he would have given his life a million times over to not ever see.

Hutch's body had disappeared under the billboard's bulk. Only his right, lifeless hand stuck out from beneath it, still holding the small plastic bag he had carried, shaking in his dead grasp. The can of shaving cream rolled down the sidewalk with a small rattle, the only moving testimony to the still tableau of death, until it disappeared down a sewer.

Starsky's breathing went off again, and a rumble, coming from deep inside him, took over him like a rising tide, until it swept him away in a savage, frenzied wave of pain, terror and denial that finally found its release in one single word.

"HUUUUUUUUUUUUUUTCH!!!!!!!!!"

Starsky fell to his knees and hurled himself at the the pale hand, taking it tenderly between both of his, snatching the bag away, frantically searching for a pulse. He couldn't find one.

"Oh, Hutch, babe!! No!! Please, don't!! Not for me!! Oh, God!" His mind was running in circles, lost in a world of sheer horror. He searched all the places on Hutch's wrist, praying for a tiny throb of life within. Nothing. Starsky's breath caught in his throat. A searing pain spread from deep within his breast. The world began spinning around him. He started feeling strangely disconnected from his surroundings. Sounds seemed to be coming from afar...

And then, his world reasserted itself when he felt an infinitesimal pressure on his hand. Reality became solid around him once again, and it sprung Starsky into action.

"Hutch! Hutch, can you hear me? Hold on, babe, I'll get you out of there!"

Giving the warm hand a final loving squeeze, Starsky stood up and grabbed the edge of the fallen billboard. Taking a deep breath, he tried to raise it from his partner's inert body. It was too heavy.

"HELP!! Somebody help me!!" he cried out in frantic desperation. Every second with that large mass crushing Hutch could be lethal to his partner.

No one answered his cry for help. On the verge of his sanity, Starsky redoubled his efforts. Terror and despair made adrenaline pump wildly in his bloodstream. His entire body protested the superhuman effort he was exerting. But he ignored the warning signs. His partner was lying under that monster, and he had to get him out, before it was too late.

*'Oh, God, please! Please, Hutch! God, help me! Please, oh, please!'* he prayed like a mantra. The veins in his arms, neck and forehead stood out from his skin as if they were about to burst. He bit his lips, set his jaw and carried on, feeling as if he was tearing apart inside, but never wavering.

Hours seemed to pass, but at last, he felt the heavy bulk yielding to his might. Taking advantage of the momentary edge he had gained, never trying to raise the mass all the way up, knowing he couldn't succeed, he hurried to push the billboard aside and reveal his partner's broken body beneath.

"Hutch!" he didn't know if he whispered the word or cried it out. It just came out of his lips like a prayer, a cry for mercy. He knelt down beside his friend and settled his left palm softly on Hutch's head, as if in benediction. His right hand held the blond's again, clasping it tenderly. He felt another tiny squeeze that brought helpless tears to his eyes.

Right then, the world seemed to start moving again at its normal pace. Pedestrians gathered around them, seemingly coming from every direction and all at once.

"Ohmigod, poor man!"

"Is he alive?"

"When I heard the racket I froze! I thought it was an earthquake or a blast or something..."

Starsky's brain was on overload. He was terrified for Hutch, his entire world was falling apart around and inside him and all these people only added to the nervousness and helplessness he was feeling. No one was truly helping.

"For God's sake!" he exploded at last. "Somebody call an ambulance!"

"Jesus!!" a familiar feminine voice uttered behind him. Starsky looked up and saw the clerk of the drugstore they had left a lifetime (or had it been only a few moments?) ago, as white as a sheet, straightening up and rushing back inside the shop. "I will!", she reassured him.

Starsky turned his attention back to Hutch, studying him closely. He didn't seem to be bleeding. There were no visible wounds on his body and that only scared Starsky more. Internal wounds could be more dangerous than external ones. His eyes were closed and he didn't seem to be breathing. The sweet face was ashen. Starsky bent closer and spoke softly into his ear.

"Don't worry, buddy. The ambulance is on its way. We'll take ya to the hospital and you'll be all right in no time. Just hang on, okay? Hold on to me, baby. Don't leave me. Please, Hutch!!"

Another tiny squeeze on his hand. Starsky bit his lower lip and nodded to himself as he reached out and softly stroked the disheveled blond strands. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw someone reaching out to his partner, clumsily trying to check him out.

"Don't touch him!" he exclaimed. "If he's got internal wounds it could only make it worse! Let's wait for the ambulance... and pray."

The next few minutes felt like centuries to Starsky, as he remained kneeling by his partner's still body, whispering reassurances to him and caressing him non-stop. They had always fed on each other's touch, especially when sick, wounded or in emotional pain. They had never been shy about their physical closeness, but after Gunther, any remaining qualms they could still harbor, were cast to the wind without second thoughts. Who cared about what people say when life was so precious, so short? This was what everything was about: touching, sharing, showing people you truly care. Starsky knew Hutch was clinging to his caresses just as he was clinging to Hutch's occasional small squeezes to his hand. He murmured softly into Hutch's ear. Soft words that only Hutch could hear. He knew he had to be mostly babbling, but he didn't give a damn. He felt Hutch could hear him, focusing on the sound of his voice, and he would go on talking nonsense for as long as it was necessary.

Sometime later, the sound of a distant siren became gradually louder and louder, until it stopped just a few feet away from them. He never looked back or took his eyes away from his partner. He heard the noises of doors opening and closing and the sound of hurried footsteps coming closer.

"Step aside, please!" a deep male voice said.

Starsky looked beside him then and saw a middle-aged man kneeling and gently beginning to check on Hutch, without moving him.

"He's alive," he informed his younger aide, who was bending over Starsky's shoulder. "This billboard collapsed on him?" he asked Starsky then, pointing at the big mass Starsky had removed from his partner.

The curly haired man just nodded, softly squeezing the big hand, that almost immediately returned the pressure. Starsky felt like crying. They had just invented a new way of communicating wordlessly what they couldn't convey through words. Another example of the instinctive understanding of each other they had always shared, reasserting itself in this new forced method of communication.

"He pushed me away and the thing fell on him instead," he needlessly informed the paramedic, swallowing the painful lump in his throat. His heart was breaking and he couldn't stand the pain.

"We've got to immobilize him first to prevent any spinal damage. Apparently, there aren't any external injuries, but more than likely, there will be internal injuries. We have to proceed with extreme caution," the paramedic looked up and addressed his aide and an even younger man who had just joined them. "Bring the backboard," he ordered.

As the two young men returned to the ambulance, the paramedic looked at Starsky, taking in his shaky state of mind. A compassionate expression smoothed his features.

"Excuse me, but you'll have to let go of your friend now. We have to prepare him for the ride to the hospital." His voice was kind and soothing and Starsky felt somewhat better. This man was treating his patient as a human being, not like a piece of machinery that had to be repaired. He nodded slowly and bent forward one final time, speaking softly into Hutch's ear.

"I have to let go now, Blintz. But I'm not going anywhere. Just hang on, all right? I'll ride with ya to the hospital. I'm not letting you out of my sight, not for a moment!" he emphatically promised, with a loving caress to the blond head.

Another short, tiny squeeze, that almost felt like a nod and then, painfully, Starsky let go of the big, warm hand, feeling as if an invisible fist was squeezing his heart at the loss of physical contact.

The next couple of minutes were hurried and full of movement. The paramedic fastened a neck brace around Hutch's neck and secured his back all the way down before slowly turning him up and gently placing him on the backboard.

Once inside the ambulance, Starsky placed himself beside his partner and took the still hand between both of his again. It took longer this time, but he was finally rewarded with a tiny squeeze. Starsky's heart skipped a beat. Hutch was getting worse. He didn't know how he knew. He just did. He immediately bent over the beloved body and started whispering into his ear again.

"C'mon, Hutch, don't let me down. We're getting you to the hospital now. Hang on a little longer. Please", he reached out and placed his free hand on Hutch's chest, feeling for his heartbeat. He inched closer. "I know you're in pain. I know you're hurting, babe, but please, hold on," he sniffled. "I know this isn't fair, but for me, Hutch. Try! I know I'm being selfish but, please, please try for me!" his voice choked for a moment, and he cleared his throat in a pathetic attempt at disguising it.

He felt another squeeze on his trembling, sweaty hand, stronger this time, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He suddenly realized his whole body was drenched in sweat. It had to be the brutal effort he had made in raising the billboard with his bare hands. He could have seriously injured himself with that action, but he didn't care. He had to get that thing off of Hutch. If he had damaged something inside his already torn body so be it. Without Hutch, there was nothing worth living for. He didn't want to survive his partner. The mere thought was inconceivable. If Hutch had to go, he would go with him gratefully.

A longer squeeze on his right hand brought him back to the present. It felt like a question, and he hurried to answer it.

"I'm right here, babe. Don't worry. You're gonna be okay, I promise ya," he sniffled again and his left hand stroked the broad chest softly.

"Excuse me, please." The paramedic was trying to examine Hutch and Starsky was getting in the way.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry," the dark-haired man apologized and released the big hand with a passionate squeeze. Reluctantly, he moved aside.

He watched curiously as the paramedic examined his partner. There was a gentleness about his touch that Starsky appreciated. This man was compassionate and caring. They had been lucky he had been dispatched in answer to the clerk's call. Starsky reminded himself to thank her personally once this nightmare was over. He had been so focused on Hutch he had completely forgotten about the young woman and all the other pedestrians who had tried to help them.

Meanwhile, after carefully unbuttoning Hutch's shirt, the paramedic palpated Hutch's ribcage all over, occasionally hitting softly in between his ribs with his fingertips, also using his stethoscope from time to time. Next, he ventured downward and placed his left hand on Hutch's abdomen, palm down, and began palpating it softly with the fingertips of the right one, also pressing down very lightly in a circular motion, all over it. Starsky recognized the procedure. He had seen it in films and TV shows a hundred times over. Then, he carefully reached one hand behind Hutch's back and repeated the same procedure in the region of his kidneys, sandwiching his partner between his hands. Apparently satisfied with the results, he opened a small medikit and took out a tiny flashlight. Bending forward, he gently held Hutch's eyelids open and pointed the small beam directly at them. He also checked his ears, looking inside.

This examination took longer than Starsky would have expected. He looked down and began twisting his hands in helplessness. If Hutch had sustained any brain damage... He closed his eyes against the terrifying possibilities. All because of him.

*'Oh, Hutch! Why did you do it? You offered your life for me. Don't you know that without you there's no life? You're the reason I wake up every morning, you're my light in the darkness, the balm to my pain; you're my whole world, babe. You're my entire life! I don't want to live without you. Oh, God, what am I gonna do if I lose you?'*

He buried his face in his hands, not wanting to keep on looking, refusing to consider the notion of a life without any hope.

"Excuse me, mister..." the deep, gentle voice of the paramedic suddenly shook him out of the spiral of grief and fear he had allowed himself to slip into.

"Starsky, Dave Starsky," he supplied, rubbing his eyes and looking up into the gentle hazel eyes that watched him with unmistakable compassion. "How's my partner, Doc? Level with me. We've both gone through this enough times by now." His face conveyed an expression of soul-deep weariness.

The paramedic took a deep breath and stared at the blue-eyed, broken man he had in front of him. In his eyes he saw sheer terror and infinite pain, but also an indomitable strength, no doubt born out of dozens of close calls throughout the years, as the curly-haired man had just said. He briefly looked down at the forgotten plastic bag that lay on the floor, filled with the few belongings the blond man carried with him. His shoes, his watch, his ring, his badge, his handcuffs, his gun, his holster and a few coins. He had tended many cops during his years as a paramedic. All those occasions had been terrible and traumatic. It didn't matter how many scenes he faced, every single one of them was like the first, disturbing and shocking. And this one was no different. Although there was something special about this call. He couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. He had encountered many close partners through the years, who had been honestly worried about their wounded friends and crushed when he all he could do was to pronounce their deaths; but there was something about this particular partnership... this man had said his partner had pushed him out of the billboard's way and it had fallen on him instead. Just that fact spoke volumes. Looking into those terrified blue eyes now, he could read the deep love and caring this man held for his partner. It was almost as if in his friend's chances of survival lay his own. His eyes opened wide when he realized there was no 'almost' there. Starsky's eyes were telling him the whole story. He cleared his throat to get rid of the sudden lump.

"Well, Mr. Starsky, my preliminary examination indicates your friend has several broken ribs, mostly on his right side. I presume that's where he sustained most of the impact. I have to say he's been pretty lucky, considering how bad it could have been. I imagine the billboard didn't fall squarely on him. I guess the thing fell at such an angle that its broken anchorage allowed a small space between your partner's body and the

ground." He looked at Starsky then with a small smile that couldn't hide a hint of admiration. "You lifted the billboard off of him, didn't you?"

Starsky nodded.

The doctor looked at Hutch for a short moment, before continuing. "Apparently, none of the broken ribs has punctured his lungs, since he presents no signs of pneumothorax. His skull is intact, thankfully, but he still could have a brain edema. He's dislocated his right shoulder and he's got a severe concussion. How severe I can't tell without a CAT scan. He's in a semiconscious state right now." He paused. "His internal organs also seem undamaged. I seriously feared for his spleen. The spleen is usually the first organ to rupture in these cases, but since it's located in the left side of the body, it's survived. Still, I can't tell for certain without the proper tests. There's no internal hemorrhage either, but he's not safe from it yet. His spinal cord seems intact as well, since all his extremities responded when I checked on them. That's all I can tell you for now. We're taking him to Memorial Hospital. They'll take good care of him there."

Starsky looked down with an ironic smile and snorted.

"What's the matter?" the paramedic asked, honestly bewildered by the younger man's reaction. "You don't like that hospital? I assure you..."

Starsky looked up immediately and shook his head, raising his hand in reassurance.

"No, no, Doc. It's not that. It's just that Hutch and I have been so many times in that hospital that we could tour you round it as if it was the Pacific Princess," he smiled sadly, shaking his head again.

The paramedic smiled softly at him, in gentle understanding. Paramedics were some of the few who knew very well of the risks of a cop's life.

A tiny rumble made both men turn about. Immediately recognizing the sound, Starsky practically hurled himself at Hutch's side, taking the blond's left hand in his own and squeezing it lovingly.

"I'm here, Blintz. Don't try to talk. We're getting ya to the hospital now. They'll fix you there in no time." He sniffled and looked at the doctor with a wry smile. "According to the Doc here, you only have a few broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder and a concussion. Piece of cake for a tough man like my partner. We've been very lucky, buddy; you're gonna be okay."

A small squeeze answered his words and Starsky bit his lower lip, trying to suppress the onslaught of emotions coursing through him. He tenderly studied the smooth features of the face he loved more than his very life. He noticed for the first time the grazes and bruises that were beginning to color Hutch's left cheekbone and the left side of his forehead. His breath caught with a wave of infinite pain. Each and every one of Hutch's wounds were telling him of the deep and abiding love his beloved friend felt for him. Hutch had been willing to give his life for him. They had always been ready to die for each other, and they had been about to far more times than they cared to count. But this time it had been so sudden, so brutally unexpected... Starsky didn't know why this time made a difference, it just did. With all the dangers and unknowns a cop has to face every day in the streets, it seemed like a practical joke to die crushed by a fallen billboard. It was the ultimate irony in Starsky's slowly slipping mind. He bent his head, trying to stifle a helpless sob. Guilt was beginning to consume him like a burning fire.

There was a fact he couldn't ignore. He had frozen. He had been unable to jump aside and escape the thing's fall. Hutch had been the one to push him away and take the billboard meant for him. What had happened to him? He had always been like quicksilver. He could move with a swiftness and an agility that had always given him, and Hutch, an edge on the bad guys. Now he felt like the shadow of the man he had once been. He wasn't worthy of calling himself Hutch's partner anymore. He was a burden to him, one that could very well cost his beloved's life now. He had only deceived himself all these months. Foolishly believed he still could...

"Sta-- Stars-..." a weak, rasping voice shook him out of the self-destructive spiral of guilt and shame.

"Hutch!" he exclaimed, looking into the now slightly open eyes, that were fixed on him with a warmth and an intensity that burned a path down Starsky's heart.

"Not... your fault," Hutch swallowed painfully and took a deep, agonizing breath. "Could've happened... t'anyone. Took ya... by surprise..."

"Oh, babe!" Starsky was on the verge of breaking down. Hutch's empathy with him bordered on telepathy. Even now. Even now he was only thinking of Starsky, protecting him! He reached out a shaking hand and brushed the soft fringe off the beautiful forehead and tenderly caressed the grazes on it. Hutch's head must have hit the ground on its left side. He bent forward and gently leaned his forehead on his partner's. The soft scent of aftershave filled his nostrils and he closed his eyes. His fingers slid through the silky blond hair, desperately seeking to alleviate the pain. He fervently wished for his hands to have some kind of healing power, so he could cure this precious being who owned his soul.

Hutch's face softened into a faraway, peaceful smile, and his eyes closed again. "S'nice... feels good..." he seemed to purr, almost in a whisper. "Thank you, Starsk."

Starsky let out a tiny, choked laugh, and looked into grateful, misted blue eyes. "My pleasure, Blondie," he squeezed the big hand once more. "But, please, don't try to talk."

"Had to... reassure ya..." Hutch swallowed again, with more ease this time. "Saw it fallin'... before you did. You had n-no... no time to... react... You... You're s- you're still... the same..." he tried to take a deep breath to fill his lungs with much needed air, and he winced at the sharp pain all over his ribcage. "Still the same... The bes-- best partner... anyone c-c-could ev— e-eve-..." he was almost breathless, but he had to finish. He had to restore Starsky's confidence.

"Shhhhh, Hutch," Starsky placed his fingertips on Hutch's lips, squeezing his eyes shut again, fighting tears of overwhelming gratitude. Hutch's uncanny way of reading him would never cease to amaze him. True, the same could be said about him, but after so many years, it still felt as humbling and wondrous as the first time it had happened. "Please, don't talk," he begged.

Hutch nodded once, very slowly, and his lips automatically kissed the pads of Starsky's fingers. He softly inhaled Starsky's scent. His eyes still closed, he concentrated on his beloved's touch, on his nearness, on Starsky's every point of contact with his aching body. He could feel his partner's forehead leaning on his own; the comforting, steady squeezing of his hand. God, even the soft, rhythmic blowing of Starsky's breath on his face was so pleasurable! Starsky's overwhelming presence all around him felt like a soothing wave of warmth and affection. He felt covered in the sweetest blanket of love and caring, enveloped in Starsky's strength and unwavering support. Even the pain was beating a slow retreat, under the influence of his curly-haired angel's healing touch. He let out a tiny sigh of relief.

Starsky's whole body throbbed in helpless delight when Hutch kissed his fingertips. He couldn't help it. He was so starved for his partner's touch! He had been feeding from it since they had first met. But now, it was... it had become his very life. He lived for every hug, every pat, every smile; he lived for every second of Hutch's life. *'Oh, God, please save him! I'll be content with just his friendship! I swear I will! Just... don't take him away from me! I beg You!'* he prayed. A sigh came from the bottom of his heart and he waited as patiently as he could for the ambulance to arrive at the hospital. He never stopped stroking Hutch's face and head. He knew Hutch was feeding from his touch as well. Gathering strength from it, just as Starsky had every time he had been hurt and Hutch had held him and caressed him all the way to complete recovery. That touch had kept him alive and sped up his healing. He was alive today because of it. Starsky looked down at their clasped hands and felt like crying at the beauty of the image. That big, gentle, strong hand that seemed to be clinging to him for dear life. A life as dear as Hutch's life was to Starsky.

Finally, the ambulance came to a sudden halt. Starsky didn't seem to notice, and it was the paramedic who draw his attention, after respectfully clearing his throat.

"We're here."

Starsky looked up then and raised his head from Hutch's forehead. He never stopped sliding his fingers through his partner's hair and holding his hand. "Oh, sorry."

The ambulance's doors opened then, and the paramedics took Hutch's stretcher out with extreme care. Starsky never relinquished his hold on Hutch's hand. They had to maintain at least one point of contact between them. It was their lifeline. As long as they stayed in touch, everything would be all right.

Starsky realized they were at the ER entrance, as he hurriedly walked through familiar corridors. He was in a bit of a daze as he trotted to keep up with the stretcher. But he appreciated the haste.

Finally, they arrived before a double door and the paramedic addressed him in a compassionate, soothing way. "We're taking him in now. You'll have to let go of your friend."

Starsky looked down at Hutch, at their joined hands, and he presented the image of sheer helplessness. He was terrified. He felt that as soon as he let go of Hutch, his vitals would start dropping. He knew it was an irrational thought, but that fact didn't prevent him from feeling it nonetheless.

"You can wait for him in that waiting room," the paramedic indicated a relatively small cubicle with a nod of his head. "It could be a long wait, so muster your patience. They'll have to run tests on him to check the exact extent of his injuries and start tending his most immediate wounds, like his shoulder or his ribs, but don't worry. We'll keep you informed of the slightest change in his condition."

Starsky looked up at the paramedic and bit his lower lip. The man smiled sympathetically at him and nodded in reassurance.

"Unless any complication presents itself, we're optimistic about his possibilities. Try to relax."

Starsky studied the paramedic's sincere expression, clinging to it for all he was worth. He ended up nodding slowly and looked down at the surprisingly open blue eyes that seemed to be drinking him in. He bent down and softly spoke into Hutch's ear.

"I have to let go now, buddy. Be good in there and let them fix you up, okay?" he reached out and softly touched the silky strands of hair on the top of Hutch's head.

Hutch's eyes began swimming and he nodded in heartbreaking resignation. He squeezed Starsky's hand with a hint of despair and downright fear that Starsky understood only too well. By unspoken mutual agreement, they slowly let go of each other's hand.

"Hold on, Hutch. I'm right here. So, you'd better stick with me. D'ya hear?" Starsky whispered when their fingertips brushed apart.

Hutch nodded one last time and while he was being pushed through the doors, Starsky could read the silent word that escaped his lips.

"Starsk." It felt like a prayer, as if he was holding the word close to his heart and drawing strength from it, from its magically healing power. Starsky's heart constricted in his chest.

Once alone, Starsky looked around him, confused and lost. He felt as if he was six years old and no one had shown to pick him up after school. Absolute despair, loneliness and a heartache as he had never known, began breaking him inside. He walked down the corridor, not really seeing where he was going, until he found himself in front of a public telephone. Immediately answering the cry for help from his subconscious, he inserted some coins and phoned Dobey and Huggy, informing them of what had happened in the most coherent way he could manage. Both of them agreed to meet him at the hospital. After hanging up the phone, Starsky slowly walked into the waiting room and flopped down on a seat, holding his head in his hands. Another long, agonizing wait had begun.

His mind was in turmoil. He couldn't shake off the horrifying image of Hutch's hand sticking out from beneath the billboard. And his scream, '*Starsky, look out!*' would be forever imprinted in his brain. And the chilling image of the can of shaving cream rolling down the sidewalk... Hundreds of images, sounds and even smells, were flashing before his mind's eye and threatening to drive him crazy. The fear, the pain, the love. Especially the love. Hutch had been about to die for him! Starsky jumped to his feet and began pacing the room, unable to keep still. Oh, Hutch! Hutch could die without ever knowing... Starsky froze on the spot. No, that thought was out of the question. Hutch must never know. Not now, not ever. It was beside the point anyway, and in the end, it would make no difference.

All of a sudden, John Blaine filled his thoughts. And in another flash of insight this time, Starsky realized how wrong and unfair he had been. For the first time, he was capable of putting himself in John's shoes and realized things weren't just black or white. What if the older man had gotten married and fathered his children, only to find out way later he was gay? Or *allowed* himself to acknowledge the fact that he was gay? He would suddenly find himself living a lie, trapped in a situation he couldn't escape from, unless he risked disappointing so many people and admitting that all his life prior to his coming out had been a monumental deceit. Starsky had no way to know the way John had rationalized his situation. Maybe he thought he couldn't escape, and resigned himself to live his true sexuality in stolen, forbidden moments. He shivered at the notion of anyone living such a life.

Not everybody displayed the same courage under the same circumstances. John had been one hell of a cop, brave and courageous. An example to the young Starsky. Maybe in his personal, private life, he preferred not to take the chance. Maybe he just didn't dare to be honest all the way. Maybe there was too much at stake for him, too much he couldn't stand to lose. Maybe... maybe he was just afraid.

As afraid as Starsky was right now.

Hutch had been far more understanding of that age-old human weaknesses called cowardice. He had seen this other side to life that Starsky had been inflexible to concede. To Starsky, if someone did something that made no sense to him or made a decision against better judgment or common sense, they were automatically wrong. Today, at long last, he finally found himself on the other side of the mirror - being forced to be a coward to protect a greater good: his friendship with Hutch. Maybe John had thought that his wife, his children and his life as a cop were a greater good to protect than live according to his true sexual orientation. He had his own priorities and Starsky had no right to judge him. Yes, he had deceived his folks. He had left them wondering what had been real and what had been a lie about his life, wondering about the real depth of their knowledge of John Blaine, even if they had ever known him at all. That was the usual result and the terrible price one has to pay for their lies: their own discredit before their peers. And John couldn't cast any light on his family and friends' million questions anymore. He was dead.

There were no easy answers. It was... life.

And *this* was the life David Starsky had chosen. To hide his love for his male partner to protect a friendship that was more important to him than his own life. No one had a right to judge him. They couldn't possibly know the chain of events and fears that had led him to make such a painful and cowardly decision.

Starsky let go of his head and leaned against the back of the chair. His head felt about to explode. Shame, guilt, pain, love... All those feelings were wreaking havoc within him and he felt like screaming. He only wanted Hutch to get well. He wanted him healthy, and happy and beautiful... and beside him in any way that blond angel wanted.

"Excuse me."

Starsky gave a start and looked at a nurse who carried a plastic bag full of Hutch's clothes and belongings. His heart skipped a beat in his chest at the sight of them. This was all that would be left of Hutch if he..., he swallowed heavily. Just a bag of useless stuff and thousands of memories... NO! Don't even think about it, Starsky!

"You're waiting for Mr. Hutchinson, aren't you?" she asked in a very kind voice, and with an edge of familiarity. Starsky had the feeling that this woman knew him. He'd be damned if he remembered her, but he guessed that the time he had made her acquaintance in the past, he had had other far more important things on his mind. He immediately straightened up in his chair.

"Yes, I am. How is he?"

"The doctors are still with him. Don't worry, if there's anything new, we'll tell you. I just came to give you Mr. Hutchinson's belongings and ask you to please accompany me to fill in your friend's admission papers."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about that. I'm sorry," Starsky stood up and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. He suddenly felt infinitely tired in both body and soul. Dragging his feet, he followed the nurse to admission, where he spent the next fifteen minutes filling out more and more papers. He paused to relieve a kink in his neck by rubbing the sore spot, and he met the woman's eyes, that were studying him with gentle compassion. He smiled sadly.

"No matter how many times we get in here, I'll never get used to these procedures," he sighed, looking down at the last paper to verify he had filled in everything correctly.

"That's the reason we're here, Mr. Starsky. You have enough on your mind already. We're here to try and make things easier for people."

Definitely, this woman knew him. He smiled gratefully at her.

"I know. Thank you." He made a short pause. "I'm sorry I don't remember you, honey," he sincerely apologized.

She smiled, with genuine amusement. "I'd be surprised if you did. We've never met. Not officially anyway. But you and your partner have become..." she seemed to ponder her next words carefully, before making her mind about them. "...sort of a living legend around here."

Starsky looked down and smiled dryly. "Yeah. In the last few years, Hutch and me've been in this hospital more times than we'd care to count."

She sobered instantly. "I know. I'm sorry. I've only been in this hospital for about a year. That's the reason I remember you. My first day here was the day you were admitted..." her voice dwindled away.

Starsky closed his eyes and a ghostly pallor seemed to envelop him. Gunther.

"That day, your partner was in the same condition you are now. But you survived," she smiled at him encouragingly. "He'll make it, too. Have faith."

Starsky rubbed the bridge of his nose. The headache that had threatened him before had returned with a vengeance. "I do. Believe me, I do. Faith's all I have left," he buried his face in his hand with a heartbreaking sigh.

"Are you all right?" the nurse asked him, with real concern in her voice.

Starsky looked up at her and smiled reassuringly. "Yeah. Thanks," he looked down at the plate pinned on her uniform. "Thank you for everything, Ms. Pierce," he said, reaching out to her.

The woman grinned at him and shook his hand. Starsky surprised her by bringing her hand to his mouth and placing a gentlemanly kiss on it. Softly he let go of it and his gaze fell upon the bag that contained Hutch's things. His face contorted infinitesimally with such a pain as the nurse had never seen before. She couldn't explain how a face that had barely changed its expression, could convey so much torment and anguish. She couldn't help the feeling that there was more there than met the eye.

During the last year, her co-workers had regaled to her dozens of little stories about those two men and the extraordinary relationship they had. They had never been shy about showing their affection for each other from the very first time they had been admitted there, and their level of intimacy had only seemed to increase throughout the years. But the last time, after Starsky's shooting, it had been... just indescribable. Neither her workmates nor herself could explain it. They had never encountered anything like it. Hutch, who usually became a bundle of nerves every time either of them was admitted to the hospital, had been lethargic the last time, almost as catatonic as his partner. But even then, their rapport had been plain to see. Even despite Starsky's coma. It seemed they were still together, someplace where no one could reach them, communicating at a level beyond any human comprehension. Long, endless hours the handsome blond man had spent by his partner's bedside, frozen like a statue. It didn't appear he was even breathing. And when he did, they realized his breathing was completely synchronized with his partner's, as if they had matching body rhythms. As if somehow, Hutch was passing on to Starsky part of his own strength, his life-force, helping him to return to them. It was a mesmerizing sight. An almost palpable reality.

Even so, everybody was positive that Starsky was going to die. There was no way his body could survive such extensive and massive damage. And when his heart stopped beating that fateful evening, they mourned him as if a member of their own family had died. And they cried inside for Hutch, who had just lost his very reason to live.

No one could believe it when, at the exact moment that Hutch barged like a charging bull into the ICU, Starsky's heart started beating again. Everybody was ready to swear both events had taken place at exactly the same time, down to the same millisecond. The miracle partners had done it again. That was the moment their affectionate nickname was born. And it was much more than an affectionate nickname. The two words were infused with respect and awe, even with a little bit of envy from more than one.

Since that moment, it was one victory after another. Starsky had survived, yes. But he would never be the same man again. He could never return to his job as an undercover cop. His body would never recover fully, not to mention ever being fit enough to exert itself the way the streets demanded.

And yet, the two miracle partners proved them all wrong. Again.

Hutch had taken it upon himself to take care of his partner, at home, on *their* terms. Both of them had refused any help. They just secluded themselves until Starsky's wounds healed. Much sooner than any of them expected, of course. When her friend Susan had checked on Starsky's scars two months later to verify they had healed properly, she found they had been exquisitely tended and had healed perfectly. She assured Starsky that in time they would hardly be noticed, especially with all the sexy chest hair he had. To her surprise, Starsky had blushed, looked down, and quickly covered himself. A most uncharacteristic behavior, knowing him and his fondness for unbuttoned shirts. But it was a very common reaction to physical and emotional trauma. Susan trusted Hutch to take care of his partner on this as well.

When Starsky's rehabilitation began, nobody dared to state anything for a fact anymore. Knowing those two, anything could happen. Anything good, that is. And they were right. After several months of a brutal, almost inhuman effort, perseverance, searing pain and a stubbornness born out of sheer desperation, Starsky was pronounced fit to return to his job. The miracle was complete. And they had earned it, both of them. Hutch was as responsible for Starsky's total recovery as Starsky himself was. The love, tenderness, understanding, and sometimes the sternness and severity with which he goaded Starsky to try it harder or just a few more times (even when the physical therapists considered Starsky had outdone himself for the day), defied description. He knew his partner better than any of them ever would. He knew when Starsky had reached his limit, and when he could push him just a little bit more, a little bit harder. As if Starsky needed to be pushed any more or any harder! He wanted to recover as badly as Hutch did. They were a sight to behold. Those two could light up a room with their mere presence. They filled it with the electricity of their rapport, with the overwhelming love and caring they felt for each other. The looks they exchanged, the way they touched, smiled at each other, talked to each other, even the way they breathed together... It was awesome.

It was then they received their second nickname. The soulmate partners. It was Susan who gave them that nickname. It just couldn't get any closer between two people. It was humanly impossible. They would have to fuse their bodies into one single being, sharing one single soul.

She returned to reality with a little shiver, only to find herself looking into those infinitely expressive, indigo eyes. Her breath caught in her throat. She felt the same awe and instinctive respect she would feel in front of her favorite movie star. And this was better, so much better! Because the values they stood for were an example to every human being on this earth. Those two men embodied something so beautiful, so perfect it couldn't possibly exist in this world. She was before a living, breathing miracle. Something so rare and precious that could only happen once in a century, in a millennium. It almost felt like a religious experience. She felt both humbled and privileged for having been allowed to witness it, so she could know what perfection was like. That was what Starsky and Hutch were, together: Perfection.

Life was being merciless with them lately. Her throat constricted in empathic pain. They had only been allowed a few months of peace this time. Now, it was the blond one who had been admitted with some very serious injuries, that very well could... No, she wouldn't even think about it! She prayed for all she was worth to every deity, to please give them a break once and for all.

Word had already begun to spread in ER. The miracle partners were back. This time, Hutch had saved his friend's life by pushing him away from a falling billboard. Once again, they had been there for each other. Once again, they were teaching everyone a lesson. A lesson on love, generosity and selflessness; on how human beings should behave towards each other.

Starsky reached out and took the plastic bag in his sturdy hands. He clasped it close to his chest, almost as if he were hugging his partner's body. He lost himself somewhere deep within his mind and a small smile brought a little light to his features. She didn't have to wonder. She knew whom Starsky's fond remembrance was about.

Just then, a booming male voice shook them out of their private musings.

"Starsky!"

The two of them turned about and saw two black men, one fat and one skinny, walking side by side. She immediately recognized them. Those two men had never left Hutch's side a year ago. She seemed to remember that the overweight one was Starsky and Hutch's superior officer. The awesome protectiveness and loyalty those two young men inspired in all those who knew them had puzzled her at first. ICU had filled to bursting with Starsky and Hutch's co-workers and friends from their precinct a year ago. That in itself had spoken volumes about their kind-hearted nature and goodness of character.

Starsky's spirits seemed to lift a bit with his two friends' arrival. When they joined him, he turned to the nurse and offered her a genuine smile that still couldn't hide the deep fear and worry he felt. "Thank you..." he left the sentence unfinished, as if he was waiting for her to say something.

She raised her eyebrows, wondering what was Starsky asking her. And then it dawned on her. "Catherine," she supplied.

"Thank you, Catherine." His look became very intense, as if he was reading her mind, and she blushed and looked down, deeply moved. Even despite all the distress and torment he had to be going through, he never stopped being gentle and thoughtful. For a second, she almost envied Hutch, for being the exclusive recipient of so much passion and fierce love. She envied them both for their luck. But then, she realized all of them were lucky for being granted the honor of being around such unique and extraordinary human beings. She nodded to him, speechless.

Starsky escorted his two friends back to the waiting room. Catherine returned to her obligations with a silent prayer for those two men, who had gone through in their lifetimes far more than a hundred men should be allowed to endure in a thousand lives.

"How is he?" Dobey asked Starsky, as soon as they were in the waiting room.

Starsky flopped into a chair, with the bag on his thighs. "I don't know. Nobody's told me anything so far. But they said it'd be a long wait, so..."

"But how long has he been in there?" Huggy insisted.

Starsky checked his watch. "Over an hour." He leaned his head back against the wall and puffed. "I need some coffee," he said, rising to his feet. "Anyone want to join me?"

Huggy and Dobey shook their heads.

Starsky put the plastic bag on the chair he had just vacated with indescribable gentleness. "Take care of his things for me. I'll be right back," he told them.

Dobey and Huggy noticed the bag with Hutch's stuff for the first time. They looked at each other and Dobey shook his head as he slumped into the chair next to it and placed his hand on the bag, in an endearing protective gesture.

A few moments later, Starsky returned with a lukewarm cup of coffee in his hand. He would have wanted at least two cups, but after calling Huggy and Dobey, he had no change left.

Huggy walked up to him and placed a warm hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Starsky. Our Blondie's a very tough guy. He's faced worse than this and survived."

Starsky looked at him with barely restrained anger. He had reached his emotional limit and he needed an outlet. "C'mon now, Hug. I've heard that song too many times. Any time could be \*the\* time and you know it. We've both survived worse than this, all right, but sometimes the silliest incident could turn out to be..." he held back his angry tirade, realizing Huggy was not to blame and, as always, he was only trying to help. "I..." he swallowed, "I'm sorry. It's not your fault, Hug," he bent his head in shame. "I'm... really sorry."

Huggy squeezed the muscled shoulder. "Don't worry, bro. I understand. And I care too. You know that."

Starsky offered him his infamous crooked smile. "I know you do. That's why you're here. Thanks, Hug," he reached out and patted the thin man's back affectionately. "You know I'm not very good at waiting. Especially when it concerns Hutch."

"You're not good at a lotta things, Starsky. Fortunately for all of us, you're good at a bunch of other things, too," Huggy half-joked.

The two friends looked at each other and smiled in mutual understanding. Starsky returned to his chair and put Hutch's bag on his thighs again. He was clinging to it in more ways than one. This was all he had of Hutch for now, and he needed it as badly as the very air he breathed.

"That billboard was falling on me, you know?" he said out of the blue, with glazed eyes. "But he pushed me out of the way and took the impact instead." The heartsick man bit his lower lip unmercifully. "It could have broken his skull, his neck or his spine... He could have ended up a cripple. But the paramedic said all his extremities responded to stimulation, so there's little worry of spinal damage. I can't believe we've been so lucky! But what if there's brain damage? What if...? God, I can't stand this!! I can't!!"

"And you're blaming yourself for not moving out of the billboard's way, aren't you?" Dobey stated more than asked. He knew how those two minds worked. "I bet you've been thinking that you're not as good as you used to be and all that crap. And what's worse, you believed it."

Starsky smiled sadly, staring at the wall directly in front of him. "Right on target, Cap'n. But Hutch put me out of my misery before we got here." He shook his head in awe. "He's amazing. A billboard had fallen on him, he could be seriously injured, and the only thing he could think about..."

"...was his partner," Dobey finished for him. "That's your strength and your edge in the streets. Hutch saved your life this time, again, the same way you've saved his life hundreds of times by now. Last week, for example, when that Mookie creep was about to blow your partner's head off. Your quick reflexes saved him. So, don't start the *'I'm not as fast as I used to be'*, cause it sucks by now!"

Huggy couldn't help a little snicker. Dobey could be just as vehement as Starsky and Hutch in his defense of them. His bulk and his booming voice could be very 'convincing', especially when he had right on his side. Sometimes he couldn't help but think his nickname would fit Dobey better. Dobey Bear. The thought made him snicker softly again. "I swear, Starsky. If you two weren't there for each other to balance your moods, nobody on this earth could stay sane around ya," he joked.

Starsky turned to him instantly. "Why, thank you very much, Skinny Bear," he deadpanned.

"Anytime, man. Any time," with an exaggerated flourish, Huggy left the waiting room, in search of some coffee for himself.

When his friend left, Starsky began shifting in his chair.

"What's the matter with you now?" Dobey asked.

"My stomach," Starsky made a grimace. "I feel kinda sick."

"It's just tension. I know it's not easy, but try to relax. You'll be of no help to Hutch if you get sick."

"No, I think the coffee upset my digestion," Starsky began rubbing circles across his stomach.

"Your digestion?" Dobey prepared himself to be surprised once again at the quantity of Starsky's food ingestion that morning.

"I had ten hot-dogs for breakfast this morning," Starsky shrugged matter-of-factly.

"TEN hot-dogs!?" the big man's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

"Yeah, right after we left the precinct. With mustard and ketchup."

Dobey looked at Starsky and shook his head in pretended compassion. "One of these days you're going to kill yourself, boy."

"I did it for a good cause, Cap'n," Starsky defended himself, almost pouting.

"And what good cause would that be?" Dobey could see the crack coming and he played along, trying to help the young man to relieve part of the unbearable tension he was going through.

"A bet."

"With your partner?"

Starsky nodded.

"Don't tell me. Hutch bet they would make your oversized stomach explode at last, right?"

Starsky shook his head. "Nope. He bet his mustache."

Dobey jaw fell open. "You mean..."

Starsky nodded dramatically. "Yeah," he looked at Dobey and shrugged with false modesty. "Hutch's mustache was flushed down a toilet a couple hours ago."

Huggy's throaty laughter made them look at the doorway. It was obvious he had arrived in time to hear most of Starsky's story.

"Well, none of us is gonna mourn it, that's for sure," Dobey admitted, rummaging in his pockets. "I guess your heroic deed deserves a couple of Alka-Seltzers."

"No, thanks, Cap'n." Starsky shook his head. "I feel better now."

Dobey looked at him. "Are you sure?"

Nodding, Starsky took a deep breath. Nervousness was beginning to eat him alive again. He blew out all the air in his lungs. "God, I'd give my left arm to know what's happening in there!"

"Yeah, me too," Huggy nodded. "I can't wait to see our newly depilated Blondie. Congratulations, Starsky. And knowing you, I bet you had this planned days ago."

Starsky looked down and shrugged noncommittally. "Well, as Hutch put it: 'I fasted for almost 20 hours, so I could be starved enough this morning.'"

Huggy and Dobey chuckled and Starsky ended up joining them.

"I'm surprised your noisy stomach didn't give you away," Dobey said.

"Yeah, me too. But to get rid of Hutch's mustache, we both reached an agreement." Starsky bent forward and placed his empty cup on the table. His stomach felt tied up in knots over again. And his head... "You know something, Captain? I could use an aspirin right now."

Dobey immediately reached into his pocket.

"Are you waiting for Mr... Hutchinson?" a male voice suddenly said from the doorway.

Starsky and Dobey immediately jumped to their feet and Huggy turned about so abruptly that he startled the doctor.

"Yes, we are. How is he, doc?" Starsky stepped in front the white-coated man, in his typically intimidating pose when threatening a suspect or desperate to get some vital information from them. Realizing what he was doing, he stepped back a little. Just a little.

The doctor looked briefly at Dobey and Huggy and then he stared at Starsky, as if examining him through a microscope. "Are you a relative of his?" he asked. He had apparently dismissed the two black men.

"No, I'm his partner. None of his relatives live in town. So I'm afraid the three of us will have to do." He didn't mean to sound hostile, but doctors' absurd fussiness and their mindless sticking to their stupid rules sometimes tried his patience to its breaking point. This doctor had to be fairly new to the ER, and this hospital; otherwise he would know who they were, or he would have heard of them at least, judging from Catherine's words.

A bit taken aback, the doctor replied in a conciliatory tone. "Excuse me, but you know hospital rules. We are bound to speak to the patient's relatives first, if available."

"We know all about hospital rules. Now please tell me how my partner's doing," the edge of desperation and the barely restrained anger in Starsky's voice seemed to remind the doctor of what had brought him to the waiting room in the first place. He took a deep breath and began reciting Hutch's diagnosis from memory. He reminded Huggy of a poor actor delivering his lines like a parrot, without the slightest intonation or any hint of emotion in his voice.

"Well, considering the circumstances of his accident, I have to say he's been very fortunate. His internal organs are undamaged. His brain stem and his spine are also intact. The electroencephalogram and the CAT scan showed no sign of brain damage. On the other hand, the X-ray indicated he's got six broken ribs, four on his right side and two on the left. Luckily, none of them punctured his lungs. We've applied an elastic dressing on them. We've also fixed and immobilized his dislocated shoulder."

Starsky took a deep breath and released it in a long, relieved sigh. He felt as if he had been teetering on the verge of an abyss and he had been dragged away from it at the very last moment. "He's gonna be all right," he said, almost to himself.

"Well, I didn't say that, exactly," the doctor hurried to amend Starsky's assumption. "There's always the risk of complications. His body has suffered a very severe trauma. There's still the possibility of an internal or even brain hemorrhage. The next 24 hours will be critical. We have him monitored to detect the slightest change in his condition. We'll see how he progresses. He's in a superficial coma."

The word 'coma' almost made Starsky's heart stop. Fear for his partner and anger at this doctor's insensitivity battled inside him like two raging beasts. "Superficial coma? What's that?" he almost hissed through clenched teeth.

"It means the patient's mostly conscious, but disoriented. He knows where he is and what's happened to him, but he's confused and a bit delirious. He kept asking for you and saying that you're the best partner anyone could ever have and that he has to protect you, even from yourself. He's got a brain edema as well, as a result of the blow, but we're treating it already. We've moved him to an observation room. He'll be there for 3 or 4 days, until we make certain he's safe from any complications."

Starsky did his best to still his wildly beating heart. It didn't look good, but, as the doctor had said, it could have been much worse. But he needed to see Hutch and see for himself how he was. Only then he would have peace. "Can I see him?" he asked.

The doctor straightened and assumed his most professional tone of voice, which sounded just as devoid of emotion as his previous speech. "I wouldn't recommend it. We finally managed to calm him down and he's resting now. I don't want my patients to be disturbed while they're being kept under observation."

Starsky hissed like a snake. Huggy and Dobey immediately moved beside him to try and prevent the surging volcano from erupting. But Starsky's explosion, when it came, was far more rational and less violent than they would have expected, although just as dangerous. "One: his name's not 'Patient', but Hutchinson. Ken Hutchinson. If you can remember words like concussion, brain edema, internal hemorrhage, CAT scan and electroencephalogram, but you can't remember the person's name, I strongly doubt your abilities as a doctor. Two: he may be resting right now, and I'm sure he needs peace and quiet, but what I *do* know is that he needs me beside him. Three: what's-his-room-number?"

The doctor's eyes popped open and he moved back a step, as if Starsky had physically hit him. He swallowed audibly and his mouth opened on its own.

"12, second floor" was the weak answer. Incredibly, there was a hint of intonation in his voice this time, and a tiny tremor seemed to accompany the small word.

Starsky tilted his head to one side, a bit amused at the ghost of a reaction he had provoked. "Thank you, *Doctor Stevens*," he said politely, without breaking eye contact, getting his point across. After a few more seconds, he moved as lithely as a panther, and left the waiting room without making the slightest noise.

The doctor blinked, as if coming out of a trance, and he frowned, wondering what had just happened. He met Huggy's amused eyes, and the thin man pointed with his long, slender finger at the plate pinned on his white coat. The doctor looked down at it and his eyes opened wide, as if he had just acknowledged its existence.

Beside them, Dobey smiled wickedly.

Starsky strode down the long corridor, looking for the observation room 12. Naturally, Hutch's room turned out to be the last one. He stopped by the door and took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for what awaited him inside. The closer he was to his partner, the more nervous and uncertain he felt; but a sweet calm also seemed to have settled in his soul. He raised his hand and knocked softly a couple of times. There was no answer. Maybe Hutch hadn't heard him, but he didn't dare knock harder. Or maybe he was dozing, and Starsky didn't want to startle him. Carefully, he opened the door and peeked inside.

Hutch lay slightly raised in a hospital bed. His eyes were closed and his face was serene and tranquil, showing no outward signs of being in pain. Starsky thanked heaven for that. He entered the room and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

A heartbeat later, he found himself next to Hutch's bed, sitting down in the uncomfortable chair beside it. He studied the much loved pale features that looked even paler framed in the white sheets and the white hospital gown. The sheets were tucked halfway up to Hutch's chest; his left arm, with the IV attached to it, lay parallel to his body and his right arm was draped across his belly. Starsky recognized the classic immobilized position for a dislocated shoulder. He could also make out the elastic dressing beneath the gown which protected the broken ribs. Those broken ribs would take at least a whole month to heal. Ribs were slower to knit together than other bones, he knew from bitter experience.

The IV, and the sight and sound of the blinking and beeping monitors made Starsky close his eyes and bite his lower lip. Those sounds were so deeply ingrained in his mind that every time he... Starsky hissed softly. He didn't know what were they for and he didn't really want to know. He just needed Hutch to get well. Every second Hutch was there would remind him of his failure, of his slow reflexes, of his...

*'You had n- no... no time to... react... You... You're s- you're still... the same... Still the same... The bes-- best partner... anyone c-c-could ev-e-eve-...'*

Hutch's breathless words began resounding in his head all of a sudden, louder and louder, deafening him with their passion and sincerity. Gazing at the sleeping face to his heart's content, Starsky fell in love all over again. Hutch's smooth face was just as beautiful as he remembered it. Even more beautiful, if that was possible. Such perfect, angelic features! Not even the grazes and bruises on his left cheekbone and on the left side of his forehead could mar so much perfection. He longed to look at Hutch and fall in love with him every single day for the rest of their lives. He wanted to cherish this man and hold him close to his heart every waking and sleeping moment.

Starsky's hand reached out of its own volition and, tentatively, his fingertips brushed the grazes on Hutch's forehead lightly, afraid of disturbing Hutch's sleep.

*'For me. You got this for me, babe. How will I ever...? I know that we've been injured in the past while protecting each other, but this time... Oh, Hutch! If something happened to you, I...'*

Starsky bent his head in a vain attempt at composing himself. His feelings were too close to the surface and he was drowning in them. He swallowed painfully and with a helpless sigh, raised his head, only to find himself looking into Hutch's open blue eyes. The happiest of smiles surged up from deep inside him and almost broke his face with its intensity.

"Hey," he croaked. His cheeks felt hot and flushed.

Hutch smiled softly back at him. A sweet, peaceful smile that made Starsky's heart flip-flop in his chest.

"Hey yourself," Hutch replied, in their age-old greeting. His eyes opened a little bit more and studied Starsky as if he could see deep inside him. "You okay?" he finally asked.

Starsky let out a sound that was halfway between a laugh and a sob. Even now... "Of course I'm okay. You took care of that, didn't ya?" he affectionately chided. "The question is, how are *you*?"

Hutch made a self-deprecating face. "I feel as if a wall had collapsed on me," he replied in a raspy voice.

Starsky had no choice but to laugh this time. "Well, that's exactly what happened, babe; so it makes sense to me that you feel that way."

"I guess so." Hutch nodded and tried to raise his head. A sharp pain in his ribcage made him desist.

"Want the bed raised?" Starsky immediately read his partner's intention.

"Yes, please," Hutch swallowed painfully.

Starsky stood up, walked to the foot of the bed and slowly raised the head a few inches.

"A little bit more," Hutch asked.

Starsky complied.

"That's okay, thanks."

Starsky returned to Hutch's bedside and sat down on the chair again. He stared at his partner, for once not knowing what to say. Guilt, worry, fear and emotional exhaustion were beginning to take their toll of him. "Wanna go to sleep?" he finally asked.

Hutch shook his head and returned Starsky's stare. He blinked quickly a few times and finally reached out his left hand. Immediately, Starsky took it in his own.

"Are you in pain?" He inched closer and dropped his voice, afraid of hurting Hutch if he raised it too much.

Hutch shook his head again and softly squeezed his partner's strong hand. "We really should stop these crazy stunts, Starsk. We're getting too old for this."

Starsky smiled. "Speak for yourself, Blondie. Thanks to you, I had a chance to feel like Bruce Banner."

Hutch's expressive eyebrows arched in silent question.

"When I saw you under the billboard, I started pumpin' adrenalin and I almost tore my shirt apart while lifting the thing offa ya."

Hutch smiled in genuine amusement. "Lucky me that I woke up the dormant beast inside you."

Starsky smiled sadly then. "I'd rather you hadn't."

"Oh, c'mon, Starsk. You'd have done the same for me. It's survivor's guilt. We've gone through that many times by now. And I'd rather be right here than in your shoes." His face suddenly darkened. "But you could have injured yourself when you lifted the billboard. Why don't you go...?"

"No way, buddy. No one's gonna drag me away from here. I'm all right."

"But, Starsky..." Hutch was practically begging now.

"I said no way and that's the end of it. Now relax, kid."

Hutch sighed, knowing that nothing he said would make his partner change his stubborn mind. "Playing Han Solo to my Luke Skywalker now?" he said.

"Well, you're the blond one, right?" Starsky smiled.

"Yeah, and the Force's not quite with me, otherwise I'd have prevented the billboard from falling on me."

"The Empire struck back on ya big time today, Blintz," Starsky cracked.

Hutch spluttered helplessly and laughed out loud. A searing pain all over his body turned his happy laughter into a moan. "Oh, shit!! Starsk, don't make me laugh like that, please!"

Starsky grimaced in empathic pain and bent forward, trying to envelop Hutch in the warmth of his body, remembering how many times the warmth of Hutch's body had eased the sharper edges of his pain, and turned it into a bearable, dull ache.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You know me. When I'm worried or nervous I tend to crack jokes."

Hutch took a deep, shaky breath and tried to relax. "Yeah, I know. But it's just me, Starsky. There's no need for words between us. Just... stay with me a little while, if you want, okay?" His ice blue eyes looked into his partner's darker ones, reminding him of a lost waif.

Starsky felt as if a knife had just sliced through his heart. How many times as a kid had Hutch needed his parents to stay by his bedside and hold his hand, or just be there, and how many of those times had been satisfied, if any? Why had such an angel been so neglected as a child? Why did children have to suffer in silence? Why did such a world have to exist? He shook his head and bit his lower lip. Hutch was begging him for a little attention, a little pampering. And Starsky cried inside for the child inside that big body that had never been comforted or taken care of the way he deserved, the way any child deserved. The way any human being deserved.

"They'll have to kick me outta here, buddy," he whispered with a lump in his throat. He clasped the big hand more firmly and squeezed it in reassurance.

Hutch's face was illuminated with the joyful innocence of a child who's just been granted his dearest, most cherished dream. He took another deep, shaky breath, and seemed to shudder. "Thank you," he murmured, his voice dripping with contentment.

Starsky felt he was going to die of love and tenderness right then and there. "No, Hutch. Thank *you*," he replied.

Hutch smiled again, closing his eyes.

"Are you falling asleep?" Starsky whispered into his ear a while later, causing Hutch's skin to fill with goosebumps.

The blond head shook slowly. "Just resting." He brought up his right hand and took Starsky's between both of his. "The ER doctor said I was in a superficial coma. If this is what a superficial coma feels like... well, it's not that bad. When it doesn't hurt and I'm not disoriented, that is."

The mention of that jerk of a doctor made Starsky wince. Just the thought of his partner being treated by such an uncaring, unfeeling machine gave him the shivers. Such people should never be allowed to enter the medical profession, and they should be kicked out of it the moment they stopped caring. "You don't look disoriented to me. Maybe you're disoriented all the time, that's why I can't tell the difference," he teased.

"Ha-Ha. Very funny, Gordo," Hutch slapped Starsky's hand softly. "Which reminds me. The girl at the drugstore said it was a tie."

Starsky blinked at the words. "What are you talking about now, Blondie?"

Hutch opened his eyes and looked directly at his partner. "The lady at the drugstore. You told her she'd have to decide which one of us was the more handsome."

"Oh, yeah," Starsky remembered then. "A tie, she said, huh?"

Hutch nodded with a new shudder. He moved his legs in the bed, looking for a more comfortable position. He suddenly felt a bit restless.

"Very diplomatic of her."

"I think she meant it. She said I had improved markedly." He attempted an arrogant look and failed, then let out a dry, self-deprecating laugh. "She should see me now."

Starsky shivered inside. "She did. She's the one who called the ambulance."

"Oh," Hutch was genuinely surprised. "When I get better, we should go back and thank her."

"Yeah," Starsky looked down, battling the surge of searing guilt. He looked up quickly enough, trying to hide his momentary relapse. "I agree with her, ya know? You've improved noticeably." He reached with a trembling finger and softly brushed its tip across Hutch's smooth upper lip. "I missed ya," he confessed in a heartbreaking sudden display of vulnerability.

Hutch quivered at the feather-light touch. *'Oh, Starsky! Your touch is life! Please, don't ever stop touching me!'* he cried out inside. "I never left," he said instead.

Starsky smiled softly. "You know what I mean," his fingertip had become instantly addicted to Hutch's softness. He realized offhand that Hutch's upper lip was damp with perspiration.

Hutch knew what Starsky meant only too well. "Yes, I know," he swallowed with an effort. "Starsk, I..."

"Shhhhh," Starsky's fingertip hushed Hutch's attempted explanation by placing itself on the soft lips. "As you said, there's no need for words between us. I understand."

*'No, you don't. You don't have a clue, Starsky. And if I want to keep your friendship, I'd better make certain you never find out.'* Hutch looked down. He couldn't help but shudder, and a loud hiss accompanied it this time.

Starsky moved his finger away from Hutch's lips as if they burned. "You okay?"

"I'm a bit cold," Hutch confessed.

Frowning, Starsky raised the sheets and blanket and wrapped them cozily about Hutch's torso. Something wasn't quite right. He held back the sudden feeling of foreboding. "Want me to get another blanket?"

"Yes, please," was the hissed answer.

Starsky placed his palm on Hutch's forehead. It was moist, but he could detect no sign of fever. Weird. Very weird. He went to the closet and returned with a warm looking blanket. He lovingly spread it on his partner's form and carefully tucked it around him. It was very soft and it didn't smell stuffy. They must have put it in the closet very recently, a fact which Starsky was glad for. "Better?" he asked.

"A little bit," was the weak answer. Hutch reached out his hand to Starsky, who had the same idea. Hutch's palm was very sweaty and his features had paled somewhat. Starsky bit his lower lip, trying to suppress the increasing feeling of apprehension.

"You've got no fever," he said out loud, more to himself than to his partner.

Hutch winced and clasped Starsky's hand tighter.

"What's wrong?" Starsky asked, really alarmed now.

"I don't know. A dull pain in my belly..." Hutch looked at his partner, his eyes slightly glazed. "I feel strange, Starsk. I'm cold. Cold and..." his legs moved again under the sheets in a clear symptom of restlessness. He tried to turn onto his right side, facing his friend, but the pain in his ribs stopped him.

"Easy, buddy. I'm right here," Starsky placed his hand on Hutch's forehead again. His touch seemed to quiet his partner's helpless agitation for a moment. He inched closer, bending over the huddled form, trying to soothe his beloved with the warmth of his body. Hutch's face and neck were covered with sweat and his hair was beginning to plaster down.

"Don't go, Starsk. Please, don't go," Hutch's eyes were feverish, haunted.

"I'm going nowhere, Hutch. I promise." All of a sudden, a loud beeping coming from one of the monitors made him look up. Something was definitely wrong here. Starsky's heart started beating wildly in his chest, and he suddenly realized his heart was almost synchronized with the loud beeping. He understood then that Hutch was in tachycardia.

Starsky looked down at his friend, already beginning to panic. Hutch was shivering and sweating profusely now, he was as white as a sheet and under the covers his legs wouldn't stop shaking. Hutch was trying to curl himself up, clinging to his partner's hand for dear life.

"I'm so cold, Starsk. I'm so cold!" his teeth were chattering.

Starsky swallowed in despair. Hutch was getting worse with every passing moment. Not thinking twice, he pressed on the call button. "Easy, babe. Easy there!" Starsky babbled, reaching out and rubbing Hutch's arm and back. "I just called the nurses. They'll send a doctor for ya. Take it easy. I'm right here!"

"Starsky, please, help me! I'm so cold, and... and... I'm... Oh, God, what is it? What's happenin' to me?" Hutch's breathing came in short, painful gasps. He seemed to be delirious.

The frantic beeping of the monitor was driving Starsky crazy. He felt helpless to help and comfort Hutch. His best friend was slipping right in front of him and there was nothing he could do. Starsky suddenly found himself opening the door and crying out at the top of his voice. "Somebody call a doctor!! My partner's getting worse!!"

Meanwhile, Hutch had buried his face in the pillow. His ribs hurt like hell in that posture, but he couldn't help the need to curl up in a fetal position. He had never felt so cold. The chill permeated his bones and couldn't be soothed. His teeth couldn't stop chattering. He tore at his IV and his cold, clammy hands reached out desperately, looking for the only comfort his body and soul craved.

"Starsky, Starsky..." he whispered time and again, his weakened voice muffled by the pillow.

Starsky returned to the bed and grasped one flailing hand in one of his own and rubbed Hutch's back with the other, his eyes filling with helpless, terrified tears. He rested his forehead on Hutch's and tried to whisper soothing, calming words to him.

Before he knew, a kind, insistent male voice was urging him to move aside. Instinctively obeying the familiar voice, he moved back, still holding onto the beloved hand. When he looked at the man's face, he froze.

"Dr. Lester," he murmured, his voice filled with awe. Here, before him, was the man who had saved his life a year ago. The man whose hands had patched him up and literally shocked his heart into beating again.

"Hello, David," the newcomer greeted his former patient affectionately. "I heard that you and Ken had decided to honour ER with your presence again, so I decided to come down, in case you needed a little help. Now, if you'll move aside for a moment, I'll try to find out what's wrong with your big fella here."

Dr. Lester's steady and compassionate voice managed to calm Starsky's hysterical state of mind. He could trust this man with Hutch's life. Dr. Lester had demonstrated time and again that he could stay calm and cool in any situation, no matter how desperate it was; and all that without losing his humanity. After what he had encountered today in the form of Dr. Stevens, Starsky felt infinitely grateful there still were men like Bob Lester in the medical profession. People like Dr. Stevens were becoming more and more commonplace lately. Feeling only slightly better, he moved aside and reluctantly let go of Hutch's hand, who moaned in anguish at the loss of physical contact with his only anchor to hope, warmth and love.

"Easy, Ken, easy," Dr. Lester took over and started soothing Hutch's frenzied attempts to reach Starsky again. "I'm Bob Lester, remember me? Your partner's right here with me. Do you see him? He's just one step behind me and he's not going anywhere. Now let me take a look. I have to find out what's going on with you. Try to turn over onto your back for me, all right? I know you're hurting, but you must try, it's the only way you can help me. I'll help you. C'mon now."

It took a few moments, accompanied by Hutch's endless moaning. He had to be in more pain than they realized and Starsky felt like screaming. He would give his life to spare Hutch the agony he was going through.

As soon as Hutch managed to turn onto his back and Dr. Lester saw the condition the patient was in, all drenched in sweat and pale as a sheet, not to mention the heart monitor's frenzied beeping, his face darkened. With unexpected roughness, he threw the covers off Hutch.

Hutch's body looked even worse beneath the sheets and blanket. He was literally bathed in sweat, the hospital gown plastered to his body. With incredibly gentle hands, the doctor undressed Hutch's torso and started palpating it. Hutch moaned out loud, his groaning reminding them all of wound animal. Starsky thought he was going mad right then and there.

Whatever he felt, was all that Dr. Lester needed to know.

"Prepare this man for immediate surgery!" he cried out, looking toward the room's entrance.

Starsky looked in the direction of the door and acknowledged the presence of two familiar faces for the first time. Catherine Pierce and another nurse named Henderson. He remembered her from a few months ago. She had checked on his surgical scars and embarrassed him no end with her flattering words. It wasn't the woman's fault, she had been very sweet and understanding. It was simply that Starsky's image of himself had been altered forever and he couldn't stand looking at his scarred body, to say nothing of others looking at it. He knew very well how he looked now and how he would continue to look.

Dr. Lester's harsh words almost stopped Starsky's heart for the second time in his life. Immediate surgery? What was going on? What was wrong with Hutch? He looked at the blue-eyed man in sheer terror. "What's the matter with him?" he asked the doctor in the weakest voice.

Dr. Lester grabbed Starsky's elbow and gently moved him away from Hutch's bed, leaving room for the nurses. "He's got an internal haemorrhage, David."

Starsky turned white and he buried his face in his hand. "Oh, God. Ohmygod!" he sobbed. "How bad is it?" he looked up at the doctor.

Dr. Lester looked away, trying in vain to avoid the distraught man's eyes. It hurt too much. "It depends on the vein that's ruptured. Pray it's not the mesenteric one." He couldn't lie to Starsky. He deserved to know the truth. Neither of those two men had ever shied away from it. As a matter of fact, knowing the truth had strengthened them both and made them fight against bad news tooth and nail. And they had beaten the odds time and time again. "But it could be," he admitted, looking into Starsky's eyes.

Starsky swayed on his feet. Everything went black around him for a moment. Dr. Lester immediately reached out and steadied him.

"Sit down, David. You're about to collapse," he dragged Starsky to a small chair in the farthest corner of the room and forced him to sit down on it. "Put your head between your legs and breathe deeply," he instructed.

Starsky obeyed and did his best to stop hyperventilating. He would be of no help to Hutch if he panicked. He raised his head and settled imploring eyes on his partner's only hope.

"Doc, that man is my entire life," he wasn't afraid of admitting the truth. Not now, not ever.

"I'll do everything in my power to save him, David. You know I will. But it doesn't look good. I think you should prepare yourself, in case..." his voice trailed off. He couldn't bring himself to say the words.

Starsky looked away, shaking his head, stubbornly refusing to listen to anything else. Hutch *would* survive. There was no choice, for either of them. It didn't matter if Hutch only had one chance in a million. That chance would be his.

The noise of Hutch's bed being pushed out of the room brought him back to reality. Starsky caught a glimpse of a flailing hand desperately reaching out, seeking him. He jumped to his feet and followed the bed into the corridor. He hurried after it until they stopped before an elevator. Starsky took the opportunity to grab the imploring hand between both of his. Hutch's hand was deadly cold and clammy, as if his lifeforce was already slipping away. "Hutch," he whispered, bending over the huddled form. Hutch looked barely conscious.

The still form shuddered and the pale eyelids fluttered open. Hutch's eyes could hardly focus anymore, but Starsky could see his beloved was making an effort to focus on him.

"Starsk..." he murmured in a raspy voice. "I... I..." the glazed eyes filled with helpless tears and Starsky understood Hutch was trying to say goodbye to him. His big blond had never been a fool and he knew these could very well be their last moments together.

"Shhhh, don't say it. Don't-ever-say-it, buddy," Starsky's forefinger settled on the soft lips and caressed them with infinite tenderness. "You're gonna make it. You're gonna make it and I'll be with you every step of the way. You'd better remember that before you ever think of giving up and leaving me alone." His eyes and his voice hardened. "Don't you *ever* dare to leave me alone, do you copy?" he threatened.

Starsky's threat seemed to work and it shook Hutch out of the well of defeat and resignation he had apparently surrendered himself to. He struggled to stay conscious and respond to his partner's vehement words. "I... I'm scared, Starsky. I don't wanna die."

"You're *not* gonna die, Blondie. Believe me. I know it. This isn't your time... nor mine. We're gonna live for a very long time. We'll get old together."

Hutch moaned at the passionate promise, fervently wishing it to be true. But he could recognize a white lie when he saw one. And he had seen it before. He had seen it a couple years ago when he had contracted the plague and Starsky had promised him they would find the cure. His partner had kept his promise on that occasion; but, unfortunately, it didn't depend on Starsky this time. And this time Hutch could *feel* death. He could feel it in his bones, in every cell of his brutally trembling body. He was going to die. He was going to die and he had never been so frightened in his life. He was ashamed of his fear, but he couldn't help it. He didn't want to die, he wanted to stay with Starsky, in any way his beloved friend wanted. Nothing was more important in his world than Starsky's happiness. He wanted to stay alive because it made Starsky happy. If he died, it would be Starsky's end as well. And he could never live with himself knowing he had caused his partner one moment of unhappiness. He swallowed heavily. "I... I'm not... a c-coward, Starsky. You know I'm not. I've- I've always been... ready to die, you know that. In... in the streets... Pr-protecting you... Protecting... others... I've nev- never been... a... c-coward. But I'm terrified now... I d-don't wanna die... Oh, God, I'm so scared!!" His hand grabbed the front of Starsky's shirt, as if holding on to his only chance at staying alive. He was terrified of losing consciousness. If he did, he knew he would never wake up again. He was gasping and panting, the pain more than he could bear, his body asking for him to let go and yield to the peaceful oblivion it craved. But his brain was frantically fighting back, with every bit of strength it had.

Starsky looked up, begging for help with his eyes. Hutch's pain and anguish were resounding deep inside him. His fear was permeating Starsky's very soul. His partner was trapped in a circle of terror and resignation, and Starsky had to get him out of that abyss before it was too late. Hutch had to be convinced he was going to survive, otherwise it would be all too easy for him to give up once his eyes closed in the operating room. "Listen to me, Hutch, and listen to me good," he cradled Hutch's cheek in one hand while still holding his partner's big hand with the other, forcing him to meet his eyes. "You're NOT going to die," he saw a perfect tear rolling down Hutch's cheek and falling on his thumb. "No matter how scared we are. Fear is good. Fear's what has kept us alive in the streets every time we've had to face any danger. This time's no different. Hang on to that fear, partner; it'll keep you alive. Control it, because I'm fighting beside ya. You're not alone. You'll never be." His eyes bored into Hutch's, feverish with passion. "When they're putting you to sleep and you feel the need to close your eyes, don't panic, just think about me. You won't be able to see me, but you'll be able to *feel* me, 'cause I'll be right there with you, keeping you safe. And when you wake up again, you'll see my ugly mug smiling down at ya, holding your hand like this," he looked down at their tightly clasped hands and shook them passionately. "Just like this!"

Hutch looked down briefly at their joined hands. He bit his lower lip, fighting back tears, and unable to restrain himself, he brought Starsky's hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. Something inside him snapped with that action, and he couldn't stop anymore. He kissed the beloved hand time and again, wetting it with his tears. "I love you, Starsk. God, I love you! I love you so much!" he pressed Starsky's hand to his cheek. He was tempted to confess his biggest secret, but what would be the use? If he died on the operating table, he would have placed on Starsky a burden he would never know how to deal with, just like John Blaine had; and if he survived, he would have to face the very situation that had led him to remain silent all those months. No, this was not the time. If he was going to die, it would be better this way, leaving Starsky with the beautiful memory of the closest, most perfect friendship two men could possibly share. He wouldn't soil it with an untimely confession that would plague his partner with doubts and questions about a friendship that was perfect just as it was. His silence would be his final gift to his beloved.

Starsky felt as if a fist had grabbed his heart and squeezed it unmercifully. He clenched his teeth and shut his eyes for a few moments. The hand that cradled Hutch's cheek moved slowly upward, and its fingers slid through the wet strands of hair, massaging the scalp very gently. So many things to say! So many unspoken truths that in the end, came down to one huge secret, one secret love that didn't dare to speak its name. Not even now. *Especially* not now. He couldn't let Hutch face the most dangerous moment of his life with the weight of such an unsettling truth. It would be unfair to him. Besides, if he told him, *when* Hutch got better, they would have to face the consequences of his disturbing truth, the consequences he had feared so much that had forced him to keep silent for over a year.

But Hutch's words... They were the words that any being would be honored and blessed to hear coming from the most honest, upright and decent man on the face of the Earth. And he, David Michael Starsky, was the recipient of this treasure. It was pure and true, and it filled Starsky's heart to bursting. It made his entire soul explode with more love than it could hold. "Oh, baby!" he moaned, his heart breaking into a billion tiny pieces. "I love you too! I love you so much it hurts! God, Hutch, I love you so!" He bent closer and placed a passionately tender kiss on the moist forehead. Something inside him was set free right then and there. Starsky felt as if he could envelope Hutch in a cocoon of love and security, taking both of them to a place where they would always be safe and protected from any harm. His burning feelings took him over and he started kissing Hutch's broad forehead all over. Next, he ventured down the beautiful, perfect nose, and covered it with tiny, loving kisses. Then, he moved up again and softly kissed the teary eyes. He rained dozens of devoted little kisses on them, wanting to take all those tears upon his own soul, not just wipe them away.

He suddenly felt an eerie warmth wrapping itself not only about him, but about Hutch as well. It was sweet and comforting, and it seemed to separate them from the rest of the world. His lips rained one final adoring kiss on the tip of Hutch's nose, and he moved back just one tiny inch. He stared deeply into Hutch's suddenly wide open, alert eyes, and he leaned his forehead on his partner's. "Trust me, Hutch. Believe! Everything's gonna be all right," his voice came out strong and full of conviction.

Hutch felt a heartwarming, tingling sensation spreading all over his body from the moment Starsky had begun kissing him. He had offered his face to his beloved friend like a plant instinctively seeking the warmth of the sun. He felt so safe, so cherished and cared for! He had lived all his life waiting for this one perfect moment in time, existing only for Starsky's kisses, he knew that now. All the times as a child he had silently longed for someone, anyone, to accept him with all his flaws and faults and be his friend; someone to share with all the feelings that waited inside him to be understood one day... All those lonely dreams had come true the day he had met this unique and extraordinary human being named David Starsky. His friend, his soulmate, the love of his life. He could die in peace now, because he had finally found perfection in the arms of his true love. He would never forget the feelings that enveloped his aching body and filled it with the most exquisite, sweet tenderness he had ever experienced. He felt treasured and loved as he had never been before.

He sighed softly and indulged himself in the overwhelming feelings that Starsky's kisses and love had evoked in him. He could feel his beloved's breath blowing on his face, filling his chilled skin with the most pleasurable goosebumps. Ahhh, it was so beautiful! To die so full of love. His body felt surrounded by a cozy bubble of warmth. There was almost no pain now. His Starsky loved him, no matter the form that love had taken for his curly-haired partner. Hutch had never been more humbled and more proud at the same time.

*'This precious being loves me! More than my own father ever did. He touches me, he kisses me, he tells me he loves me, even in public, and he's not ashamed of it. I was honored with his love and trusted with his soul and his feelings. I took care of them the best I could and I loved him with all my heart and soul. How could I ever be so lucky? Why you choose me, partner, I'll never know, but I'll never forget. You've been my sanity, my balance, my companion, my soul brother and so much more! I love you, Starsk. For making me a better person, for accepting me, for opening before me a world of love and fullness as I had never known. I'm a rich man, Starsky, thanks to you. Your smile, your generosity, your selfless love, your caring... Gawd, Starsk, thank you! Thank you for existing and taking the chance of loving me! You validated my life, you made it worthwhile. Thank you for all the things you've given me. Thank you for making my life worth living. I pray I've given you at least half of what you've given me. I pray I've made your life worth living too, and I pray my worthless existence has brought you some happiness. I hope to some extent I have, and I'm so grateful for that! Thank you, my love. Thank you for all the joy and laughter, and for all the sorrows and pain you made bearable. For everything, Starsky. Always and forever, my partner.'*

When he felt Starsky moving slightly back and found himself staring into his deep blue eyes, Hutch felt as if a fire was suddenly burning deep within him. With a start, he realized the fire wasn't only inside him, but around him as well. It was wrapped around them both, keeping them apart from the outside world. He felt strangely disconnected from his surroundings. Only he and Starsky filled that alternate reality. And in this place, anything was possible. Any miracle, any wish could be theirs. He saw that promise burning deep inside those blue depths, and, for the first time, Hutch *believed* he could survive. He believed no matter how small the chance, he could make it. He felt that certainty taking root deep inside him and finding fertile ground to grow. Yes, it could be possible. And if it could be possible, it *would* be possible! If Starsky believed, so would he. They would get their miracle once again.

"I *do* believe, Starsk," he muttered, not realizing he was speaking out loud. He never knew when he opened his mouth. Part of his consciousness seemed to me floating above him, completely detached from this weird reality. He didn't understand anything anymore. All he knew was that one moment he was saying goodbye to his partner, and the next he was absolutely convinced he was going to live.

The warm cocoon that surrounded them, Starsky's strong hand clasping his, the lingering touch of his lips all over his face, the feel of his other hand on his head, stroking and caressing him... He felt as if his every sense had been heightened, and he could feel anything, everything. His eyes opened wide and absorbed his surroundings. He saw Starsky's incredible eyes, full of tears, but burning with a certainty and a passion as he had never seen before. He felt as if Starsky was passing on to him a part of his own soul and entrusting him with it. He felt as if they were experiencing the eeriest mystical communion. And that strange warmth, that warmth that permeated everything... He felt as if they were out of time and space... together. Always together, in that special place only the two of them inhabited.

Hutch reached out his trembling free hand and reverently caressed Starsky's cheek with his fingertips. He could only nod now. His beloved had made the fear go away and filled his heart with hope. He was ready now to face the unknown. He knew Starsky was with him, he could feel his presence imprinted deep within his spirit. He could truly feel his best friend inside him, strong and protective. He smiled softly and, looking down at their joined hands, he took a deep, shaky breath. Starsky followed his gaze and, moving as one, they kissed the back of each other's hand. Then, they met one another's eyes for the last time... for now.

"Close your eyes," Starsky asked, tenderly brushing Hutch's wet fringe.

When Hutch obeyed, Starsky placed his palm gently on his friend's belly. It was like a benediction, as if he was trying to heal Hutch by sheer force of will. "I'm with you, forever. I'll be with you in the operating room, helping you keep the fear at bay. There's nothing to fear, there's just the two of us. It'll be all right. Together, Hutch. Always together," his voice had taken on a hypnotic rhythm and cadence.

Hutch smiled, his entire being comforted. Starsky was with him. He could feel him, he could feel the soothing warmth of his hand on his belly, the soft caress of his breath blowing on his face. He pressed the beloved hand to his cheek one last time, sniffing at its unique smell. His Starsky's scent. He inhaled the scent deep inside, so deep inside that it would accompany him to the operating room or wherever they were taking him. "I believe. It's going to be all right. I love you, Starsky. We're together. Starsk... Starsk..." he kept his eyes closed even as he was pushed into the elevator and the doors closed behind him. He never knew they had been forced to let go of each other's hands and his friend was now several floors away from him. He only knew that he was safe. Starsky was with him. He could feel him, he could feel his heart beating alongside his own. It was beautiful. He still could feel the tingling echo of Starsky's kisses on his skin, the healing touch of his hands on his face and on his belly. That touch was life. Life and love. Nothing could harm them. They were one. One...

He was sleepy. He could feel his consciousness beginning to slip away. Ohhhh, so sleepy! He smiled. He could feel Starsky with him. His overwhelming presence was suddenly wrapped around him, strong and compelling. He was right there with him! Deep within his heart. The two of them, together, as it had always been and it would always be...

"Starsky..." was his last word before succumbing to the effects of the anesthesia.

Starsky watched the orderlies push Hutch's bed into the elevator, at which point he had no choice but to let go of Hutch's hand. Their fingertips brushed past each other and Starsky hissed at the electric current that flowed between them when they parted. His lips formed the words 'I love you' and then, the doors closed after Hutch.

Starsky stood alone in the corridor, frozen still. Unblinkingly staring at the closed elevator doors, not really seeing them. He took a deep, calming breath and turned about. Only part of his brain was actually working, and it was that small part of his brain that acknowledged the presence of Huggy and Dobey - a few feet behind him, and a couple nurses - their faces hauntingly familiar. He wrapped his arms around his chilled body, and walked back to the waiting room. Sitting down on the chair he had vacated a lifetime ago, he draped the bag with Hutch's belongings over his thighs. He stared at the wall in front of him, his eyes glazed over and unfocused.

Dobey and Huggy entered the small room and looked at the prone man, not knowing what to make out of his suddenly withdrawn attitude. Starsky didn't even seem to be there. His body certainly was, but his mind was miles away. It was almost as if he was in a trance. Whatever it was, they didn't dare to disturb him. What they had witnessed between the two men in the corridor had left them both heartbroken. Hutch moaning and whimpering and pitifully asking for his partner in the weakest voice. And Starsky finally catching up with the gurney and reassuring his distraught friend in the tenderest way they had ever seen. The two friends had missed most of their conversation, since it was spoken in whispers. It had nothing to do with them, in any case. That was a private moment between Starsky and Hutch. Judging from what one mournful nurse had

told them, these could very well be their last moments together. But what Starsky had done for his partner defied all description. He had stroked, kissed and... made love to his partner. It was the only way they could describe it. And they felt both unworthy and proud they had been there to witness it. They would never forget this moment between the two men. It had been like the summary of the most extraordinary relationship they had ever encountered. Starsky and Hutch knew the meaning of the word love, and they had changed forever the lives of all those who had ever crossed their path; the two of them being the luckiest.

Dobey flopped down on the chair in front of Starsky, so he could keep an eye on him, and Huggy leaned on the doorframe, watching his curly-haired friend with a combination of worry and awe. The thin man watched Starsky's features like a hawk, as if trying to understand all that had been right in front of him for a very long time now, and that he had mistaken for something else entirely. His two friends' exchange in the corridor finally took the blinders off. How could he have been so blind? How could he miss the signs in his two friends for so long? Starsky and Hutch not only loved each other, they were *in* love with each other! How come he hadn't put two and two together sooner? Neither of them had dated a girl since... well, since way before Starsky's shooting. And after that, the two of them had been so involved in Starsky's recovery that it was understandable that any romancing had to be put aside for quite some time. But the fact was that neither of them had made the effort after that; they seemed to be perfectly content as they were. That was why Huggy hadn't noticed... until now.

The skinny man felt a terrible compassion for his two friends. He could guess why neither of them had dared to make any moves on each other. There was too much at risk. In any case, it didn't matter now. Hutch was undergoing a life and death operation right now, and Huggy couldn't bring himself to think of what would become of Starsky if the worst happened. He strongly doubted Starsky would've survived his partner dying, *before* falling in love with him, let alone now. He cried inside for his two friends and prayed for all he was worth for the Lord to give them a chance at finally finding out the happiness they so deserved.

Starsky appeared to be in an almost catatonic state. Huggy didn't know whether to worry about him or just let him be. And he had seen Hutch in same state. It was as if... as if an invisible thread connected them. Even now. It was spooky. It was scary. But it was good too.

For a second, his eyes met Dobey's, and he knew the older man was thinking along similar lines. "I'll get some coffee. It's gonna be a long wait," he said the words almost as a question, inviting Dobey to accompany him, if he so wanted.

The older man jumped at the chance. "I need some coffee too. Don't go anywhere, Starsky," he feebly cracked.

Starsky never acknowledged his friends' words. He had completely withdrawn from his surroundings and he was somewhere far, far away. But wherever that place was, they felt it wasn't too far away from Hutch.

Once by the coffee machine, Huggy and Dobey looked at each other, neither of them daring to be the first to break the silence. Finally, Dobey cleared his throat.

"Creepy, huh?" he commented, in a surprisingly low voice.

Huggy shook his head to emphasize his point. "You can say that again, Captain," his voice came out just as low as Dobey's.

"I wonder if... maybe he's in some kind of shock," Dobey looked away. "Everything's happening so fast. They hardly had time to say goodbye to each other. It's been one shock after another. The billboard falling on Hutch, the ride in the ambulance, the nerve-racking wait, and now... this. One minute it was just another morning patrol, and the next Hutch's on the verge of..." he shook his head, not daring to say the words. If he said them, he would make it real.

"But they're cops. They're always ready for..." Huggy tried to rationalize the situation.

"Not like this," Dobey interrupted him, already knowing what the younger man was trying to say. "A cop knows they could be dead at any moment. That's one of the lessons you learn as soon as you leave the Academy. The hardest lesson of all. A shooting, an ambush could happen in the blink of an eye and you could be alive one minute and dead the next. But this, to die because of a fallen billboard..."

"...Just like any ordinary human being, right?" Huggy finished Dobey's sentence.

"Knowing there's nothing he could do to protect his partner..." Dobey messed his curly hair with his big paw, the very image of helplessness. "Well, I don't have to explain this to you. You know them too, you know how they feel..." his voice trailed off when he realized the way he had phrased his words. "What they feel..." he stopped again, feeling he was only making it worse. He paused for a few moments, holding his breath, and finally he dared to look at Huggy out of the corner of his eyes, wondering if he should... if Huggy had also seen...

The thin man risked a glance at his two best friends' captain, just as uncertain of saying the words out loud. Dobey was from an older generation, and whether he suspected the true nature of Starsky and Hutch's feelings for each other or not, Huggy didn't know what his reaction would be if he brought the subject out in the open. Huggy decided to compromise and see what happened. "Yeah, after the scene in the corridor... It's been so heartbreaking... Neither of them could survive the other. They... They..."

"They've been in love with each other since the day they were born, for all we know," Dobey decided to put Huggy out of his misery once and for all. "I wonder why the hell didn't they act on their feelings sooner." He bent down to pick up his coffee.

Huggy looked down, trying to hide his embarrassed little smile. He had underestimated the man big time. Dobey had just taught him a lesson. After a few moments, he faced the older man again. "Maybe they never realized it. Those two turkeys always had excellent taste in ladies and they've appreciated and enjoyed them thoroughly. They had no way to know they had fallen in love with each other. When you love a person so much, I guess it's hard to tell when you cross that line from friendship to love. And when they finally opened their eyes... they understood there was just too much at stake."

"And they've been miserable for a very long time now, when happiness was only a heartbeat away. If something happens to Hutch now..."; Dobey looked down and rubbed his face with his free hand. "God, what a waste!"

Huggy took over Dobey's place and punched his coffee order after inserting the coins. He knew very well what Dobey meant. "To die with such a regret... Knowing that true love was beside you all the time and you let it go for fear of losing that person..."

Dobey looked at Huggy with newfound respect. This man was pretty wise for someone his age. "When you're my age, you learn to live and let live. You learn what really matters and what doesn't. What's really important in life and when to stop caring about what people say, conventions and all that crap. It's your life, and no one knows what's better for you but yourself. We only have this life to live, and it's a damn short life. We'd better make the most of it, because one day, sooner than we think, we'll be old and there'll be no turning back. I found my Edith and acquired the job that really filled my life." He looked in the waiting room's direction. "They found each other and yet..." Dobey closed his eyes and shook his head in dejection.

Huggy nodded in total agreement.

"Life's not fair," Dobey went on. "In many aspects. It's our duty to make of this world a better place to live, not only for ourselves, but for all those around us. It's our responsibility to make life easier to those who will follow us. We should leave behind a better world than the one we found. If Hutch makes it... God, I pray he does!, I won't interfere in their relationship, whatever turn it takes. I'll protect them to the best of my ability and I'll make certain the department treats them fairly, should they decide not to hide what they feel for each other. Times change, but we must help those changes along when the change's beneficial."

Huggy stared at Dobey with his mouth hanging open. He felt as if he was seeing the man for the very first time. After all those years, he was finding hidden depths in his two friends' boss, and his respect for the older man took a giant step.

Dobey noticed the way Huggy was looking at him and, amazingly enough, he felt terribly self-conscious. He took a small sip of his coffee, trying to cover his embarrassment. "I'll get off my soapbox now," he said, shrugging nonchalantly.

"You don't have to. I'm climbing up there with you. I'm prejudiced against very few things and I'll give them all my support too. They deserve all the happiness in the world. Life hasn't been particularly lenient with them, especially lately. But they sure hit the jackpot the day they met! Lucky dudes!" Huggy shook his head, affectionately.

Dobey took another sip of his coffee and nodded emphatically. He couldn't possibly agree more with those words. "Let's go back in there and see how Starsky's doing," he said.

Huggy looked in the waiting room's direction with something akin to apprehension. "What's happening in there is really weird. It feels as if he wasn't here. As if he was somewhere else... with Hutch. Holding on with him, somehow."

"He seems to be in a trance, all right," Dobey nodded. "He could be in some kind of shock, but I don't dare to snap him out of it. It could be important. We'll have to wait and see," he looked away, suddenly lost in thought. "They've always been able to communicate with each other in a way that nobody could explain. This is very strange, but I don't think we should disturb him... just in case."

"Yeah, every time we've had to wait for news about Hutch, he was practically climbing the walls. For once he's behaving himself, we'd better not distract him."

Dobey rewarded the thin man's attempt at levity with a little smile. He took a deep breath and followed Huggy back to the waiting room.

Starsky didn't appear to have moved since they left. He was sitting with Hutch's belongings draped across his thighs, staring ahead, blinking from time to time, but never acknowledging his surroundings.

Huggy and Dobey entered the waiting room and after checking on Starsky, they shared a knowing look, nodding to each other in mutual agreement. They wouldn't disturb Starsky's concentration or whatever it was, but they would keep a close eye on him, in case his demeanor was something else entirely.

Minutes passed, and Starsky remained the same. Huggy and Dobey became increasingly edgy and spooked when minutes turned into one hour... and then two. They shared more and more worried glances, but strangely, neither of them dared to shake the curly haired man out of his intense state. Every time one of them thought he couldn't stand it anymore and he was going to do something about Starsky's behavior, something held him back. Starsky chose that moment to blink or move slightly, or cross or uncross his legs... It was the weirdest thing. He was there, but he wasn't.

They took turns whenever they wanted to get some coffee or go to the john and they talked in whispers, not really knowing why they did so. Something compelled them not to raise their voices for fear of breaking the strange spell that seemed to have been cast on him.

When the nerve-racking wait was about to reach its third endless hour, Starsky suddenly shuddered. It wasn't a brusque movement, not by a long shot, but after three hours of sharing the room with a living statue, it was like a gunshot to the two jumpy men. They looked at Starsky with a lump in their throats, but he didn't move again. After a few seconds of watching him closely, they simply shrugged and looked at each other, dismissing the small 'incident'. But then, Starsky shuddered again, more strongly. Dobey and Huggy looked at him again, suddenly alert. Starsky had paled visibly.

"Starsky, you okay, man?" Huggy dared to raise his voice, just a little bit.

Starsky didn't respond. He seemed to be completely focused on some alternate reality that neither Huggy or Dobey could see. The bag with Hutch's clothes and belongings slipped from his inert grasp.

The two black men straightened up, truly alarmed now. Something was definitely wrong here. Not that it wasn't before, but whatever was happening right now, it made their skin crawl.

Starsky stood up then. It looked as if some strange force had grabbed him and pulled him to his feet. He remained standing for a few moments, before staggering to the door. He looked like a puppet whose strings were being pulled by a drunk puppeteer. He stopped there and turned to Huggy and Dobey, who were looking at him with undisguised fear. He looked at them, *really* looked at them for a second, he opened his mouth and slurred something like "Houch." Then, he rolled his eyes and collapsed.

"Starsky!!" Huggy and Dobey cried out in unison, jumping out of their seats.

The two men knelt down by their fallen friend and turned him onto his back. They checked for his pulse and heartbeat. Huggy gently opened one eyelid, but he couldn't tell what was wrong with Starsky.

"I can't feel his pulse! Can you?" Dobey's voice was frantic.

Huggy shook his head, still searching for the beat of life on Starsky's wrist.

Enough was enough. Dobey exploded. "Go find a nurse or a doctor!! Hurry!!!"

Huggy stood up as if he had springs in his feet and burst out of the room.

Dobey made one last attempt at finding Starsky's pulse on his neck. "Come on, son," he begged. "It's hard enough to be worried sick about your partner for you to join the party now." He bit his lower lip in sheer helplessness. "Please, Dave!"

Starsky suddenly found himself floating. It was peaceful here. No worries, no problems. Just... utter peace. And he knew this place, he realized all of a sudden. He had been there before. Once. What was he doing back there now?

But this time was different. This time he wasn't alone. There was someone else here. A familiar presence was coming closer, and his senses immediately recognized it. It wasn't just a familiar presence at all! It was the most beloved presence, the other half of his soul.

'Hutch?' he softly called.

'Starsk?' came the surprised and confused reply.

They surged forward and they met in ecstatic reunion, until Starsky felt they were as close as they could be.

'What's going on?' Hutch asked, when they calmed down a little.

'I dunno. I was in the waiting room with Huggy and Dobey, and now... I'm here, wherever here is.' Starsky looked around him, but he could make out no distinctive shapes or colours around them. He couldn't 'see' Hutch either. He could feel his warm, infinitely loving presence wrapped around him, but there was nothing even remotely solid about him. 'And as far as I know, you're in the operating room right now. What happened?'

Puzzlement came out of Hutch in waves. 'I don't know. I was with you in the corridor and... and you made the fear go away and then I... I was very sleepy... and now I'm here, with you,' he explained to the best of his ability.

Starsky looked around him once again, trying to see something, anything. But then, he felt sudden, overwhelming terror in his partner, and he quickly turned to 'face' Hutch.

*'Am I dead?'* the blond asked, with a faint tremor in his 'voice.'

Starsky's heart skipped a beat, but he quickly hurried to reassure his terrified partner. *'I doubt it. Unless I'm dead too,'* he tried to sound confident and only half succeeded.

*'I- I can't see you,'* came Hutch's weak voice.

*'I can't see you, either. And I can't touch you. But I can feel you. And it's beautiful,'* there was wonder in his voice.

Hutch smiled. *'Yes, it is. Wherever we are, it's not a bad place to be. I feel peace here, and I haven't...'* Hutch's voice trailed off, but still, Starsky knew what he had been about to say.

*'You haven't been at peace?'* he finished Hutch's thought. An infinite feeling of sadness, failure and regret swept him away. *'Why Hutch? Because of me? Have I done something...?'*

*'No, no, Starsk!!'* Hutch immediately reassured him. *'It's not your fault, but mine. I am at fault. I should never allow myself...'*

*'What?'* Starsky was desperate to know what was making Hutch so unhappy. He had caught a glimpse at something that his partner was hiding. A huge, painful secret that had been slowly poisoning him from deep within for a very long time now. He couldn't possibly imagine what was that secret about. Hutch had immediately wrapped himself around it and frantically protected it from Starsky's eyes. But Starsky would *never* spy on Hutch's secrets, knowing Hutch didn't want him to know. He only knew that Hutch was suffering. He had in fact been suffering for over a year now. And he felt that secret had been the reason for their gradual drifting apart, and their slowly developing conflict.

But Starsky knew only too well that he had been as responsible as Hutch for that conflict. He had instinctively kept Hutch away from him. Rosey Malone, Emily Harrison, Meredith... Jeeezus Christ, he had been blind!! He had just opened his eyes to the blatant truth! He had shut his partner out, refused Hutch's help when he had been hurting and stayed away from him when he had been forced to take a new partner. He had clung to Meredith as his only hope of... of what? To be a cop without Hutch? What a joke! What a crime! He had allowed their partnership to be violated by a stranger. He had been teamed up with Meredith against his will, so it hadn't been his fault... at first. But he had *wanted* Meredith as a partner later. He had accepted her wholeheartedly. He had called her 'partner' in front of Hutch at least twice. He had disdained and belittled Hutch's help, even though the other man had jeopardized his health to save both their lives. He had even joked about Hutch's shooting. *He* had committed the ultimate sin against the sanctity of their partnership.

He understood now the reasons that had led him to those unforgivable actions. But those reasons didn't exonerate him. Not in the least. The fact was that he had done it. He had meant each and every one of those words and actions. Why? WHY?! It was plain to see that Hutch's behavior those last few months had goaded his own. The classic action-reaction principle. But it still was unforgivable. If Hutch had committed any of those crimes, would he have been so forgiving? The answer unsettled him.

Who had been the first to distance himself from the other didn't matter. The unbearable strain on their idyllic, perfect partnership had uncovered his dark and self-destructive side. The masochistic streak to destroy perfection when you feel something or someone has already soiled it, or *you* have allowed it to be soiled.

What they had was so precious! It had been a gift, a miracle, a treasure to protect and cherish. And they had committed the worst sin. They had taken it for granted, convinced that nothing and no one could ever come between them, so perfect was it. And they were right. Nothing and no one could come between them...

nothing and no one but themselves. They had settled down comfortably, in the belief that they were indestructible. And they had almost lost each other forever.

He didn't know what Hutch's problem could be, but he *did* know what *his* problem was, what had almost destroyed his relationship with Hutch. And he had just discovered that his problem dated back to long before he originally thought. The symptoms had been there for a very long time and they had slowly gathered momentum until... until Kira.

Curiously, it was after opening his eyes to the truth and finally acknowledging to himself that he was in love with Hutch, that things returned to normal between them. Truth had brought with it a certain peace. The peace of knowing at last what was 'wrong' with him, and being able to give it a name. But he felt unworthy of Hutch's love now. He felt ugly and dirty. His impulsiveness had led him to do rash, cruel and dishonorable things, soiling a friendship that he was certain very few beings since the dawn of time had been honored with.

And yet, despite everything, Hutch had stuck with him. Why? Because he needed Starsky as much as Starsky needed him? Because their friendship was worth this much to him? Was their friendship above his dignity, above his feelings of self-respect? Did Hutch truly care THAT much? Starsky only had to remember the way Hutch had taken care of him, the way he had given up his job and his life for him, the way he had *loved* him after Gunther to know the answer.

Starsky moaned inwardly. Such devotion and generosity, such selfless love and dedication deserved everything Starsky had to give and more. So much more!

Starsky had never felt so much pain. Not even Gunther's bullets and all the physical and emotional agony he had endured afterwards, hurt as much as the knowledge of how much pain he had caused Hutch, how much shit his partner had to put up with. He had mistreated his partner just as much as Hutch's family had. He had taken him for granted and lashed out at him when Hutch started falling short of his expectations and antagonizing him, when in fact, he was presenting all the symptoms of a burned out cop crying out for help. He had mistreated him in both words and actions, as if he had somehow felt that no matter how cruelly he behaved, Hutch would still remain at his side the next day.

There was so much self-hatred inside him, that Starsky doubted he would ever be able to live with himself. He understood now that he had been lost at the time. He hadn't really known what he was doing or why. He had done things unknowingly, completely unaware of the consequences. And if he had somehow felt he was doing wrong, then he missed the implications. He had been deep in his own world of misunderstandings and confusion, in a downward spiral of frenetic, brutal cases and emotional turmoil. The first victim of his behavior was himself, he knew that now. But it *still* was unforgivable.

If only he had realized the real motive sooner, how much pain they would have been spared! But the society they lived in didn't make it easy for people to accept uncomfortable, politically incorrect truths. And two men loving each other was a serious no-no. That was what they had been taught from the cradle. Fortunately, over the years they had seen the real world, and they had been able to see past those archaic, unfair conventions and attitudes. But the fear remained. Fear of being mocked at, fear of losing their badges, fear of losing their credibility and reputation just because they had happened to fall in love. How could love, the most precious gift on Earth, be scorned and belittled, only because two people who were of the same gender felt it?

Besides, he had always loved the ladies. Since he could remember, he had always appreciated, and enjoyed loving, a beautiful female body. How could he possibly acknowledge overnight the fact that his sexual orientation had shifted? How could he possibly know *that* was the reason? He had had no points of reference to lead him to that conclusion. It was understandable it had taken him months to finally open his eyes. Sometimes, it's easier to see what's a few steps away from you than what's staring at you right in your face.

That was the way things had developed, and he couldn't turn back time. He would give his life for things to have happened differently, but there was nothing he could do.

In any case, he was at a dead end. His conflict had dragged Hutch along with him. His partner had suffered its consequences far more than Starsky had. And Starsky felt that it didn't matter what he did, he was still trapped. They had survived Kira, yes. Their personal and professional relationship had survived. Or had it? Had they really sorted out their problems, or had they merely been postponed until the next time a catalyst presented itself?

He had no answers. To anything. He just knew that no matter what he did, his relationship with Hutch was doomed, because secrets tended to backfire when least expected.

Whatever happened, Hutch was the only thing that mattered. If he was right and they were doomed, he would make certain that Hutch survived as unscathed as he could manage. Their lives were so interwoven with each other that there was no way their breakup wouldn't affect both of them. But Starsky would do everything in his power to make it easier for his best friend when the time came.

Still, there was something he could do for Hutch now. He could help him with his problem. Hutch always had this fastidious tendency to make a mountain out of a molehill. His problem *couldn't* be as hopeless as he thought. Certainly, it *couldn't* be as hopeless as Starsky's. He would help his beloved. He owed it to him a million times over. *'You know you can tell me anything, Hutch. We'll sort it out together. As we always have.'*

He felt Hutch making a sad, ironical gesture.

*'Anything but this, Starsk. I can't tell you this. If I did... everything would change forever between us. You'd hate me, you'd leave me!'*

Starsky's heart ached at the infinite pain and fear in Hutch's voice. *'I'd never leave you, Hutch. You're my life, don't you know that? I could never hate you. You're my friend. The best friend anyone could ever have. There's no secret you can't tell me. There's nothing about you I could ever find offensive or wrong. We've seen each other at our best and at our worst, and our love for each other only grew stronger. That's what's so special about us. We've always been able to understand each other's faults and accept them. Truth is always beautiful. Give it a chance now, buddy. Trust me with it. I swear I'll be worthy of your trust!'*

Hutch burst out crying then. *'You've always been, Starsk! Always! I'm the one who's unworthy. Unworthy of your trust and your love. I've betrayed them. I've betrayed everything we've meant to each other. I've crossed the line and I've gone too far. And I can't stand it anymore! I'm tired of carrying this burden that's rotting inside me. There's no hope for me. It won't go away and it'll destroy us. And I don't want to hurt you. I hurt you too much already. You're not to blame for my... It'd be unfair of me to put you through that.'*

Hutch was shutting him off, Starsky could feel it. Gently, but he was doing it nonetheless. And that scared him. It scared him because it was the same mistake he had made. He had to convince Hutch that keeping him away wouldn't solve anything. It would only hurt them both. And they had hurt enough already.

Offhand, he realized what an hypocrite he was. There he was, trying to persuade Hutch to tell him the secret that was hurting him so much, when he was keeping a secret that would make all the secrets in the world pale by comparison. *'Hutch, I want to help you. Please, don't shut me off. I've done that in the past and that's a terrible mistake I don't want you to make. I learned my lesson, believe me. I don't want to lose you. Since the day we met, we've always been honest with each other. We always knew how to make this work.'* He looked away, his heart filling with infinite remorse and self-contempt. *'Somewhere along the line, I forgot. I... I lost myself and I hurt you. I know I hurt you more than I'll ever be able to make up for. But don't do this to yourself. Not for me, but for yourself, buddy. We both know that's not the way. Whatever it is, we'll handle it together. I promise you!'*

But Hutch was lost in a terrifying world of denial and hopelessness. *'I can't, Starsk. If I told you, you'd have to carry the weight of my secret too. And that's the reason why I never told you. I can't place that burden on you. I won't! I don't want to hurt you any more. I don't want you to change your opinion of me. I don't want you to think that after so many years, you didn't know me after all. Just like...'* He quickly shut up, knowing he had been about to give himself away. *'I'm tired, I'm so tired of living like this! What we had was so*

*beautiful before I soiled it with... I just want to rest. I want to let go and stop this endless fight with myself I can't win. I'll lose you anyway, sooner or later. I know I will!*

*'No, no, Hutch!'* Starsky instinctively knew Hutch was talking about giving up, and somehow, he knew what Hutch's surrender would entail.

Hutch was his very reason for living, the reason why he woke up every morning with a hopeful smile on his face. Joyful of another day basking in the golden glow of Hutch's aura, another day of revelling in the sweetness of his smile and the sound of his occasional laughter. Just the thought of spending another day in his company, sitting together in the Torino, feeling the warmth emanating from Hutch's body and touching heaven every time those big hands finally gave their greatest gift... ahhhh, just the thought of spending yet another day with Hutch made his heart sing. Hutch was his light. Without him, he would dwindle away and die like a candle in the wind.

*'There's nothing I can do, Starsky. I have no strength left to fight. I can't go on like this. I'm so tired. I just want to...'*

*'Listen, Hutch. You're not going to give up on me!'* Starsky saw red. He could see himself reflected in Hutch's dilemma, whatever it was. He saw the futility of his own efforts to fight the impossible. But then, a seething anger seized him in its grasp. It wasn't fair for them to end like this. They deserved more. Life owed it to them! *'We didn't survive Gunther for you to give up now.'* He plucked up his courage and plunged ahead. *'Do you think I don't know how you feel? Do you think I don't know what's like to feel unworthy? To know that I soiled the most beautiful relationship in my world and there's nothing I can do to change it back?'* He made a supreme effort at composing himself, knowing that beating himself would lead him nowhere. Hutch needed answers, needed something solid to hold on. And it was his duty to give it to him, especially after all the things that his past behavior had taken away from him, from them. *'Whatever happened between us before Gunther taught us a lesson, buddy. A lesson we'd better remember forever. What we have is precious, and I won't let us destroy it or allow it to be wasted. What we have is worth fighting for, Hutch. Our love is worth dying for, but not like this. You're the bravest man I've ever met, partner. Fight! Fight for us!! You won't regret your decision. I'll make sure you never do! Just... please, don't do this to us!'*

Starsky felt something stirring in Hutch then. His instinct for self-preservation took over with a vengeance. *'Yes, yes, Hutch! That's the way! No matter how dark you think things are. They aren't. Life's a gift to treasure. And I treasure you above all things. I promise I won't allow my own problems and frustrations to get in the way. I know how easily everything could be taken away from me, from us. I'll settle for anything you're ready to give. If you think I'm pushing you in some way...'*

*'No, Starsk! It's nothing you have done. It's me! It's my fear. Fear of your finding out...'*

*'Hutch, you don't have to tell me. If you think it's better for me not to know something about you, that's fine with me. Everybody's entitled to their own privacy.'*

*'We've never kept any secrets from each other,'* Hutch almost whimpered, mourning the loss of the absolute trust they had always shared. Granted, it was a loss that had taken place long before this moment, but it was now when it saw the light.

Starsky smiled his infamous crooked smile. *'There's a first time for everything, Blondie. For all of us.'* He couldn't help a wave of sadness and infinite regret to escape him at his words. Words and feelings that Hutch's radar didn't miss.

*'Why so much regret, Starsk? Are you keeping something from me, too?'*

His partner's silence was answer enough. Both men observed a sorrowful, heartfelt silence for the loss of the most precious thing that had ever existed between them.

'Who knows? Maybe something good will come out of this, one day. You never know.' Starsky's eternal optimism sounded a bit forced, but Hutch appreciated the gesture. All in all, Starsky was right. It didn't have to be something bad necessarily. Secrets needed time. If they felt the other wasn't ready to know yet, they were most probably right. Nobody knew them better than each other. It was better this way. Maybe one day they would be ready to accept the truths they were holding back today. They just needed to control their true feelings for one another better. It had become increasingly difficult as time went by and their emotional pain and frustration grew; but after this close call, they swore to themselves they would renew their efforts. One day would come when they would be able to talk about it and move on, still together.

Hopefully.

But there still was something else to say. The most important thing. Something that should have been spoken out loud long ago.

'Forgive me!' they implored each other as one.

Their hearts broke at the sound of their infinitely repentant and remorseful words. They knew that no words or actions would ever make up for all the pain and unfairness they had inflicted upon each other before and with Kira, but the pain beyond belief, the bitter heartache that would accompany them forever, would be the eternal reminder of their failure. Nothing would be able to soothe the guilt of the sins they had committed against each other.

Nothing... but love.

In their eyes, they still were each other's hero, each other's protector and savior. As incredible as it may seem, everything still was pure and beautiful inside them. As pure and beautiful as the first day. It surprised them no end. After all they had gone through, after everything they had seen, experienced and laid on each other, they still could see each other with the honest, clean, adoring eyes of a child.

They felt like crying at the awesome beauty around and inside them. Their unblemished love for each other had cleansed them both. Also, they saw reflected in each other's hearts the same pain and regret. The same feeling of failure to protect their most cherished treasure. But they also saw that their failure had been born out of the secret they were terrified to reveal to the other. They hadn't failed because of their negligence or carelessness, but because of their instinctive fear of something they could feel growing inside them, that they were certain would destroy them, if found out.

And along with that realization, something even more precious blossomed inside them again. Hope. In all its overwhelming intensity, in all its blinding light, in all its blessed stubbornness. They acknowledged it inside them again, true and pure. They had restored hope to each other, just when they thought they had surrendered themselves for good to the down-to-earth world of brutal pragmatism they lived in, where wishful thinking could only be rewarded with bitter disappointment. They saw the light shining inside each other again. The sweet hope of a future where maybe... someday, somehow, everything would be understood and accepted.

It was enough; more than enough! Everything was as it had been in the past, except for that secret that all of a sudden, didn't seem so important. Yes, there was something they were hiding from each other. So what? Their love for one another remained the same. All-encompassing, untouched, neverending. Those secrets only strengthened their respect and their fierce instinct for protection for each other's privacy. Even against themselves. They knew right then and there that there was nothing to fear. They had found a way around this problem too. As always, their inbred understanding of each other and the harmony they had shared since the moment they had first met, had reasserted itself once again.

Never before had they felt so much elation and joy. They knew now they could survive *anything* life threw their way. They had passed their hardest test and their bond was stronger than ever. They revelled in that certainty and cradled it to their breasts for all they were worth.

How could they be so lucky? How could two people be so *perfect* for each other? It had to be their destiny. Their love had to be written in the stars. There couldn't be any other explanation.

*'Well, you aren't Star Sky for nothing, are you?'* Hutch joked.

Starsky ouches exaggeratedly. *'Oh, shit, Hutch! That was terrible!'* he complained.

*'Aw, gimme a break, will ya? I'm supposedly unconscious!'* the blond replied, with the happiest smile.

Starsky answered then with the sweetest, most loving smile. *'Will ya be okay, Blintz?'* he gently asked, with a little trepidation in his voice.

Hutch smiled back at his partner, knowing what Starsky was *really* asking him. *'Yeah, Starsk, I'll be okay. Don't be afraid. Everything's gonna be all right,'* he reassured, with complete certainty.

They pressed against each other passionately, somehow feeling that their time together in this strange realm was coming to an end.

*'Thank you, Starsky. Thank you for everything. I...'*

*'Shhhhh,'* the dark-haired man silenced him softly. *'I'm the one who's grateful, Hutch. Grateful for still keeping your friendship, even after...'*

*'No, Starsk. Let's not dwell on our past failures. We lost our way for a little while, but we learned our lesson. All that's forgotten now. We didn't mean to hurt each other. We were so confused and burned out, each in his own way, that we couldn't prevent it from happening. I know that you never meant to hurt me, and I swear by our friendship that I never wanted to hurt you. Not intentionally. But sometimes, even though you don't want to hurt a person, you do it anyway. We just couldn't help it. Things had gone crazy everywhere, even inside us. That's all we need to know. But we've survived this and even if things are different between us now, they're just as strong. Stronger, even. We survived, Gordo. And I know now that nothing will ever keep us apart. Not even ourselves. I'm happy, Starsky. I'm not afraid anymore. Thank you, partner. For everything. For sticking with me despite everything, for showing me the way and not giving up on me. Thank you for loving me so much!'*

Something then tugged softly at Hutch's presence. And although they were clinging to each other for dear life, Hutch's essence began slipping away from Starsky's grasp nonetheless.

Knowing there was nothing they could do, Starsky and Hutch didn't fight back. There was nothing to be afraid of. They knew everything was going to be all right. Whatever force had dragged them here, it had gotten what it wanted from them. They had sorted out their pending issues and they were ready now to face the future, *their* future, whatever it brought. Hutch had been reassured that he was loved and accepted and that no matter what, they would face anything, together. His resolve had been strengthened and he was ready to carry the burden of his secret for the rest of his life, if he had to. Starsky would keep on loving him, even knowing there was something that Hutch couldn't share with him. Somehow, knowing that Starsky was keeping a similar secret from him had balanced their situation. But even if Starsky didn't have a secret, it wouldn't matter. Nothing could touch them. Not now, not ever.

They couldn't believe the extent of their feelings for each other. It was so deeply ingrained in them, that the only perspective they could place on their existences was the love they had for each other. Their love was what defined them both as individuals, as sentient beings. Starsky was Starsky because he loved Hutch, and Hutch was who he was because he loved Starsky.

They held on to one another one last, passionate time, before slowly relinquishing their grip. Mourning the loss of their union, they contented themselves with the sweet promise of a quick reunion in the real world.

One last, longing look at the darkness that suddenly surrounded them was the last thing they knew before Starsky opened his eyes to the blurry sight of a face bending over him. When he was able to focus, he recognized the features of the paramedic who had treated Hutch in the ambulance.

"He's coming around," a familiar voice said, in the background.

Starsky blinked a few times and tried to sit up. Looking around him, he realized he was lying on the carpeted floor of the waiting room and that Huggy and Dobey were bending over him, their features contorted with fear and worry. "Wha-- what happened?" he managed to blurt out.

"That's what we'd like to know," was Dobey's relieved answer from behind the doctor's back.

"You collapsed, Mr. Starsky," the paramedic provided calmly. "Let me help you up," he grabbed Starsky's right arm and gently pulled him to his feet.

Starsky cooperated to the best of his ability as he was helped to a chair.

"How're you feeling now?" the paramedic asked.

"Fine. I feel just fine," Starsky answered, looking at the people in the waiting room in confusion. He felt quite disoriented. He had been sitting on a chair one moment, the next moment waking up to a bunch of shocked faces gathered around him. Everything felt very unreal. To him, no time at all had elapsed; and yet, he had evidently missed something between one blink of an eye and the next.

"I can see you are, but let me check you out first. Please, open our shirt."

Starsky saw the stethoscope dangling from the paramedic's neck, and he felt a small shiver running up and down his spine when he remembered that same stethoscope had been pressed to Hutch's chest a few hours before, in the ambulance.

Feeling suddenly very self-conscious, Starsky shyly unbuttoned the two top buttons of his shirt and held it open just enough for the paramedic to give him a quick check. The man took out the also familiar flashlight from his pocket and shined it into Starsky's eyes while he held the lower eyelids open. Apparently satisfied with the result, he turned the flashlight off and put it back in his pocket.

"Roll up one sleeve, please. I'm going to check your blood pressure."

Rolling his eyes and knowing better than to argue, Starsky rolled up his right sleeve. He hated to have his blood pressure checked. The increasing pressure in his arm made him wince every single time. It was a very unpleasant discomfort.

"All right," the paramedic pronounced, in a very unprofessional diagnosis, unwrapping the band from Starsky's upper arm.

"Your opinion, doc?" Starsky calmly asked, already knowing the answer.

"You're fine, as you said. Quite probably, all the accumulated physical and emotional tension took its toll of you." His face saddened. "I already heard about your friend going into surgery. I'm very sorry." The man seemed terribly moved.

Starsky smiled softly and patted the paramedic's shoulder. "Thank you for caring, but don't worry. My partner's going to make it. Everything's gonna be all right."

The paramedic smiled at Starsky's unexpected high spirits and nodded, wishing for all he was worth the young man was right. "I hope so." He stood up. "Now, you should eat something to raise your blood pressure. A steak with mashed potatoes, for exa..."

Starsky shook his head stubbornly.

"I'm staying here until I hear about my partner."

The paramedic made a face and looked away with a long-suffering look. He was beginning to experience firsthand the effects of "the miracle partners" on Memorial Hospital's medical staff. Although, if only for the privilege of witnessing from Row One their healing and soothing effects on all those close to them when the worst was over, they were worth their sometimes exasperating behavior. "In that case, what about some coffee and a candy bar?" he compromised.

"My pleasure!" was Huggy's answer, as he quickly left the waiting-room.

Starsky smiled from ear to ear, like an impenitent child who finally got his way. "See? There's nothing to worry about. I'm just fine!"

"The hell you are, Starsky!" Dobey's booming voice startled them all. "Neither Huggy nor I could find your pulse! You weren't breathing and you scared the wits out of us!"

Unflappable, Starsky bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "But I have a pulse now and I'm breathing again, so please save all that creepy stuff for The Twilight Zone, Cap'n."

Dobey looked away and bit his lower lip, not knowing what prevented him from banging his obstinate detective's head against the nearest wall.

"When I got here your breathing was shallow, but you recovered almost immediately," the paramedic butted in. "Quite probably, your friends panicked and they were unable to find your pulse. It's normal under the circumstances. Now just try to relax and eat something as soon as you can."

"You got it!" Starsky cheerfully promised.

The paramedic smiled, not bothering to hide his liking for that big-hearted and incredibly charismatic man. "All right. And my best wishes for your friend's recovery. Hutch, right?"

"Yeah," Starsky nodded. "Thank you, doc."

The paramedic nodded back. From what he had heard, Starsky's partner had slim chances of surviving the operation. But he didn't know why, Starsky's absolute faith in his friend's possibility for recovery practically convinced him that Hutch was going to make it. He prayed that the two younger men get their miracle. What Starsky and his partner had was too rare and beautiful to end like this.

Once alone with Dobey, Starsky leaned back in his chair and sighed contentedly. Huggy returned with the cup of white coffee and a couple of candy bars. Starsky thanked him and placidly sipped at the coffee, alternating bites into one candy bar, oozing peace and calm.

Huggy and Dobey looked at each other, amazed at Starsky's inexplicable behavior. They didn't know what had suddenly come over him, but at least, they were grateful for Starsky's apparent serenity.

Starsky was putting his empty cup on the table, when Dr. Lester entered the waiting room. He looked exhausted, as if a stampede of buffaloes had run over him. His face looked haggard and in a state of shock.

The three men stood up, Huggy and Dobey with their hearts up their throats and Starsky with the easy confidence of a person who knows there's nothing to fear. He faced the drained man and met his eyes.

"He's alive. He made it." It was a statement, not a question.

Dr. Lester gave him a faint, infinitely tired smile, and nodded. "Yes," he confirmed Starsky's words.

Huggy let out a loud squeal of joy, Dobey buried his face in his hands as he muttered a short prayer of thanks, and Starsky's smile illuminated the whole room.

"It was the most delicate operation I've ever performed," he smiled at Starsky. "Yours aside, that is. But we managed to stop the hemorrhage and suture the ruptured vein." His face darkened for a moment. "It was the mesenteric one, just as I feared. Only 5% of the people who suffer a rupture of the mesenteric vein survive the operation. He had lost a lot of blood and we had to give him a transfusion. Fortunately, the irrigation of his intestines was good and they didn't suffer a necrosis. The biggest problem when the mesenteric vein ruptures, is the risk of the patient suffering a mesenteric thrombosis. And that is fatal," he rubbed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "And when we were about to close, he suffered cardiac arrest." He met Starsky's gaze fondly. "You two like scaring the hell out of me, don't you?" he shook his head. "He flatlined for one minute, but we were able to bring him back."

Huggy and Dobey looked at each other and then at Starsky. The message that flashed between them was loud and clear. They were a hundred percent certain that Starsky's collapse had everything to do with Hutch "dying" on the operating table. His behavior those three long, nerve-racking hours had been too weird. From the first moment, they had felt as if he was somehow connected to Hutch, as if they were holding on to each other and keeping one another alive. It was the oddest thing they had ever witnessed, but being Starsky and Hutch, nothing surprised them anymore. The bond they shared... There were no words in any language to describe it. It was a soul deep connection between two soulmates. They were bonded at a spiritual level. If one of them died, the other would immediately follow him; it was as simple as that.

They suddenly felt as if they were standing beside a living miracle. And they felt unbelievably humbled, proud and grateful.

"He's in a recovery room right now," Dr. Lester proceeded. "We'll keep him there for a few hours, until it's safe to move him to a room. The next 24 hours will be critical. The risk of complications is very high, especially after the difficulty he already suffered. Let's cross our fingers. The operation was 100% successful and he's a very strong, healthy man. Barring complications, he should recover without any problems. But you never know."

The three men nodded in understanding.

"He'll heal just fine, right? Or will he need any special care, rehab or...?" Starsky began, feeling a bit lost. Hutch had taken such good care of him after Gunther, and now he felt at a loss what to do. But he would learn. No one would take care of his partner but himself. Just as Hutch had done a year ago. They just needed to be together. They would be all right as long as they were left alone.

"Yes, David, don't worry. He'll recover completely. His brain edema is already receding and his ribs will knit together just fine. As for the operation, I didn't open him from side to side, as you may think. I just made a couple inches long' incision across his belly. That's all it took."

Starsky let out a sigh of relief. That was more or less what Dr. Stevens had told them hours earlier, but somehow, that little creep didn't strike him as a very trustworthy person. But hearing it now from Dr. Lester's lips, a highly compassionate and caring man, he could believe the words. "Can I...?" he shyly began.

"Of course you can see him," the doctor finished Starsky's question with a smile. "And stay with him for as long as you want. I already cleared it with my department and the nurses' staff. And when we move Hutch to a private room, there'll be another bed there for you."

Starsky's eyebrows shot up. "I thought it'd take me longer to convince you," he said, in all honesty.

Dr. Lester let out a short laugh. "I don't need to be convinced of anything. I was there when Hutch stood by you a year ago. I saw what having him near did to you, and I saw how it worked both ways. Selfishly, it suits us. Hutch'll heal much faster, he'll leave the hospital sooner and we'll be able to use his bed for another patient. That's how we doctors work," he winked at the three men, who knew better by now. "If everything goes well, we should release him in a week, ten days at most."

Starsky had the good grace to look embarrassed. As far as Hutch was concerned, he had to admit he was far too predictable. He always had been. But it didn't bother him in the least. He didn't give a damn about the

entire world knowing about how much he loved his partner. He would shout it from the rooftops! He was so fucking proud that the gentlest, most decent man on Earth was his best friend and his secret love!

"He's in recovery room 8," Bob Lester patted Starsky's shoulder once and squeezed it. "Go!"

Starsky didn't need any prompting. With a radiant smile, he left the waiting room at a run.

Huggy and Dobey looked at each other and shook their heads with a patronizing smile. The same old Starsky. When he was so focused on something or someone, everything else around him just disappeared. They knew that to others who didn't know him as well as they did, he would look rude and ungrateful when he behaved like this; but they knew what lay in that huge heart.

That's the reason why the three men gave a start when Starsky's upper body suddenly stuck out from the corridor and with a wink and a wide smile, he said:

"Thanks, guys. For everything!"

And he disappeared from their sight just as he had appeared.

Dobey, Huggy and Dr. Lester looked at each other for a moment and then they burst out laughing.

Starsky quietly entered the recovery room. The room was in a semidarkness, since the blinds had been almost completely shut. The first thing that drew his attention was the sound of the monitors, controlling Hutch's vital signs.

Almost tiptoeing in the room, he opened the blinds just a little bit, so he could get a better sight of his partner. He walked up to the bed, taking a long, deep breath.

Hutch lay framed in the white sheets, his skin the same color. The left side of his bed was surrounded by monitors and several wires. He had the omnipresent IV attached to his left wrist and a nasal canula to give oxygen, just in case it was necessary.

A comfortable looking chair by Hutch's bed was the next thing he noticed. With a soft smile of gratitude, Starsky sank down into it, his right hand already reaching out to take Hutch's left. The comforting warmth of the unresponsive hand warmed Starsky's heart as nothing ever had. He brought the big hand to his lips and kissed it reverently.

"Hello, Blondie," he whispered. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I seem to remember your voice and your touch last year when I was here." He inched closer and his left hand brushed the broad forehead, his fingers moving down the smooth face, drinking from the desperately craved for contact. "We made it again, partner. Dr. Lester said everything went fine. So, please stop these scary stunts, okay? I don't think my heart could stand another surprise." He looked down at their joined hands. "I can't wait for you to wake up. I have a promise to keep, ya know? But no hurry. Just take your time. I'm going nowhere. There's no place in the world I'd rather be. It'd be nice if you answered back, but don't worry. I can talk for the both of us. You know that." He smiled softly. "All right, all right, I'll shut up now. My babbling's not letting you rest. I've got nothing clever to say, anyway," he shook his head. "I know. I never did." He squeezed the warm hand with an edge of desperation. "It's good to have you back. I'm very, very happy, Hutch. Rest now. I'll be here. I'll always be."

His hand never stopped its roaming caresses all over Hutch's face. He had never touched anything so soft and sweet. He stroked the blond hair, massaged the scalp, wishing that his touch had healing powers. Somehow feeling... *knowing* it had.

Starsky sighed. There was no escaping his wandering thoughts. And right now, they were asking for him to consider what had happened in the waiting room.

It was funny, he had no recollection whatsoever of those three long hours. His last conscious memory was of Hutch's bed being pushed in the elevator and then going into the waiting room. From that point on, it was as if he was floating on a cloud. He had felt both an inner warmth and a heartbeat that weren't entirely his own. He didn't know how else to describe it. He felt he was halfway someplace between the waiting room... and eternity. One moment, he had felt a tug on his very soul, an increasing acceleration and next, he had found himself with Hutch, back in a place he had visited only once. Once upon a dream.

He knew he hadn't been hallucinating. He had *really* been there with Hutch. And it had been wondrous and magical and perfect. They had shared as never before. They had rejoiced in their togetherness. A togetherness that had been so terrifyingly close to shattering forever. But he knew now it hadn't been all their fault. It had been because of a secret they were both desperately trying to keep from each other.

He had no idea what Hutch's secret could be like, but for Hutch to behave the way he had, it had to be as scary for him as his own was to Starsky. In any case, it didn't matter anymore. They knew now what their problem was, and they would face it together, as they always had. They would find their way around those secrets that had been so very close to destroying them.

Another close call. Far too close. And an eye opener, as well. It had strengthened his resolve to not allow his secret to poison his relationship with his partner. Never again! So close he had been to losing Hutch for good! His romantic love for his partner shouldn't be allowed to endanger the deep and abiding friendship that bound them together. He had to resign himself once and for all to the fact that Hutch could never love him the way he wanted him to.

No matter what, he was loved. He was loved so absolutely that Hutch had been ready to die for him. This was what his blond angel felt for him. It was far more than most people ever find, and far more than he deserved.

But one day, Hutch would find a kind, sweet, loving girl and... Starsky shook his head, instinctively rejecting the notion. He couldn't bring himself to consider... NO! He would face the possibility should it ever arise.

A soft sound brought him out of his musings. He looked around him, searching for the source of the sound, until he located a plastic bag hanging from the edge of the bed. It was slowly being filled with a yellowish liquid. It dawned on him then. Hutch was urinating. His poor Blintz! He was catheterized. Starsky had always hated being catheterized. Every time he had come around after an operation he had become so restless and uncomfortable down there he had forced the nurses to take the damn thing out of him. He'd rather use a bedpan, until he was strong enough to use the bathroom.

These procedures were so undignified! He hated being helpless to take care of himself. It embarrassed him, frustrated him and angered him. Only with Hutch had he ever felt comfortable enough to let him take care of those personal matters for him. He understood that was part of a nurse's job and those women had performed these chores thousands of times, but he simply couldn't stand it. He became so tense he couldn't pee, no matter if his bladder felt about to explode. Starsky smiled to himself. Only Hutch had *ever* been allowed past his defenses and into his heart and soul, into his every fault and vulnerability. And Hutch had granted him the same privilege. The thought once again warmed him and made him feel indescribably proud of himself. Such an amazing, priceless gift!

He squeezed Hutch's hand tighter and his fingertips brushed the frown on Hutch's face, that was mostly smoothed away in the peacefulness of sleep. He just couldn't stop touching his partner. He was a starved man feeding after a lifetime of hunger. His hand looked so rough compared with the smoothness of Hutch's features, of Hutch's skin. And yet, there was something about the contrast between them that somehow felt right. They had always complemented each other to perfection. Dark-fair, lean-sturdy, smooth-hairy, refined-earthy... They were so different! It was a miracle they had gotten along so well from the beginning. So many differences should have been a hindrance, they should have prevented them from finding a common ground to relate to each other. But where it mattered, they felt the same and they thought the same. Their strong feelings about righteousness and justice, their inborn need to protect and to serve a greater

good, their compassion, their respect for each other's differences and instinctively using them to their advantage, knowing that was the source of all strength... Yes, in the end, they were more alike than anybody, themselves included, would have thought at first.

Starsky sighed. It was amazing the things a person remembered when they suddenly found themselves alone with their thoughts. Sometimes they were life-changing realizations, and other times they were the most obvious facts.

An obvious fact was that both he and Hutch had "died" today. There was no way around it. It had happened, no matter how impossible it seemed. Hutch's heart had stopped beating in the operating room, and Starsky had collapsed in the waiting room at the same time. Huggy and Dobey were no fools. They had been in enough life and death situations to remain calm and act rationally. If they had been unable to find his pulse, it was because he didn't have one for them to find. Besides, he remembered the place they had been in. He had floated in and out of it several times when he had lain in a coma after his shooting a year ago. The only thing that had persuaded him to return was the faraway echo of Hutch's choked voice, begging for him to fight and come back to him.

This time, he had gone to Hutch's encounter. Hutch had needed him to calm the fear and hopelessness that were making him run away from his own body, from his own life. Starsky smiled. It didn't matter where, when, how and why. They would always be there for each other. For richer or poorer, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health... in life and in death. When one of them needed the other, the other would always be there, no matter if he had to die to help him. Until death did them part... and beyond. He knew that now. Nothing would ever be able to keep them apart. *Nothing*.

Starsky's sight became blurry and he blinked several times to clear them. It was then that he noticed the moisture running down his face. He wiped the tears away clumsily, happy beyond belief, reassured beyond reason.

"We're stuck with each other, partner. What we have is that strong. I love you so much!" He brought the big hand to his lips again and kissed it with all the love and passion that were surging up from deep inside him.

"Stwwrrsss..."

Starsky looked up and saw Hutch moving his head towards him very slowly. His face was wet with perspiration.

The dark-haired man reached out and stroked his partner's soft cheek. "I'm right here, buddy. Everything went fine. You just rest and get well. I'll be right here," he brushed the fringe away from the perfect forehead. "Everything's okay, Hutch."

The ghost of a smile curved the soft lips upward and one moment later, Hutch was out again.

Starsky smiled back, even knowing Hutch couldn't see him. His fingertips caressed the closed eyelids, realizing then how wet Hutch's face really was. He let go of the warm hand for a moment and rummaged in his pockets, looking for his handkerchief. He took it out and softly wiped the moisture away from the beautiful face. He knew that most people eliminated the anesthesia through urine. But other people also eliminated it sweating or even throwing up.

He suddenly noticed the room was darker than a few minutes before. The sun was already setting. He got up and opened the blinds all the way. He wanted to make the most of the natural daylight, until he had no choice but to turn on the lights. He returned to his partner's bedside and took the still hand in his again. He felt a tiny squeeze and he looked at his sleeping partner. Starsky smiled. Hutch hadn't even woken up, yet even in his sleep, the prone man could feel him and respond to him. Starsky felt a warm flush spreading all over his body. Ahhh, the human mind was something truly amazing! The tiny squeeze on his hand that Hutch gave him, made him feel as if he had just made love. A flush reached his cheeks when he realized that's exactly what they had been doing for a very long time. Probably since the day they had met, with each touch and caress they gave each other.

It was really funny. That momentous day – the day they first met - when he woke up he had no idea his life was going to change forever. He got out of bed, yawning and scratching his head; took a shower and got dressed. The same boring routine. And a few hours later, he was shaking hands with a big, blond, blue-eyed guy from the Midwest he had a strange connection with from first sight.

Why he and Hutch were drawn to each other, he couldn't explain. They couldn't possibly be any more different. Hutch was obviously a high-class little prince, who undoubtedly had an argument with his all powerful, inflexible daddy, and in an act of outrageous rebellion, he had decided to join the police force. No doubt, his peers would be making a great to-do back homeland! And yet, there was something about Hutch. An air of infinite sadness and pain that he instinctively felt like comforting. Also, there was something endearing about his proverbial clumsiness and occasional stammer that made Starsky want to protect him from the unthinking cruelty and mockery of the others. The blond looked so shy and vulnerable that Starsky didn't understand at first what had prompted Hutch to join the hard, unrewarding way of life a cop had to lead. But when he looked deeper into those blue depths, he recognized a passionate striving, a stubborn streak that not even the hardships and bitter disappointments of life had been able to beat. There was an inner strength in Hutch that quite matched his own. The almost obsessive need to prove himself as a valid, independent human being.

And Starsky recognized in Hutch a kindred, indomitable spirit. And a loyal friend. A soul brother even. Something he had longed for since life circumstances had forced him to leave Nicky behind, to the point that he was little more than an acquaintance now.

Hutch had also seen it. He had felt Starsky's own share of pain, hardships and bitter disappointments. And they had taken upon themselves the task of healing one another and making of their almost instantaneous friendship a warm, safe place where both of them could find a shelter from the horrors of life.

And here they were, a decade later. Older, but essentially the same. Life had hardened them, yes; but where it mattered, they still remained clean and pure. Their capacity for wonder, hope and compassion was still intact. And when one of them felt he was losing himself, there he was the other, to guide him back on the right track.

Starsky shook his head. He couldn't seem to stop his meandering thoughts. He couldn't figure out the purpose of his convoluted musings. Maybe he was trying to avoid the real issue. How close he had been to losing Hutch... again. A day that had started just like any other: waking up, getting up, showering, getting dressed, going to work... and all of a sudden, tragedy had struck once more. And as always, it had happened when least expected.

And here he was now, a few hours later. Hutch was out of surgery and he could only pray for his partner's quick recovery. He was helpless to do anything but hold his hand, caress his face and make a wish. His dearest wish.

"Please, get well soon, Hutch. I couldn't bear it if because of me..." he closed his eyes in overwhelming remorse. "It's bad enough to know there was nothing I could do to help you. But if..." he wiped the sweat from his friend's forehead and neck. "Please, Hutch. I need you, babe."

Hutch's eyelids stirred a little and Starsky froze for a moment.

"Hutch," he finally whispered, drying the moist brow with his handkerchief.

"S-Starsss..." The eyelids fluttered open.

"Right here, babe. I'm right here," Starsky said.

At last, Hutch's half-open eyes settled on him.

"Hi," Starsky's smile felt about to break his face. He squeezed the beloved hand tighter and his eyes filled with tears at his partner's loving look of recognition.

A soft, dreamy smile illuminated Hutch's features. "Not... n-not alone... anymore," he attempted to swallow, but he didn't quite manage. "N-never al-alone again. Right, S-St-arsk?"

"No, Blondie," Starsky reassured, wiping the sweat away from his friend's upper lip. "We'll never be alone again. We're stuck with each other forever."

Hutch's smile widened, as his consciousness began slipping away again. "Never... n-never alone... S-stuck with... with... for- forev-" his eyelids closed. "L-lov... love you..."

The sweetest pain sliced through Starsky's chest at the sound of those words. And when he breathed again, it only made the pain worse. It seemed as if the oxygen was burning a path down to his lungs, as if by breathing, he was taking the pain deeper inside. But, Lord! He never wanted to get rid of this pain! He wanted to feel it until his last day on this earth.

"I love you too, Hutch," he murmured into the pale ear. "I love you!"

Time went by, as Starsky devotedly dabbed the sweat on Hutch's face. He urinated a couple more times, and just when Starsky was about to call a nurse to have the plastic bag changed, Catherine Pierce came in, holding an empty plastic bag, exactly like the one Hutch was filling.

"How's he doing?" she asked Starsky while she changed the bag.

"He woke up a couple times, but only for a moment," Starsky answered.

"Don't worry, he'll wake up again very soon. The effects of the anesthesia should wear off any time now. And don't worry about all that sweat. He's eliminating the anesthesia through sweating as well."

Starsky nodded. "Thank you," he looked into her kind hazel eyes with a heartfelt smile.

She smiled back. "You should have something to eat, you know?" she gently chided him.

"I'll have something from the dispensers in the corridor. I'm not really hungry. I had a pretty heavy breakfast anyway," his eyes glazed over, in fond remembrance of the morning he had shared with his partner. And the bet he had won. Instinctively, he turned to Hutch, to gaze upon his smooth face again.

"He'll be all right," Catherine's gentle voice brought him out of his reverie.

He looked back at her with a happy smile. "I know. I can feel it," he simply said.

She grinned at him and with a nod, she left the room quietly.

Starsky resumed his relentless wiping of the sweat on Hutch's face. He was sweating less and less now and Starsky made a face. He could empathize with his friend's messy condition. Hutch hated to be sweaty and with wet clothes plastered to his body. But they would take care of that matter when the time came. In the meantime, he would look after his partner's dignity to the best of his ability. Focusing all his attention on Hutch and refusing to give in to his wandering thoughts, he proceeded to dry every tiny drop of sweat. Some time later, Hutch stopped sweating altogether. With a smile, he put his handkerchief back in his pocket and loosened the sheets that covered him just a little, hoping for the sweat that had to be covering his body to evaporate. He combed through the damp strands of blond hair and slid the backs of his fingers all over the angelic face. He lost himself in the strikingly handsome features, completely enraptured.

A sudden change in his partner's breathing pattern alerted him to Hutch's impending consciousness.

Hutch's head moved slightly and he made a small rumble. A few moments later, his eyes fluttered open and this time, it took him less time to focus his gaze on his hovering partner. Starsky knew this time was different. Hutch's gaze was sharper than the previous times. He would stay awake now... and he would remember. He brought their joined hands up for Hutch to see, and when he had the beautiful eyes settled on

him, he rewarded his partner with the sweetest, happiest smile. Ecstatic joy filled his every pore and radiated from him in waves.

Slowly, wondrously, Hutch smiled back. "I t-thought you were gonna keep your promise, Starsky," he croaked. He tried clearing his throat, unsuccessfully.

"What are you talking about, Blondie?" Starsky pretended to be offended. "Of course I kept my promise! I told ya that you'd see my ugly mug smiling down at you and holding your hand like this." He brought their clasped hands closer to Hutch.

Hutch smiled dreamily and shook his head in mock exasperation. "Ahhh, but you see, Starsk; I've never seen anything so beautiful," he whispered, blushing endearingly.

A lump formed in Starsky's throat at the sound of those shy, loving words. "You mushy flatterer," he managed to say, pressing his forehead against their hands. A soft flush coloured his cheeks.

Reaching out with his free hand, Hutch softly entangled his fingers in the soft, thick curls. He couldn't help the contented sigh that slipped from his lips. "I thought I'd never..." his voice cracked.

"Shhhhhh," Starsky reassured, as if to a child. "There's nothing to fear now. The operation went well. You only have to get better now, without any other complications. Think you can manage that, Blintz?"

Hutch seemed to consider it. "It's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it."

"Right," Starsky smiled. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Stay," was Hutch's automatic answer. He looked down sheepishly and his pale cheeks reddened again.

Starsky bit his lower lip, making a Herculean effort not to kiss those pink cheeks right then and there. "No one's gonna keep me away from you, partner. Dr. Lester and the nurses' staff gave up on us, that's why I'm here now. Doc said that when they move you to a private room, there'll be a bed for me too."

"Dr. Lester?" Hutch's eyes opened wide with something akin to fear. His memory of the kind, gentle doctor, was forever linked to Starsky's shooting and the nightmarish days that followed. He had also been there afterward, when Starsky's recovery became a reality; but still, he couldn't help but shiver deep inside every time he thought of him. He was very fond of Bob Lester, but the traumatic circumstances through which he had made his acquaintance would be forever imprinted in Hutch's mind.

"Yeah," Starsky nodded, holding the big hand tighter, recognizing Hutch's instinctive fear. "He operated on you. And he's the one who explored you in the observation room, remember?"

"Oh... oh, yes. I remember now," Hutch nodded. His eyebrows arched as he realized something else. "Well, that's another thing we have in common. Dr. Lester's meddled with both our insides."

Starsky smiled and nodded. "He said that if everything goes well, they'll release you in a week or so."

"In that case, I'll do my best to recover. We've had our share of hospitals to last a few lifetimes."

Starsky's countenance saddened a little and he nodded again, looking down.

Hutch's fingertips rubbed his scalp comfortingly and then, he slowly let go of Starsky's hair. Starsky winced when he saw the IV attached to the back of the beloved hand.

"Was it real, Starsk?" came Hutch's suddenly shaky voice.

Starsky's heart skipped a beat. He immediately knew what his partner was talking about. He gulped and faced the intense blue eyes and the expectant expression. "If both of us can remember, I'd say there's a 100% probability that it happened, don't you think?" he smiled tremulously.

Hutch looked away and nodded. His cheeks reddened again, only this time in shame. "I'm sorry, Starsky. I never intended..."

"I know that, Hutch," Starsky didn't want to give his partner the chance to wallow in guilt and remorse. He swallowed hard and squeezed his eyes shut. The mere thought of Hutch giving up... But no matter how much the subject upset him, they had to talk about it. Only he wasn't certain this was the right time. "Hutch, your... your heart stopped beating," the words came out of their own accord before he could hold them back. There was no turning back now. "You were clinically dead... just as I was a year ago."

Hutch's eyes popped open. He was speechless for a moment. "B-But you were there... I felt you..." he babbled.

"I *was* there, Hutch," Starsky reassured him. "I..." he looked down, a bit hesitant, "I collapsed in the waiting room," he finally said.

"What?!" Hutch's head shot up from his pillow, only to flop back on it.

Starsky met his eyes and Hutch swallowed nervously, realizing the awesome implications. The *transcendental* implications. "God! I... We..."

Starsky smiled softly. "It's okay, buddy. We don't have to understand it. We couldn't, anyway. It happened, it was real. That's all we need to know. We needed it and..."

"I needed it," Hutch amended him. "It's just that... it was so easy to let go... It was so peaceful, so... painless there..."

"I know," Starsky's gaze got lost in the distance. "I know," his voice was full of fondness.

"If you hadn't been there, I'd have..."

"I know."

"I failed you, Starsk," Hutch was one heartbeat away from breaking down with remorse and shame.

"No, no, Hutch!" Starsky exclaimed, holding his partner's teary eyes with his own fervent gaze. "You were afraid, you were tired of carrying your burden alone. You needed me to reassure you and show you the way back. I know you'd never have... Not willingly, anyway. You suddenly found yourself there and it was the only way to stop hurting and fighting in vain..."

Hutch looked away. "Reading my mind again?" he said in the weakest voice.

Starsky smiled sadly, momentarily grateful that Hutch couldn't see the truth in his eyes. "No. I was talking about myself," he confessed.

Hutch looked back at him.

"I felt the same when it happened to me," Starsky admitted.

"What made you come back? I wasn't there to..." Hutch was suddenly terrified. The mere notion that Starsky had felt the need to let go... he felt his skin crawl in sheer terror.

"Oh, but you *were*, Hutch," Starsky interrupted him. "Somehow, I could feel you calling out to me, begging me not to leave you alone, telling me how much you needed me..." he swallowed hard. "I could feel your pain. Don't ask me how, but I *could* feel it," he gritted his teeth at the devastating memory. "And it was bigger than my fear. Bigger than my cowardly need to give up. You've always been more important to me than my own life. How could I *not* return? You're my life, Hutch; that's why I came back. That's what I learned that day beyond any doubt. That's what *you* taught me."

Hutch sobbed, devastated by those incredible words. "Oh, Starsk!" he moaned.

"And that's what you learned today. Fear's not important, buddy. You may think your secret's gonna destroy you and destroy us both, but it doesn't have to be that way, Hutch. We can fight anything, together. I'm not interested in your secrets. I'm interested in *you*! What we have is worth fighting for, is worth any sacrifice! I also thought my secret would ruin everything between us. And it came very, very close. But you forgave me. You believed in me and stuck with me, despite all the shit I put you through. We care about each other, partner. There's no escaping that. Forget about what you can't tell me or what you think you have to hide from me. It can't be that bad, since we're still here, together. And my secret can't be that bad, either. As long as we're together, everything's gonna be all right."

Hutch's tears were falling in earnest now. "Oh, Starsk! Starsk!" he groaned time and again.

Starsky put his forefinger on the pouted lips. "Shhhh, it'll be all right. Trust me," he leaned his forehead on his friend's.

"I don't wanna hide anything from you!" Hutch whimpered. "I never did! I never had to."

"I know," Starsky lost the battle with his own tears. "But we'll survive this, too. And maybe one day, we'll be able to share our secret with each other. And maybe that day we'll laugh our guts out at how silly they were."

Hutch shook his head. "It hurts too much to laugh at it."

Starsky sighed bitterly and nodded. "Yes, you're probably right. But we'll help each other and it'll hurt less and less, you'll see." He met his beloved's reddened eyes. "You've always healed my pain, don't you know that?"

Hutch let out a strangled moan. "You too. You're... everything, Starsk. Everything! You're my... my..." Hutch bit his lower lip, almost drawing blood, fighting his feelings with all his might. He had never been so close to revealing...

"Oh, Hutch!" Starsky took the beautiful face in his hands, wiped the tears away and leaned his forehead on his partner's. Comforting, feeding on each other.

They never knew how long they remained thus. Hutch's hands came up and held Starsky's wrists, completing the circle. Gradually, they slowly returned to the real world and they swallowed the painful lump in their throats.

Hutch blinked a few times and blushed furiously, never making the slightest attempt at withdrawing from that blessed touch, that desperately craved for contact. He began caressing the pulse beating beneath his partner's wrists with his thumbs. "Too much for mushballs and soapy scenes, huh?" he feebly cracked.

"Fuck'em," Starsky answered with infinite tenderness, softening the effect his curse could have. "I love you."

Hutch's entire body burned for a moment, and then it went cold, and the sweetest throb enveloped him, in body and soul. He trembled like a leaf, wishing he could feel like this every single day for the rest of his life. The blissful warmth pulsed inside him for a few glorious seconds and it softly faded away, leaving the embers of Starsky's passionate words emblazoned within him forever. "I love you too, so very much," he whispered, reaching up and lovingly wiping Starsky's tears away with his unsteady fingertips. He swallowed again. "Nothing like a close call to make you see what's really important, huh?"

Starsky moved back just a little. "We always knew what was important, babe," he said. "It's just the need for reaffirmation."

"Why, MD. Starsky! I'm impressed!" Hutch smiled, looking deeply into the bluest eyes that had worked their way into his soul the first day they had met.

"You know me. I'm full of surprises," Starsky pursued the joke.

They grinned at each other and they gazed upon each other's faces for a very long time, drinking one another in.

Out of the blue, Starsky bit his lower lip and offered Hutch the happiest, most beautiful smile the blond man had ever seen coming from his partner. It made him feel like flying and Hutch literally soared. He answered back with an equally enraptured smile, and he felt Starsky's body shuddering.

That was the most perfect moment in the life of Ken Hutchinson. He felt the warmth radiating from him and reaching out to envelope his beloved partner in it.

With a surrendered sigh, Starsky carefully rested his head on Hutch's right shoulder. Hutch closed his eyes in bliss and his left hand moved up and pressed the beautiful head to his chest, his fingertips burying themselves in the curls behind the sweet ear. His thumb caressed the soft cheek time and again. "Drowsy?" he asked, some time later.

"A little bit," Starsky answered, burrowing his face into Hutch's warmth, involuntarily sniffing at his soft scent.

"I don't envy you the day you've had, partner. I'm sorry you had to go through it," Hutch stroked the lovely head, tingling all over at the feeling of Starsky's curls tickling his palm.

"We're okay, aren't we, Hutch?" Starsky suddenly asked, an undisguised hint of desperation tinging his voice.

Hutch looked up in supplication at the vulnerability and lingering fear in Starsky's accent, and cuddled him with both arms, cursing the IV that prevented him from fully holding his friend. "Yeah, Starsk, we are. We are," he looked down at the heartbreaking sight of that proud, cocky, independent man hiding his face in his chest like a frightened lost waif. Something inside Hutch snapped. He bent down his head and kissed Starsky's forehead with all the passion he felt.

Starsky groaned and his arms tried to wind themselves round Hutch's body, despite the covers. It wasn't a full embrace, it couldn't be, but it was enough to make Hutch melt under the sheets. He felt Starsky's hands holding on to his sides, and not for the first time, Hutch marvelled at his skin's awesome sensitivity. Starsky only had to breathe on him, and he trembled as if he had been intimately touched. Only Starsky had ever made him feel that way; only Starsky had that power over him. And it had been so since the day they had met.

They clung to each other for dear life, stroking and caressing non-stop. Their hands couldn't get enough. There were no words. They weren't necessary. They were saying everything there was to say through their devoted touching. It was so warm, so cozy and perfect they closed their eyes with a sweet, little smile illuminating their features. Starsky sighed softly and cuddled up to Hutch even more. Hutch pressed his head to his chest, burying his nose in the silky curls.

The curtains opened all of a sudden and the two men gave a start. Starsky raised his head from Hutch's chest and a soft hiss of quite-not-physical pain escaped the brunet unintentionally. Hutch winced and blinked furiously to prevent his eyes from filling with tears at the brutal loss of contact with Starsky's body. Starsky's arms remained on Hutch's sides, though, their bodies desperately refusing to give up at least one point of contact between them.

Dr. Lester and two nurses, Catherine Pierce and a younger girl named Henderson, whom Starsky also recognized from before, entered the room.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I have to check up on Hutch. My shift's almost over and I want to make certain everything's all right before I leave."

Grudgingly relinquishing his hold on his partner, Starsky moved back, giving Dr. Lester all the space he needed. He wrapped his arms around himself instinctively, trying to make up for the loss.

Bob Lester walked up to Hutch's bed and put his hand on his shoulder. "How're you doing, Ken?" he asked.

"Fine," Hutch replied.

"No pain? No discomfort? Nothing out of the ordinary?" he checked the monitors.

"No, nothing. I feel as if nothing had happened."

"I see your bladder's fully functional. That's a good sign."

Hutch blushed and looked down, not really knowing why.

Noticing it, Starsky moved back a few steps, trying to hide his smile. "Ms. Pierce changed the bag a while ago," he explained to cover his amusement, looking at the seemingly head nurse with a grateful smile.

"I know," Bob Lester nodded, apparently very pleased with his patient's progress. "Now, Hutch, let's take a look at you," he gently opened the bed and revealed Hutch's belly. The blond cop looked away, not daring to look down at the gory, probably suppurating gash. It was funny, he had loved to dress and take care of Starsky's surgical wounds; and yet, he couldn't stand to look at his own. And the same thing had happened when Vivian shot him a year and a half ago. He closed his eyes against the flashback, and against the extremely painful memories of those days. But he opened his eyes wide when he realized those memories didn't hurt anymore. Something had happened. Something that had healed the raw pain that was forever associated with those dark times. Instinctively knowing the reason, he looked at his partner, and he found the deep indigo eyes already settled on him. And Starsky was smiling knowingly. He smiled back, feeling eerily comforted, and Starsky answered by blowing him a kiss. Hutch's blush deepened and he looked away again.

Meanwhile, Dr. Lester had been gently feeling the area surrounding the incision and Hutch's entire belly. "Everything looks all right. Things appear to be progressing smoothly," he announced cheerfully. He had seen that Hutch was having a hard time, trying to avoid looking down at himself, and he attempted to ease the blond man's tension. "I must admit I made a great job on you. If you were hairy like your partner, the scar would hardly be noticed."

Hutch immediately warmed up to the lightened atmosphere. "You did a great job on him too. His scars are hardly noticeable now. You should've been a plastic surgeon."

"I almost was."

"And what happened?" Starsky asked, curiously.

"I wasn't posh enough," Dr. Lester said, with a faked British accent.

Everybody in the room spluttered, as Dr. Lester covered the incision again. "But the two years I invested in that specialization show, if I may say so myself. I picked up some of the mannerisms of a plastic surgeon, like minimal incisions, the best suture... For example, for Hutch's operation, a couple inches long' incision would have been the norm. I only needed 4 centimeters."

"And that is...?" Starsky asked.

"Almost half an inch less," Hutch supplied to his partner, surprised that he only needed such a small incision. Judging from the gravity of his situation when he had been taken to the operating room, he would have expected a more 'aggressive' approach. But Dr. Lester apparently knew how and when to detach himself and keep a cool head, despite his obvious compassion for his patients and his exquisite bedside manners.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Lester apologized to Starsky. "We're trained to use the metric system, and I forget most people have a problem with it. It's far easier to divide by ten, don't you agree? That's the system the guys at JPL use."

"JPL?" Starsky's eyebrows raised.

"Jet Propulsion Laboratory," Dr. Lester explained. "Sorry again, I'm only making it worse."

"Oh, yeah, NASA. The Voyagers, the Pioneers and all that," Starsky nodded. "Sometimes, I get muddled up with all those acronyms. Our whole lives are an acronym!" he sighed, sounding suspiciously like his partner.

Hutch smiled fondly at him, bursting with pride. He still remembered all the hours he had spent with Starsky at the Academy, patiently helping his friend to memorize all the acronyms they would have to use in the police force. It had taken some time, but once Starsky learned something, it remained inside that potent brain forever. The man had a prodigious memory and an understated intelligence. It saddened Hutch that many people tended to underestimate and belittle his partner. He knew that to many people, especially at first sight, Starsky came across as a not too bright person. But Hutch knew better.

And precisely, that was one of the many things that Starsky cherished about his partner. He never judged people by appearances. He always waited to make his mind about someone, and that only happened when he got to know them fairly well. He was the most intuitive, empathetic, loving person he had ever known.

They met each other's gaze, lost in thought. Hutch remembered Starsky's impressive library and how often he had found him reading a book, both at home and at the precinct. Starsky's urge to improve himself had always moved him very deeply. The education he had missed after high school he tried to make up for with books. He read absolutely everything, from the classics to Isaac Asimov, from Edgar Allan Poe to Ray Bradbury, from Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley to Stephen King and from Playboy to "Intimidation, Controlling People for Love and Money." That was what he loved about his curly haired imp; you could expect the unexpected from him. There were a few exasperating things about him, but 95% of everything about his Starsky was... perfect. He unknowingly let out a tiny sigh of rapture while he contemplated him to his heart's content. What an extraordinary, amazing human being!

On his part, Starsky remembered a myriad of times when Hutch had explained something to him with the naturalness and unpretentiousness of a child explaining something to another. Everything about Hutch was so unforced, so friendly, so honest... He never looked down on him. He had always seen him as an equal, with his weak and strong points, just like everybody. That man was a gift from Heaven. Good God, how lucky, how fortunate he was to have this angel in his life!

He remembered when, several nights ago, they had sat down in front of Hutch's TV set, and watched the first episode of Carl Sagan's COSMOS series. Starsky was reluctant at first. He had thought the man would use pompous scientific language beyond his capacity to understand, but Hutch had encouraged him to give it a try, and both of them were completely hooked to the show before the first episode ended. When it did, they had just looked at each other and as one, they stood up and left Hutch's apartment. Starsky drove the Torino up to the hills where they lay down on the grass to watch the starry sky until dawn, pointing at planets and constellations, and Starsky excitedly telling his partner the myths behind the names. It had been so beautiful! The two of them, together under the stars, feeling insignificant and small, but full of wonder; feeling they were a part of that vast, immense universe above them, and at the same time, a part of each other. The connection between them had expanded at that moment beyond Starsky's comprehension. He felt awed and overwhelmed, as if something bigger than anything he could never grasp had swept him away. At first he felt he was losing his feeling of self, his very identity, but then, he felt Hutch's arm wrapping itself around his shoulders, and he felt grounded again, anchored to his partner's solid reality. Belonging to him, with him. He had no words to describe what came over him, over both of them. It was as if their very souls had touched and switched bodies for a magical instant. He felt like dying of fullness, love and peace; and the next thing he remembered was the gentle weight of Hutch's head on his shoulder, sound asleep. He wrapped both arms around the big form, as Hutch instinctively cuddled up to him. In seventh heaven, Starsky followed his beloved into slumber a few minutes later, and they had awakened at just before noon. When

they arrived at the precinct and they found themselves face to face with Dobby's best bull-dog expression, the only excuse they could think about was... the truth. They had overslept. Amazingly, Dobby believed them and after telling them to buy a louder alarm clock, he returned to his office.

Memories. Memories! Hundreds, thousands of memories that would live forever inside him! Memories of this wonderful man who had made of the world a better place the day he was born. The man who had saved his life countless times. He had saved his sanity, he had picked up his pieces and put them back together time and again, with infinite love and constancy. And every single time, Starsky felt improved, bettered, renewed. He was the best person he could be, thanks to this blond angel lying in that hospital bed.

Dr. Lester was writing something on Hutch's chart and saying something at the same time, and the two men quickly pricked up their ears.

"...signing your transfer to a private room, effective immediately," were his last words. "We'll continue with the IV and the painkillers; and I'm adding an antibiotic, just in case."

"Hey, that's great!" Starsky smiled from ear to ear, looking down at his partner. Hutch smiled back at him, his face shining with joy.

"I'll send a couple orderlies to take you to your new room. I'll see you both tomorrow morning. I've earned my beauty sleep," he squeezed Hutch's shoulder affectionately and shook Starsky's grateful hand with a grin. When he opened the door to leave, he met Huggy and Dobby, patiently waiting outside the recovery room. The three men startled each other.

"Cap'n! Huggy! You still here?" Starsky had completely forgotten about their friends, and he felt like banging his head against the wall for his unforgivable slip. "I'm sorry! I forgot..."

"It's okay, bro. We understand," Huggy smiled at Starsky's sincerely contrite expression.

Starsky's eyes shifted to his Captain and the large man smiled softly at him, with a small nod. The dark-haired cop's eyes filled with heartfelt gratitude and he nodded back.

"Come in and talk to him for a while. We're sending him to a room now. He's doing pretty well," Dr. Lester explained again, for Huggy and Dobby's benefit. With a smile, he nodded at the two black men and left, followed by the two nurses.

Dobby and Huggy entered the room and closed the door after them. Huggy was carrying the plastic bag with Hutch's belongings.

"Well, well, well, Blondie. It's good to see you decided to stay with us, after all," Huggy smiled widely, warmly shaking Hutch's hand.

"Someone's got to take care of all you curly-haired people," Hutch joked, with a roguish expression on his face that turned somewhat bashful when he reached out to his Captain.

Dobby laughed heartily, not bothered by the joke in the least. "Very funny, Hutchinson. But I find these visits to Memorial Hospital awfully boring. Make certain it doesn't happen again. I have better things to do with my time," his eyes hardened in mock reproach.

"I'll do my best, Captain," Hutch sincerely promised.

"By the way," Huggy said, turning to Starsky. "You left this gem of unhealthy eating on the waiting room table," he handed his friend the second candy bar he had never consumed.

"Thanks! I had forgotten about it!" Starsky quickly took it from Huggy's hands and ripped it open. The candy bar disappeared down his throat before a minute was over. Now that the worst, hopefully, was over and Hutch looked so sharp and apparently out of danger, his stomach was roaring.

"I bet you've had nothing to eat since breakfast," Hutch chided his partner.

"Wrong," Starsky answered, still chewing while several crumbs fell out of his mouth. "I had two cups of coffee and one candy bar."

"Enough to fill your gallon-sized tummy to bursting, no doubt," Hutch shook his head and held out his arm. "Take this nuthead to the cafeteria and make sure he stuffs that oversized stomach of his, will you?"

"Hey!" Starsky pointed at his partner with his forefinger and straightened up, in an exaggerated display of dignity. "I'm a free man. I'll decide when I'm going to eat. Okay?" His stomach chose that moment to make itself known in the noisiest way. Starsky froze.

"Whatever you say, Starsky. But your stomach sounds like the engine of your wheels," Huggy commented, with a snicker.

Hutch bit his lower lip to hide his mirth and Dobey covered his mouth with his big paw, looking away.

Starsky looked down at his stomach with a reproachful look. "Traitor," he mumbled.

"I rest my case," Hutch teased. "By the way, what do you think of my new look?" he asked, softly fingering his smooth upper lip.

Huggy and Dobey looked at each other and then at Hutch.

"New look?" Huggy's eyes opened wide in confusion.

"Yeah, my new look," Hutch fingered his upper lip again, this time more slowly.

Dobey and Huggy looked at each other once more and they shrugged. Starsky was looking from Hutch to his friends and vice versa, enjoying the show immensely.

"What are you talking about, Hutchinson?" Dobey asked.

"My mustache! I'm talking about my mustache! I shaved it this morning!" the blond man exploded.

"Ooooh, the mustache!" Huggy seemed to acknowledge the change in Hutch's look for the very first time then. "Yeah, I had noticed, but I thought it'd be redundant talking about it."

"Redundant?" Hutch asked, his eyes popping open.

Hutch's expression was priceless and Starsky thought he was going to bust a gut, he was fighting laughter so hard.

"Yeah, you don't comment when a person finally does what they should have done years ago. It comes a time when it's too late."

"Too late?" Hutch's face was hilarious now.

"Yeah," Dobey took over. "It loses its effect. It's almost like... like..." he looked at Huggy for help.

"Like an anticlimax," Huggy provided.

Dobey snapped his fingers. "Exactly, an anticlimax."

"Total turn-off," Huggy crowned their little act.

Hutch finally realized his friends were joking. He rolled his eyes and sent them away with a gesture on his hand. "Oh, get lost!" he exclaimed. "For a moment, I almost believed ya."

"Almost? C'mon, Blondie. You swallowed hook, line and sinker!" Huggy giggled.

Right then, the door opened and two strong-looking orderlies entered, followed by Catherine Pierce. She walked up to Hutch's bed and removed the IV bag from the hook, holding it in her hand.

"Ready for the ride?" she asked Hutch with a sweet smile.

"Ready, but don't exceed the speed limit or I'd have to fine you," Hutch answered, flirting unashamedly.

"Oh," Ms. Pierce looked disappointed. "And I thought that breaking the law with a cop would be so exciting!"

Hutch laughed softly as Catherine stepped back, leaving room for the two orderlies to push Hutch's bed out of the room.

"We're taking him to room 385," she informed Starsky, Dobey and Huggy. "You can wait for us there," she smiled at them and squeezed Starsky's forearm briefly.

"Okay," Starsky nodded, smiling back at the head nurse. He turned to his partner. "See ya there, Blintz," he reached out and ruffled the blond hair affectionately.

Hutch nodded happily, his sparkling eyes never leaving his friend while he was being pushed out of the room.

Starsky, Huggy and Dobey followed the gurney. When they reached the elevators, Starsky turned to Huggy. "Hug, would you mind going to my place and bringing me my PJ's and my shaving kit?" he looked at Dobey then, with lost waif eyes, the insinuation clear.

Dobey looked up and rolled his eyes. "All right, Starsky. I'll give you one week sick leave, satisfied?"

Starsky smiled from ear to ear. "Thanks, Cap'n!" He turned to Huggy again. "You can leave Hutch's things at my place. Wanna drive my car?" he offered.

Huggy placed his right hand on his heart and stumbled backward a couple steps. "I don't believe it! He just offered me the stripped tomato! Heart, don't fail me now!" He straightened up and smiled. "No, thanks, bro. I brought my caddy," he patted Starsky's shoulder warmly.

"No problem," Starsky shrugged as it dawned on him. "I just remembered my car's still in Maple Street, where we parked it before..." he shivered and looked down.

"Oh!" Huggy froze for a moment. "Well, if you want, I'll go to Maple Street and bring it here."

"Don't you mind?" Starsky asked.

"Of course not! Gimme the keys," Huggy reached out his hand.

Starsky rummaged in his jeans' left pocket and handed the key to his friend. "Thanks, Hug," he smiled.

"My pleasure," Huggy smiled back and with a wink, he headed downstairs.

Starsky stuffed his hands in his pockets and grunted, looking down.

"You should eat something, you know?" Dobey kindly told his officer.

"I know. I'll have something as soon as Hutch's settled."

Dobey eyed him doubtfully.

"Cross my heart," Starsky made the sign across his chest and he followed his boss inside the elevator.

When they arrived at room 385, the door was already open and when they peeked in, they saw Catherine Pierce was hanging the IV from a new hook. The heart monitor was already beeping steadily.

"Hi, buddy," Starsky greeted his partner.

"Hi there!" Hutch waved his free hand to his friend and his superior officer.

The two men entered the room. It was small, but cozy. The two beds were separated by a small bedside table with a cream-colored lamp on it. There also was a small TV set high on the wall, an armchair and another table beside it, and on the left-hand side of Hutch's bed, there was a door that quite probably, led to the bathroom.

Starsky flopped down on his bed and met Hutch's eyes. "I've asked Huggy to go to my place and bring me some stuff," he told him.

"But, Starsky..." Hutch began.

"Don't start on that, partner. Dr. Lester said he had arranged everything for me to stay all the time I wanted, and it'd be very ungrateful of me to refuse his generosity. Besides, you know you want me to stay as much as I wanna stay."

Hutch blushed and looked down, implicitly admitting Starsky's words.

"I promise I'll be a good boy and I won't interfere with the nurses' job," Starsky smiled at Catherine mischievously.

"I know you won't," she answered, looking at him. Something in her stare made Starsky gulp.

Catherine met Hutch's eyes next and winked at him furtively. Hutch bit the inside of his mouth and looked at the bathroom door, desperately trying not to give himself away. Catherine had just made certain that Starsky behaved himself.

"I'll bring you a painkiller now, so that you have a quiet night, despite your friend here," she told Hutch.

"Don't worry. He can behave like a civilized man when he wants to," Hutch assured her.

"Ha!" Starsky exclaimed, lying down on his bed and placing his hands behind his head. "I'll pretend I didn't hear ya say that."

When Catherine was leaving the room, Starsky's stomach rumbled in the HI-FI scale.

"Yes, yes, yes," she turned to Starsky, "I'll bring something for you too." She headed for the door. "My goodness! I've never been courted by a man's stomach before. I guess there's a first time for..." her voice got lost down the corridor.

Hutch and Dobby snickered and Starsky hid his head under the pillow, as red as a lobster.

Ten minutes later, the door opened again and Ms. Pierce entered with a hypodermic in her hand, followed by a volunteer who carried a tray with a plate for Starsky full to bursting with a huge steak, mashed potatoes and mixed vegetables, an empty glass and a Coke.

Starsky's eyes opened wide with lust at the sight before him, but he made a face of disappointment when he saw the drink.

"Coke?" he groaned.

"What's the matter?" the nurse asked. "Are you a Pepsi man?"

"No!" Starsky exclaimed, "I am a beer man! How can you bring such a delicious lookin' steak and spoil all the fun with a Coke? I mean..."

"No alcohol for you," Ms. Pierce interrupted him, while injecting the painkiller into Hutch's IV. "You've had almost no food today and alcohol wouldn't agree with you. Especially when it's so late already."

Starsky put out his hands, trying to reason with the headstrong nurse. "Honey, you made a little mistake here. It's my partner they operated, not me."

Ms. Pierce walked up to Starsky and towered over the sitting man. "I said no beer and that's final. Want me to take away your steak and change it for a plate of jelly?" she reached for the tray.

"No!!" Starsky protected the plate with his own body, as if Catherine was threatening his most prized possession. "Coke's just great!"

The nurse smiled. "I knew you'd change your mind," she turned about and gestured for the younger nurse to follow her and winked at Hutch and Dobey, who seemed about to explode into gales of laughter.

Starsky cast a withered look at the retreating nurse and began attacking his steak. Every time he had to take a sip at the Coke, he made a face of distaste that was truly hilarious. Hutch had the time of his life watching his partner, knowing he was exaggerating his faces to make him smile. It was good to see him eating with such gusto. He couldn't help feeling a little guilty. There had been a little pallor around the blue eyes that was disappearing as the food worked its magic in his friend's stomach.

Starsky finished his dinner in less than ten minutes, Coke included, and when the young volunteer returned to pick up the tray, he smiled at her like a kid who's just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. She shook her head and smiled back at him. The man's charm was irresistible.

"Don't lie down now or you'll be snoring in five minutes," Hutch warned him, when the young woman left.

"What do you mean?" Starsky looked genuinely offended.

"I mean that every time you've had a heavy dinner and lain down right after, you've always fallen asleep," Hutch reminded him.

"Sez who?" Starsky faced his partner.

"Everybody. It's an established fact," Hutch shrugged.

Starsky frowned. "I don't snore," he protested.

"That's true, but you do when you've had a heavy dinner," Hutch couldn't keep the fondness from his voice.

Starsky met his partner's eyes and ended up smiling at him. He just wanted to lie down and rest, with the soft lullaby of Hutch's breathing reminding him they had survived once again. He felt a lovely warmth spreading inside him. They knew each other so well! Sometimes, they sounded like an old married couple. They knew about each other's habits better than their own mothers ever had.

The three men engaged in idle chit-chat until Huggy arrived half an hour later with all the things Starsky had asked him. Starsky and Hutch thanked Huggy and Dobey for everything they had done for them, and they kindly shooed them away, arguing that the hospital was about to close and they would be trapped inside until the next day if they didn't leave. Dobey and Huggy left after shaking the two friends' hands, with the promise of coming back the next day.

When the door closed behind them, Starsky turned to Hutch with a wink and a rascally cute smile. "Alone at last!" he exclaimed, wriggling his eyebrows.

Hutch laughed softly, wishing... "At last alone!" he repeated. "What time is it?" he asked curiously.

Starsky checked his watch. "Five past ten," he answered, grabbing his PJ's. "Wanna watch television while I'm getting ready for bed?"

"No, thanks," Hutch shook his head. "I'm getting sleepy already. The painkiller must be working."

"Okay. Be right back," with a smile, Starsky disappeared in the bathroom.

Hutch looked around the small room, feeling strange all of a sudden. When he woke up that morning, he'd have never guessed how the day would end for him. Back in Memorial Hospital, with yet another scar on his body, and a kind doctor had meddled with his intestines. Nice! But that was life. As unexpected, terrifying and sometimes, merciful. He had survived and, as a gift coming down from Heaven, his relationship with Starsky had overcome the final hurdle. He felt utter peace. Well, almost. At least, he felt strong enough to keep on hiding his secret from Starsky. As a matter of fact, knowing that the two of them were keeping a secret from each other had made them equal in a weird way. That was one of the things that had disturbed him most. Their relationship's perfect balance had shattered because of his secret. Now, as strange as it could seem, they had become equal partners again. Equal, even in their secrets.

He shook his head. It made no sense, but it made him feel better, in a convoluted way.

He yawned and felt his eyelids closing, but he fought the tiredness stubbornly. He would wait for his partner to come out of the bathroom first. He had to thank him. He looked at the empty bed beside him and stared at the indentation Starsky's body had made when he had lain down on it. He felt warm all over. They weren't going to sleep in each other's arms as they had done a few months ago, but this was probably the next best thing; sleeping across each other, within arms' length. He sighed softly. He would content himself with that. It was the most he could aspire to. He felt the most irrational urge to reach out and touch the bed's coverlet. Starsky's bodily warmth still had to linger there. Hutch's arm moved of its own volition...

The bathroom door opened then, and the arm quickly returned to its owner, resting across Hutch's belly.

Trying to distract himself from his hopeless dreams, Hutch looked at his emerging friend, and it was all he could do to stifle a gasp. Starsky was wearing the navy blue silk pajamas he had given him after being released from the hospital after Gunther. He looked... regal in those PJ's. Hutch was mesmerized, he couldn't stop looking at such gorgeous beauty. The strong body seemed to flow as Starsky walked around his bed, left his clothes on the armchair beside the TV set, turned the overhead light off and headed for his own bed.

A frantic beeping sound alerted Hutch to his wildly beating heart. Just what he needed! To be outed by his own heart! He began taking long, deep breaths, until he managed to calm down.

Starsky opened his bed and sat down on it, facing his partner. Hutch offered him a shaky smile.

"Starsk, I never got to thank you for..."

"If even after all these years, you still feel the need to thank me, you're in worse shape than I thought," Starsky cut him short. "But you wouldn't be my Hutch if you didn't do things like that," he smiled fondly at him.

Hutch blushed and looked down. A moment later, he felt the soft touch of Starsky's hand on his wrist.

"You're welcome, Blondie. Any time," the smiling voice said.

Hutch met the warm, loving eyes and smiled softly. He took another calming breath, feeling safe and protected. Starsky's love and caring seemed to radiate from his body and envelope him in a soothing, healing bubble.

"Thank *you* for saving my life," Starsky whispered, his eyes swimming with emotion and infinite gratitude.

Hutch smiled back and covered the sturdy hand with his own, completing the circle. "Anytime, buddy. Anytime," he replied.

They remained like that, staring and smiling at each other, for some time, until they let go by silent mutual agreement.

"If you wanna watch television, that's fine with me. I'll be sound asleep in five minutes," Hutch couldn't help another yawn. His eyelids weighed a ton by now.

"No, thanks, partner. It's been a hard day and I need my beauty sleep too." Starsky stroked the blond hair tenderly and got into bed.

Hutch smiled at the sight of the socked feet. He bit his lower lip, his heart suddenly full to bursting. Starsky was the only person he knew who went to sleep with socks. Agreed, it wasn't the most erotic sight in the world, but to him, it was the cutest, most endearing thing he had ever seen. Starsky complained his feet were always cold in winter and clammy during the summer. He had slept with socks all his life and he felt very uncomfortable every time he had to sleep with his feet naked. For a fleeting moment, he remembered the horrible days after his partner's shooting and how one evening, as he kept his vigil by his beloved's bedside, he had suddenly remembered how much Starsky hated to sleep without socks. Not wanting to move away from his friend more than strictly necessary, he had hurried to buy a pair of socks from the nearest shop and, sneaking in his partner's room again, he had lovingly dressed the cold feet and rubbed them carefully, wanting to pass on part of his own warmth to the still, pale form under the sheets. He would never forget the moment, some time after waking up from the coma, when Starsky had looked at him with a serene smile on his face and, drawing his attention to his feet, he had wriggled his toes playfully under the covers. Ahhh, he had never laughed so happily in his life! Starsky's boyish, grateful look had been a gift beyond price. Every single day after such a terrible ordeal had been a gift.

"Want me to turn the light off?" Starsky's voice brought him back to the present. Starsky's hand was poised over the bedside lamp.

"If you want," Hutch nodded.

A heartbeat later, everything was dark in the room. Hutch listened to the soft sound of Starsky's body sliding comfortably into bed, and he felt irrationally jealous of the cushion and sheets that were granted the privilege of touching and wrapping themselves around the body that would never be his.

A couple minutes later, Hutch realized he could make out the shape of several objects in the room. His eyes had accustomed to the low street lights filtering through the spaces in between the blinds. He could see the armchair in the farthest corner of the room and the edge of Starsky's bed. He could make out the shape of Starsky's legs raising from the flat cushion. He followed them up the long, beautiful body of his own true love.

A sudden sharp pang of pain and loneliness made him wince. So close and yet so far! Hutch closed his eyes as two helpless tears rolled down his face. No, he wouldn't dwell on it now! He was alive. His partner loved him, their friendship was stronger than ever and he looked like he was going to get well. There were so many things to be grateful for! He had to stop thinking about the only thing he couldn't have. He had to accept it and learn to live with it.

It was funny. He was mourning the loss of something that had never been his. But it still hurt. God, did it hurt! He furtively wiped the tears away, feeling that should he make the slightest noise, Starsky would know. They were so attuned to each other! Dejectedly, he let his arm dangle from the edge of his bed, and he gasped when his hand touched something warm and alive. The spark of electricity that ran up his arm and all over his body made no mistake about what he had just touched. His hand opened of its own volition as Starsky's hand opened too and closed around his own.

The peace and calmness that descended upon Hutch couldn't be described with words in any language. A soft sigh escaped his lips and the sweetest smile illuminated his face. He felt as if someone had draped a

blanket over his chilled, dying soul, and had brought it back to life. He returned the beautiful pressure and the most delightful tingle spread throughout his body.

"Good night, Blintz," the warmth in the soft voice made every hair on his body stand on end.

"Good night, Starsk," he smiled back, feeling just as he had felt the night a few days ago, when he had fallen asleep on his partner's shoulder as they watched the stars. He remembered the strong arms wrapping themselves around his body and he had wished that moment could last forever. They were only holding hands now, but to Hutch it was so overwhelming, that he could feel the warmth of Starsky's body pressing itself against his own, as he had felt it that blessed night. He closed his eyes and let go, with a lovely smile on his face that mirrored the one on his partner's features.

As the night progressed, a moonbeam filtered through one of the tiny spaces in between the blinders, and fell on the two partners' entwined hands, making them glow.

The morning found the two men's hands still entwined. Starsky awakened first and waited for his partner's eyes to open before letting go of the big warm hand. When he found the sweet, caring eyes settled on him, he smiled at the handsome face and with a gentle squeeze, they let go of each other for the first time in almost 10 hours. Starsky went to the bathroom to wash up and relieve himself, shave and dress, and when he came out, he found his breakfast already waiting for him. With Hutch's amused eyes watching him all the time, he gobbled up until the last crumb of his toast with jam and the last drop of his coffee with cream.

Nurses showed up from time to time to change Hutch's urine bag, to administer his medication or simply to see how he was doing and if he needed anything.

Dr. Lester showed up when it was almost eleven, and after carefully checking Hutch's incision, feeling his belly and asking him a few questions about his physical condition, he announced that Hutch was doing okay. He told the nurses to go on with the IV, the painkillers and the antibiotics and he asked for a blood analysis. After shaking the two friends' hands warmly, he left to check on his other patients.

A few minutes later, a young nurse arrived to take Hutch's blood. After that, the two men were left alone and they spent the time talking.

Workmates and fellow officers from their precinct dropped by all day long to visit their wounded friend and wish him a quick recovery.

Huggy arrived before lunch time with a stack of magazines for the two partners to kill time. Starsky had lunch while Huggy was there and just when the man was leaving for The Pits, Dobey and his wife Edith arrived. Edith pampered and hovered around Hutch like a mother hen and Hutch couldn't seem to stop blushing, to Starsky's endless delight and relentless teasing.

It was good to know that their friends and superior officers cared. It was comforting to know that none of the days Hutch was hospitalized they would be alone.

The day passed quicker than expected. Dobey and his wife left before dinner time. The two friends watched television and Hutch dozed off for a little while, as Starsky almost drooled at the sight of his peacefully sleeping love. He thanked heavens there had been no more complications. Hutch's color was returning and his strength was slowly coming back. He could feel it.

Hutch woke up when Starsky was getting ready for bed. They talked for a while from their respective beds and shortly thereafter Hutch asked a question which Starsky failed to answer. Looking beside him, Hutch saw that his partner had fallen asleep. With a soft smile, he reached out and turned the bedside lamp off.

"Sweet dreams, Starsky," he whispered, knowing he couldn't be heard.

As if on cue, Starsky turned onto his left side and his left hand reached out to him. Hutch bit his lips, moved to his very core by the unconscious gesture. Following his heart, he reached out to his partner. As soon as his fingertips brushed Starsky's, the sturdy hand opened and closed around his own. Hutch's skin filled with goosebumps. The tingle that spread all over his body with just the brush of their fingers, left him breathless and throbbing from head to foot.

And just like the night before, they slept thus.

The next day was more or less a repetition of the day before. Hutch was feeling much better and everybody could tell that he was getting his strength back in leaps and bounds. After his daily round, Dr. Lester announced that if everything went well, the next day Hutch would get rid of the heart monitor and the catheter, and he would be allowed to get out of bed. His ribs would bother him until they knit together, but his concussion was quite relieved, and his dislocated shoulder was also healing.

The day was spent playing cards, (Starsky sweet-talked one of the nurses into bringing him a pack of cards), watching TV and reading magazines. Their friends' visit and each other's healing company was just what the two men needed.

When it was bed time, Starsky got into bed and fell right asleep almost instantaneously with his arms wrapped around himself, facing his partner. With a sad, resigned smile on his face, Hutch turned off the bedside lamp and despite his ribs' protest, he managed to half-turn onto his right side, waiting for his eyes to get used to the darkness, so he could fall asleep retaining the image of his sleeping love. It took him much longer to slumber than the two previous nights; his right hand itched for Starsky's touch and he couldn't help but fidget in restlessness; eventually, though, he fell asleep too.

In their sleep, their hands released themselves from their mental chains and searched one another in the dark. As soon as they met, Starsky and Hutch smiled softly in their sleep and sighed in blissful contentment, holding on tight.

The morning found the two men facing one another and staring at their joined hands with wide open eyes. When they met each other's gaze, they burst out laughing and squeezed each other in happy resignation.

Just like the two days before, Starsky went to the bathroom to relieve and wash himself, shave and dress. Nurse Henderson arrived with his breakfast and after gobbling it up enthusiastically, they waited patiently for Dr. Lester's arrival.

The man arrived at 10:30 and after checking on Hutch, he gave instructions to the nurses to remove the heart monitor and the catheter. Hutch was free to get up and walk around the room, but only for short periods of time. Today would also be his final day on IV painkillers.

With a loud 'YIPPEEE!', Starsky helped his friend out of the bed. Hutch asked him to help him to the bathroom. He needed a shave and a decent wash up badly. Starsky didn't allow the nurses near Hutch. It was *his* responsibility.

Slowly, with their arms around each other's waists and Hutch dragging along the IV, they made it to the bathroom. Desperately trying to hide the trembling of his arms and hands, Starsky lovingly revealed Hutch's torso and proceeded to wash him with the utmost care and tenderness. Hutch was doing his very best not to react to his partner's thorough washing, including his neck, upper chest and back that the elastic dressing weren't covering. The touch of Starsky's hands, even through the small towel he was using, was indescribable. So gentle, so loving it made him want to cry. He had to pull himself together or Starsky would notice that something was wrong. But, how could he refuse the oh-so-rare chance to fully savor the heavenly joy of having his beloved's hands on him? Hutch instinctively turned his brain off and concentrated on feeling. He closed his eyes with a heartfelt sigh, and all too soon, the heavenly bath was over. Returning to

the real world, he answered 'yes' to Starsky's question of shaving him. He thought with irony about how much more complicated his life had become since he had fallen in love with Starsky. He always enjoyed the feel of his friend's hands on him whenever he'd been sick or hurt, or for no particular reason at all. They were so warm, so honest, so full of naked affection, and they had always taken his pain away. Now, that pleasure had turned into shame and fear. It was so sad. Even those occasional pleasures were denied to him now.

Sighing dejectedly, Hutch wondered who it was that said that love was beautiful. To him, love had always equalled pain. And now Starsky's love, and his love for Starsky, the only joy his life had ever known, had ended up reduced to this travesty of the shining beauty it had been once. Yes, they had solved their pending issues, everything was all right between them again, but there was a big part of him he couldn't share with Starsky, and it hurt him no end. He only had to think about the infinite sorrow that had taken permanent residence in his soul, to know things weren't as they had been two years before. And he doubted they would ever be.

As Starsky rummaged in his shaving kit, looking for his can of shaving cream and the disposable razors, Hutch observed his partner for the umpteenth time, coming to the same conclusion. The man was gorgeous to die for, the best friend anyone could ever have and... simply, the love of his life. His eyes suddenly misted and caressed the beloved form for a few moments, before looking down and taking a deep, calming breath. He would never get over Starsky, he knew that now. How the hell are you supposed to get over your other half? Your soulmate? The person you have been born to love and belong with?

Finally, Starsky found all the items he needed. He unwrapped the razor and put it aside, and then began shaking the can of shaving cream. Pulling the mask of 'just friendship' over his features, Hutch waited patiently.

Starsky filled his hand with cream and after putting the can on the sink, he began spreading the cream all over Hutch's cheeks and chin. He could feel the stubble tickling his palm and his fingertips, and it was all he could do not to shiver in pleasure. He pursed his lips and with grim determination, he set to complete this chore for his friend.

His mind was definitely elsewhere, that's why, not really thinking about what he was doing, he ventured into Hutch's upper lip. "Ooops, sorry, Hutch! I forgot," he immediately apologized, using his thumbnail to wipe away the cream from Hutch's upper lip.

Hutch's right hand immediately shot up and grabbed his wrist. Meeting his partner's eyes, Hutch smiled softly and moving his hand up Starsky's, he took Starsky's fingers in his own, and very slowly, making certain that he was getting his point across, he spread the remaining cream on Starsky's fingers all over his upper lip.

Instantly understanding Hutch's message, Starsky smiled. Amazingly, a soft flush colored his cheeks and Hutch revelled in the lovely shade.

With extreme care, Starsky shaved his friend and then he applied some aftershave on the baby smooth skin. Then, he fastened the hospital gown again. "Are you cold?" he asked. He feared that being stripped from his waist up all those minutes had left his partner chilled.

"No, I'm warm enough," Hutch reassured him with a bashful smile. "Thank you, Starsk," his voice sounded infinitely soft and grateful.

"Any time, Mr. Hutchinson," Starsky smiled, bowing his head politely. He put away the can of shaving cream and threw all the disposable items in the wastepaper basket beside the sink. He quickly washed his hands and offered his hand to Hutch. "Wanna sit down for a while?" he suggested.

"Yeah, that'd be nice," Hutch's face lit up as he carefully wrapped his right arm around Starsky's waist.

Carefully, they made it to the armchair and Hutch gratefully sat down on it with his partner's help.

"Do you wanna read a bit or watch TV or play cards with yours truly or...?" Starsky asked, as he placed Hutch's IV behind the armchair, out of harm's way.

"A game of cards sounds good," Hutch quickly put an end to Starsky's string of possibilities. *'Yours truly. I wish!'* he thought. A moment later, he shook his head with a small self-deprecating smile. *'You're pathetic, Hutchinson.'*

Starsky grabbed the pack of cards from the bedside table and shuffled them. "Pinochle? Blackjack? Strip poker?" he suggested.

"Strip poker would hardly be a fair game, since I only have these silly slippers, my boxers and the hospital gown to take off," Hutch replied, not batting an eyelash. "However, if you're willing to strip down to your underwear for starters..."

"And make the nurses swoon with my breathtaking 'beauty' every time the poor unsuspecting ladies come in? I don't think so, buddy," Starsky grabbed the spare chair and sat down right in front of Hutch.

Hutch worried his lower lip. There it was again, that almost undetectable tension in his friend's voice every time he talked about his body. That had been a touchy subject with Starsky for some time now. Hutch had noticed that since the shooting, Starsky avoided being barechested around him. It made no sense to him. Hutch had seen his wounds daily for months. He had dressed them, he had touched them, he had *kissed* them, for Chrissake! And the man was no close to getting over the absurd complex he had gotten. It pained him that every time he walked into Starsky's apartment and found his partner in jeans, boxers or pajama bottoms and barechested, Starsky hurried to his room and a moment later, he emerged with a T-shirt on, his robe or his pajama top buttoned all the way up. He had tried to bring up the subject several times, and Starsky either snapped at him or asked him to please drop it. He respected Starsky's wishes until now, but it was a year later and it was obvious Starsky was still having problems coping. He didn't know how to make Starsky understand he was just as beautiful as he had been a year ago. He was just as handsome, desirable and gorgeously sexy. If only he could run his hands up and down that perfect chest and bury his face in the soft hair and cover it with kisses... Hutch closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Dreams! Cherished, precious dreams that would never come true.

But he had to help Starsky. He had to make him understand that those scars didn't change who he was. His perception of himself might have changed, but the way his friends saw him hadn't. Making up his mind, he took a deep breath. "Starsk..."

"Please not again, Hutch," Starsky said, dealing the cards. He never looked up at his partner.

"It's been a year now and you still have a problem with it," Hutch ignored the warning in his friend's voice. "Reynolds, Collins, MacMahon... all of them have their own share of scars on their bodies and they're all happily married and they have no problem with nudity in the showers or the changing room. You've never been an especially vain person, not to such an extent, anyway," he allowed the mild teasing to surface. "I just want to help you. If you tell me where the problem is, we can try..."

"Bully for Collins, Reynolds and MacMahon. But they're not me," Starsky answered.

"But why, Starsky?" Hutch insisted. "I can imagine how traumatic it must be for a person to wake up with a scarred body, but eventually they get used to it. The people who love them keep on loving them, and in time..."

"Hutch..." Starsky was barely able to control himself.

"Starsky, you didn't behave like this after the shooting in the Italian restaurant. I don't understand..."

Starsky looked at Hutch with a look of infinite pain. The blond man was expecting an outburst, and he was mentally preparing himself for it, but the agony in those deep blue eyes was so unexpected that it hit him like a kick in his guts.

"You wanna know why, Hutch? Do you *really* wanna know? Okay. I'll tell ya, buddy," Starsky's voice was full of disgust. "Do you remember the rehab I had to go through right after the shooting? It included water therapy in the swimming pool to recover my muscular tone."

Hutch nodded. All of a sudden, something in Starsky's voice triggered a memory. One evening, Starsky had returned from the swimming pool completely withdrawn into himself. He had gotten into bed and refused to answer Hutch's questions and attempts at finding out what had happened. The morning after, Starsky was smiling again as if nothing had happened. Hutch assumed it had been one of those mood shifts that had plagued his friend those first few weeks, when he was convinced he would never recover completely and he would never be the man he had been before. It seemed he was about to find out what had really happened that day.

"Well," Starsky went on, looking away, "one evening... yes, *that* evening. Everything had gone well, my muscles didn't hurt as much as they used to. At least, underwater. All the other patients had left already, and I was the only one left. The therapist had gone to pick up my wheelchair. And out of the blue, I heard people coming in. I thought it was strange because it was almost closing time; but apparently, there had been some problem with their schedule that day and they had been granted half an hour. I was sitting on the edge of the pool with my legs in the water. I heard someone walking up to me and next, they said: "Bleeeech, that's disgusting!"

Hutch closed his eyes. The infinite pain in Starsky's voice lanced through his heart like a knife.

"It was a child, Hutch. A little boy." Starsky looked away again. "I looked back and I saw several children gathering behind me, looking at my back and pointing at it, making disgusted faces. They were 5, 6, 7 years old at most. And when I turned about and they saw my chest, a little girl cried out and ran to a young woman. She clung to her as if she had just seen the bogeyman," he smiled ironically, and his eyes filled with tears. "And that was exactly whom she had seen. She burst out crying and repeating time and again: '*Is that the bogeyman, mummy? Is he gonna hurt us?*'" he met Hutch's eyes again. "She was terrified, Hutch. Of me!"

Hutch gritted his teeth. It wouldn't hurt more if it had happened to him.

"The mother tried to calm her down as best as she could and looked at me with this sad, understanding smile on her face." He looked down at his hands. "I know they were only children..."

"You know how cruel children can be, Starsk," Hutch said. '*Lord knows I do*', he thought.

"Yeah, I know," Starsky nodded. "But the thing is that I looked down at my chest then... for the first time, I... I really, *really* looked at it; at how..." he sighed, in total dejection, "how *disgusting* the scars really were. Disgusting enough to scare a little girl. Disgusting enough to make children sick just looking at me," he bit his lower lip mercilessly.

"Oh, Starsky!" Hutch reached out across the small table, and took Starsky's hand in his own. "You should've told me. You should've talked to me. This has been rotting inside you for almost a year."

Starsky sniffled, pulling himself together with determination. "There was nothing you could do. But I learned something that day. How things were going to be from then on. I knew the disgusted, pitiful and compassionate looks I'd get from people every time they looked at me, just like the mother of that little girl. I knew that every time a person looked at me, they wouldn't see me. They'd see what had happened to me, there was no way around it. It'd be with me for the rest of my life." His shoulders drooped in total defeat. "And I knew that from then on, I'd be touched with loving compassion at most, but never with desire."

"How do you know that?" Hutch asked.

"That's the way you touched me," Starsky's eyes met Hutch's and they bored into the blond man's soul. "I know you were only trying to comfort me and make me feel better. And it worked. But you had always looked at me with... I don't know how to put it. Trust and pride, maybe. Pride in my strength, in my..."

masculinity, so to speak. If my scars had been able to reduce you to a puddle of mush, kissing me like a mother kissing a wound to make it better... I knew that's the way everybody would look at me from now on."

Hutch shook his head, not knowing where to begin. How to break down so many months of wrong assumptions and misunderstandings? "Starsky, you were convalescent then. How did you expect me to touch you? What did you expect me to do? Wrestle with you? I've always looked at you with pride. You have a great body. The shooting hasn't changed the way I treat you and you know it. I trust you with my life. I admire your inner strength, the strength of your body, the masculinity you exude. I admire your force of will, your determination, your courage. I look at you in the same way now. And if you can't see it..."

Starsky shook his head, more and more frustrated. "You don't get it, Hutch," he patted his chest. "*This* is what people will see. They won't see *me*! Every time they look at me, they'll be seeing Gunther! That's what I see every time I look at myself in a mirror! I see a body mangled and ugly. I hate it! I hate feeling sorry for myself! I hate to know I'm disgusting enough to frighten a child! I hate not being able to not think about it every single day! These scars are *me* now!!"

"I see," Hutch's eyes became suddenly cold. He quietly put his cards on the table and opened his hospital gown. He calmly revealed his chest, showing Starsky the scar Vivian had made on his body. Then, reaching down, he opened the dressing aside and showed Starsky his most recent surgical scar. "And what do you see when you look at this? Do you also think these scars are *me*?"

Starsky's head jerked back in shock and his eyes opened wide.

"Do you feel compassion for me? Do you think I'm going to break and that I'll put off all those who look at me? Are you put off by me, Starsky? Do you think nobody will ever love me or think I'm desirable? Do you think this is all there is to love and friendship? Real, true love and friendship? Are you really that shallow, buddy?"

Starsky's chin began trembling.

Hutch covered himself again and held Starsky's gaze sternly. "I trust I made my point here. If you're willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, why can't you give it to yourself?" He shook his head. "Starsky, the woman you decide to give your heart to, is gonna be the luckiest lady on the face of the Earth. And she'll know how lucky she is. She'll love to touch you, and she'll look at you with passion and desire."

Starsky's tears finally spilled, in total silence.

"I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression that day, Starsk. And I'm sorry if I unwillingly contributed to making you feel inadequate. I did what I thought you needed at the time. But things have changed since then. You recovered and you're every bit as fit and strong as you used to be. Give yourself the chance to trust others as you did before. Don't be afraid of opening up to other people. That's one of the things I've always loved about you. Your self-confidence, your easygoing charm that wins everybody over. I almost envied you for that. It always took me longer to open up and trust people." He reached out again and clasped Starsky's forearm. "Try, Starsk. The only thing that's stopping you, is yourself."

Starsky looked at his partner for a very long moment, as if trying to read him inside. Hutch did everything he could to prevent his true feelings for his partner to show. They were too close to the surface. He did his best to cover what he didn't want his friend to see, and everything in his power to convey his feelings of conviction and total support. Finally, Starsky wiped his tears away and smiled softly at him. "You're right, ya know? I'm the one who's holding me back. But I can't help it. I guess I relied too much on my physical appearance, and now that I..."

"Starsky, you're a very attractive man, but that's not all there is about you. If there was, no lady would have dated you a second time. Don't underestimate your intelligence. You have so much to give!" he rolled his eyes in a most expressive gesture. "Jeeezus, I can't believe I'm saying this to you after all this time! You *do* have an amazing body; you're a caring, compassionate, loving person. Why shouldn't someone fall in love with you? But you're broadcasting the '*Stay away, I'm ugly*' signal, and you're unknowingly driving people

away. Once you're comfortable with yourself again, you'll be ready to jump into the love arena like the matador you are."

The two of them burst out laughing at the colorful metaphor.

"A matador, huh? Sounds good," Starsky said, tilting his head in an endearing way. He sighed out loud. "Thank you, Hutch," his grateful look turned into one of total seriousness. "But there's one thing I want you to know. What you did for me that night was exactly what I needed. Make no mistake about that. I needed you to hold me and... touch me, and make me feel worthy of being touched. You've always known what to do when I needed something and you always had perfect timing. I felt loved that night. I felt... good, and comforted; like a human being again, not a cripple."

"I'm glad," Hutch smiled tenderly, squeezing Starsky's wrist with relief. "We'll take small steps; together, if you want."

"Such as?" Starsky asked.

"Such as not hurrying in your room to get a T-shirt, your robe or whatever every time I walk in on you and you happen to be barechested. Okay?"

"Okay," Starsky conceded. "It sounds silly when you think about it, but I just couldn't..."

"I understand, Starsk," Hutch reassured him. "There's nothing silly about feeling inadequate. There's nothing silly about suffering. But that's what friends are for. That's what I'm here for, partner. Always."

Starsky turned his hand in Hutch's grasp and they held on to each other. "Thank you," he repeated.

"You're welcome, babe," Hutch smiled, losing himself in those blue pools of warm affection.

"¡Hola, compadres!" Huggy's loud greeting made them jump. "Hey, Hutch! It's great to see you up and about, bro!"

"Thanks, Huggy," Hutch smiled at his friend. "It feels good, too."

The lanky man walked up to his two friends and flopped down in Starsky's bed. "Anita sends her love and anything you need, and I'm quoting her," he informed.

Hutch sputtered and blushed.

"She'll never get over you, partner," Starsky teased.

Hutch was about to comeback, but there was a soft knock at the door. A second later, Captain Dobe and his wife came in.

"Cap'n!" Starsky exclaimed. "Shouldn't you be working now?"

Dobe rolled his eyes. "May I remind you that today's Saturday, Starsky?" he said, taking his hat off.

"Oh!" Starsky's eyebrows raised. "Oh, that's great! We can watch the game together!"

"Starsky, I doubt this lovely lady, who just honored us with her presence, is interested in the game," Hutch said patiently, looking at Edith, who smiled back at him, very amused by the two partners' repartee.

"You're right, Hutch," Starsky agreed. "What about the cooking show?"

"Starsky!"

"Hey! I watch that show occasionally! Sometimes, even I need a few pointers, although my cooking's almost perfect. But you're right," Starsky calmly went on. "This beautiful lady doesn't need any cooking lessons," he smiled broadly at Edith, like a mischievous little boy.

"You rascal!" Edith couldn't disguise the warm affection in her voice. She placed her hand on top of the soft curls and pressed down softly. She looked at Hutch next. "How're you doing, sweetheart?"

"Much better, thank you," Hutch answered. "I'm sorry I can't offer you a chair..." he looked at Starsky pointedly.

"I'll get a couple chairs from the lovely nurses," Starsky immediately got the hint and vacated his chair, offering it to Edith with a gentlemanly gesture. He was out of the room before anyone could blink an eye.

"If he thinks he's going to get even a folding chair, then he's forgotten how things are in a hospital," Huggy commented.

"Don't underestimate my partner," Hutch proudly replied. "I bet he'll be back with at least a couple nice comfy chairs in less than 4 minutes."

"Five bucks," Huggy reached out his open hand to Hutch, looking at his watch for a moment.

Hutch immediately shook the proffered hand.

A few minutes later, Starsky made his big entrance in the room, clumsily carrying a couple chairs, one under each armpit.

Huggy's face fell and he checked the time. "Three minutes, forty seconds," he announced, reaching for his wallet.

Dobey and his wife laughed softly as Starsky stood still in the middle of the room, blinking at the scene before him.

"What?" he asked, looking around him.

Hutch waved the neatly earned bill in the air. "Huggy's courtesy," he explained to his partner. "He bet that you wouldn't make it."

Starsky shook his head pitifully at his skinny friend, putting the chairs on the floor.

The rest of the afternoon progressed uneventfully and faster than usual, thanks to the pleasant company. They talked, laughed and watched television for a little while. Nurse Henderson brought Starsky's lunch and changed Hutch's almost empty IV.

Dr. Lester showed up for an unprecedented second time to see how Hutch was doing. Hutch admitted he was a bit tired, but otherwise he felt fine. Dr. Lester told Hutch to lie down and sleep for a few hours. He told one of the nurses to administer to him a mild painkiller.

Starsky helped his partner into bed, tucked him in and fluffed his pillow, per Hutch's request. It had become a sort of running joke between them, one that brought them both more pleasure than they would ever admit, and for far more reasons they were ready to confess.

Less than half an hour after the nurse administered the painkiller to him, Hutch was sound asleep. Everybody watched him for a while, making certain he was resting properly and then, they began talking very softly. Edith finally revealed the reason that had truly brought them there. They wanted Starsky to go out for a breath of fresh air. He had spent the last 3 days in that room, and they had come to relieve him, if only for a few hours, so he could go home, change his clothes and take a proper shower.

Starsky resisted at first. He just didn't want to be away from his partner. He knew it was illogical, but he couldn't help it. He wanted... *needed* to be close to Hutch, seeing for himself that he was recovering and that everything was going well. Only when Huggy joined in and assured Starsky the three of them would stay watching over Hutch, and they would immediately call him if there was the slightest change in his condition, Starsky began grudgingly relenting.

In a flash of inspiration, Dobby suggested Starsky to go to Hutch's place instead, since it was closer to Memorial Hospital than Starsky's. Edith and Huggy thought it was a bright idea, and besides, Hutch's plants would need to be watered, after three days of being neglected.

Reluctantly, Starsky agreed to leave, but only after making them promise they would call him at Hutch's place should Hutch even make a weird face in his sleep. The three of them made the 'cross my heart and hope to die' sign across their chests, and after casting a longing and infinitely loving look at his sleeping partner, Starsky hurriedly left the room.

Heaving a collective sigh of relief, Huggy, Dobby and Edith gave each other the thumbs up.

Starsky entered Hutch's apartment and closed the door softly behind him. He stood still in the middle of the room, inhaling the smell of the place as deeply as possible. Hutch's scent impregnated the atmosphere and Starsky felt oddly comforted, closer to his partner, in a way.

He shook his head. This wasn't the time to get maudlin, but to get real. He looked around the place, feeling more at home there than in his own apartment. Lately, they spent half their free time in the other's place and the other half in their own. But it hurt to be there without Hutch. The place felt cold and empty. Soulless.

Although... part of Hutch's soul was there. In his plants, his guitar, his piano... everywhere. Hutch's caring soul permeated the place and Starsky felt warmed and protected. His partner's presence lingered all over the apartment, reassuring and taking care of him.

Without thinking, he took off his leather jacket and threw it on the couch. Walking into the kitchen, he filled the watering can with cool water and proceeded to nourish Hutch's plants. In a way, they had become his plants, too. Both of them had spent countless hours watering, fertilizing, removing the wilted foliage and just fussing over the lucky green things.

The place looked gorgeous. It was fresh, bright and full of life. The greenhouse gave Hutch's apartment an air of sensuality, of controlled wilderness. It gave the impression of being a place where life was respected and free to grow. It was a reflection, an extension of Hutch. If you cared to look for clues, you could learn many things about Hutch just looking around his apartment.

He felt so good every time he was here! He guessed that as time went by, their individual interests had become a part of each other. Starsky had to admit there was something calming and relaxing about gardening. Things had to be done slowly and carefully. It was a perfect pastime. A person could think and do something useful at the same time. He stopped for a moment and filled his lungs with the fresh air. He loved the scent of wet soil!

He suddenly found himself talking to Hutch's plants, reassuring them that Hutch was all right and he would be back soon, but in the meantime, they'd have to make do with him. When he realized what he was doing, he rolled his eyes and looked around him, almost expecting Hutch to walk up behind him and tease him mercilessly about his slip. The thought of his partner made him smile. Hutch didn't even have to be there, he was already making up their conversation in his mind.

With a sigh, he put down the watering can and removed wilted foliage for a while. When he had his hands full of dry leaves, he threw them in the garbage and got a beer from the fridge. He opened it and took a short swig, sitting on the couch.

It didn't matter how much he liked this place. Without Hutch it was empty, and knowing his partner was at the hospital didn't help. He put the beer on the table and stood up. It was time to take a shower and return to Hutch's side, where he belonged.

He went to Hutch's bedroom in search of the spare clothes he always kept there. The first thing that drew his attention, as always, was the sight of Ollie, leaning comfortably against Hutch's pillow, as if guarding the bed. The first few weeks after Hutch put it there, his heart had ached every time he had seen it. But as time went by, he got used to it, and now he felt really good about it. Somehow, it belonged there. Terry had always kept it on the bed with her, and after leaving it to Hutch, it seemed the most appropriate place for it to be. The two most important people in Starsky's life, together, watching over each other. It made no sense, but the sight of the white teddy bear on Hutch's bed comforted him and even made him smile. It felt... right.

Sometimes, he wondered about how his life would have been, had Terry lived. He could see himself married to her. She had understood and accepted the limitations of a cop's life, and he knew that she would have never forced him to choose between herself and his job. She understood that being a cop wasn't just Starsky's job, it was a big part of what Starsky *was*. And she had hit it off so well with Hutch! It was beautiful to see them teaming up against him, teasing him about his complete inability to play Monopoly, or their animated conversations about just any subject. Ahhhh, who knew? What ifs were just that. He would never know. Just as he... as *they* would never know what would have happened if Gillian had survived.

Had Terry and Gillian been his and Hutch's true loves? Or was Hutch his real true love? Could a person have two true loves? If Terry hadn't died, what then? Would his love for Hutch have never manifested itself?

It made no sense racking his brains with such questions. They were of little avail. Life consisted of infinite possibilities, and when you made a choice, a million possibilities disappeared, and a million new ones appeared. When Terry died, all the possibilities she had brought with her died with her. And a whole range of new possibilities materialized right then and there.

Starsky slumped into Hutch's bed and buried his face in his hands. How much easier his life would be if he had never allowed himself to fall in love with his partner! Here he was now, at the end of his emotional rope and with a permanent heartache. Sometimes, he needed Hutch so much that he couldn't stand the pain of it. But other times, he woke up feeling incredibly optimistic, and he couldn't wait to meet his partner at the precinct and spend a wonderful day beside the most amazing human being he had ever known.

But this wasn't one of those times. Too much had happened lately. Hutch had almost died and once again, Starsky had faced the possibility of a future without his only reason to live.

The hopelessness of his situation hit him anew full force. His life had been reduced to praying that Hutch wouldn't meet any girl worth dating; and deep down, knowing he couldn't stem the tide of Destiny. One day, they would enter someplace and there she would be; or they would pass a stranger in the street, Hutch would turn his head to look at her and everything would be over.

Starsky also knew that he would never settle for anything less than true love. He had found perfection with Terry and in his love for Hutch. But after Rosey, he had accepted the fact that he couldn't force himself to love a person, no matter how much he cared for that person and how much he wanted to find happiness and true love with them. Things didn't work like that. He had always known, but he had been so desperate at the time that he wanted to believe he could make it work; he convinced himself it *could* work out. After Terry, his heart seemed to have shut off permanently, or so it seemed to him. Agreed, he had felt the attraction, the lure, the chemistry again... but never the depth of feelings and empathy he had found with Terry. Until, somehow, he had opened his eyes to the fact that there was a person who owned his heart just like Terry had. A person who had worked their way into his heart from day one. Someone who was so deep inside him that it had become a custom to live and breathe for two.

But it was a hopeless love. What could he do? What was the use of being in love with a person who would never love him back? What was the fucking point of such a needless pain? God, he felt so much anger sometimes! He felt so alone, so lost! Like a parentless child with no one to turn to for comfort. He had

Hutch, but he couldn't tell him, couldn't ask him... couldn't even reach out to him. Sometimes, he called himself a coward and he wanted to lash out and destroy everything. There was so much fear, and pain, and despair inside him... How long was this going to last? How long would it hurt? How long before...?

He suddenly found himself holding Ollie and burying his face in the warm softness. Hutch's scent filled his nostrils, and the heartache and longing became so intense that he thought he was dying. He began rocking himself, wetting the teddy bear with his tears.

*'I'll always be there with you when you need me. When you're scared or the world seems like it's falling apart. Or just some dark night when you're all alone, when you just close your eyes and you try to remember me. I'll always be there.'*

For a moment, he felt as if he had heard Terry's words out loud again. They seemed as loud and real as that evening in the hospital when his world and his heart shattered into a billion tiny pieces. Starsky burst out sobbing, begging for this agony to end. Begging for a little peace. "Help me, help me, help me..." he moaned time and again, his voice muffled in Ollie.

He lost track of time, until, little by little, reality reasserted itself, and Starsky raised his head from Ollie's stuffed embrace. The storm of pain and the sudden raging anger had passed, and only a soul-deep sadness remained. Sniffling and clumsily wiping his tears away, he carefully put Ollie back on the bed, leaning against Hutch's pillow, and softly patted the teddy bear's head. He made a self-deprecatory face and stood up. He was pathetic. A few days ago, he had sworn to God he would be content with only Hutch's friendship, and if his partner lived he would never think again about what he couldn't have. Whom was he trying to fool? Did he really think this feeling would pass just like that, when he had been fighting it for over a year now? Loving Hutch was not a choice, like a light that could be turned on and off. Loving Hutch was a part of who and what he *was*. Sometimes, he thought that when God had created him, He had said something like this: "He will be curly-haired, blue-eyed and he will love Ken Hutchinson until his dying day." How could he fight what was an intrinsic part of his make-up?

He had no choice. He could only love Hutch and go on the best way he could. Until he could stand it no longer and he would either give himself away or die, whichever came first.

He shook his head resolutely. No more thinking, no more wallowing in self-pity and wishful thinking. He had come here to take a shower, put on some clean clothes and return to the hospital; and that was exactly what he was going to do.

He rummaged in Hutch's drawers, until he found a shirt and a pair of his spare underwear. Next, he went to the closet and looked for his jeans. When he was about to close the door, it suddenly occurred to him that the day they released Hutch from the hospital, he would need some clothes, too. Well, this was as good a time as any to get some clean clothes for him, as well. He chose a plain t-shirt, a plaid shirt and Hutch's baggiest jeans (they would have to be careful of his incision), and placed them on the bed, beside his own clothes. He returned to the drawers and took out a pair of socks and boxers for Hutch and also put them on the bed. Going back to the closet to get a pair of shoes for his partner, he reached up and felt his way on the top shelf, several inches above his line of vision. Hutch had chosen the strangest place to keep his shoes, he mused. When he touched the back of a pair of shoes, he grabbed them and took them out. Something fell on his head then, making him yelp and he let go of the shoes, that also fell to the floor with a thud. He rubbed the top of his head to relieve the sudden, unexpected pain, and looked down at his feet. It was a notebook. It had fallen open and several pages had folded. He recognized his partner's beautiful handwriting. With a sigh, he bent down and picked it up, careful not to cause more damage to the pages. He was already closing it when...

*"...this hopeless love I feel for Starsky..."*

...froze him on the spot.

His heart seemed to stop beating, but a moment later it started thumping in his chest savagely. His face flushed and he felt as if his body temperature had increased a thousand degrees.

No. It... It couldn't be! He couldn't possibly have read what... His brutally trembling arms brought the notebook closer and he looked for the paragraph where he had thought... the line he had undoubtedly misread... or misinterpreted its meaning.

He couldn't help a gasp when he found the line and read it again.

*"There's no way for me to get over this hopeless love I feel for Starsky. There's no way out. There's no turning back. There's no hope. I have no choice. I never had it. This love is me; it's what I am."*

The notebook fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers. His heart was hammering in his ribs. His temples throbbed and his ears buzzed. He was panting, as if he had been running non-stop for hours. Rising to his feet, he stood there in shocked disbelief, unable to think; unable to do anything but look ahead, completely knocked out. His life had just turned upside down. All the things he had taken as fact about himself, about Hutch, about how things could be between them... If he hadn't entered an alternate dimension of reality, if what he had just read was real and it meant what he thought it did, then... then... all his dreams and hopes had just come true.

His breathing slowly returned to normal, and he looked down at the fallen book. He was both hopeful and terrified. Was it real? Was this really happening? He suddenly felt disconnected from the reality surrounding him, detached from his own body and mind, as if seeing it all from a distance. And that notebook lying on the floor... that incredible blending of realistic practicality and the promise of a desperate man's most cherished dream...

He reached down and picked up the book for the second time. He held it in his hands reverently, studying it. The brown-colored cover. Plain, ordinary. But what he had found inside was... a miracle. It was everything he had ever dreamt about. Oh, good God! It still couldn't be! He couldn't possibly have read it right!! His eyesight became blurry and a heartbeat later, two drops fell on the brown cover. He slowly wiped them away with his fingertips.

Tears. The sweetest, most hopeful tears he had ever shed.

Walking like a ghost, he sat down on Hutch's bed and looked at the brown journal on his lap, not daring to open it again. What if he had misunderstood Hutch's words? What if Hutch didn't mean them the way he hoped?

He closed his eyes and threw his head back, a part of him still refusing to believe, still trying to protect itself from pain. If Hutch didn't mean it the way Starsky needed, it would be the final blow. He shivered from head to foot when he realized that the only way for him to understand what Hutch meant, was by reading the book. And if he did, it would be an unforgivable breach of his friend's privacy. Hutch had kept this hidden, probably for months, from Starsky and everybody's eyes. How could he do it, knowing that Hutch didn't want anybody to know what he had written in those pages? But Starsky knew that everything, absolutely everything, both his and Hutch's lives, depended on that brown-covered journal. Loyalty and despair fought inside him, but in the end, Starsky knew there was no choice, for either of them. If Hutch loved him the same way he did, this was the only way for Starsky to know, because he knew Hutch would die before telling him. And he could understand his beloved's silence. He had remained silent all these months for the same reason.

All of a sudden, he remembered Hutch's secret. The secret that made him feel so miserable and unhappy, and had been about to take his partner away from him for good. Could *this* be the secret Hutch had admitted that he was keeping from Starsky? Could Hutch's secret be Starsky's secret? Could the ultimate irony be their truth?

Starsky looked down at the book one last time, and with sweaty, trembling fingers, he slowly opened it. "Please forgive me, Hutch," he begged, as he started reading.

November, 3.

I don't know why am I doing this. Here I am, sitting on my couch at 1:15 AM, listening to Edward Elgar's Enigma Variations and crying my eyes out.

It's been five days since I moved back here after leaving Starsky's apartment. I've never felt so alone, so empty, so sad.

Living with Starsk these few months has been both hell and heaven. It's been a hell because of what happened to him. What he's had to go through... God, I don't know if I'd have been able to stand it. He's the bravest, most courageous man I've ever met, and seeing him as helpless as a newborn, so weak and in pain, broke my heart. I wish it had been me instead of him. I wish it every single day! I wish I could have taken his pain away and healed him, I wish I could have spared him the agony he has endured. I wish I could have done more. But I could only hold him when he was hurting and encourage him when he felt he couldn't go on. The rest, he had to do by himself. And he's made it. He's recovered and he's almost fit to return to the streets. I'm so proud of him and so happy for him!

And it's been heaven because this nightmare gave me the chance to be with him, live with him, share everything with him. And that was something I thought I'd never have. Not with Starsky. Not with the man I love.

Starsky gasped out loud and shaking like a leaf, he went on reading.

This is the first time I've written how I feel down on paper and it feels good. It has made it real in a new way. I feel good every time I read it. Because my truth is finally out in the open now. Outside my heart and my mind, at least.

There's so much I want to say, so many things inside me... thoughts, emotions, contradictions... But tonight, I mainly feel pain and loneliness. I'm alone in this apartment and I feel I'm going mad. The silence is killing me. With Starsky, there was always some kind of sound in the background. The TV, the radio, the stereo or just us, talking about anything. Here... there's nothing here. I feel cold. This place is cold without Starsky. My soul is chilled. My mind is frantic. My heart is empty.

I need to be with him. I need him beside me. I need *him*.

Five days alone in this cold place that doesn't even smell like him! Oh, his scent! The warmth of his body in my arms! The feel of his arms wrapped around me! I can't forget any of it! Despite the fact that we stopped sleeping together many weeks ago, I can't forget. I never will. Even his couch was better than my empty bed that only smells of... nothing. Starsky's scent was all over his apartment and I guess I got subconsciously addicted to it. I'm dying inside here.

When did I allow things to screw up so badly? When did I cross the line and fall in love with him? Honestly, I don't remember. It could have been the day I met him for all I know. But the day I acknowledged it to myself... that was the day everything ended for me. Because the day I admitted it to myself, I condemned myself to live with the secret. A secret that's been crushing me since then.

My head's spinning. The music's over and everything's silent around and inside me again. I can't feel anything anymore. I can only feel the pain of love. The pain of loving someone that will never love me back. Not like this, anyway.

Starsk, I'm so scared! I pray I won't screw it up again like I almost did with Kira. I couldn't tell you the truth then, and I can't tell you now, not ever. I know I hurt you more than anyone had ever hurt you before. I almost destroyed your trust in me. A trust that was my most precious treasure. Something so true and pure that I thought no one and nothing would ever break. And I almost did it. The look you gave me when you saw me coming out of her room... Oh, God, that look will haunt me until the day I die! Your eyes were telling me that you couldn't trust me anymore. I had committed the ultimate betrayal, and things would never be the same between us.

And the explanation I gave you was so pathetic I know I only made things worse, because we both knew it was a lie.

But, how to tell you that I slept with her because it was my only way to be close to *you*? What kind of convoluted psychological crap would explain that?

I don't know if you really, *really* loved her. But you seemed to *want* to love her at least, and for the first time, I panicked. I knew that if it wasn't her, it would be someone else sooner or later. I don't know why I went there that day. But when she practically threw herself in my arms, I couldn't resist. This was a woman you had been with, maybe just a few hours ago. Maybe your scent still lingered on her skin. And before I knew, we were on the bed and I... I was making love to *you*, Starsky. I desperately looked for you in her body. I practically ate her alive. I wanted to taste you in her, I wanted to feel your fingertips in her body, your scent on her skin. But it was barren. Useless. Painful. I disgusted with myself and what I was doing. And when I came out of her room and I saw you there... I knew I had destroyed everything for nothing. I hadn't found you in her, and I had lost you in the process. You'll never know how much our fight hurt me. I wanted to die, Starsk. You and I, fighting. It was against nature. I committed the ultimate crime against you, against our friendship, our partnership and our love for each other. With that one act, I betrayed EVERYTHING we had meant to each other, everything we had stood for, and I defiled myself beyond redemption. I felt so low, so dirty and ugly...

But you forgave me. I don't know why you did, but God bless, you did! And I swore to myself I would never fall to such a degree again. One day, you would find a nice, kind, lovely lady worthy of you. If I loved you the way you deserved, I had to let you go. And I swore to myself I *would* do it. I wouldn't stand in your way again, even if it killed me, as I know it will. Never to hurt you again! It was miracle enough to have you forgive me; I won't push my luck again.

I've never dared to broach the subject again. I don't want to open up that can of worms, but sometimes I wonder if you really forgave me or just said you did for the sake of our friendship and everything we had meant to each other. I can't bring myself to ask you because I'm terrified of your answer. You act as if nothing happened, though. I've never felt closer to you than I feel now. You allow me such intimacy! I've touched your body all over, we've slept in each other's arms for weeks. We've held nothing back. So I guess you've *really* forgiven me. But you know me. I can't help but wondering if you truly have. Such a betrayal can't be forgotten that easily, can it? The seed of distrust has been planted, and there's no way of taking it back.

I'm not making much sense. My thoughts are in a turmoil. Too many memories and feelings are coming to me all at once, and I'm mixing them all up. My heart and my brain are a jumble. I'm tired.

It's almost 3:00 AM! I'm gonna be falling asleep all over my desk tomorrow. I can't believe all the things I've written here. I just started writing and I filled over two pages with all this shit. A shrink would have their hands full with me, no doubt! I don't know why did I do this, but it feels good spilling everything out. I guess I'll be doing it again one of these days when it hurts too much, since I have no one to talk to. At least, it's prevented me from returning to that cold, chilly bed. I hate my bed! I want you in it, Starsk. I need your warm body beside me, holding me and making me feel worthy of your touch. I want us both under the sheets, making love.

But I guess some dreams are just that. Dreams. And mine will never come true. The sooner I accept it the lesser I'll suffer. But that's easy for me to say.

I love you, David Michael Starsky. I always have and I always will.

Starsky raised his eyes from the notebook, feeling like he was suffocating. He was shocked, paralyzed; his insides aching. The infinite pain and torment in his partner's words broke his heart. Good God, he could have written those words himself! He saw himself reflected in each and every word! Oh, dear, did that mean Hutch loved him that way too? It had to! He had just read so! He had just read those blessed words. There they were, in his partner's beautiful handwriting. Hutch loved him that way too!

Starsky experienced firsthand then the meaning of expression "to cry with happiness." It was as if the sun had come out after endless months of rain, cold and darkness. His spirit soared and he thought he would never touch the ground again. The searing pain in his chest became the most wonderful, exhilarating pain. The pain of requited love. His love was returned! Just as passionately, desperately and heartbreakingly! He suddenly found himself laughing out loud. Tears were rolling down his face and he was laughing! Ahhh, he never wanted to stop feeling like this! He wanted this feeling to continue while holding his beloved in his arms and kissing the stuffing out of him! He wanted to heal all that pain inside Hutch and turn it into blissful joy. The joy and happiness his angel deserved. God, he felt like he could live forever! Nothing could hurt him now! He was loved, loved by the only person in the universe that mattered. Thank you, Lord!

And thank you for finding out at last what all that nightmare with Kira had *really* been about. Everything made perfect sense now. He could understand Hutch's motives. Shit, he understood his motivations so well! If it had been the other way round, he could very well have acted the same way. He could understand the level of anguish and hopelessness that could take a man to seek relief from his pain by behaving the way Hutch had with Kira.

He had forgiven Hutch with all his heart months ago, but finding out the truth had put that nasty ghost to rest for good.

And at that moment, all the blinders began coming off. The fact that Hutch hadn't had a date in a year and a half and seemed to be in no hurry to get a girlfriend, his morose mood and withdrawn attitude the previous fateful year... Jeezus, everything made perfect sense! Starsky threw his head back as the most all-encompassing feeling of peace took him over.

His beautiful Hutch! He could picture his partner at night, alone in this apartment, silent tears streaming down his cheeks, pouring out his heart and soul in those pages, since he had no one to turn to. His heart ached for the immeasurable loneliness that angel had to go through, a perfect mirror of what lay in Starsky's heart. A reflection of what had been going on in his own cold apartment all these months, and long before that.

He let out a heartfelt sigh a taking a deep breath, he continued to read.

November, 9.

Another sleepless night. At least more sleepless than usual. I tried playing my guitar a little, but as with everything else I try, it proved useless.

I can only think of him. Always him. Oh, Starsky! If I told you how I feel about you, what would you do? Would you reject me? I saw what finding about John Blaine did to you. I know that a person being gay isn't really a big deal to you. But finding out after years of knowing a person, it's bound to make you feel insecure, doubting the very basis of your knowledge of that person. It's something I can relate to as well.

It's not that I am gay. Theoretically, a gay person feels physical and emotional attraction for people of their same sex. But I'm not attracted to men. I'm attracted to *you*. Only you. I keep on looking at ladies and I still think they're gorgeous, but they don't turn me on anymore. You do.

Do you have any idea what's like to sit beside you, across from you, touch you, smile at you, knowing that I have to hold back so that you don't suspect? Keeping my hands on neutral territory, when all I want is to hold your face in my hands and love you with my lips? Love your gorgeous body all over?

My life's so pathetic. This is what lies ahead of me. To content myself with harmless touches, knowing that if I want to keep your friendship, you must never know.

Some days are easier than others. Some days I'm just happy to have you beside me in any way, and I pat your back or squeeze your shoulder and it's enough. I swear it is. I think it's more than I deserve. After the nightmare we both survived, I thank God every single day you're with me, healthy and safe; and I know that if to have you in my life, I have to renounce to making love again for as long as I live, it's a small sacrifice to make. Without you, there's no point, anyway. But other days... Oh, Christ, *those* days! Those days I can barely refrain myself from holding you in my arms and telling you all the words I haven't told anybody in years, those corny words we used to laugh at as teenagers, thinking they were so sappy they would send us into a diabetic coma. But I'm such a hypocrite. Deep down, I secretly hoped for the day when I would meet someone I could open my heart to and tell them those words without fear of that person finding me weak or silly or... I told some of those words to Gillian, but when she died we still hadn't gotten to that stage of complete verbal honesty. We were discovering the wonder of being in love when Grossman took her away from me. But I think that soon enough, I would have been able to tell her those words. Funny that, knowing what her true 'profession' was and what she was used to hearing and doing. But I think that the harder your life is, the more you learn to value innocent, pure things. I guess. I said those words to Vanessa too, during our tenderest lovemakings, but when the bad times came, she used those words to laugh and mock at me, at how soft and simple I was. She was a natural at that. She always knew where to strike to make me feel like a failure. I guess that's the risk of opening yourself to people. They can use all the things you told them in confidence to hurt you. And the most ironical thing is that *you* gave them the weapons to use against you.

Everyone but you, Starsk.

Sometimes I wonder how are you in bed. I know how you are everywhere else. Playful, funny, sensual, imaginative, intense, sexy, loving, tender... I imagine that making love with you would be anything but dull. To be the subject of your passion and your love must be heaven on earth. I've received all those things from you in friendship, and I've never felt so cherished, so cared for, so protected and special. Sometimes, I ache for your touch so much I think I'm going to die, Starsk. You'll never know how starved for your love I am. I've been hungry all my life, and I realize now how very much I need you to breathe, to laugh, to smile, to feel, to... exist.

God, please help me to hide this from him tomorrow! I feel so much right now I don't think I'll have myself under control in just a few hours.

Love hurts. But not loving you would kill me.

It hurt to breathe. Starsky put his hand over his heart, trying to keep the searing pain at bay. To be the recipient of so much love! He was! He, David Michael Starsky! All the love inside that pure soul belonged to him! What had he ever done to be worthy of this heartbreaking poetry? Did he really mean *that* much to his partner? He knew Hutch cared, he knew he was Hutch's best friend, he knew Hutch loved him like a brother, but not to this extent. Never to this extent!

He prayed to be deserving of Hutch's love. He wanted to be worthy! He would take away those tears and that pain and he would turn them into smiles, laughter and pleasure! Never again would Hutch feel such sorrow! Neither of them would! They would never hurt like this again!

November, 17.

It's been over a week since my last entry. I could have easily filled dozens of pages in those days, but what for? It'd be redundant and pathetic. Not that it isn't redundant and pathetic now...

I'm slowly getting used to... No, I'll never get used to sleeping alone in my bed. Let's just say I manage to sleep in it. Period.

I'm trying to get drunk. But there's only one bad thing about getting drunk, and it's called hangover. There's nothing perfect in this world. If you want to get drunk, you must be prepared to deal with a hangover. You want to love your partner and...

I feel so despondent today... Almost like in my worst times. But I caught myself on time today. I'll never return to those dark days when I was miserable and I was making Starsky's life miserable too.

I wonder what's the use of a love like this. It's not that I'm not an eminently practical person. But I'm more than that. I want to believe all things have a purpose. But this love... this soulfilling, all-encompassing, neverending love I feel, is the most useless thing. It's only bringing me pain and preventing me from rejoicing in my friendship with Starsky.

I've always loved Starsky. My love for him has permeated my life and there's no corner of my soul or my body that doesn't belong to him. But why did I have to fall in love with him as well? What for? Why did I have to destroy the only perfection I have ever known?

God, everything's hopeless!

There's no way for me to get over this hopeless love I feel for Starsky. There's no way out. There's no turning back. There's no hope. I have no choice. I never had it. This love is me; it's what I am.

That's all I know. I was born to love Starsky. That's my purpose in life. To protect him, to take care of him, to love him until my dying day, and beyond.

I couldn't possibly wish for a most beautiful destiny. So many people walk through life alone, living empty and meaningless lives. I understand those people who live without hope, who have lost or renounced their dreams. When you have nothing to live for, nothing to look forward to, it's so easy to give up. So easy to lose oneself and lose one's soul in the process. I understand those people whose hearts have hardened beyond redemption when life gave up on them and they gave up on life. I still have Starsky, and yet, I feel I'm so close to losing myself! Sometimes, like tonight, I think I'm going insane with love and need. I pray I survive and I can smile and be the funny, witty, outgoing partner Starsky loves tomorrow.

I feel like a clown. Making people laugh when I'm dying inside.

But I still have Starsky. Despite the fact that this feeling of hopelessness will never end, my love for him is my most precious treasure. It makes me worthy of calling myself a human being. It'll help me to go on for as long as necessary. Forever, because my love for Starsky will last forever.

This evening, when I walked in on him at his place and I found him shirtless, I thought my heart was going to beat right out of my chest. But when he hurried to his bedroom to put on a t-shirt, I felt so much sadness... He still feels ugly. He still thinks that no one will ever see beyond his scars. I wonder what caused such complex in him. He's always been so self-assured, so confident in his masculinity and his irresistible charm! And he had several scars already, before the Gunther shooting. Why do these make a difference all of a sudden?

I wish he could see himself through my eyes. If he could see himself the way I see him, all those stupid fears would disappear for good. Oh, Starsk! Do you remember the weeks we shared your bed? Do you know how many times I wished to run my fingers through the hair on your chest? Feel it sliding through my fingers, caress your skin, to feel the taste and texture of your delicious-looking nipples on my fingers and in my mouth? Feel your body writhing in my arms with pleasure? Do you have any idea what's like to want you so, day and night, and have to content myself with pats, ruffling your hair, squeezing your shoulder? Every time I see you looking at yourself with disgust, I wish I could rip your clothes off and show you just how beautiful you are, how much you excite me, how much I love you, how much I want to love that gorgeous, sexy, amazing body of yours. I want to cover your skin with kisses, feel you trembling in my arms and make you feel safe and secure in my love and my strength. No one will hurt you for as long as I live. I promise you. I'll do everything in my power for you not to feel ugly and unworthy again. I want you happy and carefree. I want you to feel like what you are, handsome and strong. I want you to be the man you were before that bastard Gunther hurt you. I won't stop until that monster's only a memory, with no power over you.

I know I'll never be able to give you that, but I find some selfless joy in the knowledge that one day, some girl will give you what I would love to offer but I can't. Sometimes, I surprise myself with these bouts of generosity. I'm not the selfish sonofabitch I was when with Kira. I guess I've grown up a little since then. Your happiness is more important than my own. Your life's a million times more important than mine. You are everything.

Being so close to you is an agony. But I can't keep myself away from you, either. You're my pain and at the same time the balm to that pain.

Sometimes, I want to run away from you and from the pain of being so close and yet so far away from you. But I can't. You are my life. You're the reason I wake up and breathe every morning. You're my reason to be.

I just realized that I've been addressing you here. Since I started writing this stupid journal, I've been sort of "talking to you." I guess that subconsciously, I'm telling you all the things I can't tell you face to face. I'm explaining to you all the things I need you to know, but I'll never be able to tell you. It feels good to talk to you this way, babe. I know you'll never read this, but letting it all out is keeping me sane. It's keeping me from giving myself away in your presence.

My blue-eyed partner, what would I do without you? You're my laughter, my heartbeat, the air that I breathe. I love you with every aspect of my being, Starsky.

Starsky had to let go of the notebook. He was crying bitterly, his face bathed in tears. Every intake of breath burned a path down to his lungs, as if tiny needles were ruthlessly pricking his very soul.

He never thought he would read something like this. Was this what Hutch felt for him? He could recite each and every one of those words back to his blond beauty, if he had the gift for writing Hutch had. He felt so humbled, so honoured, so insignificant and so special at the same time! How could he ever live up to the image Hutch had of him? Was it even remotely realistic? Starsky was plagued by questions he couldn't or wouldn't bring himself to answer. It was too much he was learning, and all at once.

Does he really want to do all those things to me, with me? Do I really excite him? Does he really want to touch me, caress me, kiss me? The most delightful shudder swept him away. His trembling had increased as the reading progressed. It was like reading Hutch's declaration of love to a stranger, to someone so perfect they couldn't possibly exist. But at the same time, it was him he was reading about! It was his name he kept reading over and over!

To lie in Hutch's arms, to feel those long limbs wrapped around him, to taste and worship that golden body, to protect and to hold... never had those words sounded so right! To feel worthy again, to be able to undress before another human being without wanting to disappear into nowhere... *'Oh, Hutch! Your words are a*

*balm to my soul, to my dignity! Oh, the sweet hope I feel blossoming in my chest again! The hope of kissing your lips! The hope of lying naked in bed with you, pressed up against you every day for the rest of our lives. Now I don't have to remember anymore, do I?'*

He would never forget how it had been months ago. Those all-too-short nights sharing his bed, biting his fists with need, wanting to feel Hutch's body close to his own; until it had finally happened, and it had been like touching heaven. He still shivered at the memory of Hutch's body in his arms, so strong, long and perfect... and at the memory of his own body, warm and secure in Hutch's embrace, as his beloved lay spooned against him, his warm breath blowing on the back of his neck, as he almost passed out in sheer rapture.

Memories were all he had; memories of those perfect nights spent in each other's arms, when he had fervently prayed for those few hours to last forever.

And Hutch had wanted it as much as he had! He had wanted it just as desperately!

He didn't have to go on reading. He already knew everything he needed to know. Hutch was his, just as he belonged to his beautiful partner.

As soon as Hutch got well, Starsky would show him just how much esteem and regard this humble New York boy held him. Oh, yes, Hutch was gonna find out soon enough! He would put his beloved out of his misery, just like Starsky's torment had ended today.

With a little cry of overwhelming joy, Starsky buried his face in the blessed pages and started kissing them like crazy. Hutch's scent filled each and every page, and Starsky thought he was going to burst.

When he let go of the book, he realized the page had turned. It looked so much like an invitation that Starsky couldn't resist the temptation to read that one entry. The words seemed to beckon him...

November, 22.

My thoughts are morbid tonight. I don't know why. It has been a mostly pleasant day. No need to pull out my gun, just some routine investigation, questioning a couple suspects, typing a few reports, and riding beside Starsky. I never had time to think about "it."

But just as I was about to get into bed, I happened to look at Ollie, there on my bed. And then, something inside me... For the first time, I looked at it and I realized the awesome responsibility Terry bestowed on me. I've thought about it many times during the last three years, but it never struck me as hard as it did today.

I adored that lady. She was perfect for Starsk. She was so lovely, so full of life, so compassionate, such a perfect match for Starsky! I was so happy for them! She was Starsk's soulmate. She really was! It was awesome how attuned to each other they were. They communicated without words, with just one look. She balanced him, she tempered his quicksilver moods; but she did it so naturally that it was as if they were connected from soul to soul.

I loved her from the very first day. She made Starsk so happy! There was such a spring in his step! Even more than usual. He positively glowed! I loved her at first because she made Starsky happy, but almost immediately, I loved her for herself as well. She was one of a kind.

And I guess it was a reciprocal thing. She liked me right from the start, too. Very soon, I felt she was sort of a sister to me. More than that. She was a friend, a confidant, someone I could talk to, about our dangerous lifestyle, my worries, my fears and how I faced them. We would talk about Starsky. We could talk about

anything in the most open, honest way. It was beautiful. Truly beautiful. She was so witty, so intuitive, so funny. I liked her so very, very much!

When she died, something inside me died too. Not only because she took a big part of Starsky's heart with her. She took a part of my heart as well.

It's too much of a coincidence, when you think about it. Both of us lost our ladies within a few months. I would have given my life to spare Starsky the agony I went through. But no matter how much you want something, sometimes there's nothing you can do to prevent tragedies from happening to those you love. You can only clench your teeth and stand by them when they're hurting, doing everything in your power to let them know you're there to share the pain. He was there for me. Without his strength and his unwavering love, I don't know if I'd have survived Gillian's loss.

God, I pray I did everything in my power to relieve his pain!

The night we opened Terry's packages and I received Ollie... I just couldn't believe she had left it to me. It made no sense. She should have given it to Starsk, or so I thought at first.

Her words broke my heart in two. I've never felt more honored in my entire life. With that gift she opened her heart to us, all the way. What a special, extraordinary, brave lady she was! I felt humbled and awed. I still am and I think I always will be. Every time I look at Ollie, the magnitude of what she did, her amazing generosity... Good God!

Tonight, when I looked at Ollie for the umpteenth time I couldn't help but think I've betrayed her trust. She entrusted Ollie and Starsky to me. And I repaid her by falling in love with her true love.

My chest aches. I don't know why am I hurting so.

No one can replace you, Terry. And I suddenly feel unworthy. I feel I'm betraying you. I wish I knew what you think about me falling in love with Starsky. I wish there was a way for you to tell me.

You know how love is. You can't force it on anybody. You can only feel it and accept it as the selfless gift it is.

Starsky was your true love, Terry, but he's my true love, too. I can feel it, the same way I can feel my heart beating his name in my chest.

Is it possible for a person to have two true loves? Because I had Gillian once. She was so special! She made me feel all goofy and excited. Like a teenager in the flush of his first love. I felt so attuned to her! But we were never given the chance to get to know each other the way you and Starsky did. She was taken from me much too soon. Still, everything inside me felt she was the one.

Just as I feel that Starsky's the one, too.

These thoughts terrify me. What would have happened if you two had lived? Would my love for Starsky have never surfaced? Or would it? I can't bring myself to answer those questions. And I thank God I'll never know.

The fact that Starsky's a man is of no consequence to me. I've loved him in so many ways for so many years, that falling in love with him seems to be the next logical step. I'm not afraid of loving him this way. I'm not afraid of wanting him. It's as natural to me as breathing. It's what I am.

What scares me is... everything else. I'm ruining my life and I came too close to ruining *both* our lives a few months ago. And I'm afraid my secret can still cause much harm, should Starsk ever find out.

How to hide it? How to hide what I feel, what I *am*? Would I put Starsky off? His reaction to John Blaine turning out to be gay was so ambiguous, so unclear, that even after all this time, I still don't know what to

make of it. Maybe it was the deception what hurt him the most. I can understand that. He was left behind, wondering if he had ever known the man at all. Maybe it was just resentment, bitterness about all the questions that will never have an answer.

In any case, I can't take the chance. My feelings are beside the point, anyway. I can't tell him and that's the end of it. I'm condemned to this travesty of a life. A lifetime of pretending to be something, when I want to be so much more.

Sometimes, I think I'm going crazy. I can't tell what's real and what isn't anymore. And tonight, when I faced Ollie, I couldn't help but think of you. What do you think, Terry? Do you approve of my love for him? Do I have the right to take what's yours?

This is crazy. I'm talking to you as if Starsky loved me back, and he doesn't. That scenario will never present itself. But if he met another lady, would you...? Oh, jeez, so many unanswered questions! I can't bring myself to consider any of them! Everything scares me!

I want to honor your memory, Terry. You were everything to him. I just don't know what's the meaning of this anymore. What am I really asking you? Your understanding? Your forgiveness? Do you think that my love for him has betrayed yours and your trust in me? Do you think I've trespassed on what I was never allowed to dream of?

Terry, you know how much I love him. You can see right through my heart. You know he's my own true love. I know you can feel it as well as I do. What can I.. God, am I betraying Gillian's love too?

Shit, I feel I'm losing my mind! Love should be a treasure to cherish, a gift to rejoice in. And here I am, racking my brains with guilt. Begging forgiveness for something I'm helpless to prevent.

Life should be easier, should be more lenient. Or maybe I'm *that* fucked up, and I'm making it look more complicated than it is. I don't know. I just don't know. I need an answer. Please help me, Terry!

But being here, sitting on my couch, bemoaning my life and scribbling nonsense in a notebook won't give me the answer I need, will it?

I guess I should go to bed and try to find oblivion from this nightmare I can't wake up from. A nightmare I've trapped myself in. Ollie also needs a rest. I've sought comfort in his softness so many times by now that I must be about to squeeze the stuffing out of the poor thing. I wonder if you did that, too. I think you did.

I know how very much you loved him, Terry. You cared more about his happiness than your own. I guess that when you left, you found some measure of comfort in the knowledge that he still had me to protect him and take care of him. I know because that's what I'd have felt if it had been the other way round. And I'm doing it to the best of my ability. I just can't love him more.

He's my life, Terry, you know it. I would die for him in a heartbeat. And it humbles me to know that, in a way, you died for him. You entrusted me with him, and I swear I will love him and protect him until my last breath. I'll find the strength necessary to remain silent for the rest of my life, if I have to, to honor your request. I'd rather not have him than betray your confidence.

Ahhh, Terry. Wouldn't it be nice to be Starsk? In one lifetime you have two people love you so much!

Starsky didn't know for how long he remained sitting on his partner's bed, staring into nowhere, completely stunned. He was beyond speech, beyond any coherent thinking. His mouth had fallen open almost from the beginning and the only thing that disturbed the otherwise hilarious expression on his face, was the rivulets of tears that streamed down his cheeks.

He couldn't react for quite some time. His befuddled mind could only turn over the knowledge that Hutch's last words had been the same words Gillian had told him the last time he had seen her alive. Hutch had quoted her verbatim!

Starsky shook his head, as if waking up from a dream. Every hair on his body stood on end, his skin filled with goosebumps and he shivered with the creepy feeling he had experienced on extremely rare occasions, like when he had 'felt' there was something wrong with his partner when he didn't show up the morning after nailing Humphries. But this time, Starsky knew what it was. The wonder he felt, the absolute peace that had descended on him, felt as if Gillian and Terry had spoken to him through Hutch's words. As if they had spoken to the two of them, in fact, and they had told them it was all right for them to love each other the same way they had loved the two of them. Hutch had asked for a sign, and both their ladies had answered. Starsky was certain of it all the way down to his shaken soul.

His beautiful blond angel! He had put all their fears to rest. He had opened the door for them to love each other without any restraints, any guilt feelings and forever.

Starsky's heart was too full. No man could hold so much love inside and not die from the beauty of it. Love was pouring out from his every pore. Love for this gentle man, who had realized each and every one of his dreams. Hutch himself was a dream come true. Starsky's every dream of beauty, perfection and love come true.

Hutch's awesome sensibility, his respect for everybody's feelings, always above his own, his honesty, his generosity, his tenderness, his passion... all of it and so much more he had just read in those pages. And he had only covered the first dozen pages of the journal. But he couldn't go on reading. He had invaded his beloved's privacy just by opening the book. If he went on reading when it wasn't necessary anymore, it would be immoral. He already knew everything he needed to know. Hutch had put his mind to rest. Now it was up to him to reassure Hutch's and open before him a whole new world of requited love, of dreams come true and joy beyond what neither of them had ever suspected it could possibly exist.

Starsky threw his head back and burst out laughing. The sound was much like the sound of freedom, of a bird that after spending all its life in a cage, it's finally set free.

When the explosion of euphoria subsided somewhat, Starsky rose to his feet. His knees felt wobbly and unsteady. He was drunk with love. And the most wondrous thing of all was the knowledge that it was a feeling that would accompany him for the rest of his life. Both their lives! With Hutch beside him, he could take on the world; they would face any hurdle life threw their way. He had everything he needed. The rest was unimportant. Hutch was his strength, his courage, his life.

On cloud nine, Starsky picked up his clothes from his partner's bed and headed for the bathroom, detouring for a moment to finish his beer and put the notebook on the kitchen table with a final, parting caress to the brown cover.

The shower took him less than 15 minutes and he got dressed at top speed. He had to return to the hospital as soon as possible. He wanted to be there before Hutch woke up. He wasn't certain he could hold back his impulsiveness, but he would do his very best. A hospital wasn't the most romantic place for a declaration of love, and he wanted the moment to be perfect between them. They had suffered enough and they deserved it. He would have to play it by ear, but something told him that whenever and however he decided to reveal the truth to Hutch, *then* it would be the perfect moment. They had earned that perfection, in blood.

It was strange. He felt as if someone up there was watching over them. Despite all the tragedies that had befallen them, he had the feeling that somehow, someone was helping them, guiding them through this moment in time, when everything was about to change between them forever.

Grabbing his car keys and the bag where he had put Hutch's clothes, Starsky took one last look at Hutch's apartment. The place looked different. It felt different. But he couldn't tell where the difference was. Maybe the difference was in him. He was seeing it all through the eyes of a man whose most cherished dream had

just come true. He had everything he had ever wanted and needed in life. David Michael Starsky was the luckiest person on the face of the Earth.

With a loud cry of absolute happiness, Starsky left Hutch's apartment, knowing that the next time he entered, it would be to stay.

Starsky drove back to the hospital on autopilot. His mind kept reflecting back time and again about Destiny. It was uncanny that the last conversation they had in the Torino had dealt with that exact issue. The incredible chain of events that had led them both to this moment felt so... so destined to happen! He couldn't explain it, but he could *feel* it. He felt their whole lives had been leading up to this moment in time, when their eyes were opened to all the possibilities their love offered them. They had gone a long way, but they were ready now. More than!

Before he realized it, he had parked the car and was in an elevator, heading for the floor where the love of his life awaited him. Every inch of his skin was tingling like crazy at the thought.

Pausing for a moment before door 385, Starsky tried to relax and took a few deep breaths. He was certain he had to be sporting the goofiest "fool in love" expression, that would surely be his undoing as soon as he crossed the door. He did everything he could to tone it down and with a final deep intake of breath, he surged ahead.

The first sight that greeted his immediately enraptured eyes was a still sleeping Hutch. His hair was fanned out across the pillow and it seemed to shine under the late evening sunlight. His skin looked golden and his blond eyelashes fluttered for a moment, as if he was unconsciously acknowledging Starsky's presence.

Starsky was breathless. Such otherworldly beauty was his. His! It was then that the impact of his discovery hit him full force. This breathtakingly handsome man, his partner for so many years, his best friend, his soul brother, loved him too! Hutch wanted to belong to him, just as he wanted to belong to Hutch! Whole paragraphs he had read only a short time before started passing before his mind's eye at top speed, and he staggered backwards as if he had been physically pushed back. He blinked rapidly as he caught a flash of movement on his left.

Edith, Dobey and Huggy were sitting at the small table, apparently engaged in a poker game. Huggy was sitting closest to the door and he stood up when he saw Starsky coming in. "Hey, it was about time! We were about to call you. Must've been some shower!"

Starsky swallowed hard and reluctantly moved his eyes away from Hutch to face his friends. "Yeah, well, I got delayed. Ahhh, I watered Hutch's plants and I removed some wilted foliage and I guess I... I got a bit carried away. Sorry about that," he let out a shaky smile, a bit disoriented. The sight of his partner, for the first time since finding out the way Hutch loved him, had completely blown him away. He wanted nothing more than to gather the strong body into his arms and wake up his partner with the most loving, passionate kiss those sweet, full lips had ever known. He smiled softly and looked down, glorying in the infinite joy of knowing that those dreams were no longer impossible and that, in fact, they were only hours away from coming true. "Thank you for staying", he managed to say.

"It's okay. You needed some time on your own," Dobey dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand.

Edith had noticed the way the young man had been watching his friend. "He's been sleeping like a baby all the time. He hasn't even made a sound."

Starsky nodded and sighed. It had been so long since he had felt such utter peace, that it was simply wonderful to reacquaint himself with the feeling. He grabbed the footboard and watched his sleeping partner with an inscrutable expression on his face. Here, lying in that bed, was his everything. Nothing more, nothing less.

Huggy, Edith and Dobey looked at each other and nodded, acknowledging to each other that it was time to make themselves scarce. They didn't know what was on Starsky's mind, but whatever it was, it was obvious he needed to discuss it with Hutch. Privately, the three of them prayed for it to be the conversation long overdue.

Starsky bid them goodbye with only part of his brain. Thinking about it later, he hoped he had been considerate enough to say goodbye properly to them, especially after how good and kind they had been to the two of them.

When the door closed after them, Starsky practically floated to Hutch's bedside. He looked down at his partner as the happiest smile he could remember, threatened to split his face in two. He reached out several times, but somehow, he couldn't bring himself to touch him. Maybe he was afraid that everything was an illusion, and his reality would shatter the moment he touched the real thing.

The solution to his dilemma solved itself when the blond eyelashes fluttered open and two beautiful sleepy eyes settled on him. Starsky noticed how the shade of blue changed the moment Hutch's eyes focused on him. They turned bluer, more intense, and beautiful beyond belief.

And for the first time, Starsky realized the signs had always been there, waiting for him to see them.

Smiling at Hutch, he was rewarded with a tiny tremor that softly shook the big body. Starsky couldn't believe it. He seemed to be attuned to Hutch at an organic, molecular level. It felt as if his sense of self had expanded, as if he concentrated enough, he would feel two hearts beating in his chest instead of one.

"Hi, there," Hutch's slightly raspy voice brought him out of his musings.

"Hello, Blondie", Starsky smiled again. He couldn't help himself this time, so he reached out and placed his left palm softly on the blond head, letting the silky strands slide through his fingers.

They looked deeply into each other's eyes, having the most wondrous wordless conversation. Hutch's eyes were dreamy, drinking from the delicate caresses on his scalp and his hair.

Some time later, Hutch reached up and, immediately responding, Starsky took the big hand in his, intertwining his fingers with Hutch's.

His movements and eyesight sharper now, Hutch tilted his head to one side in the most endearing gesture, watching his partner's expression. Starsky was smiling at him in a way he had never seen before. It was the most open, loving smile he could remember seeing on that sexy, gorgeous face. Not really knowing why, he blushed to the roots of his hair and looked down briefly, trying to compose himself.

Starsky's smile widened even more, if that was possible, recognizing every little sign now. He squeezed the long fingers, imagining how it would be when they entwined their fingers like this while making love. Pressing against each other, never being close enough, feeling their naked skin, all sweaty and slippery in the aftermath of their loving, arms and legs wrapped tightly around one another, sharing the languorous kisses of the afterglow, holding on for dear life to their dearest dream finally come true. He shivered and swallowed heavily. "Ah, I went to your place to shower and change," he explained. "I also watered your babies, so don't worry about them."

Hutch smiled gratefully. "Thanks." He couldn't help taking a surreptitious peek at their entwined fingers and he gulped, making a funny sound deep in his throat. "Ahhhh, what time is it?" he asked, trying to distract himself from the delicious tingle that was spreading all over his body.

"Almost eight," Starsky supplied. "Wanna get up?"

"Yeah, I've slept long enough and I wanna move a bit," Hutch said, trying to sit up.

"Are you in any pain?" Starsky asked.

"No," Hutch shook his head. "I feel fine. A bit stiff, maybe. All this forced inactivity is rusting me."

"And let's not forget your bad back," Starsky made a funny face with his lips, apparently in deep thought. "Tell you what. Sit all the way up, will ya?"

Hutch complied without much effort. Immediately, Starsky sat down right behind him and started fumbling with his gown.

"W-what are you d-doing?" Hutch almost jumped.

Starsky bit his lower lip, trying to hold back the face-splitting grin that was threatening to wreak havoc on his features. That lovely stutter had never been more revealing! "I'm untying these knots, what else?" he answered. "I'm gonna give you a nice massage."

Hutch closed his eyes against the images that instantly assaulted him. He let out a shaky breath and tried to dismiss the image of Starsky's hands roaming his oh-so-very needy body. Oh, God, when would this agony end? He tried to refuse Starsky's offer, but the words never left his lips. This was a chance to feel the wonderful hands of the man he loved touching his body. How could he refuse this unexpected gift he had been freely offered? Cursing his weakness, his shoulders slouched in defeat.

Starsky slowly revealed the broad back and it was all he could do to stifle a gasp. Gawd, what a gorgeous beauty! He was enraptured by that shade of golden pink and the way it glowed with the reflection of the artificial light. It was so masculine, so powerful, so sensual; and at the same time it looked so vulnerable, so trustingly offered... He reached out his suddenly trembling hands and placed them on the warm softness. A helpless shudder racked his entire body and then, his fingers started roaming the satiny skin, allowing himself to experience this moment as a lover, not as just a friend. He was making love to Hutch with his hands. His fingertips tingled and throbbed. There was no hesitation in his movements, no awkwardness. The moment he had laid his hands on Hutch, his heart took over and all fear and nervousness disappeared. This was what he was meant to be.

His hands rubbed, kneaded and stroked the soft, pliant flesh, hating it when they slid over the elastic dressing, that constantly reminded him of Hutch's sacrifice. He wanted to heal Hutch with his love and his kisses. He craved to touch Hutch's naked body and that dressing was an annoying hindrance. But still, he felt and reveled in the strength and power beneath the warm velvety skin that wasn't covered. He kneaded the drooped shoulders, his thumbtips buried themselves in the flesh of the lovely nape, moving in tiny circles, loving the stiffness away. Hutch's heartfelt sigh moved him to his very core.

"Thank you, Starsk."

"My pleasure, Blintz," Starsky slowly ran his forefinger down Hutch's spine, eliciting a gasp from his beloved.

"W-where's everybody?" Hutch began conversationally. He was determined not to give himself away, no matter what.

Starsky's finger reached the small of Hutch's back and exerted a small, sensual pressure there. The effect was dramatic. Hutch shuddered as if he had received an electric charge. "They left a few minutes before you woke up. They've been watching over you while I was away, and they deserved a break," Starsky lay his left palm flat against the left side of Hutch's back, wanting to feel the echo of Hutch's heart beating on it.

Hutch swallowed out loud. "They've been very kind and good to us. I.. I think w-we should throw a party in The Pits when I get better, t-to th-thank them properly."

Starsky bent forward and practically spoke into Hutch's ear. "Relax, babe. It's only me. You can trust me."

Hutch shivered at the feel of Starsky's breath blowing on his ear, softly fanning the hair around it. His skin filled with goosebumps at the sensual accent. "I know that. I've always known," he whispered back. He

wondered offhand why the hell was he whispering to his partner. He turned his head and met Starsky's sparkling eyes. He gave a small start. There was fire in those eyes! He had never seen such emotion directed at him!

Right then, the door opened and nurse Henderson came in, carrying in her hand a blood pressure cuff. Startled, the two men practically jumped out of their skins. Starsky stood up and Hutch fell back against the pillow, since he had ended up leaning on Starsky's body for support.

Nurse Henderson's eyebrows shot up and she looked a bit embarrassed. "Ahhh, I'm sorry for bothering you, but I have to check on Mr. Hutchinson's blood pressure," she explained unnecessarily.

"No problem," Starsky moved away with a gracious gesture. "Go ahead. I was giving my partner a backrub. He's got a stiffness problem."

The way Starsky said the words made Hutch's eyes pop out of their sockets. He had no idea what had come over his friend all of a sudden. There was something strange about his behavior. He looked so carefree, so unashamedly frisky... He always had been, especially after surviving a close call. It was his way to celebrate life. But this... there was something different about the way Starsky was behaving towards him. He couldn't put a finger on it, but it gave him the creeps. It worried and saddened him, and he didn't know why. He had the feeling Starsky was playing a cat and mouse game, and he had no idea what the rules were or when the game had begun, for that matter.

"Well, that's understandable after spending several days in bed, with no activity whatsoever. But you'll be able to walk and exercise a bit in the next few days," the nurse kindly comforted Hutch. "And I'm sure your friend will help you," she smiled at Starsky.

Starsky smiled from ear to ear. "Oh, yes I will! Forever," he met Hutch's eyes, and the most loving look illuminated his features.

Hutch's mouth fell open. He understood less and less. Now, Starsky was looking at him as if... he blushed furiously and looked down, swallowing nervously.

The nurse checked Hutch's blood pressure and quickly left the room, wondering if Starsky's eyes were saying what she thought they did.

Hutch lay back against his pillow and clumsily tried to tie up his hospital gown. His dislocated shoulder protested unexpectedly, and the sharp pain made him desist.

Immediately, Starsky hurried to his partner and lovingly tied up the loose knots. He had seen the wounded, tortured look in his beloved's eyes, and he had instantly regretted the way he had been playing with his partner. He would cut off his arm before causing Hutch a second's pain, but he had been unable to help himself. He was so obscenely happy! He was giddy with joy! He had been holding back his true feelings for Hutch for so long that the minute he had seen a tiny outlet for his love, he had jumped at the chance. It had been just his playful, teasing nature that had made him act so. But he quickly realized he was playing with an edge here. He knew something Hutch didn't, and until the right moment for Starsky to reveal his secret came, he would behave himself. Hutch had suffered too much already. Never again and never because of him!

The problem was he wanted to tell Hutch NOW, but he feared that as long as his partner was in the hospital, the right moment would never present itself. Knowing Murphy's Law, something or someone would choose that particular moment to interrupt them or walk in on them, as Nurse Henderson had just done. And he wanted the moment to be perfect.

There was nothing he could do but wait. It would kill him, but he would wait. And he would compensate Hutch for the unthinking way he had behaved. "Okay now?" he softly asked, when he tied up the final knot. He fluffed Hutch's pillow and smiled self-consciously at him.

"Yeah, thanks." Hutch was avoiding looking at him and it made Starsky feel terribly guilty. He tenderly put his hand beneath Hutch's chin, and raised it slowly to meet his eyes.

"Hey, Blondie, don't get all shy on me now. I'm sorry about what happened before. I..." the infinite sadness and longing in those baby blue eyes made him feel as if a fist had closed around his heart. "I was so happy to be back here with you that I couldn't help teasin' ya for a moment." He swallowed heavily and tried to explain himself, without revealing too much, for now. "When I was at your place I missed you so much... The apartment looked so cold and empty without you there... I felt so alone watering your plants and seeing Ollie on your bed..."

Hutch winced at the mention of Terry's teddy bear and Starsky hurried to reassure his love.

"It's okay! Don't worry about it. It feels good to see it standing guard there, taking care of your space. In a way, I think that's where it belongs. Terry did the right thing giving it to ya," he smiled softly.

Hutch's chin started trembling and his eyes filled with tears. His feelings were too close to the surface after being shaken up so badly by Starsky's weird behavior, and bringing up Terry and Ollie had been the final blow.

Starsky knew only too well the feelings that were surging up in Hutch now, and never hesitating, he sat down on the bed and enveloped his friend in the most loving hug. "Everything's okay now, Hutch. Believe me," he felt the long arms slowly wrapping themselves around him; a bit awkwardly, because of the IV and the dislocated shoulder. He began rocking the big body, being extra careful of the broken ribs. He exerted just the right pressure the two of them needed to feel their bodies coming into blissful, intense contact. "I know she's happy for me and she only wants the best for me. I'm at peace now, as I know she is. And you should be too, babe. Trust me," one hand reached up and his fingers got entangled in the silky strands of blond hair. "Everything's gonna be okay, and both our dreams *will* come true soon; very soon, you'll see."

Hutch let out a sound halfway between a sob and a snort. If only Starsky knew! But his poor naïve partner didn't have a clue. They say it's the thought that counts, and he appreciated Starsky's gesture with all his heart. His dream would never come true, but it was beautiful to be comforted like this by the man he loved. He buried his face in Starsky's neck and sniffed at the freshly showered, fragrant skin, taking the warm scent deep inside and finding it to be the most poignant bliss he had ever known.

Starsky sensed everything, and he pressed Hutch closer to him in a gently overwhelming way. "Yes, Hutch, trust me on that one. Our pain will be over very soon. We've both suffered enough and our time to be happy has come." He felt his blond love clinging to his jacket for dear life.

"You don't know, Starsk. You don't know!"

Starsky looked up, gritting his teeth. "And you don't know about me, either. That's why I need you to trust me now," he pressed the lovely head closer, cradling it in his palm like a baby's. He marveled at the perfect way Hutch's body molded to his. They seemed to give a new meaning to the phrase, 'made for each other.' "Will you trust me if I tell you that this nightmare's about to come to an end, babe? That everything'll sort itself out for the best?"

"If you say so..." the muffled voice sounded so much like a child's, that Starsky's heart ached. He lovingly took the blond head between his hands and forced Hutch to face him.

"Trust me, Hutch. I've never, *ever* needed you to believe me as much as I need you to believe me now. I don't want you to suffer anymore. Your pain is my pain and I can't be happy unless you're happy too," he wiped the tears away with his thumbs. "Do you trust me?" he asked once more.

Hutch's eyes met Starsky's and they bored into them, as if wanting to read his friend's sincerity, his very soul. And Starsky couldn't be any more sincere. Hutch came to the conclusion that Starsky believed his own words, even if he didn't know what he was talking about. He seemed to believe everything was going to be okay, and Hutch wanted to believe it as much as Starsky. So, he wholeheartedly yielded to the fantasy. Yes,

why not? Weirder things had been known to happen, such as a man being able to tell a kidnapped girl's whereabouts just by looking at her picture. "I do believe you, Starsk," he managed to croak.

Starsky recognized Hutch's reasoning just looking into his eyes. He smiled and nodded, in gentle understanding. "No, you don't. Not quite, anyway. But it's okay. You will very soon. For now, I just want you to try and be happy. If only for these few days until they release you. Try not to think about your problem. I know it's got to be difficult, but I need ya to try. Please? For me?" his eyes implored unashamedly.

Hutch swallowed nervously again. He didn't know what all this was about, but if Starsky needed him to try, he would. Starsky didn't want him to be sad, and he would do everything in his power to please his partner.

"I'll help you, okay?" Starsky's hopeful eyes were like a beacon. His eye of the storm. His light in the darkness.

"Okay," Hutch nodded again, trying to smile.

"Good!" Starsky smiled back, rubbing his nose with Hutch's reddened one in an adoring eskimo kiss. Hutch let out a helpless laugh at the gesture.

"We're breaking our own soapy scenes' record," he commented, hoping to bring some levity to the intensely emotional moment.

Starsky smiled mischievously. "You know? I'm taking quite a liking to them. Maybe we should indulge more often," he shrugged.

"All right, who are you and what have you done to my partner!?" Hutch looked almost honestly suspicious.

"A man's entitled to admit he could be wrong, right?" Starsky pretended to be offended.

"I'm not sure," Hutch replied, moving back slightly. Starsky's closeness was sheer heaven. But the problem with heaven was that once you got there, you never wanted to leave.

Starsky refused to relinquish his hold on Hutch so soon, and he lovingly combed through the disheveled hair with his fingers and squeezed the unhurt strong shoulder affectionately. He was determined to make the rest of the days Hutch still had to spend at the hospital the happiest of his life. At least, until he could show his angel what the meaning of true, real happiness was.

Hutch smiled gratefully when Starsky offered him his handkerchief. He blew his nose and, realizing he had no pockets, he carefully put it on the bedside table. "Well! What now?" he asked.

"Wanna get up for a little while?" Starsky suggested.

"Yeah, why not?" Hutch nodded.

With Starsky's help, Hutch made it to the armchair. He was feeling stronger and he could walk upright now. They played pinochle for a while, with Starsky making all kinds of jokes, funny faces, noises and witty remarks, that had Hutch almost doubling up with laughter in a matter of minutes. Starsky was particularly inspired; no wonder, considering the wondrous discovery he had made that day, and every time he heard Hutch's laughter, his heart swelled with joy.

Dinner was an encore of what their card games had been. Hutch decided to watch television while his partner demolished a grilled sirloin steak with French fries and vegetables, a slice of bread, a generous piece of apple pie... and a beer that he had snuck in!

Hutch was concentrating on the TV show, when he felt something hitting the side of his neck. He immediately looked at Starsky, but his partner was busy taking a swig of his beer, so he shrugged the incident off. A couple minutes later, he felt (and fleetingly saw) something hitting his nose. The offending

projectile landed on the floor at his feet and he bent forward, picking it up. It was made of bread crumb and kneaded into a tiny ball. He looked at Starsky then, and shook his head patronizingly at him. "Your IQ drops dramatically at night, doesn't it?" he asked.

Starsky stuck out his tongue at him in answer and Hutch nodded to himself, as if having just seen his statement confirmed.

A minute later, when Starsky was in blissful heaven, finishing his piece of apple pie, he felt something hitting him right between his eyes. He looked at his partner and saw Hutch sporting a self-complacent little smile. "Only my IQ, buddy? What do you call that?"

Hutch smiled slyly. "I call it rightful retribution."

"I call it revenge," Starsky amended.

"Whatever. But my aim was perfect," Hutch smiled broadly.

Starsky snorted and stuffed the final piece of pie in his mouth and washed it down with a final swig of his beer. Next, he wiped his mouth clean with the napkin and patted his full tummy. "Yes, sir! That's what I call a royal dinner!" he stretched his arms above his head shamelessly.

"Yep, you only have to belch to complete the picture," Hutch commented.

"Don't tempt me," Starsky replied, standing up. He grabbed one vacant chair and put it beside his partner's armchair, sitting down on it next.

They watched television for almost an hour, until Starsky turned his head to make a comment to his partner. Immediately, an adoring smile illuminated his features. Hutch had fallen asleep.

Starsky stared at Hutch for a very long time, taking in every perfect feature. No matter he had memorized them all eons ago, each and every one of them was just as beautiful and breathtaking as the first time he had seen them. Even more now, because this time, he was seeing them with the eyes of a man in love. He revelled in the soft, creamy skin, that seemed to glint with the reflection of the overhead light. The delicate blond eyelashes, resting on the smooth cheeks, the perfect eyebrows, the broad forehead, the long, irresistibly sensual neck... God, he was so full of love he was on the verge of exploding! How he wanted to take that body in his arms and give it more pleasure than it had ever known! He wanted both of them to never feel alone again. He wanted to stop feeling empty, when everything he needed to be happy was at arm's length. But this unbearable trepidation was glorious too. It was the promise of the glory that awaited them. A reality that would come true very soon. As soon as they released Hutch from the hospital, Starsky would drive to Venice and then... then, the beginning of their new life would start. Forever and ever, if Hutch would have him.

*'My soft, golden angel. With sky blue eyes and the gentlest soul. Lips of warm velvet and heart of gold. You own my heart. It belongs to you, just as I do. I'll take care of you and although I can't promise to keep you safe, I can promise to love you until the end of time. I'm not much, but all that I am I give to you freely, cause you're my freedom and my forever. You're my past, my present and my future. You're my love and my life. You're my joy and my hope. My every dream come true. My friend, my brother, my beloved. When did I do anything to deserve you? What's so special about me to be your chosen one? Oh, Hutch! Take me! Take me whole and complete me! I need you! I love you! You're my everything!'*

Starsky bent forward and leaned his elbows on his knees, studying his love, absolutely enthralled. His eyes filled with tears of wonder.

Hutch stirred softly and his eyelashes fluttered open. Starsky smiled. It was magical the way they were attuned to one another. "Huuutch," he whispered, coaxing his partner into a sweet awakening.

Hutch's eyes focused on him and a soft, dreamy smile showed on his features. "Hey," he murmured.

"Hey yourself," Starsky answered, reaching out and cradling the lovely face in his hand. "Wanna go to bed?"

Hutch sat up. "Yeah, I think so. Sorry, I can't seem to stop sleeping, painkillers or not."

"It's okay, your body needs sleep to heal. I was sleeping all the time after the op last year, remember?" Starsky patted the blond head. "C'mon, buddy. Lemme help ya."

Starsky carefully got his partner into bed (after fluffing his pillow and tucking him in, of course) and hurried to get ready for his own bed.

When the darkness enveloped them, Starsky waited patiently for their nightly routine. When it didn't come, he smiled to himself. He was not afraid anymore. The courage Hutch had given him emboldened him to ask now. "Hey, Blintz," he whispered.

"Yeah?" came Hutch's surprisingly shaky voice.

"Can I have your hand, please?" Starsky reached out.

Starsky *sensed* the soft tremor racking the body of the man he loved and, after a couple seconds of hesitation, he felt the warm and slightly sweaty hand touching his. Starsky closed his fingers around it and squeezed it. "Thanks. Sweet dreams, Blondie."

He heard Hutch making a funny noise in his throat as he swallowed. "Good night, Starsk. Sweet dreams, you too," his blond love finally said.

And they *did* have sweet dreams.

The next few days passed fairly quickly. Hutch's steady improvement enabled him to get up more and for longer periods. He walked the hospital corridors with his partner lending a supportive hand whenever it was necessary. The fifth day after the accident, Hutch was released from the annoying IV and introduced to light food. Further tests showed that Hutch's ribs were knitting together very well and very fast, his dislocated shoulder hurt less and less and his concussion was practically healed. The scrapes and grazes on his forehead and left cheekbone began to disappear, and the swelling and bruising went down. Hutch was healing by leaps and bounds, and everybody knew his curly-haired partner's tender care had a lot to do with it.

Huggy, Dobby, Edith and countless friends from their precinct passed by to visit them and bring Hutch all kinds of silly and more often than not, outrageous get well presents.

Sometimes, Hutch couldn't believe he could be so happy being in a hospital. Starsky's loving care overwhelmed him. There were no words to describe his solicitousness, his gentleness, his constant caring about his physical and emotional wellbeing. His partner never gave him a moment's respite to wallow in self-pity and think about "it". Sometimes, he seemed to read his mind. Hutch would start thinking about him with bitter longing, and Starsky would immediately start clowning. Starsky's uncanny perception and empathy with his own feelings almost scared him. How could Starsky possibly *know* what was crossing his mind at those particular moments, when his face had been carefully schooled for months now to hide what his heart was feeling?

He couldn't help thinking there was something wrong with Starsky. There *was* something different about him, that was certain. A self-confidence about everything that unsettled Hutch. He looked as if there was nothing in the world that could hurt him anymore, as if he had everything he needed to be happy and he knew everything he needed to know. And Hutch envied him. He envied him for the peace of mind he had found, that Hutch would never have.

In any case, those days were over before any of them fully realized they were passing. They were in constant physical contact. Starsky couldn't seem to keep his hands off of him. And Hutch found that those hands gave

him more peace than he would have expected, considering his circumstances. They soothed him, they took his fears away, they reassured him he was loved and cherished. Sometimes, their touch felt like a promise. And other times, he felt Starsky touched him differently, although he couldn't tell what the difference was. The sturdy hands never roamed beyond neutral territory, they were loving and friendly as always. But there was something else there. Like the look in his eyes, that gleam of unrestrained joy and happiness he had never seen in them before. There was a hint of playfulness there too, as if Starsky was telling him: "you'll see." He had no idea what was going on there, but he was grateful for being looked after so lovingly. Both of them needed to be as close to each other as possible after the trauma they had endured. Once again, they had faced their own mortality, the possibility of losing one another permanently, and touching had always been the balm to that fear.

Finally, in the evening of the sixth day, Dr. Lester announced that Hutch would be released the following day. He was healing quicker than expected, and there was no point in having Hutch occupying a room that other patients needed. Starsky and Hutch looked at each other with a wide smile and they threw their arms round each other.

The miracle partners had done it again.

Those last few hours in the hospital were the longest in Starsky's life. He was so excited he couldn't keep still. No more holding back! No more of this heavenly torture! In less than 15 hours, the world would be their oyster and each other's arms, their home. It didn't matter what life threw their way, they had found the antidote to it, the greatest treasure on Earth. True love. The kind of love that has to be written in capitals for it to be named and honored as it deserves.

Hutch watched his partner as if he had a screw loose and asked him if there was a full moon that night. Nothing could spoil Starsky's mood anymore, and after almost squeezing the stuffing out of his partner with an impulsive bearhug, he told him the next day would be the happiest one of their entire lives. Hutch looked at him with a suspiciously raised eyebrow, that still couldn't hide the fact that he didn't have the slightest clue as to what Starsky was talking about. But he didn't care any longer. He was more than used to Starsky's exuberant moods.

And so, they spent their final night at the hospital clinging to each other's hands across their beds. Starsky found a sort of masochistic delight in the knowledge that this was going to be his final night alone in a lonely bed. He stayed awake for a very long time after Hutch fell asleep. He wanted to remember forever what it was like to feel so isolated and desperate. That way, he would make certain he would never take for granted what they had in each other. There was no need to fear, though. He would never forget, and he would never stop thanking God for bestowing on him the biggest gift known to man. With a loving squeeze to the big hand wrapped around his own, Starsky closed his eyes. "Sweet dreams, my blond angel. In a few hours, we'll have nothing to fear; ever again," he whispered.

In his sleep, a sweet smile crossed Hutch's features and his fingers squeezed back Starsky's hand.

The next morning dawned warm, sunny and bright, just like Starsky's heart. Today's forecast had said that the high winds were officially over and springtime was back full force.

Starsky jumped out of bed, opened the blinds and looked out of the window for a few moments, at the life unfolding below, with a huge grin on his face. Turning about, he watched his love sleeping peacefully. Today was the first day of the rest of their lives. Unable to help himself, he walked up to Hutch and gently shook his partner awake. "Wake up, Blondie! It's 9:30 in the mornin'! It's a beautiful, sunny day, and we're gonna bask in the sun! We're leavin' the docs and nurses' lovely company, ain't that great?"

Hutch opened his eyes and squinted at the light in the room. He shielded his eyes with one hand to protect them from the brightness, and found a big smooch planted on his cheek! His entire body trembled from head to foot in helpless reaction. "Hyperactive so early in the morning, Starsk? I'm still convalescent, you know? So please, take it easy!" he put out his hands in an openly begging gesture.

In answer, Starsky took the big hands in his own and gently helped his friend up and out of bed, although Hutch really didn't need much help now. He was a bit stiff after so many hours of sleep and inactivity, but once he got warmed up, he could walk and bend and move around without too much difficulty.

When Hutch was standing, Starsky looked at his partner with a pout.

"What is it?" Hutch asked.

"I bid ya good mornin', but you never answered back," he complained, his voice sounding surprisingly childish.

Hutch rolled his eyes and looked up. It was going to be a very long day! "All right. I don't wanna be accused of jinxing your day," he smiled at his irrepressible partner. "Good morning, Starsky."

Starsky's face illuminated with the happiest smile. Giving up, Hutch sighed and squeezed the strong shoulder. Who was he trying to fool? He couldn't wait to leave here! The doctors and nurses had been very solicitous and kind, but after all it was still a hospital, and he was counting the hours for them to put as much distance as possible between them and that creepy building, full of too many painful memories.

But Starsky was taking away all those bad memories with his boyish exuberance and love of life. Unable, and unwilling, to help himself, Hutch wrapped his arms around his partner and held him for all he was worth. He immediately found his embrace returned tenfold, and he thought his heart would explode with joy. This was the only perfection he had ever known. The overwhelming intensity of his love for Starsky swept him away and surrendering to it, he reached up and entangled his fingers in the soft curls. He felt Starsky melting into him and clinging to his hospital gown, burying his face in his shoulder. With a soft moan, he cuddled his face against the crook of Starsky's neck, drinking from the blissful warmth, desperately wishing for this moment to last forever... and knowing it couldn't be.

As if he had picked up his sudden bitter thought, Starsky whispered into his ear. "C'mon, partner. Get ready so I can take ya outta here."

Hutch nodded, clasping the compact body to him one last time, before moving back. There were no words to describe how much it hurt to separate from Starsky's touch. As if he had read his mind, Starsky rubbed his arms up and down briskly, as if trying to restore his circulation. And it worked. Hutch felt a delicious spark of electricity passing between them and with a radiant smile, he grabbed Starsky's shaving kit from the closet and hurried to the bathroom. After relieving himself, he carefully washed up and shaved. He threw the disposable items in the basket beside the sink and came out, feeling incredibly fresher.

To his surprise, he found Starsky finishing his breakfast. He idly wondered how did the nurses manage to bring their breakfast, and most of their meals, for that matter, when one of them wasn't in the room. He shrugged and started on his white coffee. It felt great to be able to eat again after all those days of forced fasting. Ahh, small joys he had taken for granted! So many things to be grateful for! So many blessings he didn't deserve!

Right then, he felt an affectionate hand ruffling his hair. Looking up, he saw Starsky standing in front of him with his clothes draped over his right arm. The curly haired man pointed a finger at him.

"No more sad thoughts or I'll have to kick your ass. Understood?"

"Since you ask so nicely..." Hutch made a disgusted face.

With an impish smile, Starsky grabbed his shaving kit from Hutch's bed and disappeared in the bathroom.

Hutch finished his breakfast, taking his lovely time, savoring every single toast with strawberry jam. When he finished, he washed it all down with a swig of water and lay back against the bed's headboard, propped on his pillow, contemplating the days that awaited him.

Starsky would have to move in with him for a few days, and the perspective both delighted and terrified him. For one fleeting moment, he considered asking Starsky not to, but he immediately dismissed the thought. Starsky wouldn't listen anyway. He would move in with him whether Hutch wanted it or not. Besides, if he suddenly started behaving so out of character, Starsky would become suspicious. They had always been there for each other after a serious injury. It was a given that the other would move in with them until he was recovered enough to take care of himself.

He had no choice. He would have to harden his defenses if he didn't want to give himself away. His friendship with Starsky was at stake, and he couldn't afford to slip. It was such a delicate balance to maintain! Being friendly but never allowing Starsky too close; touching, but not letting his beloved's touch move him too much. Always minding his body language, that Starsky could read so well; and his face... Shit, how long could he go on living like this? He would end up mad! He rubbed his stinging eyes with the balls of his hands and sighed dejectedly.

The room's door opened and Dr. Lester and a couple nurses came in. Hutch sat up immediately.

"Hello, Ken! How're you feeling this morning?" Dr. Lester greeted his patient with a gentle smile.

"If you'll excuse my bluntness, I can't wait to get out of here," Hutch answered sincerely.

Dr. Lester laughed appreciatively. "I take it that you're feeling all right and ready to leave."

"You got it," Hutch tilted his head in a most endearing gesture.

"Okay, let's take a look at your incision first," Dr. Lester approached the bed.

Hutch lay down and revealed his belly. He studied the ceiling while the doctor felt the incision and the area surrounding it.

"Perfect. You're one of the fastest healers I've ever met. You and your curly friend."

Hutch smiled dreamily at the mention of Starsky.

Right then, the bathroom door opened and Starsky came out, carrying his PJ's in one hand and his shaving kit in the other. "I thought I heard voices," he said, staring unashamedly at Hutch's body. "How is he, doc?" he asked, walking up to the other side of his partner's bed and looking down lovingly at the incision, dying to cover it with kisses.

"He'll be ready to leave as soon as I take out half his stitches," he produced a small box from his pocket with a flourish and opened it on the bed. "I could get a resident to do it for me, but I feel like working today," he winked at Hutch.

The nurses had taken Starsky and Hutch's breakfast trays, and it took only a couple minutes for Dr. Lester's deft fingers to take out Hutch's stitches. Hutch only felt a light itch. To distract his partner, Starsky started messing with his hair and telling him about the dozen hot dogs he intended to demolish as soon as they found a stand in the street. Hutch spluttered and told him he didn't intend to bet against him this time.

When Dr. Lester finished, he covered Hutch's incision again and patted his shoulder affectionately. "Well, Ken, it's been nice to have you with us, but if you get up now and get outta here, you'll make us both very happy."

Hutch burst out laughing. "You won't have to ask me twice, doc," he replied, sitting up. His eyes softened as he reached out to the man who had saved his life. "Thank you," he simply said.

Dr. Lester rolled his eyes in an exaggerated display of patience, and shook the proffered hand. "My pleasure. But I'm not going to say 'any time'!"

The three men laughed wholeheartedly then.

"You'll have to come back here next week to take out your remaining stitches. Give my office a call in four or five days, and I'll arrange an appointment."

"Right," Hutch nodded.

"Take care, you too," Dr. Lester fondly shook Starsky's hand and left the room to go on with his morning round.

"What a great man," Hutch said pensively, after the retreating figure. "We've been very lucky, Starsk."

"Yeah," Starsky nodded distractedly. "I'm so happy you didn't end up in the hands of that Stevens creep," he mumbled with a chill of fear.

"Who?" Hutch asked, not quite picking up Starsky's words.

"The 'doctor' who examined you in ER," Starsky's voice oozed venom.

Hutch shivered at the memory. He would never forget how upset, confused and disoriented he had been then, and how that cold, unfeeling man had examined him, showing him the same compassion and understanding of Dr. Menguele. He had succeeded in making him more nervous and scared than he already was, his stutter reappeared and he mistakenly took it as a sign of his concussion. A good proof of how much damage a bad doctor could cause. "Let's get out of here," he muttered.

Starsky couldn't take Hutch's clothes out of the closet fast enough. While his partner got dressed, Starsky took a last look around the room and the bathroom, making certain they weren't leaving anything behind. Finally, he joined his fully dressed Blintz by the door. "Ready, babe?" he asked.

Hutch smiled from ear to ear. "Ready, partner."

Starsky opened the door. "After you," he said, politely.

Hutch put his hand on his chest and staggered backwards, not believing Starsky's manners. Starsky grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him out of the room.

Once outside, they saw nurse Henderson heading towards them, pushing an empty wheelchair. The two men looked at each other and rolled their eyes. They had forgotten the most annoying procedure of all!

"Be my guest, Mr. Hutchinson," she invited the tall man to sit down.

Resignedly, Hutch flopped down on it.

"Honey, do you mind?" Starsky asked the kind nurse.

"Of course not," she smiled at him, stepping aside. "I hope not to see you again until next century, at least."

"Believe me, we'll do our best," Hutch wholeheartedly assured her, reaching out to her.

Very moved by the unexpected gesture of gratitude, something she had rarely seen in all her years as a nurse, she shook the handsome man's hand, only to find Starsky's outstretched hand reaching out to her, too!

"Thanks for your patience, lovely lady," Starsky's sparkling eyes were so full of sincere gratefulness, that she had to swallow the sudden lump in her throat as she shook the strong hand.

Waving goodbye to the gentle and compassionate nurse, Starsky pushed his partner along the corridor, turning to the left next, only to meet a queue of nurses, a couple doctors (Dr. Lester amongst them) and even several patients they had befriended during their stay, all lined up alongside the corridor, who on seeing them, burst into a standing ovation.

With his mouth hanging open and blushing to the roots of his hair, Starsky pushed an equally agape and flushed Hutch to the elevators as quickly as he could manage. Loud whistles of appreciation followed them all the way into the elevator, until the doors closed after them.

"We'd better do our best not to get hurt again, Blondie. I don't think we could live down another stay in this hospital. Especially after this," Starsky whispered, still as red as a beetroot.

Hutch was too nonplussed to reply. He just nodded at his partner's words and hid his face in his big palm.

Outside the building, Hutch stood up and looked skywards, throwing his head back with abandon, basking in the warmth of the sun.

Starsky watched Hutch's childlike display biting his lower lip, in awe of the innocently sensual, handsome beauty, doing his utmost to hold back and not make a scene right then and there.

At last, Hutch turned to him and offered him a carefree, ecstatic smile, that Starsky understood perfectly.

"All right?" he asked, smiling back, enraptured by the heavenly sight.

Hutch nodded once, his eyes shining with barely restrained glee. "All right," he replied.

As one, they threw their arms round each other's shoulders and walked away from their most recent nightmare, grateful to the bottom of their hearts for yet another happy ending.

The ride home was made in silence at first, each of them lost in his own thoughts that, for once, couldn't differ more. Hutch couldn't stop thinking about how was he going to share his apartment with his partner and keep his secret at the same time. He had succeeded last year, during Starsky's convalescence, but this time he doubted he could be strong enough. And the fact that his body was physically weakened after the trauma it had endured, didn't help, either. He would have to take one day at a time and pray.

On the other hand, Starsky couldn't wait to arrive at Hutch's apartment, put his beloved out of his misery and love him the way both of them had wanted for so long. He was painfully aware of all the times Hutch had surrendered to those terrible feelings, and he had done his best to distract him, sometimes in the most outrageous ways. Hutch's torment had lasted long enough, and he felt guilty for all the days he had been free from that kind of pain, whereas his partner... But it was about to come to an end. It was a matter of minutes now.

Starsky gripped the wheel impatiently, strongly tempted to step on the gas. But he caught himself in time. He didn't want to alarm his partner. Besides, he had to admit there was something delightful about this unique brand of torture: knowing what's about to happen and yet, glorying in every moment of nerve-racking trepidation. He stiffened instinctively when he felt the helpless tension in his partner's body, and he immediately reacted to it.

"Music?" he suggested.

"Sure," Hutch answered quickly. *Too* quickly.

Starsky turned on the stereo Merle had installed in the Torino a few months earlier. A cheerful male voice inundated the cabin.

*"...dedicated to all the Butchs and Sundances out there. To best friends, who make life worth living."*

When the song began, Starsky and Hutch looked at each other, not believing the coincidence. They smiled at each other, feeling suddenly light and euphoric, realizing all the things they had to be grateful for, all the things they had in common, not the least of them being all the precious memories, both good and bad, they had shared for so many years.

Hutch rolled down the window and put his head slightly out, breathing deeply, feeling the breeze blowing on his face, messing up his hair and making him feel all exhilarated and giddy.

Starsky looked at his happy partner, thrilled that the infectious mood of the song had worked its magic on his gloomy frame of mind. Damn, it had affected him too! He was tapping on the steering wheel, following the rhythm of the song and whistling softly. He looked at his blond beauty again, in time to see Hutch putting his head back in the Torino, his long fingers tapping on the strong thighs.

*'C'mon, babe, sing. I can't wait to hear that lovely voice of yours,'* he wished.

As if he had read Starsky's mind, Hutch started singing.

*But there's one thing*

*I know*

*The blues they sent to meet me*

*Won't defeat me*

*It won't be long till happiness steps up to greet me*

*Raindrops keep fallin' on my head*

*But that doesn't mean my eyes will soon be turnin' red*

*Cryin's not for me*

*'Cause...*

*I'm never gonna stop the rain by complainin'*

*Because I'm free*

*Nothin's worryin' me*

Unable to help himself, Starsky joined in, needing to share in the joy bubbling over in his chest. Their voices blended beautifully and feeling obscenely boyish, they began moving their upper bodies from side to side to the song's rhythm, synchronizing their movements to perfection.

*It won't be long till happiness steps up to greet me*

*Raindrops keep fallin' on my head*

*But that doesn't mean my eyes will soon be turnin' red*

*Cryin's not for me*

*'Cause...*

*I'm never gonna stop the rain by complainin'*

*Because I'm free*

*Nothin's worryin' me...*

When the song finished, they looked at each other and burst out laughing. There were no worries in their world anymore.

Hutch opened the door to his apartment and stepped in, followed closely by his partner, who then closed the door. "Home Sweet Home!" Hutch exclaimed, unable to help himself. Nothing like a stay in a hospital, not knowing if you're going to survive, to value something as ordinary as your own place. He dropped onto his couch unceremoniously, after unbuttoning and taking off his shirt.

Following his friend's example, Starsky took his leather jacket off and threw it on the couch on top of the discarded shirt. "It's just past noon. Want me to make us brunch?"

"I'm not really hungry. But I'm thirsty. How about a cool drink?" Hutch suggested.

"Comin' up," Starsky opened the fridge and smiled at its contents. Huggy had been there the day before, taking care of Hutch's plants and filling the fridge to bursting with food. He had to feed his Blintz now to

help him put on the pounds Hutch had lost after his ordeal. He took out a couple Cokes and offered one to his partner, who was leaning back on the couch, looking at the ceiling. "Penny for your thoughts," he asked.

Hutch's eyes settled on him. "Nothing in particular," Hutch accepted the Coke with a soft smile and a nod. "I was just thinking that I'm glad to be back here and trying to decide how we're going to spend the next few days. We're not used to having so much free time on our hands." He took a generous swig of the cool drink.

Starsky smiled to himself, having a pretty good idea of just how were they going to spend their sick leave. "Yeah, we're a couple workaholics, huh?" he said instead, sitting by his partner. He took a swig of his own Coke. "Dobey's been very kind to extend my sick leave a few more days. He knows I won't work with anyone but you. And I'm useless to him typing reports at a desk."

"He's spoiling us," Hutch joked.

"Not really," Starsky smiled. "I've more than made up for these days of sick leave. All these months we've been working an average of 15 hours a day. It's not like we're on holiday, precisely."

"Yeah, but I feel like we were, though," Hutch said with a sigh, thinking of the nightmare they had just left behind.

"Yeah," Starsky held back a shudder at the thought. He nudged Hutch's shoulder with his own, in a gesture of mutual comfort and reassurance.

Hutch returned the nudge, just as affectionately.

"Wanna lie down and sleep for a while?" Starsky asked, taking another swig. "By the time you wake up, I'll have something cooked for us."

Hutch made a face. "I guess I *could* sleep if I lay down, but I'd rather sleep when I'm supposed to, not in the middle of the day."

"Whatever you wanna do, that's fine with me. You need to rest to build up your strength."

"I know. I just... I don't wanna lie down just now."

"Okay. Make yourself at home," Starsky smiled at his choice of words. "I'll put these away." He stood up and, grabbing Hutch's shirt and his own jacket, went to Hutch's closet.

Hutch stood up too and headed for the kitchen, finishing his Coke and throwing it into the trash can. He checked the plants hanging from the walls. The soil was still damp from Huggy's yesterday visit.

Starsky returned to the living room and entered the bathroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Satisfied with his rounds, Hutch sat down at the kitchen's table, drumming his fingers on the wood, wondering what were they going to do for the next few hours. They could watch television, play checkers or Monopoly (no more pinochle for a while, thank you!), or they could just lie down and doze off for a few hours. Maybe Starsky was hungry. In that case, they would prepare something. Tonight was COSMOS night, and there was no way on earth they would miss the show. He smiled when he remembered the way Starsky devoured each and every episode. So much enthusiasm and hunger for knowledge! His boyish, childlike, beloved friend! So beautiful and...! The warning bells ringing in his head quickly brought him out of his daydream. Not now, not now with temptation being so close! He covered his face with his hands. How in hell was he going to get away with this?! HOW!? He would give himself away somehow, he had no doubts about it now. It was just a matter of time before his feelings betrayed him.

His fist hit the board in a fit of helpless anger. When his hand contacted something other than hard wood, he looked down at the table.

Hutch's eyes bulged and he let out a shocked gasp at the sight of his journal. What the blazes was the thing doing on his kitchen table?! He had kept it safely hidden in his closet, on the top shelf where it would be invisible to the naked eye! He had put it back there the last time he had written in it! Or had he? And when had that been? One, two days before his accident? He couldn't remember anything anymore, but his main worry now was, if he had somehow forgotten to hide the book, had Starsky...? His blood ran cold in his veins and every hair on his body stood on end with panic at the mere thought.

If Starsky hadn't seen the book, he'd better put it away right now, before his inborn curiosity got the better of his partner.

With sweaty, trembling hands, Hutch hugged the notebook to his chest, his arms closed protectively across it, and stood up on shaky legs. He turned about...

...and bumped into Starsky, who was looking at him with the eyes of the cat that ate the canary, and the biggest Cheshire grin he had ever seen.

"Where are you going with that notebook, *partner*?" his voice oozed mischief and sensuality.

Hutch swallowed hard and opened his mouth, trying to say something, but only an inarticulate croak came out of his lips. "I... I w-was... I was g-gonna..." he stuttered.

"...put it back in your closet?"

Hutch stiffened and froze. He watched his friend with his eyes wide open, not wanting to believe this was really happening. It was too sudden, too unexpected, too frightening. "H-how do you know I k-keep it in m-m-my closet?" he managed to ask.

Starsky's smile broadened even more, if that was possible. "Because that's where it fell from when I was looking for some shoes for you."

Trembling from head to foot, Hutch met the indigo eyes, only to be pinned under the hypnotic, awesome intensity of his partner's stare. His mouth was dry, his heart couldn't possibly beat any faster. "And did you... did you... r-read it?" he asked in a whisper, with a sinking feeling.

Starsky's grin completed the circle and turned into the tenderest, most loving smile the blond man could remember. "It wasn't my intention at first, but the words *'this hopeless love I feel for Starsky'* most definitely drew my attention."

Hutch's face lost all color, the notebook slipped from his frozen grasp and he stepped backwards, burying his face in his hands. All the dams broke with the knowledge that the secret he had painstakingly kept for over a year, the secret that could very well cost him the most beautiful relationship he had ever been honored with, was out in the open now. He would have given his life for Starsky to never find out. At least, not like this. If Starsky had to know, it should have been coming from him. He deserved that dignity, after everything they meant to each other and everything they had gone through together. This was simply the worse scenario he could imagine. What would have Starsky made of what he had read? What would he think of him now? His mind recoiled in denial, refusing to believe this nightmare was really happening. "Oh, God! Oh, my God! I've lost you! I've lost you now, Starsk!" he burst out crying. The backs of his quivering legs contacted the chair he had vacated and he slumped down on it without looking.

"Easy, easy there, Blondie!" Hutch's collapse spurred Starsky into action. He grabbed his partner by the shoulders, trying to steady him, but Hutch desperately tried to shake him off, too ashamed to bear his touch. "You never lost me. You just found me, baby. Just as I found *you*."

Hutch shook his head from side to side, refusing to listen to anything. He was so focused on his pain, his fear and his shame, that he shut out the world, wanting to disappear into nowhere. He was still hiding his face in his hands, not daring to look at Starsky.

Starsky fell to his knees in front of his partner and tried to pry the stubborn hands away. Not an easy thing to do, since Hutch seemed determined not to show that beautiful face of his. "Please, please, Hutch, look at me," he begged.

Hutch shook his head again and his crying got worse.

"Don't be ashamed of your feelings for me, baby. Your love is my greatest treasure. I've never been so honored in my life. I never thought I'd be so loved by anyone. You have no idea what I felt when I was reading this," a shudder racked his body at the memory of all the pages he had read a few days before. He would remember them for as long as he lived. His fingertips began stroking the rigid fingers hiding the lovely face. "Look at me, Hutch. Everything's okay, I swear. Look at me and let me show ya. Please, babe," his voice dropped to a whisper and it felt like a sweet, intimate caress that brushed the chilled skin of his distraught friend.

The brutally trembling body finally yielded and the stiff fingers gave a little. Seizing the opportunity, Starsky took the cold fingers in his hands and bent forward. Hutch's wet, reddened face, full of tear tracks, finally appeared before his eyes. Following his heart, as he had always done, Starsky leaned in closer and bestowed a tiny, infinitely loving kiss on the pouted lips.

His body's reaction to that minute touch of lips on lips was dramatic. He had fantasized about kissing Hutch for so long, that he couldn't remember what it was like *not* fantasizing about it. And poor fool that he was, he had thought he could guess how it would be. He knew it would be beyond anything he had experienced before, because it would be Hutch, the most important person in his world, the person he loved more than he had ever thought he was capable of loving. But what he felt... it was beyond compare. His spirit was soaring, his body was burning, he wanted to cry from the perfection and beauty of it. He felt as if he had kissed Hutch with his soul instead of his lips. He had never exposed himself so much and given so much in a kiss. He felt naked and vulnerable, and he never wanted this feeling to end, because he knew his dignity and his heart couldn't be in better hands.

For his part, Hutch was completely taken for a loop. In little more than one minute, he had gone from being resigned to having Starsky in his life as just a friend, to finding out he had not only read his journal, but... He blinked, unable to believe this was still the real world. Events were progressing too fast for him to catch up with them. This couldn't possibly be happening to him. He had to be dreaming it all, as he had been doing for months.

And yet... his body believed. It was throbbing, tingling all over. He had never felt like this before! He was melting inside out. This was the most meaningful moment in his entire life. He felt his insides liquefying just from that kiss. He blinked again to clear his eyes and looked at his partner, full of confusion and disbelieving hope. "W-what did you do?" he asked in the weakest voice that only Starsky could hear.

Starsky smiled, his eyes filling with tears of overwhelming tenderness. His heart was breaking over Hutch's vulnerability. He had stripped him naked with the revelation. He had left him defenseless to protect himself with the abrupt uncovering of his truth. But he would reassure him now. He would put an end to their misery and open the door to the most awesome, all-encompassing love on Earth. "I kissed you," he answered with a roguish smile. "But it was more a peck than a kiss," he edged closer to Hutch, so close they could feel their warm breaths blowing on each other's faces. The warmth and the mounting agitation filled their skin with goosebumps. "This..." Starsky opened his mouth and held it an inch away from Hutch's instinctively open lips. The tip of his nose brushed his partner's accidentally, and he let out a little smile at their fortuitous eskimo kiss. He was hanging on the verge of the single most important turn his life would ever take, and he wanted to enjoy the glorious feeling to the fullest. He was certain Hutch had to be hearing his frenzied heartbeat. His ears were buzzing, his body temperature seemed to have increased a hundred degrees. This was the moment his whole life had been heading for. Hutch's scent enveloped him and made him feel heady and inebriated. And yet, he had never been so alive, so self-aware, so certain of his destiny, of what and who he was meant to be. "This..." he almost captured Hutch's lips in his mouth, but he closed his lips one moment too soon and their mouths closed on thin air. Hutch whimpered and the heartfelt moan echoed all over Starsky's body. He opened his lips again and Hutch's immediately responded. They moved their heads

in tiny circles, searching each other's lips, but never touching. Until, finally, Starsky decided this delicious torture had lasted enough. "This-is-a-kiss," he murmured, feeling his every word caressing the full, juicy lips. With a sigh of total surrender, he closed his lips around Hutch's.

The feeling was so immense he almost passed out. He couldn't believe he could feel like this from just a kiss. The warmth, the flavor, the sheer beauty of the moment blew him away. Nothing had ever felt so right, so perfect, so destined to be. There was no fear, just love and homecoming. He had found his lifemate. At long last, he was one with his own true love. A desperate hunger, so long unsatisfied, made him press his lips against Hutch's, never being close enough, never touching enough. For a moment, he thought he was catching fire. He wanted to fuse himself with Hutch. To cease to exist as a separate identity and become one with the other half of his soul.

Hutch couldn't believe what was happening. The world was spinning and the only thing holding him in place were Starsky's lips, clamped to his own.

He had dreamt so much of this! He had written about it, he had put down in his journal all his feelings, his every hope, imagining how Starsky's lips had to feel and taste, how they would claim him forever with their passion. And how he would return the kiss and claim that powerful masculinity as his own.

He couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't anymore. But if he was dreaming, he never wanted to wake up. Giving up every spark of sanity he had left, he opened his mouth and devoured the delicious, sensual lips, nipping at every little corner of his dream come true. He could feel the heat coming out of his every pore. He was burning, he was soaring, he was insane with love!

They kissed desperately for as long as their lung capacity allowed them. Only oxygen deprivation forced them to let go of each other's thoroughly ravaged lips, and they leaned on each other's foreheads, gasping and panting, glorying in their breathless state. Their hearts seemed about to beat right out of their chests.

"Starsk, oh, God, Starsk! Tell me I'm not dreaming!" Hutch begged, still in need of reassurance. "Please, tell me!"

Starsky could feel his heart beating in his throat. He breathed deeply, trying to slow down its frantic rhythm. He closed his eyes and smiled, feeling every point of contact between them. He suddenly realized he was still holding Hutch's fingers in his hands. He bent his head and devotedly kissed the fingertips. Those long fingers, that had written the most beautiful words he had ever read! No being could deserve such words! "No, babe. You're not dreaming. Neither of us is," he looked up into the full eyes that watched him with a blending of awe, hope and disbelief. He let go of one hand and reached out, settling his trembling fingertips on the wet lips. Unable to help himself, he began caressing them back and forth. "I've dreamt of touching your lips. I knew they'd be soft, but not *this* soft. I knew it'd be beyond all my dreams, but I never thought..." he swallowed heavily. "So long in love with you, praying for a miracle, and knowing it was hopeless. And now..."

Hutch reached out too with his free hand and touched Starsky's lips with his index and middle fingers, skimming them reverently in sheer wonder, feeling the words leaving Starsky's lips and vibrating on his fingerpads.

"These sweet lips, this perfect mouth I wanna kiss forever and never let go," Starsky groaned.

With a moan, they embraced for all they were worth and they clung to each other, as their lips became blissfully acquainted with one another.

It had been far too long, far too much loneliness and misery. They kissed and kissed for what seemed like hours. Their hands roamed each other's backs, they tingled the nape of their necks with their fingertips, their hands got lost in each other's hair, feeling it slide between their fingers, they held each other's faces in their hands while devouring each other's lips and tongues, and they couldn't stop shuddering. What they were feeling, loving one another like this, was beyond everything they had ever experienced with anyone. They

had a lifetime to make up for, and they intended to spend the rest of their lives making up to each other for all the pain and suffering they had endured.

When the fit of passion and extreme need subsided somewhat, they wrapped their arms around each other and started rocking one another comfortingly, their faces buried in the crook of each other's necks, catching their breath.

"Hutch," Starsky whispered, in a strangled voice.

"Starsk," Hutch replied, in sheer wonder.

Neither of them had ever heard their names spoken in such a manner. It sounded like a prayer, a benediction, a miracle, and it tore at their hearts.

"I love you!" they exclaimed, feeling they were emptying themselves in the words.

They held each other even tighter.

"I guess now you know what my big secret was," Starsky managed to say after a long while, planting a loving kiss on the beautiful ear.

Hutch nodded against his shoulder. "An awfully familiar secret," he commented, in a muffled voice.

"Ain't it?" Starsky smiled broadly.

No more words were needed. Roving hands and adoring lips saying more than any words could say.

"You forgive me for reading your journal?" Starsky finally brought up the transgression that had been preying on his mind for days.

"Nothing to forgive," was Hutch's immediate answer, and Starsky felt that Hutch had somehow seen it coming. "You said it wasn't your intention to read it, and if you hadn't, Lord knows how long this absurd situation would have lasted," he blushed helplessly and buried his face in the cuddly neck. "I only pray I can live down some of the things you've read there."

"Aww, Blondie," Starsky cuddled his partner lovingly, feeling the heat emanating from that big body even through their clothing. "You know I'll never hold anything you wrote there against you. Not even your curiosity about my chest hair and the taste and texture of my delicious-looking nipples," Starsky just *couldn't* help it.

"Ouch!" Hutch hid his face in the strong shoulder even more.

Starsky laughed softly and stroked the baby soft hair, combing through it from roots to tips, his whole arm tingling at the heavenly sensations. "But I only read the first dozen pages or so. Just enough to be sure I wasn't dreaming or misunderstanding your feelings for me. It was so hard to believe! I couldn't read beyond that," for a fleeting moment, he thought about the brown-covered notebook, that had fallen from Hutch's hands when he had walked in on him. He looked around him and saw it on the floor beside Hutch's chair. He bent down and picked it up, putting it on the table with a grateful caress. If it hadn't been for it, they would still be living in darkness.

Hutch realized then that Starsky was kneeling on the floor. "Get up, love. Don't kneel there," he grabbed Starsky by the forearms and pulled him to his feet. The endearment was out of his mouth before he could even think about it. He blushed furiously and looked down, biting his lower lip.

Starsky smiled lovingly at the endearment. It had fulfilled a deep-seeded need he didn't even know he had. And he knew he would never get tired of hearing Hutch utter sweet nothings to him, or vice versa. He took

the beautiful head between his hands and looked down at it, totally enraptured. Hutch met his eyes with some reluctance. "We never minced words, Hutch. Let's not start now. We never gave a shit about conventions or roles of behavior. Don't ever bite your tongue with me. We're free now, babe," he caressed the soft cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Let's love each other the way we've been dreaming of for so long."

Moved to his very soul, Hutch nodded and pressed his face against the broad shirt-clad chest, sniffing at the fragrant skin needfully. Starsky wrapped his arms around the strong body and kissed the top of the blond head passionately. The long arms wound themselves round his back and held him close.

They lost track of time. Their hands couldn't stop moving all over their bodies, endlessly stroking everywhere they could reach.

"I don't know about you, but I can't stop touching," Starsky finally said.

"Me neither," Hutch began moving his face, nuzzling Starsky's chest like a cub. "So long holding back..."

The raw pain in his beloved's words cut through Starsky's heart like a knife. He nodded and lost his fingers in the strands of silky hair. "To be or not to be," he whispered.

"What do you mean?" Hutch asked, looking up into the sparkling blue eyes.

To his amazement, Starsky blushed slightly. "I mean that a part of me wants to lie down with you and do all the things I've been dreaming about for over a year. And another part wants to just take things slow and savor every kiss," he bent down and brushed his lips with Hutch's in a feather-light caress that made his partner moan in delight. "Every caress," he stroked the fading bruises on the pink cheek. "God, Hutch! You're so beautiful!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

Hutch trembled at his beloved's impassioned accent. "Beauty's in the eyes of the beholder, my love," he softly said, with a sweet smile. It felt so good and right to speak endearments to Starsky! He moved his hands from Starsky's back to his sides, and he caressed them up and down. "I'm in the same dilemma," his hands seemed to have a mind of their own and they ventured into Starsky's chest, feeling it all over. Its perfect shape, its strength, its awesome male beauty that had always drawn him, long before actually falling in love with his partner. He was suddenly assaulted by the desperate need to touch bare skin. With a passionate kiss on the center of the gorgeous chest, his fingers began deftly unbuttoning the shirt.

Starsky's reaction was immediate. He stiffened and his hands quickly covered Hutch's, effectively stopping him. "Hutch, don't," his voice was surprisingly weak and with a hint of vulnerability and fear that lanced through Hutch's heart. "I know I told ya I'd try, but... I can't. Not now. Please, it's too soon." He looked into Hutch's eyes, openly begging, asking for understanding.

Hutch smiled with all the love he had in his heart. His face actually *shone* with love, and it left Starsky speechless. "I've been waiting for this moment for over a year, Starsk. Let me see how beautiful you are."

Starsky snorted, in the most expressive self-depreciating way.

"Don't do that!" Hutch saw red. "Don't ever do that again! I used to think that if it depended on me, I'd make certain you got your self-esteem back. You can bet against me if you want, Starsky, but I'm not going to lose this time! I won't stop until you see yourself the way I see you."

Hutch's vehement speech threw Starsky off balance, and the blond man took the opportunity to undo the two remaining buttons and slowly reveal the chest of his dreams. The mere sight of it brought an ecstatic smile to his face, as if he was looking at the most heavenly thing in the world, which was exactly what he was doing. "Oh, my!" he whispered. "It's even more beautiful than I remembered." He settled his eyes on his partner's distressed face. "Do you know the last time I saw it this close, Starsk?" he looked down at the rugged chest and bit his lower lip, completely enthralled. "Nine months and twenty one days ago, the last day I dressed your incisions. Since that day, I've had to content myself with quick and furtive looks from afar, before you

hurried into your room to cover yourself. Almost ten months of deprivation, my love. Just let me look at you now."

Starsky wanted to die with shame and embarrassment. He looked up at the ceiling as his eyes filled with tears. He couldn't bring himself to look at his partner staring at the chest he still couldn't see reflected back in a mirror without feeling like throwing up. He jumped when he felt Hutch's hands on him.

Hutch was in seventh heaven. His hands trembled with desire and love. He was touching Starsky as a lover! He had been given the right to touch, and caress, and kiss, and love! And he intended to abuse that privilege for as long as Starsky allowed it. He slid his hands all over the broad expanse of skin and hair. He had never touched another man like this; he had never wanted to, until now. He had longed and suffered for it with every tear he had. And now, this priceless treasure was his. A home to his tired head, a warm nest to belong. His palms throbbed and tingled with the caress of all that soft, velvety hair. He had touched and nuzzled it briefly once, the night he had kissed Starsky's surgical wounds, but he hadn't dared to linger for too long, in case it gave Starsky the wrong impression. Always holding back; but no more! God, he never wanted to stop touching Starsky's chest! He opened his hands and pressed down gently with his fingertips, as if reading Braille. His heart felt about to explode inside him.

Starsky whimpered, unable to believe this was truly happening to him. He was almost afraid to look down and find out he was dreaming. But those feelings coursing through him couldn't be a dream. He had never felt so much pleasure in his life. He was practically convulsing with it. But it wasn't only sensual pleasure. He felt as if Hutch was caressing his soul, cradling it in his hands and covering it with sweet drops of love. Hutch was healing him. He was healing the scars of his spirit, and giving him back what he thought he had lost forever.

Summoning up his courage, Starsky dared to look down, and he was rewarded with the sight of his blond angel sliding his forefinger all along one scar, moving his fingertip back and forth, never getting enough. The scar tingled and throbbed under the light caress. He had never thought it could be so sensitive. He hadn't touched himself there since the shooting. Whenever he took a shower, he just scrubbed enough to clean himself up, never lingering anywhere near his scars long enough to find out just how sensitive they were. He had become the shadow of the man he had been once. But he didn't care anymore. He didn't intend to share his body with anyone again, anyway. Only one person could work the miracle, and since it was highly unlikely that person would ever be available, there was just no point in exploring his own body the way he used to.

Starsky watched the big loving hands moving on to the next scar, making love to it just as thoroughly and devotedly. Hutch was smiling at it, staring at it as if he was seeing the most beautiful thing in the world. Then, he reached out his thumb, and never losing contact with the second scar, he began fingering the third in the sexiest way his bulging eyes had ever seen. He could hear some helpless moaning in the background, and he couldn't believe it when he realized it was his own voice he was hearing. His body was spasming delightfully, in the throes of a passion he had given up to long ago.

Hutch bent forward and settled his lips on the scar his thumb was caressing. Something inside him exploded then. He rained dozens of little kisses all over the three scars, until he couldn't stand it anymore and he stuck out his tongue and began licking them, tasting them hungrily.

Starsky bit his lower lip unmercifully to prevent himself from crying out. Helpless tears rolled down his face. He had never felt so much. Every possible feeling was gathering up inside him, threatening him with complete overload. This was what it felt like to be loved by Hutch? This glory? If it was, he wasn't certain he could survive it. But he was ready to try. He was more than ready to commit his very life to making Hutch feel the same way he was making him feel now. Even die in trying. His arms wound themselves around Hutch's shoulders, crushing the large body to him. His body had taken control over his mind, and he couldn't help it. "Hutch! Oh, Hutch!" he moaned time and again. The name of his beloved was the only thing holding him in place. If this loving went on for another minute, he would float away.

Hutch was out of his mind. He had completely abandoned himself to Starsky's loving. He couldn't stop. He wouldn't stop! The sensual, sexy chest hair was tickling his face, making him giggle like a child. The feel of Starsky's skin on his lips and the taste of the warm flesh had put him in a hazy state of love he intended to sublimate by loving Starsky into oblivion. He rubbed his face all over the hairy chest, like a playful cub, tasting, licking, nuzzling and feeling it all over. His hands and his lips were sending the most otherworldly sensations to his brain, and he briefly wondered what prevented him from passing out right then and there.

All of a sudden, his lips encountered something soft and hard at the same time, something round and fleshy that stuck out from Starsky's chest. Unable to think about what it could be, his body immediately recognized it though, and Hutch responded by attaching his lips to it and beginning to suckle instinctively.

"OHMYGOD!" Starsky cried out then. His arms closed around Hutch's head, holding it to his chest, desperately wishing that his angel would never stop loving him like this. For the first time in a very long time, Starsky felt desirable again, and worthy of love, and sensual, and beautiful. His dormant libido awakened with a vengeance, with a desperate need to be fulfilled, after so many months of resigned chastity.

Hutch hugged Starsky's body to him, caressing the strong back all over, finding the entry wounds and making them tingle with his fingertips. He lacked arms and fingers, and lips and tongues, to love Starsky the way he wanted. The feel of the erect nipple in his mouth was driving him insane. He was feeling everything! All of him was open to Starsky. It was as if every sense, every pore, every corner of his body and his soul had opened wide at the same time. He had never felt something like this. The sweet, hard little bud filled his mouth in a way he couldn't understand. He was salivating like crazy, driven by a hunger only Starsky could satiate. Starsky's taste was unlike anything he had ever sampled before. He tasted of spice and sensuality; he tasted of warm silk and sweet love.

Suddenly, a funny thought struck him. Would Starsky's right nipple taste the same? Not wasting a second when there was the most pleasurable way to find out, Hutch reluctantly released the enraptured little nub and crossed the bridge between both nipples, rubbing his face against the soft fur, until he found the little mate of the baby he had released. His lips kissed and he licked the hardened bud in greeting, before sheltering the lonely nipple in his mouth, finding it just as delicious as the left one. *'Oh, yes. Feed me, Starsk. I've been starving all my life until the day I met you.'*

Starsky was about to black out. The room was spinning and his legs wouldn't hold him for much longer. He was throbbing from head to foot, his face was bathed in tears of pleasure, love, joy and gratitude. He wanted to return to Hutch all the feelings he was giving him, but it was all he could do to keep the lovely head close to his heart and those lips attached to his nipple. He had felt so ugly! He needed this loving so much! But he didn't want to be selfish. He wanted... he *needed* to share his pleasure with Hutch. Hutch needed him just as desperately as he needed his blond. He was the only one who could heal all the pain and suffering he had read in those pages.

Starsky cradled Hutch's head in his hands and forced his beloved to look up at him. Hutch had no choice but to let go of the tasty nipple he was suckling, with a moan of regret that broke Starsky's heart. The full lips made a wet, smacking sound when they released his nipple, and something inside Starsky snapped. He took the beautiful face in his hands and gazed down at it with all the passionate love and adoration that were surging up from deep inside him like a volcano. There was no stopping him now. "My sweet, blue angel. My precious love," he whispered into the soft lips, a heartbeat before fusing his mouth to Hutch's in the single most earth-shattering kiss.

Both men let out a loud whimper that almost singed their eyelashes. Starsky couldn't stand it anymore and he got Hutch to his feet, pulling the T-shirt from his pants almost at the same time. He had to feel Hutch's skin. He had to touch and roam that silky skin again, but as a lover, not as a friend.

Reading his beloved's intentions, Hutch cooperated by raising his arms. One moment later, his T-shirt was on the floor, while the two men fumbled with Starsky's shirt, taking it off the broad shoulders and sending it lying atop Hutch's discarded T-shirt. They embraced for all they were worth, groaning uncontrollably at the feel of their naked chests kissing each other for the first time. They started rubbing them together, almost

fainting at the unique feeling of soft hair rubbing against smooth skin. Their lips sought each other again and they became a writhing mass of love, seeking to join until there was no trace of the two separate beings they had been once.

It seemed they would never stop. Their helpless moaning only fueled their need. They wanted to devour each other, but gently, taking their time, enjoying every single moment of this miracle they thought they would never get.

Starsky released the juicy lips with a groan. He needed to breathe or he would pass out. He rested his forehead on the strong, naked shoulder. Looking down at it, he just couldn't help but clamp his lips to the long, sensual neck, licking and biting softly at it, fulfilling the dream that had haunted him for months.

Hutch threw his head back with the most astonishing sound of pleasure. "Oh, please, yes, Starsk!" he gasped.

The wanton sound and the total surrender in the beloved voice was too much for Starsky. He bent his head and ventured into the smooth pink chest, that was all flushed and covered with a thin sheet of perspiration already. He kissed and tasted it, drooling at the delicious flavor. He rubbed his face all over the entire surface except what the elastic dressing was covering, irrationally wanting to roll on it like a playful child. He was so blown away he really didn't know what he was doing. He was acting on instinct; just loving Hutch, loving him with everything he had. His hands, his lips, his soul. He stroked the quivering flanks, while Hutch squirmed in his arms like an eel, unable to help himself. He could feel the big hands on his back, clinging to him for dear life, the fingertips sliding all over him, back and forth, up and down, almost convulsively. He was being bombarded from all fronts, and could hardly keep up with Hutch's frantic loving. He inhaled his blond's scent deeply, and as impossible as it would seem, his mind reached a place it had never been before. His hands roamed the sensual chest, looking for the tiny buds he wanted to love. When his forefinger brushed one rosy little nipple, Hutch let out an almost animal sound, full of need. Starsky opened his lips and engulfed the sweet thing, claiming it.

"YES!" he heard Hutch crying out from afar.

They were losing their minds. Hutch's knees gave and if it hadn't been for Starsky, he would have collapsed to the floor. The curly-haired man suckled on the painfully erect nub for a little bit more, while supporting the swaying body.

"Let's take it to the bed?" he suggested, breathless.

"Please!" Hutch begged, leaning on his partner's strength.

A moment later, they found themselves by Hutch's bed, with Starsky tenderly undoing Hutch's pants, while his beloved undulated helplessly against him, kissing and sucking on his neck and shoulder, leaving tiny reddish marks that made Starsky tingle all over. Hutch kicked off his shoes and Starsky knelt down before him, pulling the pants down and taking them off, along with the socks. Before he could proceed any further, Hutch pulled him to his feet and tried to return the favor. But he was so nervous his fingers wouldn't obey him.

Starsky smiled at the adorable display of need and vulnerability and he brought the trembling hands to his lips, kissing them lovingly. Despite the journal and despite all the proof Hutch was giving him, it still was difficult to believe that Hutch wanted him. "No hurry, babe. We have the rest of our lives now."

Hutch closed his eyes and a shudder coursed through his body at the endearment. So long waiting for this! So long dreaming, fantasizing and crying for this! He swallowed the painful lump in his throat. "I know," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Starsk. M-my hands wanna do everything at once and I.. I c-can't seem to..."

Starsky put his forefinger on the pink, swollen lips. "Shhhh, no need to stutter here. We're safe now. We've never been safer, my love," he moved his finger away and pecked the soft mouth.

Hutch sighed and rested his forehead on the beautiful shoulder, rubbing his face back and forth across it and giving it tiny, adoring kisses, trying to calm down. "I know. It's just that I love you so much!"

"Just as I love you. But we've got nothing to prove. It's just me, Hutch. Love me the way you've always done."

Hutch met the most beautiful eyes in the world. Eyes that watched him brimming with tears. Tears of love and an emotion beyond anything he had ever seen in anyone's eyes before. And he wished to drown in that emotion and never survive it. *'No, Starsky, it's not just you. You're just everything.'* Heedless tears streamed down Hutch's cheeks, but he was smiling.

Starsky smiled back, as if he knew what Hutch was thinking. His lips wiped Hutch's tears away, he looked into his eyes and nodded in understanding.

And Hutch knew he had found perfection. It was his, now and forever. Reaching out, he cupped the handsome smiling face in his hands and kissed the soft mouth with every feeling he had inside.

Starsky returned every feeling in the kiss he gave him back.

They cherished each other through their lips. It was sweet and devoted. A promise of eternity and beyond. When they separated, they stared deeply into each other's souls, seeing the other reflected back, smiling and safe in the love of a lifetime.

Hutch's hands, sure now, unbuttoned and unzipped Starsky's jeans with what could only be described as worship. He sat down on his bed and pulled them down, smiling at the extremely erotic sight of Starsky's legs as they were slowly revealed. His curly-haired love had gotten rid of his Adidas by stepping on the back of them. When Starsky stepped out of his now useless pants and socks, the two men looked at each other, a silent message flashing between them. Only one garment remained to be shed. They would have to be blind to not see the desire imprinted in the front of their shorts, but with just one look, they made the decision not to hurry. This was far too important. The time would come soon enough. Meanwhile, they had all the time in the world to just touch and caress and kiss and explore each other leisurely. Their bodies would guide them. Everything would happen in its own good time.

With an innocently sensual smile, Hutch leaned back on his elbows, crawling backwards slowly and smoothly, never losing eye contact, lovingly inviting Starsky to follow him and share his bed.

His entire body suddenly hot and flushed, Starsky stretched his body like a cat on the bed, looming over Hutch with a sly smile, readily accepting the invitation.

With an excited giggle, Hutch turned about, getting on all fours, and threw the coverlet aside, revealing the sheets beneath and making Ollie jump.

Hutch froze on the spot, his blood immediately running cold in his veins. He remained kneeling on his bed, staring at the teddy bear, his chest aching with the searing pain of the betrayal he had committed.

Starsky knelt down beside his beloved and held Ollie in his hands unhesitatingly. He knew all too well what Hutch was thinking and feeling right now. He wrapped his right arm around the suddenly cold body and hugged it tight. "They approve of us, Hutch," he whispered softly, holding Ollie at arm's length. "Don't be afraid. Terry and Gillian are smiling down at us right now."

Hutch smiled sadly, taking Ollie from Starsky's hands and nuzzling the teddy bear's nose in a heartbreakingly childlike gesture. "How do you know?" he asked, in a broken voice.

"You worked the miracle, babe. They answered you," Starsky's fingers got entangled in the silky strands of blond hair. At Hutch's incredulous crooked smile, Starsky reached out an infinitely gentle hand and turned the pale face to him. "In the last entry I read, you were talking to Terry."

Hutch shuddered and looked down, not daring to meet his eyes.

"No, Hutch," Starsky took the face of the man he loved in his palms, forcing him to look at him. "It's the most beautiful thing I read in my whole life. The things you said to Terry; your hopes, your dreams, your feelings for me... your fear of having betrayed her by falling in love with me... Your need to get her blessing, and Gillian's too. Well, you got it, love. They answered and you wrote it down."

"How do you know?" Hutch asked again, his eyes feverish with the need to believe.

Starsky swallowed heavily and met the agitated gaze. "When I went to Gillian's apartment before Grossman..." he looked down with a pained look on his face. It still hurt to talk about Gillian's brutal murder. It always would. He had liked the lady at first sight, and he had loved her for the way she made his partner shine and got him all goofy and excited. Just as Hutch had loved Terry, Starsky had the feeling he could have come to love Gillian in the same manner. He replayed their mild confrontation in his mind, and he couldn't help but raise his eyebrows at the memory of something she had said, that only now it got him to think. *'You love him too, don't you?'* she had said. But in what way did she mean those words exactly? Did she merely acknowledge how very much Starsky cared about his partner... or did she see something else there; like Starsky being *in love* with Hutch as well? Had he been in love with Hutch back then? Could he have fallen in love with Hutch *that* early? He had no way to know. His love for Hutch was so all-encompassing that he felt he had been in love with him since the day he was born. He couldn't tell when did he cross the line anymore. In any case, her voice had held no accusation, no grudge, no resentment whatsoever; it was just the simple acknowledgment of a fact. And Starsky respected her for that even more now. What a lady, indeed! Hutch had been so very lucky... Offhand, he was glad the poor unfortunate woman had met someone who could love her the way she deserved, even if Hutch had entered her life almost too late.

Starsky shook his head and focused on his beloved, who was staring at him, hanging on to his every word like a drowning man to his only chance of staying alive. He went on with the explanation that would give him peace. "I told her that one way or the other, you had to know. She accepted it and said she'd tell you that very night. When I was leaving, she looked at me and said: *'Wouldn't it be nice to be Hutch? In one lifetime you have two people love you so much.'*" He looked at his blond angel in sheer wonder.

Hutch returned his look, still uncomprehending. But a moment later, he got a faraway look on his face, as if those words had rung a bell.

Starsky nodded. "Yes, Hutch. They're exactly the same words you wrote Terry in your journal. You quoted Gillian to the letter," he smiled in awe, caressing the pink cheeks with his thumbs, his chest exploding with love. "Our ladies answered your distress call. The moment I read what you wrote, *I felt* we had our answer," he looked up at the ceiling, in a most expressive gesture. "That's why I know that wherever they are, they're happy for us and they approve of us being together. They gave us their blessing through you."

Hutch opened his mouth, but no sound came out of it. His eyes darted back and forth, trying to digest what Starsky had just told him. If that was true... "A-are you sure, Starsk? Are you completely sure of that?" he was frantic, desperate to believe, to have his beloved's certainty.

Starsky smiled and tried to convey his conviction through his hands. They had always been able to transmit their feelings through physical contact. Hutch would feel it now, too. "Hutch, I felt it in my bones, in my soul. The moment I read it, I had this gut feeling. *I knew* it was our answer. Beyond any doubt."

Hutch studied Starsky's features for another long moment, feeling the heat of those hands seeping into his being. If Starsky felt it, then it had to be true. He had never met anyone with so much sensitivity, so down-to-earth in some aspects, and with such an uncanny sixth sense for things that apparently had no logical explanation. But he had come to rely on Starsky's feelings as much as in proven facts.

And as strange as it could seem, Hutch started to feel that certainty too. Maybe Starsky was transmitting it to him through his hands, he didn't know. But he had to admit it was too much of a coincidence. His every

instinct was telling him Starsky was right. He had asked for a sign and Starsky had shown it to him. So typical of them! Always working in perfect harmony, the perfect team.

Nothing stood in their way now. They were free to love each other, ready to face anything life threw their way, because they had each other. It had always been so, but now it was more, so much more!

He met Starsky's eyes and nodded in acceptance. He tried to look down, but Starsky's hands held him firmly in place. The intensity in those blue depths was almost scary now.

"Don't ever be afraid, Hutch," Starsky said. His voice dropped an octave and it made Hutch's skin fill with goosebumps. "I loved Terry with all my heart, but she's my past. *You* are my present and my future. Forever. I know our ladies don't mind and they're very happy for us. Don't think about anything else, okay? It's me and thee, always. You're the one, Hutch. Until the day I die and beyond, my beautiful golden angel."

Hutch shook from head to toe at those words. Starsky drew him close and kissed the trembling lips with all the passion, devotion and commitment in his soul. This was what and who he has. Now and for all time. He nipped the soft lips, sending tiny, short messages that Hutch understood one by one.

When they finally separated, they looked at each other and burst out giggling.

"Okay?" Starsky asked, with the sweet innocence of a child.

"Okay, my love," Hutch nodded, all fear forgotten. He took a deep, cleansing breath, feeling as if he was the richest man in the world. He had everything he needed to be happy here in his arms. After a lifetime of searching, he was finally holding the reason why he had been put on this earth. With a final, all-encompassing nod, Hutch took Ollie in his hands and after nuzzling its nose one last time, he gently put it on his bedside table, watching over them protectively.

Starsky reached out and turned Ollie about, making it face the wall. Hutch looked at him with a question in his eyes.

"It's still too young to see certain things," Starsky answered, wriggling his eyebrows playfully.

Hutch laughed out loud. "How do you know? Have you seen his ID?" he asked.

"*His?*" Starsky's face was full of love and adoration.

"Ollie's a boy," Hutch explained. "Don't tell me you didn't know!"

"Not really. I never looked," Starsky shrugged.

Hutch burst out laughing once more. Starsky had done it again. Playing yin to his yang, and vice versa. Always his perfect balance, always perfectly attuned to his moods and always reacting to them just the way Hutch needed. And Hutch revelled in the knowledge that it worked both ways. This was his soulmate, his kindred spirit. Exploding at last, he embraced Starsky and brought them both down on his bed.

They wrapped their legs around each other, pressing against one another, never being close enough. Their lips met and didn't separate for a very long time. When they found themselves looking into each other's eyes, they smiled. Just smiled. They had never been happier. They felt warm and flushed with the immensity of their love. They reached out and cradled the other's cheek in their hand, in a gesture of pure worship; they were speechless and could only pray for the other to see and feel it through their touching.

Starsky looked down at the golden body beneath him and bit his lower lip in awe. After so long dreaming of this, the real thing had blown him away completely. He just looked down at Hutch, at their intimate position, at their almost naked bodies lying on the bed, and there still was a sort of surrealistic feeling about it all.

"It still feels unreal, doesn't it?" Hutch read his thoughts once again.

Starsky met the shining, crystal clear blue eyes and nodded. "I've been dreaming of this for over a year, Hutch. My mind's been very busy creating all these scenarios, alone at night... in my bed..." a fleeting painful expression crossed his features, "...and now that it's finally happening, my brain's still a little foggy."

Hutch nodded, in total understanding. "But my body's not," he smiled, his face lighting up.

Starsky's shining smile was only a heartbeat behind. "Neither's mine," he said.

Hutch reached out one long forefinger and traced down the sensual nose. When he reached the tip, he pressed very gently. "Close your eyes," he told Starsky lovingly.

Starsky immediately obeyed, and Hutch felt his heart constricting at his partner's blind faith in him. Such a precious gift he treasured above all things!

Hutch studied the handsome features to his heart's content. How could a face he had known for a decade now, look so new and fresh and so breathtakingly beautiful? He framed the loved face in his hands and caressed it all over with his fingertips. He mapped the eyebrows, the cheekbones, the bridge of the nose, the eyes, the chin, the full, sensual lips that smiled at his touch. He could spend the rest of his life like this. He took a deep breath and released it in a long, happy sigh, that matched the mirrored sigh that escaped Starsky's lips. "I love you, Starsk," the words left his lips of their own volition. "I love you with everything I am," he bent forward and kissed the lovely mole on the left cheek. "God, you're so beautiful!"

Starsky opened his eyes and copied Hutch's gesture, holding the beloved face between his hands. "Hutch," was all he could say. He felt so clumsy! There were so many things he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the words. He could only look at the man he loved, biting his lips, feeling his heart exploding with love.

They caressed each other's faces endlessly, staring at each other completely enraptured, occasionally kissing their starved lips. They couldn't believe it could be like this. Instead of making love frantically and desperately to make up for all the pain and lost time, they found they were in no hurry. Being together like this, on a warm, cozy bed, looking at each other and locked in an intimate embrace, was everything they needed. Just being free to look at each other with all the love they felt plain to see on their faces, was enough. It was already more than they had thought they would ever be able to do.

Their hands started moving up, their fingers entwining in each other's hair, trembling at the sensations. Starsky's curls wrapped themselves around Hutch's fingers and Hutch's strands of blond hair slid between Starsky's fingers, making them tingle all the way up their arms, down their spines and spreading all over their bodies.

Hutch's hands cupped the back of Starsky's neck. "Kiss me," he asked.

With a moan, Starsky bent down and took the pleadingly open lips in his mouth, with a passion he had never known to possess. Hutch threw his arms round him, holding him close. So close Starsky feared for his beloved's tender ribs. He had been trying to avoid resting his weight on Hutch. But Hutch only pressed him closer. He seemed to want to crawl up right inside him, in a perfect reflection of Starsky's feelings.

Unable to help it, Starsky's tongue came out of his mouth and softly brushed the moist lips. Immediately, Hutch's tongue came out to greet it with a fond lick. They quickly wrapped their tongues around each other, drawing delightfully sensual circles, as the most incredible shudders shook their bodies. All of a sudden, Starsky pursed his lips and started sucking on Hutch's long tongue, who let out a keening wail of surprise and rapturous excitement.

Every hair on their bodies stood on end. They felt tiny explosions of warmth deep inside them, as if they were emptying themselves in each other.

Hutch retracted his tongue and clamped his lips to Starsky's neck, kissing, licking and sucking on the velvety skin there, desperate to love him, kiss him, eat him alive. Starsky threw his head back with a breathless gasp.

Their bodies were short-circuited with more pleasure than they could stand. They had never felt like this before. They had no idea they could be so sensitive all over, that their bodies had the capacity to feel so much. They felt they were reaching the limit of their endurance. If this went on, they would either pass out or pass away. Every single feeling was so intense, so fiercely profound that tears welled up in their eyes, squeezed out by the strength of the emotions they were experiencing.

In a helpless spasm of pleasure, Starsky pressed the entire length of his body against Hutch's. His eyes popped out of their sockets at the unbearable sensations that assaulted him then. "Hutch! God, Hutch!" he cried out. "I can feel you! I can... Ohmygod!"

"I can feel you, too!" Hutch replied, in a tone of voice Starsky had never heard before.

Beside himself, Hutch took the beloved face in his hands again and looked deeply into the feverish eyes. "My love. My precious love," he moaned, almost painfully. His face was flushed and burning with need and desire. The compulsion to become one with Starsky came over him, and for the first time since he had fallen in love with his partner, he gloried in the knowledge that it was possible now. Dreaming was over. This finally was the joyous reality.

Starsky returned his hot gaze, and Hutch felt consumed by the heat and love in those all-encompassing blue eyes. Not giving him time to react, Starsky buried his face in Hutch's throat and began kissing, nibbling and licking it all over. The softness of the skin there blew him away, and he knew this was the person he was made for. He had been created for Hutch. To love him, to cherish him until his dying day. His lips ventured into the smooth pink chest, that was covered by a thin sheet of sweat. The skin was flushed and he could feel the frantic heartbeat under his hand. With a somewhat bashful smile, he noticed his own heartbeat was completely in synch with Hutch's. Together, even in their wild heartbeat rate. Made for each other. Heaven on Earth. Happiness as he had never thought it could possibly exist.

Offhand, Starsky thanked God that Hutch's nipples were uncovered, or it would have posed a really, *really* serious problem. He fingered the one closest to him with his fingertips, watching the little nub's involuntary reaction, that matched the tingle that spread all along his arm. He nuzzled the puckered bud with his nose, playing with it like a kitten would a ball of yarn. He rubbed tiny circles around it, astonished at his nose's unexpected sensitivity. Even his nose was having little orgasms from Hutch's touch! Opening his lips like a baby, Starsky sought to satiate his thirst, his endless hunger for the only person in the world who could provide him with everything he needed, physically and emotionally.

When Starsky's mouth closed around his nipple, Hutch arched his back and cried out. He was dying here. No one could experience so much pleasure and stay sane and alive. He was certain he was giving up either his life or his sanity now; or both of them at the same time, he didn't know anymore. Every cell of his body that Starsky touched, was having tiny orgasms. There was no other way to describe it. They were imploding and exploding at almost the same time. He was breathless, destroyed. He was seeing little colored lights dancing before his eyes, that created the most wondrous aura around Starsky. He could hear some incoherent moaning and whimpering in the background, not realizing it was himself. His fingers entangled in the silky curls and he caressed them in his hands.

"Oh, Starsk. I love you. Oh, my, you're killing me!" he sobbed, sliding one hand down the powerful back and caressing it up and down and from side to side.

Starsky suckled and made love to the enraptured little nipple, loving the feel of it in his mouth. Soft, hard and pliant. So cute and delicious! He was drooling, so deep in a love trance that nothing in the world could distract him from loving Hutch. His Hutch.

His hand suddenly touched Hutch's scar. The scar Vivian made when she shot his partner. Raising his head and releasing the silky nipple with a juicy slurp, he stared at the healed scar with tears in his eyes. If Hutch looked at his scars the same way he was looking at the ones on his beloved's body, then he had nothing to fear. With trembling fingers, he caressed the slightly wrinkled and yet smooth surface of the scar, finding it the most beautiful thing he had ever touched, with Hutch's other body parts' permission, of course. He

couldn't decide what part did he love the most. It was a tie between all of them. But his scars... there was something about them. Something that spoke of vulnerability and mortality. A reminder of how easily everything could be taken away. And yet, those scars were the proof of human's stubborn resiliency, of the body's instinctive refusal to surrender and go on living despite everything. Starsky worshipped the lovely mark, understanding at last what Hutch saw every time he looked at his scarred body. There was beauty there. A strange kind of beauty only the two of them could see. With a sigh, Starsky covered the entire surface of the scar with kisses. Passionate, devoted kisses of gratitude and love. He stuck out his tongue and licked it hungrily, while Hutch became a wriggling set of limbs beneath him, and his big hands stroked the entry wounds on his own back and made him squirm in helpless delight.

Starsky roamed the gorgeous upper chest with lips, tongue and fingers, nibbling and suckling on the desperately erect nipples, fervently wishing for Hutch to heal soon. He wanted to get rid of that white elastic dressing that prevented him from worshipping the godlike golden body the way Hutch deserved. His lips danced all over the areas uncovered, just barely touching them, brushing the skin delicately, like the soft feathers of a bird.

Hutch's head thrashed from side to side, delirious with the sensations he had experienced a million times before, but not like this. Never like this. Never coming from his own true love. He was losing his mind, he was soaring, he was in heaven, hand in hand with Starsky. His Starsk. The reason why his heart was still beating. "Your name... Your name... Your name..." he began chanting unknowingly.

The hypnotic cadence of Hutch's chant made Starsky abandon, if only momentarily, his thorough worshipping of the most beautiful body he had ever seen. He reached out and steadied the tossing head between his hands, trying to give Hutch a focus for the pleasure he was giving him. "Hutch, babe, look at me. Shhhhhh, it's okay," he crooned soothingly.

Little by little, Hutch seemed to return from wherever he had retreated into, and settled his misty eyes on the man he loved beyond reason. "Your name, Starsk," he smiled at his beloved as if he was having a celestial vision.

"What about my name, Hutch?" Starsky asked, not understanding what was making his treasured blond smile with so much bliss.

With infinite tenderness, Hutch grasped Starsky's right hand and placed it below his left nipple. "Feel it, my love? Can you feel it?" he asked in return.

"I can feel your heart beating," Starsky answered, thanking all the gods above for every beat of that strong, beautiful heart. He closed his eyes for a moment, to experience with his every sense the powerful, steady throb of the organ that was, more than any other, joyful evidence of his partner's life. Life he cherished above all things.

Hutch smiled beatifically and shook his head, pinning Starsky with an almost scary intensity in his blue gaze. A blue that seemed to swim in the crystalline sea of love that filled his eyes. A warm ocean of liquid blue love... for him. "It's beating your name, Starsk. Can you feel it?" he whispered, pressing the suddenly trembling hand harder to his chest. "Can you?" he asked again.

Starsky's chin began quivering and his eyes filled with tears, in reaction to the most wondrous words he had heard. But the craziest thing of all was that he *could* feel it. He could feel Hutch's heart beating his name. He must have lost his mind. But if he had, he never wanted to know sanity again. Not when madness was a lifetime of love and poetry with this man. Everything about Hutch was poetry. His hair, his eyes, his lips, his hands, his skin, his heart, his soul. Kenneth Richard Hutchinson was a Shakespeare sonnet come alive.

Two hot, scalding tears rolled down his cheeks and fell on Hutch's chest at the same time as Starsky grasped Hutch's right hand and placed it over his own heart, the heart that had stopped beating once and that the doctors and Hutch's love, reaching from deep within him, had brought back to life. "And you?" he asked back. It hurt to speak, to breathe, but he forced himself to go on. "My heart's beating your name too, Hutch. It's been beating it since the day I was born."

Hutch reached out with his free hand and held the side of Starsky's face. His partner cuddled into the warm palm and kissed it, as a tender thumb wiped his tears away. "Feel it, Hutch? Feel my love for you?" he asked again, feeling beautiful and desirable for the first time in a very long, long time, and realizing they were Hutch's eyes that made him feel so.

Hutch nodded and took a deep, painful breath.

Everything was like a fairytale come true. The corny, unbidden thought made him blush, but he recovered almost immediately. This world wasn't very prone to fairytales. Fairytales were usually scorned and laughed at unmercifully. Sadly, he had lived enough to know that the day a person realized that fairytales, true love and justice didn't exist, never mind the order, they had lost their innocence forever. This cruel, unfair world had destroyed the last vestiges of the child inside them.

Life hadn't granted him a happy childhood and youth. Life had crushed his dreams and hopes from a very early age. He had tried to become a mostly practical person, he had tried to shield his heart behind an impenetrable barrier no one would ever be able to cross. And he thought he had succeeded, until the day a cocky, funny-walking Brooklyn young man entered his life and turned it upside down. The day Starsky's spontaneity, innocence and overwhelming honesty entered his world, was the day Hutch realized fairytales sometimes did come true. He was convinced he had renounced them long ago, but Starsky gave him the greatest gift of all. He gave him back the child he had been once and had died before his time.

And today, the ultimate fairytale had come true, in all its glory. Here he was, lying on his bed, almost naked, with his almost naked Starsky lying atop him, making him see real fireworks. Feeling the strong beating of his heart resounding on his palm; strong, powerful, full of love... for him. Touching his Starsk, all of him. Free to roam his gorgeous body anyplace he wished, feeling that soft, sensual carpet of dark hair on that masculine chest he had dreamt about, both sleep and awake, for what seemed like forever. He smiled to himself. Here they were, wrapped in each other's arms, giving pleasure to one another. Making love to each other. His hand wandered all over the cozy chest; hungry, ravenous for his beloved's body and soul. He bit his lower lip and smiled.

"What?" Starsky asked in his weakest voice. He was breathless, blown away. His every sense was on overload. This was Hutch beneath him. These were Hutch's hands caressing his chest, holding his face. Despite the fact that he had known for several days now what was going to happen between them, nothing had prepared him for the actual reality of it. Nothing at all!

Hutch met his eyes with a mesmerizing blending of coyness and naughtiness. "I was thinking that now I can stop wondering about your chest hair and the texture of your delicious-looking nipples," he punctuated his words with a roving caress to the nearest nipple with his fingertips, that earned a thrilling moan from Starsky.

The uninhibited quality of the caress, the absolute spontaneity of the gesture, seemed to strike them as nothing they had ever done so far. They were free now to touch anywhere, to kiss anywhere. They were free to make love, and make love again, and again, and again...

They looked at each other, sharing everything there was to share, saying everything there was to say through their eyes. They pressed their hands against each other's chests in a sudden spasm of need. A need to feel each other's hearts beating one last time before letting go.

Starsky's hand headed directly for Hutch's left nipple then, and rubbed it lovingly between his thumb, index and middle fingertips. Hutch's nostrils flared and he threw his head back in helpless abandon, as his hands reached behind Starsky's back, feeling it until the last inch of skin, and kept on moving steadily down the long body.

Starsky bent down and wiped his tears away from Hutch's chest with his lips. He caressed his face with the smooth chest like a kitten, trembling at the sensation of his eyelashes brushing against his angel's softness. He blew his warm breath on the suddenly goosebumped skin and an electrifying groan was his reward. "Touch me, Hutch. Make me beautiful," the words were out of his lips before he could stop them.

"Oh, my dearest love!" Hutch sobbed. "You're the single most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I look at you and... How can you be so beautiful, Starsk?" he cradled the back of the sensual neck in one hand.

"Beauty's in the eyes of the beholder, as you said," Starsky answered. "What you see in me is the reflection of your beauty, Hutch."

Hutch shook his head slowly. "What I see in you is perfection, babe. Just perfection. And I'm anything but perfect," he kissed the side of the sexy neck, that instinctively cuddled his head. Hutch moved back after a moment, to speak into an ear surrounded by curls. "Everything about you," he gave the lovely feature a fond lick that made Starsky shiver, "your body," he sucked softly on the yummy earlobe, "your soul," the big hands stroked down Starsky's back again, "your scent, your taste, your touch, your overwhelming presence all around me..." Hutch's body surged upwards and for the first time, his hands moved beyond neutral territory and into the fleshy mounds of Starsky's buttocks. One of his most cherished dreams had just come true.

Starsky gasped at the touch of those blessed hands on him like that. He had dreamt so long of this! So long! The awesome sensitivity of his buttocks took him completely by surprise. He felt as if the tingle that spread from there all over his body could suffocate him with its intensity.

"This is the day our dreams come true, Starsk," Hutch whispered into the sexy ear, blowing softly into it and getting the response he wanted - another gentle shudder. "Let me make all your dreams come true," he pleaded into the thoroughly ravaged ear.

Starsky moved back and met the tenderly imploring eyes that watched him burning with love, passion and need. The same feelings that were boiling inside him and he couldn't control anymore.

They saw the volcano erupting in each other's eyes and there was nothing they could do to stop it, nor did they want to. As in everything they had ever done together, they were completely attuned in this, too. It didn't matter they had never made love with another man before, their bodies and their souls knew what they needed. They would guide them through this journey they were about to embark on, together. As it was meant to be.

Starsky took the blond head between his hands and inched forward ever so slowly, devouring the man he loved with his eyes. The fire inside him consumed him and demanded that he become one with this being who owned his heart. The big hands kneaded his buttocks in an almost shy caress that calmed the sudden outburst of overwhelming passion. He saw himself spiralling down Hutch's eyes and into his soul, in free fall. But he was not afraid. Hutch would hold him and take care of him. Hutch would make certain he survived this love that was an essential part of him before time itself existed. "Hutch," he murmured, in ecstatic joy.

"Starsk," was the heartbreaking answer that unravelled him.

As one, they lunged at each other's lips, the most amazing sound coming from deep within their throats. The strength and fierceness of their love released something inside that they were totally unaware of its existence, until the moment their raw and naked passion for each other set it free.

Starsky slipped his arms beneath Hutch and felt the long, sensual back all over, finding it the silkiest thing he had ever touched. There was a world of difference between the friendly caresses he had given the gorgeous back lately, always holding back, forcing himself not to feel too much, and the exultant freedom to explore and love this perfect body everywhere he wished now, as a lover. He was feeling everything, with every tiny part of him. His every pore was wide open, hungry for any point of contact with the golden body he had worshipped from afar. He kneaded the hard, pliant flesh all over. The powerful upper back, the strong shoulders, feeling the erotic curve of them down the long arms that wouldn't let him go.

Starsky's mind followed his connection with Hutch's arms, until it led him... to himself! All of a sudden, he felt himself in Hutch's arms, being just as worshipped and cherished, writhing over the long frame, that

squirmed helplessly under him. He heard the pleading, whimpering sounds that escaped both of them, and they felt so foreign and so right at the same time!

Hutch opened his mouth and nibbled at the juicy, delicious lips of his Starsky. He couldn't get enough of them. He had dedicated long, endless paragraphs to those lips and how much he wanted to love them. He had been making love to Starsky for months in the only way he could, by pouring out his feelings in those blank pages. Now, he had all time in the world to savor every second of this ecstasy he thought he would never know. He ran his tongue all over them. So soft, so full! He wanted to spend the rest of his life discovering every little nuance and mystery about these lips that had completely bewitched him. He tilted his head and plunged forward with renewed energy. When he felt the tongue tip of his curly-haired love coming out to greet him, he immediately took it in his mouth and started sucking on it like a madman. His hands rubbed and stroked the sexiest backside he had ever seen, feeling the overwhelming sensations running up his arms and into his very soul. Jeezus, Starsky's buttocks fit his palms as if the sensual forms had been made for them! Just the perfect size for him to touch, knead and cover them whole!

Starsky never hesitated when his hands reached Hutch's waist. He slipped them beneath the waistband of the boxers and before he knew, he was cupping the hard buttocks of his big blond beauty in his quivering palms. They felt slightly cold to his burning skin and he squeezed them lovingly, trying to pass on to them all the warmth they needed. They felt so creamy! Just the right size for his palms! So perfect, so sweet! It was like every dream he had ever dared to dream, and every dream he had *never* dared to dream come true!

Hutch let out a keening wail when he felt those warm hands on his butt. He gave a hard suck on the mouth-watering tongue and pressed his chest to Starsky's. The shock of feeling his smooth skin rubbing itself against the silky fur adorning Starsky's chest, almost sent him up the wall. Gawd, it was the most awesome feeling he had *ever* experienced! He had to have more of it! He had to spend the rest of his life rubbing himself against that chest, non-stop, before it was nearly enough! His nipples felt as if they were about to explode. It was as if Starsky's chest hair was wrapping itself around his nipples as he brushed them. They felt like minuscule tendrils trying to capture his sensitive flesh, eliciting delighted moans from his enraptured throat. He could only pray his uninteresting hairless chest felt just as pleasurable to Starsky as having those million little devils caressing his skin like crazy. And judging from Starsky's frenzied attempts at lighting a fire by rubbing his chest against him, his doubts were quickly dispelled.

But right now, his brain had so many things to pay its undivided attention to, that it was on the verge of short-circuiting with all the earth-shattering sensations. When it dawned on Hutch what his beloved's hands were doing to his naked backside, Hutch almost passed out right then and there. His mouth let go of Starsky's tongue and he froze, but no sound came out of him. He clenched his eyes shut and bit his lips, desperate not to scare his neighbours with the overwhelming scream that threatened to escape him. The electric shocks reverberated all over his body. Starsky's hands were on his butt! Another hopeless dream had just come true.

Hutch couldn't stand it anymore. His palms were tingling madly as they touched the thin layer of cloth that separated him from the man he loved more than life itself. Sometimes he was too shy for his own good. But he couldn't help it. He respected Starsky above all things. His partner was everything. And he wanted so badly for this moment to be perfect! Starsky deserved it. He deserved everything Hutch had to give. And for once, he envied Starsky's uninhibited sensuality. Starsky loved him, so he had nothing to fear, he was just following his heart. Suddenly, Hutch realized that was the only secret. To follow his heart, to follow his instincts and his love for this extraordinary man, who was making love to him as if he had been born with the knowledge of exactly how to please him.

Casting all his self-doubts to the wind, Hutch reclaimed the juicy, delicious tongue and slipped his hands inside the suddenly annoying briefs. His palms had never felt so full; full of warm, writhing, alive Starsky. The flesh was hard and pliant, and so wonderfully different from anything he had touched before! Starsky automatically made him forget all the women he had ever been with. This was his lover, this was the other half of his soul, the body he had been born to love.

The thorough sucking his tongue was experiencing, had Starsky about to blackout. No one had ever paid so much attention to him. He felt he was the center of the universe. His blond angel was projecting his love in a way he couldn't explain. Hutch always had that ability, the gift to make Starsky feel the center of Hutch's world. When those baby blue eyes stared at him, he was lost. Just as he was lost now. Ohhh, that smooth, silky chest! It was like rubbing himself against sheer velvet! He couldn't stop, he just couldn't! And those big hands on his butt! They felt so right there, as if they had been made to fit him to perfection. He was being bombarded from so many different fronts he could only jump from one sensation to the next, and do his best to survive the mind-blowing pleasure he received from Hutch's reverent loving. His eyes stung. He had apparently closed them sometime during their lovemaking, because he suddenly realized he couldn't see. He couldn't see, but he could feel. He could feel as he had never felt before. He had never really been alive before this moment, he knew that now. Nothing existed beyond their entwined bodies. There was no apartment, no Bay City, no California, no America and no fucking planet! Nothing existed but Hutch's soul fusing with his own.

Remembering Hutch's broken ribs all of a sudden, he quickly moved his chest back, preventing it from resting fully on Hutch. Hutch let out a wail that sounded terribly close to a sob, and he crushed Starsky to him for all he was worth. Since Hutch's hands were on his backside, Starsky's groin was blissfully brought into contact with Hutch's.

Both men froze, as a new door opened wide before them. The two of them knew very well what this shift in their relationship was going to entail. They had fantasized about it for over a year now. It had even occasionally crossed their minds before that. They had had ample time to think about it, about where they wanted this relationship to go should their dream ever come true. They had spent many lonely months and even lonelier nights considering everything. And both men had silently acknowledged the truth that they wanted *everything*. Everything their relationship could offer. They wanted to love and be loved, they wanted to take and be taken, possess and be possessed. There was nothing to fear, except a life without each other.

They smiled at one another, seeing their thoughts reflected back in each other's clear gaze.

The momentary pause in their loving was immediately swept away by the overwhelming tide of feelings and sensations of being so intimately pressed up against one another. They surged against each other like a volcano that has been unnaturally plugged for far too long. As one, securely grabbing each other's cheeks in their throbbing hands, they pressed against each other excruciatingly slowly, looking into each other's eyes. They saw their pupils dilating and their nostrils flaring as the contact increased blissfully. They bit their lower lips in unison, and a long, endless moan escaped their throats.

They suddenly realized they had crossed the line. This final aspect of their lives they had been unable to share until now, was no longer denied to them. Nothing stood between them anymore. Nothing at all.

The exultant feeling of freedom and the unbearable need they could no longer hold back, was just too much. They joined their lips once more, in a blistering kiss that signaled the point of no return. Now they could share the ultimate intimacy, they could see each other completely exposed and vulnerable, knowing they had never been so safe and so cherished.

Overwhelmed by a feeling he had never experienced before, Hutch opened his legs wide and captured Starsky's body between them. His hands moved almost reverently, peeling back his beloved's briefs and revealing the most gorgeous butt he had ever settled his eyes on.

Never losing contact with the mouth he had wanted to kiss longer than he could remember, Starsky arched his body back, so that Hutch could pull down the bothersome briefs as far as they could go. Moving in perfect synchronization, his own hands pulled Hutch's boxers down the strong thighs. His blond angel arched his hips and did his best to wriggle out of them, while clinging to Starsky's lips like a leech. When Hutch couldn't go beyond his calves, Starsky took over. Hutch had to relinquish his legs' hold on his thighs and allow Starsky to move aside, in order to take off his own briefs. To do so, Starsky had to release Hutch's lips, that were desperately clamped to his own, letting out a strangled groan at the separation.

Contenting himself with the knowledge that they had all the time in the world now to kiss, however, whenever and as often as they wanted, Starsky pecked Hutch's lips once, with a loving promise in his eyes that Hutch instinctively understood and rewarded with the sweetest smile.

A heartbeat later, Starsky got rid of Hutch's boxers too, and the two lovers stared at their hot and flushed bodies. Starsky stretched himself beside Hutch, unashamedly looking down at his naked body, lying in all its golden glory before him. He could feel Hutch's eyes on him like fire, marking him as his, just as he was claiming Hutch as his own.

The most amazing sound escaped them at their first sight of each other's furious erections. They couldn't imagine how something they had never considered attractive in another man before this moment, could have possibly become the sexiest, most beautiful thing they had ever seen.

Hutch gasped out loud and his mouth watered at the gorgeous sight of his Starsky, all hard and reaching for him. If it was possible for a person to fall in love with a dick, he had completely fallen in love with Starsky's. He swallowed heavily, feeling a terrible emptiness in his heart that only Starsky could fill. He couldn't even blink, he had to have his fill of the proud member that was desperately trying to draw his attention. He could see it grow bigger and bigger before his eyes. His ever analytical mind guessed it had to be around eight inches long, like his. It was thick and cut, and the loveliest shade of pink. It was shiny and with the cutest rounded head. It looked silky and it was covered with a thin sheet of - forgive the corny thought! - dew. Like a flower in the morning rain. Jeezus, he had lost it! It looked delicious, it looked like... Starsky! Starsky's erection was like a summary of everything Starsky was. Passionate, intense, playful, loving, boyish, stubborn, fiercely loyal, sexy, cocky, tender, cuddly, caring... All of it and so much more! He felt like taking it in his tingling hand and never letting it go! Just the thought of holding it in his palm almost undid him. He couldn't stop staring at it, he couldn't stop seeing it bloom for him, for his eyes only. He knew he had to be smiling like a fool, but he didn't care. He was in love!

Starsky could hardly breathe. The sight of Hutch had left him breathless. He was too perfect to be real. He was awesome! Those gold curls looked dreamy enough, but the organ jutting out proudly from them was beyond description. Long, thick, juicily pink... Starsky studied it shamelessly, after what seemed like a lifetime of longing. Just at first sight, he could tell that Hutch was a bit longer than him and that he was a bit thicker than Hutch. His big beauty was around eight inches long, uncut and simply the sexiest thing on Earth. He had seen Hutch naked hundreds of times, but now that he was looking at this most intimate part of him to his heart's content for the first time after falling in love with Hutch, he was so blown away by the heavenly sight that he was gaping in wonder and salivating like mad. He had no idea how could he find Hutch so attractive, so handsome and perfect. He had never looked at another man like this and he knew he never would again. His attraction for Hutch was way beyond gender. It was a soul-deep compulsion to be with him in every way possible and impossible.

Under his close scrutiny, Hutch's erection lengthened with a little shudder, and a pearlescent drop appeared on the shiny tip. Its shape was delightful; the domed head seemed to glow under the light filtering from the windows. Starsky wished to hold it in his hand and feel it throb and grow while he made love to it. He wished to shelter it in his mouth and eat it whole. He wished to take it inside him and never let it go. He just couldn't stop looking at it, feeling like crying from the sheer beauty of the moment.

Reading each other's minds once more, they looked up into each other's eyes, having another one of their wondrous silent conversations. They smiled joyfully, enraptured by one another's perfection, sharing the passion that was arousing in them. They shyly shared their lack of knowledge at how to handle each other now. They shared every little thought that was crossing their minds, knowing they had nothing to hide anymore, nothing to fear; not even the raw, almost animal need to couple, that was rising from deep inside them like a tide no human force could stem. But that savage tide was immediately tempered by the tenderest love, that soothed the cruder edges of their passion.

Not really knowing why, they laughed bashfully. Blushing, they wrapped their arms around each other in the most affectionate, loving hug, that calmed down their frightening need somewhat.

Hutch instinctively opened his legs again, and Starsky fell on his partner's body, unable to fight the pull.

The instantaneous onslaught of devastating sensations almost killed them on the spot. They let out a short, agonizing cry of unendurable pleasure as their hips helplessly began a slow, undulating motion. The flash of blinding pleasure reached a nearly intolerable level, and they clung to each other, desperate to find an anchor to keep them from levitating out of the apartment. They couldn't control themselves anymore. Their bodies had taken over and they couldn't stop. They had dreamt of this for... forever. This was the one perfect love every person always dreams about, but very few ever find. They had waited all their lives, they had searched high and low for years, to finally realize that true love had been beside them for a decade now, waiting patiently for them to open their eyes and *see*. And they thanked heavens they had been clever enough to allow the blinders to come off and give this perfection a chance to exist.

This instant was everything their entire lives had been leading up to. They had never felt anything so much and so intensely. No feeling had ever been as strong, as all-encompassing, as right and sublime. They were feeling with every spark of life their bodies, hearts and souls possessed. They were absorbing every tiny sensation, starved for it like dying men on their last opportunity to feel alive. And this was just their first time. The first time of, hopefully, thousands and thousands of hours they would spend in each other's arms, either making love or simply basking in the most beautiful thing in their world.

Hutch's fingers roamed the strong back of his lover with all his love radiating out his fingertips, alternating feather-light caresses with impotent squeezes to the beloved flesh, whenever the pleasure became too much to bear. The sounds of their lovemaking were blowing his ears and his brain away, the scent of their merging bodies made him feel heady and dizzy. He had never known it could be like this. So uninhibited, so carefree. He felt he was free to be himself as he had never allowed himself to be. Starsky would take care of him, would accept him completely, as he always had. As tender, vulnerable and romantic, and as wild, raunchy and naughty as Hutch had never allowed himself to be. Hutch knew, for the very first time in his life, the meaning of the word freedom. Tears came to his eyes and fell on his beloved's neck and shoulder, joining the small beads of sweat that were already sprinkled all over the sexy body.

He had lost all control over his hips. His erection felt in heaven. All warm and wet and harder than it had never been. He was hanging on the verge of total annihilation, snuggled up and rubbing desperately against Starsky's equally frantic organ. He could feel it trying to bury itself in his belly, and he wished he could take it inside himself and love it the way such a gorgeous member deserved.

He brought his hands up and cupped the beloved head in his palms, cherishing this man in his arms, the most precious thing that had ever honored his life. "Starsk!" he whimpered, desperate to convey all the feelings he couldn't express verbally.

Starsky shuddered through the corners of his soul at the sound of that exclamation of his name. This was everything he had ever dreamt about, everything he had always known that making love with Hutch would be; and more, infinitely more!

Never had he felt such a strong connection with another human being. If he closed his eyes, he could feel Hutch's heart beating alongside his own. He could feel every deep breath his beloved took as if it was his own. He could feel Hutch's blood coursing through *his own* veins. He couldn't tell where he ended and Hutch began, and he never wanted those feelings to end. He never wanted to be just Starsky anymore. Never again.

It felt like everything they had always done and shared, only raised now to the power of n. It was like finally reaching the end of the journey they had started the day they met. Today, at last, they had crossed the finish line. Only that line didn't mean this was the ending. It was simply the beginning of the rest of their journey. One they were embarking on for the rest of their lives, together, as lovers, as partners with every meaning of the word.

As soulmates.

Starsky didn't need to die to go to Heaven. He was already there. Heaven was here, safe in Hutch's arms, cradled in Hutch's heart, in Hutch's love. Like always, only more. It was as if his perceptions had been enhanced beyond the merely physical senses. As if their love had opened the door to something that had been waiting for just this moment to be revealed. Something he could only understand now that they had given themselves over completely to each other and reached the ultimate level of sharing.

Overwhelmed by all those thoughts and feelings beyond his comprehension, Starsky needfully crushed the big body to him, only to be brutally brought back to the real world when his hands touched the elastic dressing protecting Hutch's ribs. Along with that realization, his enraptured erection brushed across the dressing covering Hutch's incision, and Starsky froze on the spot. All that frenetic humping could hurt Hutch, especially when they lost all control over their bodies, and were only seeking to increase the pressure and the friction.

Hutch kept on surging up against him, devastatingly rubbing his full-to-bursting member against Starsky's equally swollen one, drawing a simultaneous ecstatic moan from both throats. When the momentum faded away and Hutch noticed Starsky wasn't reciprocating his movements any longer, he opened his eyes and settled them on his curly-haired love, with the most vulnerable expression on his flushed face.

Starsky smiled, his heart exploding in his chest with tenderness at the heartbreaking openness he was seeing in the angelic visage. He held the side of Hutch's face in one hand while keeping his other arm wrapped around the broad back. "It's okay, love," he softly answered to the unasked question. He bent down and bestowed a slow, adoring kiss on the full lips, that belied the unleashed passion of a few seconds before. Hutch returned it with the same heartfelt devotion and a small hint of relief. When they separated Starsky gave his answer, never losing contact with the silky mouth he was totally smitten with. "We have to be careful of your incision and the stitches." He looked down at Hutch's belly then, knowing his partner would follow his gaze. He brought his hand down then and smoothed the dressing lovingly, making certain it hadn't come undone already.

Hutch swallowed hard, realizing Starsky was right. But the honest truth was that he had completely forgotten about his operation, about his broken ribs and about his shattered soul until just a few moments ago. Starsky had healed everything with his love. Nothing could hurt him anymore. There was no pain, only joy and happiness such as he had never known. He looked up at his guardian angel with a shrug and shook his head shyly, explaining with that simple gesture he had forgotten about everything.

Starsky smiled and nodded in perfect understanding. He brought the shining face close and kissed the soft lips with all the love in his soul. His mouth tingled with the need to merge with Hutch. One big hand cupped his face, completing the circle of passionate adoration.

They kissed until almost losing consciousness. Their bodies instinctively resumed their helpless undulating movements, unable to control themselves. The flame burning between them rekindled again, and they knew nothing would stop them this time. Not until they had consummated their love. They craved it. Not only for the physical release, but for all the time they had waited and the tears they had shed, praying for this moment. They needed it for the emotional release just as much.

They got lost in one another's eyes, feeling more at home than anywhere else in the world. They reached out and placed their palms on each other's chests. Splayed fingers reverently caressed down the chests they had admired and desired from afar. Down their finely sculptured bodies, tracing scars, nipples and perfectly outlined muscles; evoking ecstatic groans that filled their skin with thrilled goosebumps.

Soon enough, it became obvious they shared identical thoughts regarding how to bring their rapturous lovemaking to an end. As their hands moved lower down ever so slowly, their eyes followed the same path, memorizing unique patterns, forms and textures. They continued down to their navels, slipping their little fingertips inside, in a fleeting caress that was rewarded with another blissful moan.

Their eyes were already settled on straining goals, and they reached for them as one. They shuddered in helpless anticipation just before contact was made. Their palms were sweating. This was their birth to a

lifetime of love as nothing they had ever imagined. The atmosphere around them seemed to close in on them, making certain they were aware of the step they were about to take. This was forever. Nothing more, nothing less.

They looked up at each other with a small knowing smile. There was no big decision to make. This particular decision had been made long before they met, long before they were born, and there was just the most wondrous feeling of coming home, of utter peace and contentment. As simple as breathing, as natural as loving each other.

Shrugging, they smiled at each other sweetly. Then, they looked down again, and without hesitation, took each other's erection in their hands, embracing their destiny.

It felt like a religious experience. Like taking communion. It was the most affirming, validating moment of their entire lives.

The feeling of Hutch's member, warm, snug and safe in his hand, made Starsky tremble from head to foot. He felt as if he was holding his very life in his timid grasp. He squeezed softly, to be sure this wasn't another one of his dreams. How many tears he had cried in his cold and lonely bed, after waking up from terribly vivid dreams like this! But this time it was no dream. Hutch's answering moan, that reverberated in every cell of his body, was his joyful proof.

Hutch was... oh, he was just perfect! And his stiff organ was so hard! It felt a bit strange to be holding an erection that wasn't his own, but it was so good! He was blown away by everything, and he felt like crying with gratitude. He wanted to stroke Hutch for the rest of his life. He wanted to feel that gorgeous erection throbbing in his palm and make love to it in any way he could. He started to rub up and down the long shaft instinctually, the way he was used to doing with his own. He wanted to learn to pleasure Hutch's delicious member. He wanted to discover every hotspot of his partner's godlike body and play it like the most exquisite instrument it was.

The organ lengthened dramatically and gradually became slick, and Starsky's grip became more sure and confident. It felt as if he had been born with the knowledge of how to please his partner. Some inborn knowledge he was accessing for the very first time now. He fondled it from root to crown, and involuntarily ran the tip of his thumb across the engorged head in a feather-light caress that was rewarded with a devastating groan and a gush of liquid, that he readily spread all over the flared glans. Starsky smiled happily to himself. He was becoming an adept at loving his beautiful partner. *'It's no wonder, anyway,'* he thought with a sigh. They had always been so attuned to each other's needs and feelings, that if they hadn't been perfect for each other in this too, *then* that would have been strange.

He couldn't stop watching himself love Hutch. He was so focused on the loving, on giving Hutch all the pleasure he could stand and more, that he was hardly paying any attention to everything his lover was doing to him.

Hutch wasn't wasting his time. He was making love to his partner with all the desperate passion he had been holding back for what seemed like forever. He could no longer remember what his life was like before falling in love with Starsky. He had a lifetime of longing and heartache to make up for, and by the gods, he intended to make the most of every second, every day and every year of loving this curly-haired little devil, who was making love to him beyond his dearest dreams.

How could it be so good, so homey even? It was as if they had a thousand years experience of loving each other. And, at the same time, it was so shockingly new... Just a short time ago, he had been terrified of giving himself away. He had been certain he would slip somehow, and the secret that could destroy his only reason to live, would finally be out in the open. How could he possibly imagine that Starsky had known for days? The rascal! That explained Starsky's weird behavior these last few days that had puzzled him so.

Hutch looked briefly up into his beloved's intense, radiant face, that was riveted on his own fist, handling him as if he had known how to hold him this way all his life. Hutch followed Starsky's enraptured look, and

watched as he was lovingly cradled in the warm, strong hand, that stroked and milked him with an ability that denied his partner's inexperience.

All of a sudden, Hutch's eyes popped out of their sockets when the reality of what they were doing to each other struck him in all its brutality. They were making love! They were lying on his bed, naked and aroused, masturbating each other to orgasm! His heart skipped a beat in his chest and he felt as if all his senses had awakened at the same time. Every organ in his body felt as if it was melting inside him. He was alternately cold and hot, burning with a feeling that was sweeping him away and taking him to Heaven. To Nirvana. His eyes filled with tears and he blinked fiercely to get rid of the moisture that prevented him from watching the sight he had almost died for. Swallowing heavily, the saliva burned a path down his throat. He ached all over - with love. Pain was all he had known since long before he had consciously acknowledged he had fallen in love with Starsky. But he had only known the negative side of that love. Today, at long last, he was finally allowed to know the other side of that love. The otherworldly glory of requited love. And he swore right then and there to never forget what those past months had been like and felt like, so that he would never take this gift for granted.

Paying no attention to the tears that streamed down his cheeks, Hutch's gaze shifted from himself in Starsky's hand, to the swollen organ that filled his own hand like nothing ever had. It was flushed rosy pink and the shiny head seemed ready to burst with just the slightest touch.

Hutch closed his eyes momentarily to simply *feel* Starsky in his hand. Hard, long, thick, sexy, full to bursting and beating in his secure grasp. The organ felt like steel covered in silk. It marvelled him that he felt no clumsiness or hesitation at handling his Starsk like this. There was only the most awesome feeling of rightness and peace. As if he was fulfilling his destiny once and for all. He slid his hand slowly up and down the shaft, becoming instantly acquainted with his beloved's responses, learning them by heart and discovering what caresses and movements caused the most pleasure. He opened his eyes and looked down at his hand enveloping the treasured organ he had dreamt about, revelling in the exciting skin color and texture, in every tiny feature that added to create the most beautiful picture of perfection he had ever seen. It was the most humbling experience for him. He sniffed and stroked the enraptured member that seemed to cuddle up to his palm. He felt the long vein that ran alongside the shaft, fingertips memorizing every inch of it, every touch being imprinted on his mind by love and fire for as long as he lived and beyond.

They instinctively matched their rhythm, squeezing and stroking each other in perfect sync, each of them finding their own unique way to please one another. The sight of their beloved growing bigger and bigger under their loving ministrations made them feel worthy and proud of themselves in the most unselfish way.

Hutch fingered the delicious slit with his thumb, coaxing his beloved into giving him the reward he was looking for. Starsky gave it to him with an agonizing moan that moved him to his very core.

Only then was Hutch capable of opening himself to the pleasure his beloved was giving *him*. It was as if Starsky's moan had burst a door open, and an avalanche of sensations as he had never experienced before swept him away in a rising tide, that threatened to drive him insane. No man could stand so much pleasure and survive. Not only physical pleasure, that was the least of his 'worries'. What he was feeling in his heart, knowing it was Starsky who was giving it to him... His Starsky. His best friend. The man he had considered as the brother he never had shortly after meeting him. Starsky was everything, and the thought of this man he cherished above all things loving him, holding him like this, blew his heart and his mind away.

The sound that left his throat then paralleled Starsky's in its excruciating intensity. Blessed madness called love! Beside himself, Hutch's hand expertly worked the flushed organ, and his fingertips caressed the full balls beneath with every downward stroke.

His breathing became ragged and unsteady. A thin sheet of sweat covered his whole body and he edged closer to Starsky, needing the physical contact as much as the release that was coming closer and closer.

Starsky pressed closer to him in return, trapping Hutch's left leg between his own, his left knee slightly bent, insinuating itself between the strong thighs in a helpless up and down rubbing motion that Hutch imitated, wrapping his right leg over Starsky's.

"It's so beautiful, babe," the sweetest, sexiest breathless voice suddenly whispered into his ear.

Hutch gave a start. He had never heard Starsky's voice sound like this. The million nuances he read in his partner's accent were almost his undoing. He looked up and settled his feverish eyes on the face he loved more than life itself.

Starsky's face was red, sweaty and just, the most beautiful thing on Earth. He was shining from within. He had never seen so much happiness in that handsome face. It was glowing and smiling with the heartbreaking innocence of a child. It seemed as if Starsky was being physically swept away by a bliss that was taking him to a realm beyond time and space. Someplace where only the two of them could be.

Hutch swallowed hard at the sudden sight of the tears running down the beloved ecstatic face. Starsky seemed unaware of them and he simply stared at his partner, wrapping him in his loving gaze, taking Hutch deep inside.

"To hold you like this," Starsky's smile broadened even more. The sensual voice sent chills up and down Hutch's spine. "Do you have any idea how incredibly beautiful you are?"

Speechless, Hutch responded by squeezing the swollen organ in his palm. Starsky closed his eyes momentarily and bit his lower lip. His nostrils flared and the wail that escaped him almost sent Hutch up the wall. When Starsky opened his eyes again, there was fire in them. An all-consuming fire that made Hutch want to cry out with joy and pride. He was the subject of his partner's love and desire. He and nobody else. He wanted to be consumed by that fire and be reborn in it.

Hutch boldly met the eyes that claimed him, and surrendered to them as soulfully as his curly-haired angel surrendered to his unspoken claim.

They inched ever closer, until they could feel their breathless gasps panting on each other's lips. Their passion reached an intolerable level. The warmth around them was like a living thing. Opening their lips simultaneously, they lunged at each other's mouths, sealing their commitment with the same fire they were creating, together.

Their hands never stopped the devoted loving of each other's erections. If anything, their stroking became more coordinated, almost like a dance. It was as if they had been loving each other this way forever. Every sweep of their fingers, every fervent squeeze, every caress of their thumbs across each other's throbbing tips found a perfect mirror in the other's caresses. They were reinventing their own special language in this new realm. They were speaking to each other with their hands, creating new words and music as they moved along. Understanding everything, sharing it all, always together, joined in body and soul. Making absolute, perfect love.

When their lips had been thoroughly ravaged and they had only begun to satiate their hunger for each other's mouths after so much starving, they let each other go to see every emotion, every feeling, reflected in their burning pupils. They fell into each other's blue eyes, getting lost in the fathomless immensity of the love that was reaching out from deep inside their beloved, and encompassing them whole. They had never felt so safe and protected, so cherished and nurtured. Nothing could penetrate the cozy cocoon of love that enfolded them. It was feeding on itself, beating around them, sheltering them from any harm.

Mesmerized by the raw and vulnerable display of feelings on each other's beloved face, they reached out with their free hand and cupped wet cheeks, wiping the tears away. A painful spasm made them look down at themselves in each other's grasp. They cuddled even closer, as close as their intimately entwined bodies allowed. But it was never close enough. There was hardly any room left for their stroking hands. But they *had* to look. They couldn't tear their eyes away from the heavenly sight they had thought they would never see. They alternated bewildered looks between their hands fondling each other, and at themselves to watch

as they were being devastatingly loved by the hand of their best friend and the only lover they would have until their dying day.

Their throats were dry, the feelings around and inside them more than they could stand. If this was what was in store for them every time they made love, they doubted they would survive for too long. But they were ready to take on the challenge. Oh, yes, they were! A love like this was worth dying for. This love between them was worth every drop of their blood.

"Starsk!" Hutch's strangled groan of the most precious name made Starsky inch forward even more, and comfortingly brush the tip of Hutch's member against the tip of his own organ.

Their love for each other was in their hands, in their eyes, in their every needy pore as it brushed against the body so long yearned for. Their love was in the joint scream that left their lips when the electrifying pleasure became too much to bear.

Hutch brushed the head of Starsky's member with his own in an instinctive answer. To their foggy minds, it looked and felt more like a kiss than a brush, and when they moved back, a thin thread of liquid bridged the short distance between their organs. Thinking as one, they started rubbing their flared glans against each other in delicious circles, while frenetically loving the shafts that felt as hard as iron now.

"Dear God, I can't believe it!" the poignantly naked words left Hutch's lips before he could stop them.

They looked into each other's eyes, and the heartbreaking blending of love and disbelieving wonder they saw there was the last straw. They kissed passionately, conveying every feeling that was rampant in their souls. When their mouths separated, they nuzzled each other's faces with their lips and their noses, gasping and moaning against each other's cheeks.

"Hutch! Oh, Hutch!" was all Starsky could say, as the overwhelming tingle he had been feeling since he had kissed Hutch for the very first time grew to an almost unbearable level, enveloping his whole body and reaching out beyond it to encompass his blond angel, who writhed and squirmed helplessly in his hand and in his arm. He needed to be closer! His legs wrapped around Hutch's, until they got almost tied up in knots. And it still wasn't close enough! They had to be so close they ceased to exist as two separate beings.

All at once, right after the big thumb brushed devastatingly across his endlessly oozing slit, something inside Starsky snapped. The pleasure turned into a burning wave of thrilling chills that took him over. With a loud cry, he began spasming and shooting his seed all over their hands and bellies. He felt like dying. He wasn't giving just his seed to Hutch, he was giving him his very essence, everything he was and everything he would ever be. He gave his entire soul willingly, knowing he had never been in better care.

Hutch felt Starsky's erection shuddering and spurting in their hands. Feeling like he was falling into an abyss he never wanted to come out of, he closed his eyes tight and groaned from deep within his soul. He pressed his tear-soaked face to the pleasure-contorted face that was desperately snuggling up to his own like a cub asking for protection. He let out a hoarse cry, as his body was swept away by something beyond his comprehension. Like a huge heartbeat that turned him inside out, drawing from him the most intense, earth-shattering orgasm he had ever experienced in his life. "Starsk!! Oh, my, Starsky!!!" he wailed, as his own erection exploded at last, bathing his beloved's hand and belly with all the love he had to give.

They trembled, sobbed and cuddled against each other, clinging to one another with their free arm, fighting to stay conscious, struggling to survive the beauty they had just bestowed on each other. The pleasure peaked beyond their wildest dreams and it seemed to never stop.

They lost track of time. They didn't know who they were, they couldn't remember their names anymore. But there was one thing they knew, though. Nothing would ever be the same between them again. They had found perfection and there was no turning back.

Frenzied kisses were planted about their faces, calming each other down until they settled one another softly back on earth. Starsky was racked by a helpless fit of the giggles, and he buried his face in Hutch's shoulder. Rhapsody as he had never known, was bubbling over in his chest and he couldn't stop it.

Delightfully exhausted, Hutch raised a trembling hand and cradled the beloved head in his palm. He smiled tiredly while petting the wildly disarrayed curls. "You... you okay?" he gasped, resting his cheek on the soft mop of hair. It would take a while for his respiration and his heartbeat to return to normal. He was devastated, destroyed and reborn.

Starsky's giggles became the most joyous laughter the blond man had ever heard. It was the very sound of love and freedom, and Hutch's heart soared.

"Heaven. I'm in heaven. You've taken me to heaven and beyond," Starsky swallowed the lump in his throat and pressed his face against his partner's neck, panting heavily.

Hutch laughed merrily and wrapped his left arm around the broad back, his right hand reluctant to release the slightly softened organ, that seemed perfectly content encased in the warmth of his palm. "Oh, Starsk! Be careful then, 'cause I'm floating on air and I could float away if you don't hold me close enough."

"Never!" Breathless, Starsky hugged his friend tight with his free arm, feeling Hutch's member snuggling up to his hand like a kitten. He squeezed it one last time, to make certain he wasn't dreaming. The answering moan brought a smile to his face. "I'm never letting you go!" He wiped away an errant teardrop in Hutch's hair. His heart felt about to beat right out of his chest, but he had never felt so complete, so fulfilled, so at peace with himself and with everything around and inside him.

They panted for a little while, until their breath caught. Their hands roamed the sweaty strong backs lovingly. They sniffed at each other's skin, licking and kissing everywhere they felt like it.

Hutch squeezed Starsky's shoulder when his feelings became too much to bear. Starsky nodded against his neck and sniffled, nuzzling the clammy, creamy skin he wanted to feel beside him every single day for the rest of his life. He began raining sweet kisses all over the wet collarbone.

Hutch bit his lips in awe. He couldn't understand this connection between them. It was a constant outpouring of feelings on each other. They had always shared this magic. One look, one raised eyebrow, and they knew what the other meant. But after what they had just shared, something inside him and blossomed and reached out to Starsky. The innermost part of himself he had been forced to hide all these months, no longer belonged to him. It was a part of Starsky now, as well. And he could feel the reverse was also true. That same part of Starsky was now a part of him, too.

Nothing had ever felt so right. He felt light and soft, and at peace. He didn't remember *ever* feeling so much peace! Here he was, holding the reason why he had been born. His soulmate, the love of his life. And they had just made love. His body was still throbbing gently, unable to forget the overwhelming pleasure it had felt. His skin was covered with goosebumps, and he smiled when his fingertips felt that Starsky's skin was in the same state as his own. He sighed when the sturdy hand began carding through his hair and massaging his scalp. He moved his head slowly, following the caresses, closing his eyes and shuddering helplessly. When the fingertips reached the nape of his neck, he threw his head back in abandon with a sensual moan.

"My big blond beauty."

The naked vulnerability and wonder in the oh-so-loved voice made him open his eyes, and he found himself staring into Starsky's misty eyes. He recognized in those blue depths the same astonished disbelief and the same ecstatic joy he felt. And he melted inside.

As one, they cupped the other's face in their hand. They looked deeply into each other's warm blue sea of love, that welcomed them home just like it had always done; only now there was so much more there. All the doors had opened wide and nothing stood between them anymore. No more hidden secrets and no more

unacknowledged half-truths. Love was the only truth there. Love as they had never encountered. Love as they had never deserved. It was so beautiful it hurt.

Hutch shook his head, angry at himself for not finding the words. "Starsky... My Starsk..." he whispered at last, smiling tremulously through the tears in his eyes.

Starsky's smile lit the whole room and Hutch couldn't help but smile back. His heart had grown too big for his chest and he took a deep, shaky breath.

They turned their heads and kissed each other's palms without looking away. They couldn't stop staring at each other.

Hutch shuddered again, and it seemed to bring Starsky back to the real world. "Are you cold?" he asked, with infinite tenderness.

Hutch swallowed hard and shook his head. He surged up against Starsky's body in answer. How could he be cold, being covered with the warmest human blanket? The body of the man he loved?

Starsky smiled again, in perfect understanding. Pointedly, he looked down between their bodies; at each other, still cradled in their loving hands. "I still don't wanna let you go," he said, with a hint of sadness and regret in his voice, his thumb caressing the mostly soft tip.

"Me neither," Hutch replied with a shiver, bringing the beloved head close, silently asking for a kiss.

Starsky closed his eyes, and the slow, heartfelt kiss they shared was the most perfect, beautiful thing he had ever known.

When they moved back, they reverently let go of one another's member with an adoring parting squeeze. Always thinking as one, they stroked the now dormant organs once, as if wishing them sweet dreams. They looked at each other with a raised eyebrow and they burst out giggling bashfully.

"Let's get in bed, love. We'll be more comfortable there," Starsky encouraged his partner, caressing the smiling face. Honestly, he couldn't wait to lie in that big brass bed and fall asleep with his greatest treasure sleeping peacefully in his arms, and safe in the cozy circle of Hutch's arms.

With superhuman effort, they let go of each other for a moment, long enough to quickly open the bed and slide into the fresh sheets and tuck each other in, their arms immediately winding themselves round each other.

"Ahhh, so good!" Hutch couldn't help the words from escaping his lips.

Starsky looked around the place with his eyes wide open. They were in Hutch's apartment, in Hutch's bed and they had just made love. He blinked and took another look around him, feeling as if he was seeing the place for the first time. Everything felt so new and exciting and so right! He held the precious body close and smiled. "I also prayed for the morning to never come when we were sleepin' in my bed," he suddenly confessed, with just a tiny hint of bitterness in his voice.

"After...?" Hutch couldn't bring himself to finish the question.

Starsky nodded and pressed closer to the warm body.

"We've been feeling like this for..." Hutch snorted, "...forever, and yet..."

Starsky nodded again. "We couldn't take the chance to tell each other," he simply said, and he felt Hutch nodding in silence against his skin. He sighed loudly. "Thank God, I found your notebook! If I hadn't..." he shivered at the thought.

Hutch buried his fingers in the thick, soft hair, and kissed the temple by his nose. "Thank God you found it!" he agreed, clinging desperately to the compact body and wrapping his left leg around Starsky's.

Out of the blue, Starsky let out a short laugh. "Well, it found me, more like," he smiled fondly.

"How's that?" Hutch fingered the mole on the smooth left cheek, revelling in the freedom he was allowed now. Starsky turned his head and kissed the caressing fingertip.

"I was feeling my way in the top shelf looking for some shoes for you, and when I pulled back, the thing fell on my head," he explained, absently rubbing the place on his head where the book had fallen.

Hutch laughed too, just imagining the scene.

"Yeah, you laugh; but really, Hutch, what a place to hide your journal!" Starsky commented, with a small smile.

Hutch shook his head, in total agreement with his partner. "Don't look for any logic in that. It's just that... no place looked safe enough," he smiled sadly, remembering the pain and fear that had been his silent companions for over a year.

"In plain sight, partner. That's the best place to hide anything, like in 'The Purloined Letter.'"

"Sure, like you did when you left the book on the kitchen table! You wanted to make sure I saw it right away," Hutch pinched the skin on one strong shoulder playfully.

"You're the best detective in town, babe. After me, of course. I wanted you to get my message," Starsky caressed the long back up and down and rubbed his right leg against Hutch's left, trapping it and squeezing it sensually between his thighs.

"I did," Hutch almost gasped at the indescribable sensations spreading all over his body. "And now, we have this. I have you..."

"And I have you," Starsky's voice was thick with joy. "I can make love to you, and touch you, and sleep in the same bed with you, and hold you in my arms, and tell you how much I love you, how happy you make me..."

Hutch interrupted the flow of words placing his fingertips on the full lips. Starsky began kissing them, finding another way to show his love.

Hutch felt all weak and mushy inside. His body tingled like crazy and his mind almost blacked out from the memory of what they had just done. He met the eyes that observed him with sheer worship and his heart ached. There was so much naked love in those eyes that it took his breath away. It humbled him and made him feel like the most special person in the world. He turned onto his right side and immediately reading his intentions, Starsky turned onto his left side. They cuddled with a long sigh of deep-seated contentment.

It was so perfect to just lie there in each other's arms! No words were necessary, they were already saying to each other everything there was to say.

"I love you," Hutch murmured, nuzzling Starsky's neck and burying his face there. "Oh, Starsk! Everything's so... huge... But at the same time, it's no different than how it always was between us."

"Yeah," Starsky nodded, stroking one long arm up and down, smiling at the goosebumps his fondling raised. "It's new. And when something's new and you've wished for it for so long, it's just... overwhelming."

Hutch looked up and met his eyes. "Our love is overwhelming. And I'm not saying this because this aspect of our relationship is new. Since we became friends I.. what I feel for you always was bigger and stronger than anything I've ever felt for anyone else. You always were my whole world, babe. That's why I know I'll always feel like this."

Starsky's eyes filled with tears. He bent forward and kissed the tip of the sweet nose. "Me too. It'll always be new and overwhelming, no matter how many years pass." He reached out and caressed the flushed cheek. "God, I look at you and I feel as if my heart's going to explode! And I felt the same four years ago, when we were just friends. You'd say something or do something or just look at me with those baby blue eyes, and I turned to jelly."

Hutch blushed and looked down. Timidly, he reached out and started playing with the hair on Starsky's chest, feeling it between his fingers. "Yeah. I felt the same, and it was beautiful. Until... it began bothering me..." he was reluctant to talk about the most awful period of their lives.

Starsky held him tight, trying to drive the demons away. "It began bothering me too, and what upset me the most was that I didn't understand why I suddenly felt like this. Until..." he shrugged his shoulders, "...I just knew."

There was nothing else to say. They knew all the truth now, and that truth put to rest all the ugly ghosts that had made the safe haven of their friendship a living nightmare for so many months.

Hutch nodded in silence, edging even closer to the man he loved.

"We have all the answers, at last," Starsky sighed, looking briefly at the ceiling. "And now, we'll live happily ever after," he wrapped his arms around the broad back and, displaying all his charm and sensuality, he contemplated his partner with one of his roguish smiles.

If he hadn't been naked already, Hutch would have sworn Starsky was undressing him with his eyes. But he could only laugh in delight at his partner's way of summarizing their future. "You say the nicest things. I hardly recognize you. What happened to the man who hated soapy scenes, huh?"

"He disappeared the day he found his own true love," his eyes softened and enveloped Hutch in a warm bubble of tenderness. "That was all I needed. To have you."

Hutch bit his lower lip, speechless once again. He reached out and cradled the gorgeous face in his hands, shaking his head. Starsky drew him even closer. So close, they could feel each other's hearts beating in their chests.

"I have the feeling you always liked them, but you refused to admit it," Hutch finally said, with a kind smile that held no hint of accusation.

"Maybe I even feared them a bit," Starsky confessed a few moments later, with a faraway look.

Hutch bent forward and kissed the delicious lips he'd never have enough of. "You'll always have me. Have no fear, my love. Never mind what life throws our way. We'll always have a safe place to return to, and we'll live happily ever after there."

Starsky's eyes settled on the solemn face that looked at him with more love than he had ever thought anybody could possibly feel for him. He smiled and held the strong body with an intensity that elicited a sensual moan from his partner. "There is here, Hutch," he said, looking down at their entwined bodies. "This is where we'll live happily ever after."

Hutch's heart almost stopped. The look in those eyes was unfathomable. It spoke of a timeless wisdom that touched him to his very core. Starsky was exposing himself completely, revealing until the last corner of his dreams and hopes. And Hutch felt like crying at the wondrous beauty that wrapped itself around him, keeping him warm and safe. Too moved to say anything anymore he just nodded and feeling vulnerable like a child, he sought protection in the cocoon of love that were Starsky's arms.

They remained thus for a very long time. Breathing together, caressing endlessly all over, absorbing every feeling, every touch, every scent, starved to death for each other. Their fingertips hungrily memorizing every inch of skin, thanking heaven for granting them this ultimate gift.

Hours seemed to pass, and they never stopped roaming each other's bodies everywhere. Sighs, little moans and soft sounds of contentment were the only audible noises in the cozy apartment. They occasionally wiped away errant tears streaming down one another's faces and they embraced reassuringly, soothing the beautiful pain they wanted to feel forever. They interlaced their fingers and studied each other's hands once again. They knew every little feature of them by heart after so many years. But now, everything was different. Those hands had held each other in passion. They had touched the remaining places of their beloved's bodies they thought they would never be welcomed to touch. The notion made them tremble in body and soul. The magnitude of what they had done, overwhelmed them again. But not in a bad way. Never that. It overwhelmed them because they became terribly aware of just how lucky, how truly blessed they were. The greatest treasure on Earth was theirs. What they had found in each other was every person's dream come true.

The beautiful pain made their throats ache and filled their hearts with something they couldn't even understand. They could only feel it, thanking the heavens for being given such a priceless honor, and cherish and protect it for as long as they lived.

They looked into each other's eyes, knowing what lay in their hearts at that very moment, and they made the silent oath that would seal their destiny and bind their souls to each other for all time. Like it had always been, only now it would encompass every aspect of their lives... and beyond.

They dropped their gazes and stared at their joined hands, at their perfectly entwined fingers. Something in their hearts and minds was reaching out to each other, as if a door had burst open and invited the other to cross it. And they knew that absolute happiness awaited them on the other side.

Never hesitating to take the gift they had been granted, they humbly accepted it, knowing they wouldn't be here if they weren't destined to succeed.

Smiling in wonder, holding each other ever closer, they looked up into the blue pools of love and saw themselves reflected back. Moved to their very cores, they spoke in unison. As one. As they had been since the day they were born.

"I do."

THE END

Send in the Clowns. Lyrics & Music by Stephen Sondheim.

Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head. Lyrics & Music by Burt Bacharach & Hal David