

Summary: Nearly two years after Gunther's hit, Starsky has recovered and he and Hutch are back in the groove on the street. It had taken a lot of grueling, painful work for Starsky to get up to speed, and no one knows that better than Hutch. But Starsky's trials aren't over. Dobby asks Hutch to break the worst kind of news to Starsky. After all they've been through, Hutch has to find the strength to support his friend through what might be his toughest trial yet.

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Warnings: Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

Solace

by Glow

ONE

Hutch fought to suppress a grin as he noted the expressions on the faces they were passing in the corridor of Metro. Rolled eyes met his and several pairs of lips twisted in knowing smirks as his partner's voice carried along the halls they were walking through. He forced his own face to remain neutral, however, not wanting to give Starsky anything else to gripe about. As it was, Starsky was in an animated tirade, voice raised in agitation as his arms gestured boisterously.

"I mean what was I thinking? I say, 'what do you want to do for lunch' figuring you'd suggest...I don't know...maybe a place to *eat*. But noooo! Not my partner. Why sit down for a nice casual, normal lunch when you can drive down to the gym for some *racquetball*."

The word was said as though it were some kind of obscenity. Hutch tried to cut in while his partner paused for a breath.

"Look, Starsk...." That was all he managed to get out before the diatribe began again.

"What kind of game is that anyway? You got this ball flyin' around, bouncin' off all four walls...you don't even know where it's comin' from. Just bing, bing, bing...whamm! The next thing you know, something that looks like a Super Ball but feels like a cannonball is smashing into the side of your head."

"I told you to duck," Hutch cut in reasonably. His remark was greeted with an icy glare. He swallowed, again trying to control his urge to laugh, as he muttered quietly, "Sorry."

"Sorry? I'm the one who's sorry. How do I let you talk me into these things?" Starsky's voice changed as he went into his best Hutch imitation. "'Come on, Starsk. It'll be fun, Starsk. It's good for you, Starsk. Get that heart pumping. You've got to try new things.'"

This time, Hutch did laugh. "I don't sound like that."

"Don't laugh at me, Hutchinson. You've already ruined my damn lunch hour. And on top of that, I'm starving."

They stopped just outside the doors to the squad room as Hutch held up a brown bag. "I bought you lunch, remember?"

Starsky sneered at him in disdain. "Sure. What's in there anyway? Some healthy piece of rabbit food or some crap like that. No thanks."

He pushed open the door forcefully and allowed it to slam closed in Hutch's face. Undaunted, the blond pushed the door open and followed his partner to their desks.

"That's not true. The rabbit food's for me. I got you a nice greasy cheeseburger with fries."

The curly dark head peered up from the chair Starsky had thrown himself into, interest now piqued. "Oh yeah?"

"Yup." He reached into the bag and took out the foil wrapped burger, tossing it to Starsky. He removed the fries, then put his hand back in the bag, letting it linger there as he smiled teasingly. "I even got you dessert."

Huge blue eyes met his in an expression a puppy uses when begging for table scraps. "Dessert?"

"Yeah. I picked up a couple of donuts." He paused, enjoying the look of anticipation on Starsky's face before adding persuasively, "Jelly."

Starsky grabbed the bag, pulling out one of the gooey treats which he bit into ravenously. Hutch laughed as he watched the trickle of jelly slide down the side of his friend's mouth.

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?"

Starsky wiped the wayward jelly from his face with his finger, which he promptly sucked clean. He took another bite before answering Hutch with his mouth full.

"I'll think about it."

Hutch sat down shaking his head as he watched his partner devour the donut. "You know Starsk, you're supposed to eat the dessert last."

"Don't start with me Hutchinson. A man who enjoys spending the better part of an hour chasing a Super Ball back and forth in a room that would give most people claustrophobia shouldn't be givin' advice."

"Oh, come on. You've got to admit that it was fun. The rush of adrenaline...the non-stop action... pushing your body to its limits while your heart pounds frantically in your chest...."

"The sound of your bones cracking as you hit the floor...the feel of muscles you didn't even know you had cramping...the twist of your neck as you keep snapping it back and forth trying to figure out where the damn ball is...oh yeah, sure. Loads of fun."

Hutch shook his head with a smile as he reached into the bag for his 'rabbit food.' Despite the cynicism and the tantrums, Starsky had had fun and Hutch knew it. Complaining about it only added to Starsky's enjoyment and nothing he said could have dampened Hutch's mood anyway. It had taken a long time to get back the playful, teasing, relaxed, wise-cracking Starsky that he had missed so much. After all that had happened, it was a welcomed sight. Even the old appetite seemed to be returning, he noted, as he watched Starsky drain some of the ketchup packet onto his donut.

"Oh, Starsky, that's disgusting!"

"No, what you're eating is disgusting. They serve that stuff to the animals over at the petting zoo." As Starsky bit into his ketchup-jelly donut his eyes sparkled teasingly at Hutch. "You

know, I think I liked you better when you were lettin yourself go. Maybe you should regain some of that weight and grow the old mustache back, eh?"

Hutch knew his friend was only joking. Nobody had been more worried than Starsky when Hutch went through that dark period, allowing his disillusionment with life and the stress of his job to overwhelm even his desire to take care of himself. And nobody had been more relieved than Starsky when the old blender came back out of moth balls and the health concoctions, along with jogging and workouts at the gym, became part of his daily routine again.

Hutch wondered if his partner realized how much of that had been done for him. He had fought hard to get himself back in shape after Starsky's near fatal shooting over a year and a half ago. He had been determined to be there for Starsky and knew that he had to be in the best possible condition so that he wouldn't risk letting his partner down. With everything his friend had gone through then as well as all that came later, Starsky had needed all the strength Hutch had to give.

It was Starsky who was now recovering from his own dark period, slowly beginning to resemble his old self, and nothing could have pleased Hutch more.

"You don't mean that," Hutch countered smugly, enjoying the familiar banter. "In fact, I'm so sure you don't mean it that I booked the court at the gym for us again tomorrow."

"What! Hutch, you don't think...."

Hutch stuck a french fry into his friend's open mouth to end the outburst. "Don't talk with your mouth full." He stood up then, ducking out of the way of the paper clip holder that came flying at him. As he moved towards the coffee pot, Starsky called after him in a voice that only barely concealed his amusement.

"OK, fine. You want to play racquetball, we'll play racquetball. Just don't be surprised if I mistake that thick skull of yours for the Super Ball."

"That's what I like about you, Starsk. Always willing to try new things." Hutch returned to the desk with two cups of coffee, one of which he extended towards his partner. "You can have this if you promise not to throw it at me."

"I don't know. I might have to think about that deal for a minute."

Hutch started to pull back the coffee but Starsky grabbed his arm.

"All right, all right. I promise." They both smiled as Starsky took the coffee from Hutch's hand.

"You know, you might find you'd have more success at the game if you stopped using your head as the racquet."

"And you might find if you don't shut up, I just might go back on my promise." He stood up and moved menacingly towards Hutch with the cup in his hand.

"Hutchinson, in my office! I need to talk to you."

Dobey's gruff voice cut into their laughter. Starsky's smile was mischievous.

"Oh, saved in the nick of time. This must be your luck day, Hutchinson."

"What can I tell you. I lead a charmed life. Coming, Captain."

"You need me, Cap?"

"Uh, no, Starsky. You go ahead and finish your lunch."

Starsky chuckled as he sat back down to his feast, smirking at Hutch tauntingly.

"Now whose lucky day is it?" He picked up his cheeseburger for a hearty bite before waving to Hutch. "Have fun. I'll try to keep your rabbit food from wilting?"

"Gee, thanks."

Hutch left his cheerful partner to his lunch as he followed Dobby into the office. His lighthearted mood immediately sobered as he noted the look in the Captain's eyes.

"Something wrong?"

"Yeah, Hutch, I'm afraid there is. Sit down."

Hutch took a seat as Dobby moved around his desk to sit down in his own chair. The room was silent then as the look on Dobby's face reflected a struggle to find words. The hair on the back of Hutch's neck pricked up as his instincts began to scream to him something was wrong, and everything inside of him was telling him it had nothing to do with police work. Hutch started to ask, then stopped himself, realizing that whatever it was would be out soon enough. So he waited as Dobby took a deep breath then covered his face with his hands before running them through his hair.

"There was a call when you were at lunch," the Captain began, his voice sounding nothing like the no-nonsense, business tone he usually used. It wasn't a tone totally unfamiliar to Hutch, however.

You can stop looking. We just located your third possible.

Wedell?

He's been dead four days...heart attack.

Hutch's fingers dug into the sides of the chair as though to brace himself. His mind immediately raced to Starsky as the gnawing sensation in his stomach began. It was a feeling that he experienced only when there was some kind of threat to his partner. Unfortunately, it was a feeling he had become far too familiar with, especially of late.

"Since you and Starsky were out," Dobby continued, "they transferred the call to me. It was Starsky's Aunt Rose."

Dobey stopped then, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. Hutch's eyes remained riveted to the dark, somber face as he tried to keep his mind from racing through the possibilities. It was impossible, however, to stifle the questions. *Why would Starsky's Aunt Rose call the station? Why would a personal call for Starsky be transferred to Dobby? Why didn't Dobby call Starsky in here if this was about him?*

Dobey again seemed to be struggling for words, but this time Hutch could no longer bear the suspense.

"Tell me," he whispered, voice tight, shoulders rigid.

Dobey's tense features softened as he spoke into the quiet room. "It's his mother, Hutch. She's dead."

Hutch sat, unblinking, unmoving. His mind couldn't seem to fix on any concrete thought. Only the words *she's dead* reverberated over and over in his head. Slowly the words were replaced by other words...similar words...words from the not too distant past...words also spoken by Dobby. *I got a call from the prison. Nicky was killed today in a knife fight with one of the inmates.*

Those words were spoken in this room too. Only Starsky had been here then. Starsky, who had suffered a near fatal assassination attempt. Starsky, who had endured endless months of painful, tedious recovery. Starsky who had fought his way back only to be crushed by the news that his wayward brother had been arrested for dealing drugs...tainted drugs that had resulted in the deaths of three teenagers. Starsky, who had sat through the long months before and during the trial blaming himself and feeling helpless and inadequate. Starsky, who had held and comforted his mother as his little brother was sentenced and led off to jail. Starsky, who three months later had to break the news to his mother that Nicky was dead...Starsky...Starsky...Starsky....

Hutch threw himself out of the chair in an effort to break away from the unrelenting thoughts. He realized then that Dobby had been speaking to him, but he hadn't heard a word of it. He looked toward the older man in confusion.

"What?"

"I said that his Aunt Rose didn't think it was the kind of news he should hear over the phone. She had called to speak to you. She was hoping that you could...well that it might be easier coming from you."

"Easier?" Hutch laughed sardonically. "Hey buddy, your mom's dead. But I'm sure it's not such a big deal for you hearing it from me." Hutch kicked the metal trash can, sending its contents flying all over the floor. He turned sharply then, punching his fist into the wall as he mumbled every expletive he could think of.

Dobey rose from his seat and quickly moved beside Hutch, placing a restraining hand on his arm.

"Easy, son. You've got to keep it together for his sake."

Hutch nursed his bruised fist to his mouth as he struggled to get control of himself. He heard

Dobey's words...knew he was right. But how could he? How could he hold it together when he had to be the one to tell Starsky that his world had just exploded in his face yet again?

Now whose lucky day is it?

The cheerful eyes. The laughing grin. Had it only been a few minutes ago? How had it all fallen apart so quickly? Hutch turned to Dobby searchingly.

"How do I do this? How do I tell him this? I mean it was only eight months ago when Nick..."

Hutch heard his voice crack as he was unable to continue. The hand on his arm tightened as the older man tried to offer support.

"I know, Hutch. I know."

Hutch closed his eyes, fighting to get hold of himself. Dobby's right hand came up to grasp his other arm. The firm grip on both of his forearms may have been the only thing that kept him standing because his legs certainly felt like jelly. He looked up at the Captain needing to voice the thought that kept running through his head.

"It's not fair."

"No. It's not."

It wasn't fair. The past year and a half had been hell for Starsky and now this. But fair or not, it was true and it had to be faced. Somehow, he would have to find the strength to get them both through this. As Hutch struggled to compose himself, he heard Dobby's voice low and tentative.

"Do you want me to tell him?"

"No," Hutch responded immediately. As hard as this was going to be, he couldn't let Starsky hear it from anyone else. "No, I need to do it."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm going to have to be. Just give me a minute."

Dobby nodded understandingly then eased up his grip on Hutch's arms. When Hutch stood up more surely, Dobby released his hold altogether. They nodded quietly at each other, then Hutch walked over towards the desk and leaned forward, spreading his palms flat atop its surface as he hung his head down and fought to clear his mind. The only way to get through this was one moment at a time. He couldn't allow the anguish over the past and the anxiety for the future to immobilize him.

"OK," he called to Dobby when he felt himself as steady as he was going to be. But when the door behind him was opened and the Captain's voice called to Starsky to come in, Hutch found himself unable to turn around. Instead, he listened as his unaware partner began to babble blithely.

"Somehow, I knew that was too good to last. Luckily, I'm a fast eater so I got most of it down. I guess I figured you two would be needin' my expert input. So, what's up? What is it you can't handle without me partner?"

The door behind them closed softly and Starsky's voice held a note of confusion.

"Hey Cap....Where's Dobby going?"

Taking a deep breath, Hutch forced himself to turn around. Just as he feared it would, his face spoke volumes to his partner. Starsky's features immediately changed from relaxed confusion to guarded apprehension. The easy tone from only a moment ago was nowhere to be found in his voice now.

"What is it?"

"Buddy, I think you should sit down."

Starsky didn't move a muscle but a rigidness seemed to suffuse every inch of him. Guileless blue eyes became cold and hard in a protective reflex that had become all too essential in the past year and a half.

"What is it?" he repeated, more sharply this time.

Hutch would have gladly died himself in that moment rather than speak the words that were going to devastate this man. But there was no getting around what had to be said and prolonging it would only hurt him more. Pushing past the lump that had formed in his throat, threatening to choke him, Hutch uttered the terrible words as softly as he could.

"It's your mom, Starsk. She...she died."

Hutch waited then, not certain what the reaction would be but prepared for anything. At least he thought he was. But the eyes before him remained emotionless and the body stayed hauntingly still as a resigned voice uttered a simple "Oh" before falling silent again.

Despite his efforts to control it, Hutch's voice filled with enough emotion for both of them.

"Babe, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I know how much this has to hurt."

He stepped towards Starsky wanting so desperately to reach out...to help somehow. But the man before him was so distant...so removed. He was afraid to push, so he stood still again, trying to give Starsky whatever time and space he might need.

Endless moments seemed to pass in silence, neither of them moving. It was Starsky who finally broke it, walking slowly towards the window behind the desk. Shoulder leaned against the wall, he poked one of the blinds up with his finger and stared out through the narrow opening. When he spoke, his voice seemed tired, but Hutch could detect no other emotion in it.

"I guess I should have expected it. She really hasn't been well. Not since Nicky. It was her heart wasn't it?"

"I...I don't know." Hutch felt foolish, realizing he hadn't even asked. "Dobey got the call. I'm sure he would...."

"Something died in her when Nicky went to jail." Starsky continued on as if he wasn't even aware Hutch was speaking. "She's been sick a lot off and on. I've tried to get out there as much as I could, you know. I wish she would have come out here like I wanted but she wouldn't. This wasn't her home. Her memories were there...and with Nicky gone I guess she felt that's all she had left."

Starsky grew quiet again, staring intently out the window with eyes that didn't seem to be seeing. Hutch thought about what he had been saying. He knew how troubled Starsky had been over his mother's health. There were numerous visits, phone calls, letters...endless pleas for her to come and stay here where he could be closer to her. At one point he had even considered moving back to New York but Ruth Starsky wouldn't hear of it. As relieved as Hutch was that the move didn't take place, he couldn't forget the bitter pain that Starsky endured when his mother told him that his coming there would change nothing and that there wasn't anything he could do for her.

Hutch had always liked Ruth Starsky. He found her to be a warm, open woman. But he could never understand the favoritism towards her younger son any more than he could understand Starsky's enduring allegiance to him. Nick Starsky was a selfish, greedy, arrogant, egotistical man who only looked out for Number One. He had shown no remorse for the part he played in the extinction of three young lives.

Though he understood that the death of a child was the most devastating experience a parent could go through, Hutch could never fathom how it could blind Ruth Starsky to the love and devotion her older son tried so hard to show her.

'Her memories were there and with Nicky gone I guess she felt that's all she had left.'

But she had you, buddy. How was it that she could always make you feel that that didn't count for anything?

Hutch wondered if Starsky were blaming himself again; blaming himself for not being able to provide his mother with a will to live, just like he blamed himself for not being able to protect his brother. It was hard to decide what Starsky was feeling. His face was so blank, so unreadable. It could almost be a stranger standing here. Hutch wasn't used to feeling so disconnected from his partner. Even during the worst of times, he always had some sense of what was going on behind those vivid blue eyes.

"Talk to me, babe. Tell me what you need. Tell me how to help."

Starsky turned to him then, and for a brief moment, the features reflected the man he knew better than himself.

"You're doing it. Just be here."

There was a small attempt at a smile, more for Hutch's sake than to express any inner feeling. And then the face went expressionless again as he turned back to the window to stare.

The door to the office opened slowly and Dobey stepped in. Concerned brown eyes roamed from Hutch to Starsky then back to Hutch again. Hutch answered the unvoiced question with a shrug. He had no idea how Starsky was. Dobey moved forth, coming to stand beside Starsky as he put a hand upon his back.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Dave."

"Thanks, Cap," the flat voice replied, eyes remaining on the window.

Hutch exchanged another look with Dobey, certain they were thinking the same thing. Here in this office the day Nick was killed, Starsky ranted over the inadequacies of the system, cursed his brother for every stupid mistake, agonized over how he would tell his mother and then, finally, cried for the loss and pain. In fact, through all of it...his recovery, the trial, Nick's death, his mother's illness...there had always been a gamut of emotion: fear, anger, frustration, guilt, pain, love, grief, hope, despair. But now there was nothing. *Maybe he's got nothing left.*

"I guess...I guess I've got some calls to make...stuff I should be doing." The words sounded lifeless and the body made no move to follow through.

"That can wait. I think you should just sit down for a while. Take some time for yourself."

Starsky shrugged at Dobey's advice but he moved from the window nonetheless, taking a seat on the other side of the desk.

"Can I get you something? How about some water? Yeah, a glass of water would be good," Dobey decided and left the office to get it.

Hutch realized then that he himself had been almost as immobile as Starsky. It was as if his partner's shutting down turned a switch off inside of him as well. Cursing himself for his ineptitude, Hutch forced his body to move. He walked over to where his partner sat and crouched down beside the chair. Starsky's left hand lay flat across his thigh and Hutch covered it with his own hand. Instantly the fingers beneath his responded, wrapping themselves tightly around his and holding on forcefully as though that grip was all that kept him from falling. The remainder of his body and his face remained impassive but Starsky's grip on his partner's hand stayed fierce. Hutch tightened his own hold, relieved to feel the sense of connectedness again.

You're doing it Just be here.

"I'm here buddy. I'm right here," Hutch whispered, hoping the familiar words could bring comfort to them both.

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Starsky lay on his back in his bed staring up at the ceiling as he studied the way the light from the living room combined with the darkness of the bedroom to produce the silent shadows. An itemized catalog of the day's events ran through his mind with detached clarity. Woke up. Shower. Breakfast. Work. Racquetball. Lunch. Your mother's dead....The details got a little hazier after that. He wasn't sure how long he sat in Dobey's office, but it must have been a while.

There had been a voice in his head telling him he should be doing something, yet he had sat motionless as Hutch and Dobey went over plans and made phone calls. People who had to be contacted. Details gathered. Airline reservations made. Hotel booked. Somehow it all got done despite his ineffectualness.

All he remembered about getting home was that Hutch had taken him. Other than that, the trip between Dobey's office and his apartment was a blank. After that, there had been some attempt by Hutch to get him to eat dinner...was it that late already?...but he couldn't remember what the food was or if he had tasted any of it. Blank again after that until he came in here to lay down. Now he laid, not because he was tired or because he had thought for one minute that he could fall asleep...no, he laid down because Hutch had asked him to, and he couldn't bear to cause any more worry in those already overly concerned blue eyes.

*Your mother's dead.* No matter how many times he repeated it to himself, it didn't feel real. She had been sick on and off, but lately things had been better. He had actually started to believe that maybe the worst was over. But instead his mother went to bed last night and never woke up. He wondered if he should feel relieved that she went...as people would say...peacefully. Was there some comfort in that?

Starsky could feel his own heart pounding in his chest, causing him to think about what kinds of things made a heart stop. Physical things like the trauma caused by his gunshot wounds. But probably emotional things as well. Did a heart just get tired of beating after it was broken beyond repair?

That thought threatened to stir too many others that Starsky was unable to cope with, so he turned over on his side and pushed it out of his mind. He again forced his head clear of emotions and concentrated instead on the sounds coming from his kitchen. Water and dishes and glasses.... Hutch was cleaning up from the dinner he had made them...the dinner Starsky now remembered he hadn't eaten. He pictured Hutch standing over the sink as he methodically soaped each pot and plate and glass and fork...systematically laying each down on the counter in a bubbly collection until all had been lathered. Only then would he begin to rinse them off in the warm running water, then carefully place them into the dish rack to dry. Starsky preferred to soap a dish then rinse it immediately so that when he laid it down, he was finished with it. He often teased Hutch that his method made twice as much work, though in reality they both probably took the same amount of time. Of course, he would never admit that to Hutch. It was much more fun to annoy the long-suffering blond with his absurd theories. And Hutch, of course, would never consider changing his method of dish washing just to shut Starsky up. He took just as much pleasure in being stubborn and contradictory as Starsky did. It was one of the things that Starsky loved about him...one of the million things.

The thoughts of his partner were relaxing some of the twisted tension that infused Starsky's body, so he allowed his mind to drift along that path. Not for the first time he tried to remember when exactly he had fallen in love with Hutch. As far as he could tell, it had always been there... he just used to fight harder to disguise it, especially from himself. The endless string of women he dated and had affairs with...most of whose names and faces he couldn't even remember anymore...were all part of the deception. It wasn't until Terry that he was forced to face the truth...a truth she saw more clearly than he ever had himself.

Beautiful, understanding, compassionate Terry...he loved her as much as he could love any woman...but that was never as much as he loved Hutch. It was Terry who made him realize how reversed the roles were...that it was she who fulfilled the role of best friend while Hutch held the lovers place in his heart. That was why she always referred to herself and him as best friends. For a while, Starsky had tried so hard to make it different...to try to feel for Terry what he knew she felt for him. But at that time, he was too unskilled at pretending to feel things he didn't, and she was too perceptive to fall for it.

Oddly enough, the truth only brought them closer. He was able to open up to Terry about thoughts and feelings he never believed he could share with anybody. Instead of condemning him, she supported him and helped him to accept himself. A cherished friendship was formed between two people who really understood each other. Terry was an incredible person and he loved her...loved her enough to be serious about wanting to marry her and take care of her in those last days. But Terry couldn't be selfish, even then. She turned down his proposal and spent many of their last conversations together urging him to be honest with Hutch. *Life is too short, Dave. Live it to its fullest. Grab the brass ring while you can.* That was one of the last things she said to him before she went to the hospital for the last time.

But his guilt and pain over her death immobilized him more than her words could set him free. Even her final attempt to draw him and his partner together through her death by leaving Hutch that note and Ollie, though no doubt intended to give Starsky an opening to come clean with his feelings, couldn't give him the courage to do so. He had lost Terry...one of the few people he had really loved in his life...so senselessly. Life was cruel and unpredictable. He wasn't about to risk alienating...perhaps even losing...Hutch by telling him the truth.

Instead, he went back to pretending, though it was much more difficult now. If he couldn't fall in love with a woman like Terry, he knew with certainty that no woman would ever have his heart. Yet he dated and went through the motions with woman after woman. At some point Rosie Malone came along...Rosie who he had pursued in the park that day more to keep Hutch from doing so than because of any real interest. He suspected the attraction there was his gut feeling that it was a relationship doomed from the start. She would never be free to really love him anymore than he could really love her. So they play acted together for a while, trying to fool everyone, including themselves. When she said it was over, he didn't fight hard to dissuade her. What was the point?

More time passed...more meaningless relationships. Somewhere along the line he had become a masterful impostor. When John Blaine died, he even managed to convince Hutch that he couldn't fathom the idea of two men together. Surely that performance was Oscar worthy.

But deception has its price, a bitter lesson he learned when Kira came into their lives. In some desperate, half thought out attempt to get his partners attention, he actively pursued the conniving woman who came on to them both, at one point even telling Hutch he was in love with her. He had participated before in these contests with his partner over the attentions of a woman he didn't even want. He had always done it more to keep Hutch and the interloper apart rather than to snare the female for himself. But something went terribly wrong in the situation with Kira. Starsky had wanted Hutch to feel threatened by his phony declaration of love for Kira, perhaps igniting some jealousy or re-evaluation of feelings. Instead, Hutch pursued Kira,

unleashing a torrent of long built up emotion in Starsky that resulted in a painful, violent rage. He ended up taking his rage out on the one person he never wanted to hurt, and in the aftermath, he had almost blown the most important relationship in his life.

Starsky had to take a harsh self-inventory after that. His emotions were becoming far too unstable and dangerous and he needed to get them back in check. There were no more games after Kira...no more juvenile attempts to play with his partners head...and no more deluding himself.

He loved Hutch. All the meaningless relationships in the world were never going to change that. He was through dating women and pretending to be something he wasn't. It was just too much of a strain. He was equally adamant about ensuring that his love for Hutch would not cost him the friendship which was the only thing that gave his life meaning. Somehow, he would learn to accept and live with what he had...a wonderful, fulfilling friendship...a trusting, dedicated partnership...and the lonely, endless prison of unrequited love.

Not long after he came to his resolution, fate stepped in to install some new, steep drops in the roller coaster that was his life. And while health and family crisis provided never ending demands on his time and attention, his love for Hutch remained strong and constant. In fact, his increasing dependence on Hutch's strength and support over the past year and a half continually threatened to weaken his resolve to ask and expect nothing more than friendship from his partner. There were moments when he was certain that if he couldn't feel Hutch's moist lips upon him...feel that smooth, golden skin pressed against his in a lover's embrace that shut out all the pain and fear, that he would cease to exist....

Starsky loosened his grip on the sheet that he had been clutching tightly in his fisted hands and used an end of it to wipe some of the perspiration from his hot, flushed face. What on earth had made him believe that thoughts of Hutch would relax him? That was the last thing he needed to think about tonight.

"Are you all right? Can I get you anything?"

Because of his train of thought, the soft voice in the doorway startled him more than it should have. He visibly jumped, pulling the sheet to his neck like a protective armor.

"I'm fine," he answered gruffly, afraid to let his voice betray anything more.

"I didn't mean to startle you. I'm sorry." The voice was tender, apologetic.

"It's OK."

"Listen, if you want to talk..."

The voice was gentle and full of love. Hutch had been trying so hard all day to be supportive and Starsky loved him all the more for it. But the last thing he wanted to do was talk...or think...or feel...

"No. Not now. I really just need to be by myself if that's OK."

"Of course it's OK." The words did their best to hide the hurt and concern, though they didn't quite succeed. "I'll be on the couch if you need me. Just call."

"I will." But he knew he wouldn't. Just like he knew Hutch wouldn't go home even if he'd asked him to, so he didn't. Hutch would sit on the couch all night, ready to be there if Starsky called.

*And me? I'm going to lay here and do my best to turn my mind into a black hole, devoid of all thought or feeling.*

Starsky turned onto his other side, facing his back to the door. He felt Hutch linger in the doorway for several long, silent minutes before he finally headed back into the living room. For a brief moment, Starsky felt an incredible sense of guilt. But then he pushed that and all other sensations harshly from his mind until numbness infused him. Reaching over to his nightstand, he picked up a small Matchbox car that was sitting there. He contented himself with rolling it across the mattress, becoming absorbed by the turn of its wheels and the direction of its travel. For as long as he could manage it, this car was all that existed.

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Hutch glanced down at his watch as he tried to stretch his long legs in the narrow confines of space between his seat and the one in front of him. It was 2:00 p.m. The plane should be landing in another hour or so. The thought reminded him that he ought to re-set his watch to New York time. He unsnapped the watch from his wrist and carefully re-set it to 5:00. Before returning it to his wrist, he paused and flipped it over, glancing at the inscription on the back.

Get with the times - S. A small smile pulled at Hutch's lips as he stared fondly at the present his partner had given him on his last birthday. Starsky had forever teased him about his penchant for pocket watches, telling him they were for grandfathers and train conductors. The present had been his not so subtle way of pushing Hutch "into the modern era." Though not too modern, Hutch had been relieved to realize. The watch was a classically styled Seiko analog timepiece with a round black face and gold hands and hour markings. The band was black link with two lines of gold woven through. It really was a beautiful watch, possessing none of the gizmos or sci-fi type gadgets that adorned the wrist wear his partner bought for himself.

Hutch ran his thumb lightly over the treasured present as he turned to the man sitting beside him. Starsky was still staring silently out the window, though there was nothing really to see besides clouds and blue sky. Hutch was concerned at how subdued Starsky had been during the lengthy flight. His partner hated to fly and generally fidgeted like a caged animal for the duration of the trip. But they had been in the air for nearly five hours now without any pacing trips to the bathroom, bi-hourly time checks, or nervous rhythms being tapped out on the tray table. There was no long string of endless chatter either, not even during the usually dreaded take-off when a slight tensing of body muscles had been the only indication that he had even known what was going on.

Snapping his watch back onto his wrist, Hutch shifted around in his seat. He reached out to place a hand on Starsky's forearm.

"Hey, how're you holding up?"

"I'm doin' OK."

"It should only be another hour until we land."

"That's good. I hate planes."

"I know."

Starsky turned and faced him then, the blue eyes surrounded by a sea of red.

"Guess I haven't been much company for you. Sorry."

"You don't have anything to be sorry about."

Starsky sighed as he leaned his head back against the seat. Hutch knew he had to be exhausted.

"Why don't you close your eyes for a while. I'll wake you when we get there."

"Nah, I'm all right."

No, you're not, Hutch thought to himself, but he didn't say it. He tried to think of something else to say but Starsky had already turned his head back to the window, immersing himself back in his distant reverie.

It had been like that throughout the night. Hutch woke several times to check on him, each time finding him awake and staring silently either at the ceiling, the wall or out the window. Any attempt at conversation ended up as brief and inconsequential as the one they'd just had.

Hutch's hopes that he would at least get some rest on the plane never materialized. He hadn't slept or eaten. He had no interest in watching the movie or in the magazines Hutch had bought him. Hutch himself had passed most of the time sleeping or reading. He had even watched some of the inane movie, afraid that if he didn't keep himself distracted he would drive Starsky crazy with his anxious worry.

Sighing, Hutch checked his watch again, realizing he wasn't entirely sure how eager he was for the plane to land. On the one hand, it would be a relief for this seemingly endless flight to be over. On the other hand, what awaited Starsky in New York was sure to be an ordeal that would make the last 24 hours pale in comparison. Most of the arrangements were being held off until Starsky got there. While the relatives in New York felt it was respectful to leave the important decisions for Ruth's son to make, Hutch really didn't know how much of it his partner was going to be able to deal with. So far, the only decision he had shown any interest in making had been his insistence that they stay in a hotel in New York. He had no desire to stay at his mother's apartment and found the idea of bunking with relatives almost equally as unappealing. This was not a decision that went over big with the family. Relatives just didn't stay at hotels, especially during times of crisis. But it had been what Starsky wanted and Hutch made the reservations, silently hoping the family didn't give Starsky too much of a hard time about it when they got there. Hutch was glad that Captain Dobey and Huggy would be flying in tomorrow to be there for the funeral. Starsky was going to need all the support he could get.

The pilot's voice began to sound through the cabin as he smoothly announced that their flight would be landing at LaGuardia airport in New York on schedule in about forty minutes. As he began to relay the temperature in New York and remind the passengers of the time difference, Hutch felt a light touch on his thigh. He looked down to see Starsky's left hand shyly edging along his leg. He immediately covered the hand with his own and glanced over at Starsky. His pensive friend was still staring blankly out the window. Hutch stroked the back of his partner's hand comfortingly with his thumb. As his finger brushed across the two rings that were such a familiar part of the left pinkie, he paused and looked down at them thoughtfully.

Memory flooded back. It seemed like a lifetime ago, a time when he was the one grieving and Starsky's support was the only thing holding him together. When his grandmother died, he felt he had lost the best part of himself. She was the only one in his whole screwed up family that mattered; the only one who ever made him feel like *he* mattered. As his relatives argued over her belongings and how to divide the estate, Hutch had only asked for two things: the slim gold wedding band that she wore proudly from the day his grandfather had slipped it on her finger, and the silver rope ring that had belonged to her mother, upon whose death the treasured ring had joined the gold one on her hand. Since neither had any huge financial worth, the family was more than willing to give them to Hutch with the agreement that he would forgo his claim to any other part of the estate.

Having rescued his grandmother's most prized possessions from the vultures, Hutch was at a loss as to what to do with them. Looking at them was extremely painful, as the memories of her overwhelmed him each time he did. But he was reluctant to put them away in a drawer somewhere, discarding them as if they had no meaning. Unable to decide what to do, he finally gave them to Starsky and asked him to hold them someplace safe. He watched in awe as his partner slipped the rings onto his pinkie stating simply "it's the safest place I know." The look in Starsky's eyes assured that he understood the value of the cherished mementos and that they would be well taken care of.

Hutch had been overwhelmed by the touching gesture. The difficulty he had had looking at them turned to comfort. The rings seemed to belong as naturally to his partner's hand as they had to his grandmother's. He realized then that the best part of him hadn't died as he'd feared. In fact, the two best sides of him were now connected in a symbolic bond. Only he and Starsky knew the significance behind the jewelry that had remained on his partner's slender finger from that day forth. There had since been times when Starsky had questioned whether Hutch was ready to have the rings back, but he always declined. There was an underlying sense of comfort in knowing that those rings never left his partner's hand. It was as if no matter what happened to them or between them, their connection remained unbroken.

As he stared down at the familiar rings now, Hutch hoped that he could be the source of strength and comfort in the difficult days ahead that Starsky had always been for him.

TWO

Starsky managed to find a secluded corner in the kitchen and sat down, enjoying what felt like the first moment of peace he had had since the plane landed. He wiped a hand across his brow, surprised by the amount of perspiration he felt there. This was October...Autumn in New York. The air should have felt cool to his LA accustomed body, yet the heat inside the apartment felt stifling. He brought the glass of ice water that he was clutching to his mouth and took several long sips, hoping to ease some of the hot flush he felt effusing his body.

The sound of the voices from the living room were pounding into his already aching head, crowding him...threatening to crush him. He felt, as he had from the moment he had gotten here, an overwhelming urge to get out.

He was hoping not to have had to face them tonight. Tomorrow would have been soon enough. But despite the fact that he and Hutch were going to be renting a car at the airport and staying at the Holiday Inn near LaGuardia, they had still come to meet him. There were his Uncle Leo and Aunt Kay, along with his cousins Fran and Ben, waiting for him as he got off the plane, ready to smother him with hugs and condolences. They insisted on waiting while the baggage was retrieved and the car rented. The entire time Starsky had to endure an endless discourse on why he shouldn't be staying at a hotel. When they grudgingly accepted the fact that all their arguing wasn't going to change his mind, they followed him and Hutch to the hotel, giving them only enough time to check in before ushering them off to Flushing.

Though the apartment in Queens where his mother had lived was not the home he had grown up in, his mother had lived there for many years and her essence permeated every inch of the place. Walking through that door...seeing all of her things but not seeing her...was like a hard blow to the gut that knocked the wind out of him. He wanted to get out the moment he came in, but the roomful of relatives that had gathered there made that impossible.

Instead, he endured the endless line of hugs and condolences...the insufferable questions about how he was 'holding up'...the monotonous litanies about how terrible he looked and how he really should eat...the disapproving remarks about his staying at a hotel...and...most difficult of all...the ceaseless renditions of how his mother had died 'so peacefully.'

When he wasn't fending off another advance by a well-meaning family member, he was confronting an apartment full of reminders; his mother's favorite chair...the knickknacks on the book shelf, each with its own story behind it...her pink robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door still smelling like her...the countless photographs of her and his father and himself...and Nicky. They were all gone now...all but him. Nothing left but the haunting images encased in well-polished silver frames.

It was all too much. This was his mother's home and these people were his family and yet he felt cut off...isolated. He didn't want their comfort, or their support and he certainly didn't want all these reminders of his mother. Worst of all, he didn't want to go through this again...this scene from a bad play...this *deja vu*. The setting was the same...all the same characters in place except for one...they had all played out this scene only eight months before. He wasn't up for the encore. He didn't have the strength to play out his role again.

"David, there you are. What are you doing sitting in here by yourself?"

Trying to get away from all of you, Starsky thought to himself. He looked up into the eyes of his Aunt Vivian and instead replied, "I just needed to get a glass of water."

"Water! Well certainly you're not going to keep your strength up with nothing but water. It's time you had something to eat."

Starsky watched as the determined woman moved about the kitchen piling food onto a plate from the huge spread laid out on the table. Just the sight of it turned his queasy stomach.

"I'm really not hungry."

"Nonsense. You have to put something in your stomach."

Aunt Vivian was his mother's older sister; older by eleven years. She was a formidable woman whose role in the family had always been a matriarchal one. She was not the kind to take no for an answer...not that anyone usually argued with her. Starsky groaned inwardly, realizing he didn't have the energy for the battle that was about to ensue but knowing he didn't have a choice. The nausea in his stomach was churning as he caught a whiff of the food she was bringing towards him.

"I can't eat that, Aunt Viv."

"And I can't let you continue to be so stubborn. You haven't eaten anything all day."

"That's not true."

Starsky sighed in relief at the sound of the familiar voice in the doorway.

"He had a small sandwich in here a little while ago while you were on the phone with the Rabbi," his partner continued easily. "He also ate a little bit on the plane. I don't think he needs to eat any more right now."

For a moment, Starsky wasn't sure his perceptive aunt was going to go for it. But then his partner laid on one of his most angelic smiles...the kind that forced you to trust him...and it was all over.

"All right, Kenneth. If you say so. I'll just put this down over here for now and you can have it later, David."

"Sure," Starsky managed, eyeing Hutch gratefully.

After putting the food back down on the table, Aunt Vivian turned back to them.

"Since you're here with David, I guess it's all right if I go in and see if anyone else needs anything."

"Go on. We're fine," Hutch assured. When they were alone, Starsky spoke quietly to his partner.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Although I'm not sure I did you any favors. You really should eat something."

"Hutch, I...."

"I know. I know. I saw the green complexion on your face when you were looking at that plate of food." Hutch moved to the table and picked up some crackers. "Here. At least try to get some of these down." As he handed them to Starsky, the pale blue eyes overflowed with concern. "Please. For me."

Starsky took the crackers, vowing to himself he would choke them down if he had to for Hutch's sake. It was the least he could do. Hutch had been running interference for him all night. When Aunt Kay was getting ready to renew her protest about the hotel for the fifth time, Hutch distracted her with questions about her garden, knowing how she loved to go on and on about her azaleas. When Aunt Vivian had asked him to go into the bedroom to get the folder with his mother's papers, it was Hutch who noticed his distress at going into the room where his mother had died. He jumped up to get the papers himself, insisting he was already up. Hutch had been friendly and charming, holding up their end of conversations in a way that covered much of his partner's sullen moodiness. He had listened with infinite patience as various relatives droned on and on about the events following his mother's passing, descriptions of the cemetery and countless explanations about the Shiva, which would be held here for three days following the funeral. Each time, Hutch listened as if he hadn't heard it all before; as if he hadn't been through it all before just eight months ago.

As Starsky struggled to swallow the bite of cracker past the bile in his throat, he looked into the calm, strong face to see the familiar, comforting gaze that had several times this evening been the only thing that kept him from running screaming from this place.

"I'm glad you're here," he whispered before forcing down another bite of cracker. "I just wish I didn't have to be."

Hutch reached out to squeeze his forearm. "I know."

"It's like...like that Twilight Zone episode where the guy keeps reliving the same day over and over. I just finished doing this. I don't want to do it again. I don't want to go to that cemetery tomorrow and I don't want to look at that same book of headstones and make the same damn arrangements and..." he stopped abruptly, realizing he had crushed the remaining crackers in his hand to crumbs. Hutch unclenched the fingers of his fist and scraped the crumbs into his own hand before depositing them in the garbage. Then he heard Aunt Vivian's voice calling to him from the living room. He looked at Hutch with panic in his eyes. "I've gotta get out of here, Hutch. I can't do this."

Before Hutch could respond, Aunt Vivian was filling the door frame. "David, Kenneth, come on inside. The Rabbi is here and we're going to say some prayers. Hurry along." She left without waiting for a response.

Starsky felt both of Hutch's hands kneading his shoulders encouragingly. "Come on. You can do

it. It's just a little while longer and then we'll go. It'll be all right."

He was not nearly as certain of that as Hutch seemed to be, but he didn't resist when Hutch led him back into the living room. What choice did he have really? This nightmare was going to go on whether he liked it or not. All that was left for him to do was to play his part.

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Hutch opened his eyes to the darkness of the hotel room. He wasn't certain what it was that had awakened him since all was quiet, but he knew that something had jolted him insistently from his sleep. He glanced over toward the illuminated face of the bedside clock: 3:20 a.m. He rubbed his eyes tiredly, noting the traces of exhaustion that still permeated his body. Between the emotional strain, the jet lag and the time changes, he knew that the few hours of sleep he had gotten were far from enough to leave him feeling rested. So then why had he awakened so fully? As he started to become more oriented, something occurred to him and he twisted in the bed to look across the room.

Even with the curtains drawn, the bright New York City glimmer from outside lit enough of the room for him to be able to discern immediately that the other bed was empty. He quickly got up and switched on the light before making his way toward the small alcove where the bathroom was located. The door was not fully closed and the light from inside was shining through the crack. Somehow, he knew without a doubt that his partner had not gotten up simply to relieve himself. Something felt wrong.

Placing one hand on the knob, he used the other to knock lightly even as he eased the door slowly open. "Starsk...."

When he had opened the door fully he found his partner curled up on the floor against the bathtub, knees held tightly to his chest as he rocked back and forth. There was a strange, distant look in his eyes at first but when he became aware of Hutch's presence he seemed to snap back to reality.

"I'm sorry. Did the light wake you?"

"No," Hutch answered. "I just..." he paused, uncertain how to explain the unsettling feeling that had woken him. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Fine. I just couldn't sleep so I came in here. I didn't feel like being in the dark and I didn't want to wake you with the lights."

Hutch moved further into the bathroom and sat down on the edge of the tub beside his partner. Something about the way Starsky's body reacted made him hesitate to move closer. He wanted more than anything to be of some comfort, but he kept feeling that his presence was only serving as a source of further agitation. He couldn't hide his growing concern from his voice.

"You haven't slept at all have you?" When they had both gone to bed, Starsky had lain so still he was sure that the exhaustion had finally overtaken him and he had fallen asleep. Now, he realized his partner had only been pretending for his sake. He sighed, shaking his head. "You can't keep

going on like this. You have to rest."

"I know. I will. I'm just a little wired from the jet lag and all."

Hutch started to argue that he hadn't slept at all last night either, but he stopped himself. Starsky had been on the defensive all evening from well-meaning but over bearing relatives. He surely didn't need to go through another inquisition now.

"I understand. Listen, since you can't sleep and I'm up now anyway, why don't we do something. Do you want to watch some TV or play some cards? Or we can just sit here and talk. Whatever you want."

Starsky looked at him with a smile that was forced. "I'm OK, Hutch. Go back to bed."

"Not until you do." Hutch folded his arms stubbornly, prepared to resort to this childish tactic if it would force his partner to get some rest. Starsky looked at him for a long moment then let out a resigned sigh. He stood up and headed towards the door.

"Fine, whatever you want."

There was a note of resignation in Starsky's voice that was discomfoting. But Hutch knew it wasn't the time to pursue it fully. It was enough for now that he was willing to lay down. Hutch followed his partner back into the other room and watched as he climbed into the bed. Starsky lay across the bed stiffly, not even bothering to get under the covers. Hutch stood at the foot of the bed, gazing at his partner with deep concern.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk or something? Or maybe you're hungry. Do you want something to eat?"

"Just go to bed Hutch."

There was a dismissive tone to the statement that did not invite any further debate. Hutch sighed in frustration then made his way to his own bed. As he reached over to shut off the light, he caught a glimpse of the look that passed through his partners eyes. There was something almost fearful there. Hutch withdrew his hand and left the light on. Some of the tension in Starsky's face relaxed as his lips curled in a shy smile. Then he turned around in the bed, facing his back to Hutch as his arm curled up around the pillow. The room grew silent but for the sounds of city life beyond the window. Hutch lay for a long time watching the rise and fall of his partners back, trying to discern if the breathing pattern changed in any way to indicate sleep. But nothing changed...there was no movement, no sound but the light inhaling and exhaling. After what felt like almost an hour of watching and waiting, Hutch's exhaustion got the best of him and he fell into a restless. sleep.

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Starsky twisted uncomfortably in the confines of the hard, leather chair. He had not been here very long, yet the voice of the funeral director was already droning into his head in a wave of indiscernible noise. Mr. Cox was a stone-faced, heavy set man dressed in a somber blue suit. He

wore a tie with thin dark blue and gold stripes, in the center of which there was string of pulled material that bobbed up and down when he talked. Starsky found his attention riveted to that string, watching its rise and fall in focused scrutiny. He hadn't been giving Mr. Cox' words nearly the same concentration, which he realized only after the man had cleared his throat impatiently and spoke more sharply.

"Mr. Starsky. I do not believe you have been hearing everything I am saying to you."

"Huh? What...oh...sorry. What was that again?"

"I understand what a difficult time this must be for you, Mr. Starsky, but we have a great deal of work to get done here. The funeral is tomorrow and there are many decisions still to be made."

"Yeah, listen, about that. Why don't you just go ahead and do whatever you think is best. I'm sure that'll be fine."

Mr. Cox sighed with barely masked impatience before going on in a more patronizing tone.

"I am afraid that is not the way this works. As the next of kin, it is your responsibility to..."

The words 'next of kin' sent an icy chill down Starsky's spine. He bolted up from the chair, feeling suddenly stifled by the lack of air in the room.

"Look, it's awful hot in here. I need to go and get some air. We can finish this in a little while."

"I really do not think that is a good idea. Time is an issue here and these decisions take time. We have not even begun to choose the proper headstone and casket. As I am sure you will recall from your experience here when you lost your brother, choosing the appropriate headstone can be..."

Starsky lost the rest of the words as the sound of his heartbeat pounding in his ears raged louder. Mr. Cox' voice became distant, as though it were being filtered through a tunnel. The room was beginning to feel incredibly small and Starsky was certain that someone had sucked all the air from it. An overwhelming urge to get away was calling to him from every pore. In his haste to retreat, he knocked over the chair behind him. Clumsily, he tried to right it as Mr. Cox continued to beseech him.

"I do not mean to sound insensitive. However, I have found that the best way to approach these matters is directly. I know you will feel better once all of this has been taken care of and it is my job to make sure that happens. Now if you'll just sit back down, I am sure we can..."

Perspiration clinging to his skin, Starsky shook his head vehemently. "No...I can't...not now please..."

Starsky headed quickly for the door with Mr. Cox calling after him. He fumbled a moment with the handle, then jerked it open, running straight into Hutch who was on the other side. Hutch grabbed him by the arms to halt his forward motion and spoke confusedly.

"Hey, what's the hurry? What's going on?"

"I gotta get outta here, Hutch."

"But I don't understand. I just finished parking the car. I thought you needed to..."

"I can't...I can't do this..."

"Mr. Starsky, please," Cox' voice was right behind him now. "If you'll just take a moment to calm down, I am certain..."

"No!" Starsky could hear the increasing panic in his voice but he felt helpless to stop it. This place...this 'responsibility'...these decisions...not again. He wasn't ready...he wasn't able. He clutched onto the lapels of Hutch's jacket, pleading for his friend to understand.

"Hutch, please...I can't do this now...I can't breathe in here...let me outta here...please!"

"Mr. Starsky, surely..." Cox' voice was even closer now, like a vulture swooping down on unguarded flesh. Any moment he would be swallowed alive...but then Hutch's firm voice halted the attack.

"Hold it! Just back off a second and let me talk to him."

"And just who would you be, sir?" The condescending tone in the question was met with a sharp response.

"I'm the person who just told you to back off." That quieted the vulture immediately. Then, seamlessly, the voice lowered to a soothing tone meant only for Starsky. "Now talk to me. Tell me what's wrong. How can I help?"

Starsky looked helplessly into the eyes of his partner. He couldn't talk...couldn't explain. Emotions and voices were screaming inside him and it was all that he could do to fend them off. Most of his thoughts were an incoherent jumble and he was having difficulty staying in control of his reactions. He felt himself breathing in short gasps, as though he had been running for miles, while the sweat continued to dampen his skin. He noticed then that the hands that were still clutching Hutch's jacket were shaking. Hutch seemed to notice the same thing at the same moment, sliding his own hands down Starsky's arms to cover the trembling limbs.

"It's OK. I'm right here," the gentle voice continued to assuage. "Just relax and take a deep breath. Easy does it."

Starsky tried to do as he was asked, though it wasn't easy. Fighting to calm his breathing, he struggled to explain what he barely understood himself.

"I don't think I can do this again. That book...those headstones...caskets...I can't. I can't breathe in here. I don't know...I just...maybe later...maybe I just need some air...maybe..." The panic was returning to his voice despite his efforts to quell it. Hutch grabbed his hands more firmly.

"Hey, hey, stop. It's all right. You don't have to. Just take it easy. I'll take care of everything. I just want you to relax. Don't worry about any of it."

Starsky let out a long, grateful sigh and nodded. He could feel a small part of himself start to relax, feeling secure in Hutch's care. He did not resist when Hutch led him towards the sofa next to the water cooler on the other side of the room.

"I know you don't feel comfortable in here, but I can't let you walk out right now. You need to take a few minutes to calm down. Just sit down over here and I'll get you some water." Starsky sat down, leaning his back against the firm leather cushions of the sofa as Hutch drew a cup of water from the cooler. Handing the cup to his partner, he spoke reassuringly. "Just drink this and take a few minutes for yourself. It'll be OK. When you feel up to it, you can go outside and get some air. I'll go deal with Mr. Cox."

Starsky nodded, feeling drained and numb. He brought the cup to his lips and sipped, grateful for the cool swallow of liquid that soothed his parched throat. As Hutch turned to walk back across the room, Starsky called to him.

"Hutch."

He wanted to say something...needed to say something...and yet his frazzled brain couldn't seem to form any words. As always, though, somehow Hutch seemed to understand. He nodded wordlessly to his partner and gave him a comforting smile. Starsky nodded back then took another sip of the water as Hutch walked towards Mr. Cox' desk.

Though they were across the very wide room and Starsky's head was still somewhat jumbled, he was able to make out the beginning of the conversation that took place.

"My name is Hutchinson. I'll be taking over for Mr. Starsky. Whatever needs to be done, I'll take care of."

"And you are a member of the immediate family, Mr. Hutchinson?"

"No, but I'm his family."

"I do not understand."

"He's my partner. Whatever you need to talk to him about you can say to me."

Mr. Cox' tone became more agitated. "This is very unorthodox. The kind of decisions that need to be made here should be done by immediate family."

"I understand," Hutch went on in a voice that was trying to remain patient. "However, as I'm sure you understand, Mr. Starsky there has been under a tremendous amount of emotional strain and he's also thoroughly exhausted. We both decided it's best that I take care of the arrangements, so if you don't mind I'd like to get on with it."

"I really do not think it would be appropriate for me to do that. Perhaps if I spoke with Mr.

Starsky again we could..."

Cox was getting up from his chair and coming around the desk. The tall blond that blocked his path was obviously losing patience rapidly.

"That's not a good idea, Mr. Cox. I prefer you deal with me."

Mr. Cox was either very brave or not very bright. Or perhaps he was just too shallow to recognize the underlying warning in that request. Heedlessly, he made a move towards where Starsky was.

"Mr. Starsky, I think that..."

Though Hutch's back was towards him, Starsky knew instantly by the tone of his voice what the expression was on his face. Hutch was nose-to-nose with Cox, his right index finger jutting forward authoritatively, while his eyes held an intense stare that dared you to defy it while at the same time terrified you of the consequences of doing so.

"I said you deal with me," the icy voice commanded. "I don't want you to so much as look at him again, you got that."

Apparently he did, because when Starsky glanced over again, Mr. Cox was back in his chair and the conversation was proceeding in a much quieter manner, Cox offering no further protests.

A faint smile crossed Starsky's lips as he thought about the ease with which Hutch moved from reasonable to intractable. Oftentimes the shift was a result of his protective instincts towards his partner. Starsky's head leaned back against the sofa as his heavy lids began to drift shut. *I'm going to my partner.* Words from the past...a hazy image witnessed from the floor of an Italian restaurant. Unbelievable pain...shock...fear...yet somehow assuaged by that commanding tone. His partner ready to stare down, almost daring a killer...to get to him. So much blood then...red like the squares on the table cloth...red blood like the blood covering Nicky's shirt when he identified the body at the prison...red like the roses on a coffin...a coffin picked from the black leather-bound book with the pictures of coffins...coffin after coffin...headstones...graves...mounds of dirt beside the hole in the ground that would soon hold his brother's coffin...his brother.

Starsky's head jerked up and he looked around disoriented. His heart was beating quickly as he fought to focus his blurred eyes. He was still in Cox' office. Hutch and Cox were still across the room, heads bent over that ominous black leather-bound book. Standing abruptly, Starsky moved towards the door. He had to get out of here. If he could just get out of here, everything would be all right.

Hutch turned towards him in concern as he hastened to the door. Starsky nodded at him in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture. Fighting to steady his voice, he spoke quickly.

"I'm all right. Just gonna get that air now. See you outside."

He didn't give Hutch a chance to respond. He just hoped that somehow he had managed to look

convincing enough to keep his partner from following after him. He just needed some space, that's all. A quick walk around the block and he would be in control again. By the time Hutch was finished, he would be back and everything would be OK. At least that's what he kept telling himself as he burst through the door and out onto the street to the cool, welcoming air.

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Harold DobeY tried to stretch some of the kinks from the long flight out of his back as he walked through the crowded airport terminal beside Hutch. Looking across the sea of bodies that continuously swam back and forth, his eyes landed on the familiar forms of Huggy Bear and Starsky as they waited by the baggage claim area for the luggage. From the moment he saw him at the Arrival Gate, DobeY had noticed how drawn and pale Starsky looked. Even from this distance there was an obvious slump to his posture that spoke of exhaustion, both mental and physical.

"How is he?"

"I don't know. Not good."

Stopping in front of a newsstand, DobeY turned and eyed his companion, noting that he looked somewhat haggard himself.

"And you?"

"Me? I'm just fumbling around trying to help but I don't think I'm doing him much good." Hutch sighed heavily as he ran a hand through the long blond hair. "I don't know, Cap. I feel so cut off. I have no idea what's going on inside him. Most of the time he's just closed up...quiet...distant. But then there's these moments...these attacks of panic when he looks like he's about to lose it."

"Has he talked at all about what he's feeling?"

"Not really. It's like he's fighting real hard not to feel any of it. Then it sneaks up on him and starts to overwhelm him. Like today at the funeral home. He was shaking and sweating and desperate to get out. There was a look in his eyes...almost pure fear. He just couldn't face being there and making all those arrangements again. Then he went to take a walk while I was finishing up with the director. When I got outside, I couldn't find him anywhere. Then he shows up ten minutes later with everything closed back off again and telling me he's fine. And that's it. He's barely said a word since."

"What about his family? Has he been able to open up with them?"

"It's more like he's doing everything he can to stay away from them. He retreats even more when they're around. Last night in that apartment he was like a caged animal. I don't think he really took a deep breath until we got out of there. All day he's been avoiding their calls. He refuses to go back over there."

"That's not like Starsky." DobeY glanced over again toward Starsky and Huggy. It was obvious the conversation was one sided, with Huggy babbling on while Starsky stood staring off

distractedly. "He looks like he's about to fall on his face."

"He hasn't slept at all. He's barely eaten either. He's got to be running on empty, but I can't get him to lay down. He's in so much pain and I don't have the first clue what to do to help him."

Dobey turned to Hutch, recognizing well the look he saw in those expressive blue eyes. Hutch was one of the strongest people he had ever known. He'd seen him battle the kind of personal demons that would bury lesser men and come out on top. He could face down any challenge...any danger in the street. He was tough and tenacious and could go strong for days on nothing more than coffee, catnaps and pure adrenaline when he was pursuing a case. But when something hurt his partner, it was Hutch whose lifeblood drained, especially when he felt helpless to do anything to fix it. Oh, he would stay strong and steady on the outside, being an unwavering source of support while putting all of his own needs on hold. But inside, the emotional wound cut deep, slicing through the barriers that he had built to guard him against any other kind of assault. Dobby could already see the signs on the face he had come to know so well over the years.

Laying a hand on Hutch's shoulder, he spoke with quiet understanding. "Listen to me, son. There's no way you're going to take that pain away. All you can do is be here for him and you're doing that."

Hutch nodded mutely, as though seeing the truth in the words didn't make accepting them any easier. After a few silent moments he started to speak. "I know...you're right...I just...it's..." he stopped and took a deep breath. As he let it out slowly, he closed his eyes and composed himself. When the eyes opened again, he gestured toward the Baggage Area. "Come on. We should go. They must have those suitcases by now."

Dobey nodded and walked alongside Hutch as they started to cross the terminal.

"So the funeral's set for tomorrow?"

"Yeah. 9:00 a.m."

"And it was OK to wait that long? I know the Jewish tradition calls for burial as soon as possible."

"With yesterday being the Sabbath, it would have been held over until today anyway. And then they received some kind of dispensation to wait the extra day, being that Starsky had so far to travel and they felt it was important that he be the one to make the arrangements. You know, first born son and all."

"I take it nobody knows that you..."

"No," Hutch snapped. "And it's going to stay that way. He doesn't need to deal with anymore family pressure right now."

"What if the funeral director should mention something?"

"He won't," Hutch stated coolly. "Let's just say that Mr. Cox and I came to a clear understanding about things."

Dobey wasn't about to question that further. He knew Hutch well enough to gather the meaning of that statement. Instead, he changed the subject.

"And the Shiva. It's going to be three days this time rather than seven?"

"Yeah. Non-orthodox families have the option of choosing from three to seven days to hold Shiva. The last time...with Nick...well, it was important to Ruth that it be seven days. But now...well I'm not sure Starsky's going to last three hours in that apartment let alone three days. I'll just be glad when this part of it is all over and I can take him home."

Dobey thought about cautioning against expecting things to be any better after the funeral. There was a good possibility the opposite might be the case. But before he could think of a way to voice his concerns, they had reached the Baggage Area. Huggy and Starsky were standing next to two suitcases and Huggy was pointing to them and speaking animatedly.

"Didn't I tell ya. It pays to put out the extra buck for quality."

"I see you two found the bags all right," Dobey stated.

"Oh, we got 'em but I don't know if all right is a word I'd use. I'm afraid your bag looks a little worse for wear, Captain."

Huggy stepped to the side, giving a better view of the brown suitcase that now sported several dents and numerous dirt marks.

"As I was just explaining to Starsky here, I prefer to travel with Samsonite myself." The lanky man reached down to pick up his own suitcase which didn't have a scratch on it. "It may cost a little more up front, but it pays for itself in the long run." He dropped it to the ground with a smile. "See. Indestructible."

"Just give me the damn suitcase and save the commercial," Dobey barked.

"Hey, no problem. Just trying to dole out a helpful piece of advice."

"I've listened to about as much of your advice as I can handle on that endless plane ride. I'm having my seat assignment switched for the return trip."

"You wound me, Captain."

"Not yet, I haven't."

Hutch reached over to pick up both bags, hiding the smirk on his face.

"Listen, why don't we finish this fascinating conversation later. I for one would like to get out of this airport."

"You'll get no argument from me there," Huggy responded. "Having found this particular airplane ride somewhat more cramped than usual, I would have appreciated some fresh air along with an adequate amount of elbow room."

Dobey ignored the obvious reference to his size, recognizing Huggy's banter for what it was; an attempt to lighten up the mood, if only for a few moments. But Starsky, who in the past could rarely contain his amusement at the endless bickering between his two friends, didn't even seem to be hearing them now. Instead, he stood quietly off to the side with eyes that watched but didn't see. Dobby exchanged sobering looks with Huggy and Hutch before moving closer to Starsky and speaking in a more serious tone.

"Edith wanted me to apologize to you again for not being able to be here. Rosie's fever still hasn't gone down and she felt it best to stay close by."

"That's the way it should be. Mothers should be with their kids." Starsky's voice was hollow and his body remained still. Dobby wasn't sure how to respond and Huggy and Hutch seemed equally speechless. It was Starsky who finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Why don't I go get the car. This way you don't have to carry those suitcases to the parking lot."

"No, it's all right." Hutch's response seemed almost too quick. "It's not that far to the lot and these bags aren't very heavy. Why don't we all just take the walk. It's a nice night."

Dobby eyes searched both of his officers. Hutch was painfully reluctant to let Starsky go off alone. And Starsky, who was one of the more contrary people Dobby had ever known, seemed strangely apathetic, shrugging his shoulders in disinterest.

"Whatever."

With that, he started off toward the exit. Hutch hoisted the two suitcases in his hands and fell in right behind him. Dobby heard Huggy Bear sigh and turned to see him shaking his head sadly. Then he began walking as well and Dobby followed along, completing the foursome that traveled through the bustling New York City airport in silence.

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Starsky wandered about the darkened hotel room aimlessly. The sounds of city life filtering through the window did nothing to relieve the sense of silence in the room. He felt so disconnected from everything around him, as though he were watching someone else pace the floor of the lonely room. Flopping down into the chair, he felt the ache in his limbs that signaled the exhaustion running through his body. Tired...so tired...and yet not sleepy. Sleep was the last thing he felt able to do, remaining instead trapped in this endless limbo.

Unable to get comfortable in the chair, he stood again to begin his measured steps across the carpet. Why hadn't he gone? Hutch had practically begged him to go with them to dinner, but he had stubbornly refused. It was only his insistence that he needed time alone that finally convinced the reluctant blond to go without him. Time alone. For what? From the moment the door had closed, Starsky felt the near paralyzing loneliness engulfing him.

He realized now that this had been the first time he had been truly alone since he heard the news about his mother. Hutch had been by his side or at least close by every moment since then. It was only now that he began to see how much he had been depending on that support. Without it, he felt set adrift without an anchor and the unsettling, near immobilizing feeling was becoming more difficult to stave off with each passing minute.

Glancing toward the clock, he reminded himself that it had only been about thirty minutes. Surely he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't hold himself together for a lousy thirty minutes. He was acting like a child. No, even as a child he hadn't been this skittish. It was Nicky who used to panic at night ten minutes after their mother left for work. It was his job to comfort and reassure...to search for the monsters under the bed...to convince a frightened boy that unlike their father, their mother would be coming back.

What would I say to you now, Nicky? I guess I was wrong. She wasn't always going to come back. If you were standing here right now I'd have to help you deal with that. I wouldn't have time to...Time to what? Time to feel the insecurities and abandonment that I never allowed myself to feel as a child?

Starsky flopped down on the bed and pulled the pillow over his head, desperate to block the unwelcome thoughts from his mind. He felt his hands shaking as he clutched the pillow. It was there again. That feeling of control slipping away...that inexplicable sense of panic that was beginning to take hold again like it did this afternoon.

Flinging the pillow to the floor he stood up abruptly and began to pace more quickly. The room felt so small and oppressive...and yet it felt empty and hollow as well...like a tomb...is that what it felt like to be in a tomb?

Nerves frayed, Starsky physically jumped at the sound of the key in the door. He turned to see it opening slowly, the glare from the corridor lights illuminating the darkened room in which he stood. His face must have conveyed his rattled demeanor since Hutch paused in the doorway speaking soothingly.

"It's only me. I didn't mean to scare you. Sorry."

"I just didn't expect you back so soon," Starsky covered, trying to will his features to relax.

"I know," Hutch began apologetically as he entered the room and closed the door behind him. "I know you said you needed to be by yourself and I tried to respect that. It's just...well I just didn't feel right leaving you like that. It kept nagging and nagging at me until I realized there was no point in my staying out because all I was going to do was worry about you anyway. So I had them drop me back here." He held up the bag he was carrying. "I brought take out," he said hopefully before dropping his voice to softer tone. "I hope you're not mad."

"No," Starsky replied, able to take in the first deep breath he had in the past forty minutes.

"Is it OK if I turn on the light?"

Starsky nodded, grateful that the darkness hid the blush of embarrassment. "Sure. I was just

getting ready to do it myself. Guess I'm still on California time. Didn't realize it was night already."

The excuse sounded lame even to his own ears, but Hutch let it go without comment. He reached over to turn on the light, then carried the bag toward the small table near the window.

"Feel like eating something? I got burgers."

The knots in his stomach made the thought of a cheeseburger nearly unthinkable, but he knew he should at least try to eat, if only for Hutch's sake, so he shrugged his shoulders noncommittally and moved towards the table. The blond quietly laid out the contents of the bag on the table. Starsky sat down in the chair, the smell of the food turning his stomach as he tried to keep from looking at it. The silence lingered in the air as Hutch sat down across from him and began to eat while Starsky picked at the sesame seeds on his bun.

It was Hutch who finally ended the silence. "Don't force it." He nodded towards Starsky's untouched food. "I brought it in case you wanted it. If you don't, you don't."

Starsky couldn't bring himself to meet the worried eyes. "Sorry."

"Don't be." The tone was full of understanding. "Here. Try this instead. I brought you a shake. Maybe that will go down easier."

Starsky took the cup and drank down a few sips. It didn't have much flavor in his tasteless mouth but at least it seemed willing to stay in his stomach. He was grateful for that. He was grateful for a lot of things.

"Thanks," he stated, hoping that Hutch would understand that he was talking about more than the shake. He didn't have any real desire to eat or talk or even think for that matter. But he took comfort in the sense of security that had begun when Hutch stepped through the door and was continuing to ease his frazzled spirit.

Hutch looked at him searchingly for several long minutes as numerous unvoiced questions and comments seemed to pass through his mind. Finally, however, he settled on a simple "you're welcome," for which a weary Starsky was very thankful. Silence fell over the room again as Hutch finished eating his dinner and Starsky did his best to get the shake down. Starsky realized that the silence wasn't nearly as overwhelming as it had been only a short time before.

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Heavy. Leaden eyelids drooped down across the pain-dulled blue eyes, slitting them against the bright morning sun. It was becoming so hard to keep them open...so hard to see. People and things moved before him in blurred images. Sounds came to his ears in a delayed fashion that made them seem so far away. Starsky struggled to make them out...music...words...prayers... choked sobs. It was all going on around him and yet miles away.

He shook his head trying to clear it as his eyes became riveted to the smooth pine surface of the casket before him. Beneath the large array of flowers, the wood gleamed in the sunlight.

Pristine...lustrous...glossy...such a sleek, perfectly crafted box. It could be beautiful were it not for what it was, but its dismal purpose would render it eternally ugly.

A crisp autumn breeze rustled the trees above them, but its cooling breath did not touch the heated skin that was suffocating beneath the woolen black suit and dark, somber coat. A shaky hand reached toward the tie that strangled his neck, wanting to rip it off so that much needed air could pass through the constricted throat. But then Starsky wrested the hand down, knowing the tie had to stay in place...forcing himself to stay in place as well. Minutes...hours...days...he lost all sense of time as he stood near the freshly dug excavation. Eyes wandering across the grassy cemetery as the unintelligible words droned on from afar, his wavering attention was caught by the neighboring headstone.

*Nicholas Starsky...Born 1952 Died 1982*

A shiver ran through him then, though his body continued to perspire beneath the smothering clothing. *It will give her peace to lay beside Nicky.* The voice of his Aunt rang in his ears as the words echoed again and again in his mind. *Peace.* The faraway voice was talking about peace, too. He strained to listen...to hear it but, the words remained obscure and jumbled. It was like trying to translate a foreign language but no matter how hard he tried his scattered mind remained lost to it all.

He felt his weary shoulders slumping down as his knees quivered beneath him. A strong hand pressed into the small of his back steadying him. Instinctively he moved back into it...away from the deep hole and the mounds of dirt and the gleaming coffin. There was no peace here...only death...his brother's...his mother's...That was his mother in the polished wooden box. Soon the box would be put in the ground. A vivid image flashed through his mind briefly. Another wooden box...not nearly so polished and shiny...his mother bent over it crying as his little brother stood beside him clutching his hand so tightly it hurt. Nicky's tears spilled out onto their jointly clasped hands as Uncle Leo tried to get his mother to move away from his father's coffin. She didn't want to go...she threw herself against the coffin, clutching it tightly, refusing to be moved.

The memory dissolved, leaving him staring at the rich brown casket in front of him. He felt no desire to touch it or wrap himself around it. On the contrary, what he wanted most was to be away from it...from this place...this finely mowed and manicured garden of death. He took another step, pressing harder into the hand that had been rhythmically kneading his back. The hand moved to his waist, tightening around him and drawing him closer against the familiar frame that supported him. He closed his eyes and tried to will everything else away, focusing only on the comfort and safety of the embrace. The respite was brief.

The voice that had been droning on seemed to have finished. Its termination signaled a flurry of activity...music playing...voices crying...flowers being laid...movement...shuffling. The mass of bodies seemed to be converging toward him and he wanted to get away. But before he knew it, he was pulled away from the shelter of Hutch's strength and swept into the maelstrom. Arms and bodies pressed into him with unwanted hugs and pats...tears were falling on him and all around him...voices coming from all directions murmuring disjointed words that he heard in bits and pieces.

‘...it was a beautiful service...’

‘...lovely flowers...’

‘...finally at peace...’

‘...so, so sorry...’

‘...poor, sweet David...’

‘...with Nicky now...’

‘...such a shame...’

‘...mother and father finally together...’

‘...must be strong...’

‘...in God's hands...’

And on and on until he could no longer make out the words any more, just the muffled voices and the sobbing.

Flowers were thrust in his hand to lay down upon the coffin as he was pushed forward by the arms that wanted to support him but felt more like they were imprisoning him. And then the coffin was before him, but he didn't want to touch it...didn't want to kneel by it like the others had done...didn't want to say *good-bye*, for his mother was already gone and this was just a casket that housed her breathless body. He dropped the flowers down and tried to move away but Aunt Vivian had snaked her hand around his waist and Uncle Leo had taken hold of his arm...he was talking to him in a somber tone...careful instructions about the guests he had to see to...the condolences to be acknowledged...the invitations he needed to extend to the Shiva. He glanced over toward the throng of mourners who were all waiting to speak with him...offer their empty words and handshakes and tears. So many of the faces seemed unrecognizable although he was sure he must have met them before. But right now, they were strangers and he didn't want to hear their words or endure their sympathies...and why didn't these people who were his family stop pulling on him...stop expecting things from him...why wouldn't everyone just leave him alone so he could breathe?

A blinding pain pierced behind his eyes. As he reached up his hand to rub his temples, he realized he was shaking. At first, he thought it was just his hand but then he felt the tremors coursing through his body. What was happening to him? He closed his eyes tightly to try to clear the vision that had been blurred by the pain. But when he reopened them everything around him seemed to be moving in slow motion. He could feel his heart beating hard in his chest as his clothes clung to his sweat soaked body weighing him down and threatening to suffocate him.

He had to move...to get away...but everywhere he turned there was someone grabbing at him...blocking his escape...speaking to him in that mumbled jargon. Too many bodies...too many faces...too much perfect grass strewn with rows and rows of finely chiseled

headstones...death all around...and that big hole where they were going to put his mother....

*Daddy's with God now, Davey. It's just us now....*

*No! No! Not my Nick! Not my baby....*

"Starsk!"

The familiar voice cut through the sounds of his mother's screams in the turmoil that was his mind. He looked up and struggled to focus on the face that had pushed through the crowd to reach him. He reached out his trembling hands and clung to the lapels of Hutch's coat like a drowning man would to a life preserver. He could hear his own voice in that same distant tone that all sound had taken on.

"Hutch...help me."

### THREE

"Starsky's losin' it."

Dobey glanced briefly at Huggy Bear who had just uttered the anxious words beside him before returning his attention to the scene across the grass. Throughout the funeral he had watched with concern as his dark-haired detective waged an internal struggle to hold himself together. Starsky's hands had been fidgeting nervously, his eyes darting everywhere though seeming to see nothing, perspiration covering his face despite the chill in the air. He had taken several steps back, away from the grave and into his partner whose presence seemed to be the only thing keeping him upright. But it was when the service ended that Dobey had become truly worried about Starsky. All the color had drained from his face as his relatives moved forward to console him. Rather than taking comfort in their proximity, he seemed to recoil, looking as though he was drowning among the sea of dark coats and bodies. Even from here, Dobey could see the trembling that infused the stout body as he backed away from the grave, flowers dropping from his unsteady hands. Still surrounded by family members, his head and eyes darted everywhere as though desperate for escape. But then he became deathly still, riveted to the spot in which he stood, seemingly unable to see or hear those around him, a helpless look on his face as though he had no idea where he was or what was happening to him.

Dobey watched as the blond head made its way intently through the crowd, honing straight in on his partner and pushing aside anyone who stood between them. It was only when Hutch reached him that Starsky demonstrated any ability to move, grabbing onto his friend with trembling hands and nearly collapsing into him. Dobey couldn't hear the words that were exchanged between them, nor what Hutch said to the concerned throng who were still trying to get near Starsky. Whatever he said had succeeded in getting them to move, though reluctantly, and he was able to guide Starsky several feet away from the crowd, where the two stood now, the dark head hung down, straining to catch his breath, while the blond remained close beside him, speaking softly in his ear.

Hutch looked up then, eyes searching, until he found Dobey and Huggy. He motioned for them to come closer and the two men quickly responded. When they got closer, Dobey noted that Starsky was in even worse shape than he thought. His breathing was strained and ragged, he was deathly pale, and he was covered in perspiration. Huggy went to his side and laid a hand across his back as he spoke softly.

"Hey man, take it easy. It's gonna be all right."

Hutch exchanged glances with Huggy, then left Starsky to his care, moving a few steps off and beckoning Dobey to join him.

"What's happening, Hutch?"

"What's happening is that he hasn't slept or eaten in three days," the blond began in a voice filled with alarm and agitation. "His body's on empty, his emotions are in overdrive...he's been holding all this stuff in with no outlet and now he's too wired to control it anymore."

"How can we help?"

"We need to get him out of here."

"Are you sure that's wise? I mean his family should...."

"The hell with his family!" Hutch snapped. "This is not about them, it's about Starsky. Right now he can't be what everybody wants him to be and they're just going to have to back off and...."

"Hey, take it easy," Dobby cautioned. "I'm not the enemy. Nobody here is." The words got through, Hutch pausing to take a deep breath and run his hand through his hair.

"Sorry. I just...."

"I know." Dobby was only too familiar with the fierce streak of protectiveness that suffused Hutch whenever his partner was in danger. He was also aware that, blood ties or no, there wasn't anybody else here better qualified to judge what was best for Starsky. "Hutch, whatever you want me to do, I'll do. I'm worried about him too."

"I know." Hutch's tone had softened considerably. "I just want you and Huggy to take the car and take him back to the hotel."

"What about you?"

"Things are going to be a little dicey here. I think I should stay and try to smooth things over...tie up the final details with the funeral director, make the appropriate acknowledgments and apologies to the guests and try to reassure the family enough that they don't try to follow him and swoop down on him right now."

Dobby glanced over to the large group of family and guests nearby who seemed on the verge of swooping already and did not envy Hutch his task. He knew, though, that if anyone could handle it, his sincere, smooth talking detective could.

"Good luck," Dobby mumbled just as Aunt Vivian began to wave toward Hutch.

"Kenneth, is everything all right now? David?"

"Just give me another minute," Hutch responded with a reassuring tone that seemed to temporarily halt her intention to come closer. Hutch turned back to Dobby. "You'd better get going now while the coast is still clear. I'll get a cab and meet you back at the hotel as soon as I can."

Hutch moved back towards where his partner and Huggy were standing. Huggy was talking non-stop in an effort to distract Starsky from whatever turmoil was going on inside him but Starsky seemed to be only slightly aware that he was even there. Hutch laid a gentle hand atop his friend's shoulder and spoke in a soft, calming tone.

"Listen, buddy, the Cap'n and Huggy are going to take you back to the hotel now. You need to rest. You go on with them and I'll be there soon, OK?"

When Starsky looked up at Hutch his eyes were glassy and confused. It was uncertain whether he even knew where he was anymore.

"Hutch?"

The voice was small and unsteady. Hutch tightened his grip and spoke with tender authority.

"Starsk, just do what I'm telling you. Go back to the hotel and I'll be there soon, I promise. Everything's going to be all right. Just go on now."

Starsky nodded, although Dobby still believed that he had very little understanding of what was going on around him. But he responded to Hutch's entreaty and meekly walked along beside Huggy as he led him away. Before Dobby turned to follow them, Hutch called to him.

"Cap," the voice was much less assured than it had been a moment ago.

It was Dobby's voice this time that spoke with the measured authority. "He'll be fine. You do what you have to do. We'll stay right with him until you get there."

Hutch nodded, trying hard to look reassured but not quite succeeding. His eyes followed worriedly along with his partner for several long minutes before his focus was broken by the voices of Starsky's Aunt Vivian and Uncle Leo who were calling to him with alarm from behind them. Dobby hurried along after Huggy and Starsky, eager to get as much distance between themselves and this place as possible as Hutch turned to face the concerned, questioning crowd.

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Starsky had been hauntingly silent during the ride back to the hotel. Upon first entering the room, the silence continued, with Starsky curling up into the chair and staring vacantly at the wallpaper. Dobby wasn't overly concerned since his breathing had calmed and the trembling had lessened significantly. But after an hour had passed, the signs of agitation began to return. Starsky bolted up from the chair and paced toward the window, looking out searchingly, his fingers curling and uncurling into tight fists at his sides. After a few moments of looking, he would return to the chair, throwing himself into it and tapping his fingers against its arms until he felt the need to return to the window again.

Dobby and Huggy watched the pattern continue for the next thirty minutes. With each trip to the window, Starsky became more anxious, his breathing once again growing uneven. Though several previous attempts had been met with silence, Dobby tried again to speak to him.

"Starsky, I really think you should try to rest. You can't keep going on like this."

"Hey, I got an idea," Huggy added. "Why don't I call down for some room service? I'm sure this hotel can rustle up something decent, though it may pale in comparison to the fine cuisine you're used to getting at my establishment."

For several long minutes, Starsky remained silent, pressing his forehead against the window pane and tapping his fingers along the sill. But then he turned abruptly and faced them, his voice

hoarse and unsteady.

"Where's Hutch?"

"He stayed behind at the cemetery, remember," Dobby stated calmly. "He'll be here soon."

"It's too long. It's taking too long." Starsky grasped his wrist and looked at his watch, then walked over towards the night-stand and picked up the clock. "Is this right? What time is it?"

"It's 1:45, like the clock says."

Starsky threw down the clock and moved back to the window. "It's too long," he muttered, voice filled with apprehension.

Dobby looked to Huggy who seemed equally uncertain about what to do. Finally, Huggy shrugged his shoulders and spoke in an easy tone.

"Hey, these New York highways ain't so different from the freeways back home. Could take a man an hour to travel a block, especially if some greedy cabby's got his meter runnin'."

Starsky's head was shaking back and forth in vehement disagreement. He moved towards the two men now, perspiration again dripping from his forehead. "No! Something's wrong. Something's happened. Why won't you tell me!"

"Dave," Dobby forced calm into his voice despite his growing worry. "Nothing's wrong. Nothing has happened. Hutch will be here as soon as he can. You've got to calm down."

Dobby reached a hand toward him but Starsky pulled back. With trembling hands, he reached for the back of the chair and leaned on it to steady himself. He fought to control his breathing but was having great difficulty regulating it. His eyes were glazing over again in that distant stare and he began muttering to himself incoherently. His body looked ready to collapse on itself, yet he was forcing it stay upright.

"He don't look so good, Captain. It's like the funeral only worse." The worried look on Huggy's face mirrored Dobby's own fears. Starsky seemed to be coming completely unglued before their eyes. He moved towards the trembling detective again, grasping his arm. He could feel the pulse beat pumping way too fast through the sweat-soaked sleeves of his shirt and jacket.

"Listen to me, son. Hutch is fine, but you're not. You can't keep going like this. Now let's get you out of these wet clothes and laying down in that bed. Huggy, will go get you some aspirin and then you can...."

"No!" The distress in his voice seemed to shake the room. "I've got to find Hutch. Something's wrong. I can't lose Hutch too...not Hutch...No!...."

It took both Dobby and Huggy to block the frantic bolt for the door. Starsky struggled with them for a moment before losing the last strand of strength that was keeping him upright. Clutching his stomach, he dropped to his knees moaning 'no, no' over and over. Huggy bent to help him but

he retreated from the touch, scrambling backwards along the floor until his motion was halted by the wall. He curled up into it gasping for air as he clutched his trembling knees to his chest. His face was twisted in distress as confused, frightened eyes swept back and forth in a disoriented gaze.

"Leave...me...alone...." Every word was a struggle. "All...of...you...everybody...stop pushing me...leave me...alone...."

It was unclear whether he was talking to the inhabitants of this room or of his mind. He seemed to have taken a step out of this reality, which would make reaching him even more difficult.

"Maybe we should get him a doctor," Huggy mumbled worriedly, his eyes still riveted to Starsky.

Dobey wasn't certain that was necessary and he was well aware of Starsky's dislike of doctors. Yet he couldn't think of anything else to do and something clearly needed to be done. Starsky's pulse rate was dangerously high a few moments ago and it was surely higher now. That fact, along with the ragged attempts to catch his breath, put him in real physical danger.

"I think you're right, Huggy."

"I'll go down to the front desk...see if they can tell me how to reach...."

"What's going on?!"

Both Dobey and Huggy's attention had been on Starsky so neither had heard the door open. They both turned at the sound of the anxious inquiry and found Hutch standing in the doorway, alarmed eyes locked on the sight of his cowering partner.

"He's freakin', Hutch. We can't get through to him. I was just going to go get a doctor...." Huggy was moving towards the door but Hutch blocked his exit with his body then closed the door behind himself.

"No, wait." The blond was fighting for composure. The sight of his partner so distraught had obviously unnerved him greatly. But in order to help, he would push his own emotions aside to maintain a clear, level-headed veneer with which he could effectively approach the crisis. When he spoke again, his voice was calm and direct. "Tell me what happened. Everything."

Both Dobey and Huggy filled him in on the details, recounting everything that had happened since they left the cemetery, including Starsky's increasing apprehension that something bad had happened to Hutch.

"Hey, maybe that's it," Huggy reasoned. "Just tell him you're here. Show him you're OK."

"It's not going to be that simple," Hutch stated as he removed first his coat then his suit jacket. "His body's reactions are out of his control right now. He's having some kind of panic attack...anxiety. This is what I was afraid of at the cemetery."

"But I don't get it," Huggy went on. "If somebody's panicking and it's all in their head, why can't you just tell him everything's all right? I mean you're safe."

"It's not just about me," Hutch went on as he loosened and removed his tie. "And telling him the fears are unfounded will only exacerbate the physical distress. This kind of thing hits after a crisis. It can be triggered by several conditions...grief, despair, helplessness, repressed emotions. Being so physically run down makes him more vulnerable to it."

"And I was going to call a *doctor*," Huggy remarked with irony as he regarded Hutch with a note of awe.

"You may still have to," Hutch admitted with apprehension as he unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his shirt sleeves. "The physical symptoms are real. If I can't help him to calm down, he could be in a lot of trouble."

"What are you going to do, Hutch?" Over the years on the force, Dobby had seen several people in similar states of emotional attacks and knew it was a serious thing. It had usually taken trained professionals to alleviate the situation.

"Just try to reassure him. Help him ride it out and find his way back." It seemed as though Hutch were trying to sound more confident than he felt.

"Can we help?" Dobby questioned.

"Get a basin of water, some wash clothes, a blanket, a few towels...and just stay close."

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As Hutch moved toward the corner of the room where Starsky was huddled he took a deep breath, hoping to muster the strength and confidence he didn't totally feel. Starsky was in a bad way; doubled over with one hand clutching his stomach while the other held his head. He was fighting for every labored breath. His clothes were soaked, clinging to his body limply as though he had just worn them in the shower. Most disconcerting, though, were his eyes. The usually brilliant blue pupils were small and dark, clouded over in an unfocused gaze that traveled rapidly back and forth yet couldn't even see that Hutch was next to him now. Hutch paused, his mind racing as he began to fear what would happen if he couldn't reach his distraught partner. No sooner had the question surfaced, however, than it was pushed sharply from his mind. He stubbornly refused to allow the self-doubt to incapacitate him...not now...not when Starsky needed him.

Crouching down on his knees about a foot in front of the shaken man, Hutch spoke in the calm, soothing tone that he would maintain throughout.

"Starsk, it's me. It's Hutch. Can you hear me?"

There was no change, no sign of recognition, so he tried again.

"Starsky, I need you to hear me. Focus on my voice. Come on. I know you can."

"Hutch?" The response was low and weak, but it was there.

"That's right. It's Hutch. I'm right here. I'm right next to you. Try to look at me."

"Hutch..." Flickering eyes fought to focus. "Hutch...you...are you...you...."

"I'm fine. I'm just fine. I promise."

"...sure...are you...sure...."

"Yes, I'm sure. Come here. Give me your hand." Hutch gently unclenched the hand that Starsky had pushed tightly into his stomach. He brought it slowly to his cheek, noting with alarm the rapid pulse pounding through the damp wrist as he held the trembling hand against his face.

"See. I'm right here and I'm fine. I'm really fine."

For a brief moment Starsky's eyes seemed to lock with his as the cold, clammy, unsteady hand tried to stroke his face. But then a violent shudder ripped through his body and he jerked his arm back, wrapping both of his arms around himself as he cried out breathlessly.

"Hutch!....Something...wrong. I can't...breathe...."

"I know. I know. But it's going to be all right. Just try to stay calm."

"What's happening? My head...everything's spinning...can't stop it."

"Hold on, buddy, I'm right here. It's going to pass."

Starsky gasped as he threw his head back against the wall. Shoulders heaving back, he tried to inhale deeply but his throat sounded constricted. Hutch moved towards him, causing him to plaster himself further back against the wall as he tried to retreat.

"No air...there's no air in here...."

Hutch immediately backed off, realizing he had moved too quickly. He had to be more careful.

"I'm sorry. Here, is this better? I'll stay back."

"No...Hutch...sorry...just...Hutch...."

The eyes were pleading now. He seemed fearful that Hutch would go.

"I'm not going anywhere. I just want to give you some space. I'm right here. Just try to breathe. Just focused on that."

Starsky closed his eyes and seemed to be making a concerted effort to regulate his breathing. It was still coming in short gasps, but it was clear that some air was making its way through.

"That's it. In and out. Just in and out. Don't worry about anything else." They remained like that for several minutes, Starsky laboring to take short breaths while Hutch continued to coax him. Knowing the tiny breaths were not going to be enough for long, Hutch searched for a means to

make more progress. "Starsk, listen to me. I think it would help if we got rid of the tie. I'm going to move forward just a little to help you get it off. Is that OK?" Starsky's head nodded slightly but his body visibly tensed. Hutch hastened to reassure. "I'm not going to crowd you, I promise. I'm just going to move a little bit closer. If it's too much you just tell me."

There was no discernible response so Hutch edged very slightly towards his partner. At the slight change in breathing pattern, he paused, using his voice to ease the trepidation. "It's OK. Just one more little inch and I can reach, all right?" Moving with measured slowness, he brought his hand up to the knot of Starsky's tie. "There we are. I've got it. Now. I'm just going to slide it down a bit." Gradually, the knot was loosened. Bringing up his other hand, Hutch pulled the material until the knot came undone then took one end and drew the tie from around the shirt collar. Fingers at the collar button, Hutch paused again. "I'm going to open this button here, so you can breathe easier, O.K.?" Hutch unfastened the top two buttons then backed off as Starsky gasped deeply. "That's right. Just breathe."

Again, minutes passed while Starsky struggled to get some deep breaths. He shifted then, pulling his knees up toward his chest and clutching them tightly as he rocked back and forth. He reached one hand to his chest and gripped the material from his shirt in a tight-fisted ball.

"Hurts...in my chest...so tight...like...like somebody's standin' on it."

"I know. It's because your heart's beating too fast." Hutch reached over and covered Starsky's hand with his, pressing both their hands against the frantic rhythm pounding through the soaked cotton.

"What's wrong with me?" The plaintive wail echoed through the room. Desperate eyes roamed Hutch's face searching for answers. "Can't catch my breath...everything's spinning...can't...keep shaking..." He started to shift again, attempting to get to his knees. "Gotta stop...too closed in...it's all closing in...gotta get out of here...let me outta here..."

Hutch struggled to keep his touches as nonrestrictive as possible while he hastened to halt the escape. "No, no. Listen to me. You need to stay here. I know you feel like running but it's not going to help. You have to just stay here and try to work this thing through. I know it's scary, but it'll be all right. You're safe here. I promise. Please, Starsk. You've got to trust me here."

Starsky's forward movement halted though his eyes continued to dart frantically around the room as though looking for a way out. The agitation became more palpable, every fiber of his body twitching with barely controlled distress, but finally he slumped back down against the wall, digging his fingers into the carpet to anchor himself there. His voice betrayed the cost of the action as he spoke the whispered syllable; "Hutch..."

It was a plea filled with such desolation, confusion and raw fear that it threatened to decimate the walls Hutch had carefully built around his own precarious emotions. It had always been so easy for him to feel Starsky's pain...too easy in fact. The intensity of the connection was often overwhelming. In the beginning, he wondered about it...he even attributed all kinds of psychological theories to explain things like why, when his partner got a paper cut, his own finger would feel as though it stung. Or why he would go to work after spending a restless night unable to sleep and inevitably find that his partner had woken with the flu or some other ailment.

As time went on, he stopped trying to analyze it and just accepted it. But with that acceptance came a new dilemma...how to cope with it. How to cope when you're trying frantically to decipher the cryptic clues from Simon Marcus' twisted ramblings while a screaming, icy fear keeps grabbing hold of your gut and threatening to unravel you. Or how to focus on disarming two gunmen and saving a restaurant full of hostages when you can't shake the feeling that your essence is slowly draining out all over the musty cushions of a dilapidated sofa.

It was always a balance...a thin line being walked inside his consciousness between the feeler and the doer...the reactor and the actor. Most times he could separate the two long enough to take care of the situation at hand while keeping the feelings to a bare minimum...at least in the present. The after effects were always another story. But the balance was always tenuous at best. Right now, the blue eyes boring into him, pleading for answers he wasn't sure he had, were cutting like a knife through his heart. He felt his own calm slipping as he became engulfed by the liquid blue anguish and plagued by inadequacy. The composure he had been so careful to maintain in his voice was slipping now as his own heart began to beat too fast.

"Starsk, I...just...don't...don't worry...."

"Hutch!" The tone became more distressed by the hesitance.

It was only when Dobeys firm clasp touched his shoulder did Hutch realize how damp his own shirt had become.

"Easy, Hutch. Stay steady."

The Captain's words echoed in his ears. *He's right. The key is to help him relax and calm down. Constant reassurance...steadfast support.* Hutch closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Trust that connection. It works both ways. If you're calm, he'll feel it. If you stay relaxed, eventually he'll be able to relax too. Just trust it.*

When Hutch opened his eyes again he met Dobeys questioning look with a reassuring nod. Then he slowly inched over beside Starsky, leaning his back against the same wall as he spoke comfortingly.

"Buddy, listen to me. Everything's going to be all right. We're just going to sit here together until this thing passes...and it will pass, I promise you. It's just going to take a little time. I know it's scary. You're feeling very helpless and out of control right now and those are very real feelings. But it won't last forever. Just keep with me. Talk to me. Tell me what's happening."

"I don't know what's happening!" was the sharp reply.

"I understand that. It feels like it's all unraveling beyond your grasp."

"Can't stop it...can't stop the feelings...."

"Not right this minute, no. But they'll stop. Just give it a little time. You've been carrying around a lot of stuff. It's just all starting to rebel a little. It's nothing to be worried about."

"No...not right...it's not normal...."

"Sure it is. And it's perfectly understandable. There's nothing to be ashamed of or worried about. Just try to breathe. Don't fight it. Go with it. I'm right here."

'Hutch...."

"I'm right here. You're not alone. Just breath with me. Come on. In and out."

"It hurts...so tight...everything's racing...."

"It'll slow down. Just work on the breathing for now."

Starsky pushed his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. His face was contorted and tense but his efforts to breathe resulted in several long, good gulps of air. As Hutch looked on, he felt something damp and clammy touch his thigh. Immediately he wrapped the unsteady hand in his sure one and continued to speak with quiet encouragement.

"That's right. I'm right here. You just keep breathing. I'm not going anywhere." The hand in his stayed tightly fisted and shaky but Starsky made no attempts to withdraw it. They remained that way for the better part of an hour, Starsky struggling valiantly to contain the war being waged within him while Hutch continued his unflinching support. When there had been enough of an improvement in Starsky's breathing and pulse rate to indicate he was out of physical danger, Hutch signaled that Dobey and Huggy could leave. It had been a long day and both looked worn out. There was nothing more they would be able to do here for now anyway.

"Call us if you need anything...anything at all," Dobey whispered as they moved towards the door.

Hutch smiled gratefully. "I will. And thanks." The word seemed inadequate but he hoped that the sentiment was understood. From beside him, a hoarse voice called out signifying another step taken towards awareness.

"I'm sorry."

"Ya got no need to be," Huggy assured with a dismissive wave of his hand. "You just go easy, huh. And do what blondie tells you. He knows best."

Something that almost resembled a smile trailed across Starsky's lips before his head slouched to the side tiredly. Exhaustion permeated every muscle in his body. When the door to the room had closed and they were alone, Hutch got to his knees and faced Starsky.

"How about we try to get you a little more comfortable. We can start by taking this jacket off. Is that O.K.?"

Starsky gave a small, disinterested nod. With care, Hutch was able to peel the sweat soggy jacket from the still trembling frame. He tossed it to the side where it landed in a heap on the floor. He gave a small smile, trying to lessen some of the tension in the room. "The cleaner's going to

charge you triple to get that back in shape."

"Throw it out. I don't want it." His lips pressed together in a bitter frown before adding sardonically, "Better yet, bury it. Bury the suit of death."

Hutch sighed, clutching Starsky's forearm in a gentle squeeze before running his hand up and down it. The shirt was damper than the jacket had been. Hutch pulled over the basin of water and a washcloth. He moistened the cloth in the water then brought it to Starsky's hot, wet brow. As he cleansed the heated skin he noted the vacant expression. Worrying that he was losing him again, Hutch spoke into the quiet room.

"Listen, you can't be very comfortable here on the floor. How about we get you up...maybe have a shower, a change of clothes, lay down for a while?"

The dark curls shook from side to side as a barely audible voice declared, "I'm fine."

Hutch slid the wash cloth down Starsky's neck with one hand as he unfastened the remaining shirt buttons with the other. "No, you're not," he stated quietly. Trailing the cloth down through the matted chest hair, he made his voice as gentle as he could. "And you can't keep holding it all inside. You don't have to. I'm right here."

Hutch felt the shiver that shook Starsky's body as goosebumps cropped up along his flesh. Concerned about the effect of the room air conditioning against Starsky's sweat drenched body, he put down the wash cloth and started to peel the saturated shirt off of him.

"You can't sit here in these wet clothes. You're going to get sick. Here, get this shirt off." After he removed the shirt, Hutch draped the blanket around Starsky's shoulders. "There. That's better."

Starsky clutched the blanket to him, continuing to shiver. Hutch rubbed his hands up and down the blanket covered arms until the shivering lessened. Exhausted blue eyes that seemed to be carrying the weight of the world looked up at him as a voice filled with repressed emotion uttered, "Thank you." The head dropped down then, sagging from the load, as the voice began to crack. "Ah, Hutch...what am I doing? What's wrong with me? I didn't hear a word that was said at my own mother's funeral. I didn't go to the Shiva...."

"Couldn't," Hutch corrected vehemently. "There's a difference between didn't and couldn't. I know your mom would understand that difference."

A sharp intake of breath preceded the next hoarse words. "My mom is dead, Hutch. She's dead."

Hutch felt the tears start to well in his own eyes as he watched Starsky pull the blanket even tighter around himself like a cocoon, the taut muscles constricting as arms wrapped around legs trying to hold on. Hutch laid a hand upon the rigid back wishing Starsky would just stop fighting it and let it go. "I know, babe. I know."

Starsky was curled up into himself, bowed head resting upon knees inside the cloak of the blanket. The voice was tense now...tense like the body that refused to give in. "It's like this

quicksand all around me. It's dark and it's cold and it just keeps pulling at me. It's trying to pull me in...pull me under. But I can't let it. I won't."

"I won't either," Hutch hastened to assure as he stroked his hand rhythmically up and down the blanket covered back. "I won't let you drown. But that doesn't mean you can't let go. You can let some of this out without going completely under. I'll be right here to pull you back out."

Hutch felt the tight body convulse beneath his hand. Several strained intakes of breath were the only sound in the room for a while. Then the muffled voice from beneath the blanket struggled to speak.

"Mom's dead. She's gone...gone like Nicky...like Dad. All gone except me. It's like...like I'm some kind of orphan or somethin'...no family...all alone...nobody...."

"No!" Hutch choked past the lump in his throat. "That's not true." He reached into the blanket, placing his hands against the hot cheeks and lifted Starsky's face to his. Sapphire eyes brimmed with tears but only one had managed to escape. The lonely drop was sliding down along the side of Starsky's nose. Hutch caught it with his thumb just as it reached the quivering lip. Fighting to keep his own voice steady, Hutch spoke with quiet conviction.

"You listen to me. You are never alone. Not ever. I will always be here. I'm your family and you're mine. Me and thee, remember. That's for keeps. I promise."

At last, the dam broke.

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Every muscle in his body seemed to be weighted down. Just breathing took effort. Tired. So tired. Things felt so surreal as though he were a stranger in his own body. He had no idea how long he had been like this. He noted through swollen eyes that the room was dim and daylight was fading beyond the window. It had been bright with sunshine before.

He was so weary. He made an attempt to shift himself, perhaps even sit up, but his limbs gave no response. He tried to remember when he last felt in control of them. Certainly not during that endless frenzy when he could barely get his breath and his heart was threatening to burst from his chest. And not during that torrent of sobbing that racked through him uncontrollably for what felt like hours. Not for the first time today he wondered what was happening...wondered if he were going insane. He couldn't remember ever feeling so disconnected and unstable. Worse yet, he didn't have an ounce of energy to fight it.

The steady arms that were wrapped around him tightened their grip. He closed his eyes reveling in their security. *Hutch*. Through it all, Hutch had been with him...was still with him. They were still huddled on the floor against the wall and Starsky was laying limply in Hutch's embrace. It was disconcerting to feel so debilitated and yet he had no burning desire to move. He felt safe here...safer than he had felt in a long time.

The exhaustion continued to pull at him, dragging him down a dark corridor that beckoned behind his closed lids. He felt himself drifting...floating helplessly into it. He was only half

aware of the movements that stirred him. Vaguely, he realized that his body was moving but he knew it was not of his own accord. He felt himself being lifted up...up into the arms that still sheltered him. His supine body was carried easily across the room and deposited on the bed. He felt his mind begin to form a protest but it never translated coherently into words and so he let it just fade back into the blackness. Again, all was dark...dark and distant. A rush of cold assaulted his heated skin as the material that covered it was removed. Blanket. Yeah, it was a blanket pulled away...pants too. But then there was warmth again as a cotton fabric drew up his legs and pulled around his waist in an elastic grip. As he felt a tee shirt being tugged over his head and arms he attempted to regain control over his pliant body and offer some assistance. He couldn't seem to get his arms to obey him, however, and ended up tangling them in the shirt. He groaned in frustration as he pulled at the shirt, but gentle hands stilled his efforts.

"Take it easy. It's OK. I got it."

Obedying the soft entreaty, his head dropped back, again drifting into the darkness. It had become impossible to keep the swollen, heavy lids open. Murky shadows danced in measured waves. The sound of heavy breath echoed in his ear. Faintly he realized it was his own. Hands cradled his head now as a pillow was placed beneath it...a fresh blanket enveloped him in its warmth. The shadows were calling to him...drawing him further into their midst.

Muscles that ached with fatigue melted into the mattress. Wearily, he yearned to surrender to the enticing nothingness...yet he could not. Though thought and emotion had long since transformed into disjointed fragments too fleeting to discern, something barred his passage to the much-desired oblivion. An unsettling agitation began to wash over him as his leaden limbs squirmed restlessly beneath the blanket. Trapped in this oppressive limbo between consciousness and unconsciousness, helpless to fully embrace either, he heard his own frustrated moans escape from his throat, though he wasn't aware of making the sounds.

A weight pressed down on the mattress beside him and then familiar hands were pulling on him...pulling him against the sheltering form that had been missing since the blanket had been drawn over him.

"It's all right...I'm right here," the voice that sounded like music intoned. "Just rest now. Everything's gonna be all right."

Something inside of him gave way then as he sagged into the arms that enfolded him. There were other words...hard to distinguish their meaning but the tone was lulling. Soothing touches gentled his restless limbs. All felt peaceful then. Calm. Uncomplicated. And then the darkness overcame him at last.

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Partial awareness returned to find the room basked in darkness but for the glimmer of the small television screen. A familiar fullness was pressing on his bladder insistently. He tried to sit up, but he didn't get far as lethargic limbs moaned from the strain. The body he was pressed against stirred and hands tightened their grip around him.

"What's wrong?" the anxious, scratchy voice asked.

"Gotta pee..." he managed to reply through the dry soreness of his throat.

Hutch stirred again, bracing firm arms behind him to help to help him sit up. A woozy rush passed through him at the change of position.

"Easy," Hutch cautioned.

"I'm 'kay," said the voice that sounded so far away from him. With effort, he peeled his eyes further open, though the lids felt weighted down. The features of the room were a blur but he thought he could make out something on the clock. Managing to get his legs over the side of the bed, he moved to stand, groaning with the exertion. He was able to take two steps before a nauseous rush overcame him and the entire room began to spin, his weakened body swaying with it. Steady arms moved quickly around him as Hutch got to his side in an instant.

"I said take it easy. There's no hurry."

"Tell that to my bladder," he heard himself say as he clutched the arms that kept him upright. They stood that way for several minutes as Starsky struggled to get his bearings. When the speed the room was moving at changed from tornado to light wind, he figured it was safe to venture forward again. He patted Hutch's arm assuredly. "Okay, I think I got it now." Hutch let go slowly, staying close behind until Starsky's steps became more steady.

When he finally reached the bathroom, he felt like he had completed a marathon. He stumbled inside, leaning hard against the wall for support as he released the long stream that had built up inside him. That done, he made his way toward the sink, flinching as he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. His face was pale but for the huge rash-like red blotches that were interspersed across it. His eyes were swollen to twice their normal size, bloodshot pupils nearly lost amidst the puffy lids. The haunted gaze made him almost unrecognizable even to himself. He bent to splash some water on his face then cupped some with his hand and sipped it down to lubricate his parched throat.

As he left the bathroom, he shook his head from side to side in an effort to become more oriented. Hutch was sitting on the bed still in the pants and shirt that he had been wearing earlier. His back was against the pillows which were propped up against the headboard. The bed across the room was still fully made. Glancing from the beds to the television, Starsky forced his voice to speak.

"You haven't slept at all have you?"

"I wasn't tired."

Starsky would have challenged the remark if he'd had the energy. As it was, his depleted body was having enough trouble making it back across the room. He felt his shaky legs beginning to give out and he stumbled near the foot of the bed. Hutch was out of the bed and beside him in a flash. A guiding hand moved around his waist and led him back towards the bed.

"Come on, Starsk. That's enough calisthenics for the night. You need to lay back down."

There was no disputing that. The pervading fatigue was becoming impossible to ignore. He fell meekly into the bed, eyes already falling shut. But when he felt Hutch climb back in beside him, he fought to summon the strength to protest.

"Hutch...it's okay...you don't have ta. You need to get some rest..."

As if he hadn't even spoken, Hutch resumed his position against the propped pillows, pulling Starsky's head onto his chest and drawing the blanket up around them.

"Hutch..." Starsky's voice sounded spent even to his own ears.

"Starsk, for once in your life don't argue. Just go to sleep."

Starsky took a deep breath, trying to muster enough energy to reply. But as he did, he inhaled the fresh, distinctive scent of Hutch and he felt his stomach quiver. Why was he fighting this? This was one of those rare moments when he was able to be as close to Hutch as he always longed to be. He needed to just cherish it as he had the others.

With a deep, contented sigh he burrowed further into the body beneath his where accepting arms wrapped him up tight. The steady beat of Hutch's heart pulsed beneath his ear as the familiar scent intoxicated him. It was like a piece of a dream...so many dreams actually. Dreams of wild, abandoned passions fulfilled...and always followed by this intimate embrace...this feeling of total serenity, as if nothing in the world mattered beyond this moment.

Were the delicate fingers combing through his hair real or was that just an image from the fantasy he had played out in his mind so many times before? Did it really matter either way? He was far too drained to attempt to separate the fantasy from the reality. All he wanted to do right now was close his eyes and live in this moment forever.

## FOUR

When Hutch opened his eyes, he saw the end credits of some New York morning news show scrolling across the screen. Realizing he must have dozed off, he glanced over at the clock. 8:58. His last recollection was seeing the dawn begin to break in the sky outside the hotel room window. Looking down, he noted that Starsky was still sleeping peacefully in his arms. In fact, he had barely moved an inch from the position he had fallen asleep in.

The kinks in Hutch's back screamed to be stretched out, but he chose not to shift position either, fearful that he might disturb his partner's much needed rest. Instead, he lay still, contenting himself as he had for most of the night, with keeping a protective watch over his sleeping friend.

Running the events of the past few days through his mind, Hutch wondered for the hundredth time whether Starsky was going to be all right. Yesterday had been like a nightmare, watching helplessly as the manifestation of his partner's grief and pain came pouring out, first in that frightening anxiety attack and later in the agonized sobs that wracked his entire body.

*But at least it came out.* Surely that was a good sign. For days Starsky had walked around like a tightly packaged bomb that wouldn't allow itself to explode. This unburdening, though difficult, had to be a step in the right direction.

Hutch looked down at the face that was sleeping so serenely now. A feeling came over him then that he couldn't quite discern. There was just something about the trust that his partner always placed in him. Whether he was shot up with bullets or pumped full of poison...or grieving the unending losses that seemed to plague him...that trust never wavered. It was a humbling feeling to know that somebody could depend on you so completely. No one else in Hutch's entire life ever had. And it was not something he took lightly. He strove constantly to live up to that trust...to not let his partner down in the way he had let down everything else in his life...including himself.

For Starsky, he could always manage to find a way to be better than he thought he could be. He wasn't sure how yet, but he was determined to find a way to help get his partner through this latest adversity. Stroking the back of his hand against the tear blotched cheek, he whispered softly to the sleeping form.

"You're going to be all right, Starsk. I promise."

He continued the quiet stroking for several minutes until he heard the knock at the door.

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Huggy glanced with concern at the wrinkled, disheveled blonde who answered the door.

"Rough night, huh?"

"Yeah, but we got through it. Come on in Hug."

Huggy Bear entered the room and looked over towards Starsky's sleeping form. Even in sleep,

the face reflected the toll of a difficult emotional battle.

"How is he?"

Hutch sighed as he looked with concern towards his partner. "I don't know. It got pretty bad there for a while. But at least he's finally getting some rest. He slept through most of the night."

"For which the same can't be said of you my friend."

Hutch shrugged, a weariness to his posture that was more emotional than physical.

"I dozed off a few times. I'm all right"

"Couldn't stop worrying about him, huh," Huggy said knowingly. "Had to keep watch...make sure he was all right."

A faint smile crossed Hutch's lips as he eyed his friend. "Yeah, something like that."

"Say no more. Who knows you two better than me?"

Huggy's mind briefly flashed back to a time in a room over his old place. It was Starsky who went without sleep then as he kept a protective vigil over his de-toxing partner. There had been many such times over the years, the roles reversing as needed. *Cut one and the other bleeds*. And so it had always been.

"Listen, Dobby's big old stomach's got to growling something fierce so we were gonna go out and grab some breakfast. Should I bring something back for you boys?"

"Yeah, that would be great, Huggy. I'm hoping I can get him to eat today...start building back his strength."

"Anything in particular you want?"

"I don't know. Bring a few things. Maybe if there's enough variety we can find something he can stomach."

"One variety breakfast comin' up," Huggy smiled. "Oh, by the way, after breakfast we were gonna go by and pay our respects at the Shiva. You think you'll be heading over there later?"

Hutch shrugged. "I don't know. I'll play it by ear I guess. Whatever he's up to."

"Was it a bad scene with the family yesterday after we left?"

The look that crossed Hutch's face resembled that of a man who had barely escaped a firing squad. The response, though evasive, was said in a tight-lipped manner that seemed to be struggling to remain in control.

"It wasn't pleasant." Hutch looked toward his sleeping partner and sighed. "They just don't get it Hug. I don't think they have any idea what he's going through...how much this is all affecting

him, especially so soon after Nick. I can't wait until we can just go home and start putting all this behind us."

"And that's going to solve it, huh...going home?" Huggy tried to keep the tone of the question neutral but he couldn't help but be concerned. He wondered if it wasn't Hutch who couldn't see the full implications of the situation.

Before the conversation could proceed any further, however, they were interrupted by the sound of low, distressed moans from the bed. Hutch moved immediately to his partner who had begun to thrash about in a restless nightmare. He sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling Starsky's head over towards his lap.

"It's all right. I'm right here. Take it easy."

The still sleeping man clutched an arm around Hutch's thigh as the blonde stroked his hand up and down the sweat dampened back. Hutch continued to speak soothingly until the moans slowly subsided and the sleep was once again peaceful. Hutch looked up at Huggy then with a look that revealed the inner turmoil.

"He's in so much pain, Hug. I wish there was more that I could do for him."

"I think you do plenty," Huggy reassured. This brief scene had served to remind Huggy of the strength of the bond these two shared...a bond that had seen them through many dark times. Maybe he had been wrong to harbor so many doubts before. Maybe once they did get home things would get back to normal. Maybe.

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Hutch hoisted himself atop the hood of his most recent 'classic' Ford and gazed around the near empty parking lot. There were only three other vehicles parked outside of *Pappy's Dogs and Fixins*, so the line inside couldn't be very long. Starsky would probably only be a few minutes. Squinting his eyes against the bright sunshine, Hutch realized that even after all these years, the contrast in temperature between LA and Duluth still unbalanced him at times. On a mid-January afternoon like this, the only way he could be sitting on top of his car in Duluth would be if he had dug it out from under 5 feet of snow first. And even then, he would have to be dressed in about six layers of clothes to withstand the wind chill.

Hutch's musings were interrupted by a heavy set, balding man who exited from *Pappy's* carrying a large brown bag. Hutch watched as he got into the red Chevy that was parked near the entrance and drove off. It was only a few minutes after that when his partner emerged carrying a smaller version of the same brown bag with the green *Pappy's* lettering.

As Starsky made his way across the parking lot, Hutch's eyes drew to the lithe frame. He was certain Starsky had dropped more weight. How could he not? In the three months since they had returned from New York, Starsky's appetite had been minimal at best. Hutch had actually been surprised when Starsky suggested they come here for lunch...surprised and pleased. So pleased, in fact, that he made no mention of the perpetual case of indigestion that lunch from *Pappy's* always left him with.

"So how is old Pappy?" Hutch asked as Starsky got beside the car. "Last I heard, he was getting ready to close down and sell in order to afford those alimony payments to wife number 3."

"Well, fortunately he just married wife number 4," Starsky responded as he opened the car door, "and she's got quite a nest egg."

"Really?" Hutch pondered as he slid down from the hood and opened the driver's side door. "Family money?"

"Kinda," Starsky grumbled, sliding into the seat. "It seems she made her money in the family business...mom and grandma passed on the legacy. The women in her family have an entire franchise down in the red-light district."

Starsky removed a can of soda and a small, white wrapped object from the bag before passing it to Hutch. Hutch looked distastefully at the bag in his hand as he leaned it against the steering wheel.

"Uh, Starsk, wife number 4...she doesn't help out in the kitchen, does she?"

"Nah. You know how Pappy is about his secret recipes."

Hutch reached into the bag and pulled out a container of chili. As he lifted the lid, a familiar odor assaulted his senses.

"Yeah. Wouldn't want those secret recipes to get out," Hutch remarked dryly. "Restaurants all over town might start serving food with that special Pappy flavoring." Hutch looked over at his partner eyeing the simple, plain hot dog that Starsky had unwrapped. "What happened to your usual?" Starsky never came here without ordering the *Pappy Spectacular*...a foot-long dog heaped nearly three inches high with toppings that Hutch didn't even want to know the names of.

Starsky shrugged quietly as he popped open his soda. "Just not in the mood I guess." He took a small bite out of the naked hot dog and then washed it down with a long sip of soda. The ensuing silence indicated he had nothing more to say on the subject.

Hutch lifted a plastic spoon out of the bag and began to poke at the powerfully smelling chili while his mind filled with thoughts of his partner. More and more lately, he found himself at a loss for words. He felt like he never knew what to say and since Starsky didn't say much of anything, the silences between them had steadily grown. As he snuck a quick glance at his partner who was eating in silence beside him, Hutch longed for the days when an afternoon meal signaled the start of Starsky's ceaseless babble about some tabloid discovery or some harebrained money-making scheme.

Hutch wasn't even sure if Starsky read the tabloids anymore. He wasn't sure if he did much of anything beyond work. As far as Hutch could see, he worked and he went home. In the beginning, Hutch left it alone, believing Starsky just needed some time to come to terms with his grief. When weeks passed without change, he tried to push a little...look for ways to persuade his partner to go out for some dinner or a ballgame or something social, even try to get him to talk about what was going on inside of him. But those attempts resulted in Starsky drawing more

deeply inside himself. Days of silence in the car and at the station would follow Hutch's most earnest attempts to cajole his partner from his withdrawn state. Now, he just walked on egg shells...talking only when Starsky seemed responsive and backing off when the walls shot up again.

It was all so frustrating. Even in New York, when Starsky was sick with grief and exhaustion, he was still Starsky, and Hutch felt connected to him. After that night when Starsky broke down and allowed himself to express some of the abundance of pain he was carrying, Hutch had truly believed that things were going to be OK. They spent the next several days at the Shiva and Starsky seemed in control. He handled his family and his obligations smoothly and even began to start eating again.

But the person who returned to LA with him after the family mourning period ended slowly began to resemble a stranger to Hutch. The changes weren't drastic...maybe they were even intangible to the untrained observer...but they were there. Little things...a different slant to the walk...joke opportunities that went by without being pounced upon...favorite clothes no longer worn...lack of obsession over a small knock in the engine...hundreds of little things in the past three months. The most glaring, of course, was when Christmas came and went without so much as a carol or a sprig of mistletoe. Hutch even roused himself from his own Scrooge-like tendencies to try to re-ignite the spirit of Christmas in his partner, but was met with moody disinterest.

"Chili that bad?"

Hutch snapped back from his reverie and realized he had been staring blankly into the untouched chili container. He looked at Starsky who had finished his hot dog and was now swallowing down a long gulp of soda.

"No, it's not bad...I just..." Hutch began and then paused. After a moment he continued. "I guess I just wasn't as hungry as I thought I was." He picked the top of the container out of the bag and replaced it. "I'll just re-heat it and have it later." Hutch placed the uneaten chili back into the bag and tossed it into the back seat.

"I'm sorry, Hutch."

The somber tone caught him off guard and Hutch looked questioningly into the face of his partner.

"For what?"

"I know you don't care much for the food here," Starsky began in a voice that sounded much too serious to be merely about lunch. "I know you..." There was a long pause while something almost painful seemed to be lurking behind Starsky's eyes. But in another moment it was gone, wiped away with a shrug and a turn of the head. In a much more neutral tone he concluded, "I'm just sorry you didn't enjoy your lunch."

There it was again...that feeling. In the few seconds that had just passed between them, Hutch felt the brief trace of uneasiness that he could barely define. It was more like a sense...a fleeting

certainty that there was something deeper here...something that went beyond Starsky's guilt and depression. Something between *them*...like something off kilter...something not right. But it passed so quickly, as it always did, and Hutch was left with nothing solid to put words or meaning to.

Helplessly, he shrugged as well. "Not a problem," he said quietly before reaching for the ignition and turning the key. Silence once again permeated the car as he drove out of the parking lot.

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It was close to 7:00 p.m. when Hutch pulled up in front of Starsky's place. He looked over at his partner who was sitting quietly beside him staring off into the distance as though a million miles away.

"You know, it's still pretty early," Hutch ventured cautiously into the silence. "We could go downtown and catch that new science fiction movie. Maybe grab a pizza or something."

Hutch waited, breath held tightly in his chest. Starsky had been distant and quiet for the remainder of the day since lunch and he sensed that this wasn't the time to be pushing. He couldn't help himself though. The thought of letting Starsky just get out of the car and go home alone in the state he was in troubled Hutch.

Several minutes passed before Starsky finally responded quietly. "I don't think so, Hutch. Maybe another night."

Hutch let out the breath he had been holding and along with it stumbled the groping words that he couldn't seem to halt. "Yeah...um...well...I could come up. Watch some TV or something. I mean we don't have to go out or anything. I could still order that pizza...or not...whatever..."

Hutch literally had to bite down on his lip to stop the stream of babble. When did it all become so hard between them? When did he forget how to talk to Starsky?

"I'm kinda tired. I think I'm just gonna go to bed. Another time, OK?"

No, it wasn't OK, but he didn't know how to say that. Some part of him felt he should be grateful that he hadn't set Starsky off, as he had been doing recently, with his pushy invitations. Another part of him was angry as hell that it had to be like this. He started to speak again but then stopped himself. What should he say? Keep pushing the invitation until Starsky got angry and closed him out altogether? Or should he say 'yeah, sure, fine' when it sure as hell wasn't fine? As it turned out, it was Starsky who broke the silence.

"Listen, could you pick me up again tomorrow?"

Hutch looked with confusion towards the Torino that was parked in front of them.

"Yeah sure but...haven't you even taken it into Merle yet?"

"I haven't gotten a chance. Maybe this weekend."

Didn't you say the same thing last weekend?

"Goodnight, Hutch. See ya in the morning."

Before Hutch could even utter goodnight, Starsky was out of the car with the door closed behind him. Hutch watched as he walked quickly towards the apartment, continuing to stare long after he had slipped inside, wondering just who that was that had been sitting beside him. Where was the Starsky who would jump at the chance to go to a movie, especially science fiction? Where was the man who fussed over his car like a mother hen...the man who wouldn't ride a minute longer in Hutch's 'heap' than he absolutely had to? What happened to the Starsky who would scoff at even the idea of someone going to bed before midnight? Little things again...just little things and yet they screamed out at Hutch like sirens blaring.

Clasping the handle of the door, Hutch made a move to get out. Then he pulled his hand back, changing his mind. In another moment, he opened the door...then slammed it shut again just as quickly. Hutch pounded the steering wheel in frustration as he fought to make up his mind. A memory triggered then...last weekend. Hutch had called Starsky on the phone to try to talk him into going out. Starsky had refused, saying he had a lot of stuff to do around the house. Hutch decided to go over anyway...and was met with a greeting that would make an icicle look warm and toasty. Starsky allowed him to come in, then proceeded to treat him as if he weren't even there.

Hutch stubbornly stayed for several hours, deciding that even though it was uncomfortable, at least he knew Starsky wasn't alone. But then right before he did leave, Starsky came to him with a look of raw pain so deep in his eyes that it burned into Hutch's soul.

"I'm sorry, Hutch...please...please just don't push this right now...I'm doing the best I can...don't make it harder...."

Hutch left feeling like the biggest heel on the planet. He didn't want to make things any harder for Starsky...be the cause of anymore pain or discomfort.

"Don't make it harder...."

Do I do that buddy? Do I make it even harder with all my pushing and pulling at you?

Hutch swallowed past the lump in his throat and reached for the ignition key. He didn't want to leave...he didn't feel right leaving. Yet he wasn't up to seeing that look in Starsky's eyes again...the look that told him that he was making the pain worse. The look that begged him to back off and understand.

As he pulled the car out of the parking space and drove off up the street, Hutch wondered when he ever would understand.

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Slumped down on the couch, Starsky stared blankly at the images playing across the television screen while a persistent ache continued to develop in his head. He realized he had no idea what

he was watching or what it was about, despite the fact that he had been sitting here in front of it for over an hour. With a tired sigh, he leaned forward to change the channel. He flipped through all the channels, not really noting what was on them. Finally, he just pushed the Off button and silenced the TV.

On the coffee table in front of him were the remains of the 'dinner' he had made for himself. A nearly untouched sandwich lay beside a bag of half eaten chips. Beside that was a half empty bottle of beer. He reached for it and took two slugs of the warm liquid. He frowned at the flat taste as he contemplated the sandwich. Did he want it? He probably should eat. But he really wasn't hungry. Maybe later.

Standing, Starsky picked up the food and beer bottle from the table and moved into the kitchen. He noted with little interest the state of disarray things were in. He thought about cleaning up, maybe washing some of the pile of dishes, but he really didn't feel up to it. He put the sandwich plate and chips down on the counter along with the bottle and then flicked off the light as he left the room.

Glancing at the clock in the living room, Starsky noted that it was midnight. *Midnight? Wasn't it just 9 something?* The dull ache behind his eyes became more insistent so he rubbed his temples as he headed to the bathroom for some aspirin. He found the aspirin jar laying in the sink. Had he already taken some aspirin tonight? He couldn't remember. He couldn't remember much of anything that had happened since he got home...since he had gotten out of Hutch's car. He could remember that...the look on Hutch's face. It was a look he had seen so often these past months; a mixture of concern, confusion and distress. *Somehow, I managed to do it again. Why do I keep doing that? How do I keep managing to upset him...to let him down in some new way that I'm not always even aware of?*

Gulping down the aspirin with little regard for whether or not he had taken some already, Starsky drew a handful of water up from the faucet and washed them down. Not that they would do much good. Aspirin seemed to have little effect on the headaches these days. Oh well. Maybe they would at least make him sleepy so he could go to bed.

As he returned to the living room, a pile of mail on the table in the corner caught his eye. He moved towards it, hoping that maybe he could actually go through it, take care of it. But as he sifted through the stack of letters, notices, demands, the pain in his head sharpened and he winced from the ache. Sooner or later he had to deal with this. His relatives kept sending all of these papers pertaining to his mother's estate to him. Yet when he looked at them all he could see were blurred words. He wanted to take a match and just set fire to the whole pile. He probably would have if he thought that would make it go away. But it wouldn't go away. It felt as if none of it would ever go away.

He dropped the envelopes back down on the table and moved back to the couch, throwing himself down into it as he stared at the darkened TV screen. His life was starting to feel like that...like images that played across a TV screen that he couldn't quite touch...couldn't comprehend. He just watched it, unable to change the channel...unable to turn it off. Unable to do anything but watch the story play out. He became more and more the distant observer of his own life. Most times he couldn't even feel it anymore...couldn't or wouldn't.

In a flash, the images were back...the ones that assaulted when his defenses were down. He tried to stop them but as always, he couldn't change the channel...just had to watch as they played. He was back in that hotel room with Hutch. After his mother's funeral. After it all came crashing down in a drowning fury that he was helpless to stave off. The lowest point in his life. Feeling like he was falling and would never stop falling. But Hutch caught him. Caught him and comforted him and protected him. And that night in Hutch's arms had been like nothing before in his life. Beauty among the ruins. A glimmer of life amidst all the death. Confirmation that the best part of himself had not been buried too.

Oh, but how bitter the sweet. The briefest taste of what he could never fully have. The understanding that everything you could ever need was right beside you eclipsed by the realization that it could never be yours.

Hutch was his partner, his friend, his family, his life. He was all that mattered in the world anymore. Which is why he could never lose him...why he could never reach beyond what they had to seize what he needed to quiet his soul. It had all felt so perfect that night in Hutch's arms. He never wanted to let it go. Yet he could never risk getting that close to it again because he knew that next time he wouldn't be able to pull away. And then he would lose everything.

*Like you're not losing everything now, the bitter voice reminded him. Every day you push him further away. Every day you hurt him again. How long will he keep putting up with it? How long until he tells you to take a hike like he should have a long time ago.*

Starsky stood up, shaking his head hard to try to knock the voices and images from inside of him. He couldn't lose Hutch. He couldn't lose anymore. But what the hell did he have left to give Hutch anyway? A man who dreaded going to bed at night because he knew that when he woke up, that moment would come...that moment when he would awaken and have to get up...when he couldn't...when the voices inside would ask 'Why bother?' and he had no answers...when it took everything inside himself to force his body from that bed even though he couldn't answer 'why'...when he wondered for the hundredth time what would happen the next morning...would he be strong enough?

Starsky kicked at the coffee table in front of him, knocking it over on its side. He fought the images away. He needed to stop thinking about it...to stop feeling. *Just do what you gotta do. That's the only way to get through it.* And with that he forced himself into the bathroom to wash up and get ready for bed. There was another moment of apprehension as he left the bathroom and approached the bed. But he forced it back and blanked out his mind. He threw himself down onto the mattress and shut his eyes, waiting for sleep to take him...hoping it would before his mind started working again.

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A week later, Hutch walked beside his partner as they entered the station. It had been an important bust and many of their fellow detectives had stopped to congratulate them as they passed. Even Captain Dobey was waiting for them by their desk when they approached.

"Hell of a bust. Good work."

"Thanks Captain," Hutch replied as Starsky sat down quietly in his chair.

"I just got a call from Captain Stuart in Narco," Dobby continued. "They really appreciate the assist."

"That's great," Hutch responded. "Maybe he can come over here and give us an assist with all the paperwork." He indicated the stack of folders on the desk.

Dobby smiled and shook his head. "I wouldn't expect that if I were you. But I'll tell you what. Why don't you knock off early today? That'll all still be there in the morning. Paper work always looks less intimidating in the morning light."

"Gee, thanks Captain," Hutch groaned, but he knew he wasn't quite hiding the smile on his face. "You know, actually, I think it looks even better at around 10 a.m. What do you think Cap? Maybe we should come in a little later then?"

Dobby shook his head as he started for his office. "Fine, 10 a.m." he grumbled as he reached for the door.

Hutch, who had followed behind him continued his appeal. "You know, 11 might even be better. I bet that paperwork would be barely noticeable at 11."

Dobby turned around and glared at Hutch who was trying to look innocent. "Don't push it, Hutchinson or you'll be in here at 6:30 a.m."

"You know on second thought, 10 seems like just the right time. I think you were right Captain. 10 a.m. sharp."

"Not a minute after," Dobby barked. "Now get out of here before I change my mind about the leaving early."

"Yes, sir. Whatever you say."

Dobby went into his office and slammed the door. As Hutch turned to walk back towards the desk, he saw Starsky leafing through the top folder from the pile.

"Hey, come on partner. Didn't you hear Dobby? We don't have to tackle that pile until tomorrow. We're off duty."

"You go ahead," Starsky replied in a quiet voice. "I think I'll just get started on this stuff now. I got nothing important to do tonight."

"Well we'll just find something important to do. You're not going to pass up an opportunity to get out of here early, are you?"

Hutch watched in disbelief as Starsky pulled some paper out of his drawer and began to load his typewriter. "There's a lot to do here, Hutch. If I get a jump on it now, there'll be less waiting for us in the morning."

There'll be none waiting in the morning, Hutch thought with disapproval. Starsky had become a paperwork machine, clearing it up faster than it could be laid on the desk. Of late, Starsky had thrown himself into the once despised, and avoided at all costs, task. Hutch couldn't remember the last time he himself had to finish as much as a report. Before he could even pick it up to do it, it was already done. Whenever he mentioned it, Starsky would just say something like he had extra time, or he needed to practice his typing more anyway. But Hutch knew there was more to it than that, and it bothered him.

"Yeah, but in the morning, we'll both be doing it so it will go twice as fast," Hutch stated as he pulled the sheet of paper out of the typewriter. "Right now, I think we should get out of here before Dobeey sees us and decides to have us do overtime instead of leave early."

Starsky very calmly pulled another sheet of paper out of his drawer and reloaded the typewriter as he spoke. "Hutch, if you're so anxious to leave then go. I want to get this started. Have a nice time tonight. Why don't you call...what's her name...Jane...Janis...."

"Janet," Hutch corrected with annoyance. He didn't like the way Starsky was dismissing him. Rather than get into an argument, however, he decided to try another tact. "You know, Janet has this friend; tall, red hair, legs that go on for miles. Why don't we all go out? You know, celebrate our big bust."

"No thanks," Starsky mumbled distractedly as he began to type. Hutch had an almost overpowering urge to knock the damn typewriter off the desk so Starsky would have to at least look at him. He felt the anger and frustration boiling inside of him as he watched his partner focus in on the report he was typing as if Hutch were already gone.

"Fine," Hutch stated irritably. "You want to sit here and type damn reports all night, you go ahead. I'll see you tomorrow. And don't look for me before 10." With that he started off gruffly towards the door but turned back at the sound of Starsky's voice.

"Hutch."

"What!"

"Have a good time." It was said so simply and sincerely that Hutch paused, speechless. Starsky looked up at him and smiled then, an open, caring smile that lent credence to the words. The anger drained completely from Hutch's body almost as fast as it had risen.

"Thanks," Hutch muttered as he tried to think of something more to say. But then Starsky turned back to the typewriter and once again became immersed in the report before him.

Hutch left quietly, his mind on his partner as he headed out of the station. Just what the hell was going on between them? He couldn't explain it. All he knew was that Starsky just wasn't Starsky. Except at work. On the job, he was still the intuitive, smart, savvy cop he had always been. His performance today proved that. But when Hutch thought about it harder, he did see a change there too. Oh, Starsky still did the job, no question about it. But there was a coolness there; an icy efficiency that somewhere along the line had replaced the buoyant passion. He was a good, hard working, effective, thorough, detective. He just wasn't Starsky. Not the Starsky Hutch had

been partnered with for all these years.

Approaching his car now, Hutch thought harder, determined to figure some things out. He thought about his own dark period; the days when police work had lost any meaning for him and he was just going through the motions. Was that how it was now for Starsky? No, it didn't feel like that. There wasn't any anger there, any hostility or dissatisfaction. Hutch felt angry at the world during that period and came to hate this job and all it stood for. He was an angry cop and it showed in every move he made. It wasn't like that with Starsky. There was no rage there.

Sitting in the car now, Hutch held the key in his hand but did not slip it into the ignition. Instead he thought about how Starsky was after Nick died. Was it like this? After Gunther, Starsky had come back on the force so full of excitement and enthusiasm after his hard road to recovery. He tackled the job with renewed vigor, as though getting back to being a cop and being Hutch's partner were the greatest things in the world. Then Nick died, and he went through all that grief and pain. But he was still there somehow, still connected to things. He yelled and he cried sometimes, mostly he talked...talked about how hard it was, how worried he was about his mom, how much he missed his brother. He was sad and he was hurting but he was still Starsky. Hutch still knew how to talk to him, how to help him.

Now it was like...what? Hutch thought about Starsky's description of one of those crazy movies he loved. He was like one of those pod people. It was Starsky on the outside but nothing on the inside. He went through the motions of Starsky's life but seemed detached from it at the same time. Most worrisome of all, he seemed determined to stay detached...like he was using all his energy to keep everyone and everything else out. But why? Why would this man who had leaned on him through so many crises...who had seen Hutch through an equal number of disasters as well, suddenly want to build these walls around himself?

Did I do something to hurt him? Did betray his trust in some way? Is this my fault? Hutch scoured his mind trying to come up with something he had done to bring all this about. Maybe if he could just figure it out, he could fix it.

Turning the key slowly in the ignition, Hutch finally decided to start the car. He thought about where he wanted to go. He really didn't feel like going out with Janet. He had only been out with her a few times. She had been a convenient way to pass the time and keep his mind off his worries. But tonight he didn't want any distractions. He decided it was best to just go home, sit quietly and try to think this thing through. Maybe, if he was lucky, he would come up with some answers.

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As Hutch stood outside the door of Starsky's apartment that following Saturday, he had to bring his finger to the bell three times before he could ring it. He had been mulling this over for days, but now that he was finally here, he questioned the decision. He had convinced himself that Starsky's pulling away must have something to do with a lack of supportiveness on his part. He obviously wasn't demonstrating forcefully enough that he was here for him. Maybe he needed to be more persistent. He thought back to the days right after Starsky's mother's death. He had barely left his partner's side then, despite not having been asked to be there.

*But he did say several times how glad he was you were there...how much he needed you there. He doesn't say that kind of stuff now. He asks you to leave now.*

Confused, Hutch began to wonder again if he should be here. The intent was to stay closer; to be there for Starsky even when his partner's behavior made it difficult or uncomfortable to do so. Maybe Starsky couldn't ask for his help right now, but that didn't mean he needed it less. Maybe the turning away was just a silent plea for help.

But was pushing support on him the way to go?

*...don't make it harder...*Starsky's voice rang in his memory.

*Damn,* Hutch thought, *what did he mean by that? Stay away?*

The only problem with that was Hutch didn't know how to stay away. Not where his partner was concerned. It was not something he ever had to do before.

As the door started to open, Hutch had a fleeting thought about running before Starsky saw him. But it was too late now. Starsky was staring into his eyes with a bewildered expression.

"Hutch, what are you doing here?"

"I had nothing to do," Hutch answered, trying hard to sound casual. "I was getting bored staring at my walls so I thought I'd come over here for a change of scenery. I hope you don't mind."

Hutch half expected Starsky to say 'I say do mind' and slam the door in his face. But instead, he merely shrugged and stepped back from the door to allow Hutch entrance. Maybe the original instinct was right. Maybe Starsky did need him here. After all, he let him in without a fuss.

As Hutch stepped inside, he realized it had been a while since he had been here. There was a time when he was here, or Starsky was at his place, at least once a day. But he hadn't been here since that dreadful Saturday two weeks ago when Starsky barely spoke to him. Would it be like that again today?

"Want a beer or something?" Starsky asked.

"Sure," Hutch answered, grateful for the welcoming gesture.

As Starsky walked toward the kitchen, Hutch stared at him more closely. Though it was nearly 2 p.m., his partner was still dressed in a pair of pajama bottoms and a wrinkled tee shirt that had obviously been slept in. His face needed a shave and his hair was disheveled, indicating that he hadn't even showered yet.

A glance around the room showed it to be in a worse state than its owner: Clutter strewn everywhere, thick coats of dust covering the furniture, coffee table over on its side. There were stacks of magazines and unopened mail lying about as well as some empty soda cans and beer bottles distributed throughout. The look of the room disturbed Hutch greatly. Not that Starsky was the most fastidious housekeeper, but he had always managed to keep his place tidy even

when he was working double shifts. Now, it was not so much that it was messy as it was 'uncared for.'

Hutch struggled to wipe any traces of concern from his face as Starsky returned with the beers. He focused his attention on a large box that sat near the couch.

"It's a little early for spring cleaning," Hutch said as he took the beer being offered and nodded towards the box.

Starsky looked at it and made an annoyed face. "It's not mine."

For a few minutes, it seemed that was all he would say. But then Starsky put his untouched beer down on the end table and walked over toward the couch. He sat down quietly, pulling the box closer toward him as he studied it with caution.

"It's Nicky's stuff," he muttered, resting his hands on the cover of the box but not removing it. "Aunt Vivian sent it here. It was in my mom's place. She had wanted this stuff when they cleaned out his place. Now they're cleaning out her place...I guess they got pissed waiting around for me to do it. Anyway, they decided that whatever they don't know what to do with, they're sending here. I got this last week."

It had been here since last week and yet it still remained unopened. Hutch moved across the room to rest a hand on Starsky's shoulder in an effort to offer comfort. The reaction to the gesture bothered Hutch, though he should have been getting used to it by now. Starsky never brushed off his touches or flinched, but there was a definite uneasiness and discomfort that came over him whenever Hutch made contact. And his once overtly tactile friend rarely reached out in any way anymore.

*What the hell is that about? When did the things that always came so easily between us suddenly become so hard?*

Hutch removed the hand, not wanting to do anything to make Starsky uncomfortable, though something that bordered on resentment stirred in him. He forced it deep, reminding himself that he came here to be supportive not to lament his own wounds.

"So, are you going to go through it?" Hutch wondered as he sat down on the chair across from the couch.

"I guess," Starsky replied unenthusiastically. He lifted the lid off the box and laid it down on the floor. Gazing down into the box that seemed filled with pictures, books, mementos and some other assorted junk, his eyes grew distant. "You always wonder what you'll leave behind," he stated in an impassive voice. "Although I don't think you ever really picture it...picture people going through your stuff...looking at it...trying to decide what's important?"

"No, I guess you don't."

"Do you ever really think about it, Hutch?"

"About what?"

"About life. About what it's all for. I mean like, are we put here for a reason and when that reason's finished, we're done?"

Hutch didn't know how to respond. Starsky's voice was growing more remote, yet this was the most he had opened up in a long time. Best to just stay neutral; give him space to say what he needed to say.

"I don't know, Starsk."

"I think about it," Starsky continued as he looked forlornly into the box. "But then if that's it, what was Nicky's reason? Did he do it? Was he finished?" Starsky's left hand reached into the box and pulled out a small framed picture. It was a picture of Nick with his mother and seemed to have been taken at his Bar Mitzvah. "I think maybe he was put here to make her smile," the voice stated wistfully. "Nobody could make her smile like Nick could."

Hutch shifted in the chair, a growing sense of uneasiness coming over him. While he didn't want to interrupt if Starsky needed to get this stuff out, he couldn't help but feel that this was leading someplace very painful. Still, it was better than having Starsky crawl back into that shell again.

"She loved Nick very much," Hutch agreed quietly. "There was no doubt about that."

"I let him down, Hutch. I let them both down."

"What is it that you think you should have done?" Hutch questioned, fighting to keep his own opinion on the matter at bay.

"I don't know," the voice grew colder, full of self-loathing. "I only know what I didn't do." There was a painful edge to the voice now as Starsky stared down at the picture. "Maybe my reason to be here was to take care of them...and I blew that. So now what?" Starsky stood, anger and frustration mounting in his voice. "Why am I still here then? Was it just a fluke that Gunther's men didn't have better aim? Is my being here now just a mistake?"

Something inside Hutch flared beyond his control. Suddenly he heard his voice barking in the quiet room. "Don't say that! Don't ever say that!"

"Why? Maybe it's true." Starsky kicked the box aside as he walked toward the kitchen. Hutch stood and moved forward to grab his arm roughly.

"Don't talk like that! Not ever!" Vivid images came flooding back through Hutch's mind before he could stop them...Starsky on the ground covered in blood and riddled with bullet holes...Starsky hooked up to all kinds of tubes and monitors...the flat line squealing from the screen as doctors fought to bring him back. They were pictures stamped in Hutch's consciousness forever...the visions of a thousand nightmares.

Hutch felt himself twisting Starsky's arm tighter as the images played and replayed. He heard the fierceness in his voice when he spoke. "You didn't die because you weren't supposed to die. It

wasn't a fluke or a mistake. You were meant to be here, and you are here and that's the way it's supposed to be!"

"And Nick was *supposed* to die?" Starsky's voice was emotionless as he stared vacantly at Hutch.

"I don't know...I don't know anything about that. One thing I do know, though, is that while you were laying in that ICU fighting for your life, your brother was nowhere to be found. And during all those weeks in the hospital and all those months you fought to get well after that, he was nowhere again...no calls, no cards, no visits. Too busy out selling tainted drugs to teenagers I guess, huh?"

The minute the words were out, Hutch regretted them. Where the hell had that come from? Not that he didn't mean them though. The idea of Starsky going through all this grief over a no-good brother who hadn't even cared that Starsky had nearly died twisted something inside of Hutch.

Afraid of what he would find there, Hutch forced his eyes to meet his partners. But of all the reactions he expected, a blank, vacant stare wasn't among them. Nor was the quiet whisper that followed Hutch's unplanned outburst.

"Yeah, I know that too."

Starsky gently withdrew his arm from Hutch's grip and moved back towards the couch, staring down at the box in front of it. "I got a lot of stuff I got to get done here, Hutch. Thanks for stopping by."

*Oh shit.*

The detachment was back...the cool, emotionless veneer. Hutch wanted to scream but he wasn't sure at who, himself or Starsky. He moved to his partner, desperate to scale the walls before they closed him out again.

"Starsk, don't do this," he began in a voice he fought to keep calm. "I'm sorry about what I just said about Nick. It was out of line. But don't push me away. Let me stay here so we can talk this out."

Starsky's eyes became softer for a moment as he regarded Hutch thoughtfully. "I'm not mad at you, Hutch. You didn't say anything that wasn't true. It's not a problem. Really."

"If it's not a problem then why are you shutting me out again?"

Starsky shook his head, rubbing it as though it really hurt. His voice was confused and disjointed.

"I'm not...I...I wasn't trying to...I just have things to do now...I didn't want to make you mad...I screwed up again, didn't I?"

"You didn't screw anything up," Hutch assured despite his own confusion. He didn't have a clue what was going on here. "I just want us to talk, that's all."

"But I don't have anything I want to talk about." The look in Starsky's eyes then became all too clear to Hutch. With a sinking heart he uttered the words he didn't want to hear Starsky say.

"And you don't want me here, either. You want me to leave, right?"

He wished so much that Starsky was going to deny it, but instead, he just turned his head, unable to meet Hutch's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Hutch."

"Don't be," Hutch stated in a curt voice that masked his hurt. He headed brusquely towards the door then, calling back to his partner as he walked. "I'm sorry I bothered you."

He had gotten to the other side of the door and was closing it behind him when he heard the soft reply. "You didn't."

There was something so vulnerable in the tone that Hutch was unable to hold on to his anger, which left only the pain to contend with as he closed the door behind himself.

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Huggy walked slowly back from the bar with the beers in his hand. As he approached the corner table he studied the sullen blond carefully. He was a little surprised at the things Hutch had been telling him. Not surprised that they happened. Just surprised that Hutch had been so forthcoming.

In the past couple of months, Starsky hadn't been the only one keeping to himself. Hutch did most of his brooding silently and only occasionally did he reveal any of the confusion, worry and frustration that he had been wearing like a second skin. But Huggy saw it. Huggy saw a lot more than either of them knew. The trick was making sure he didn't intervene where he wasn't asked to.

Setting the beers down on the table, Huggy resumed his seat across from Hutch. He looked closely at the tired, troubled face and thought about that morning in the hotel room in New York. Hutch had so wanted to believe that coming home was going to be the answer to everything...well, that and a little time to heal. But life was rarely ever that simple. Especially when you didn't consider the whole picture.

"Here, drink this," Huggy said as he slid the beer towards Hutch. Hutch merely glanced at it with disinterest. "You want something to eat?" Huggy tried. "I could get you a burger or something."

"I'm not hungry," came the grumbled reply.

Huggy sat back with a sigh. "There's no easy fixes here for you, my friend. Beer and food sure aren't the answer. What is? What would make it right?"

"I didn't want to make things worse," Hutch sighed as he shook his head in disbelief at how things had turned out. "I just wanted him to talk to me...to open up."

"He did talk to you."

"I'm not talking about that," Hutch's voice became annoyed. "I don't mean going on about how he let down 'perfect' Nicky or how it was a mistake that he didn't die from those gunshots. Can you believe he said that? You remember how he looked then, Hug. How close he came. To think that he believes maybe he should have..." Hutch's hands had balled up into fists as his body twisted in the chair.

Huggy did remember. He remembered not just Starsky's state but Hutch's as well. He fully believed that had the line on that monitor remained flat, two hearts would have stopped that day and not one. *It's still so raw for you. I don't think he has any idea what you went through then...how much it scarred. That's why you can't stand hearing him talk about it like that.*

Huggy wrestled for a moment with his thoughts. Which would help Hutch more right now? Conveying his understanding of why the emotions had gotten so out of control or pushing him to see a side of this he wasn't seeing. Taking a deep breath, Huggy decided to go for the latter.

"Oh I see," he began matter of factly. "So, you want him to talk to you. But only about the things *you* want him to talk about."

"No, that's not what I meant!" The tone was expectedly indignant. "I just meant...it's just," he became flustered now as he fumbled for the words. Finally he just sighed. "I just want him to talk about the stuff that's going on with him. I just want him to let me in."

"Isn't that what he did? Maybe those were the things he needed to talk about right then. Maybe this isn't about you and what you want."

Hutch's eyes reflected shock and dismay as he regarded Huggy closely. "What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything. I was merely wondering. And while I'm at it, I wonder about something else. I wonder how you'd feel about yourself if you found out you couldn't fix this."

"I don't want to *fix* it," Hutch said the word like it bit him. "I just want to help."

"Even if helping meant staying away...not taking over...not making it all better?" Huggy tried to tread lightly on this dangerous ground, but Hutch was still becoming highly agitated.

"So what you're saying here is that this is my fault? That I'm the one who's causing him to pull back because I'm pushing too hard."

"Back to you again, huh?" Huggy shook his head in a quiet sigh.

"I don't get you, Hug. One minute you're saying it's my fault and then the next you're saying all I'm thinking about is me."

"No, that's what you're hearing. That's not what I'm saying."

Hutch was wound so tight, you could stick a pin in him and he would explode all over this bar.

There are times people aren't ready or able to hear what's being said, Huggy reminded himself. Still, he had started this and now Hutch was looking at him for answers.

"What are you saying then?" There was so much in that voice, those eyes. Annoyance, impatience, frustration...and behind all that, a naked hope that perhaps Huggy held some key to all the answers he had been wracking himself searching for. Huggy wished more than anything that he did have those answers; that somehow he had a magical way to make this right for these two dear friends who were in so much pain. He leaned forward in his chair, placing a hand over Hutch's forearm as he spoke in as gentle a voice as he could.

"I'm just a lowly barkeep, Hutch. I don't have any profound wisdom or sacred truths. I just listen and observe and try to learn from what I see. I don't have an answer for you, but I'd like you to think about a question. Who are you? Who are you when you're not the White Knight...the hero...the savior who needs to protect at all costs. Who are you when you're simply just Hutch? When you're just a man who can't make everything right. While you're lying around during your next sleepless night torturing yourself over all the things you've done wrong, see if you can find that person...and see if you can't figure out why you hate him so much."

Huggy stood then, grasping Hutch's shoulder with a comforting squeeze before returning to the bar. The confused look in Hutch's eyes confirmed Huggy's suspicions that he wasn't in that place yet to really understand. But he also knew Hutch well enough to know that he would analyze this; rehash it over and over in that never-at-rest brain of his until he could make some sense of it. Huggy only hoped that then he would be able to find the answers he was looking for.

FIVE

The cemetery was cluttered with headstones. Starsky kept tripping over them. There was no place to walk. He wanted to find a path out but there was no path. Just more and more headstones crowding in on him. There was no space, no air. He fought to get a deep breath but couldn't. Something was pressing down on his chest, constricting it.

It was dark now. Dark and damp. Still so little air. He bumped against one of the headstones and fell against it. He tried to get up but he couldn't. Again, the pressure bearing down on him.

"You can't, David," came the voice. He looked all around but couldn't see it in the dark. "There's nothing you can do."

He tried to call out to the voice, but he had no voice himself. No words would come. He saw the box then. It was familiar somehow. A casket. A casket surrounded by all the tombstones. He tried to go towards it but couldn't find a place to put his feet. There was no place to move.

A blurred image by the casket. It looked like a picture. A picture of his father. The one that stood on the mantel at home. The voice was coming from the picture. "There's nothing for you to do. Go away now."

His mother was there next to the picture that spoke. Nicky was holding her hand. Nicky like in the Bar Mitzvah picture. They had that same smile. "I'm going with Nicky now, Davey. You go on home."

Inside his head Starsky was screaming but no words were heard. He tried again to move there, but the heavy weight was on his chest. Nicky was grown-up then. He was laughing. "You can't do nothing for me, Davey. Go on home now. We don't need you."

Nicky and Ma and Dad's picture were moving away from him now. He was cut off...alone in the dark. It was so dark. There was no air. He needed air.

He was in a room now. The room was dark and he couldn't breathe. People were pulling at him but they had no faces...just hands reaching and grabbing. They wanted something but he didn't have it. But they kept pulling at him. He couldn't talk to them...couldn't tell them he didn't have it. He couldn't breathe. They were going to crush him.

But then Hutch was on the floor in front of him. He was opening his shirt and wiping a cool cloth across his chest. The people were pushing behind Hutch, but he didn't let go. He put the blanket around Starsky and picked him up.

Hutch held him close in the bed. Starsky felt the warm hands all over him, stroking him, holding him, touching him. He tried to touch back but he couldn't move. Hutch's face was so close...beautiful lips whispering to him, "It's OK babe, I'm right here."

Starsky's whole body strained to get closer. He had to tell him...tell him now. Beg him not to leave...beg to be loved. Hutch's hand was on his chest helping him breathe. Starsky couldn't move...couldn't tell him. It was all so right. All so right. He could feel their bodies

touching...Hutch's mouth was so close. Please kiss me...please...please...please. The longing that was pain ripped through him. The ache so familiar...the want...the need...but he couldn't speak...couldn't move.

The hands were back, pulling again. They pulled at Hutch. Hutch would go with them because Starsky wouldn't stop him. But I can't. Hutch don't.

With everything inside he tried to scream...to call Hutch back, but there was no voice...no words....

The hands were pulling at him again...pulling him down...he couldn't breathe...it was too dark. He was in the box...the pine box...it confined his body so he couldn't move. There was no light...no air...so cold...why can't I scream?

Starsky sat upright in the bed, shaking. He fumbled beside him trying to find the switch for the lamp. The phone fell off the night stand as his arm banged into it. Finally getting the light on, he looked around the empty room searchingly. For a few moments, he wasn't sure where he was. This wasn't the hotel room. Wait, no, this was home. His bedroom.

Images from the nightmare were still fresh...his body still felt tight, as though he couldn't breathe. He darted up out of the bed, needing to know that he could move. There was a fear inside of him...a scared, lonely ache that he couldn't shake even though he now realized it was all a dream.

The sound of the beeping startled him and he jumped. He turned toward the phone on the floor. The receiver was off the hook which is why it was making that sound. He slumped down on the floor beside the phone and grabbed it tightly. He needed to call Hutch. He had to hear Hutch's voice.

Starsky had already dialed the first 3 digits when he slammed the phone down hard. What was he going to say?

Hutch, help me. I had a nightmare.

Hutch, come and hold me. I'm so scared.

Oh god, Hutch. I don't know what's happening to me anymore.

Starsky's trembling hands put the phone back on the night stand as he struggled to get a grip on himself. After all, it wasn't like he didn't have nightmares all the time, right? It was just that lately...well, it was getting harder and harder. He hated going to bed. He dreaded it.

But what was Hutch going to do? Maybe he'd come over. Maybe he'd wrap me in his arms like that night. That beautiful, perfect night. He could hold me and I could feel safe. I could feel his strength all around me. Feel his love. Oh god, I need that love.

And then what? What would happen then? What would happen this time? Starsky knew that he wasn't weak and exhausted and out of it like he was then. Nothing would stop his body from

reacting this time. Nothing would keep his limbs from trembling; his breath from quickening; his heart from pounding; his groin from responding. Nothing would stop him from reacting as he had in the countless dreams he'd had of that night since. Sometimes those dreams were worse than the nightmares. Those dreams where he would wake up in Hutch's arms in that hotel bed and Hutch would stroke his face and his hair and his back. The crystal blue eyes would look straight into his soul and they would know the truth; there would be no hiding it from their knowing gaze. And it would all be OK. Hutch would understand, and he would smile that dazzling smile. He would look at Starsky in that way that he only used for his partner. He would chide Starsky for keeping it hidden for so long. And then Hutch would lean forward and touch those moist, luscious lips against Starsky's and....

Stop it! Don't do this again. No more!

Starsky stood up and walked to the bathroom fighting to clear his head of the images. After he had relieved himself and splashed water on his face, he looked at his reflection in the mirror. Who was this person? Who was this man that didn't know how to smile anymore? Who was this man who had to force himself to eat, who feared going to sleep, who felt alone in a crowded room? Who belonged to this tired, listless body that felt as though all the blood had been drained out of it; as though a wet, heavy blanket had been thrown upon it, constantly pulling it down? Starsky had no answers to any of those questions. More frightening, perhaps, was that he wasn't even sure he cared what the answers were anymore.

He dragged himself back into the bedroom, staring at the bed as though it were the enemy. He knew he should be able to do this. He knew he needed to get some rest since he could feel the exhaustion that permeated his entire being. He knew they were only dreams and therefore not real.

He knew he wasn't getting back in that bed.

In the living room, Starsky flipped on the TV as he made his way to the couch. Flopping down on it, he stared at the screen, hoping he could make some sense out of the images, the dialogue; hoping he could make some connection with whatever this was and give his mind a place to focus for a while. It wasn't working though. The characters on the screen could have been speaking Japanese for all he was discerning.

The feelings began to creep up on him again. Loneliness. Isolation. Pain. Fear. He felt his eyes begin to well and his stomach lurch. It was like a volcano brewing so close to the surface. For a brief moment, it threatened to overwhelm everything. But he wouldn't let it erupt.

Just make it go away. Push it back. Just don't feel it.

Starsky took a deep breath and submerged all the emotions in a practiced manner. Just turn it all off. Tune it out like the TV. As long as his mind stayed blank, he would be safe.

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It was near 7:30 p.m. Wednesday when Hutch slowed his car to a stop outside of Starsky's apartment. He moved the gear stick into the 'Park' position and sat back in his seat, staring

thoughtfully at his partner. Starsky was slumped over to one side, his right cheek pressed against the glass of the side window, fast asleep. Hutch was hesitant to wake him. He looked so beat. Besides, it was the first unguarded moment they had spent together all week.

The events of the past weekend had left their mark. Starsky was more distant than ever, seeming almost like a body with no soul inside. And Hutch refused to push it. He knew he had screwed up Saturday and still felt guilty and awkward about it. *Luckily* for them, crime in LA had been on the upswing the past few days. They had been busy enough on the street that the personal silence between them had been almost unnoticeable. Almost.

Except for the fact that it hung like a dark cloud over them; obscuring all the light, bearing down, oppressively suffocating.

Hutch leaned forward, taking this rare opportunity to study his partner's face closely without being questioned. Starsky was so tired. It was more than a physical tired, although that was there too. But this seemed more like a tiredness of spirit; like a crucial life-force was being slowly drained.

Hutch had sensed that Starsky hadn't been sleeping well these past months. The dark circles under his eyes were becoming a part of his features. But the past few days, the problem seemed to have worsened. Every move he made seem to require maximum effort. By the end of the day, there was a weariness that suffused his entire being. Tonight, he had fallen asleep five minutes after sitting down in the car seat. Yeah, it had been a hectic day and Hutch had felt the strain himself. But his partner seemed to be depleted in a way that went beyond the stress of the job.

*What's going on with you, babe? Why won't you let me help you?*

Even in sleep the face was troubled. There was a tightness to the features that indicated even sleep was not a respite. Hutch gazed down to the left hand that was clenched in a fist, knuckles white with tension. Without thinking, he laid his hand on top of the fist and began to stroke it gently. He needed so much to soothe some of that tension; to just for a moment ease some of that tightly wound ball of pain.

Starsky stirred slightly, a sound of discomfort escaping from his throat. Hutch noticed the fluttering behind the closed lids and knew he was caught in some kind of dream. Hoping to ease him from its grip, Hutch slid closer along the seat until he was pressed up next to Starsky. He continued to stroke the hand while he reached over with his other arm and trailed his fingers softly through Starsky's curls.

Starsky moaned again, more painfully this time. It was a harsh, stifled sound, like a scream that was trapped unuttered. All of Hutch's protective instincts came alert as he pushed closer still. Starsky's breathing became irregular as he struggled for air.

"It's OK, Starsk," Hutch whispered, trying to coax him awake. "It's just a dream. Let it go."

Hutch felt the body beside him grow rigid as the fluttering eyelids tore open. The look in the expressive blue eyes was a mixture of pain, disorientation and fear. Starsky was gasping noiselessly as his eyes roamed searchingly, trying to get his bearings.

"It's OK, you're safe. I'm right here. It was just a dream."

Starsky turned towards the voice. Because of their proximity, this brought his face directly in front of Hutch's. Hutch could feel the shaky breath brush against his cheek as Starsky blinked his eyes hard, trying to see beyond whatever vestiges of the nightmare remained.

"Hutch?" The voice was hoarse and scratchy.

"Yeah, I'm right here, babe. Take it easy. I'm right here." Hutch continued to draw his fingers through Starsky's hair in a comforting gesture. Starsky's eyes bore into his as though they wanted to crawl inside them. The tension in the taut body relaxed a fraction as Starsky let out a long sigh.

Hutch looked deeply into the face that was more open to him than it had been in a long time. He could see Starsky there...the partner he knew and missed and loved. Hutch slid his hand down from the curls to caress the side of that face that he had missed so much.

"Hutch." The voice was more relaxed this time: more affirmation than question. Starsky closed his eyes, leaning his face into Hutch's hand. The fist that he had been holding in his other hand loosened and unsteady fingers interlocked with his. Something stirred deep inside Hutch. It had been so long since Starsky had let himself be touched, had responded to it so openly. Hutch only now fully realized how much he had missed the contact. It was as though he hadn't allowed himself to recognize the longing before because it had been too painful. But now, in this moment, for the first time in a long time, he felt whole...completed.

"I'm right here, buddy," Hutch assured softly. *And you're right here where you belong.*

Starsky's eyes opened slowly. They were soft and moist and vulnerable. They were the most beautiful sight Hutch had seen in a long time. There was something so compelling in those eyes. Something that called to Hutch. Something that drew a response from someplace so deep inside that he couldn't put a name to it. Those eyes were calling to him. There was a need there...a need for something that only Hutch could fulfill. Somewhere inside he must have the answer that his partner needed. In that brief moment he knew whatever it was Starsky needed, only he could give it.

But in the next moment, everything changed. Something panic stricken passed through Starsky's eyes. His body became rigid and his hand pulled back from Hutch's as though it were on fire. The eyes that had just been so open, so guileless, became closed and distant; unreadable. Starsky pulled back in the seat, plastering himself against the door as he fumbled for the handle.

Hutch fought to understand what was happening. What brought this on? What did he do wrong? He reached out toward Starsky, struggling for words as his mind continued to race. "Wait, what's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing's wrong," Starsky lied agitatedly. "I just gotta go. Goodnight, Hutch."

"Starsky, no, wait!" But Starsky had finally located the door handle and already had one foot on the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry, Hutch. Goodnight." And with that, he was gone, sprinting off towards the building as the car door slammed behind him.

Hutch sat, unable to move, staring at the empty seat where his partner had just been moments before. *What the hell just happened here?* For a few brief glorious moments, Starsky was Starsky and all was right with Hutch's world. And then...smack...it was all over, and the stranger was back. What happened in between?

Hutch wasn't sure how long he sat immobilized in his car. It was 8:40 when he finally found the coherence to put the car into 'Drive' and begin the journey home. He got there mostly on instinct since his brain was busy replaying the evening over and over. Repeated viewing of the events only served to heighten his confusion. Finally, he just gave up trying, dragging himself from the car and up the stairs to his place, feeling defeated and exhausted.

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The next two days were very tense. The conversations between them were kept strictly to the job, and even then the exchanges were minimal. Hutch made a couple of attempts to bring up what had happened in the car, but Starsky became unnerved and defensive, insisting that everything was all right. Finally, Hutch just let it lay, totally at a loss as to how to deal with the situation.

His concern for his partner continued to build, however. At times, Starsky seemed like a tightly wound bomb ready to explode at any moment. At other times, he appeared numb, seemingly oblivious to what was going on, both around him and inside of him. Hutch had never felt so helpless where his partner was concerned. He could see the distress signals so clearly but was clueless about how to respond to them.

Frustration and worry escalating, Hutch could no longer stand by and do nothing. He had decided that even if he couldn't do anything to help Starsky, that didn't mean no one could. By the end of the shift on Friday, Hutch was in Dobby's office requesting a leave of absence for his partner.

"Does Starsky want a leave of absence?" Dobby questioned from his seat behind the desk.

"No, but he needs it," Hutch responded as he paced agitatedly about the room.

"So what are you saying? You want me to force him to take a leave?"

"It's for his own good, Captain."

"And on what grounds do I make this request? On the grounds that he's too quiet? That he doesn't drive enough? That he does too much paperwork? That he's tired?"

Hutch sighed, his frustration welling. Yeah, the stuff he had been telling Dobby sounded insignificant when phrased like that. But they were all signs...all signs that something wasn't right.

"Cap," he appealed earnestly, "we know what Starsky's like and we both know that something is

terribly wrong with him. He needs some time...he needs to figure out what's going on...to try to take care of it...."

"Hutch," Dobey cut in, his voice empathetic. "I know what you're saying, believe me I do. As his friend, I'm worried about him too. But as his Captain, I have no grounds to force him to take a leave. He does his job, Hutch. There's no disputing that."

"But it's *how* he does it, Cap," Hutch insisted. "He goes through the motions. He's efficient and thorough, but there's no heart in it. It's like he's on auto-pilot; some instinct that makes him get out of bed and come to work every day, but that's all there is."

Dobey stood then, moving around to the front of the desk where he sat on its edge next to Hutch. "You're not telling me anything I haven't seen with my own eyes. He's in a bad way, has been for months. It pains me to watch it and I would do whatever I could to help, but I can't do what you're asking. You know that." Dobey reached out a hand and placed it on Hutch's shoulder. There was compassion in his eyes. "Hutch, I know what this is doing to you, how hard it is."

Back to you again, huh? Huggy's voice echoed in his ear.

Was that what this was about? Did he come in here because it was what Starsky needed or what he needed to do? Was this just another attempt to *fix it*?

"I'm sorry, Cap. You're right. I had no right to ask you to put him on leave. It's his life. I shouldn't be in here trying to run it." Hutch felt tired and dispirited.

"You were worried. It's very understandable. Hutch, I'm here for you too, you know. If you need to talk...."

"I know. I appreciate it." Hutch turned to leave then, not even hearing the last thing Dobey uttered before he closed the door behind him. Starsky was at his desk, typing diligently.

Hutch just stood quietly in front of Dobey's door looking at him.

Who are you when you're simply just Hutch? When you're just a man who can't make everything right?

"Jane called," Starsky's voice called to him.

"Huh?" Hutch's mind was a million miles away.

"I said Jane called."

"Jane? Oh, you mean Janet."

"Whatever. She said she'll be waiting for you at 8:00."

"Thanks," Hutch murmured as he made his way towards his desk. He had made that date over a week ago and promptly forgotten all about it. Oh well, what the hell. It beat brooding, didn't it?

Picking up his jacket off the back of his chair, Hutch spoke quietly to his partner. "I'm gonna get going. Have a good weekend."

He had started towards the door, not expecting much response when Starsky's voice halted him.

"Hutch, hold up. Can I hitch a ride?"

Hutch was taken aback. He thought sure that Starsky was going to stay here buried in that pile of paperwork. "Yeah, sure, I didn't know you were ready." *Or willing to ride home with me. You wouldn't last night.*

"I can finish it Monday," Starsky said, nodding toward the folders on his desk as he stood up and put on his jacket.

"I'm sure it will still be there," Hutch responded, not knowing what else to say. Talking to Starsky had become an exercise in avoidance. He chose every word carefully, hoping that he didn't pick the wrong ones.

Starsky didn't say anything more. He just came up beside Hutch to indicate he was ready to leave. And with that, they walked quietly from the station house.

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Sitting at the table across from Hutch, the voice in Starsky's head kept asking him what he was doing. Hutch was obviously surprised when Starsky invited him in for a beer, but Starsky was even more surprised that the words had come out of his mouth. This wasn't a good idea. It was too dangerous, especially after what had happened in the car the other night.

Watching Hutch bring the beer to his mouth, Starsky focused on the moist lips, memories flooding back to him. At first, he had believed it was another dream, waking up to find Hutch so close to him, touching him. The touch was like a salve on his open wounds...the gentle voice hushing the raging fear...the sincere blue eyes offering sanctuary from the isolation. Defenseless, Starsky's shields began to crumble and everything that had been held at bay for so long began to surge forward in an overpowering rush.

In that brief moment he almost gave into it, too tired to fight any more. But then some deep-seated survival instinct kicked in and he fled. He had spent the last two days, and sleepless nights, trying to push all of those emotions back beneath the surface where he would be safe from them. But the strain between him and Hutch had intensified, and it was tearing him apart. He had seen the look on Hutch's face as he fled from the car. He had seen the look last Saturday when he asked Hutch to leave. Every day, every moment, he seemed to discover some new way to hurt this man that he only wanted to love.

"So, are you taking the car into Merle tomorrow?"

Hutch's question broke the silence between them and Starsky fought to clear his mind.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, I guess so."

He hadn't really thought about it. He had no real desire to drive anywhere. Still, he really should get it fixed. It wasn't right for Hutch to have to be chauffeuring him to work every day.

"Sorry. I know it's a pain having to pick me up all the time."

"It's not that," Hutch was quick to clarify. "I was just wondering, that's all. I know how much you hate riding around in my car."

A shadow of a smile came upon Starsky unexpectedly, as he remembered some of the not-so-subtle ways he had gotten that point across to Hutch over the years.

"It's not so bad," he mumbled, enjoying the confounded look in Hutch's eyes. Starsky motioned towards the half-empty beer bottle. "You want something else? Another beer? Something to eat? I can make you a sandwich."

"No thanks. I'm good."

"Oh yeah, that's right. You gotta get going. You have a date." Starsky regretted the flip tone, but Hutch seemed not to notice. He glanced at his watch casually.

"No, it's OK. I've got time."

Again, the silence fell, but it wasn't a comfortable silence. It seemed like a lifetime ago since there was that ease between them; that affinity that made even the quiet moments relaxed. Everything was hard now and Starsky knew it was because of him. But knowing that didn't make him any more able to solve the problem. Still, he really needed to put something right. It wasn't fair to keep hurting Hutch just because he was such a screwed-up mess.

"Listen, Hutch, about Saturday," he began hesitantly, trying to tackle one of the issues that hung between them. "I don't want you to think I didn't appreciate your being here. And I'm sorry if I upset you."

"I'm the one who should be sorry." Hutch jumped at the opportunity to discuss the topic. "I was way out of line saying those things about Nick."

"You were just saying what you thought...telling the truth. I can't fault you for that." *I can't fault you for not being a coward like me.*

"Whatever he was, he was still your brother." Hutch's voice was tender...the way it was in the car. "I know you're hurting over it, Starsk. I just want to help."

There it was again...that look in Hutch's eyes that made Starsky's insides turn to mush. The look that made him weak, left him unguarded. The look he couldn't afford to bask in.

He got up, moving away from the table. Away from those eyes.

"I put the box in the closet. I figured it's not going anywhere. I can go through it some other time."

"That sounds like a good idea."

Starsky had moved into the living room to the couch, where he sat down. Hutch followed in after him, sitting down in the chair.

*Why did I do this? Why did I ask him here?*

At the same time he questioned it, he knew the answer. More and more the loneliness had been threatening to envelop him. It nearly did Saturday the moment Hutch closed the door behind him. And Wednesday...coming up from that car...coming in here to the emptiness and the memories and the desolation....

But even now, sitting here with Hutch, none of it abated. The feeling of isolation had grown so strong, it followed him whether he was alone in a room or not. It was like he was cut off; adrift on this island where nobody could reach him, and he didn't even remember how to call out for help. He didn't know what he would say if he did call out. There didn't seem to be any words to describe what he felt anymore. All he knew was that it was dark and oppressive and consuming...and utterly helpless.

"Did you hear Miller got promoted?"

Starsky struggled to focus on the neutral conversation Hutch was trying to draw him into.

"Yeah, that's great. He deserved it."

"Hey, did he show you the pictures of that new baby of his?"

"Of course he did. He couldn't stop beaming." Starsky paused for a moment, thinking back to the picture of the brand new, brown-eyed baby boy. "Nicholas," he muttered without thinking.

"Shit."

Starsky looked up to see Hutch's face drain of color. Obviously, his partner hadn't been thinking about the newborn's name when he brought up this 'safe' topic. Starsky hastened to defuse the guilt Hutch was sure to feel.

"It's OK. It's not a big deal."

"Yeah, it is a big deal," Hutch snapped in annoyance which was directed more at himself than at Starsky. "I don't seem to be able to say anything to you without screwing up anymore."

"Don't do that, Hutch. It's not you."

"Really? Then what is it? What is it that makes us sit here like a couple of strangers, tip-toeing around each other, searching for small talk?"

The hurt in Hutch's eyes ran deep. Starsky began to realize how hard his partner had been working these past months to mask it.

*I put that hurt in your eyes and you work your ass off trying to protect me from it. Jeez, what a shallow shit I am.*

"It's not you," Starsky repeated. "You don't do anything wrong. Your only mistake is putting up with me."

"What does that mean?" Hutch seemed desperate to understand. Starsky wished he understood it himself so he could free Hutch from worrying about it.

"I don't know what it means." Starsky stood up, his own agitation making him restless. "I think maybe it means you better go. Staying around me right now is just going to make things worse for you."

Hutch stood too, his voice straining to stay calm but losing the battle.

"You think it's that easy? You think I just walk out that door and...poof!...you're out of my mind and all is wonderful? Is that what you think?"

"No," Starsky uttered, the tension in his head beginning to pound in a painful rhythm. "I just...I can't do this Hutch."

"So you want me to leave? That's what you want?" There was a bitter edge to the words that revealed the inner turmoil.

"Yes," Starsky whispered as he turned away, unable to face him.

"Oh, no you don't." Hutch was immediately beside him, determined hands gripping him and turning him around, forcing him to face the damage he had done.

"Stop hiding! If you've got something to say to me then you say it to my face. What do you want, Starsk? You want me to leave and pretend everything's fine? You want me to keep ignoring this thing that's festering between us like it's no big deal? What do you want?!"

The eyes that bore into him were even more demanding than the hands that held him; eyes that demanded answers...demanded the truth...demanded his soul.

*What do I want? I want this all to stop. I want to feel normal again. I want to stop hurting you. I want to stop waking up in the middle of the night unable to scream, unable to move. I want to end all the lies between us. I want to love you. I want to be worthy enough for you to love me back. I want to believe that I can curl up inside your strong, loving arms and shut all of this out...make it all stop. I want to be able to feel again without the fear that if I do, I'll be swallowed up inside that black murky swamp that's just waiting to drown me.*

Head swirling, Starsky heard his voice mumbling words before his brain got a chance to censor them.

"I want you to stay...I don't want you to leave."

The grip on his arms loosened as the eyes staring down at him softened.

"Fine. No problem." The voice was so soothing, so gentle, Starsky felt disarmed by its caress.

Mind still swimming, Starsky fought to comprehend what was happening. Vaguely, he was aware of Hutch moving towards the phone. He made out pieces of the conversation with Jane or Janis or whatever her name was. From what he could gather, she was none-too-thrilled with his partner's last-minute cancellation, but Hutch didn't seem in the least concerned or apologetic. Starsky got the impression that Jane wouldn't be making any more calls to the station in the near future.

*What the hell are you doing? Why did you do that? Why are you doing this to him? How did you let this happen?*

Starsky was fighting desperately to remember what he had said. So many things had been screaming in his mind. Which of them had he said aloud? It was all so cloudy. He was so tired. His head hurt so much.

*'Stay.' You asked him to stay.*

"OK. That's done. See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Hutch seemed so relaxed, so at ease. "All you had to do is tell me, buddy. Is that so hard?"

"No," Starsky was mumbling nearly incoherently. "No, that's not right." He walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver, holding it out towards Hutch with his unsteady hand. "Call her back. Tell her it was a mistake. Tell her you're coming."

Hutch was looking at him totally baffled. "What?"

"It's not too late. You can call her back. You can..." Starsky stopped, trying to get a deep breath. His pulse was racing way too fast.

Hutch took the receiver from his hand and hung it up. "Starsky, I'm not calling her back. You asked me to stay and I'm staying. I want to stay. It's all right."

That voice again. That voice would be his undoing if he wasn't careful. He felt the sweat breaking out across his forehead as he fought once more to clear his mind...steady his voice.

"I don't want you to do this. You need to go."

"Didn't we just go through this?" Hutch sighed, a note of exasperation in his voice.

"I shouldn't have said what I said. I didn't mean to...I..."

"You what? You didn't mean the words, or you didn't mean to let them slip out?"

*Oh God, I can't do this. Please make it stop.*

"I'm sorry, Hutch."

"I don't want you to be sorry. Just talk to me, Starsk. You want me here. I know you do. Why are you trying to push me away again? Just talk to me."

The voice was so imploring, the face so compassionate. Starsky wished with everything inside of him that he could find a way to keep from failing Hutch again. But he knew there was no avoiding it. He didn't have what Hutch needed. He didn't have what anyone needed. There were no answers...no explanations...no words. Why couldn't Hutch see that? Why couldn't anyone see that?

"I can't...I just can't..." He struggled to keep his limbs from shaking as he backed away from Hutch. "Please Hutch...just go...just leave it alone...."

He headed for the bedroom, closing and locking the door behind him as he heard Hutch's distressed calls.

"Starsky! Damn it, don't do this! Starsky!"

The knob rattled and the door shook as Hutch tried to gain entrance.

"Open the door!"

Starsky's knees gave out and he slumped down to the floor with his back against the door as Hutch continued to pound on it.

"This is ridiculous. Open the damn door, Starsky!"

Starsky fought for breath as the room before him blurred. He could feel his heart beating hard against his chest as he struggled to control the overload.

*Just push it away. Block it out. Make it stop.*

"Fine, Starsky. You want to run, run. But I'm not going anywhere. I said I was staying and I'm staying. Sooner or later you're going to have to face this."

The body huddled against the door barely heard the words.

*Push it back. Just don't think about it. Don't think about anything.*

With effort, he forced air in and out of his lungs while his mind strove for nothingness.

*Everything will be OK if you just don't think.*

~~~~~

Light pierced persistently through his heavy, closed lids. He tried to ignore it, not wanting to be pulled from the grip of sleep. He was tired. So tired. His body felt as though it weighed a thousand pounds and at least a hundred of those pounds were weighing down his eyelids.

Despite his reluctance, awareness was creeping back, his mind ascending from the depths of

sleepfulness of its own accord.

As the swollen lids slit open, his pupils were assaulted by the shaft of sunlight blazing in through the window. A sharp pain coursed through his eyes and reverberated in his already throbbing head. With effort, he was able to shift his body, turning his back to the brightly lit window.

That simple movement nearly depleted him. He lay still for a long time after that, hoping that sleep would once again claim him. That was not to be, however, as his mind was working against him.

Piece by piece, the memories filtered back. Awareness came with them. He was stretched across the foot of the bed, still fully dressed. Somewhere in the night he had made it from the floor to here, but the details of the journey were sketchy.

He wasn't sure how long he had sat on the floor before that. There were blurred recollections; fighting for breath...limbs quaking...mind fighting to shut down...body becoming limp with exhaustion.

And before that?

Hutch.

He wondered if Hutch was still out there. Surely he would have left by now, wouldn't he? Starsky knew he had to go out there and see...go out and face the million things he needed to face...yet he couldn't muster the energy to do so.

Today was Saturday, wasn't it? No need to get up. There was no work to do today. Maybe he could just lay here until it was Monday again...or maybe even beyond that. What difference did it make?

Time passed again unnoticed. Was it minutes, hours? He couldn't relax enough to fall back to sleep, yet he couldn't rouse the energy to move from the bed either. He began to wonder if he laid here long enough would everything else around him just disappear?

No such luck, I'll bet.

Eventually, the pressure on his bladder made moving a necessity. Fleeting, he considered just letting it go right there. The self-disgust engendered by that image provided enough motivation to rouse his body from the bed.

Soundlessly, he unlocked and opened the door. Apprehensive about what he would find on the other side, he ventured forth with caution.

The apartment was quiet. He stopped in the bathroom to take care of business and then walked silently out to the living room.

Hutch was sprawled on the couch -- half sitting, half laying -- with the afghan tossed over part of his body. He was asleep, although it didn't look like a restful sleep. It seemed born more of

exhaustion then relaxation.

The guilt that filled Starsky at the sight threatened to overwhelm him. For a moment, he considered fleeing the apartment and never looking back...never returning to have to face the pain that surely lurked behind those closed eyelids. The pain that he caused.

“Sooner or later you're going to have to face this.”

Maybe Hutch was right about that. Starsky didn't know. All he knew for sure was that he couldn't leave. He had hurt Hutch enough for one lifetime. To let him wake up and find that his partner had slipped out, abandoned him...no, he couldn't do that. He had done enough damage already.

Having decided he was staying, he was faced with the dilemma of what to do with himself. He needed to do something, anything. Anything that would keep him from having to think too much.

He had no desire to go back in the bedroom. It had taken tremendous effort to get out of bed once today. He wasn't sure if he would be able to do it again. He risked waking Hutch if he did anything in the living room. That left the kitchen.

Wandering in there aimlessly, he noted what a mess his kitchen had become. When was the last time he cleaned in here? He moved towards the stack of dishes that lay unwashed in the sink. The idea of washing them wasn't very appealing, but at least it was something to do.

He began the chore with minimal enthusiasm, leaning up against the sink as he held his hands under the steady stream of water. His tired mind drifted, focusing alternately on the sound of the water, the smell of the soap, the feel of the sponge. When awareness returned, he was surprised to find he had been soaping all the dishes and laying them on the counter in the same manner Hutch always used. Hutch....

He didn't leave me. He stayed here all night even though I acted like a crazy shit.

The thought was comforting and frightening all at once. It touched him to know how deeply Hutch cared. But he knew he didn't deserve it. He knew eventually he would ruin it. And when it was gone....

Starsky shuddered with the chill that ran through him. How long until it was gone? His hands began to tremble in the water as he thought about last night. Soaping the glass he held with a vengeance, he began to wonder if somehow he had purposely hurt Hutch.

You know some part of you enjoyed it. One word from you and he blew her off without even blinking an eye.

Starsky got the glass to the counter a moment before he would have dropped it. Christ, was he manipulating Hutch? Using his partners loyalty to keep Hutch with him?

You keep pushing him away, but the more you push, the more he comes back. Is that what you wanted?

Starsky viciously grabbed the handle of the pot and brutalized it with the soap. The harsh self-loathing that was infusing him threatened to choke him. He never, ever wanted to do anything to hurt Hutch. Hutch was the only thing in the world that even mattered any more.

Then why do you keep hurting him? Why do you claim to love him and then treat him so horribly?

A side of Starsky's consciousness tried to fight back, reminding him he wasn't doing it on purpose. He never meant to hurt Hutch. Everything was just spinning out of control and he was hanging on as best he could. But an angry voice inside berated him for his selfishness.

He's your partner. In spite of everything, you're supposed to look out for him. But you're blowing that too...just like you did with Nicky.

Starsky's hands worked frantically at the dishes now as he tried to push the voices from his mind. But they were relentless.

You're going down...every day you sink a little further...and you're pulling him right along with you.

He knew it was true. He knew he needed to find some way to let Hutch go before he did more damage. But he also knew he couldn't. Hutch was all that was left in the world...the only thing that mattered. How could he let that go without letting himself go as well?

Pain was coursing through his body, but he became numb to it. He had gotten so good at shutting out the pain. But could he withstand the pain of losing Hutch?

Eventually, it's going to happen anyway. I can't love him the way I need to, and I can't let him go. I'm dooming him to live in this hellacious limbo with me until it destroys us both.

He felt his fists tightening as he tried to steel himself against his mind's assault. Once again, his body shook beyond his control, pain coursing through his arms and knotting his stomach and head.

Oh God, what's happening to me? Is this what it's like to go insane? How do insane people know they're insane?

"Starsk!"

The frightened call snapped him from his reverie, though his mind still felt dazed and cluttered. He looked to see Hutch striding purposefully toward him, a pale look of alarm etched in his features.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

There was a note of panic in Hutch's voice that Starsky didn't understand. He stood mutely as Hutch came up beside him reaching frantically for his arm.

"Jesus Christ, babe."

There was distress in the voice now as Hutch's hand went around Starsky's left wrist. Looking down, Starsky finally saw what had Hutch so concerned. His hand was wrapped tightly around the carving knife he had been washing. The serrated edge was closed inside his clenched fist and thin streams of blood were oozing out between his fingers.

With an almost surreal detachment, Starsky found himself watching the scene as if it were happening to someone else. He hadn't even been aware of the knife in his hand, and the sharp pain had become lost beneath the burden of everything else he was contending with.

Hutch kept a firm grip on Starsky's wrist with his left hand while carefully unfolding the fingers with his right. From somewhere in his consciousness, Starsky noted that Hutch's hands were lightly trembling.

The blade of the knife was imbedded deeply within the skin of Starsky's palm. With his hand now open, more blood was escaping from the wound and running down into the sink, mixing with the soapy bubbles near the drain to create a red, bubbly clog.

Starsky limply dropped the sponge from his right hand as he watched Hutch gingerly dislodge the knife from his broken skin. The blood started to gush full force then as Hutch dropped the red-stained knife into the sink and pulled Starsky's hand under the water.

His head reeled, making it difficult for him to concentrate on figuring out just how this had happened. Hutch was mumbling something, but he couldn't make out what it was. He numbly watched Hutch. His partner had a firm grip on his wrist, holding it under the water as he reached with his other hand to open a drawer and remove two clean dish towels.

Hutch was turning off the water now. He kept Starsky's bloody hand over the sink as he wrapped first one towel then the other tightly around it. Supporting the hand in his, he turned Starsky away from the sink.

"We need to get you to the hospital," he was saying, voice laden with mixed emotions. "That gash is too deep. You're going to need stitches."

Stitches? What the hell had he done? He looked meekly into Hutch's eyes. His friend's face was colorless, eyes burning with worry and fear. The pain he garnered from Hutch's appearance broke through his lethargy in a way that the knife could not.

"I'm sorry, Hutch," he whispered hoarsely, hearing his voice in a distant echo. The hand supporting his arm was trembling harder now. He noticed that patches of blood were already seeping through the layers of terry cloth.

"Let's just get to the hospital."

SIX

Peering into the bedroom, Hutch saw that Starsky was sleeping soundly. The pain killer they gave him at the hospital had really knocked him out. His eyes were drifting shut before Hutch could even steer him to the bed.

Closing the bedroom door quietly, Hutch walked into the living room and flopped down onto the couch. His head spun as the adrenaline rush that had been sustaining him finally started to dissipate. He closed his eyes, trying to sort out the disconcerting chain of events. Behind his closed lids, he kept seeing red...blood red.

The wound had bled a great deal before they got to the hospital. It had taken ten stitches to finally close it. Some tendons were damaged, which would limit Starsky's use of the hand for weeks.

"Well, I guess he's going to be on that leave after all," Dobey had stated when Hutch called him. Starsky wouldn't be able to grip a gun for some time and even paper work would be difficult since Starsky was a lefty. Writing was impossible and turning an already slow two-finger typist into a one-finger typist meant that reports could probably be carved in stone faster than Starsky could type them.

Hutch shook his head as he opened his eyes, still struggling to figure out what the hell had happened. Starsky hadn't said a word either en route to the hospital or during his time there. He was dazed and remote, as if he were uncertain himself what was happening to him. When they got back here, Starsky merely informed Hutch that he was exhausted and that there was no need for Hutch to stay since he was probably going to sleep for a long time.

Hutch knew he should have confronted him and gotten him to talk about what had happened. But he had seemed so lost during the ordeal, and afterwards the exhaustion that permeated his body was clearly visible. Hutch just didn't have the heart to push him about anything.

So what do I do? Just pretend like this didn't happen?

Gazing down at his clothes, Hutch saw the blood stains that clung to him in silent testament to the seriousness of what took place here this morning. A shudder passed through him as the images replayed in his mind. He could see Starsky standing over the sink, body shaking, eyes glazed and vacant, as though his mind were a million miles away. He stood there clutching the knife so tightly that the veins in his wrist protruded. But he was oblivious...oblivious to the knife piercing deep into his flesh...oblivious to the blood oozing from his hand.

Hutch shuttered again, remembering the feeling of sheer panic that gripped him at the sight. Even when Hutch approached him, Starsky seemed to have no idea what he had done.

Or did he?

Starsky wouldn't have hurt himself deliberately, would he?

Hutch shook his head, refusing to accept that thought. But even if the act hadn't been deliberate,

the lack of concern over it was cause for alarm. Starsky had stood there so apathetically, as though the pain didn't penetrate...as though it didn't matter.

Restlessly, Hutch stood, pacing around the room as he tried to make sense of this.

Are you hurting so much that you can't even feel the pain anymore? Or have you just stopped caring about it?

Hutch thought about Starsky's recovery from the near fatal gunshot wounds. Almost from the moment he woke up in that hospital, Starsky was fighting to get well. Every hour of every day he was working toward recovery. Yet that same man sat today in a hospital emergency room watching them stitch up his hand with such a total lack of interest that it may have well been some stranger's hand.

Nothing made sense any more. Nothing had for months. And this past week...the scene in the car followed by the near total shutdown...the contradictory behavior last night followed by this morning's bizarre incident...this past week had been nothing but baffling. Hutch didn't know what to think any more and he certainly didn't know what to do.

Realizing that his pacing had brought him into the kitchen, Hutch moved closer to the counter and gazed down at the blood-spattered sink. An uneasy wave twisted and churned in his stomach, bringing with it a fierce bout of nausea. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, fighting off the insistent sensations.

Something was wrong. Something was terribly, horribly wrong. And he had the sinking feeling that if he didn't figure things out soon, it would be too late.

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Hutch sat at his desk at Metro, impervious to the hubbub that surrounded him in the busy office. He reached for the phone, then hesitated, running the idea through his mind once more. As ideas went, it wasn't remarkable, but it was all he had at the moment. Bolstering himself, he reached again for the phone and dialed.

It took five rings before Starsky finally answered the phone in a listless voice.

"Hello."

"Hi, Starsk, it's me."

"What's up?" The tone changed to cautious.

"I need a favor." Hutch paused for a moment to see if there would be a response. When there wasn't, he pushed ahead. "I was heating up some stuff in the oven this morning. The phone rang as I was taking it out. I remember answering it, then when I hung up, I remember grabbing the food container and heading out the door. What I don't remember is turning off the oven. Now I'm sitting here with the sinking feeling that I didn't."

"You didn't turn off your oven?"

"I'm not sure. I wanted to run home and check at lunch time but Dobby's got me up for that baby-sitting assignment with those London police detectives. You know, the ones who are coming here for the tour."

"Yeah, I remember."

"I was hoping you could take a ride over there for me and check it out."

Hutch held his breath as he listened to the silence on the other end of the line. Starsky couldn't use the car as an excuse since Hutch had taken it over to Merle's himself Monday morning and gotten it repaired, not wanting Starsky to be stranded at home with no transportation. What else could he say? That he was busy? How would he make that one fly?

When the silence lengthened, Hutch tried to push a bit.

"Hey buddy, you still there?"

"Yeah." The voice was low, almost imperceptible.

"So you'll do it?"

Again, the long silence. Finally, Hutch heard Starsky sigh and respond unenthusiastically.

"Yeah, I'm on my way."

"Thanks. I really appreciate it. I'll talk to you later. Bye."

Hutch hung up quickly, not wanting to leave an opportunity for Starsky to change his mind.

Sitting back in his chair staring at the telephone, Hutch began to feel uncomfortable with the deception. But any straightforward attempt to get Starsky to leave the house would surely have been met with refusal.

Hutch wondered how on earth he could have believed that a leave would be a good thing for Starsky. This past week since Starsky had been forced into this unwelcome 'vacation' had been disastrous. Without work to provide motivation to get up and leave the house every day, Starsky had turned into a hermit. He went nowhere. He did nothing. Hutch stopped by every night to check on him and bring some food, since he knew there was none in the house. Starsky would tolerate his company for a short time and then he would declare that he was tired and was going to bed.

Hutch stood up and put on his jacket. He glanced at his watch, noting that it would be about noon by the time he got home. Starsky would be there by then. He prayed he'd believe Hutch's excuse when he got there. Hutch peered his head into Dobby's office on his way out.

"I'm going, Cap."

"Good luck, Hutch. I hope it works."

"Well, at least he's out of the house. Let's just hope I can keep him there for a while."

"Let me know how it works out. I'll see you Monday."

"Thanks again, Captain. I appreciate the time off."

"Not a problem. Without your other half, you're not much use to me around here anyway."

Hutch looked into Dobey's knowing eyes and nodded.

*Not much use anywhere*, he silently added as he made his way out of the office.

~~~~~

"Starsky!" Hutch called out as he let himself into the apartment, not wanting to startle him.

Starsky came out from the kitchen looking at Hutch in surprise.

"What are you doing here?"

"I got a reprieve. The flight those London hotshots were supposed to come in on got postponed because of some storm activity over the Atlantic." Hutch was making sure to keep his voice as casual as possible. "Since I'm going to be stuck with them all day Monday instead, Dobey cut me a break and let me take off early today. I tried to call you back, but you had already left. Sorry."

"It's OK," Starsky responded, seeming to accept the story.

"So, was it on?" Hutch questioned innocently.

"Huh?... Oh yeah. You need to be more careful. You're gonna burn your whole place down."

Hutch berated himself for his 'carelessness.' "Damn, that was pretty stupid, huh." He had figured this would all look too suspicious if the oven turned out not to be on. He probably *was* lucky he didn't burn his place down.

"Thanks for coming and checking it for me. I really appreciate it."

"Well, it wasn't exactly like I had to make room in my busy schedule," Starsky noted dryly.

Getting out, even for this short trip had obviously done him some good. He had actually changed out of that old tee shirt and ripped pair of sweat pants that had been the extent of his wardrobe this week. He was showered and shaved, and his skin didn't have that pallor that it was taking on in his stuffy apartment.

"Looks like we're both at loose ends today," Hutch stated matter of factly. "Why don't we make the best of it? I think we should go down to the Rialto and catch the matinee. We can stuff ourselves with popcorn and candy and laugh at all the working stiffs who are cooped up in their

offices missing the good life."

Was that a trace of a smile in Starsky's eyes? Hutch knew how much his partner always loved going to the movies in the middle of the day. He used to say it was like being a kid and playing hooky. Hutch couldn't even count the number of times Starsky had dragged him into movie theaters on their days off, with a child-like gleam in his eyes and a non-stop dissertation on why the matinee was always better than the evening shows.

"The popcorn tastes better in the day," came the echo from the past. *"See, since there's less people, they put more butter on it. They fill the soda higher in the cups too. And the sound in the theater...well that's always better because there aren't a lot of bodies in there clogging up the sound waves."*

Hutch couldn't keep the smile from breaking out on his face at the memories.

"It's been a while," he said, wondering if Starsky's mind was playing the same memories.

Starsky was quiet but the indigo eyes seemed to be looking straight into Hutch. There was something there. He seemed mesmerized by Hutch's smile.

"Yeah, it has," Starsky finally responded, a small smile curling the corners of his lips.

Hutch clapped his hands together enthusiastically. "So, what'd you say? Should we go for it?" Hutch tried hard not to look like his whole world was riding on the answer.

Starsky's face reflected an internal battle. After a few of the longest minutes in history, he finally nodded and replied quietly.

"Sure. Why not?"

Hutch felt his heart soar. He was certain he was grinning like an idiot, but he didn't care.

"Great. That's great. We'll go then. I just want to go change. I need to put on a heavier sweater. It's getting chilly out there. I'll be right back."

Tripping over his own feet as he turned, Hutch stumbled into the bedroom laughing. He went to the dresser and opened the drawer, pulling out a heavy brown wool sweater. It had been getting increasingly cooler outside...it felt as though a storm might well be brewing, but Hutch didn't care. For the first time in a long time he could see something beyond the clouds.

As he tugged the sweater over his shirt, Hutch actually started to hum. When was the last time he looked forward to something? Probably somewhere around the last time he and Starsky had done anything social together, which felt like an eternity ago.

Walking into the bathroom to take care of a few essential needs, Hutch recalled how he had never been particularly fond of going to the movies. But he always went because Starsky loved it and his pure joy never failed to rub off on Hutch, causing him to have a good time in spite of himself. Today, going to the movies seemed like the best thing a person could do in life.

It had always been like that. Even things he dreaded doing seemed not so awful when Starsky was by his side. He remembered the time Starsky went with him to the dentist, sitting next to him in the waiting room, joking and teasing and distracting Hutch with some unending story about aliens infiltrating the Earth through the water supply. Hutch still hated the dentist, but he never failed to smile when he thought about that day.

There were so many things that Hutch had come to miss about Starsky these past months: the crazy stories, the heartfelt laugh, the ceaseless chatter, the childish pouts when he didn't get his way...the puppy dog look that ensured that didn't happen often...the silent exchanges when it seemed as though they could read each other's thoughts, the smile that could light up the darkest day....

There was an ache inside of Hutch, the depth of which he'd only allowed himself to partially recognize. He had never felt more alone in his life than he had these past few months. But as he walked from the bathroom and back towards the living room, he allowed himself to feel a glimmer of hope.

"I heard they opened that new burger place over by the theater." Starsky was sitting on the couch with his back towards Hutch as he approached. "Maybe we can try it out after the movie?"

Not receiving a response, Hutch moved closer to the couch. "Hey, did you hear what I said? I was thinking we could..." Hutch stopped short beside the couch, feeling as though he had crashed into a brick wall when he saw the expression on Starsky's face. It was cold and impenetrable. Hutch's eyes drew down, seeing the book Starsky was clutching in his hand. He felt his heart sink.

"What's wrong?" he tried, hoping he was overreacting.

"Wrong?" Starsky answered coolly. "Well, I don't know. Maybe I can check this interesting piece of reading material and find out."

Oh shit.

Hutch felt the color drain from his face as he looked at the book: *Depression's Dark Grip: A Guide To Understanding Depression's Hold On The People You Love.*

How the hell did Starsky find that? Thinking furiously, he remembered he had been reading it on the couch last night before he fell asleep. He had a habit of sliding books down between the cushions when he was reading on the couch.

"You should be more careful with your fancy books, Hutch. I sat on this one. Nearly ripped it. But you don't need to worry. It's all intact." Starsky fanned through the pages. "Fascinating subject matter. You're quite the intellectual, aren't you?"

The voice and face remained impassive. Hutch didn't have a clue what Starsky was thinking, but his intuition told him it wasn't good.

How the hell could I have been so careless?

Hutch had bought the book a few days ago in a desperate attempt to find some answers. But how could he have left it stuffed down in the couch like that?

"Well, you know me. I like reading about a lot of things." He tried to keep his voice casual.

"That's true," Starsky replied with no emotion in his voice. But something unsettling was lurking behind his eyes. "You sure are into this one, though. I mean you've even got stuff underlined in here." He opened to one of the pages and began to read aloud. "'Depression is more isolating and socially devastating than any other chronic illness. As the joy in living dissipates, a depressed person pushes away the warm blanket of companionship and intimacy, often leaving the people in his life to feel as cold, alone and helpless as he does. Symptoms of depression include headaches, loss of appetite, changes in sleep pattern, distractibility, withdrawal from normal social activity and personal interaction, poor concentration, feelings of sadness, emptiness hopelessness, remorse, guilt...'"

"Give me the book," Hutch demanded, reaching for it. Starsky pulled it back and stood, moving away from the couch.

"Wait, we haven't gotten to my favorite part yet." He flipped the page and began to read again. "'Depressed people often shut themselves off from the people in their lives. It is important to help find ways to bridge those gaps. Some suggestions that might prove helpful include taking off from work to spend an afternoon together...having lunch...taking in a movie...'" Starsky closed the book and looked straight at Hutch, voice icy. "You sure do your homework."

Hutch took a deep breath, trying to calm his rising pulse. He needed to keep a clear head if he was going to handle this properly.

"You've got this all wrong. I don't know what you think...."

"It doesn't really matter what I think does it? You're the one with all the answers. You're the one with the fancy psychiatrist books. You're the one who's decided I'm crazy!" Starsky flung the book at Hutch, his voice trembling with suppressed rage. "Maybe you can do a study of me. Write your own book. Become some kind of big shot Ph.D. or something!"

"Starsky, will you listen to me! I'm not trying to study you. And I sure as hell don't think you're crazy!"

"Really? Why not? Didn't I score high enough on one of those test things in there? Here, give it back to me. I'll take the test for you. I'm sure I can get a higher score in person."

Starsky went to retrieve the book which was laying on the floor, but Hutch got to it first and picked it up.

"Will you forget about the damn book and listen to me. I didn't buy it to analyze you. I was worried about you. You're going through a lot of things that I don't understand. I wanted to help. I thought I could find some answers in here, but I'd rather get them from you. The problem is, you won't talk to me."

"So if I don't talk to you, you just take it upon yourself to decide what's wrong with me...what to do for me!" Starsky's right hand was balled up in a fist and his face was heated red. The anger in his voice switched to mocking sarcasm. "'Let's go catch a movie Starsk'...and I fell for it, too. Does the book list stupid and gullible as symptoms too?"

Hutch began to respond, but had to stop himself. The pent-up hostility emanating from his partner was fierce. But there were other, more guarded emotions concealed behind his eyes: betrayal, frustration, shame...fear. Hutch fought to keep his own emotions from overtaking him as he spoke in a deliberate, non-threatening tone.

"I do not think you're stupid. I asked you to go to the movies because I wanted to go to the movies with you, not because of anything written in some book. I think maybe we need to both just calm down and talk about this."

"Don't talk to me like that!"

"Like what?"

"Don't use that condescending 'talk to me like I need to be *handled*' voice. Who do you think you are? Dr. Depression and his know-it-all books?"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to do that."

"See, you're doing it again."

Hutch felt his patience slipping.

"Just exactly how is it that I should talk to you?"

"How about honestly? Or would that be too hard? It's easier to sneak around behind my back trying to analyze me and setting me up with phony oven stories."

"You can't handle honest," Hutch snapped, wounded by the unfair attack.

"Try me," Starsky growled tauntingly.

"Fine. You want honesty, here's honesty. It freaked me out to find you standing there oblivious to a knife sticking out of your hand and blood pouring out all over the place!"

"You think I did that on purpose?" Starsky gasped, horrified.

"No, I don't!" Hutch countered forcefully. "But that doesn't make it any less serious. You talk about honesty, but you're the one who forces us both to walk around acting like nothing's wrong when the truth is nothing's right."

Starsky turned away from him then, his hand held against his temple. Hutch sensed that there was something registering on his face that he didn't want Hutch to see. His body was so tightly held that it made Hutch tired just watching him.

Why the hell can't you just let some of it out? What are you so afraid I'm going to see?

Hutch moved closer to him, softening his voice. He had to make Starsky see that he wasn't the enemy.

"I don't want to fight with you, babe. And I'm sorry if anything I've done has made you more upset. But something is really wrong here. I know you see that."

"Yeah, I do," came the quiet response. Starsky turned slowly back around, his face once more a mask, his voice dispassionate. "But whatever's wrong is my problem and I'll deal with it the way I see fit. It's not for you to analyze or figure out or fix. So, you can stop buying books and you can stop hatching schemes. If I'm crazy, it's my business. I would appreciate it if you let it stay my business and leave me the hell alone."

Starsky couldn't have hurt him more if he had plunged that knife into his flesh. He was being dismissed; being told in no uncertain terms to 'leave me the hell alone.' In some part of his consciousness, Hutch recognized it as a defensive tactic. Starsky couldn't deal with the things that were going on inside of him, so he cut off the one person who would keep insisting he try. But knowing that didn't make the pain any less severe.

Immobilized by the torment, he watched mutely as Starsky walked out the door.

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The sky had grown increasingly darker throughout the day. By 6:00, it had opened up to emit a fierce barrage of rain. Thunder roared to announce the storm's arrival. Huggy Bear glanced out the window of his bar, seeing the dark, wet pall blanket the streets.

Inside, things weren't any brighter. A dark cloud of gloom hung over the bar in the person of one David Michael Starsky. He had been there for most of the afternoon, quietly consuming one beer after another. Huggy had been surprised to see him. It had been at least a month since he had been here, and that time his visit was only due to Hutch's cajoling.

Huggy knew about the hand...knew that Starsky had been forced to take a leave. Still, the last place Huggy expected to see him in the middle of the day was sitting at his bar downing a countless supply of beer.

As the afternoon progressed, Huggy grew reluctant to keep fulfilling the request to 'bring me another one.' But he had the strong sense that Starsky was determined to get drunk, and if he didn't do it here, he would simply do it someplace else. At least if he was here, Huggy could keep an eye on him.

And keep an eye he did, noting each mood change with growing concern. Starsky had entered seething with barely contained fury. The initial conversation was brief and acerbic.

"Hey Starsky, how ya doing?"

"It's none of your business. It's none of anybody's damn business how I'm doing. Just bring me a

beer."

That brought an end to the repartee for a while. Huggy laid off, busying himself around the bar until about an hour had passed. The mood had grown more sullen then, as the anger turned inward.

"Sorry for biting your head off, Huggy. You should probably be more careful about the kind of people you let in here."

"I got no complaints."

"Not yet. Another hour of me might change that."

Several more beers brought another change. Some of the guard started to slip and carefully contained emotions started to seep out.

"I did it again, Huggy. No matter what I do, I seem to screw it up. I screwed up with Hutch big time today."

"We always hurt the ones we love."

*Especially the ones we can't admit we love.*

There was a time when Huggy believed that Starsky would eventually come clean with Hutch. Now he wasn't so sure. The amount of losses the curly-haired detective had had to withstand made him understandably wary of taking risks with what he had left.

So many times Huggy had wanted to confront Starsky with what he had concluded years ago. That time after Terry's death was when confirmation was brought to the long-held suspicion. Huggy clearly remembered Starsky's drunken discourse after that tragedy.

*"She was so good, Hug. Such a good person. She really knew me. She knew the truth about me and she didn't hate me for it. I let her down in so many ways. And now she's dead and I'm still letting her down because I don't have the guts to deal with the truth like she wanted me to." Head hung low, Starsky had mumbled the rest nearly imperceptibly...nearly. "I can never tell him. I can't tell him the truth or lose him too."*

Questions flooded Huggy's thoughts. *Should I have forced him to talk about it by confronting him with it? Would that have given him an outlet, or would it have just caused him to close down and resent the intrusion?*

Huggy had never been big on intrusion. The few people in his life he held close, he would do anything for. But he never felt comfortable pushing things that weren't asked for. Whether that was the best way to handle things or not, he wasn't sure. It just was how it was.

This certainly wasn't the time to back Starsky into any corners anyhow. There were just too many things going on here. He was way too fragile emotionally. While Huggy felt certain that the long-held, long-denied feelings for Hutch played a significant part in this, there were many

other factors at work here as well. The potent combination of all those factors had clearly pushed Starsky to the brink.

Starsky sat now, looking physically and emotionally beaten. His entire body was sagging forward into the bar and his skin had a yellowish hue. He was nursing the bandaged hand to his chest.

"Hand hurting?" Huggy questioned with concern.

"A little," Starsky responded with a shrug, as though he didn't really care.

"Didn't they give you something for that?"

"Yeah."

A look crossed Starsky's eyes that caused Huggy pause. An alarming thought crossed his mind then.

"You take any of them today?"

"Just a couple."

"Jesus, Starsky!" Huggy reprimanded as he pulled the beer bottle away. "You're sitting here drinking like a fish and you're on pain medication? Are you crazy?"

"That seems to be the consensus today," Starsky responded in a voice so heavy with despair it smothered Huggy. Hopeless, damp eyes bore into him then.

"Am I crazy, Huggy?"

"No, man," Huggy assured softly as he reached to pat the trembling forearm. "You're just hurting. You're just hurting real bad."

"I don't know how to make it stop anymore," the exhausted voice croaked. "And I just keep hurting Hutch. I know he wants to help, but he can't help. Why won't he see that?"

"Because it'd be easier for him to cut off his own arm than to see you in pain?"

"I'm not good for him, Huggy. I'm just going to let him down. I've already let him down in so many ways. Sooner or later I let them all down: Dad, Terry, Nicky...Mom. I tried to be what I was supposed to be for them, but I blew it. And now Hutch. He wants me to be the Starsky he knows...the partner...the friend...but I'm not him. I can't be him anymore."

"You just need to be who you are. The people who love you will accept that."

Starsky's head slid down until the side of his face rested on his forearm. His voice grew thick with shame and sorrow, each sentence punctuated with heavy gulps of air.

"I think I was *trying* to hurt him, Huggy. I don't want his pity and I don't want him to see me as

some head case. And I was so mad at *me*...and I couldn't find the right words...and it was all so humiliating...and I knew I couldn't make him understand...it all got twisted up and then I'm saying all these cruel, hurtful things...and in a way it felt good...but then it felt so horrible..." The color completely drained from his face...even his lips were pale. "Ah jeez, I'm gonna be sick...."

Huggy rushed to the other side of the bar to help him up. He staggered woozily for a moment then headed off purposefully towards the men's room.

When he emerged, he wasn't walking straight. Huggy went to his side and helped him over to a booth.

"Take it easy, Starsky. You've got too many things working through your system."

"I need to go home. I gotta go." He started to stand, but Huggy pushed him back down.

"You're in no shape to be getting anywhere on your own."

Starsky ran a hand through his hair as eyes hung half closed.

"I'm just tired. I want to go home and go to bed." The voice had become more insistent and Huggy didn't want to argue with him.

"OK, OK. You just sit here and get your sea legs back while I go call you a cab."

Huggy got up and went to the back room, trying to decide what he should do: should he call the cab? Should he take him home himself to make sure he got there? Should he call Hutch? What would Starsky's reaction be to any of those things? He stood at the phone for several minutes running the options through his mind.

"Huggy, you better come quick." Gina, his waitress, had rushed into the room with a worried look on her face. Heart sinking, Huggy rushed after her to see what had happened.

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The phone began to ring, disturbing the silence in the darkened room. Hutch sat motionless on the couch where he had been for most of the afternoon. He glanced apathetically toward the phone, unable to find the energy or the interest required to pick it up. By the seventh ring, however, a disconcerted feeling began to nag at the corner of his mind. By the ninth ring, he had reached over to answer it.

"Hello."

"Oh man, I'm glad you're there."

"I don't really feel like talking right now, Huggy. Maybe tomorrow."

"Hutch, wait! This is important."

"What is it?"

"It's Starsky. He's been here all day. He's in a bad way, Hutch."

Hutch fought the urge that instinctively raced through him.

"Starsky doesn't want my help. He made that real clear this afternoon."

"Well he may not want it, but he sure as hell needs it."

"I don't get it. Weren't you the one getting on me for playing protector?"

"Yeah. And I'm also the one who makes it a policy not to stick my nose into friend's lives when I'm not invited. But all of those lofty edicts don't seem so noble when a friend who's been mixing booze with pain pills all afternoon curls up in a ball on the ground in my alleyway and refuses to move."

Hutch was out the door without even hanging up the phone.

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Heavy drops of rain pelted his face as he stepped out the back door. Ignoring it, Hutch moved quickly through the alley, heading towards the large trash bin against the wall. He paused when he got there, a queasy wave shaking his stomach.

There on the ground, huddled in the corner, was his rain-soaked partner. Pressed against the wall, arms wrapped around his knees -- which were pulled up to his chest -- Starsky rocked back and forth with a vacant look in his eyes. The dark curls were matted down against his head, clothing plastered to his body, as the harsh rain showered down upon him.

"Shit," Hutch murmured to himself as the sight unbalanced his equilibrium. *"Go real easy with him, Hutch,"* Huggy's voice intoned. Hutch had gotten the distinct impression that Huggy knew more about what was going on with his partner than he let on. But, anxious to get outside, Hutch hadn't bothered to ask the countless questions that were swirling through his mind.

Now, faced with what was obviously a crisis situation, Hutch was uncertain how to proceed. Angry, defensive warnings to 'leave me the hell alone' echoed in his mind, warring with a gut instinct to just wrap the sopping waif in his arms and never let go.

Despite the hurtful words exchanged this afternoon and all the ways that Starsky had been pushing him away, Hutch knew that deep down his partner needed him. There was no way he was backing off now, no matter what Starsky said or did. He only hoped he could keep his cool this time and not let his own emotions get the best of him as he had been doing lately. That was a tall order, though, considering that the sight before him had already caused tears to well in his eyes.

Cautiously, he moved forward, crouching down in front of the quivering form. As he tried to decide what to say, a soft voice whispered to him, barely audible over the rain.

"Hi, Hutch."

"Hey partner," Hutch responded gently. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," was the unsteady reply.

"Well, why don't you come in out of the rain and we can talk about it?"

Starsky shook his head, causing droplets from his curls to roll into his eyes. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's just...Oh God, Hutch...everything's so mixed up."

"I know buddy," Hutch assured as a sharp pain pierced his heart.

"It's like all these things and I can't stop thinking about them, but they don't all make sense."

"What kind of things? Tell me." Hutch kept his voice steady and soothing amidst the insistent clatter of rain.

"Like my dad," Starsky croaked, "and like how he was like Nicky in a lot of ways...at least what I remember...maybe I don't remember...maybe it's just what people said..." Starsky's eyes glazed over as though he were looking inward.

"What did they say?" Hutch asked as he pushed his dripping hair out of his face. He had to keep drawing him out, not let him slip too far inside himself.

"He liked to cut corners...do things the fast way...didn't want to wait for things to happen...too much ambition...had to get ahead fast...I used to hear them talk. If you're real quiet, people will say anything in front of you. Like you're not even there. Like if your mouth isn't working, your ears can't be either." Starsky stopped again as a violent shiver ran through him.

Hutch knew he had to be freezing. He wanted to get him up off that wet ground and indoors where he could be warm and safe. Hutch's own clothes were nearly soaked through now, clinging to him uncomfortably. Yet he sensed this wasn't the time to interrupt, despite his concern for his partner's health.

"He wanted to make detective," Starsky continued as the rain trailed across his lips. "But they say he was hot dogging it...taking stupid risks...taking stupid risks because he wasn't willing to share the collars...'he got himself killed with his own blind ambition'...that's what they'd say behind my mother's back...."

"Oh jeez. Starsk." Hutch's voice cracked. Starsky rarely talked about his father, and the few things that he did say never even hinted at this. It explained some things about Nicky, though.

"Do you know I didn't cry when he died? Not once. And all the years since then, I've never cried a tear for him...I couldn't..." The voice faltered then, but Starsky drew his legs up closer to himself and forced out more words. "I couldn't let Mom and Nicky down. I had to be strong for

them...I just pushed it down so deep...I was a little boy standing in that cemetery pushing it all down so hard...the tears...the grief...the fear...and...."

"And what?" Hutch encouraged, knowing he had to, despite how hard it was.

Starsky's face grew twisted, eyes narrowing in the dimness of the alley. His fingernails on his right hand were digging into the soaked-through bandage on his left. He spoke hesitantly, as if each word required an enormous push to get out.

"I...was...so...angry. How...could he...do that...leave us like that...leave me to do everything...to take over?" His head dropped down as his voice scratched against his throat. "And I couldn't do it. I kept trying to do it right, but it was never enough...."

"Starsk." Hutch spoke tenderly as he reached out to dislodge the fingers from tearing at the bandage. "You did the best you could. You didn't do anything wrong."

Starsky's head lifted, his face turning up into the pelting drops of water. He glanced around the alley with eyes that saw more than the dim surroundings before him.

"This reminds me so much of that back lot behind the old warehouses. Mom always told us never to play there, but Nicky was so stubborn."

Hutch had no idea where this was going, so he stayed quiet, waiting stalwartly as heavy drops of rain made rivulets down his back.

"I went along because he would've gone anyway. I couldn't let him go by himself. There was this pile of long metal tubing. Nicky liked to walk across it...but he slipped that day. His leg got wedged between the tubes and he was stuck. I couldn't pull him out. The pipes were too heavy."

The rocking motion increased as Starsky's voice became accelerated, speaking in breathless spurts.

"I wanted to get help but he was too scared...wouldn't let me leave him there alone...he kept crying and screaming...I kept talking to him and trying to calm him down...and it got so late and so dark...I didn't know what to do. And Nicky kept holding my hand so tight and begging me not to leave...but it was so dark and scary there...I was so scared, but I didn't show it. I didn't want Nicky to be afraid. I couldn't leave him there all alone, but we were going to die back there; I just knew it. It was so, so scary...and dark...and cold...and Nicky was going to die...and it was all my fault..."

Huge blue eyes reflected the terror of that little boy so vividly that Hutch felt he was in that alley with Starsky.

"Finally, Mom and Uncle Leo found us. Leo got his two friends and they got Nicky loose...and he was so hysterical...and she was so relieved...and she cradled him and held him and rocked him...."

Starsky's body was shivering non-stop now, and it seemed to be from more than just the cold

dampness of the rain. His drenched appearance made it impossible to distinguish, but Hutch felt sure that some of the moisture running down his face was caused by tears. His own tears had been mixing with the water on his cheeks for some time now.

“And I didn't cry.” The voice was almost non-existent. “And I didn't tell how scary it was...and she didn't hold me or cradle me or...” The voice stopped, unable to emit anymore sound.

In his mind's eye, Hutch saw that scared little boy so clearly: the stoic face that masked the pain and refused to crack; the small shoulders held back hard to keep from sagging; a need for comfort so great that it had to be buried down deep or it would have annihilated him with its oppressiveness. A little boy standing alone, unable to recognize or voice the pain that no one seemed to see.

Hutch moved beside his partner, sitting down in the puddle against the cold, hard wall, and pulled both that little boy and the man he had become into his arms and held them fiercely. Hutch's arms wrapped so tightly around the drenched, shaking body that, had he wanted to, Starsky would have been unable to move. But there wasn't even a trace of resistance in his arms. Starsky sagged into him like dead weight, as though everything inside of him had just come crashing down in a heavy heap.

"It's OK to be scared now," Hutch whispered as he held fast. "it's OK."

Hutch wasn't sure how long they sat like that. He became accustomed to the feel of water saturating him to the core. But the shivers in the body he held had become more pronounced and he knew he had to get Starsky warm and dry.

"Come on, buddy," he said into the wet curls. "We're going home."

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Hutch had wondered as he pulled up to Venice Place if Starsky was going to protest. He had made this decision inwardly, knowing that if he had taken Starsky to his own place, there would have come that moment when he asked Hutch to leave and he couldn't face that. At least here, he could remain by his side, certain that he was safe.

As it turned out, Starsky accepted the decision compliantly. Even if he hadn't, he wasn't in much shape to get anywhere else on his own. The combination of alcohol and pain medication, coupled with the physical and emotional exhaustion, had left him drained and not cognizant of much going on around him.

It took several long minutes to guide and support the soggy, uncoordinated body up the stairs and into the apartment. Starsky was still shivering beneath the two heavy blankets Huggy had thrown around him on their way to the car. As he helped Hutch pull Starsky's spent form up off the wet ground in the alley, Huggy, who had watched with concern from the back door, tried to insist that they go upstairs to at least dry off a bit. However, Hutch had a strong need to get Starsky home, though he wasn't sure if that was more for his partner's sake or his own.

The struggle up the stairs took its toll on Starsky, what little color left draining from his face as

he beseeched Hutch urgently.

"Hutch..."

There had been a similar plea in the car, followed by Starsky's insistence that they pull over. Hutch did so just as the wave of nausea hit and Starsky threw the door open to release the contents of his stomach onto the rain-soaked ground.

Starsky pulled away from him now, stumbling toward the bathroom. Hutch followed him there, watching his partner drop to his knees in front of the toilet and vomit again. Maneuvering behind him, Hutch went to the cabinet and pulled out a washcloth that he moistened in the sink. When Starsky had finished, Hutch flushed the toilet then wiped his partner's face and mouth. He ran some cold water into a Dixie cup and handed it to Starsky, who rinsed the water through his mouth then spat into the toilet.

"That it?" Hutch questioned as he took the empty cup.

Starsky nodded weakly, then his head lobbbed to one side, eyes half closed. Hutch eased him down fully onto the floor, propping his head against the wall.

"OK. Just stay right here and take it easy a second. If you feel sick again, just lean over here. I'll be right back, OK?"

Starsky nodded, again, eyes closing fully as he rested his head against the wall.

Hutch proceeded quickly, peeling his saturated jacket and shirt from his body as he moved through the house. He picked the phone receiver up from the couch and replaced it in its cradle before picking it up again to dial. As promised, he called to assure Huggy that they had arrived home intact, while he kicked off his shoes and removed the rest of his dripping clothes.

After he hung up the phone, he gathered the wet clothes up and tossed them on the floor in the kitchen. He moved to the closet, pulling out a small stack of towels which he placed on the bed when he entered the bedroom. Hutch picked up the top towel and dried his flesh haphazardly as he moved purposefully about the room. He took down the extra blanket, then searched through his drawers for the warmest pajamas he could find, all the while keeping an ear tuned towards the bathroom monitoring for any sound of distress. Locating the heavy flannel pajamas that he hadn't used since his last trip to Duluth a couple of years ago, he placed them on top of the pile of towels. He threw some heavy socks on top of that, then grabbed a pair of jeans off the chair and stepped into them. After fastening his jeans, Hutch took the towel he had been using and mussed it through his hair, the thick terry cloth soaking up the moisture from the thin blond strands quickly. When he was finished, he dropped the towel to the floor, picked the pile of towels and bed clothes up, and made his way back to the bathroom. In all, he had been gone for about six minutes.

Starsky was exactly where he had left him, seeming not to have moved. A small puddle was forming around him caused by the run off from his hair and clothes. Hutch looked at him for a moment. He looked as though he had been dragged through the ringer, wet, aching muscles sagging in depleted submission. He was still shivering as he clutched the wet blanket around

himself. His face was pale and drained. The dark curls were flat and tangled, dispensing drops of water that made their way into the closed eyes. The sight of him broke Hutch's heart...yet warmed it at the same time. A mixture of protectiveness, empathy and love swelled within Hutch as he swore to himself with renewed determination that he would find some way to get Starsky through this. Crouching down in front of him, Hutch placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, partner. We've got to get you out of these wet clothes."

Starsky stirred, eyes opening as he looked at Hutch. The huge blue eyes were tainted with red, but they were unguarded, clearly displaying the torment that lurked beneath them.

"I don't think I can, Hutch," he responded hoarsely. "Everything's spinning...my body feels so heavy...."

"Don't worry," Hutch reassured. "I'll take care of the hard stuff. Just *let* me, OK?" The need evident in that plea caught Hutch off guard.

Whether it was the alcohol or the pain pills or just the sheer exhaustion, Hutch wasn't sure, but the defensive walls that Starsky had been keeping between them lowered. Hutch felt his heart soar at the acquiescent nod, feeling a sense of purpose that had been missing for so long.

Adroitly, Hutch set about to peel the layers of wet clothing off his partner's shivering body. He moved quickly, bringing the towel to the damp chest and arms as soon as they were free of the cumbersome clothes. Goosebumps erupted across the exposed skin as the tremors increased. Starsky's skin felt so cold to the touch. Hutch wrapped the towel around him and rubbed his hands up and down his partner's covered arms in an effort to get some circulation going. After a few minutes, he removed the now soggy towel and wrapped a dry one around Starsky's shoulders. He brought a smaller towel up to the mop of unruly curls. Unlike his own fine hair, it took several passes with the towel to even begin to absorb some of the moisture from his partner's thick mane.

When he had dried the torso as well as he could, Hutch removed the large bath towel and reached for the heavy pajama top. He drew it up over Starsky's arms and shoulders, then fastened the buttons in front. The large top dwarfed his smaller partner, who had lost so much weight these past two months. With his hair a mess of disorderly curls, and the baggy pajama top enveloping him, he looked like a little lost urchin. Hutch couldn't help but smile as he reached down to roll the sleeves up over the hidden hands. He noted how wet and dirty the bandage was and knew that was his next order of business after he finished getting Starsky changed.

Starsky's eyes kept drifting shut during Hutch's ministrations. However, he struggled to help by shifting and lifting when necessary. Still, Hutch knew he wouldn't be able to finish the task with Starsky down on the now very wet floor. Hutch turned and reached for the soaked-through Adidas and pulled them off, along with the sodden socks. That done, he braced his hands below his partner's armpits.

"OK buddy, I need you to help me out here. We've gotta get you up. Think you can handle that?"

"Piece of cake," Starsky mumbled without an ounce of conviction.

"Don't worry. I've got you. Just go with it. On three. One...two...threeeee...."

With that, Hutch hauled him up to his feet and Starsky tried to get his shaky legs to hold there. Hutch leaned him back against the wall and supported a good deal of the weight, as the fingers of Starsky's right hand dug into Hutch's arm.

"You OK?"

"Yeah...just...a little...woozy."

"I know. Just hold on. I'll hurry."

Hutch quickly unfastened the clasp, then tugged the zipper of the pants. Leaning his shoulder into Starsky's waist to keep him supported, Hutch bent down and held the waistband, dragging the briefs and the saturated pants down Starsky's legs. The water-logged denim was heavy and difficult to slide. Hutch had to peel it inch by inch. With his shoulder still pressed into Starsky and the bending required to strip down the jeans, the side of Hutch's face was in close proximity to his partner's groin.

He wasn't surprised to find the long, thick cock at half mast, with both the pressure from the pants and exposure to the cool air assaulting it with stimuli. What he *was* surprised by, however, was his reaction to it. He found his eyes drawn to the alluring sight. It wasn't as if he had never seen his partner naked before...he had, many times. But for some reason, at this moment, the sight stirred something deep in his own body and he felt a twitch of response in his own balls.

"Oh God..." Starsky moaned above him in a voice that sounded pained. That immediately snapped Hutch back from his distraction, realizing he had just been frozen there hovering, his shoulder digging into Starsky's abdomen. He must have hurt him in some way.

Hutch forced himself back into action, pulling the pants down around Starsky's ankles and then stepping on them to provide leverage so Starsky could pull his feet out.

"Sorry buddy. I didn't mean to hurt you. Just pull your leg out...we're almost finished."

Starsky did as he was asked, then stood quietly as Hutch patted the thick towel along his damp flesh. Hutch pushed the disconcerting thoughts from his mind as he quickly dried off his partner then drew the pajama bottoms up.

As he fastened the snap at Starsky's waist, he spoke softly. "There we go. Now let's go get you under the covers so you can get warm."

Starsky's eyes opened and stared into his for a long moment. It was almost the same as that look in the car...the look that haunted Hutch even in his dreams. Hutch knew he could easily become lost in that look. Therefore, it was he this time who broke the connection

"Come on, easy does it." He wrapped an arm around Starsky's waist and walked him into the bedroom. He sat him down on the edge of the bed then went back to the bathroom. He retrieved the socks, placing them on Starsky's cold feet when he returned. Then he propped the pillows up

against the headboard and guided his partner to the head of the bed to lean back against them.

"Here, you need to sit up for a few minutes so I can change that bandage. I don't want that wound to get infected."

Starsky didn't respond, but he leaned back into the pillows obediently as Hutch drew the blanket up to his waist. Hutch went back to the bathroom to retrieve scissors, bandages, gauze and tape. When he returned, he sat on the edge of the bed beside a dozing Starsky and lifted his left hand into his lap. Starsky's eyes opened then, and they watched Hutch intently as he removed the tattered bandages and redressed the wound.

Just as Hutch was taping the last of the edges down, he felt the tentative fingers of Starsky's right hand drift across the skin of his bare chest. The voice that accompanied them was thick with emotion. "My very own angel of mercy..." Starsky's eyes followed the path of his fingertips along Hutch's chest. "You do look like an angel, you know, Hutch...always did."

Hutch couldn't believe how immediate his body's reaction was to the feather light touch. He tried to ignore it, concentrating on finishing the dressing on Starsky's hand. Once that was done, however, he couldn't help but raise his eyes to Starsky's. His partner's eyes had remained focused on his chest in a glassy stare as the quivering fingers continued to roam his skin.

A violent tremor rocked Starsky then, and he began to shiver with the same intensity as he had in the alley. Concerned, Hutch laid the bandaged hand down on the mattress and stood up, the loss of Starsky's touch sending a lonely ache through his flesh. But there was no time to think about that now. Starsky was freezing.

Hutch picked up the extra blankets and spread them out over Starsky. He pulled the trembling body down onto his back beneath them, then adjusted the pillows accordingly. He sat beside Starsky, rubbing his hands up and down the blanketed form to generate more heat.

It took a few minutes, but the shivering finally lessened. As it did, the exhausted blue eyes could barely remain open any longer. Head falling to the side, he started to give in to his depleted body. But as he did, he whispered the soft words that Hutch could just barely make out.

"Nobody, Hutch...nobody in my whole life ever really took care of me except you...."

"I'll always take care of you, babe," Hutch whispered back as he stroked the soft curls.

The heavy lids opened then, though the strain that it took to do so was evident. The expressive blue pools reached deep into Hutch's soul.

"I love you, Hutch. I love you so much..." And then the lids fell shut again as the prone body yielded to sleep.

"I love you, too," Hutch murmured into the silence as he watched his friend sleep. It wasn't the first time the words had been exchanged between them. Yet it felt different this time...more intense somehow. Hutch tried to figure out why that was...tried to find some words to put to all the strange sensations he had been experiencing tonight. Exhausted himself, however, his own

mind went mercilessly blank. He got up and pulled a chair over beside the bed, then sat down on it. He leaned the side of his face down on the mattress, eyes drawn to the sight of his sleeping partner. Maybe tomorrow they could figure this thing out together.

When tomorrow came and he woke up alone in an empty apartment, Hutch no longer knew what to think.

SEVEN

It was close to 7 p.m. when Starsky dragged himself from his car and made his way toward his apartment. It had been over twelve hours now...twelve hours since he had fled Hutch's apartment...got a cab to his car...drove home to shower and change...and then....

Then what?

Then spent the rest of the day driving aimlessly, occasionally stopping in deserted areas to walk for a mile or two. Driving...walking...wandering...trying to do anything to keep from thinking or feeling. But one overwhelming thought pervaded throughout the day: you could run as far as you wanted to, but you could never run far enough to get away from yourself.

Feeling the utter despair wash over him, he entered his apartment. He had taken only about three steps inside, not even closing the door, when he felt the other presence in the room. Turning quickly, he caught a glimpse of the blond head which shone in the darkened room. While he fumbled to switch on the light, Hutch rose from the chair. Starsky's heart began to race in his chest as he got a good look at his partner's imposing stature. Drawn up to his full height, arms folded in front of him, face impassive, his voice roared into the quiet room.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Taken aback, Starsky tried to locate his voice...find his words. "I...I was...I went...."

"Went where?" Hutch demanded. "Where the hell did you need to run off to at the crack of dawn this morning? Where were you that was so important you couldn't take a second to bother to call me and let me know you were all right?"

Unconsciously, Starsky took a step back, the unexpected barrage throwing him off balance.

Hutch must have misread the move as a retreat. In a flash, the blond was across the room, slamming closed the door and blocking it with his body as uncompromising eyes pinned him in place.

"Oh, no you don't! Don't think for one second you're running out on me again. No more running, Starsky! We're going to face this here and now."

"I wasn't trying to leave," Starsky managed to get out in an unsteady voice. He swallowed hard, a feeling of dread lodging in the pit of his stomach. This was it. He had finally done it. He felt the car keys drop limply from his hands as he turned away from the unwavering gaze.

"I'm sorry, Hutch...about yesterday...last night...this morning...all of it."

"I don't want an apology," Hutch responded in a voice lower in volume but still forceful. "I want answers. I want you to talk to me."

"What do you want to know?"

"Where you went for starters. And why you ran out on me."

Starsky heard the pain buried behind the tight voice. He had hurt Hutch again...badly. And after everything Hutch had done for him last night...after the way he had stood by him and cared for him and comforted him....

Oh jeez, Hutch. Can't you see? I didn't want to leave. I never wanted to stay anyplace more in my whole life. But how could I stay there? How could I stay there beside you...waking up next to that smooth, creamy flesh...remembering how I touched you there last night...remembering how it felt to feel you drawing down my pants...your breath against my groin....

"Answer me, damn it!"

Starsky flinched as Hutch's firm tone snapped him back to the present.

"I didn't mean to run out...not like you think. I just...I needed some air. I needed some air to clear my head."

"And you couldn't have just told me that? You couldn't have just let me know where you were going so I wouldn't spend the entire day going out of my mind with worry?"

Hutch kicked the heel of his foot back hard against the door as he struggled for composure. Through clenched teeth he admonished, "Damn it, Starsky, how could you do that to me?"

"Because I'm a shit," Starsky stated dryly, filled with self-loathing. All he had thought about was himself...his need to escape, to run. He never bothered to consider what it would be like for Hutch to wake up and find him gone...to not know where he was after his irrational behavior last night. Hutch couldn't help but be worried. Hell, Starsky didn't even know himself what he was capable of doing anymore. How could Hutch not be concerned?

"I thought we had made some progress last night," Hutch said, no longer hiding the raw pain from his voice. "You let me in again...let me comfort you. I thought you were starting to trust me again."

"I never stopped trusting you," Starsky protested, pain engulfing every fiber of his being. For him to have hurt Hutch like that...to have him thinking he didn't trust him....

Starsky forced himself to look at his partner, though he regretted it the moment he did. Hutch was still against the door, but not to barricade it. His body was leaning back heavily against it as though it were the only thing holding him up. The blue eyes were tired...defeated. The blond head slumped down with a lengthy sigh. Starsky wanted more than anything to go to him, to hold him, to comfort him...but he didn't dare. He wasn't strong enough to handle it. As it was, his knees were buckling beneath him. He grabbed onto the back of the couch as he tried to reach out to his partner with heartfelt words.

"This is not about you, Hutch. It never was. I trust you more than anything. You've been...nothing short of terrific through all of this, everything. And not just this. You've always been there for me. You're the only one..." he paused, emotion caught in his throat.

"The only one who's ever taken care of you," Hutch finished softly.

"Yeah," Starsky nodded, unable to say more.

"Then why won't you let me take care of you now?" Hutch beseeched.

Because I can't. Because really soon I'm going to lose it all and I've gotta be prepared. Because I need it too damn much, but I don't deserve it one bit. Because I've got so many things bottled up inside me that if I let my guard down and let you in, the dam is going to burst and I won't be able to stop what comes rushing forth. Because if I hadn't passed out last night I would have....

"Starsky." The tender voice was right beside him now. When did Hutch move? How did he get so close? Was he shaking too?

A trembling hand cupped his chin and forced his face around. Imploring eyes threatened to unravel him. "If you really trust me, then trust me now. Stop hiding behind the damn walls and let me in."

Summoning every ounce of willpower, Starsky resisted the temptation as he pleaded for his life.

"For both our sakes, I'm begging you, just leave this alone. Just go."

A new shard of pain sliced through the liquid blue eyes at this latest perceived rejection. Hutch removed his hand and backed away, but to Starsky's dismay, he did not leave. Instead he began to pace about the room, fists clenching and unclenching. Starsky recognized the facial expression...that steel-trap mind was hard at work trying to figure, to understand. Words started to spill out of Hutch as he walked, his tone a mixture of anger, confusion, sorrow, defeat and stubborn refusal.

"No. No. We're not going to play this game anymore. It's a sick, twisted game and it needs to end. Push...pull...accept...reject...hurt and anger and guilt and pain...and sandwiched between all of it is this *thing*...this artificial facade that doesn't ring true. *This* is not us. We've always been real with each other. It's never been a game. So where is this coming from? There's more happening here. There's more going on than grief and depression. I mean those are real and they're powerful, but there's more to it."

Starsky gripped the couch tighter as his head began to spin. Hutch could be like a dog with a bone when he put his mind to something, and he obviously wasn't letting go of this now. With trepidation, he listened as the stream of words continued unceasingly.

"I almost had it that night in the car. It was there for that brief second, but I just couldn't get my hand on it. And then you locked it away again. Except for last night. It was there for a little while last night too. There's something there...something you need...something that's in me to give...something I'm missing...something important and you won't tell me. You won't tell me what it is!"

The last sentence was a frustrated shout. Starsky was unsure if Hutch was still trembling or was it just the pounding of his own head jarring his vision? Starsky tried to walk, to move away, but

he didn't get far. Hutch caught him by the arm and swung him around, capturing his forearms in a vice-like grip. Starsky had no strength. No energy to pull away. His limbs had turned to jelly as his world slipped out from under him. It was almost over now...it was all slipping away like sand through an hour glass.

He stood mutely as Hutch's steely grip kept him upright. But it wasn't the strength or the power that proved to be his final undoing. Hutch's face was inches from his now, stripped of all veneer. He hid behind nothing, his face, eyes and voice steeped in impassioned, unguarded emotion.

"It's the distance I can't take. I think I could take anything but that. You're killing me here, Starsk. Every day I watch you. You're falling apart. Everyday another piece dies off and I'm helpless to stop it. All I want is to be there for you, but you just keep pushing me away. Do you have any idea how much that hurts? You are everything to me. You are all that matters to me in this whole world and I'm useless to you. When I think of all you've given to me...all the things you've brought to my life...hell, you are my life. I don't even know how to be me anymore without you. So much of who I am is tied up in who I am to you. And when you're pushing me away, I lose all sight of who I am and why I exist. I know you need something, Starsk. I can see it...I can feel it. But you won't tell me what it is. You won't let me give it to you. You may as well just rip my heart out of my chest and stomp all over it. Please, Starsky. Please...I'm begging you. Tell me."

A strange sense of relief flooded through Starsky as he listened to the poignant words; it was the relief born of knowing the fight was over and, even though you'd lost, you were glad it was finally finished. He had fought against the inevitable for so long he was almost glad to give in to it. It would have been liberating if it hadn't been so tragic.

It was ironic that he had never loved Hutch more than he did at this moment...this final moment right before he would lose him. For even if Starsky had the strength or will to fight anymore, there was no way he could be anything but honest in the face of Hutch's sincere disclosure. Hutch was finally about to learn the truth...and Starsky was about to lose the last remaining tie he had to the world.

In those final moments, when Hutch had finished speaking and the charged silence hung between them, Starsky tried to memorize every detail of his friend's face, knowing he would never be this close to it again. Tears flooded the vulnerable eyes staring into his...tears that left streaky trails down the fine cheek bones. The fair complexion was colored crimson; stray strands of hair flopped into the side of his eye.

But it was the mouth that held Starsky's attention the longest. The mouth that had just uttered those words that would live in Starsky's heart forever. The mouth that, just last night, had been so close to him, he could feel its moisture against his stirring cock, the mouth that had pressed against Starsky's so willing in countless recurring dreams.

Standing there transfixed by that luscious mouth, Starsky realized that he was a man with nothing to lose, for he was a man with nothing left. From somewhere deep inside, a devilish voice told him that if he had to go down, he may as well go out with gusto. Why should the last memory between him and Hutch be his uttering the words that would sever their relationship

forever? In one gesture, he could bare the inevitable truth, while at the same time steal one bittersweet taste of that perfect mouth that he could savor forever.

Before he had a chance to reconsider, he leaned into the solid frame and bent his neck upward, pressing his lips against the lithe mouth before him. Starsky closed his eyes, blocking out all thought, as he tasted the salty, tear-stained mouth beneath his. Hutch's lips were soft and warm and a perfect fit to his own. And though he didn't dare invade them, the genteel contact ripped through his starved system like a tidal wave. He heard his own moan escape his throat as he lapped and nibbled and tasted the sweetness over and over. As his head started to swim in a dizzy rush, he became vaguely aware that Hutch's hands still had a firm grip on his forearms, holding him up rather than pushing him back. He continued to feast greedily on his treasured banquet until his own breathlessness forced him to pull back.

As he tried to regain his balance amidst the swirling sensations assaulting his body, Starsky glanced up at Hutch, bracing himself for the worst. The face staring back at him contained elements of confusion and surprise...and something else mysterious to Starsky. But nowhere could he detect the expected repulsion or disgust.

Pulling back to give Hutch space, Starsky found himself still caught in the grasp of the powerful hands. To his surprise, Hutch tightened the grip, pulling Starsky forward until their lips touched again. Some part of Starsky's consciousness tried to question and comprehend what was going on here. But it was drowned out by the primal urges that exploded within him as he got a second chance at that mouth.

Unable to stop himself this time, Starsky parted the lips with his probing tongue and ventured forth into the forbidden channel. Pliant lips gave way to his, opening wider for greater access. Starsky's tongue plunged further, partaking in every crevice, learning, then memorizing, every detail. It was like nothing he'd ever encountered. He felt almost drunk from the nectar.

When he did finally pull back his whole body was trembling. He tried to catch his unsteady breath...to find some coherent thought somewhere in his brain. Hutch was staring unblinkingly at him as though he were seeing him for the first time. Starsky tried to form words...to apologize...to figure out a way to make this right....

"Hutch, I'm sorry...I...."

Whatever he was going to say became swallowed by the mouth that swooped down to devour his. If Hutch had not been holding him firmly upright, he surely would have fainted from the shock to his system.

Hutch is kissing me.

The inflamed lips were no longer accepting but initiating...initiating the most heavenly kiss Starsky had ever known. The tongue he had just caressed with his had now sprung to life, invading his mouth with relish.

Hutch is kissing me.

The words echoed over and over in Starsky's mind as he tried to convince himself that this was real. It had to be real. No dream had ever left him this devastated from one kiss. But how could this be happening? How did he move from the lowest point in his life to this fantasy come true? What was going on here?

When his mouth was finally released, Starsky was gasping for air. He noted then that the hands that were holding him were trembling as well. That's when he saw it...the look in Hutch's eyes. It was a look Starsky had never seen there before. Nobody had ever looked at Starsky like that, especially Hutch. But what did it all mean?

Before he could decide, he realized they were kissing again. He wasn't even certain who started it this time. All he knew was that their mouths kept coming together like magnet and steel. Hutch's kisses were like nothing he'd ever known...nothing he could describe. His responses to them seemed pre-determined, as though they were part of his genetic make-up. Nothing he could remember was so fully capable of short-circuiting his entire system.

He felt himself slipping down, despite Hutch's hold on him. His body was just too overcome to sustain much muscle control. This was all so unexpected, so overwhelming, so confusing...so incredibly arousing.

Hutch's mouth left his then as the blond struggled to steady the collapsing body in his arms. He turned them both, leaning Starsky against the back of the couch for support while he took several deep breaths to regain his own control. Hutch looked closely at Starsky, a look that attempted to ascertain his partner's condition. There was something almost like guilt in Hutch's eyes, as though he were berating himself for his lack of restraint. The blond took another deep breath, which composed his body though the fire still burned in his eyes. But it was gentle, unhurried hands that clasped the sides of Starsky's face and held it as though it were made of porcelain. Lips moved forward to plant cherishing kisses on Starsky's forehead, nose, eyelids and chin. Though meant to slow things down, the reverence completely undid the bolts that the passion had already loosened. Starsky fell helplessly forward into his partner, limbs giving out completely under the strain of his accelerated pulse, heated shivers, rapid breathing and lightheaded wooziness.

Hutch responded immediately, wrapping one hand around Starsky's waist while he bent to scoop up the buckling legs. Gathering Starsky into the sanctuary of his arms, Hutch carried him into the bedroom. There was a surreal quality to it all that made Starsky worry once more that he was dreaming. But the way he was reacting...the things he was feeling...were unlike anything he'd ever experienced. How could a dream capture sensations that he never knew existed?

Hutch sat him down on the edge of the bed then knelt on the floor before him, pressing between his thighs. Crystal blue eyes held Starsky in hypnotic rapture while steadfast hands reached to take the jacket down from his shoulders. As the jacket was drawn off his arms, special care was given to safeguard his bandaged hand. The jacket was then discarded in a heap on the floor, Hutch's eyes never leaving his. Those eyes held him as powerfully as the strong arms just had. Starsky knew that if he could just keep looking in them, nothing bad could ever happen to him again. Everything in those eyes was honest and open and safe. Starsky had always sought and found refuge there, and now, when his whole world was spinning out of control, those eyes were

the anchor that held him in place.

Hutch's hands moved to his face again, feather light fingertips outlining his temples...sliding down along his cheeks...his jaw. The thumbs of each finger brushed beneath his eyes, dipping into the moisture that Starsky wasn't aware had been there.

"Too many tears," Hutch whispered, his own eyes still shimmering with moisture. Then he leaned forward, still holding Starsky's face, and lapped the them away with his tongue and lips.

The tender gesture rocked Starsky to his core. Emotion welled up from deep within him, catching in his throat and burning through his eyes. A choked sob was emitted from his throat while his eyes filled with heavier tears. He wouldn't have been able to keep them from falling if he'd tried, but Starsky didn't even try. He was beyond hiding anything at this moment. As the tears flowed unbidden from his eyes, Hutch was there to kiss each one away. Only when the last tear had fallen, did Hutch guide him down on his back to lay across the mattress.

He lay staring up at the ceiling that he knew was his, yet thinking it looked different somehow. Glancing around, everything in the room looked different, felt different. The bed he had lain in for years was the same...yet not the same at all. The body he had lived in his whole life felt strange to him...senses felt heightened, reactions unexpected, control unattainable.

He was aware that Hutch had removed his shoes and socks...perhaps even his own from the sound of things. He was pulled up further onto the bed so that his legs stretched out across the mattress as well. Hutch was hovering above him then, supporting arms propped on either side of Starsky's head, knees straddling his hips. As Starsky looked up into that face he adored, once again finding the eyes that he trusted, he knew he wanted to lay here in this place forever and never move. At that moment, he wasn't even sure if he could move. His limbs felt as though they had melted into the mattress, become one with it. Again, his body's responses seemed out of his control. His body decided it wanted to lay here in this place and there wasn't a damn thing he was able to do about it.

Hutch, on the other hand, seemed to be experiencing no such lack in coordination. Shifting his balance to his left arm, he brought his right hand to Starsky's hair, to sift through the curls. The hand moved to Starsky's face again, caressing his cheeks and chin. The index finger traced a faint line around his lips then brushed across them. Starsky's mouth fell open and Hutch trailed the finger along the moist inner flesh of his lower lip.

Hutch's face swooped close to his then, desire and restraint seeming to do battle behind his eyes. The kiss this time was less consuming than the ones in the living room, as though Hutch were being careful not to inundate Starsky's overloaded system. Starsky had fast come to realize, however, that any contact with that mouth would send him into orbit.

The kiss became longer and deeper with every minute that passed, mouths moving in unison...lips sealed together in intimate bond...tongues mating with the joy of finally finding their predestined match. Hutch's hand was in his hair again, seemingly fascinated by the feel of it. The fingers twisting in his curls bent his neck back, opening him further to the depths of the kiss.

When Hutch finally pulled back, they were both gasping for air. Starsky's mouth continued to tingle in swollen passion. He wanted more...needed more. If Hutch didn't kiss him again right then, he would surely forget how to breathe. He was a starving man and Hutch's mouth was the only nourishment that could sate him. He moaned with longing, hoping the pleading in his eyes was understood. It was, and once again he was swept up into the whirlwind that was kissing Hutch.

Dizzily, he began to decipher the situation. He was here, awake in his own bed. Hutch was on top of him...touching him...kissing him. Nothing about that felt plausible. Yet it felt more right, more familiar, more natural than anything he had ever experienced.

While his mind struggled to comprehend, his body merely reacted. He was hot everywhere, his clothes clinging to his perspiration-soaked skin like wallpaper to a wall. His heart was pounding so hard he could hear it in his ears. His groin was pressing so firmly against his pants that he could almost count the teeth indentations from his zipper, even through his briefs.

When Hutch released his mouth this time, he wailed from the loss. He was shaking so badly...needing so desperately. His head ached from the riotous profusion.

A quieting hand smoothed along his face and neck as a voice whispered in his ear.

"Shhhh...easy. We've got time."

Lips were kissing his ear then, as the hand massaged his chest at the point of his thundering heartbeat.

"Shhhhh." The light entreaty blew in his ear again. It was as though Hutch had sensed how desperate...how painful his passion had become. He could feel the concern in each touch...feel the efforts to relax him and help him breathe. He closed his eyes, trying to give into the lulling gestures.

Moist lips and tongue moved unhurriedly along Starsky's face and neck. Gentling kisses were planted everywhere: forehead, eyelids, cheeks, ears, nose, chin, neck, throat. Hutch was tasting every inch of him...treating every unconcealed patch of skin to the magic of his touch.

Without his mouth leaving Starsky's flesh, Hutch leaned back on his legs, redistributing his weight to free his other hand. Both hands gripped the hem of Starsky's red knit shirt, sliding it up slowly as Hutch nibbled on a particularly sensitive spot on his neck.

With his shirt bunched up below his neck, Starsky felt the air assault his heated torso, causing him to shiver. But then warm palms rubbed up and down...from his stomach to his shoulders and back again...over and over....

While continuing the strokes, Hutch slid further down, bringing his mouth to Starsky's chest. Again, every inch of him received equal attention as the hot trail of kisses laved over him unceasingly.

Starsky heard his own soft whimpers, which he could not control. The pleasure was much too

disarming. Never...never in his wildest dreams could he ever have imagined this. Even in his most daring of fantasies, Hutch would *allow* Starsky to touch him...and if Starsky were really careful...and lucky...toleration would melt to acceptance...and maybe -- eventually -- pleasure.

But now, Starsky lay motionless, seeming to have lost all ability to move...to touch...to speak...the moment Hutch had kissed him back. Finally faced with his heart's desire, he found its attainment too overpowering to handle. The sheer magnitude of it had blown him apart, scattering him into dysfunctional pieces.

Hutch had been gathering those pieces...one by one...kissing them, stroking them, fitting them back together. Only they were coming together in a new way, creating a new Starsky...someone he'd never met. This new Starsky was being lavished with love and attention and tenderness. This Starsky seemed to be cherished and desired by the only person in the world he'd ever truly loved.

He felt his arms being lifted up over his head as his left nipple was captured by the tireless mouth igniting his body. The slow sucking there sent a blinding flash past his eyes. When the gentle nibbling began, his back arched upward and his head bent back in a howl. Hutch took advantage of this position, sliding the shirt out from under his back, along his upstretched arms and over his head...all without releasing the nipple he was electrifying.

With the shirt removed, Hutch's hands were free again to return to Starsky's body. Deliberate fingers seized control of the other nipple and Starsky was once more sent soaring. Hutch's hands and mouth were unleashed fully then, and Starsky's torso was their playground. Starsky lost track of everything but sensations...hot, wet caresses...soft tickles...firm kneading...licks, bites, kisses, strokes. Anywhere and everywhere. Liquid fire burning through his veins...balls full and throbbing...he wasn't sure where he was or who he was anymore. All he knew was that he was in a place where everything felt wonderful and nothing hurtful could get near him.

It took a while to come down from that tremendous high and become aware of his surroundings again. When he did, Hutch was sitting up above him looking down, his ass resting back on Starsky's thighs. One hand was lightly tracing his chest, outlining the scars there as if they were something to be revered. Hutch's eyes burned with emotion, as though he too had been overwhelmed by the depth of what he was feeling. He looked into Starsky's eyes then, a look so pure and adoring that Starsky found himself unable to breathe.

"You're so beautiful," Hutch was saying in a thick voice. "You look so...elated...so..." Hutch shook his head, words seeming to escape him. Finally, he bent to kiss one of the bullet scars...a visible reminder of the many hurts they shared. When he lifted his head and looked at his partner again, he sighed. "It should always be like this...you should always be like this." He leaned forward to kiss Starsky's quivering lips. It was a sweet kiss, a treasuring kiss. Only when it was over did Starsky's body forcefully remind him of the need to breathe.

He wanted to say something then...to tell Hutch...to begin to find a way to express all the feelings he'd held inside for so long. But he couldn't force the words from his throat. Fear gripped him...fear of breaking this spell between them...fear of doing something wrong...something that would bring reality crashing back down upon them. He didn't want

reality. He'd had more reality than he could cope with. What he wanted was for this magical, perfect sanctuary to go on forever. And so he remained quiet, eyes transfixed by the dream lover before him.

Hutch was a sight he never grew tired of. At work, in the car, in front of the television, even on the damned racquetball court, Starsky's eyes were constantly drawn to his partner. To be looking at him here, now, in his own bed -- hair ruffled, face flushed, mouth swollen -- it was a sight so exquisite it was almost blinding.

Hutch noted the way Starsky was looking at him. He must have recognized the hunger in those eyes...the need to see more. The skilled fingers that had delighted Starsky's flesh moved to the buttons of the white cotton shirt. One by one, the buttons were unfastened, revealing small glimpses of flesh to Starsky's captive eyes. When the last one had finally been undone, Hutch slid the shirt down off his shoulders in a move that was so sensual it should have been illegal.

Starsky was gaping openly, nearly salivating at the sight before him. It wasn't that he had never seen Hutch shirtless. But this was the first time he could react to the sight instinctively...without fear of letting something slip. The freedom was exhilarating. He allowed his eyes to linger languidly over the perfectly formed physique, licking his lips again and again. Broad shoulders, well-defined pecs, toned arms, flat belly...all encased by the creamy, smooth, unblemished skin. Starsky was enthralled.

Hutch smiled at the scrutiny. He teased his partner lightly. "You like that, huh?"

Starsky could merely nod, but he knew his face and eyes were saying much more. Hutch seemed to blossom in the face of the open admiration, as though it was the first time he had been looked at that way. Didn't he have any idea how incredible looking he was?

"Well, whatever makes you happy," Hutch stated shyly as he reached for the snap at the top of his jeans. Eyes locked with Starsky's, he opened the snap and began to pull the zipper down.

Starsky's breath caught in his throat as his eyes became riveted to the bulge protruding beneath the zipper. His own groin pulsed painfully in sympathy. Hutch moved off of Starsky, climbing from the bed to stand beside it, as he grasped the top of the black jeans and began to ease them down his long frame. The briefs slid down inside the pants.

Starsky gasped aloud as a tremor coursed through him. The sight was almost more than he could bear. Hutch was standing there...this blond, perfectly sculpted statue...thick, uncut cock stretching tauntingly towards him from a patch of light curls. Hutch, completely naked and aroused...balls heavy, cock fully erect, nipples taut...and all for him.

It felt as though his entire being were going to rupture. He wasn't sure he could handle the flood of reaction, both physical and emotional, that was swamping him. As Hutch got back in the bed and crawled slowly towards him, his head swam as though he might black out.

Hutch was beside him now, stretching all that gorgeousness across the mattress next to him. Arm folded at the elbow, Hutch rested his head upon his hand, lounging on his side, only inches separating his body from Starsky's.

Starsky struggled to move, but breathing was taking a tremendous effort. He finally managed to peel his right hand off the mattress and tried to maneuver his only working limb towards Hutch. But it shook fitfully and fell against Hutch's side in a thud rather than a caress. Starsky moaned in frustration as the tears welled in his eyes.

"Shhhh," Hutch soothed as he lifted the offending limb and planted light kisses all over it. He turned the hand and licked the inside of the palm before returning the arm to the mattress from which it had come. In the gentle eyes there was understanding...understanding for the things Starsky couldn't understand himself. And then Hutch climbed on top of him, pressing his bare chest against Starsky's, providing the contact Starsky longed for but couldn't seem to seek for himself.

He sunk deeper into the mattress as the weight of Hutch's body bore down on him. Hutch was everywhere...against his chest...his arms...his legs. Those hands that he adored clasped his face, holding it in place for the determined mouth that was descending upon him.

Hutch's mouth covered his and took possession of him, not only kissing him powerfully but forcing him to breathe through his partner. Much needed oxygen was being blown into his mouth in a steady rhythm, causing his erratic breathing to become more regulated. Some of the lightheadedness cleared as his lungs got a continuous supply of air.

When Starsky's breathing had slowed and the tremors became less pronounced, Hutch began to undulate on top of him, squeezing his erection into Starsky's denim covered bulge. Starsky groaned into Hutch's mouth as the fire spread throughout him.

His chest and mouth were sealed to Hutch's, his cock held prisoner beneath him. The smell, the taste, the feel of Hutch was everywhere, and it was heaven...and it was hell. He needed more. He ached for more. Just as he tried to figure out what it was he needed, hands were at the fastening to his pants and he knew.

Hutch broke away from Starsky's mouth, trailing white hot kisses down his body as the adroit hands undid his pants. The blond head poised over his stomach, devilish tongue darting in and out of his navel as the zipper to his pants was pulled down. In another moment, his strangled cock was set free as his pants and briefs were drawn from his body in one swift move.

His cock didn't stay free for long, however. It was captured by two determined hands that began to stroke him mercilessly as Starsky reveled in the birth of this alliance between their naked flesh.

Starsky cried out at the feel of Hutch's hands upon his love-starved cock, precum oozing from him at the moment of contact. It wasn't going to take much to put him over the edge.

The base of his cock was gripped firmly, fingertips trailing down the pulsing vein. His back arched up and his hips began to thrust in a need-filled frenzy. Hutch repositioned himself, sitting down on the top of Starsky's thighs, digging his knees into Starsky's bucking hips to hold them steady. Pinned hard into the mattress, Starsky could only groan as his balls were fondled with the most delicate touch. His cock was grasped more tightly and stropped in a rhythm that would quickly be his undoing.

It didn't take much...his ravenous body could not withstand this glorious torture for long. And then it happened. Starsky...who hadn't been touched by anyone but himself for over two years...who had longed for the touch of only one person for what felt like a lifetime...came...and came hard. His entire body seemed to convulse up into Hutch's hands as spasm upon spasm tore through him.

Blinding light flared behind his eyes. His throat burned raw from his screams. Jet after jet of hot liquid erupted from him like lava spewing out of a volcano. Every muscle inside him tensed and rode out the waves. Long, glorious moments of ultimate release cumulated in an inebriated haze that he floated in unhindered.

Still drifting, he became aware of soft, light sensations tickling his ear and neck. He smiled and leaned into them as the sensations increased. He didn't need to open his eyes to recognize the feel of Hutch's mouth. His ear and neck were being nibbled in the most provocative way, and Starsky, who was just coming back from the throes of a mammoth orgasm, felt the slightest twinge of reawakening in his balls.

He opened his eyes and turned his head, coming face to face with Hutch, who was lying beside him. The smile that met him touched him more deeply than any orgasm could. Gentle fingers carded through his hair while Hutch continued to look at him, as though looking at him was the most satisfying experience in the world. Starsky still couldn't believe this was happening. Was he really lying here naked and spent beside his partner...and was his partner really the one who got him in that condition?

Thinking about conditions brought a sharper sense of awareness. He was free from any trace of uncomfortable stickiness...Hutch must have cleaned him off after he came. Hutch was still firmly erect beside him yet lying here as though he didn't have a care in the world.

Apparently seeing Starsky's eyes lingering on his still engorged cock, Hutch cupped his chin and brought his face back to meet his eyes.

"It's OK," he reassured. "It can wait. I'd much rather look at you." He edged closer then, his voice huskier. "Actually, I'd much rather kiss you."

He pressed several sweet, undemanding kisses on Starsky's lips. Starsky knew he had already become addicted to the taste and feel of Hutch's mouth, so he wasn't surprised when his lips fell open and his tongue engaged in a mission to attain its next fix. They took turns probing each other's mouths, leisurely kisses becoming more and more insistent.

Starsky felt his body responding to Hutch in a way that he had never responded to anything before. To his utter surprise, his hunger was once again ignited. This realization made him feel greedy. Here he was, caught up in his own needs and desires again, when Hutch hadn't received any satisfaction at all. Hutch had given such unflagging attention to all his needs and never asked for anything in return.

The fingers that were lightly caressing his side came to a stop by his hip. Starsky was grasped there and pulled closer into Hutch so that the scorching kiss they were sharing could be deepened. As Starsky groaned into his partner's mouth, he became consumed by a craving...a

craving which had been denied and suppressed for an eternity, a craving that could satisfy Hutch's needs as well. To satisfy it, however, he'd have to regain some use of his faculties. That wasn't the easiest thing to do, especially with Hutch's other hand stroking across his chest, alternately fondling each of his nipples until they became hard, hot steel.

Starsky felt himself becoming overwhelmed again, bulldozed by the intensity of having so many long dormant yearnings liberated at once. The only way to get out from under the deluge was distance. Steeling himself with every ounce of strength he possessed, Starsky broke the kiss and pulled back. With effort, he was able to sit up and move to the edge of the bed.

"Something wrong?" Hutch's concerned voice questioned from behind him. Starsky shook his head as he pulled open the drawer of the night table beside the bed. He had actually hoped to get out of the bed to do this, the heat from Hutch's body far too close behind him to make thinking clearly an easy task. If he were to move closer....

Starsky fumbled quickly through the drawer. He realized when he sat up that he was far too unsteady to stand and put distance between himself and the bed, so he had to make this quick. He located what he was looking for just as Hutch's hand fell upon his back. The simple touch inflamed his flesh.

Without turning around, he laid the tube of KY on the mattress beside him, grateful that his quick glance showed that the expiration date on the long unused tube hadn't passed. The hand that had been rubbing his back froze, and he felt the body behind him stiffen. There was silence in the room for several minutes...unless you counted the sound of Starsky's heartbeat which he was sure was as loud as a jackhammer.

Finally, the hesitant voice behind him questioned, "Starsk?"

Starsky took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He cleared his throat twice before he trusted it to work properly, then he pushed forth with the first words he had uttered in hours. "Make love to me, Hutch...please."

The request was met with silence. When Hutch's hand dropped from his back, Starsky's entire body went ridged and he was unable to move a single muscle. Fear enveloped him. What had he done? Had he pushed too far? Why couldn't he have just left things alone...been grateful for the unexpected gift he'd received tonight. Why did he have to push Hutch beyond what he was ready to give?

If he had had any strength left in his body at all, he would have run from there at that moment...run as far as he could without ever turning back to see the look that was surely on Hutch's face. But he was trapped in this nightmare which was about to get worse. Hutch's hand was on his arm pulling him around...pulling him to face the consequences he had been dreading all night. With a sigh of resignation, he turned.

A hand went to his cheek, lifting his face. He looked directly at Hutch then, mentally preparing himself for the worst. But the face that was looking back at him was not what he expected at all. It was tender and open and...if Starsky was reading it correctly...highly aroused.

"You sure that's what you want?" Hutch whispered, searching his face for the truth.

"Yes," Starsky managed as he held his breath.

"Then why are you so tight? Why do you look so...scared?" Hutch's eyes filled with concern.

"Because I thought...I thought you were gonna say no."

Though he tried to conceal it, Starsky saw the fleeting look that implied Hutch thought that was the most improbable thing he'd ever heard. Starsky glanced down then, seeing Hutch's penis in full bloom between them.

"Guess I was wrong." The flood of relief nearly bowled him over.

"I don't want to hurt you," Hutch said in a voice that indicated he might change his mind about this despite his desire.

"You couldn't," Starsky said simply, believing that more than he ever believed anything. Emboldened by the realization that Hutch actually wanted to make love to him, Starsky reached down and ran his fingers along the length of that perfect cock. It surged beneath his touch as Hutch let out a stifled groan. Wrapping his fingers more tightly around it, Starsky closed his eyes and allowed the sensations of touching Hutch in this intimate way wash over him. He stroked the silky, pulsing organ again and again as he became consumed with the thought of having it inside of him.

"Please, Hutch," he murmured as he toyed with the no longer forbidden fruit. "I've been like the walking dead for so long. I thought I'd forgotten how to feel. But you make me feel...you make me alive. I need this, Hutch. I've needed it for so long, I can't remember a time when I didn't."

A ragged wail rang out in the room right before Starsky was pushed back on the bed by an unleashed force. Hutch fell on top of him and they both became swept up in the maelstrom. Arms and legs tangled together as hands groped for everything they could touch. Starsky felt the fleeting frustration of only having one working hand now that he was finally able to touch Hutch as he'd dreamed of doing for so long. But what he lacked in quantity he strove to make up for in quality, demonstrating his worship for the body beside him. Their mouths were sealed together, feeding off of each other as their bodies were grinding in rhythmic delight.

His hand roaming freely over Hutch's body, Starsky felt delirious, as though caught in the throes of a high fever. He couldn't even register all the stimuli engaging his senses. His body was voraciously aroused as though it had never been sated. He was so charged that when his cock brushed up against Hutch's, the contact nearly pushed him over the edge again. The encounter seemed to have a similar effect on his partner, and Starsky felt sure that Hutch was going to take him soon. His pulse increased in anticipation.

To his surprise, however, the blond pulled back, easing Starsky's hands from his body as he worked to control his breathing. When Starsky tried to reach for him again, Hutch snagged his arms and pressed them down into the mattress.

"Whoa, easy tiger. You keep this up and I *am* going to end up hurting you. We gotta slow down."

Starsky didn't want to slow down. He had waited his whole life for this. But Hutch refused to be rushed, silencing his protests with tender, gentling kisses. Hutch proceeded to cover Starsky with kisses, moving at a deliberate pace that allowed time for his own body to ease back off the precipice.

Laying back, Starsky focused on breathing in and out as his heart raced inside his chest. Hutch's hands and mouth were stroking him in a soothing rhythm, making it difficult not to succumb to their lulling. The comfort found in the tenderness was like a balm upon Starsky's aching soul.

After what felt like an eternity of being bathed in sensuous delight, Starsky felt the moist breath brush across his groin. His thighs were coaxed apart as the velvet tongue slid across the surface of his balls. He shook at the contact, goosebumps cropping up along his flesh. Peeling his eyes open, he managed to catch a glimpse of Hutch stretched out on his stomach, face insinuated between Starsky's open thighs. The sight of that, combined with the exultation as one of his balls was pulled into the heated mouth, sent his mind spinning off into a murky daze.

Things became disjointed then as a plethora of riches assaulted Starsky's system. Fingers and tongue played wickedly with his balls. Moist, satin strokes worked their way up the underside of his cock. Willowy touches teased the entrance to his anus. Finally, the head of his cock was engulfed in torrid suction while, simultaneously, a gel-coated finger penetrated his asshole.

Starsky howled, his back arching off the mattress as his legs came further apart, knees pulling up towards his chest. The motion lodged the finger deeper as the lips pursed tightly around the head of his cock.

The finger within him began to probe, spreading the cool lube around his tight orifice. The head of his cock was being sucked more fervently now, as the tongue darted in and out of its moistened slit. Starsky balled his right hand into a fist, pounding it into the mattress as he struggled to endure.

As his cock was drawn deeper into the merciless mouth, a second finger entered him. The two invaders made themselves at home inside of him, scouting and stretching the uncharted territory. They continued to tunnel undaunted until they came up against a pleasure point that was obviously created to be Starsky's undoing.

Lost in a euphoria Starsky had never known, he bucked up hard into the mouth that merely opened wider to accommodate. There was no escape. He lay pinned between the pleasures wreaking havoc within and without. Somewhere along the line he thought a third finger had joined in his dismantling, but it was hard to distinguish anymore. By the time Hutch was ready to enter him, Starsky was so far gone it felt as if just the word 'fuck' would be enough to set him off.

During the frenzy, a pillow had been propped under his hips and his legs had been pulled open wide and bent at the knees. Hutch's thickly lubed cock was perched at his entranceway, and Starsky's last coherent thought was a plea to his teetering body to hold out long enough for him to enjoy this hungrily anticipated union.

With a gentle push, Hutch's engorged cock took its first step inside. The steely rod inched forward slowly, giving him a chance to accommodate its bulk. Despite the multitude of sensations he had experienced this evening, Starsky was caught completely unprepared for this unprecedented encounter. This was Hutch...Hutch making love to him...Hutch becoming buried inside of him...becoming part of him. The significance of that was astounding.

Hutch felt so big inside of him. Starsky's inner walls tried to constrict and rebel, but he refused to let them. He pulled his legs further apart and took several deep, lung-filling breaths as he focused everything he had on relaxing. Hutch waited patiently, not moving again until the contractions ceased.

The pressure from the stretching might have been painful were it not so wondrous to Starsky. He was staggered by his body's ability to open...adjust...adapt...conform to Hutch. They were joining together as one. Anything necessary to achieve that was worth it.

When it was safe, Hutch sunk in further. With that motion, he brushed up against the place that he had driven mad with his fingers. Starsky grunted as stars burst before his eyes. He felt a blood rush ignite within his deepest recesses and extend outward through his cock, which grew even thicker despite its engorged state.

Having found this Achilles Heel, Hutch was once again merciless. He massaged it with the slick tip of his insistent manhood until Starsky's breathless screams filled the room. As he writhed from wave upon wave of unbearable pleasure, Hutch moved again, filling Starsky so completely that his sacs brushed against the tender ass.

Starsky gasped, the moment so complete...so ideal...that he was afraid to move. He tore his eyes open to look at Hutch...to see their joining...to capture the image in his mind forever. His vision of the radiant blond was blurred. He knew it was from tears, but he didn't care. For once the tears that fell from his eyes weren't bitter or remorseful. They were born of a more profound joy than anything he had ever known.

Having fought to still his body to preserve the moment, Starsky was particularly attuned to the tremors coursing through his other half. Hutch's face reflected the strain he had been enduring to maintain Starsky's pleasure. Admonishing himself for not detecting it sooner, Starsky rocked his hips back and pumped the golden cock he held within.

Interpreting the unspoken entreaty, Hutch let out a long-held grunt as he grabbed Starsky's hips and reared back. Though the controlled Hutch had brought him to heights he had never known, he was certain this unleashed Hutch was going to obliterate him. Starsky smiled broadly as he anticipated the journey to oblivion.

The pumping began in earnest, accelerating with every pass. Hutch was everywhere...inside his body...around his organ...resounding in his ear...inhabiting his heart. Hutch filled him and possessed him and sent him soaring. Nothing had ever been like this...nothing. It was as though he was created just for this moment...this purpose...and everything else in his life was just filler.

He belonged to Hutch now...belonged in a way that he had never belonged anywhere. Tears continued to spill from his eyes as he reveled not just in the physical wonders, but in the bliss of

completeness.

He wanted it to last forever...to be loved like this forever. But Hutch was too good. Every nerve ending in Starsky's body was on overload and he knew he could not endure much more.

Starsky threw his arms up over his head and pushed harder down onto Hutch's cock, constricting every muscle he had in an effort to feel more...to get closer...before he passed out from the ecstasy.

A piercing cry emitted from somewhere deep in his partner's throat. Its raw intensity filled the room. Starsky felt the hand that had been pumping his cock tighten then fall away, moving to his hip where the fingers dug into his skin painfully. Starsky's hips were pinned by a similar grip on his other side, holding him in place for the throbbing cock that lunged into him with a force that expelled the air from his lungs.

The vice-like hold on his hips increased as Hutch's entire body began to spasm. The cock inside of him was surging of its own accord as its owner seemed to be clutching on to Starsky to keep from falling over.

With his right hand, Starsky clutched Hutch's left wrist while drawing his inner muscles tighter. The echo from Hutch's screams nearly shook the window panes. Hot creamy jets of liquid began to spray Starsky's insides...coating him...filling him...drowning him....

The phenomenal realization resounded in his brain...*Hutch is coming in me*. Everything inside Starsky shattered then as he followed his partner into the abyss. His body began to convulse uncontrollably, his cock exploding in endless gushes of semen that splattered everywhere. He could hear his voice shouting Hutch's name over and over as a burst of colors spun like a kaleidoscope through his mind.

Starsky's body continued to burst until it felt as though every last ounce of his essence had been drained. Depleted, he lay cresting on the wings of nirvana, his last purposeful breath a jagged whisper.

"I love you, Hutch."

EIGHT

It was morning when Starsky awoke. At first, he wasn't sure he *was* awake. There was a sense of well-being about him that he didn't recognize. Mornings, when he was most defenseless, usually left him vulnerable to the choking grip of despair. But this morning something hopeful...almost joyful seemed to permeate his system.

Shifting, he felt soreness throughout his body, but it wasn't the familiar pain that he awoke to. This was more like the satisfying burn you feel when you've run several long, hard miles. He lay still for a while, basking in the relief of waking up out from under the dark cloud. As his mind and body relaxed, memory flooded him.

Hutch.

His eyes tore open and he scanned his bed, surprised to find he was alone. A quick search of the floor found only his own clothing lying there. Starsky fell back hard into the pillow, his heart rate increasing as the anxiety started to build.

Calm down, he instructed himself. Just think.

It couldn't have been a dream. The sticky remains both on him and inside of him confirmed that. Thinking harder, he remembered it was Sunday. Hutch wouldn't have had to go to work. He couldn't remember anything during the night...no good-byes...no conversations. The last thing he remembered was coming harder than he ever had in his life...and then sleep.

So what happened? Where was Hutch? Why would he leave?

Starsky heard sounds from beyond his bedroom door. Someone else was in the apartment. Hutch? It had to be. The sounds were coming from the kitchen. Starsky started to get up to check, but then he stopped himself. Something didn't feel right.

He could understand that maybe Hutch woke up before him and went to the kitchen, perhaps needing something to eat or drink. Starsky's own throat was as parched as a desert. But why would Hutch have gotten completely dressed just to go into the kitchen? Was he so eager to get out of Starsky's bed...perhaps even out of his home?

Despite his efforts to quell them, paranoid thoughts and questions flooded him. Did Hutch regret what had happened? Did he have second thoughts? Was he so uncomfortable about what they had done that he couldn't face Starsky? But then, why didn't he just leave altogether? Why was he, from the smell of things, making breakfast?

Because he's Hutch, a voice answered. Even if he regretted what had happened, he wouldn't just run away. He'd try to let you down easy; make sure you were OK. Hell, he'd even make you breakfast, ever the caretaker.

Caretaker.

Hutch's voice echoed in Starsky's mind. "There's something there...something you

need...something that's in me to give...something important and you won't tell me...."

Starsky suppressed the nauseous rush as he felt his skin grow cold.

Oh, God, was that what last night was about? Was that Hutch taking comfort to the ultimate level...trying to give me the thing that I needed the most because he's been so worried about me? So worried that he'd do anything...anything...to fix it?

Starsky's hand went to his stomach, feeling as though he had just been kicked there. With dread, he replayed the entire evening in his mind. It had been so amazing, so unexpected...so...unbelievable? Almost too good to be true. Hutch was everything he could have ever wanted him to be and more. The unselfish way in which he focused on Starsky's needs astounded his partner. Hutch had given him everything...made him feel a euphoria he had never known. At no time had he demanded anything in return. In fact, he took nothing for himself until the very end.

Starsky felt the tears begin a path down his face as he got the uneasy impression that his world was collapsing down around him again. Desperately, he tried to remember every word that Hutch had said...every facial expression...every gesture. He tried to remember beyond his bliss-clouded perspective of last night. Here, in the cold light of day, were there clues he missed, things he hadn't picked up on?

'I need this, Hutch. I've needed it for so long I can't remember a time when I didn't.'

'I love you, Hutch.'

Starsky's own words drifted back to him easily, but he couldn't remember any similar declarations on the other side. No admissions of secret longings...no pronouncements of discovered feelings. Just quiet acceptance of Starsky's feelings, Starsky's desires.

'Too many tears,' Hutch had whispered before he kissed them away. And then he did his best to bring tears of joy to the eyes whose tears he had dried so many times.

He does love me, Starsky realized. *Just not the way I love him.*

Starsky curled up in a ball on the space in his bed where Hutch had lain. The sound of his heart breaking was almost audible. Ecstasy to agony in less than 24 hours. Everything then nothing. From hope to utter hopelessness.

The feelings were not foreign, however, and Starsky found himself accepting them with fatalistic acquiescence. Such things had become common place in this roller coaster ride that posed as his life. What was the use in fighting against it? Better to just accept it and be grateful for the one perfect night of paradise, the brief respite from the weight of the shadows.

Lethargically, he pulled himself from the bed and headed for the bathroom.

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Fifteen minutes later, Starsky emerged from the bathroom showered and dressed. Since he knew that Hutch had done the same upon waking, he decided it was best to follow suit. No need to make this any more uncomfortable for Hutch than it needed to be. Feelings buried as far down as he could stuff them, Starsky entered the living room on auto-pilot. But the walls of detachment he was trying so desperately to hide behind nearly came tumbling down when he saw his partner.

Hutch was sitting on the couch, on the phone, looking...beguiling. The clean blond hair shone like a crown upon his head. The white shirt looked crisp despite its night on the floor, and it clung to his body in a way that highlighted every contour. The shirt was tucked into the narrow waistband of the tight black jeans, which hugged his long muscular legs.

Visions of what lay beneath those clothes flooded Starsky. His mind taunted him with pictures of Hutch naked and aroused...Hutch's body rocking in the throes of orgasm....

*Stop!*

Starsky forced the images away and headed towards the kitchen as he overheard some of Hutch's conversation.

"Yeah, I know it's short notice, but I don't see why that's an issue...Yes, the whole thing...no...wait...hold on a second...."

Hutch stood up and snagged Starsky's arm before he could disappear into the kitchen. His eyes seemed bluer somehow if that were possible...and they were positively shining. Why did he have to be so damned beautiful?

"Good morning," Hutch said cheerfully. He motioned towards the receiver in his hand. "Sorry about this, I'll be off in a second. I heard you in the shower, so I put breakfast on the table. Why don't you get started before it gets cold?"

Hutch squeezed his arm affectionately and gave him a warm smile. Then he moved back towards the couch and returned to his conversation.

Starsky stood where he was, momentarily unable to move. Hutch seemed awfully chipper for someone feeling the regrets of 'the morning after'...for someone who needed to find a way to extricate himself from such an awkward situation. Deciding that Hutch's veneer must be for his benefit, Starsky again strove to clear his mind and just get through this. He walked to the table where he found an expansive breakfast of pancakes, eggs and bacon. Hutch had gone to a lot of trouble. Too bad he didn't have the stomach for any of it.

"So, we understand each other, then," Hutch was saying into the phone in a tone that brooked no argument. "Good, then I expect this taken care of as soon as possible...no that won't work. I've got a tight schedule today, so I'll be in and out. I'll have to call you back...Yes, I'll be working those details out this afternoon...Right, take care of that, too...Yeah, I'll get in touch with him later when I have a free moment...All right, thanks." The receiver was set down in the cradle after that.

Starsky was still staring down at the breakfast when Hutch approached.

"Busy day?" Starsky questioned caustically.

"You could say that," Hutch said, smiling as though there were something amusing in the statement. He moved closer then, his lips seeming to zero in on Starsky's mouth. Starsky dodged the advance.

"Well, I guess you need to get going then. Don't stay around here on my account."

"What?"

"Look Hutch, you did your duty. You even made me a nice breakfast to boot. So go on. I wouldn't want to keep you from your plans."

Starsky bit his lip, ashamed at how bitter he was sounding. He hadn't intended it to come out that way. It was just that when he heard Hutch going on with all his plans as though this were just any other day, his defense mechanism kicked in.

"Did you hit your head on the headboard or something?" Hutch asked, sounding genuinely confused. "Or did you just wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?"

"I woke up alone in bed this morning," Starsky shot back. "I got the hint." He tried to walk away then, but Hutch grabbed his arm and spun him around.

"Whoa! Back up. What the hell is going on here?"

Starsky wrenched his arm away. "Don't, OK." Despite his best efforts to squelch them, emotions were slipping through. He found himself snapping brusquely. "Look, I'm sure you've got some flowery speech all planned so you can let me down easy, but save it. I don't need it. I'm a big boy and I can handle reality. So stop worrying about protecting my feelings and just go."

Pain did battle with confusion behind Hutch's eyes. He sighed as he ran his hand through his hair. "I don't get this. After last night...after everything...you're still pushing me out...dismissing me instead of talking to me."

"Last night is over," Starsky declared as headed back towards the living room. Hutch was right behind him, indignant.

"So what does that make me? Some kind of cheap one-night stand?"

It was Starsky's turn to be confused now. Why was Hutch pressing this? He had given him an out. Why wouldn't he just take it?

"No, of course not." Starsky tried to soften his tone. He had never intended for this to go this way. None of this was Hutch's fault. He didn't deserve hostility. "Look, Hutch, last night was wonderful. It was an incredible gesture and I'm grateful to you in more ways than I can say. But it's morning now and it's time to face reality. You don't have to feel any obligation to me."

"Gesture? Obligation?" Hutch was shaking his head as though they were foreign words. He

looked at Starsky with a droll smile. "If how I treated you last night felt like obligation then I need to work on my technique."

Starsky was completely bewildered now. None of this was making sense. He turned away from Hutch, unable to think straight when those eyes were distracting him. He fought for words, babbling whatever came to his mind. "You don't owe me anything, Hutch...it's OK...I understand...I mean you're my best friend...you were there for me...you wanted to comfort me...that means more to me than you'll know but...I don't want you to think there's any strings attached...feel like you have to do anything more...feel obligated...."

Hutch's hands were on his shoulders urging him around. When he turned he saw startled concern in the face perusing his features.

"Jeez, Starsk, you really believe that, don't you? It's so easy for you to believe the worst right now, isn't it? So hard to get out from under all the pain. I should have realized that. I should have been more sensitive to it. I'm sorry."

He wrapped Starsky in his arms then, squeezing him into a tight embrace. Starsky was afraid to move...afraid to breathe. He didn't know what was happening, but at this moment he didn't care. At this moment he just wanted to stay inside those arms forever.

It was Hutch who broke the hug, pulling back so that he could look into Starsky's eyes. His voice was tender.

"Let me be real clear about what's going on here so you don't have any more reason to misunderstand. Last night was not about obligation. Yeah, maybe a small part of it was about comforting you, but I'm not going to apologize for enjoying being able to make you feel good." He lifted his hand to Starsky's face and trailed his fingers over the features. His eyes glimmered in a way Starsky had never seen before. His voice was steeped in emotion. "Starsky, last night...when you kissed me...it was like all the pieces of my life suddenly fell into place. Everything felt clear for the first time. It was like having the answers to questions I didn't even know I had. And it all seemed so obvious. How could I have not seen what was so clearly always in front of me?"

"You're talking about how I feel about you...."

"No. I'm talking about how *I* feel about *you*. I'm talking about finally understanding it...about finally understanding me. All the countless relationships that never satisfied and always failed. All the times I felt frustrated and unfulfilled and I couldn't figure out why. All the times I wanted to feel close to you, but I could never feel close enough. Fragments of dreams denied...voices ignored...yearnings that didn't even have words. Realization that I never felt whole unless I was with you. It all finally made sense. In that one moment when you kissed me, I understood it all. It was like my life began right then...my life the way it was supposed to be."

Starsky's head was reeling. He was frantically trying to assimilate all of this...to hear what Hutch was saying. But something inside him was fighting it. For some reason these words were more frightening than the rejection he had anticipated. He shook his head forcefully, unable to accept this.

"No...you're just confused. You don't want to hurt me. You're mixing up my needs with yours."

Hutch smiled at him indulgently. "You can't run away from this. It's not going away."

"You need some time to think about this..." He was backing up but Hutch was moving forward.

"I thought about it all night. I couldn't sleep; I was so heady from it. Why do you think I got up so early?"

"To get away from me."

"Come here, you big dope," Hutch caught him in his arms and kissed him then, a kiss that ignited all the same sparks as the ones last night. When he pulled back, Hutch whispered softly. "Does that feel like I want to get away from you?"

"Hutch, wait...stop...we need to talk about this."

"Oh, now you want to talk," Hutch said with amusement.

"Yeah, I think we should." Starsky was trying to dislodge himself from the embrace, but Hutch pulled him closer.

"Fine, we'll talk," he said into the ear he was nibbling. "I'll tell you all the things I should have been telling you last night...all the things I was feeling and was too overwhelmed to say." He kissed him again then, long and hard. "Did you know that I didn't understand what kissing was until I kissed you? Your mouth is like nothing I've ever known before. Just the taste of it sends me soaring."

Starsky was shaking all over. His emotions were in turmoil. Part of him was screaming inside to give into this, but the fear of doing so was outweighing that urge.

"That's not what I meant we should talk about," his unsteady voice pleaded. He turned his head to keep his lips out of Hutch's path, but Hutch simply rerouted his course, kissing down Starsky neck. He spoke between each kiss.

"Oh? Well then how about I talk about what it's like to hold you in my arms...how we fit together like pieces of a puzzle...how the lightest brush of you against me makes me shiver with desire...."

"Breakfast...what about breakfast..." Starsky desperately tried another track.

"It's cold...but you're hot...and I'm hungry for you..." Hutch's hands moved down his back to rest on his butt, which he squeezed tightly, pressing Starsky hard against him. Hutch's demanding erection dug into Starsky's rapidly growing one, causing Starsky to gasp. His body was quickly veering out of control.

"You...said...you...had...plans...busy day... remember...."

"The plans are just going to have to wait." Hutch trailed his tongue along the outside of Starsky's

lips. "It seems to me that you need more convincing that I'm sincere. So, I'll just have to prove it to you." He moved his hand around to cup the bulge in Starsky's jeans. "That's my number one priority right now."

Starsky's knees buckled then as his head spun. He couldn't fight this, though he knew he should. He looked up into Hutch's eyes pleadingly, desperate to make him understand.

"Please...Hutch...please...don't...."

Starsky felt himself pushed against the back of the couch. He was leaned down across the top, his back pressed into the cushion as his left leg flopped over the edge. His right leg was still planted on the floor, but it was not stable enough to balance him. Hutch's upper body flattened down over him, pinning him there to keep him steady. Hutch clasped Starsky's cheeks in his hands and gazed down into his eyes as though he could see through to his soul. His voice was compelling.

"Don't be afraid of this, Starsk. Don't be afraid of us. Most of all, don't be afraid of yourself. Don't be afraid to feel and dream and want. I know those are scary things for you right now, but I promise you, it'll be OK. Close your eyes," he said as he kissed the lids closed. "Now just relax and let it happen. Feel it babe, let it come."

"Hutch..." Starsky heard his broken voice appeal as he grabbed onto Hutch's arm.

"I'm right here. Feel me with you. Open yourself up to that connection that's always existed between us. Trust it. Know what's between us is real. Somewhere inside of you, you know it. Let it come out. Don't push anything down anymore."

In the maelstrom of his mind, Starsky was shocked by how hard it was to do what Hutch was asking. Every reflex inside him fought to shut down...to find a place to hide. The need to do so was nearly paralyzing. But he focused with all his strength on Hutch's voice...the sensation of Hutch's hands stroking his face and hair...the wave of assurance he could sense emanating from the body beside him....

"That's it. Just relax and breathe. Take your time. Don't push anything. Just feel it...accept it...."

Starsky wasn't sure he knew how to do that anymore. The idea of letting the light cast its glare on the darkness was terrifying, and he couldn't even articulate why. He felt the panic grip him and his muscles tensed. The clutch he had on Hutch's arm increased.

"It's too much...it's too hard...."

"Look at me," Hutch said softly. "Look into my eyes."

Starsky did, wishing he could climb into the sanctuary he saw there.

"I love you," the solemn words were spoken like poetry. "Believe that. Trust it. If you can do that, the rest will come in time. Tell me you believe me, babe."

With an almost painful sense of relief, Starsky realized he did believe it. Somewhere deep inside of him, he knew Hutch loved him. He grabbed onto that thought like it was a rope being lowered down into a deep, gloomy pit, and tried to use it to climb upwards.

"I do believe you," he said breathlessly. A smile brighter than the sun's core beamed down on him. Then the brilliant mouth moved to his and took him in a soul-searing kiss that seemed to last forever.

In the wake of it, Starsky found himself disconnected from the groping tentacles that were trying to pull him down. Right for this moment, all that existed was him and Hutch.

"I love you, too." His voice was unsteady. "I've always loved you...feels like forever. I never thought it could be like this...I never thought you would want me like this."

"Want you?" Hutch smiled. "It's more like a necessity at this point." He slid his hand up under Starsky's tee shirt, carding his fingers through the thatch of chest hair. "My soul calls out for you to quiet the ache that has lived there forever. My body craves you for sustenance."

Starsky shuddered. "You sure have a way with words."

"You ain't heard nothing yet." There was a gleam in his eyes that told Starsky he fully intended to make all this thoughts and desires crystal clear. Starsky silently prayed he could withstand it. Hutch's hand rubbed across his belly.

"I love that...the way your body quakes when I touch you." The hand traveled back upward where fluttering fingertips traced the outline of his nipple. "And right here...you're so sensitive...one touch and this little nub springs to attention."

Starsky felt his nipple come alive in Hutch's hand. He arched up into the touch as Hutch's breath whispered into his ear.

"The feel of you drives me crazy. Just the simplest touches make my balls ache. Do you know how hard it was last night? How hard it was to go slow and not just devour you? How hard it is right now...."

Letting out a frustrated growl, Starsky tangled his fingers into that silky hair and pulled the sweetly talking mouth to his, searing it in a kiss that demonstrated he understood full well how difficult it was to maintain control. Hutch moaned into him as their tongues danced and dueled. When Hutch pressed his palm against the mound between Starsky's thighs, the leg that had been supporting his weight on the floor gave out. He lost his balance, clinging to Hutch as his weight shifted downward to the seat of the couch. This threw off the blonde's balance as well and they both tumbled down onto the sofa cushions, mouths still sealed together.

Hutch's weight was on top of Starsky, pressing him into the deepest recesses of the sofa while pinning his right arm below them both. The bandaged hand of this left arm was fairly useless, but Starsky dragged it back and forth across Hutch's back in an effort to get closer. The wily hand that had snagged his groin before was back now, kneading through the denim, which was the only barrier that separated it from its prey.

Hutch tore his mouth away, impassioned words spilling forth as he fumbled with the fastening to the bursting pants.

"I need to touch you...I need to see that incredible cock...I want to see it all thick and hard, blood pulsing through it in primal need. I almost came from looking at it yesterday...I've never seen anything that turned me on so much in my life...."

As the words sang through Starsky's brain, that tireless hand got inside his jeans and was pulling him free. Starsky lurched upward, his cock surging into Hutch's hand.

"Oh yeah, babe. I love the feel of you in my hand. It's another place where we fit together so perfectly."

With fervid zeal, Hutch began squeezing and stropping in earnest. At the same time, he maneuvered his body up off Starsky's a bit to help free the trapped right hand. Grasping it by the wrist, Hutch pulled it to rest on top of the angry bulge that was threatening to tear his pants.

"See what you do to me. It started getting hard the minute you came out of the bathroom this morning. It was hard all night just from thinking about you. I need you to touch me, babe. I need to feel your hand against me...please." The moan then was pain-filled.

Starsky hastened to oblige. It took a few minutes to work the pants open with his right hand, particularly with the distractions Hutch was providing to his own flesh, but with concerted effort he reached his goal. When he had drawn down the zipper and rescued the needy cock from the strangling confines of briefs and denim, his lover let out a wail.

"Oooooooooohhhh...shit, Starsk...oh yeah...."

While their hands worked in a frenzied rhythm, their mouths found their mates. Legs tangling, arms pumping, bodies humping, mouths pillaging...the frenetic motions soon became more than the limited confines of the couch could withstand. Once again, they found themselves tumbling, this time onto the floor. Barely missing a beat, Hutch stripped the cushions from the couch and tossed them to the floor, rolling his partner on top of them as they continued their foraging.

It was hard to distinguish whose moans were whose. They were both on fire. Clothing was removed in a fumbling rush...sounds of tearing blithely ignored. Any doubts Starsky may have had about whether this passion was mutual were becoming quickly dispelled. Hutch was more spirited and alive than Starsky had ever seen him. Starsky could feel the pleasure burning in the fair body almost as intensely as he felt his own. They couldn't seem to get enough of each other...each touch eliciting a voracity for more.

Starsky knew he was close. His body was so far gone he thought he would surely melt down at any moment. But then he felt Hutch untangling them...moving away. The sense of abandonment was crushing. He let out a strangled moan.

"I know, lover," the breathless voice that leaned to kiss his face soothed. "Me too...just hang on...I'll be right back."

He called to Hutch as he heard him leave the room. "Huuuuuutch...."

After an eternity, that was really only half a minute, Hutch was back beside him again. Half sitting up, Starsky fought to clear his hazy vision and understand what was going on. When he glanced down to Hutch's hand and saw the familiar tube, all became clear.

"Oh. God, yes," he heard himself growl as he flopped back down against the cushions. Glorious images of their joining flooded him...that perfect joining of body, mind and soul. He needed that again more than he needed air.

"Making love to you last night was the most incredible thing I've ever known," came the silky voice beside his ear. "It was as though my whole life was spent in a coma and I only woke up when we became one. I felt it in my body; I felt it in my soul...I felt it in places I didn't even know I had. I felt connected to you in a way I've never felt with another living being. It's like you became part of me. And I became part of you." When he leaned down to place a gentle kiss on Starsky's lips it became obvious he was trembling. "I need to feel that again, Starsk." The entreaty was spoken in the faintest whisper.

Starsky wrapped his arms around this man that he loved with everything he had. "Me, too."

Hutch's smile could have lit up the world. Starsky felt himself smile, too...the broadest, most enveloping smile he could remember experiencing in a long time. They were kissing again then, their mouths unable to resist each other. As Hutch's tongue probed deeply in his mouth he felt the hands upon his groin. One hand wrapped around his cock while the other began to fondle his balls. The touches sent him into orbit as he anticipated what he was being readied for. His legs fell open in invitation as he waited impatiently for Hutch to claim him.

The sensation of something cool and slick being worked along his cock made him shudder. He opened his eyes to see Hutch spreading the lube liberally all over his cock which was writhing from the stimulation. Starsky watched in frozen bewilderment as Hutch straddled him and lined his anus up with Starsky's straining organ. Afraid to move, afraid to breathe, Starsky held stock-still as his partner lowered himself down upon him.

The sight of it was astonishing enough, but the feel was staggering. He felt the head of his cock become sheathed by the tightest pressure he'd ever known. Searing heat was everywhere and he had to finally breathe...a long, gasping breath...to keep from exploding on the spot.

He looked up at Hutch, struggling for clarity. "Babe...what? I don't...."

Hutch's face was twisted in concentration, yet he still was able to form a more coherent sentence than Starsky. "It's my turn," he said lightly, then sobered as his eyes appealed to Starsky. "I need to feel this, babe. I need to feel you in me...please...."

Starsky was floored. Not only did Hutch want him in this way, but he actually thought he had to coax his lover into it. As if Starsky would refuse this. As if he could. Starsky once again struggled to communicate, needing to reassure.

"Hutch...love...of course...of course I want this too...I just...I don't want you to be hurt."

Hutch smiled the most charming smile. "Not to worry... I'm a careful guy." He inched down a bit further then and Starsky nearly dissolved into the cushions.

So many things were flooding him at once that he couldn't get a firm handle on any of them. There was this overwhelming sense of love for Hutch; this mind-blowing realization of how deeply his partner's feelings for him ran. There was wariness of causing this beautiful man pain. There was the awestruck disbelief that anything like this could really be happening. And eclipsing it all, there was the blinding elation pulsing through his cock as it was slowly swallowed up in rapture.

With determination, Hutch had managed to encase half of his length. But the discomfort was becoming apparent as he groaned with the exertion. Starsky reached his hand up to caress his face as he whispered with concern. "Babe, don't...."

"Please, Starsk...I need this...it's so incredible...I just...just help me out a little, OK?"

Cursing himself for being so self-absorbed, Starsky slid his hand down Hutch's body to take hold of the now semi-erect penis and began to caress it. Pissed that he didn't have two working hands to bring pleasure to his lover, Starsky tried to make the best of what he had. He released Hutch for a moment to wet his hand and fingers with his saliva, then he coated the stirring cock and formed a slick channel with his hand. After a few minutes of this diligent attention, Hutch moaned, his clenched muscles loosening around Starsky's organ. He gripped the base of the couch behind them for leverage and began to work his way down again.

Starsky had to concentrate to keep himself from ripping Hutch's cock from his body. The pressure around his own groin was electrifying and it was becoming nearly impossible to stay still. Starsky wondered fleetingly how the hell Hutch stood it as long as he did last night. The need to thrust was more powerful than the need to breathe.

At last, Hutch's ass came flat against Starsky's thighs as they were fully united. They both seemed unable to move for a few moments, staring at each other through glazed eyes as the gravity of it all washed over them. Despite his arousal, Starsky felt content to stay in that moment forever. But then Hutch shifted, stroking Starsky with his body, causing his control to snap like an over-stretched rubber band.

Starsky's back arched off the floor as he thrust up into Hutch. Hutch strengthened his grip on the couch and moved to parry every thrust, creating the most consummate friction. They moved together in synchronized splendor. Starsky worked the engorged cock in his hand hard as he lunged to nail the point inside of Hutch that sent him howling. All too soon it became too much to bear, as their sweaty, quivering bodies pinnacled. Starsky felt Hutch's hands grab hold of his shoulders, nails digging into the skin as he began to convulse. The walls of the tunnel that housed Starsky's cock began to collapse onto him in constricting waves as hot semen splashed his hand and chest. He had to let go of the spewing cock then, for fear of hurting it, as his own body began to spasm. Starsky wrapped his hand around the couch leg and held on as his head bent back to emit a strangled cry. His balls tightened harshly as he felt his essence flow from his body and into Hutch's. There were stars then...magnificent, shooting stars that rocketed within him and all around.

In the aftermath of the powerful orgasm, Starsky helped his lover ease off him. Hutch slipped down into his waiting arms, and they held each other quietly until their breathing regulated enough for speech.

"So, are you convinced?" Hutch said teasingly into the silence.

"Huh?"

"Are you convinced? I said I was going to convince you that I was sincere about my feelings for you. Did I succeed?"

Starsky looked down into the expectant face that was nestled on his shoulder. He sighed, speaking with uncertainty. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Hutch said indignantly.

"Well, if I say yes, does that mean you're going to stop trying to *convince* me?"

Hutch laughed as he started to sit up. "Yup." He leaned down to plant a kiss on Starsky's nose. "Now that you're convinced I love you, all that's left is to spend the rest of my life demonstrating how much."

"If you demonstrate as good as you convince, you're going to kill me," Starsky groaned.

The laughing blond started to stand up. Starsky snagged his hand to stop the motion. "Hey, where you going?"

"I've got plans, remember," Hutch said with a wicked glint in his eye.

"Just what the hell are these plans anyway?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Do they have to do with me?"

"Most definitely."

"Well then, that's not fair. You gotta tell me. Or at least give me a hint."

Hutch smiled indulgently at him. "OK, you want a hint? While I'm gone, I want you to pack."

"Pack?! Pack what?"

"A suitcase, Einstein. And while you're packing, think at least two weeks-worth of stuff and think cold...very cold."

A confused Starsky was still sputtering as Hutch stood up and gathered his clothes from the floor.

"Pack...cold...2 weeks...what are you talking about? Don't you have to go to work tomorrow?"

"Nope. It's all been taken care of. While you were sleeping like a log this morning, I was busy with details. I am officially on vacation."

"Vacation?"

"You really need to stop repeating everything I say. You're starting to sound like a parrot."

Hutch was obviously enjoying this immensely. Now that he thought about it, Starsky was too. It had been a long time since they had been like this together...like *them*.

"But Hutch, I don't get it. What vacation? Where are we going? Why do I have to pack?"

"Those are all the hints you're getting for now. Just be ready when I get back. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to shower."

"Huuuuutch..." Starsky whined to the retreating back. Hutch merely waved him off and kept walking. Starsky slumped down on the cushion in an exasperated pout.

"Cold?" he grumbled to himself. "I hate cold."

## NINE

They were on the last leg of their drive toward Squaw Valley in Northern California, as the sun was getting ready to set. The view from the mountain road was spectacular. Starsky had been quiet for the past half hour, staring out the window at the serene valley and snow-covered mountains. Hutch smiled at the enthralled look on his face, relieved that this idea had been a good one. Starsky needed this.

Of course, trying to convince him of that had not been so easy. He had hounded Hutch like a spoiled child for the remainder of the day yesterday, trying to get him to divulge where they were going. He even threatened not to come if Hutch didn't spill the secret. While he enjoyed the familiar bantering with his stubborn partner, Hutch detected that underneath it all lay a very real anxiety about making any kind of trip. This was the first time Starsky had gone anywhere since New York and his emotional state was still precarious. Starsky's inclination right now was toward locking himself behind the doors of his apartment and keeping the world at bay. In the end, it was only Hutch's heartfelt entreaty to come that encouraged Starsky past his reluctance.

"You know when you said cold, I didn't think you meant this. I didn't pack for snow."

"It's OK," Hutch smiled. "I packed a few extra things for you when you weren't looking...you know, boots, long johns, mittens, ski pants."

"Ski pants? I don't have any ski pants."

"So I brought extra."

"Aren't you the boy scout."

"You gotta be prepared."

"Well I hope you're prepared for the fact that I don't ski. Besides, I'm injured remember?" He held up the bandaged hand.

"Which is the only thing saving you from ski lessons, believe me. The pants are to keep you warm in the snow. Unless, of course, you'd like to try some one-handed skiing...you know, only one pole."

"Pass."

Hutch laughed softly as he saw the small smile touch Starsky's lips. Then his partner went back to his study of the sights. Hutch looked down at the hand that lay across his thigh. They had gone to have the stitches removed yesterday so that they would be free to leave for the trip this morning. Hutch was relieved to hear that things were healing well. Starsky might need a little physical therapy, but other than that, full function was expected to return to the hand.

It was mind-boggling to think that that nightmarish scene had played out only a week ago. So much had happened since then, good and bad. The best, of course, was the unexpected turn his relationship with Starsky had taken. That was pretty mind-boggling in itself.

Acknowledging his love for Starsky had probably been the easiest thing Hutch had ever done. The cynical side of himself kept telling him that it couldn't be that easy...that there must be something here that he was missing. How could he go so easily from friendship to love in one night?

*Probably because the love was always there all along. It was just never recognized as such.*

Looking back now, Hutch could see hundreds of signs over the years that should have told him he was in love with his partner. But for some reason that would probably take years of therapy to figure out, Hutch had a proclivity towards doomed relationships. It was almost as though he sought out ways to make himself unhappy...like he didn't feel he deserved happiness.

*Now there's some psychiatric mumbo jumbo, huh? Maybe Starsky's right. Maybe I do read too many 'fancy' books.*

Whatever the reason, Hutch had been through his share of hardship and heartbreak. And through it all, the one constant had always been Starsky. His partner's love was the only pure love he had ever known in his life with the possible exception of his Grandmother. He recognized a long time ago that without Starsky, he wasn't whole. That's what made these past few months so difficult. Hutch had been losing the only thing in his life that mattered and he was helpless to stop it...and clueless as to why it was happening.

This trip had been a long one, nearing the eight-hour mark now. But it had been time well spent. They had talked a lot during the drive...talked more than they had in a long time. Starsky revealed some of what it had been like...how he had hidden his feelings from Hutch and lived in fear of losing him. Hutch was astonished at the way his partner had silently coped with this burden for so long. Hutch couldn't think of a time when he was going through something monumental, that his first instinct wasn't to share it with Starsky.

*I wish you would have told me sooner, babe.*

Maybe if he had known Starsky's feelings years ago, he would have recognized his own sooner...and perhaps that would have saved them both a lot of pain.

No sense thinking about that though. The important thing was that their feelings were all out in the open now. As he glanced in the review mirror, Hutch felt as though he were seeing himself for the first time. He thought about the way Starsky had looked at him Saturday night. Impossible as it was to believe, he was the person who made those eyes shine like that. No one had ever looked at him in that way before...not even Starsky. Somehow, he had managed to mask that look of pure, unadulterated love until that glorious Saturday...and then it came bursting through like a nova, nearly obliterating Hutch with its intensity.

Hutch glanced over at his partner, hoping that somehow he could be the person he saw shining back at him in Starsky's eyes. In the last forty-eight hours he had discovered the love of his life in the face that had always been right there in front of him. He fully intended to do everything he could to hold on to it and to be worthy of it.

"I wish I brought my camera," Starsky was saying as his eyes combed the surroundings.

"You did." Starsky turned to him with a surprised smile. Hutch felt himself blush. "Hey, what can I tell you? It's the Boy Scout thing again."

"Thanks, Hutch."

Starsky slipped his hand into Hutch's and squeezed. Hutch squeezed back. As he made the turn onto the last stretch of road before their destination, he prayed that Starsky would like it here. It had been over ten years since he'd been here, but it was still the most beautiful, peaceful place Hutch could think of. After all he had been through, Starsky needed a place like this where he could unwind and relax for a change.

"Holy shit," Starsky exclaimed as they pulled up in front of the chalet. "Where are we? What is this place?"

"It's a family vacation home."

"Whose family, the Queen of England?"

Hutch smiled, forgetting how impressive this place looked when you had never seen it before. Even when you had seen it, it was still impressive. Hutch brought the car to a stop before shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He had no idea how Starsky was going to take this next piece of news.

"Actually, the Hutchinson family."

"What?" Starsky was looking at him as though he had grown another head.

"It belongs to my family," Hutch said awkwardly. He waited then, as his partner stared at the property in wide-eyed fascination. The chalet was situated on a raised foundation, overlooking the lake on one side and the mountains on the other. The land around it was expansive and lush. The house itself was made of fine wood, with large glass windows and a terrace overhanging the view. It spoke of elegance and class, two things the Hutchinson family demanded in any property they bought.

Hutch began to squirm uncomfortably, wondering now if this had been a good idea. He didn't want Starsky to think he was trying to impress him or show off. And he certainly didn't want to be lumped in the same category as the pretentious family that owned this house and several others like it.

A shrill whistle broke the silence. Starsky was nodding as he whistled. Then he glanced at Hutch, giving him the once over as though he were a stranger. But there was a playfulness in his eyes that began to put Hutch at ease.

"Well, it's like my Aunt Vivian always used to tell my cousin Myrna... 'It's just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as it is with a poor man.' I guess she was right." He smiled broadly at Hutch, totally amused. "Jeez, Hutch, if I'd had any idea you were this loaded, I would have propositioned you years ago." Starsky was laughing then, a hearty laugh that was music to Hutch's soul.

"Yeah, but then I would've known you were only after me for my money instead of my body."

"Now I got both," Starsky said as he raised his eyebrows up and down in a leering gesture.

"Well, I hate to disappoint you, but you're going to have to settle for the body. I don't make it a practice to dip into the family funds...or use the real estate for that matter."

"So why now?" Starsky asked, voice sobering.

Hutch shrugged. "I just thought you'd like it here...thought it would be good for you."

"But not so easy for you, I'll bet." Starsky eyes seemed to be peering straight inside him.

Though technically part of this house belonged to him and he had the right to use it whenever he wanted, he never did. The last time he was here had been a family celebration and he had only come because his grandmother had been here. He made it a practice to disassociate himself from the family holdings as much as possible. Having to call his father this morning to tell him he would be using the house was uncomfortable, but he decided the reward would make putting up with the excruciating conversation tolerable. What was the use of having things if you couldn't share them with the people you loved?

"It's no big deal," he told his partner, though Starsky's eyes told him he understood just how very big a deal it was. "I just hope you like it here."

"I already do," Starsky said quietly. "You're here."

A car pulled up beside them then and out stepped a gray-haired man of about 50 years of age.

"Who's that?" Starsky asked.

"That's Mr. Jenkins, the caretaker. He looks after the place when nobody's using it. I called him yesterday to tell him we were coming so he could set things up. He's probably dropping by the keys."

Hutch stepped out of the car and walked toward Mr. Jenkins, extending his hand.

"Hello, Mr. Jenkins, how are you?"

"Fine, Mr. Hutchinson. Good to see you. Haven't seen you up in these parts for years."

"Well, I've been busy." Hutch motioned to Starsky who had just gotten out of the car. "Mr. Jenkins, I'd like you to meet my partner, Dave Starsky."

"Good to meet you," Starsky said, shaking his hand.

"Nice to meet you, too. First time up this way?"

"Sure is."

"Well I'm sure you're going to enjoy your stay. It's beautiful country up here."

"I can see that," Starsky agreed.

They went up to the house then. When they entered, Starsky got the same slack-jawed expression he had when they pulled up. As Jenkins filled Hutch in on provisions and other information, Starsky wandered around gaping. Every few minutes he would return to the living room to inform Hutch of something else.

"Did you know there's a fireplace in every room?"

"Did you know there's a Jacuzzi in the bathroom?"

"Have you seen that view?"

"That refrigerator's stocked with food."

"That television is enormous."

Hutch merely smiled, enjoying his partner's enthusiasm. He stood with Jenkins now in the large living room area.

"The place looks wonderful, Mr. Jenkins. Thank you for getting it ready on such short notice."

"My pleasure. Good to have you here. The chalet doesn't get used nearly enough. Although from the looks of your friend there, maybe you'll be coming around more often now."

Hutch laughed as he looked at Starsky inspecting the stone fireplace.

"You never know."

"I've stocked the wood for all the fireplaces. I think I'll go take a look around the grounds now and make sure everything is in order. Then I'll bring your bags on up for you."

"Thank you," Hutch said as he handed him the car keys. "I appreciate that."

"Happy to be of service. I'll be back in a little bit. I want to check the door springs on that shed while I'm out there."

"Take your time," Hutch said as Jenkins went out the door. When it had closed, Starsky let out another of his long whistles.

"Whoa, Hutch, very impressive. And here I thought you only went for broken down shacks in the woods. I'm glad we took my car though. It would look pretty seedy to have your hunk of junk parked outside bringing down the property values. What would the neighbors say?"

"The nearest neighbors are over a mile away, smart guy." Hutch looked at Starsky then, grateful for the first time in his life for what his family ties had given him. Hell, to see that look on Starsky's face, he would be willing to move back in with his father.

"I really appreciate this, Hutch," Starsky said sincerely, his eyes shining at Hutch with love.

"I'm glad you like it." Hutch moved towards the hearth then. "I think I should see about getting this fire going." He stood in front of the fireplace now, looking down at the supply of logs stacked beside it. He felt Starsky come up behind him, pressing into his back while arms snaked around to his chest.

"I bet I know how to light your fire," the hoarse voice whispered in his ear.

"I'll bet you do." Their close proximity had already sent a spark through him. Starsky's hand moved down from his chest and began to rub across his groin.

"Starsk!"

"Hmmm?" The rubbing became more intent as his neck was kissed and nibbled.

"Babe, Jenkins is going to be back here in a few minutes," Hutch protested, even as his traitorous cock began to stir.

"Well then," Starsky murmured between bites, "I'll just have to light your fire real fast, huh?"

Starsky slid his hand into the waist band of Hutch's pants and down to the turgid flesh growing in there. Without the barrier between them, he began to coax a more immediate response.

"Starsky I..." Starsky used his left forearm to turn Hutch's face to his so he could silence him with a kiss. Hutch wasn't sure which was more persuasive, the mouth that was devouring him or the hand that was wreaking havoc inside his pants. All he did know for sure was that his body was reacting rapidly.

When his cock had hardened to full tumescence under his partner's touch, Starsky pulled his hand out of the pants and spun Hutch around to face him. He kissed him again then as his hand worked the fly open.

*He's getting awfully good at maneuvering with one hand,* Hutch thought, apprehensive about how dangerous his partner was going to be with two fully working appendages. One handed, he had already drawn Hutch's pants down his legs and had appropriated his cock in a relentless grip.

Despite his reservations, Hutch found himself pumping into that grip. How his partner had managed to get him so horny so fast was beyond him. All he knew now was that his penis was thick and aching with need and his body was shivering from something other than cold.

Starsky's mouth left his then and traveled downward. Before Hutch realized what was happening, a heated tongue was lapping at his balls. Hutch rocked forward at the sensation, as he gripped the mantle of the fireplace behind him for balance. He felt his legs being pushed apart as his partner's curls brushed against his thighs. He looked down bleary-eyed to see his partner kneeling on the floor in front of him, eyeing him intently.

"Wait...Starsk...no, don't...ohhhhhhhhh!"

Liquid heat enveloped his shaft as Hutch's head flew back to gasp for air. Teasing fingers manipulated his heavy sacs as Starsky began to suck in earnest. Moist suction surrounded him, pulling him deeper into the torturous mouth.

Licking...stroking...fondling...squeezing...it was maddening. Hutch could hear the pounding of his heart echo throughout the room.

*That's not your heart, that's the door!*

"Mr. Hutchinson, it's me, Jenkins."

*Shit!*

"Starsky...stop...the door...."

Starsky's rhythm didn't even falter.

"Mr. Hutchinson, you in there?"

"J...ust..." Hutch cleared his throat and tried to call out again. "Just a second."

Hutch tried to pull back, but Starsky snagged his hip and pulled him closer instead.

"Starsk..." Hutch protested even as his cock grew harder under the deluge.

"I ain't finished," Starsky mumbled around his shaft.

"Oh, Jesus..."

"Mr. Hutchinson, you want me to use the key?"

"No!"

Hutch heard the distinct sound of a snicker coming from between his legs. He fought to steady his voice despite the increasing pressure in his balls.

"I'll be right there, Mr. Jenkins. Just hold on a minnnn...ohhhh...minute."

Hutch reached a shaky hand towards Starsky's face, trying to urge it up. Only the eyes responded, peering up at Hutch wickedly. He then swallowed Hutch's cock back deep in his throat while his hand returned to tantalize his balls.

Hutch moaned loud as white light burst in front of his eyes. From someplace distant he heard a voice calling to him to ask if he was all right, but that voice existed in a different world from where he was right now. At that moment he didn't care if the entire state was outside the door. All that mattered was the man in front of him and the ecstasy he was caught up in.

Hutch felt the orgasm build from its inception in his scrotum to its culmination in his thrusting cock, which blasted jet after jet of molten liquid down his partner's gulping throat. It was a fiery

journey that left him wasted.

As he stood on wobbly legs, Starsky cleaned off his cock with his tongue and then pulled his pants back up, fastening them securely. He wrapped his arms around Hutch, who sagged into them, sighing. Soft kisses played over the sides of his ear and cheek. Then Starsky pulled back, propping Hutch back upright.

"Hutch."

"Hmmm?"

"Answer the door."

"Huh?...What...oh shit...."

Hutch straightened himself and moved quickly to the door, his face so heated he must have looked as if he'd gotten a sunburn. As he opened it, he tried to steady his hands.

"I uh...I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Jenkins."

"Is everything all right in here?"

"Uh...yeah...I uhhh...we uhhh...."

"I had to change the dressing on my hand," Starsky offered coolly. "Hutch was helping me."

"Oh, I see. I was just a little concerned because I thought I heard some kind of moaning sounds...like someone was in pain."

Hutch didn't think it was possible to blush any harder, but he was wrong.

*Oh, no, Mr. Jenkins. No one was in pain. I was just coming hard into his mouth.*

"The tape got caught in my wound. I guess the sound you heard was me. I'm a bit of a baby when it comes to pain."

How was it that Starsky could stand there acting so nonchalant? He certainly didn't look like a man who just had a cock buried down his throat. Hutch, on the other hand, was certain his face was giving away everything.

"Well, I hope your hand is feeling better now."

"Oh, much better. I feel *terrific*. How about you, Hutch? How're you feeling?"

Hutch shot him an angry glare. "Fine," he muttered through clenched teeth. "Just fine."

"I brought your luggage up. Where would you like me to put it?"

"It...ummm...over there...over by the sofa there will be fine."

As Jenkins carried the bags across the room, Starsky gestured to Hutch, pointing down at his crotch and making a brushing motion with his hand. Mortified, Hutch looked down at himself, certain there was some tell-tale stain on his clothing. When he saw nothing, he looked up at Starsky who was grinning from ear to ear in a 'made you look' manner. Hutch made a gesture of his own then, which only caused Starsky to laugh out loud. When Jenkins looked up at him to see what was so funny, Starsky shrugged.

"I was just thinking of a funny story I heard yesterday. It was about this guy who went on vacation with his friend to this ski resort and...."

"I'm sure Mr. Jenkins wants to get home to his family, Starsk. Maybe another time."

"Sure, no problem. It was pretty funny though."

"Your sense of humor is not exactly universal."

Jenkins looked at both of them in puzzlement as he walked back towards the door.

"Do you gentlemen need anything else this evening?"

"No, thank you, we're fine."

"There's a full supply of food in the kitchen if you're hungry."

"I'm pretty full myself," Starsky grinned. Hutch seethed. But he held himself together enough to finish speaking to Jenkins.

"I appreciate all your help, Mr. Jenkins. Thank you again."

"Anytime. Just call me if you need something."

"I will. Have a good evening."

The door had barely closed behind Jenkins when Hutch took off after Starsky.

"I'm going to drown you in that damn Jacuzzi when I get my hands on you!"

~~~~~

As they entered the chalet, Starsky shook the flakes from his hair. A light snow had begun to fall, making the view from the bay window look like a postcard of a winter wonderland.

"It's so beautiful out there," Starsky said as his eyes were drawn to the sights beyond the window. "Let's go back out. I want to get a few more shots." He hauled the camera strap up on his shoulder and started for the door. Hutch's hand fell across his arm in a gesture of restraint.

"I think it's better if we stay inside for a while. At least until you stop shivering."

The cold had seeped through to his bones and, for the better part of the last hour, he hadn't been

able to control the shivers that infused him.

"I'm OK," he said automatically, willing to continue to ignore the discomfort.

"Babe, your lips are purple, and your cheeks and nose are bright red. Why don't we just stay inside for a while, at least until you get a chance to warm up?"

It was this same concern that had brought them indoors in the first place. Starsky felt guilty, knowing that Hutch had been having a great time on the ski slope. His partner seemed to be in his element here and Starsky enjoyed watching him.

"Come on, Hutch. There's still time for a couple more passes down that suicide mountain before sunset."

"First of all, it's not a suicide mountain."

"Looked like it from where I was standing. And those skiers in the lodge were talking about it like it was the most treacherous trail they'd ever seen." Hutch was a hell of a skier. Granted Starsky couldn't see all of the slopes from his vantage point, but what he did view, along with what he heard, impressed him a great deal.

"It'll be there tomorrow. Now take off your coat and your boots while I go get a fire started."

Hutch moved towards the fireplace, signifying the discussion was finished. Teeth beginning to chatter, Starsky let the issue drop. Even here, inside the warm room, he couldn't seem to steady the chills that gripped him.

He sat down on the chair near the door, pulling off the big mittens. He hadn't worn mittens since he was a kid, but with the bandages on his hand making gloves impossible, he had no choice. He took a moment to blow on his fingers, which had been red and cold below the wool. Then he pulled off the boots and the rest of his outer wear as he watched Hutch build the fire.

Even after four days, Starsky couldn't get over this place. It wasn't so much that he was surprised to find the Hutchinson's had the kind of money that could buy a place like this...several places like this actually. He knew they were a very wealthy family, but he also knew how much his partner worked to distance himself from that wealth. Hutch never had much interest in money or things he didn't get for himself, and he was particularly averse to anything attained by the family he had such little respect for. There were all kinds of legal mumbo jumbo that said Hutch was entitled to a good deal of his family's assets, but his partner never took advantage of it. Starsky imagined there were countless savings accounts and trust funds sitting somewhere untouched even during the months when Hutch was scraping around to come up with rent money.

All of this made the fact that Hutch had brought him here very significant. Hutch was intent on giving Starsky this idyllic respite even if it meant associating himself with the Hutchinson holdings. Starsky had been so moved by the gesture that he couldn't even find words to express it. He was determined not to do anything to mess it up. He wanted this to be the most wonderful vacation Hutch had ever had. Starsky just needed to keep focusing on that.

Not that Starsky wasn't enjoying it here. It was the most beautiful place he had ever seen. The days had been filled with long scenic walks, animated picture-taking sessions, sight-seeing drives, much needed naps and a few trips to the ski slopes to watch Hutch in action. At night there were intimate dinners, stargazing from the terrace and two visits to a local club that played wonderful music. And, of course, there was the love making, unbelievable passionate sessions which lasted deep into the night.

With all that to fill his time, it seemed impossible for anything adverse to slip in. Yet somehow it did.

With his outer clothing now removed, Starsky's shivers increased. He moved over onto the couch to get closer to the fire that Hutch had just kindled.

"There we go," Hutch said as he stood up. "I think I'm going to need to get a fireplace for my apartment. I'm going to miss doing that when we get home." He turned to Starsky as he unzipped his jacket. The expression on his face went from relaxed to concerned. "Starsk, you're freezing!"

Hutch picked up the giant comforter that lay upon the cedar chest and brought it to the couch. He wrapped it around his partner's back and shoulders then drew it closed in front. Starsky latched onto the blanket, pulling it closer to himself.

"I knew I should've made you come in sooner," Hutch admonished himself. "As soon as I saw you shuddering like that."

"Hutch, relax. It's just the chills. I'm usually a warm climate dweller, remember? It'll pass."

Hutch placed his hand upon Starsky's forehead. "Maybe you're getting sick."

"Hutch...."

"No fever. Still, that doesn't mean you're not coming down with something."

"Hutch, will ya stop hovering. I'm fine. We're on a snowy mountain and I'm cold. That's not a real big deal."

Hutch looked at him closely for a minute, then finally sighed and stepped back. "You're right. I'm hovering. I'm sorry. I'll back off."

Starsky knew how much that took and he was grateful.

"Thanks."

"Hey, I know. Why don't I go make us some hot chocolate? That should take the chill out." He started towards the kitchen then stopped and turned back uncertainly. "Or is that hovering too?"

Starsky smiled, so much in love with this man. "Nah. Hot chocolate sounds great."

"OK. Be right back."

As Starsky watched Hutch go into the kitchen, he pulled his legs up onto the couch and snuggled into the cushions, pulling the blanket tighter in an effort to get warm. He stared into the flames of the fireplace, watching the way they danced and glowed. The feeling came over him then...the one that snuck up without warning. His stomach twisted, his throat constricted, his pulse raced. Tears began to well in his eyes. Something black and cold was there just below the surface of his consciousness. He could feel it lurking in the shadows of his mind, but he pushed it down as quickly as it came, refusing to look too deeply.

He took a few deep breaths as he fought the feeling off. It had been coming more and more lately and usually struck during the quiet times...the times when his mind was not occupied or engaged in anything. It came during the late-night hours after Hutch had gone to sleep. It came during a shower. It came in the car when he was driving. It came in the morning when he first woke up.

It was hard to describe exactly what *it* was because *it* didn't have solid form to put words to. It was more like an image...a sensation. It was as though everything inside him was rushing at him at once and he couldn't stop it. And he couldn't look at it either...couldn't stop to view it or interpret it because it felt too powerful and it would surely decimate him if he got in its path. He didn't want to look. If just the briefest awareness brought this kind of reaction, what would happen if it were allowed to fully unfold?

Starsky had become good at pushing it down. It was a reflex that kicked in the moment the danger loomed. But he was worried about the increase in frequency. He was even more worried that it was no longer confining itself to just the quiet times. He found this sense of despair lurking beneath everything he did; beneath his lighthearted conversations...beneath his laughter...beneath his passion. His outer veneer belied his inner turmoil. He felt as though he were two different people at times, able to truly enjoy a moment while simultaneously feeling the oppressive weight pulling him down.

"Here you go," Hutch said, entering the room with two mugs in his hands. "Heavy on the chocolate...heavy on the marshmallows. Just the way you like it." Hutch set the cups down on the coffee table and then sat down beside him on the couch.

Starsky shifted, burrowing into Hutch in a curled ball. Hutch's arms immediately came around him.

"Hey, you OK?"

"Yeah," Starsky mumbled as he squeezed his eyes tightly closed. "Just cold."

TEN

Two nights later, the restless blond tossed in his sleep. Something was nagging at him, following him deep into his unconscious state and gnawing away, layer upon layer, until he completed the steady climb back to awareness. Even before he opened his eyes he felt that something was missing. He reached a hand out searchingly as his eyes came open to gaze across the empty bed.

As he sat up, he reached to turn on the light. The room was empty as well. No sign of Starsky. Hutch sighed as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He knew Starsky still wasn't sleeping well, but in past nights this week, he could be found sitting up awake in the bed beside Hutch or across the room in a chair, reading.

The clock beside the bed informed him it was 2:14 a.m. Silence hung like a curtain around the chalet, a stark contrast to the accustomed sounds a city dweller awakes to even in the deepest of night. It was a silence that offered no refuge, no distraction, from the thoughts that might otherwise remain half formed.

On the surface, things had been wonderful. They had fallen into the role of lovers as easily as they had that of friends and partners. At each level of their relationship, a synergy existed from inception: friends whose souls already knew each other upon introduction, partners who could wordlessly anticipate each other's thoughts and moves, and now lovers whose bodies responded so instinctively it was as if they had been created for each other.

It had only been a week and already the role of lovers felt as natural as breathing. Hutch couldn't imagine how he had survived without this in his life for so long. It was incomprehensible to think of ever surviving without it again.

But below the surface bliss, Hutch knew something was awry. He didn't doubt that Starsky loved him or that on one level he had never been happier or more content. But on another level, something coexisted with that happiness. Something dark and debilitating. He knew Starsky was trying to hide that from him, but there had been countless clues over the last seven days. The most recent had been earlier this evening. Starsky had made love to him in a driven frenzy, as though desperately trying to lose himself in the sensations...as though frantically needing to feel alive.

Hutch got up out of the bed and located a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. He got into the pants and threw the shirt on without buttoning it, then proceeded toward the center of the house.

He became alarmed when he hadn't located Starsky in any of the other rooms. The remainder of the house had been dark except for the fire still burning in the living room. As Hutch stood in there now, he caught a glimpse of a shadow from the terrace. He moved toward it, trying to distinguish the shadow from the darkness of the night air, but it was only when he got beside the door that he could make out the huddled form of his partner. Starsky was sitting on a chair, wrapped in a heavy blanket, staring out into the darkness. As Hutch opened the door the frigid chill assaulted him, sending shivers across his exposed chest. He couldn't believe that Starsky was sitting out here in what looked like no more than the blanket.

"It's a little cold to be sitting outside, don't you think?" Hutch didn't want to overwhelm his

partner with his concern, so he tried to go easy.

Starsky turned and looked silently at him. He seemed to be trying to focus, as though he had been asleep with his eyes open. When recognition registered on his face, he spoke softly.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Come inside, please." Hutch extended his arm outward. Starsky looked at it, then at Hutch. Slowly, he rose from the chair, his stilted movements indicating he had been sitting for a long time. Hutch draped his arm around the blanketed shoulder and led him back inside, drawing him towards the fireplace. Hutch threw some of the big pillows from the couch down on the floor in front of it, and they sat down before the fire. Only then did Starsky begin to shiver, as the contrast in temperatures affected his body. Hutch rubbed up and down Starsky's covered arms and back, noting that he had been correct about there being nothing underneath the blanket.

"Do you want me to get you something hot? Some soup or some tea, maybe?"

"No, I'm OK."

Hutch looked straight into his eyes and spoke frankly. "No, you're not."

Starsky sighed heavily, then cast his eyes downward as his shoulders slumped forward. "I'm sorry, Hutch. I'm trying."

"I know you are," Hutch reassured. "I just don't understand why you're still trying to hide stuff from me."

Starsky's head bounced up as he spoke vehemently. "Not to hurt you, Hutch. I swear. And not because I don't trust you, so don't think that, please."

Hutch caressed his back in a soothing manner. "I don't think that. I promise. I'm not trying to accuse you of anything or be critical. I just want to talk to you."

Some of the tension eased beneath his hand as Starsky sighed. "Hutch...these past days...this time here...this time with you...it's been the most incredible thing in my life. I'm so grateful to you. And I've been so happy with you; I really have. It's just...."

He stopped, seeming unable to complete the thought. But Hutch understood.

"It's just that it doesn't take everything else away."

Starsky nodded. He looked in Hutch's eyes again. "And I didn't want you to get the wrong idea. I didn't want you to think something was wrong because of you...like you had failed me or something...that all this wasn't good enough...like it was your fault somehow."

"I wouldn't have felt like that." Starsky's eyes questioned the validity of that, forcing Hutch to reconsider. "Well, I would have tried not to...yeah, maybe I would have a little."

Starsky smiled at the admission. Hutch found himself smiling too.

"We're quite a pair, huh?"

Hutch thought about a lot of things then...about his behavior and reactions these past months...about the conversations with Huggy and Dobby...even about the heated confrontation with Starsky over the book.

"You know, I think I've been so busy trying to help you 'get over it' that I haven't bothered to stop and just support you through it. A lot of that is my own shit. I've spent so much of my life feeling like I didn't measure up...like something was always lacking. And then you come along and for the first time I have someone in my life who places this unconditional trust in me...as though there's something in me that's worthy of that. I thought I was losing that these past months and I felt lost, like I didn't know who I was anymore."

Hutch paused, trying to get all these thoughts into focus so he could express them clearly. Starsky reached out and took his hand, squeezing it encouragingly. Hutch had never felt more accepted.

"A while back," he continued, "Huggy asked me who I was when I was simply Hutch...just a man who couldn't make everything right. I realize now, I didn't know who that man was because I was terrified of finding out. I think I still am in a lot of ways. I'm not sure what I'd be if you didn't need me."

Starsky gripped his hand tighter, speaking with conviction. "I've never not needed you. I don't think I ever could. You're so much a part of me. I love you. But I don't love you because you fix everything for me. I love you because you're *there*." A small smirk formed on his mouth then. "And being the amazing person that you are, more often than not, you *do* fix it. I've always envied that about you. That ability to jump right into a situation and instinctively know how to take care of it. When something happens to me, I *know* you'll be there to take care of me. I've never had that in my whole life. I've always taken care of myself. But I was always afraid of how dependent I was on it. I was afraid, because in the back of my mind, I knew I was going to lose it one day...."

His voice choked then. Hutch suppressed his instinct to jump in and reassure. Instead, he tried to give Starsky some encouragement and space to let things out.

"Is that why you've been pulling away from me these past months?"

"That's part of it," he continued in a vulnerable tone. "I think now that there was more, though. Hutch, you know me so well, there's such a connection there. You're like a mirror to my soul. If you see something, I have to see it because you reflect it back to me. And lately there's been a lot of stuff there that I just didn't want to see. By keeping it from you, I was able to hide from it better."

"And now?"

"And now I'm learning that I can't hide forever because it keeps finding ways to creep up on me. It's harder now to keep it out. Before, I was so afraid that my feelings for you would slip out, that I just closed everything down so tight, only traces could seep through. But now that what I feel

for you has been set free, it's like all this other stuff is coming tumbling out with it. I can't keep things down. But I don't think I can handle all of it...it's like this rush of waves pounding down on me one after the other and I can't get my breath."

"Maybe instead of trying to hold all the waves back, we need to ride them out, one wave at a time." Hutch reached out to run his fingers gently through Starsky's hair. "Babe, you've been through so much. You almost died not so long ago. It took you months to recover from that. Then you had to go through Nicky's trial and his death. Then it was your mother's illness and her death. Death, especially of family members, has a way of dredging up all this unresolved stuff from your past...your childhood, your relationship with your family, your dad. Separately those are overwhelming things, but when you combine them...well there's bound to be a lot of feelings wrapped up in there. Even this thing with us...as wonderful as it is...it's still another change in your life, another transition. Starsky, the fact that you've been able to hold on at all through all of this is a testament to what a courageous, strong person you are."

"I don't feel very strong," Starsky replied in a heavy voice as he leaned his body back against the front of the couch. "I feel...I feel so out of control. I feel like I don't know me anymore. Sometimes I think I'm going crazy. Sometimes it's like...." He sighed in frustration, clenching his fist in a ball. "There's not always words...I can't get a handle on it. It's hard to talk about it because it doesn't always have words. There's just these images and feelings and impressions and panic...and all this fear. It's this dark, mysterious thing...it won't go away and I'm terrified to look at it. I know I'm not making any sense...."

"You're making perfect sense. Just say whatever you want to say. I'm right here. And even when I don't understand, I'll still be right here."

A choked sob caught in Starsky's throat. "I don't want to lose you, Hutch. I don't want you to think I'm crazy or get tired of me or get sick of having to put up with me. Jesus, Hutch, we've just found each other in this way and it should be wonderful and magical and I'm ruining it...I'm screwing it all up."

Hutch felt the tears well in his own eyes. He took Starsky's face in his hands and spoke with all the love in his heart. "It *is* wonderful and magical...and it's the greatest thing I've ever known in my life. There's nothing you could possibly do to screw it up. And I'd never get tired of you or get sick of you. Starsky, I love you. That was true before we ever kissed each other and it's only more true now. You are my soul and no matter what is going on with you, I'll love you anyway. Haven't these last few months at least proven that to you?"

"You never left me," Starsky said in a tear-filled, child-like voice. "No matter what...no matter how many times I pushed you away...hurt you...."

"I will *never* leave you, Starsk. And I'm not going to try to 'fix' you either because that would imply that there's something wrong with you and there's not. I want you to feel free to be whoever you are...to feel whatever you feel at any given moment and know that it's OK because it is. You don't have to be some ideal for me. Just be you...just do what you need to do and feel what you need to feel...and know that I'm right there beside you, loving you just the way you are."

Starsky came into Hutch's arms then, falling forward with a trust that believed he was going to be caught...and he was. Hutch pulled him onto his lap and held him securely as they both gave license to their tears.

When the first light of dawn shone in through the windows, they were still huddled together on the floor before the flickering fire. They were both exhausted from a night of talking, sharing and crying, but there was a sense of renewal as well. There was a renewal of hope and spirit. There was a confirmation of the healing power of love.

Starsky lay now, head cradled in Hutch's lap, looking up at him through red, swollen eyes. Hutch stroked his face tenderly, wanting never to move from this place and this moment.

"Do you need anything?" he asked, concerned for his partner's comfort.

"Just for you to stay right there like that. I just want to keep looking at you...keep looking at your face to make sure you're not going to disappear."

"I'll be right here," Hutch promised, and then he watched in contentment as Starsky drifted off to sleep.

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A week later, Starsky stood out on the terrace, taking in one last look at the breathtaking view. He was going to miss this place. He would miss it for its peacefulness and its beauty. But he would miss it most of all, for the things it represented in his life.

As he walked back indoors, he reflected on his time here, particularly the past week. He knew he would be leaving here a different person from when he had come. So much had happened here.

After that night in front of the fire, Starsky knew that the only way to survive was going to be, as Hutch had said, to ride each wave one at a time. The steps he had begun to take were small ones, but they at least propelled him in a forward direction, which was a path he had not traveled for a long time.

There had been a lot of talking this week...and a lot of tears. There continued to be long, companionable walks with Hutch, but Starsky was also able to venture forth on his own at times. During these walks, as well as the time he spent quietly on the terrace, he was able to allow himself to recognize some of the things he had been pushing down inside himself. He could take one or two of them out for inspection without being overcome by the panic. Granted, it was only for short periods of time, but it was a start.

The things that had begun to surface had been painful and difficult. He knew as time went on, it would only get worse. But as hard as it was, things seemed much less intimidating and overwhelming when brought into the light than they had been when festering in the dark.

As he heard the front door opening, Starsky went to retrieve a small package from the oak table. Hutch came in, glancing down at the suitcases by the door.

"What's this? I told you I would help you pack when I got back."

"I figured, why wait? I wasn't doing anything else." When Hutch came over and kissed him lightly, he smiled. "Your nose is cold."

"So is yours. You've been out on that terrace again, haven't you? You're getting awfully comfortable out there. Jeez, now I'm going to have to build a fireplace *and* a terrace in my apartment when we get back."

Starsky laughed. "No, I don't think you'll have to do anything that drastic." He looked towards the terrace, a sense of melancholy coming over him. "I just wanted one last look. I'm going to miss it."

"Well then, we'll have to come back some time," Hutch said softly. Starsky's face brightened, understanding the ramifications of that.

"But what about your family?"

"You're my family," Hutch reassured, "and you like it here. This place is special to us. If that means having to deal with 'them' occasionally, then it's a small price to pay."

Starsky threw his arms around Hutch and hugged him tightly.

"Thanks, Hutch, that means so much to me."

After a few moments, Hutch motioned towards the package in Starsky's hand that was digging into his back.

"What is that?"

"What, this?" Starsky asked innocently, as he withdrew from Hutch and held up the package that was sloppily wrapped in note paper.

"Yes, that. What is it?"

"It's a present," Starsky said as he handed it to him. "It's for you. A little memento."

Hutch carefully unwrapped the gift in that annoying way he had of not tearing any of the paper except at the tape line.

"Oh, will you come on," Starsky said, impatiently. "It's note paper from the desk, not some fancy gift wrap. Just tear it."

"What, and ruin the suspense?" Hutch said, eyes showing how much he enjoyed driving Starsky crazy.

The look in his eyes changed when the paper had been carefully unfolded to reveal the contents. Starsky had taken some pine cones, twigs, stones and other souvenirs from around the grounds and constructed a rustic picture frame. In it was a photo he had taken of the chalet with the

majestic view in the background. The picture depicted the way Starsky had first seen the place and the way he would always remember it in his mind.

Hutch just stared at the gift in silence, running his hands carefully upon it. Starsky began to chatter nervously. "I got some of my film developed yesterday when we went into town. I saw that picture and I thought...well I just thought it captured so much of the essence of the place. I wanted us to have a reminder...you know, something to take with us. I know the frame is kind of corny, but I guess I was just feeling a little creative, so I stuck some things together. We can get a real frame for the picture when we get home, if you want."

"*Real* frame," Hutch stuttered, struggling for words. His voice seemed to be caught in his throat. "Starsk, you *made* this...for me. It's beautiful. It's the most beautiful present I ever got."

Starsky was surprised to find Hutch's eyes were damp. He felt his own eyes grow damp at the sight.

"I guess you like it then?"

"I love it. I love you. Thank you." Hutch slid his hand along Starsky's neck and pulled him close for a kiss. It was a tender kiss filled with affection and devotion. When it ended, Starsky felt warm all over. He sighed, then looked around the room that he had come to feel so comfortable in.

"Well, I guess it's time to get going." Something inside him shuddered at the thought. Hutch caught the reaction and grasped his hand.

"Not just yet. Come here and sit down with me for a second." They moved towards the couch and sat down. Hutch gingerly re-wrapped the frame and laid it down on the coffee table. He turned to Starsky then and spoke softly. "I know this is hard for you...leaving I mean."

Starsky shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. Kinda dumb, huh?"

Hutch placed his hand under Starsky chin and lifted his face up. "No, it's not dumb. Just feel what you feel, remember?"

Starsky nodded, knowing Hutch was right. He took a deep breath and tried to assess what he was feeling...put some words to it.

"I guess it's just scary. To go back. To be in the world again and trying to cope. I mean the problems are with me here too, but at least it's peaceful and I have the space to take my time. Back in the real world everything gets so...overwhelming I guess."

"I know it's going to be hard," Hutch said with quiet understanding. "But I want you to remember something. When you walk out of here, you don't do it alone. I'm going to be right there beside you. And I know things are going to be far from perfect and that there are a lot of tough times ahead. But whatever happens, we'll face it together. Me and Thee, right?"

"Right," Starsky agreed as he squeezed Hutch's hand.

"Which reminds me," Hutch said as he reached into his pocket with his other hand. "I have a present for you, too."

Starsky felt a grin spreading out across his face. "Ah, the mysterious errand. So that's where you were."

"That's where I was," Hutch agreed as he handed Starsky a small box that was elegantly wrapped.

"Well, you sure outdid me in the wrapping paper department," Starsky laughed as he tore the fancy paper to shreds.

"Don't hold back now," Hutch teased. "Just jump right in."

Starsky looked at the tattered remains of the paper that he had sent flying everywhere. "Oh, did you want that paper? Sorry." But they both knew he was not. Excitedly, he opened the small black box and looked inside.

Starsky felt his heartbeat still as he realized what he was holding. For a moment, he couldn't move, couldn't bring his hand forth to touch it. He just sat staring at it, certain that any second it was going to disappear and this would all be a dream. Finally, he was able to bring his trembling right hand forward and pick up the shimmering, handsome gold band. His breathing seemed to stop along with his heartbeat as he read the inscription in the ring: *Me and Thee...Always*.

Starsky struggled for words. "Hutch...I...it's beautiful...I...I don't...it's a ring...."

He thought of something then and raised his left hand, indicating the two thin bands that glimmered on his pinkie right above the curve of the bandage. "But I already have...do you want these back?..."

"No!" Hutch stated forcefully as he took the hand in his. "Those belong right where they are. They are a symbol of our past...of the bond. That connection was never broken no matter what happened. This..." he pointed towards the ring that Starsky was holding in his now trembling right hand, "is a symbol of the future. It's a commitment to face that future together. And that bond will never be broken either."

Starsky's head was reeling. When his breathing and heart beat returned, they did so in a rush that nearly bowled him over. Emotions were flooding everywhere, and he couldn't get them under control. He tried to think of something to say...some way to express what this moment meant to him. Finally, he just threw his arms around Hutch and hugged him fiercely as the moisture from his eyes dampened Hutch's jacket. "Oh God, Hutch...."

Hutch held him quietly, stroking his face and hair as he cried. The ring was clenched inside his right fist. Eventually, he was able to unfold his fingers and look at it again. It was simple and elegant and classy...just like Hutch...and, next to him, it was the most perfect thing in the world. Hutch was saying something then and he had to focus to listen.

"I mean you don't have to wear it or anything. You could just keep it with you and know it's

there. Or wear it in the house...you know, whatever you feel comfortable with."

Through his delirious fog, Starsky realized what his partner was saying. He sat up then, taking Hutch's hand in his and placing the ring in it. Then he held up his own hand and pointed his left ring finger towards the band.

"I know where I want to wear it. Right there. Will you put it on for me?"

It was Hutch's turn to be choked by emotion. He sat looking at Starsky, visibly moved, as the hand with the ring began to tremble.

"Are you sure? There's going to be a lot of complications we'll have to face with that."

The importance of what he had to say helped Starsky recover enough to speak lucidly. "Hutch, if there's one thing I've learned throughout this whole ordeal, it's how unpredictable life is. Nothing is safe. It can all be gone tomorrow and there's not a damn thing you can do about it." Starsky paused to take in a deep breath, trying to keep the emotion from choking him. "What we have, Hutch...it's a gift. And I'm not going to waste a single second of it being worried about what anyone else says or thinks. There's not enough time in this life to waste it like that. I've waited an eternity to love you, Hutch. Now that I can, no one and nothing will ever make me back down from it again. And whatever 'complications' stem from that...well, so be it. Hell, I've faced worse."

Starsky reached up to wipe the tears from Hutch's cheek.

"I feel exactly the same way," Hutch said in hoarse voice. "I wanted...I was going to buy matching rings, but I wasn't sure how you would feel about it."

"Oh, no. I get to pick yours out. And you get to take an hour unfolding all the fancy paper." They laughed through their tears.

"OK, deal."

Hutch looked down then and slid the gold band onto Starsky's finger. His finger was a little swollen, but the ring was able to fit. Starsky didn't have much sensation there but he decided that was for the best. Any more sensations flooding him right now and he surely would pass out.

"I love you, Hutch."

"I love you too, babe." They sat silently then, both gazing down at their joined hands to the gold band on Starsky's finger. They had survived the past and were committed to the future...but for this brief respite they wanted only to concentrate on the present, on this extraordinary moment that they would never forget.

By the time they heard Jenkins' knock on the door, they felt ready to go. Hutch kissed Starsky fully before getting up to open the door.

"How are you, Mr. Jenkins?"

"I'm fine. I hope you both enjoyed your stay."

"Couldn't have been better."

"Glad to hear it. I hope that means we'll be seeing more of you around here."

"You can count on it," Hutch said as he smiled at Starsky.

"Why don't I take these bags down for you and then I'll come back and lock the place up."

"That would be great. Thanks a lot."

When Jenkins had left with the luggage, Hutch moved back to collect his picture frame from the table. Then he reached out to Starsky and clasped his hand in his.

"Ready?" he asked, eyes full of love and support.

"For anything," Starsky replied, heart full.

"Anything, huh?" Hutch mused as they walked towards the door. "Well then, what do you say we go hit the racquetball court tomorrow?"

"Oh, no. No way. I'm injured, remember." Starsky held up his bandaged hand with the shiny gold band.

"Well, I was thinking about that. I think you should learn how to play right-handed. I mean you can't do any worse than you did lefty. Besides, like I've told you before, the world was designed for right-handed people. Maybe you should take this opportunity to develop the muscles in your right hand. It might open up a whole new world for you."

"No thanks," Starsky laughed as they headed out the door. "I'm happy with the world I got."

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*I will remember you;
Will you remember me;
Don't let your life pass you by;
Weep not for the memories.*

*I'm so tired but I can't sleep;
Standing on the edge of something much too deep;
It's funny how we feel so much but cannot say a word;
We are screaming in sorrow but we can't be heard.*

*So afraid to love you;
More afraid to lose;
Clinging to a past that doesn't let me choose;
Once there was a darkness;*

*A deep and endless night;
You gave me everything you had;
Oh you gave me light.*

"I Will Remember You"
lyrics by Sarah McLachlan

Author's Note: *Dedicated to Kelly and Rosemary. Without your unending support, patience, encouragement, and love, I would have never gotten through this. Thank you.*