

**Story Notes:** Hutch has trouble shaking an undercover job, and Starsky steps in.

**Story Notes:** Written in 2005. First published in the gen multifandom anthology zine, "[Of Dreams and Schemes](#) 21," produced by Of Dreams and Schemes Press in 2006.

**Categories:** Gen

**Genre:** Zinefic

**Warnings:** Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

---

## **A Partner Thing**

by **K Hanna Korossy**

It was over.

Two months, thousands of taxpayer dollars, miles of video and audio tape, and one weary detective had finally led to this: bringing down the largest child prostitution ring in L.A. And the only part of that equation David Starsky cared about now was the weary detective.

Starsky stood leaning against the wall of the mastermind's study, a controlled confusion of FBI and LAPD and ATF and CIA and a half-dozen other acronyms swirling around him. His eyes tracked a single figure in the midst of the chaos, as Ken Hutchinson answered questions, pointed out evidence to the officers, made a photo ID of a suspect. He was the eye of the storm that revolved around him, isolated, apart even as he did his duty.

Starsky crossed his arms and kept vigil with hooded eyes.

He was watching over his partner as he had from a distance these past two months. But more than that, he was looking for the man he knew underneath the stranger only a dozen feet away. The pale blond hair was now a mass of permed, darker curls, and a thick beard covered the lower part of his face. A cigarette protruded from his lips, and as soon as it burned low, it was replaced by another. The easy grace was gone, replaced by sharp, jittery movements, the whole body language shifted into tones of anxiety and tension. Hutch looked ill, what little body fat he had, gone now, face sunken, cheeks flushed. And his eyes...

Starsky watched him a minute longer, jaw slowly clenching, then straightened to go find Captain Dobey. And for the first time, he felt his partner's eyes on him as he walked out of the room.

Starsky was leaving. The panic that swelled in Hutch at the realization was just as powerful as it was irrational.

Like a junkie in need of a fix, he'd felt wired, ready to boil over. It had been that way for most of the previous two months, and while the takedown should have been a release, it had just

increased Hutch's restlessness. Even as he directed officers and agents, he fought the urge to take off running as fast and as far as he could.

And then Starsky had appeared.

His partner hadn't had a chance to say a word to him, had done nothing more than stand nearby and watch, but knowing he was there was an even more potent balm than his voice had been those lonely eight weeks. Hutch's skin still felt tight over stretched nerves, but having that physical presence at his back dampened the tension in him to at least a bearable level.

He had only looked up when he felt Starsky move, in time to see him go out the doors.

*He'll be back.* Starsky hadn't been keeping him sane long-distance all those weeks just to leave now. He'd probably just gone to supervise another part of the scene. Hutch was an adult; he could handle this all by himself. Besides, he wasn't sure he was even ready to face his partner yet, not with the memories of this case still fresh in his mind. Not when just being around all these people made him feel like there wasn't enough air left in the room. Space was what he really needed, Hutch told himself. Space and quiet.

The memories and the crowd pressed in closer around him, and the urge to flee started to build inside him again.

*But...God, please, let him be back soon.*

It was an hour later before Starsky returned, to a much different scene. Most of the agencies had finished their part, taking away the evidence to comb through later. Only a few Feds lingered, along with the members of the LAPD taskforce that had worked on the case and a half-dozen uniforms to control the scene. Hutch was sitting by himself in one corner, a notebook and pen in hand, but his gaze somewhere on the carpet. The aloofness was more than just physical distance.

Starsky walked over and leaned down to touch his partner's shoulder. "Hey--"

Hutch flinched hard, nearly falling out of his chair. He caught himself, and his eyes shot up to Starsky, angry and defensive. And maybe a little relieved? "What're you doing?"

"I'm gettin' you outta here. Are you done?"

"No, I'm not done." He reached for the notebook, face twisting when Starsky calmly pulled it away. "Starsky--"

Starsky turned away, picked out the two captains on the scene, Dobby, and Oriani from Vice. "Is he done?"

Oriani just waved a hand of release. Dobby nodded. "Go home, Hutch. We have what we need for now."

Hutch shot Starsky a glare before craning around him to look at Dobey. “Captain, I still have to--”

Dobey pulled himself to his feet and stepped closer. “You’ve been on duty for eight weeks straight, Hutch. Go with Starsky. We’ve got enough to work on here.”

There was rebellion and a flicker of something else in those otherwise opaque blue eyes. “Fine,” Hutch finally snapped. He stood, hesitated for a moment as he glanced around the room. He had to want to get out of there even more than Starsky wanted him to leave, but Starsky’s compassion deepened at the lostness of the gesture. Hutch had spent a lot of time there the last two months, and as awful as this world had been, it had become his. Leaving it, returning to his old life while this one still clung to him, was probably almost more frightening than the thought of staying, and Starsky knew it. That was why he was there.

He reached up a hand, stopped himself, and stepped around into Hutch’s field of vision instead. “Hey,” he said with a bare smile. “Let’s get outta here, huh?”

The anger, rootless to begin with, had already blown away, and it was with a muted nod Hutch surrendered and walked out the door, Starsky right behind him.

Hutch stopped outside, as if he’d walked headlong into a solid wall of sunshine, which probably wasn’t a bad analogy. The undercover work had been a business that lived in the dark. Starsky carefully sidestepped his partner again, and, pulling out his sunglasses, held them up in mute offer. Hutch took them without comment and slipped them on. They kept walking.

The Torino was parked close, and Hutch hesitated again at the passenger side, his hand hovering over the roof in an attitude of near reverence before settling on the hot metal. Starsky watched him obliquely as he went around to the driver’s side. The glimmers of the partner he knew were reassuring, but how deeply they were buried frightened him. If these little moments of normalcy were affecting Hutch this badly, what would the bigger stuff do: his house, his job, the person he really was? Starsky chewed his lip, glanced at the bags in the back seat. Yeah, he’d had the right idea. He wasn’t sure of a lot just now, but he was of this. And that somewhere in the alien look and movements of the man on the other side of the car was still his partner, buried for survival’s sake.

Starsky just had to show him it was safe to come out now.

“You ready?” he asked softly, seeing Hutch flinch at the intrusion. He gave a curt nod and opened the door, sliding inside.

Starsky joined him. He started the car and turned out into the street.

Something else was off, and it took him a few moments of contemplation before he realized what. Hutch smelled of cheap cologne, obvious now in the small confines of the car. The odor shoved its way into Starsky’s subconscious, strengthening the feeling of sitting next to a stranger. Starsky grimaced, and reached over to roll down his window.

Hutch was doing the same, but for a different reason. He'd stubbed out his cigarette in the study before leaving with Starsky, but now he pulled out the pack and stuck another between his lips.

"Not in the car, Hutch," Starsky said quietly.

Hutch hesitated, glancing at him. Then, with angry motions, he plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and jammed it back into his pocket. "There. You happy now?"

"Thrilled," Starsky said dryly.

Another minute of driving. He changed lanes, heading toward an exit onto PCH.

Hutch scratched his beard with one hand, tapped his fingers restlessly on his leg. Starsky considered relenting on just one cigarette, but dismissed the idea as quickly. It wasn't what Hutch really needed. Starsky reached out instead to rest a hand on the man's thigh, trying to absorb some of his restless tension.

Hutch jerked as if Starsky had juiced him with a live wire. Starsky looked over at him, concerned, but Hutch wasn't meeting his eyes, just shook his head. "Don't, I... Don't."

Starsky nodded, withdrew back to his side of the car, hating the invisible wall between them.

He'd been so naïve. He'd counted down the days until the assignment was done and he could see Hutch face-to-face again instead of the furtive phone calls they exchanged twice a week. Yeah, he'd worried about Hutch being under for so long and in a business like that, but once the assignment was over, Starsky had figured maybe a day or two off, a lot of sleep, some gut-spilling over good food, and things would get back to normal. He'd anticipated the return of communication by touch and glance, the silent give-and-take, and had thought Hutch was doing the same.

Now, he was wondering if Hutch had even been able to see past the bleak assignment at all. A man who smoked like there was no tomorrow and didn't seem to know what to do with a simple human touch, wasn't someone just playing a role. This went deeper, to some place Hutch was trapped in, and it would take more than a little sleep and food for him to climb out. In fact, Starsky was starting to figure out this would take a whole new approach to deal with.

Assuming this was even a shell Hutch had burrowed into and lost himself inside, and not someone he'd changed into. Starsky swallowed, and kept driving.

Hutch, silent for a long minute, stirred next to him. "Where are we going?"

And here was the first step. "Up the coast."

"What? Why?"

"We're goin' out of town a few days. We both need time to unwind, and--"

"Why? Starsky, stop the car."

Starsky hesitated, then obeyed, pulling onto the shoulder of the highway. He had no intention of relenting on this or turning back, but having it out while they were going sixty miles per hour was probably not the best idea, either. He put the car in park and turned to his partner.

Hutch's expression was tight with anger. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I told you," Starsky said patiently, "I'm drivin' us up the coast."

"Not me, you're not. You want to leave town, fine. I'm going home. Dobby--"

"I cleared it with Dobby."

It was the wrong thing to say. The blue of Hutch's eyes deepened with fury. "So now you're making decisions for me? Let me tell you something, Starsky--my life hasn't been mine for two months now. All I could think about that whole time was being free, being able to go where *I* wanted to go, being in control of my life again. So if you think you can just come along and take over from Smedley--"

That hurt. Smedley had been the head of the operation they'd just brought down, and the worst scum Starsky had ever come across in his whole career. Being compared to him was meant to be a low blow and it was. In context, though, it just softened Starsky even more toward his partner. Hutch only fought dirty when he was cornered. "You call this bein' free?" Starsky quietly asked.

That sent a ripple of emotion across Hutch's face, and just as Starsky felt a spark of hope, the bearded jaw set. "Turn the car around."

"Uh-uh."

Hutch cursed. "Starsky, turn the car around or I'm getting out and walking back."

"Ten miles?" Starsky glanced back, estimating. "That's a long walk."

"Watch me," Hutch spit, and reached for the door handle.

"Hutch, wait." He grabbed his partner's arm.

Hutch had his gun in his hand before either of them realized it. Not pointed at Starsky--his head caught up to him before he got that far--but at ready against his chest, safety off, a second away from aiming and firing.

Starsky instantly pulled back, his heart stopping for a moment.

Shock stretched Hutch's skin white over the planes of his face, and horrified eyes lifted to Starsky's. The first real emotion he'd showed since the takedown, and it was despair.

"Starsk..." It was like the plea of a drowning man.

“It’s okay,” Starsky whispered, meaning it in one sense, lying through his teeth in another. He gently took the Colt out of Hutch’s loose grip, putting on the safety and shutting it in the glove compartment. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not, it’s...” Hutch’s respiration was ragged. “Starsky, I would’ve never--”

“Hey, I know that,” he chided, his voice as soothing as he could make it when his own heart was pounding. “I shouldn’t’ve grabbed you.”

“That’s no excuse.” Hutch dropped his head into his hand with a moan. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me--I know it’s over but I can’t just...” He shrugged blindly.

Starsky slid a little closer to his passenger, careful not to make him feel cornered, caressing only with his voice. “Listen to me, babe. We’re gonna get out of here, find someplace quiet and woodsy. You’re gonna take some long showers and naps and eat some real food, and then when you’re ready, we’ll talk. We’ll work it out, I promise.”

Haunted eyes looked up at him. “You don’t know that.”

Which was true. But Starsky didn’t waver. “I’m not comin’ back without ya, Hutch.”

It took a lot of long seconds, but finally Hutch nodded. “Okay,” he said hoarsely.

“Okay,” Starsky nodded. “Why don’t you close your eyes, try to get a little sleep on the way, huh? We’re gonna be driving for a while.”

Starsky knew he was asking his partner to trust him when Hutch wasn’t trusting much of anything or anyone, including himself. But they had to start somewhere. And so he waited for an answer, raising his eyebrows encouragingly.

Hutch slowly nodded again. He’d been shaken by his reaction far more than even Starsky and probably would have agreed to most anything right then, but Starsky wasn’t about to take advantage. The only good way to build trust was the old-fashioned way, slowly and one piece at a time.

And he had all the patience in the world where his partner was concerned.

Starsky waited until Hutch settled back into the seat by wary degrees, the strangely bearded and dark head leaning against the window. Starsky considered offering him something to use as a pillow, but thought better of it. Hutch was self-conscious enough as it was just then. It was time to just leave the man alone for a while.

Putting the Torino in drive, Starsky pulled back out into traffic.

It took less than two minutes for Hutch’s eyes to sink shut, and one more for his breathing to slow into the rhythm of sleep.

It was a fitful slumber, strung with mutters and the occasional start awake before, eyes glazed, Hutch would sink back into sleep. And for the first time Starsky could remember in years, his touch couldn't penetrate his partner's unconscious to calm his agitated spirit.

In all, it left his own spirit fairly agitated, too.

He dreamed of violated and broken little bodies. And even in the nightmares, Hutch couldn't scream.

The sun was just starting to set as Starsky pulled into the small graveled parking lot. The crunch and rattle of the car roused Hutch, and he blinked at the scenery around them as he pushed himself up in his seat. "Where're we?" The mumble was heavy with fatigue.

"Cambria. The gas station attendant 'while back recommended it."

Hutch drew a hand over his face, down his beard. He was already used to the facial hair, Starsky noted, yet another sign of just how long and thoroughly he'd immersed himself in his job. "Gas station?" Hutch repeated.

"Yeah. You slept through it," Starsky replied with amusement. "I asked him about quiet places near the water."

And indeed, there was the distant sound of crashing surf, now that he listened for it. The ocean wasn't in view, but it was probably just behind the small string of bungalows they were parked in front of. On either side, low hills of sand blocked the scenery beyond.

Hutch snorted softly. "Woodsy, huh?"

Starsky shrugged. "Trees, ocean--it's all nature, right?" And he climbed out of the car, folding the seat forward to pull out the bags from the back.

Actually, the choice for a seaside place to stop had been deliberate; for all Hutch's love of nature in any form, right now he was clearly verging on claustrophobia, restless and suffocating. What better cure for that than a horizon that stretched as far as the eye could see?

Hutch followed his cue, dragging himself out of the Torino with slower, clumsier movements. But beside the car, he stopped, tilting his head back, eyes closing. Just breathing.

Starsky stopped, as well, to watch him. This was the most peaceful he'd seen Hutch in months, standing there, breathing in the clean air with its soft salt tang. And despite the unfamiliar hair and beard, Starsky finally saw the silhouette of his partner in his companion.

"Mm-hmm," he murmured to himself, and bent down to get Hutch's bag.

The door closed and locked, he waited until Hutch reopened his eyes and gave him a slightly embarrassed look. Starsky just smiled and reached out a duffel.

“My clothes?”

“Sure, along with your shaving kit and your pajamas. You didn’t wanna wear the same thing for the next few days, didja?”

Hutch glanced down at his clothing, the expensive tailored slacks and silk shirt, and a shadow crossed his face. “No,” he said tersely.

Starsky also grew serious, but gently clapped Hutch on the back, then led the way into the rental office. If Hutch stiffened up at being touched again, Starsky didn’t want to see it.

Five minutes later, they came out with key in hand, and Starsky strained to see the numbers on the small buildings in the fading light. Six-- “There,” he pointed, and Hutch silently followed him.

The door opened into a living room, with a small kitchen and breakfast nook to one side and three doors opening off beyond it to the left and right. Starsky opened the first--bathroom. The second was a small bedroom trimmed in blue, the third another room in earth tones that looked out toward the ocean. Starsky nodded his chin toward that room. “You take this one.”

Hutch edged past him, not bothering to turn the light on in the dim room. Starsky gave him a last glance, then went to put his bag in the room next door.

He hadn’t even come out yet when he heard the click of the front door. Surprised, he strode over to the doorway, surveyed the small house. “Hutch?”

Silence. The room beside his was empty.

Starsky sighed, walked over to the window beside the door. Hutch was already disappearing in the direction of the beach, still in his undercover clothes and that cloying cologne and facial hair. Well, maybe there were other trappings he needed to get rid of first. Starsky turned away from the window and headed into the kitchen to see what he could cook up from the bag of groceries he’d also brought with him.

It was like he hadn’t breathed in fifty-some days.

Hutch strode toward the sound of the ocean, pulling out and lighting a cigarette as he walked. He crested two small dunes until the water came into sight, then stopped, inhaling the tobacco deeply. The beach had always brought him peace, one of the reasons he’d been a sea scout as a kid, then moved out to California and lived in Venice as an adult. He’d visited the shore a lot since becoming a cop.

Now, though, he wasn't paying attention to the water or the gulls or the pounding surf. All he craved was the openness and the solitude. Especially the solitude.

He'd drawn his gun on Starsky. On *Starsky*.

The groan came up from his chest, and desperately, Hutch dropped the cigarette and kept walking.

Near the end of the undercover assignment, he'd lost track of why he was there, of the good he was supposed to be doing. His world had boiled down to the filth he worked with and the innocents they were destroying. Even the calls to Starsky weren't restoring his perspective anymore. He'd just clung to the knowledge that sooner or later it would be over and he could shake this all off like a bad dream. It was the only hope he'd had.

But he wasn't waking up. And now he'd pulled Starsky into the nightmare with him.

His breath was coming in sharp pants, and Hutch forced himself to slow. He scrubbed his face with both hands, his beard too familiar against his skin. Growing it had been another way to distance his undercover persona from who he really was, another trick that hadn't worked. Hutch's hands shook as he lit another cigarette. Running away wasn't going to help; what he'd done was too much a part of him. The images in his mind, the crawl of his skin at the thought of being touched, the revulsion, would all go with him wherever he went. But if he ran long enough, Starsky would come after him, too. For better or for worse--and Hutch wasn't sure which one it was yet--his partner didn't know how to give up on him.

Hutch turned, looked at the distant glimmer of the light he'd left behind. It would probably be for the best if he went off somewhere on his own to try to work through the poison in his system before he really infected Starsky with it or, like a rabid wolf, turned on his friend. Even Starsky had his limits, and Hutch didn't want to stretch them. He needed Starsky to be waiting when he got back.

But, Hutch cursed his weakness, he also needed Starsky now. Too much so to keep walking.

He flicked the cigarette butt away, watching it smother in the cool sand. He might end up extinguishing his partnership just as thoroughly. Despite his need, it was hard not to push his partner away after two months of withdrawing into himself in order to survive. Or maybe he'd slip and let spill some of the horrors he'd kept even from Starsky. And then there was the instinctive aversion to being touched. Starsky wouldn't understand that one at all.

And yet, almost helplessly, Hutch found himself retracing his steps back to the little bungalow. Maybe it was a mistake he would keenly regret. But right now, he didn't have any other choice.

He was sitting in the easy chair in the small living room, reading in the pool of light from the nearby lamp, when the soft knock came. Starsky dropped the book, one of the dog-eared spy novels that lined the single bookcase in the room, and hurried to open the door.

Hutch's hands were buried in the pockets of his jacket and he was bowed against the chill breeze. His eyes had cleared of both sleep and the shock Starsky had seen in them after the abrupt takedown, and, like any thawing, it had released what was frozen underneath. Bleakness, grief, rage, and desperation welled in them now, held back by sheer force of will. That alone had to be exhausting, and Starsky's own expression twisted in empathy. "Hutch..."

An abrupt shake of the head was his cue to back off, and, with effort and great reluctance, Starsky did, stepping aside to allow the blond to enter. He watched his partner's every move, while Hutch seemed to avoid watching anything in particular.

Okay, they would take a stab at normalcy for now. Starsky cleared his throat. "I fixed some macaroni and cheese and some chicken."

"Yeah?" Hutch's voice sounded raw, as if he'd been screaming, but maybe it was just the scouring of the salty wind.

"It's a little cold now," Starsky said in awkward apology, and moved around him to bring the food to the table. In hindsight, he should have made something that would stay simmering, but he hadn't expected Hutch to be gone so long.

They ate in silence food neither of them seemed to want. It was good, but Starsky could barely taste it and it stuck in his throat. He choked it down anyway, and watched Hutch manage a few bites before giving up.

Starsky took a sip of soda. "There's a bathtub if you wanna have a soak."

"I can't, I..." Hutch trailed off, frowning.

It took a moment to realize what he was thinking. "You're safe here, Hutch," Starsky said quietly, leaning forward. "You can soak until you're a prune if you want--it's okay." He hadn't realized it had been so bad that even a little extra time cleaning up made you feel vulnerable, although, why not? Literally or figuratively, it was going in naked.

Hutch just gave an angry shake of his head, whether at his own nerves or Starsky's suggestion, and fumbled out his pack of cigarettes. It was flatter than it had been in the car.

Starsky's eyes went from the pack to his partner's face. "I didn't know you'd started smoking again," he said evenly. Not that Hutch's terse reports had given much in the way of personal details.

"Everyone was smoking," Hutch said around the cigarette, and flicked his lighter on. "Cigarettes, pot, something. Besides," a bitter laugh, "it gave me something to keep my hands busy so I wouldn't wrap them around Smedley's neck."

Starsky felt his blood chill. This wasn't his partner, either. But it was part and parcel of Hutch now, of what he'd had to deal with, which meant they'd both have to deal with it...starting with the obviously toxic stuff. Starsky reached out and closed his hand over the pack. "That's over now. No more smoking after that one, huh?"

The blue eyes glinted dangerously at him. “You’re not my mother.”

“No, but I am your partner, and for the next few days I’m also your roommate. I don’t wanna be breathing all that smoke.”

“Then I’ll take it outside.” Hutch started to stand.

Starsky’s hand moved to his wrist and didn’t let go even though Hutch immediately went rigid. “I don’t want you ruinin’ your lungs, either,” he said seriously.

There was a silent tug-of-war of wills, and Starsky honestly didn’t know who would win. Pull too hard and Hutch would run, or retreat and lock the door behind him. Let go completely and there would be no reason for this stranger to disappear. That role had let Hutch survive and stay sane, and he would cling to it until it would perhaps be too late, too much a part of him to untangle. Starsky refused to let that happen, as much for his sake as for Hutch’s.

But he wasn’t sure he knew where that fine line between pushing and supporting lay, either.

Hutch let out a slow breath, wariness dissipating. He looked at the pack of cigarettes, then tossed them across the table to Starsky. “I’ve only been using ’em the last two weeks.” He shrugged.

Which was plenty to feel the craving, especially since he’d smoked when he was younger, but Starsky didn’t comment. He picked up the pack and crumpled it one-handedly, then lobbed it into the kitchen trash. “That it?”

A stiff nod. Hutch flicked the lighter on again, raised it to the cigarette still dangling from his mouth, then slowly lowered his hand again. With a small sound of frustration, he took the cigarette and threw it after the others, then stood. “I’m gonna take a shower and go to bed.”

Starsky nodded. He watched Hutch stumble toward the bathroom.

It was over an hour before he came out again, a towel loose around his lean hips, looking pale and exhausted. He’d taken a shower--Starsky had heard the water running for a better part of the time--and the beard was gone. It made his face look thinner but, oddly, no more familiar than with the heavy covering of hair.

“G’night.” Hutch raised his hand a few inches, and turned away toward his room.

“Night,” Starsky called after him.

In the doorway, Hutch stopped, a hand on the wall. His head hung forward tiredly, as if he’d taken the last step he had strength for. Starsky’s eyes narrowed as he watched him from behind, wondering what was going through his head.

Hutch half-turned back toward him, his face a silhouette.

“Thanks, Starsk,” he said softly. And then he disappeared into the bedroom.

Starsky stared after him a long time, trying to dissolve the clog in his throat. It was a while longer, long after silence had descended, before he finally rose to clear the dinner dishes and also prepare for bed.

His body was exhausted, aching with sleep deprivation and tense musculature. But his mind raced, a mouse running on an endless wheel, and Hutch stared up at the ceiling with sleepless eyes.

He wanted a cigarette. There was still the one in the trashcan that hadn't been crushed. One last smoke to bid goodbye to the life it represented.

No, what he really wanted was to forget. To go back to being just plain Ken Hutchinson, not Karl Hutchins the pimp. To rest, just for a few minutes, to get some real sleep. *Perchance to dream...*

With a muttered curse, Hutch climbed out of bed and dressed.

There would be no rest tonight.

It was the first time in eight weeks he hadn't gone to bed wondering where his partner was, and still Starsky couldn't really sleep. He drifted off, feeling like he was still awake, only to surface again in an hour to repeat the process. The dreams were wild, felt like they were real, and faded each time he tried to think about them, but they all seemed to involve Hutch.

Hutch. Starsky rolled over on his back and stared at the dark ceiling.

The surf was a barest whisper in the silent house, and Starsky focused on that instead, willing it to hypnotize him. That was one advantage he hadn't thought of, the soothing sound of the ocean. Hutch had always loved it, too. Maybe it would give him the rest he so badly needed.

Starsky made a face and turned onto his side. And realized the small lamp he'd left on in the living room had been turned off, no light showing around the edges of his door.

He rolled out of bed, pulled on a t-shirt, and went out into the living room.

"Did I wake you up?"

Hutch's voice was low and deep and from the direction of the easy chair. Starsky turned, saw the glint of moonlight from the window on dark gold hair, and felt his way over. He saw the soft glow of the cigarette tip then, but didn't say a word. His knee bumped the couch and he went around it and collapsed onto the end by the chair. "Nah, couldn't sleep."

"Me, either."

The living room was a little chilly, and Starsky glanced around. There was no blanket in sight, though, and he had no desire to go back to his bedroom to get one. The cold wouldn't kill him.

"I would've gone crazy if I hadn't had your calls to look forward to."

Starsky took a breath. This was it, Hutch wanted to talk now? He didn't feel ready. "That's why I was on the other end," Starsky said quietly. Hutch would never know how hard Starsky had fought to remain his contact, once everyone realized how big the case was.

Hutch nodded, took a pull on the cigarette. Starsky watched it wave in the air. "I, uh, rescued it from the trash."

"Okay," he said, accepting that. At least Hutch was being square with him. If he needed a little artificial courage, so be it. Starsky yawned, rubbing his face. It had been a long time since he'd had a good night's sleep. He leaned back against the sofa, tilting his head so he could keep his partner's faint outline in view. "You gonna tell me what it was like?"

A barked laugh. "It was...depraved."

Starsky digested that. It wasn't a word they used often, even in their business, but it seemed to fit. He licked his lips, chose his words carefully. "Did you--"

"I don't want to talk about it."

He felt disappointment and relief at that, and disappointment at himself for the relief. "You're never gonna *want* to talk about it," he said, maybe a little more disapprovingly than he'd intended.

"Back off, Starsky," Hutch growled.

Starsky ignored the warning. "Fine, if you wanna keep staying up all night and leapin' out of your skin every time somebody touches you, be my guest."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

That did it. Hutch hadn't been the only one soloing on a difficult job those last few months, and the accumulated frustration blew away the last of Starsky's common sense. He leaned forward. "Hey, I ain't your wife, your sister, or your mother--you don't have to protect me. I've been there, I get it, and nothing you say'll shock me or scare me off. And we both know you have to talk about it, Hutch, or it'll eat right through ya."

The cigarette died in a flare of light, mashed out with considerable force. And then Hutch was on his feet, striding past Starsky, toward the front door.

His brain finally caught up to his mouth; he hadn't just crossed the line, he'd jumped right over it. Starsky grimaced, kicking himself. "Hutch, wait."

His partner didn't even slow, almost at the door.

This was all wrong. He'd brought Hutch there for a change of scenery, an environment in which he could feel safe and relax and just take care of himself for a while. And, hopefully, eventually get a few things off his chest. Badgering him wasn't supposed to be on the program. "Please. I'm sorry."

The shadow of his partner stopped, framed in the light that sifted in through the front window. There was a pause, and Starsky held his breath. "I didn't ask you to fix me, Starsky." It was bitter and wounded and reminded Starsky a little too late he wasn't supposed to be doing this for himself.

"I know," Starsky said. "I just don't like seein' you hurt."

Hutch stood there, not turning back but not going out the door, either.

*Partner...* Starsky shook his head wearily. "Look...I'll make ya a deal."

"What?" Hutch sounded suspicious.

"We forget the case tomorrow. No talking about it, not even thinkin' about it. We just sleep in, take it easy, maybe go swimming or go out to eat."

"And after that?"

"After that, you at least think about it."

There was a moment of consideration, then a soft huff. "When you sink your teeth into something, you don't let go, do you?"

It was the people he didn't let go of easily. "Is that a yes?"

A moment of silence. "Yes." Hutch was abruptly in motion again. "I'm gonna take another walk."

"Now?" Starsky's eyebrows went up.

"I need to clear my head." But there was a touch of apology in the words. Hutch didn't want him to take it personally.

That was something. And, well, they weren't exactly in a bad part of town. Starsky leaned forward, tiredly scratching his head. "Yeah, okay. Just don't go too far."

"I'll try not to get lost." It was deadpan, but at least there was no sarcasm in it. Hutch opened the door.

"And dress warm." As best he could see, Hutch was in street clothes already, but at Starsky's admonishment, he reached back and grabbed something from the kitchen chair.

"Go to bed, Starsky." The door shut behind him.

“Yeah, right,” Starsky muttered, and reached over to flick on the light beside the couch. Squinting at the brightness, he found his book, then made a face at the draft that had finally reached him from the door. Starsky trudged back into the bedroom for the blanket off his bed and pulled it around himself. Suitably bundled, he curled up on the sofa again, found his place, and began to read.

The ocean was different at night, louder, more ominous somehow. The distant reflection of moonlight off glossy black waves just emphasized how far and deep the water went. Seemingly unending, like the desolation inside him.

*I didn't ask you to fix me.* If fixing him was why they were there, they might as well pack up and go home that night. Starsky couldn't put right what was wrong with him, and shouldn't have to. Hutch wasn't some pet project.

But he *was* broken, and he didn't know how to mend himself.

*One day at a time.* His grandfather had always said that. You couldn't see the future when you were a farmer, couldn't know if the season would bring lots of rain or none at all, if produce prices would rise or fall. You just had to live one day at a time.

*We forget the case tomorrow.* Easier said than done. Not thinking about it would be impossible, but not to talk about it, to just relax with his partner on the beach and live the illusion for a while that they were just there on a nice little vacation... That sounded good. He could do that.

Whether from Starsky's deal or from the wind and salt-scoured air, Hutch's chest felt a little looser, no longer threatening asphyxia. Maybe he could even manage to fall asleep now.

Hutch shrugged, turned away from the water and back toward the bungalow. One day--and one night--at a time.

He could do that.

Maybe the nights were cold, but the days were just right for the beach. Sitting and reading on the sand, anyway. Neither of them had gone in the water yet, nor had Starsky thought to pack bathing trunks.

Starsky lowered his book and glanced over at the figure sleeping beside him on a towel on the sand. Hutch was in khakis and a loose long-sleeved shirt, stretched out on his stomach, only his neck and part of his face exposed to the sun that had finally come out an hour before. Starsky gave the thinning clouds a speculative glance, then sidled closer to his partner to cast a shadow over the bare skin, and kept reading. Starsky's eastern European skin only bronzed in the sun, but Hutch burned and peeled first. He had enough to deal with just then without adding that, too.

This was the second book Starsky had pulled off the shelf in the bungalow, but it was just as absorbing as the other one had been. Who knew the James Bond movies were also books? He'd only gone to see the beautiful women and the action, but this Fleming guy was pretty good.

"You know who did it yet?" a sleepy voice asked from beside him.

Starsky grinned into the pages. "It's not a mystery, dummy."

"Yeah?" Hutch turned a little on his side, peering painfully up at him, with the sun just over Starsky's shoulder.

"Yeah. Spy novel." Starsky turned the corner of the page down and shut the book to give Hutch his full attention. "Have a nice nap?"

Hutch grunted as he turned over completely and pushed himself up on his elbows. He reached over to remove Starsky's sunglasses and put them on. "I don't know how you stayed awake after having three of those sandwiches."

Starsky grinned again. He'd gone back to basics for lunch that day, with grilled cheese sandwiches toasted a golden brown and oozing cheese. Considering they'd both gotten up close to eleven, it had made a good breakfast, too. Even Hutch'd had seconds.

Hutch sat up all the way, then leaned forward to rest against his upraised knees. "I've been thinking."

"Yeah?" Starsky made himself sound casual.

"We should call Dobey and tell him we're not coming back."

Starsky cocked his head, still not sure if Hutch was joking. "Okay. We just gonna stay here then?"

"Yup."

"Where're we gonna get the money? The owner's gonna insist on us payin' the rent--they're kinda funny that way."

Hutch shrugged carelessly. "We'll get jobs."

"Oh, I see. Sure. I'll be a beachcomber and you can be a towel boy."

Hutch's face looked so much better with a smile on it. "Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of fisherman or boat builder."

The funny thing was, he could imagine Hutch in one of those roles. But not himself, and the thought made Starsky unexpectedly a little uneasy. "I dunno, sounds kinda dull," he said, still trying to continue the light tone.

Hutch glanced over at him, not really smiling anymore. “Dull sounds good to me right now, partner,” he said wistfully.

There was a shriek of laughter to their left, and they both glanced over at the two kids who were running along the edge of the water. Brother and sister, it looked like, and when the boy pulled his sister’s pail, dumping water and sand onto the beach, the girl protested at full volume and took off after him down the beach, away from the detectives and toward their watching parents.

Starsky’s face softened at the sight, and he turned to Hutch to say something.

Hutch had gone expressionless. He stared after the kids with an intensity that even the sunglasses couldn’t hide, but otherwise his face could have been made of marble. Stone would have had more color, too.

“Hey,” Starsky nudged him quietly with a word. “We’re not gonna think about it today, remember?”

Still no expression. Starsky didn’t even want to see what was behind the glasses. Hutch just began moving stiffly, flexing his legs to stand, one hand bunched in the towel to yank it up. “Yeah. I’m going for a walk.”

Starsky took a chance and put a hand on his partner’s arm. He could feel the strain of muscles not to yank away from him, then put it out of his mind. “Why all the hiking, Hutch? What’s out there?” He nodded toward the stretch of beach, carefully away from the kids.

A slight twitch of the lips now. Hutch was still struggling, obviously wanting badly to get out of there...yet not breaking away from Starsky’s light grip. Then the dark blond head sagged, shook heavily once. “I don’t know, it’s just...it’s away from people.”

Starsky’s heart twinged, and he pulled his hand away, studied the back of his book. “Oh. Uh, you know, I can go home for a few days, come back for ya at the end of the week?”

Hutch’s face blanked in astonishment this time. “What? No, Starsk, that’s not what I mean. Really. I don’t...you don’t have to stay, but...” His ears turned pink.

Starsky swallowed a smile and saved him. “I kinda like it here.”

Hutch made a face, knowing he’d been seen through and not liking it. “It’s not you. It’s just...pure out there. Untainted by evil. I watch the water and the waves, and it’s almost like...”

“Things like that don’t happen,” Starsky said quietly.

“Yeah.” Hutch scooped up a handful of sand and let it trickle out from between his fingers. “Sometimes I think I should just move out into the middle of nowhere and be a hermit.” He seemed to react to Starsky’s wince before he even glanced over. “Family could come visit,” he added softly.

Starsky nodded once. He'd known a long time ago he'd crossed over from friend to kin. Still, it was good to hear now. Hutch wasn't trying to shut him out, he was just struggling, and that was fair enough. Starsky sighed, fanning the pages of the book idly with one hand, then finally shrugging. "Who would save the kids from people like Smedley then?"

Hutch didn't answer, just stared out over the water.

Starsky gently nodded at him. "Just be home for dinner, huh?"

A moment passed, then Hutch dipped his head in acknowledgement and stood, leaving the towel behind and, pausing, the sunglasses. Then he took off down the beach, those long strides carrying him no closer to an answer, Starsky knew. Hutch probably did, too. Sometimes you just had to exhaust the easier ways before you were ready to tackle the harder ones.

Starsky slipped the sunglasses back on and watched the ocean for a few minutes before opening the book again. He read to the end of the chapter, then grabbed Hutch's towel and headed back to the bungalow.

The kids had really thrown him.

The little girl... Hutch swallowed. She'd looked just like Tricia, the eight-year-old blonde who was a particular favorite of a Russian mobster Smedley did business with. They weren't supposed to know the names of the kids, but Hutch hadn't been able to bury his humanity that completely. He knew almost all the kids Smedley "owned." Jenny. Meredith. Annette...

Hutch rubbed his eyes hard with one hand, trying to crush out the faces that went with those names.

He'd only been a dealer, at least, not expected to partake of the merchandise. But some of those he'd worked with liked to indulge and were allowed their pick, as long as it didn't cut into business. There were also the clients who couldn't wait for privacy before sampling what they'd bought. And then there were the kids who'd been at it so long that they didn't know any other way, offering favors to Hutch in exchange for a full night's sleep or a little extra food. Touching or being touched: the thought of either eventually started to make him physically ill. It was a filth he couldn't wash away.

He'd done his best to look after them, to make it a little easier for them until he had enough on their captors to put all of them away for good and save all the kids instead of just a few. But how many had they lost in the meantime?

They were going to forget about the case today, but Hutch couldn't forget that. Maybe he wasn't supposed to.

*God, be with them wherever they are. Hutch found himself unexpectedly praying. Help them heal and get past this.*

The waves were particularly strong that day, pounding the beach with what almost felt like righteous anger. Like Someone was answering him. Hutch bowed his head.

*And, please...help Starsk and me.*

Starsky looked up from the pot he was stirring when the door opened, and he gave Hutch a welcoming smile. "Good timing. Soup's gonna be ready in about fifteen minutes."

"Smells good," Hutch said. Was it Starsky's imagination, or was he looking a little better? Less haggard somehow. Maybe he really was working through some stuff out there in his beloved nature. Starsky was eternally optimistic.

Hutch knocked the sand off his loafers, then started walking toward the living room. And suddenly stopped.

Starsky didn't turn around, knowing what he'd seen. "I forgot I had it out in the trunk."

It was a moment more before Hutch moved again, with soft, almost reverent steps this time. The couch creaked, then the guitar thrummed a quiet chord.

Starsky smiled at the chicken soup.

The rustiness of two months away from the instrument didn't last long. Soon, Hutch was playing a complex piece full of minor keys and sorrow with an effortlessness that always made Starsky a little jealous. It was the mood of the music he was listening to that day, though, and it made him ache for his partner. Hutch had finally found a way to talk, and Starsky found he wasn't as ready as he thought to hear it.

He finally peeled his partner away for dinner, a silent affair as they both kept their own peace. And then Hutch went back to playing. Starsky took his book out, settled into the chair beside the sofa, and tried to read.

The music eventually changed. Slow and sad gave way to quicker, angrier chords. Starsky peeked over the edge of the pages to see Hutch's face grooved with concentration and emotion. And still the music grew wilder. Furious.

A string suddenly snapped, jolting Hutch back before it whipped him in the face. He sat for a moment as if not knowing what to do next, then set the guitar down beside the couch so hard, the strings hummed in protest.

Starsky recognized the stiff body language and spark in the eyes. Hutch was fighting now, and for all tension in the room, Starsky was glad for that. Smiling benignly, he held out his book. "Wanna throw something?"

Hutch glared at him, then grabbed the book and pelted it against the opposite wall before shooting to his feet in sheer restlessness.

Starsky watched him prowl the invisible cage of his mind, bracing himself as Hutch abruptly changed direction toward the bookshelf. One vicious sweep and another dozen books went flying.

“Hutch--”

“I need a smoke.”

Starsky stood. “That’s not what you need and you know it.”

A hot stare cut through him, and then Hutch lurched away from him. His chest was starting to heave, like something inside was getting ready to explode.

There was healthy release, and then there was this unleashed fury of emotion, and Starsky was starting to realize he’d misjudged just how much his partner was struggling. The desperation that fueled him was quite capable of hurting anything or anyone in its path, including Hutch himself, before it was tapped out. And that thought scared Starsky more than the possibility of it getting buried and festering.

He took a step closer to his partner. “Hey.”

Hutch jerked back.

Starsky stopped, raising his hands placatingly. “Hey. It’s me.”

He’d seen a wounded dog look less at bay. Hutch’s nerves were shot, no longer able to sort the good from the bad, everything setting off his defenses. How could someone even function like that for any length of time, never able to let their guard down, to connect with another person? No wonder he was exhausted and kept wanting to be alone. The proximity that usually recharged them was draining Hutch instead.

And it finally clicked. This wasn’t about talking or letting something out. It was about Hutch getting something back that he’d lost.

Starsky finally had an idea what to do.

He spread his hands, non-threatening, and met his partner’s gaze head on. “Hutch,” he said very softly, “I’m gonna ask you for something.”

Hutch was quivering with agitation, but he was listening.

“The last eight weeks weren’t a walk in the park for me, either. I kept sitting on that phone, wishin’ I could see you face-to-face, worried that I wasn’t there to watch your back. And don’t ask me why, but I guess I missed ya.” He tried a smile.

Hutch stared at him like he was speaking another language.

The smile died. Starsky crept a step closer, and this time Hutch didn't move away. "I just...I know you're safe now, but I still can't feel it sometimes, you know? Here," he laid a palm over his chest. "Like you're still out there and I can't touch you."

His partner's face twitched.

One more step and he was standing close now, and still Hutch hadn't retreated. "I know it doesn't make sense, but I just need this for a minute. Can you do that for me?"

"What?" Hutch didn't even seem to realize he'd said something.

Moving slowly, Starsky put an arm around the man's shoulders, feeling the immediate resistance. But he didn't stop, shifting in so that there were only inches between them, and then not even that as he wrapped his other arm around Hutch's waist and pulled him into a simple hug.

Hutch was panting, muscles braced as if he were about to fall, or run. "What're you doing?" he finally managed.

"Nothing. Just stand here for a minute, huh? I just wanna get it through my head you're okay and I can stop worrying," Starsky continued with what he hoped was soothing nonchalance, like they did this sort of thing every day. "I figure it's kind of a partner thing, you know?"

Hutch was anything but okay. He'd broken out in a sweat and was shaking harder now, and Starsky was thrown back to another time, another crisis. Heroin withdrawal had been a more devastating and physical attack, but the symptoms weren't all that different. Nor, for that matter, was Starsky's way of dealing with them. He just hated to think what Hutch had witnessed those last few months that had so tainted any kind of physical contact for him. Well, he couldn't be there for him then, but he could now.

"Relax, partner," Starsky murmured, trying to knead looseness into the locked back muscles but not succeeding. It was like massaging rocks.

"Starsky." Hutch's voice shook, and he stopped to bring it under control. "This is dumb."

"Yeah, okay, so it's dumb. Just humor me for a few minutes, huh?" He rubbed the taut neck, just shy of those unfamiliar curls.

"I need to clean up--those books--"

"--can wait. Just relax for a minute."

Hutch squirmed. "I can't, okay? I don't like this."

"Just give me a few minutes." Still no give to the lean body, and a moment of doubt crept into Starsky's mind. What if he'd misjudged again, if this just pushed Hutch further away? But he had no other ideas...and something about this felt right.

“Those kids didn’t have a choice--they forced them to...” Hutch swallowed hard, definitely pulling away now, testing his hold.

Starsky hadn’t even thought of the comparison and hated that his partner had, almost letting him go at the revolting thought. But he didn’t. It was time to replace some of those appalling associations with good ones. “Shut up, Hutch,” Starsky said gently.

“I thought you said we weren’t gonna talk about this today.” Hutch was starting to sound desperate, but he wasn’t fighting nearly as hard as he could to get free.

“So don’t talk. Try to relax.” He could feel Hutch’s heart pounding against his chest.

“I don’t understand.” A whisper.

Starsky wondered what exactly he was referring to. “Don’t try. Just let it go, Hutch.”

There. The tiniest bit of pliancy in the rigid arms.

“See? It’s not so hard.” Which wasn’t true and he knew it. Starsky rubbed the side of his face against those strange curls. The texture was different, but he recognized his partner underneath now. “Just rest.”

A strangled laugh. “Starsk...”

“I know. But it’ll get better.”

The shoulders were slumping, fight and strength leaving them. That was okay, Starsky could hold them both up.

Hands clutched him, digging in hard enough to bruise muscle. The shakes were back.

“S is stupid,” Hutch said almost inaudibly.

“Yeah. We won’t tell anybody.”

Hutch pressed his forehead against Starsky’s shoulder, and Starsky cupped the back of his head, the dark curls gritty with sand against his palm.

“I’m here.”

Sometimes, that was all it took.

Hutch lay under the mound of covers Starsky had heaped on him the night before, his knees still pulled up to his chest for a little extra warmth. The cold had really come from within, but it was easing. That probably had more to do with the silent figure Hutch was watching than with all the blankets.

Starsky sat a few feet away on the floor, one leg also pulled close to his body, the other extended in front of him. His body was slumped in worn out slumber, head lolled down to rest against his knee. He'd fallen asleep sometime after Hutch, after making himself comfortable on the carpet next to the window, a silent promise to keep watch while Hutch slept. It had worked, too; no dreams had made it past the determined sentinel. Hutch was starting to believe his partner could do anything he set his mind to...like penetrate two months' worth of muck that had accumulated on Hutch and threatened to cut him off from the world, with a simple clinch.

A partner thing, he'd called it. Hutch snorted silently. Truman or Huntley wouldn't have been caught dead doing something like that when they'd been partnered with Hutch in years past. No, this was a Starsky thing, unconventional and unabashed and ludicrous...and exactly what Hutch had needed. He hadn't even realized until the night before how much he had missed human contact that wasn't tainted with lechery and disgust. But it had melted something inside him that had gone hard during the assignment, and brought back Ken Hutchinson more than shaving or wearing his own clothes had even begun to. And how his partner had known that, he didn't even want to guess.

Hutch swallowed thickly. The emotions were still raw and tangled in him. Dobey had warned he wouldn't come through this assignment unscarred, and he'd been right. But Hutch had backed away a few feet from the edge of the pit the night before, the ground no longer crumbling under his feet. Here, he had time to sort through what he'd seen and felt and make peace with it without feeling like it might consume him any minute. From here, he might actually find his way home.

Besides, he had an extremely loyal guide for the trip.

A partner thing... Hutch shook his head. Loyal and crazy.

And the only person on God's green earth Hutch would have trusted enough to let him do what he'd done the night before.

Huh. Maybe it *was* a partner thing.

His neck hurt and his mouth was dry. Starsky grimaced, slowly lifting and stretching that aching neck. Why had he gone to sleep on the floor instead of in his bed?

And, as his sixth sense awoke, who was watching him?

Starsky's eyes flicked open. Hutch lay a few feet away and awake, buried in a mound of covers but scooted to the edge of the bed, silently watching him with that opaque look that said he was thinking deep thoughts.

Starsky's mouth twisted. "We should get a room with a double next time. One of us always ends up sleepin' funny." He twisted his neck this way and that, trying to get rid of the sharp kinks.

"You didn't have to stay."

“Yeah, like you didn’t have to go undercover,” Starsky shot back without heat. The neck was a lost cause, and he propped his head back against the wall behind it. “Did you get some sleep?”

Hutch nodded. He’d almost been out on his feet the night before when Starsky had navigated him to bed, exhausted from the battle he’d fought and won to let himself simply be held.

“Dreams?” Hutch hadn’t said he’d been having nightmares, but it was a good guess.

“No.”

Starsky nodded and drew a hand over his face, trying to rub the fuzziness of sleep away.

Hutch made a sound like his throat was half-blocked, and his eyes moved to the window above and to the right of Starsky. “I thought about it.”

His instincts usually connected the dots to any non sequitur Hutch came up with, but fatigue slowed him down this time. Starsky gave the man a puzzled look.

“About talking it through. It’s not about...letting it out. I just don’t wanna go through it again, Starsk.” Hutch was looking at him again, frankly admitting Starsky into his soul. “I don’t think I can do it again.”

“You’re gonna have to,” Starsky said as gently as possible. “For the reports, then the trial--you’re the star witness.”

He knew Hutch knew that, and, from the tired flinch, guessed maybe he’d been avoiding it. Hutch rolled back from the edge of the bed to stare up at the ceiling.

Starsky glanced around, as if something in the room would give him the answer he was seeking. “Maybe...maybe it won’t be so bad if you tell me first.”

A sound of disbelief from the bed. “You can’t fix everything, Starsky.”

There was that word again. “You’re not broken, partner,” Starsky shook his head. “You’ve just got a lot to carry. I can help with that.”

He watched Hutch swallow and blink at the ceiling, and waited. Starsky really believed this, that dragging it out into the light here, in a safe place and supportive company, would make the next time easier and the weight a little lighter, but what mattered was whether Hutch believed it, too.

Hutch finally sighed, long and slow. Resignation. Starsky didn’t change his expression, just tentatively propped his leg up on the bed, his socked foot just touching Hutch’s side. Grounding him.

“You already know there were eighteen kids.”

Starsky held his breath and slipped a small notebook from his pocket.

“Smedley got most of them from foster care--they were harder to track and nobody cared much if a kid went missing here or there.” The soft start strengthened into a hard anger. “None of them were older than eleven, and Yvonne was six.”

Thank God. The relief was undiluted this time; this one giant hurdle and they could finally head for the home stretch. Starsky really believed that now.

A long pause, and Hutch started talking again.

Starsky wrote down the facts and absorbed the emotions, waiting when some of the silences stretched out over minutes or Hutch's words grew muffled from the hand over his face. Starsky had his own rage to deal with, although unlike those discouraging phone conversations with his partner that had resulted in some broken furniture and bruises, this time it was a sorrowful anger.

But Hutch took priority as he always did, and so Starsky set his own feelings aside for the time being and just listened and empathized. His own release would come later, perhaps also in a long walk, or a talk with Hutch at some point, if the man was feeling up to it. Or maybe just in sitting and watching him sleep as Hutch had done with him, and feeling down in his bones that he wasn't alone in all this madness. Starsky hadn't been lying the night before that it was a partner thing, something he needed as much as Hutch did.

But as Hutch went on, voice growing hoarse and strained, it became harder for Starsky not to give vent to the anger that boiled inside him at the inhumanities being detailed. Which finally gave him some idea of the forces that had been tearing the blond apart. Starsky had asked a lot of him, and Hutch had to have trusted him an awful lot to give it to him. The kind of strength that took...

Well, maybe he wasn't helping his partner as much as he thought he was. But Starsky would do all he could to make it a little easier. And as Hutch finally tapered off in sheer exhaustion, that included getting a wet washcloth to ease some of those lines etched in his forehead, and sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing Hutch's stomach absently until his partner relaxed enough to doze off.

With a final look that was as much pride as it was sympathy, Starsky finally got up and walked out of the room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

They would celebrate later. For now, he had a report to write.

At first, Hutch thought it was because his partner had backed off, no longer pushing him to talk about the assignment. It took a while before he realized the freedom he felt was from having broken down and talked, the horrible secrets no longer his own.

Starsky was still being gentle with him: the teasing was soft, the glances fond, and so far the only thing Hutch had had to do was set the table. But Starsky wasn't treating him like a bomb that was ready to explode anymore, and that, more than any faith in his own survival skills, convinced

Hutch he would get through this. It was hard not to believe in yourself when someone believed in you that much.

The late lunch was light, conversation even lighter. Starsky wanted to try a restaurant in town for dinner, Hutch only consenting once he was sure it wasn't a greasy spoon. They both agreed Hutch would have to pick up some perm-relaxer while in town, even though Starsky had put up a halfhearted defense for curls. An after-dinner walk on the beach came up, and Starsky surprised him by assuming Hutch would go alone. And Hutch found himself inviting his partner along exactly because Starsky *hadn't* insisted on going, and was gratified at the look in Starsky's eyes when he accepted.

He would get through this. *They* would get through this.

Ken Hutchinson was back, and it felt...good.

Starsky had tried not to hover, but it was hard not to keep checking. Hutch had been reading the report an awfully long time, his pen occasionally scratching as he added or changed something Starsky had written. It was the only sound in the bungalow besides the distant crash of waves, the clock that ticked in the kitchen, and the occasional peels of laughter as kids played outside.

Hutch didn't react to them. Didn't hear them or didn't mind them? Starsky wished he knew. He ducked back into his book and continued to skim words he didn't comprehend.

The day before had been a really good one. The restaurant in town was everything Starsky had heard it to be, and the lazy walk through town afterward unwound a few tight strings in them both. Hutch had enjoyed the architecture of the expensive houses that filled out the small town, and Starsky had loved the little stores, especially the hobby shop. The new model ship he'd broken down and bought was already packed away for their return home in two more days.

Hutch had lingered at the cigarette displays in the drugstore, but had finally pulled himself away and walked on. The cravings would linger, Starsky knew, as would a lot of that assignment, but neither of them expected it all to disappear. Moving on was a big enough goal. And they were getting there. But this report...

Giving up, Starsky put the book down in his lap and tried to read his partner instead. Hutch was hunched over the kitchen table, braced against the intangible, only his eyes moving as he read silently. His hair was white-blond again and no longer in those ugly curls, a little long, hanging into his eyes. Hutch didn't seem to notice that, either.

Another pause, the sheets laid back on the table as Hutch crossed something out and wrote a few words above it. Some of the details had gotten sketchy near the end, and while Starsky had filled them in the best he could from his side of the arrests, he knew there were still a few gaps to be plugged. He'd just hoped doing the bulk of the work would make it a little easier on his partner. There had seemed to be a little relief mixed into the tension in Hutch's eyes when Starsky had handed him the six sheets.

Hutch put the papers down again and wrote something near the bottom of the page. With the sweep of his hand, it looked like maybe a signature. And then he took a deep breath, straightened the pages, and looked up at Starsky.

“We locked ’em all up?” he asked, restrained.

Starsky nodded. “Every last one of ’em.”

Hutch’s head jerked once, and he stood with new weariness and took the one step to the kitchen sink. He ran some water in his hands and splashed it over his face.

Starsky set the book aside and went to join him in the kitchen, grabbing some paper towels and offering them when Hutch finally came up for air.

“Thanks.”

Starsky nodded again, once, and collected the papers. He wanted to read the changes later, but there was no need to leave the report out, a constant reminder. Folding it twice, he stuck the sheaf in his back pocket.

Hutch watched him but didn’t say a word. He drew in another breath, then shook his head. “You want some ice cream?”

Starsky’s eyebrows rose and his lips twitched. “Ice cream? We just had breakfast an hour ago and you want ice cream?” That idea had come out of left field, which was pretty promising. Maybe it was a bit of a desperate change of subject, but Hutch was trying, and that counted for a lot.

“It’s milk,” Hutch said defensively, already looking like he regretted mentioning it. “It’s a lot healthier than most of the junk you eat.”

“Hey, I’m not complainin’.” Starsky put up a hand. He wasn’t about to argue Hutch out of dessert. He ducked into his room to get his jacket before his partner changed his mind, and grabbed Hutch’s off the couch as he returned. “I think I saw tutti-frutti in that little ice cream store on the main strip--you think they got jellybeans to go on it?”

Hutch sputtered in indignation at the thought and then laughed. Really laughed. “I take back what I said about it being healthy.”

Starsky was already grinning. “Hey, it’s still made out of milk, and fruit. Doesn’t get a lot healthier than that.” He tossed Hutch’s jacket to him, and put his on so that it covered the papers sticking out of his pocket. Hutch would be welcome to bring it up whenever he felt he needed to, but as far as Starsky was concerned, the last two months were a closed subject now. He was determined to enjoy the last few days of sun and surf and ice cream with his best friend while they lasted.

Hutch shook his head in exasperation, but as he reached the door, he curled his hand against Starsky’s side for a second before stepping outside.

It was like a thousand other times, the automatic, silent interaction of two people in a job that required knowing where the other was at any given moment, and who were comfortable in each other's space. But it was the first time in over two months, the first time since they'd been of the beach that Hutch had reached out to him instinctively and easily. He hadn't even realized what he'd done, just standing there fiddling with his glasses in the sunshine while he waited for Starsky to lock the door.

Starsky smiled, loving this guy with his atrocious taste in cars and food. Feeling a moment of pure joy at having him back.

And then, before he got caught being soapy, Starsky locked up and went to join his partner.