Golden Skies

by

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The California sun turned everything golden, because the light itself was gold. The water droplets Hutch was gently tipping onto his plants were molten, the green haze of leaves had a sort of shine, and Hutch's hair was a nimbus in the light. It was Sunday afternoon, and Hutch was revelling in the peace, and the sunshine and the quietness.

Then the phone rang. He'd been so relaxed, even his strong nerves jerked a little as its shrill tone broke the silence, and a few drops of water hit the rug.

"Don't let it be work," sighed Hutch to himself as he turned to answer it.

"Hutchinson," he answered, expecting to hear Starsky or Captain Dobey.

"Hi, Ken," he heard. "Are you busy?"

"Uh, no, not busy," said Hutch honestly, "but..."

"Hear me out...don't worry. It's a beautiful day. All I want to do is go for a walk in the park. It'd be much nicer with company. What d'you say? I promise not to get heavy."

"The park, huh?"

"Yeah, it's too hot for the beach."

Hutch was suddenly filled with longing to get away some place cool and green and shady. It would be very nice too, he had to admit, to feast his eyes on that golden beauty that matched his own.

"OK, Stephen," he smiled. "I'll meet you at the north gate in twenty minutes."

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The park was crowded with people, families having picnics, kids on skates, couples strolling hand in hand. There was music from the radios of the young wide-boys on the grass with their knees in the air, and laughter, and babies squawling.

"It's like the whole city's here," said Hutch. "I never get to see this side of it. You know, the normal people, the nice guys, just out enjoying themselves. Sometimes I forget they're there."

"Then it's good you came," said Stephen. "Take a break from the sleaze pits where your customers operate. Damn, I wish I wasn't too old for roller skates. Wouldn't you just love to go wheeling down the path?"

"Yeah, and end up with scabbed knees..no thanks! It wasn't the little kids I was envying," said Hutch, as they walked past a couple who had their arms wrapped lovingly round each other.

"Use your imagination," whispered Stephen. "You just have to imagine what we can't have. Imagine I'm putting my arm around your waist, and you're putting yours around me. And we're slowing down, 'cause our heads are getting closer together..."

"And our lips are getting very close," Hutch whispered back, "and I could just stop and look into your eyes, for as long as I wanted, without anyone getting funny ideas..."
"I think we could probably manage that bit," said Stephen conspiratorially. "Some parts of this park are quieter than others. Take a left, here, and we may just end up in the woods..."

"Vanilla and chocolate," said Starsky firmly. "And raspberry sauce, and chocolate vermicelli, and some of those biscuity-things. Please."

"You'll get fat," said Charlotte.

"What's talking about, fat? I never get fat. I can eat anything."

"More like everything," his date smiled. "But I'll get the ice-creams like I promised. The line's awful long. Why don't you see if you can grab a shady table?"

"OK, sweetheart," said Starsky, and started shimmying through the tables outside the park café. He spotted a good one, out near the edge of the grassy mound, in the shade of a sweet chestnut. The elderly couple who were occupying it had nearly finished, and Starsky stood there with his arms folded, smiling charmingly, until they relinquished possession. Then he sat back with a sigh of contentment, to wait for his ice-cream. And Charlotte, of course. Nice girl. Bit more sensible than some, she had a sense of humour. Coming here had been her idea, and he'd thought it a bit daft at first, when they could have been at the beach, but he had to admit it had its good points. There was something deeply satisfying about seeing so many different kinds of people. He couldn't put his finger on the reason why, but it was filling him with quiet pride.

He glanced towards the café; Charlotte was inside now, she wouldn't be too much longer. He looked down the grassy slope towards the lake. Those kids on skates weren't half buzzing along. He wouldn't have minded a go of that. That baby was going to fall out of its pushchair in a minute if it wasn't careful, it was wriggling so much. Temper, temper, thought Starsky, and smiled as the baby threw its plush dog down on the path. Its harassed mother hadn't noticed, but some other people did. Couple of gay guys, who'd been strolling along doing everything but touch each other. The one nearer Starsky reached down and picked up the toy, and handed it back to the worried infant. Its mother obviously made some funny remark, because they were all laughing. The other one's head went back a little, and his face caught the sunlight. Starsky went cold. It was Hutch.

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Starsky didn't stop to wonder why his heart was thudding so fast in his chest, or why his hands were shaking. He barely noticed, as he took the actions that were second nature when you wanted to observe unseen - lower your head, move out of the line of sight, keep your head still and move your eyes.

Who the hell was that guy with him? Starsky was sure he'd never seen him before. You wouldn't forget a face like that, he thought, seething, so beautiful it was almost girlish. Blond hair, too, so long he wore it tied back. Different shade to Hutch, more straw-coloured. Damn him and his blonds! And what the hell, what the hell did he think he was doing, dating another man? Hutch isn't gay! Is he? But if he's just a friend, how come he's never mentioned him? The questions chased each other around in Starsky's head, and he didn't know any of the answers. He felt like running down that hill and shouting, making a big scene, asking that pony-tailed pretty-boy just who he thought he was to be looking at Hutch like that, anything to make the questions go away. He knew he wouldn't - for one thing, Hutch would really freeze him out if he caused a scene - and for another, Charlotte was back, smiling and chatting about annoying irrelevant things, and blocking his view. He wondered how on earth he was going to swallow all that ice-cream.

The woods were the oldest part of the park, and it was shady below the canopy of the trees. Voices quickly died away, and the only sound was bird song.

"Got you to myself now," said Stephen shyly, and Hutch caught his hand, without looking.
The contact was electric. Hutch felt his heart thudding in his chest, and stole a glance at the face beside him, on a level with his own, that was looking at him so tenderly.

"Stephen," Hutch breathed, drowning.

"Don't worry. Ah, love, don't worry. Oh, God, you're so beautiful."

"So are you," said Hutch. "I could look at you for ever."

"Look as long as you like," said Stephen.

He stopped walking, and leaned back against a tree trunk, looking straight at Hutch, his dark brown eyes steadfast and unwavering. Hutch put his hands lightly on Stephen's shoulders, and gazed his fill into those dark depths.

"I know what you're thinking," said Stephen.

"Do you? What am I thinking, then?"

"That you'd like to kiss me. But you daren't, in case I think it means more."

Hutch lowered his eyes.

"Something like that," he admitted. "Something very like that."

"A kiss is a beautiful thing in itself. So just follow your heart."

Hutch smiled, and brushed Stephen's lips with his own, gently, strokingly, three, four times, before they clung together in a breathless force, on the surface just the soft sheen of lips, and underneath the hard pressure of strong necks and sharp teeth.

"Oh," shuddered Stephen, as they parted, both glancing nervously around. "Oh, Ken. Come on. We have to get out of here before we lose it."

"I'm going fast," said Hutch, trying to laugh. That had been so beautiful. "We need to cool off. D'you want a cold drink, or something?"

Stephen thought about that.

"No... that café'll be so crowded. Let's just go and sit by the lake."

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Starsky pretended to be enraptured by the flavour, to excuse his eyes being focused on the middle distance. They had their backs to him now, and you could tell they were talking less and less. They were going to go out of his sight, into those woods. Woods! What the hell were they going in there for!

"What?" said Starsky abruptly.

"I said, it's dripping on your t-shirt," laughed Charlotte. "I know you like it, but you don't have to make it last that long!"

Starsky pulled himself together.

"That may not be the last time you say that today," he warned.
That made her laugh. Good, thought Starsky, see, I am paying attention, honest...but I have to see how long they stay in there. He finished his ice-cream as slowly as he could.

"Dave," said Charlotte apologetically.

"Yeah?"

"I know you probably wish we were somewhere else...maybe somewhere more private...but I'm so thirsty. Would you mind very much if I went to get a pot of tea? I'm afraid I'd have to wait again."

Starsky knew he ought to do the gentlemanly thing and offer to do the standing in line. But you had to have a ruthless streak to hack it on the streets, and it emerged now.

"I'll wait for you," he sighed, as though staying here was the last thing he wanted to do. A saber-toothed tiger might get him away, he thought. If it tried really hard.

They had their hands in their pockets now, Starsky noticed, when they came back into his view. Trying to look casual. You don't fool me, he thought. Fifteen minutes to stroll through there? I don't think so. What you playing at, Hutch? You're going to get burned again, partner, and I don't like to see it.

They were getting very close to Starsky now, and he shrank back a little, desperate not to be noticed. If Hutch had been with a girl, it would have been the most natural thing in the world to put his fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle that his partner would instantly recognise. He'd wave, and invite them to join him and Charlotte, introduce the girls, and they'd all have a good time together. He couldn't imagine doing that today, no way. The thought of the awkwardness, the embarrassment, made him break out in a cold sweat.

They'd gone past him now, they were going to the lake. Starsky leaned forward to see better. They sat on the grass, and the other guy was talking. He was doing a lot of talking. Starsky looked at Hutch, saw the slight tension in his shoulders. Like when he's walking into a strange place for the first time, he thought. Wary. Then he saw him turn his head, looking at the water. It was defensive; whatever that guy was saying, Hutch wasn't sure about it. Just say no! thought Starsky. Don't listen to him, buddy.

But then they both laughed, and wriggled down to lie flat on the grass, on their fronts. Their hips were touching, and Starsky was sure they were pushing against each other when they thought no-one was looking. They were still talking and smiling. Damn! thought Starsky. Here's Charlotte back.

"No!" he snapped, when she offered him some tea. "You need it, you drink it." She looked puzzled at his tone, he could see, but he couldn't keep the worry out of his voice. And he couldn't stop looking. Despite their relaxed position, they seemed tense as wires. Their faces were so close together. Desperate to touch, Starsky thought, and of course, they can't. He felt an unexpected pang of sympathy. What must that be like, to feel like that and not be able to show it, to have to hide it all the time? They were sitting up, it was obviously getting unbearable. The other guy stood up and stretched, and looked straight at Starsky. Starsky looked away, though he knew it was irrational. There was no way he could know who he was. He leaned over and gave Hutch his hands, to heave him to his feet, and Starsky felt livid. How dare you, he thought. That's my job. But then the guy seemed to point towards the café, and Hutch nodded, smiling. Oh, shit, thought Starsky.

"Come on, Charlie-girl," he said. "We gotta get out of here."

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"How about over there?" said Stephen. "Under the tree?"
"Perfect," said Hutch, and coiled a foot around a chair leg, that had been pushed in haste too far from the table. His nose twitched as he sat down, a look of puzzlement across his face.

"What is it?" said Stephen.

"Nothing...it's gone, now...just a faint... something, I thought I recognised. Weird."

He smiled at Stephen, but wondered what on earth it was that had brought Starsky suddenly so vividly to his mind.

What would he say, if he knew where I was? thought Hutch. And who I was with? I've got to tell him. But Starsky's reaction was unpredictable. He might even...don't even think about it. He had to be sure, to risk that. And he wasn't sure. And even if he was sure, which was the greater loss?

"You're worrying again, aren't you? About your partner?" said Stephen.


"No, you're my problem. Can't stop thinking about you. See your face in my dreams. I want you so bad, it hurts."

"Don't want you hurting on my account. I'd love to make you happy. Come home with me...for the evening, at least. Let's just see what happens."

"This is California," sighed Stephen happily, letting a bit more southern drawl into his voice than he usually did. "Didn't get no offers like that in Alabama. Sure beats, 'You want your legs breaking, faggot?'"

"They're still around, even here," said Hutch.

"I know. But it's not in the water, in the air. What was it like in Minnesota?"

"Neither hated nor tolerated. Just ignored. Pretend it doesn't exist. You could grow up there not even knowing, and end up getting in a real mess before you found out what you were."

"You're sure now, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm sure about that," smiled Hutch.

He said no more, but he didn't need to. Stephen knew exactly what he meant. Ken was in love with his partner - desperately in love. But his partner was straight, there was no chance of happiness for him there. And Stephen was willing, more than willing, to show him that second best was better than nothing. But it wasn't as simple as that. Ken would forgo any chance of happiness that risked his working partnership. He had to have the certainty that it wouldn't make a difference, and Stephen wasn't sure it wouldn't. And he knew Ken wasn't sure either. Damn you, David Starsky, whoever you are, he thought. Wouldn't I like to throw you and your hang-ups into the Ocean.

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They parked side by side outside the little house by the canal, and Hutch smiled as he drew Stephen into his home.

"On our own at last," he sighed, and pulled Stephen into his arms. "Come here, beautiful."

He stroked Stephen's hair, and pulled away the band so that it fell loose. "Golden," he breathed, kissing a
strand. "Like sunshine."

"So what are you?" said Stephen, considering. "You're just as blond, but it's different. Moonlight, that's it. We're sunlight and moonlight."

"Nice," said Hutch, as Stephen's hands moved from his head to his neck. He felt his head being pulled into a kiss, and he yielded meltingly. Their lips met, gently, then fiercely, then their tongues flickered together, moist and so hot. Hutch's hands ran down Stephen's back, and yanked up the fabric of his shirt, wanting to feel skin. His fingers inched into the waistband of Stephen's shorts.

"Mmm," Stephen moaned, and pulled Hutch's hand round to his front. Hutch cupped his hand round the hard bulge and squeezed gently.

"How long you been feeling like that?"

"Oh, a couple of weeks. Yeah, seriously, well, on and off. Told you I was hurting."

"We have to do something about that," said Hutch gently, and sank to his knees, easing the thin fabric over the jutting cock and sliding it down.

"Step out," he said, and Stephen moaned again.

"Hush, lover, it's all right," said Hutch. "Soon it's going to feel real fine, just fine. Just lean against the door... don't want you falling. That's all nice and hard against your ass, is it? Lovely. Now I'm just going to touch you with my fingers, don't want to shock your system too much, got to take it slowly... want to make you real happy. God, your skin, it's beautiful. Feels like silk. Smells like roses. Mouth's watering at the thought of it. You ready, Stephen? You want this in my mouth?"

"Ah, Ken, Oh God, yes, please..."

Hutch leaned his hands flat against the door, his arms pinned against Stephen's slim waist. He looked up, gazed lovingly into Stephen's eyes, then lowered his head, and licked. Stephen shuddered, but Hutch held him firm, as his tongue explored delicately, teasing, going up and down, then flicking round the tip. Then he took the very tip between his lips, and squeezed, and sucked down a little further.

"Oh," groaned Stephen, with a sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of his soul.

Hutch opened his mouth, and slid down firmly, his lips brushing the skin all the way, until his mouth was full and the soft tip was touching his throat. Again and again he raised and lowered his head, and every movement made his own excitement grow stronger and stronger. Stephen's hands were in his hair, clutching and stroking, his hips were arching from the door, he was ready to move.

Hutch sat back a little, and leaned his head back. His eyes met Stephen's, and he nodded, because he couldn't speak, and Stephen knew he was giving him permission to fuck his mouth.

It didn't take long, his lover was too desperate. A dozen swift thrusts, and Stephen was coming down his throat, crying out and sobbing in his ecstasy. Hutch swallowed fast, and quickly got to his feet so he could catch Stephen before he fell over.

"Can I pick you up?" he asked, and Stephen nodded weakly. He knew Hutch loved sweeping him up into his arms and holding him, and it always amazed him that he could do it. He was much slighter than Hutch, but nearly as tall. His strength was incredible.

Hutch held him tight, relishing the feeling of having this man in his arms, but careful not to baby him. He
laid him on the couch, and nestled down beside him, and Stephen's hands at once touched him, stroking his chest and squeezing his arms.

"Take your shirt off," he said.

Hutch's eyes didn't leave Stephen's as he unfastened his shirt and dropped it to the floor.

"Muscles to die for," sighed Stephen. "Want to do you now."

"You don't need to," said Hutch. "I'm all right. In fact," he added apologetically, "I'm a bit sticky. Maybe later, when you've had a rest. Look at you, you're nearly dropping! What time did you get to bed last night?"

"Er, half four, I think it was."

"What are you like?"

"It was going so well," Stephen explained.

"Have a little sleep," said Hutch. "Here, shove a cushion under your head. That's it. I'll have a shower, then make us some dinner. Sound OK?"

"That sounds wonderful," sighed Stephen sleepily. "But I shouldn't let you spoil me like this."

"I owe you," said Hutch simply. "Two weeks of dithering...you're so patient with me."

"You're worth it," said Stephen, with his eyes closed. "Kiss?"

Hutch kissed him gently, laid his own shirt lightly over the still-naked groin, and went off to the shower.

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Starsky knew he ought to drive straight home after dropping Charlotte off at her apartment. It was only nine o'clock, but she seemed to have had enough of him, and he couldn't really blame her. But the Torino seemed to have a mind of its own that night, and it found its way to the canal all by itself. Starsky had the presence of mind to make it park itself out of sight, though. He didn't want Hutch to think he was spying on him, even though that was exactly what he was doing.

"It's for his own good," Starsky told himself. "Sure, he's got a right to keep anything he wants private...but this is heavy. I'm the one who'll have to pick up the pieces. I need to know."

All the lights were on round the back. That was a good sign, wasn't it? No music, though, coming from the open window, no sound of television. A quiet dinner, maybe? Or just smooching on the couch? Starsky's heart started banging again, and his fists clenched. He walked round the front, and stopped dead when he saw the car, parked so confidingly close to Hutch's battered motor. A beautiful car, new and well-cared for. It was black; classy, powerful and understated. The sort of car Hutch ought to drive himself, if he wasn't so hung up on anti-consumerism. Starsky understood cars, and the language they spoke. He realised at once he'd underestimated that guy. This was a man's car, and it belonged to someone who was absolutely sure about who he was. And someone who was very like Hutch. Starsky made his way back to the Torino. That car had shaken him more than he cared to admit.

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Starsky had been right about the smooching on the couch. Hutch was feeling blissfully happy, and wondering what on earth he'd been worrying about. This was heaven, this was right. They were just getting
down to it properly when the phone rang.

"Oh, no," groaned Hutch. "Don't let it be work."

Stephen let go of him at once so he could get up to answer it. He knew Hutch was practically on call twenty-four hours a day. He saw Hutch's face drop with disappointment when he heard who was speaking, and his own shoulders sagged to match.

"Can't it wait till morning, Cap?" Hutch was saying. "OK, OK. You just ruined a beautiful evening, you know that, don't you? What's that? No, he's not here. He's probably at home. Or you could try his girlfriend's, what's her name, Charlotte. OK, see you there."

He put the phone down with a very rueful expression.

"Sorry," he said. "Gotta go."

He started pulling his shoes back on.

"Don't worry," said Stephen. "It's hard, but that's the way it is."

"Yeah."

Hutch went to the closet, and Stephen watched him strapping on his gun. It was so natural to him, just second-nature. He wasn't even thinking about it, his thoughts were all for Stephen himself as he chatted while fastening the straps.

"Don't wait for me," he was saying. "Could take all night. Stay as long as you like, though."

"I'll go home in a bit," said Stephen. "I'll lock up for you. But if I can't have you in my hands, I'd rather have my pen."

"Don't stay up all night," grinned Hutch. "I'll call you tomorrow."

He leaned down for a kiss.

"See you, lover."

"See you, gorgeous. Take care."

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Starsky pulled up behind the coroner's wagon, and looked around at the familiar scene. A body, covered. People watching. Uniform guys from a black-and-white. Captain Dobey. And Hutch. He'd got here quickly. He looked just the same as ever...Starsky tried to stop thinking like that. Of course he looks the same, what did you expect? Get a grip, this is work. Concentrate.

"Hi, Hutch. What you got, Cap?"

"Black male, age approximately thirty-five, single bullet wound to the head. Small calibre gun, close range. He's wearing working men's clothes, but definitely not a working man. Hands are too smooth. And, in a very inside pocket, this."

Captain Dobey held out an official ID card, and Starsky took a good look.
"A Fed agent? John Fraser. What was he doing in town? Is it kosher?"

"Looks pretty good," said Hutch. "Photo's the dead man, all right."

"If it's genuine, I want to know what he was doing here," said Captain Dobey. "And if the Chief knew. And if he didn't, why not. This is going to mean a lot of tactful, diplomatic phone calls."

"That's why you sent for your best team, huh?" said Starsky.

"Don't push me too far, Starsky, not just now. Diplomatic, I don't think. What I do want, is to know if a local hit him. Was he a random victim, or did someone know what he was doing here? And I want some answers by morning, so hit the streets. Sorry to mess up your romantic evening, Hutch, but Starsky's right about something - you are my best team, and you don't need your hands holding. Get onto it."

"Yes, sir," said Hutch, wondering why Starsky was staring at him like that.

Dobey knows! thought Starsky, stunned into silence, then realised Hutch would never have said just who he was spending the evening with.

"Let's have a look at him," said Starsky hurriedly, and crouched down by the body. He was quiet for a moment, confronted with a man's death, as he always was.

He never gets casual about it, thought Hutch warmly, watching him.

"What else did he have in his pockets?" asked Starsky, gently re-covering the man's head.

"Over here, Sergeant."

One of the uniformed men showed him the contents of the pockets, laid out on a car seat.

"Street map? Seems a bit amateurish. Bus ticket, dated four days ago, route 9. No money? So he was robbed, or someone wanted it to look like that. And a hotel key...that looks promising."

"Yeah, the Coronet, it's not too far. He could have been walking there. Let's check out the witnesses, then work our way back."

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They spoke to a kitchen porter who swore he'd heard a man's footsteps pelting down an alley before the sound of the gunshot, and a waitress who'd definitely heard footsteps running after the gunshot.

"Really helpful, that," grumbled Starsky. "Proves he didn't have wings."

"Could show it wasn't a hired hit," said Hutch mildly. "They'd have a car, surely?"

Starsky conceded the point with a mooch of his lips, and they started walking back towards the Coronet Hotel.

"Romantic evening, huh?" said Starsky.

"His words, not mine," said Hutch. "What? What you looking like that for? Yeah, OK, I'm seeing someone. I was gonna tell you...just hadn't got round to it. But now is not the time, Starsk, believe me. We've got to keep our minds on the job."
That's not the only reason, is it, Hutch? You know you're gonna have some explaining to do. At least you were planning on telling me, that's something. And I can see it wouldn't be an easy thing to come out with. But boy, have you got your beautiful blond head in a mess this time.

"Here we are," said Starsky.

He went up the steps two at a time, and shook the hotel keeper awake.

"Police," he said, showing his badge. "The occupant of Room Ten was murdered this evening, and we need to look at his room."

"Shit, he hadn't paid," grumbled the man. "Go ahead, though. Got his key, have you?"

"Yeah," said Hutch. "Send your bill to the DA's office, it will be forwarded to his executors."

"Thanks," he said, surprise in his voice at such helpfulness. "First floor."

Nothing had been disturbed. Whoever had killed him wasn't after anything in here. A small suitcase full of simple clothing, basic travel necessities. The only thing out of the ordinary was a photograph of a young man. A nice face, with a dazzling smile. Red hair, and eyes that looked almost green.

Hutch sank down on the bed, and Starsky leaned against the window ledge.

"OK," said Hutch. "Something doesn't fit. What is it?"

"No gun."

"No gun. Catch a Fed travelling without his gun...does that mean he knew he wouldn't need it? Or does it mean he was a fake?"

"If he was a fake, he'd definitely have a gun. 'Cause he'd be up to no good."

"True...so maybe he was tracking someone down?"

Hutch picked up the photograph.

"Someone he knew was harmless?"

"Sounds good so far," said Starsky. "But if he's harmless, why do they want him?"

"Witness on the run, something like that?" Hutch hazarded.

They bounced ideas off each other, thinking, weighing up, getting the feel.

"Let's chat up the guy downstairs," said Starsky. "Before he falls asleep again."

Hutch slipped him a five.

"Get yourself a drink," he said. "Can we see the hotel register, please?"

"Sure...but I don't guarantee any of these names are for real. We don't ask for ID."

Hutch read the list, while Starsky waved the photograph in front of the man's face.

"You seen this kid?"
"He asked me that...Number 10, the guy you say's been murdered. Told him, he checked out yesterday."

Hutch looked up.

"This kid stayed here? Which room?"

"Now you're asking...24, 25...not sure. Lemme see my book...yeah, that was him - Joseph Colarelli. Came middle of last week, he was looking for work. Used the phone a lot, and the Business Directory."

"Could you overhear him? What sort of work was he looking for?"

"Stonemason. He was working his way down the list. Friday, he got lucky, I reckon. Saturday, he checked out, just before Number 10 arrived."

"Thanks, pal," Hutch tossed to the man as they left. "Think the kid's name's for real?"

"It could be," said Starsky. "If he didn't know he was being tailed. New town, new job...sounds like someone who thinks he's escaped, making a fresh start."

Escape, thought Hutch, thinking of Stephen and his flight from the prejudice of his home. People come here to escape a lot of things, not only justice. The golden west, the land of promise, it had lured people for ever.

"He's a runaway," said Hutch. "He thought he'd made it, but someone had other ideas."

"And now that someone's dead," Starsky pointed out. "So did this kid - Joseph - kill him? Or is someone after him, too?"

"Let's get back to Metro," said Hutch. "See what Dobey's turned up. It looks like we're going to have to find this kid, whichever way it goes."

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They had to take both the cars, much to Hutch's relief. He didn't want Starsky to have the chance to start asking him questions. He had to tell him, he knew that, but not here, not now. They were going to need a bit of time and space.

Ah, Starsk, he thought, why does it have to be like this? You're the only one I want, really. If only you wanted me, too. But Stephen's right, if I have to watch you and your women, time after time, it's gonna destroy me. This isn't the answer I want, but it is an answer. Stephen and I could make each other very happy. If only you can handle it.

They had to take both the cars, much to Starsky's annoyance. He wanted to hear Hutch talking, to get a feel for what was going on in his head, so he knew how to handle this.

Ah, Hutch, he thought, you've been mesmerised, I reckon. What's got into you? You're the only one I want, really. If only you wanted me, too. But Stephen's right, if I have to watch you and your women, time after time, it's gonna destroy me. This isn't the answer I want, but it is an answer. Stephen and I could make each other very happy. If only you can handle it.

It was three-thirty when they slumped into chairs in Captain Dobey's office. They were all looking the worse for wear. Hutch was nearly asleep, and Starsky badly needed a shave.

They waited until the captain put the phone down.

"He's genuine," he told them. "Got a grudging acknowledgment that an agent by the name of John Fraser
exists. Did exist. But no-one's admitting to knowing anything about what he was doing here. He's on leave. Official. End of story."

"Doesn't anyone want to check out his death?" asked Hutch.

"His immediate superior is flying out, but not until tomorrow. They're from Maryland. Operating a long way from home. Peter Colarelli. What? What you two grinning about? Spill."

"It's certainly an unusual name," Captain Dobey conceded, after they'd told him. "All right, so what have we got? This kid's the Fed boss's son? Run away from home? And he puts one of his agents on leave, to go and find him? This is looking more and more like a random hit. Sheer coincidence. I want this wrapped up quickly, before the man gets in from Maryland. Go home and get some sleep, then get back on duty by noon. Soon as it's office hours, I'll get someone on the phones to find out which stonemason offered the kid work. Once you've spoken to him, things might get clearer."

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The Torino was parked in the shade, a little way from the gate to a stonemason's yard. There was no rush; the way Starsky and Hutch saw it, there was no point messing up the kid's new job by having police barge in to see him on his first day. He had information, sure, but he was no killer. They'd decided to wait, and Starsky had promptly decided it was time for another sleep. His head was back, one leg was stretched out, and the other bent, the knee resting on the door. He looked perfectly at peace, his heavy-lidded eyes still, and his lips just slightly parted. Hutch was curled round, his hands on the seat back, and his head resting on his hands, watching him.

It's just not damnable fair, thought Hutch. All that beauty, wasted on witless girls. When I love you so much, and I can't touch you. Well, not much, anyway. Not enough. What would you do if I just leaned over and kissed you? You look so tempting, lying there like that. Would you hit me? Or just push me away? What would it be like, if you kissed me back? Oh, God, stop it, he told himself, as beautiful fantasies started floating through his mind. This didn't often happen when they were working. There was usually just too much going on. And there was a lot more to his love for Starsky than mere lust. He loved everything about this man, all that he was. But the lust was there, and Hutch had to admit, it was harder to control after he'd been with Stephen. It was as if he was waking some dangerous creature that would have been better left sleeping.

Maybe my answer's no answer after all, thought Hutch. What if it just makes it worse? Oh, I don't know. I don't know anything any more. All I know is that I love him, I want him. I want him so bad it hurts. But that's how Stephen feels about me. Oh, someone stop the world, I want to get off.

"Hutch, what's the matter?" said Starsky. "You're shaking. You got malaria?"

Too late, Hutch realised he'd closed his eyes and that Starsky had woken and started watching him. Those dark blue eyes were looking at him strangely. They were puzzled, they were worried.

"I gotta talk to you," said Hutch simply.

"Whenever you want, buddy," said Starsky. "Looks like it's quitting time at the old sculpture factory. Let's get this job wrapped up and go home."

As Joseph Colarelli passed them, Starsky leaned out of the door.

"Joe! How're you doing? Want a ride home?" he called.

As the young man turned in amazement, Starsky muttered under his breath.
"Get in the car - police. Don't want to cause a scene."

He came near, but didn't get in.

"If this is another of my dad's tricks, I'm not interested. What do you want me for?"

He was older than the photograph, they realised. This wasn't a kid, this was a young man who knew what he was doing.

"We're nothing to do with your father," said Hutch, "and you're free to leave any time. But we do need to talk to you. Bet you're thirsty after cutting stone all day, aren't you? Let's all go for a drink."

"John Fraser," said Starsky, handing Joseph a cold bottle of cola. "Do you know him?"

"I didn't, till yesterday. He found me on the beach, early evening. Said he knew I'd be there, but I don't know how he knew. He must be a good detective."

"What did he want? He ask you to go home?"

A slightly bitter smile curled round Joseph's mouth.

"No. That wasn't why my dad sent him. He was sent to get my grandfather's medal. The medal was mine, he left it to me. Grandfather was a hero, you see. In the D-Day landings, 1944. But my dad insisted I returned it to him, because I wasn't man enough to have it. Mr. Fraser gave me his message, and offered me $300 in compensation."

"What did you do?" asked Hutch.

"I gave him the medal. It was in my pocket. If dad wanted it that much, he could have it. I turned down the money, of course. The medal itself didn't matter, it was knowing Grandfather had wanted me to have it that mattered."

"Then what happened?"

"He shook my hand, and wished me luck, and went away. I walked on the beach till it went dark, then went back to my boarding house. But why are you asking me all this? You're the local police, aren't you? Shouldn't Mr. Fraser have come here, is that it?"

"No, he shouldn't," said Starsky, "though not how you mean it. I'm sorry Joseph, but soon after he left you, someone killed him. Just a street robbery, by the sound of it. There was no money, and no medal, on his body."

"What? Dead, just like that? God, I'm sorry. He seemed a nice man. Is there anything I ought to do?"

"All you have to do, is make a go of your new life," said Hutch. "Why a stonemason, though? You're educated."

Joseph smiled.

"I love stone. I'm going to be a famous sculptor one day. I'm going to earn enough to pay my way through Art School, and then, you just watch!"

"Couldn't he handle your ambitions? Is that why you felt you had to leave?"
"No," said Joseph, hesitantly. "No...he could maybe have come to terms with that. It was something else. I didn't run away. I told him I'd leave, as soon as I was twenty-one, if he couldn't...couldn't accept..."

"...that you were gay?" said Starsky gently.

"Yes," said Joseph. "He caught me one day, kissing my boyfriend. He nearly killed us both. I knew then that I had to leave."

Hutch's knuckles were white in his fists, but he spoke calmly.

"Welcome to California," he said. "You're going to make it. With strength like yours, there's no question. Listen, Joseph, your father's coming to Bay City tomorrow, to deal with John Fraser's death. He won't hear a word about you from us. We'll do the rounds of the fences, and get the medal back if we can. Can you sketch it for me?"

Joseph drew the medal easily, skilfully, in Hutch's notebook, and wrote down his address when they asked him to.

"If we find the punk who hit him, we'd need you to be a witness in court," said Starsky. "You'd give evidence of the valuables he was carrying at the time of his death. You OK about that?"

"Yes, of course," said Joseph simply, leaving the two detectives wishing that everyone they dealt with could be like this. But if everyone was like this boy, there wouldn't be any crime at all.

"Phone this number if you change your address," said Hutch. "Or even if you need any help, any time. I know you want to stand on your own feet, and good luck to it, but you're on your own in a strange city...well, you just made two friends, OK?"

Joseph gave them a dazzling smile.

"Thanks a lot," he said. "If you two are a fair sample of Bay City, I think I'm going to like it here."

They dropped Joseph off at his boarding house, then Starsky leaned on the steering wheel, looking at Hutch over his shoulder.

"Whatcha wanna do? Hit the fences now, or leave it till morning?"

"Might not take too long, if we get lucky...let's get it finished. Where do street punks go in that neighbourhood?"

"Irene Koblensky?"

"Worth a try. Hit the road, partner."

The Polish jeweller rolled her eyes when Starsky and Hutch sauntered in, picking things up and putting them down.

"Oh God, what's so hot they sent you two? Name it, it's yours, just don't give me any stress."

"A D-Day medal," said Starsky.

"Already sold it on. Gerard Thomas, he'll kill me if he finds out I've passed him something dodgy! Let me get on the phone, I'll get it back. My kid can go and get it on his motor-bike."
"Take your time, Irene," smiled Starsky. "Who brought it in?"

"Just a little drug-rat. I think he's called Mickey. Lives in that doss-house on the corner."

"We know him," said Hutch. "We've pulled him before, for small-time dealing."

"I'm not going in there!" said Starsky. "It's full of fleas. Last time I went in there I was itching for weeks."

"OK, I'll get on the radio, someone can pull him in for us. He'll keep."

Hutch went back to the car, and flicked the switch.

"This is Zebra Three, requesting a warrant for the arrest of Michael Kelly, of Pentin House Hostel, for the murder of John Fraser. And patch me through to Captain Dobey, please."

"Cap, it's Hutch. Definitely a street crime, Joseph Colarelli will give evidence that Fraser was carrying $300 and a valuable medal. We can get the medal back, and we know the perp. So it's all sorted. Yeah, thanks, Cap, see you tomorrow."

When Starsky came out, he was carrying a slim grey box.

"Personal delivery, we must be getting important. We got lucky, all right."

"Let's have a look," said Hutch. "Nice. Must have been quite a guy, Grandfather."

"Between his son and his grandson, he knew which was the better man," said Starsky.

"Starsk," said Hutch, "how did you know he was gay?"

Starsky met his eyes.

"I don't know, Hutch. That's the God's-honest truth. If you asked me for ever, I'll never know where that came from. I was as wallopped as you were. But," he added, "I will admit the subject's been on my mind."

His finger traced the steering wheel's edge, all the way round.

"You ready to talk now?"

"I'm not sure, Starsk. Maybe this isn't a good time."

"Don't you go wobbly on me now, Hutchinson. If it's any help, I saw you in the park on Sunday. Maybe you weren't kissing your boyfriend, but you were sure as hell thinking about it."

"Oh, God," said Hutch, and hid his face.

"Come on, buddy," said Starsky. "Let's get you home. Ain't nothin' we two can't sort out, somehow."

******

Hutch was quiet all the way back home. Starsky took charge, opening his door for him, making him sit down at his own table, opening a beer for him and putting it in his hand. He took a few sips of his own beer, then slumped back comfortably in his chair.

"So, shoot," he said.
"I don't know where to start."

"Start with the easy stuff. Who is he? Where d'you meet him?"

"Starsky, you've got to believe me, I never meant you to find out like this. I really was going to tell you. His name's Stephen Danvers. He runs that bookstore on 5th, I go in there a lot...we got talking."

"When was this?"

"Couple of months ago."

"A couple of months! This has been going on for a couple of months! And you still hadn't got round to mentioning it!"

"Nothing's 'going on'! Or not much...and it's not that long...you know what our lives are like, how often do you get to see anyone in two months?"

"Maybe...so what've you got in common? Apart from both being drop-dead gorgeous? What can you have in common with a store-keeper?"

"You can knock that off right now. Needling questions! No bullying the witness. I know all the tricks just as well as you do."

"Didn't mean it like that," said Starsky sheepishly. "Just habit, I guess."

"OK. But he's not just a store-keeper. He's a writer. He works all day, then writes most of the night. Hardly ever sleeps. Dedicated to his own work - just like we are."

"Right. And he's gay?"

"Yes."

"But you're not! Damn it, Hutch, you were married! Even I've never been married! And you've been out with dozens of girls since! And I never heard any of them complaining!"

"I told you!" Hutch blazed. "I told you I was through with women!"

"You never told me you were going to start going with men!"

They both sat back, realising there was no need to get angry, and trying to calm their tempers.

"OK," said Hutch. "OK. You've got the right to say anything you want, to ask anything you want. I don't want any secrets from you. OK. But being married - and divorced - and having a string of unsuccessful relationships doesn't mean you're not gay. I'm not saying I am, mind you. Not because I'd be ashamed of it, but because I'm not sure I have the right to. I haven't suffered for it. Like Stephen. Like Joseph."

"So to you, that name's a kind of honour - that you feel you don't deserve?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"You're weird, Hutch. But, like, I already knew that. You'll suffer soon enough if anyone else finds out what you're up to! Bay City may be a hotbed of tolerance, but the Police Department is not the centre of it!"

"I know. I'll be careful. But in the end, there's only one opinion that matters. Yours."
"My opinion," said Starsky, "is whatever you want it to be. I refuse to have any remarks I may have made in the past held against me. I mean, I've never been that keen on people who keep pet fish, you know? I think they're weird. But if you turned out to be a secret fish-keeper, well, I would revise my opinion of fish-keepers."

"So you really don't mind?"

"I didn't say that. I'm worried that you're gonna get burned again, by another beautiful blond, just like you always do. Fact that he's a guy just makes it more complicated. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"That's a chance you take any time you let a relationship start getting serious. It's just the same for you."

"I never get serious, you ought to know that. Yeah, sometimes it might look like that, but I'd never let any woman get close enough to hurt me."

He leaned forward, looking into Hutch's eyes, trying to read his mind.

"I'd feel a lot happier if I felt sure you knew what you were doing. I'm sensing uneasiness. You're not sure about this yourself, are you? Maybe what you really want is for me to tell you not to do it."

"If I seem uneasy, it's because I think he cares more than I do. I don't want to hurt him. It's not because I'm unsure of what I want. I want a lover who's a man. I don't want women, ever again."

"How do you know this isn't just a reaction against women who've hurt you? I'm not stupid, I know that people aren't just gay or straight, with no in-between. You might change your mind."

"I know what you're saying," Hutch admitted. "I admit the possibility. All I can say is, right now, this is how I feel."

"Why, Hutch? 'Cause I'm right, aren't I? This is the first time for you? Is it just curiosity? See what it's like on the other side? You don't have to be ashamed to say so, I guess most men have wondered that at some time."

"You want convincing? OK, damn it, see if you can handle this. I want an equal, a twin, someone who's as big as I am, as strong as I am. I want to feel his strength when he touches me, and I want him to feel mine. I want fierce passion and gentle tenderness without mushy sentiment. I want the hard, smooth planes of a man's body, two cocks throbbing together, and all the hot places they can go."

Starsky sat staring at him for a few moments, speechless, while Hutch calmed down after that outburst.

"Actually, it sounds quite good when you put it like that," said Starsky.

It was Hutch's turn to stare, and he hoped Starsky wasn't trying to read his mind again. But Starsky just smiled, and shrugged.

"I guess you have to be made that way," he said, almost regretfully. "OK, I'm convinced. You're gay. Right. I can handle that. You do know I'm going to wind you up every single day for the rest of your life, don't you?"

Hutch really smiled then, with real joy.

"Now you look happy, now you look sure of what you're doing. Why's that? Just because of me?"

"Yeah, Starsk, just because of you. This is important to me...but not as important as you are."
"I get you, buddy. You don't have to worry about our partnership. That's as important to me as it is to you, and nothing's going to spoil that, because we won't let it. Won't make any difference. And I do understand, actually. He's your equal in beauty. Like I am on the streets. I got enough confidence to know that, I'm as fast as you, I'm as brave as you. Side by side, we're equals, I know it, you know it, we have the skills, we have the guts, and we take care of each other. But in bed, you'd want an equal too, I can see that. Not someone dark and skinny, someone all golden and lovely, to match you. I can see that."

He smiled, and got up.

"I gotta go, Hutch, I need to think about all this. And you need to talk to Stephen. I think you been messing that boy around long enough. But I'll pick you up in the morning, as usual, right? That bit's mine, and I can keep it, right?"

Hutch was almost too overwhelmed to speak, but he managed it.

"I belong to you. To you, first. And don't you ever doubt it. See you, buddy."

"Night, Hutch."

Hutch sat at his table, unmoving, while his mind went round in dizzying spirals. Not someone dark and skinny? Could that possibly mean what it sounded like? What the hell was going on there?

Don't be stupid, he told himself. He didn't mean he wants to be in your bed. All he meant was, he hasn't got a very high opinion of his own looks. Just how obtuse can he be? He's maddening. Doesn't he know he's the most beautiful man God ever made? Oh, I want to bury my hands in those black curls, I want to smother him with love, I want that tiny ass in my hands, I want to kiss it...

Amazing, how difficult a tiny thing could be, sometimes. Swallow, that's it, you can do it, just swallow. That's better. Just stop thinking like that! It's stupid. As stupid as thinking of going into a gun fight with Stephen. Come on, get a grip.

Hutch phoned Stephen, and was pleased, in a perverse sort of way, that Stephen didn't seem that excited. He was glad Hutch had finally told his partner, and glad Starsky seemed OK about it, but Hutch could tell where his mind really was, and let him get back to his book.

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"Why can't morning start eight hours after you fall asleep, huh? Whatever time it was?" grumbled Starsky as he sloped into the changing-room at the gym.

"Always the little ray of sunshine," said Hutch, peering out for a moment from the towel he was drying his hair with. "What's up? Couldn't you sleep?"

"It's your fault. You made my brain go into overdrive. You owe me breakfast for that."

"As much as you can eat at Mason's."

"Expensive. Tasty. You must be feeling really guilty, Hutch."

"No, generous. Just don't expect me to join you."

"Why not? His pancakes are beautiful!"

"I'm sure they are - that's not the point."
Hutch dropped the towel from his waist and started to get dressed. He was very cheered by Starsky coming in here as usual. Most men would have shied away - however sympathetic they were - after a confession like Hutch had made last night. They'd have made some excuse to avoid being in such close contact. But not Starsky. When he said it wouldn't make any difference, he meant any difference. But there was something he had to get his head round.

"It's all right for you, Starsk," he explained. "You can eat anything and you never put on weight. You've got a perfect, lean figure that most people just envy. But I can't do that. If I ate as much as you do, I'd get fat. If I didn't work out, I'd get fat. And then what use would I be, if I couldn't keep up with you? I have to put a bit of effort in, to achieve what you can take for granted. So it's no disrespect to the pancakes. It's just, I have to use a bit of self-control."

Good, thought Hutch, that's made him think. It's about time he realised that he's the one with the perfect body. I would never have guessed he could have felt insecure about that.

Hutch combed his hair and slipped his jacket on, then turned to Starsky and stood still, looking into his eyes.

"You all right?" he asked quietly.

Starsky met his gaze, and there was still love and trust there.

"Yeah," he said. "A little worried still, maybe, but all right. I want to meet him, Hutch."

"Really? That'll feel weird."

"I know. But I've got to get used to him, and he's got to get used to me."

"I don't deserve either of you," said Hutch. "We'll fix something up."

******

When they got to headquarters, they interviewed Michael Kelly. The shaken junkie soon confessed, swearing his finger had slipped and he'd never meant to hurt the man. Then they went to catch up on their paperwork, so they'd be around when Peter Colarelli came in. Hutch was diligently typing away, but Starsky was bored. He started looking at Hutch, willing him to look up. And Hutch sensed his eyes, somehow, and remarked mildly, without looking up,

"D'you ever get a feeling that a ghoul is watching you?"

"What's a ghoul?"

"C'mon, Starsk, you've seen every horror movie ever made, you know what a ghoul is."

"I know what a girl is," said Starsky. "And what they're for. Which is more than you do."

Hutch sighed.

"Every day? For the rest of my life?"

"You said it, partner," grinned Starsky.

Then Captain Dobey summoned them into his office. He introduced them to Peter Colarelli, and asked them to give a report of the investigation into John Fraser's death. Hutch started, as usual, then gave way to Starsky seamlessly.
It's as though they speak as one, not just think as one, thought Captain Dobey. They don't even know they're doing it.

The Fed agent frowned when Hutch returned the medal to him.

"Detective Hutchinson," he asked, "you haven't told me how you came to know there was a medal."

"Irrelevant detail," smiled Hutch. "Always stick to the pertinent points, isn't that right, Captain?"

"And the impertinent ones," muttered the captain. "Answer the man's question."

"Sorry, I didn't hear a question. What was it?" said Hutch.

"How did you know there was a medal to be found?"

"The man who gave it to Mr. Fraser told me. The man who knew he was carrying $300, because he'd turned it down. One of our newer citizens, and the sort of man we're proud to welcome in this city."

Starsky was very alert, ready to intervene if Hutch looked like losing his temper, but he had himself well in hand, he was making his points bite, without losing his control. Only Starsky knew, by the fine lines around his eyes, just how angry he was.

Peter Colarelli's face was taut with anger too.

"My son is a foolish boy. I insist that you tell me where he's staying."

"Ain't that a shame?" said Starsky, taking Hutch by the arm and starting to lead him out. "We clean forgot to ask."

******

They went back on their beat, cruising around, watching, guarding. They had a chat with Huggy, they listened to a bar-keeper complaining about vandalism, stopped to help a uniform pair break up a fight. A very ordinary afternoon. Nothing exciting. But Hutch was getting quieter and quieter, and Starsky wanted to know why. He had his suspicions.

"Silence is not as golden as all that," he remarked. "What's up?"

"Sorry," said Hutch, surprised. "I was miles away. Shocking behaviour, on duty."

"You seeing Stephen tonight?"

"Mmm."

"Look," said Starsky, "you can tell me to shut it and mind my own business, or you can tell me everything. But don't fob me off with politeness. It works both ways, Hutch. This won't make any difference to us, if we don't let it. If we don't let it. Both of us, not just me."

"Oh," said Hutch.

Starsky let him think about that, then repeated his question.

"So, what's up?"

"I'm scared. Damn it, Starsk, look where you're going! Drive the bloody car!"
Starsky spun the wheel to avoid the truck he was veering towards.

"Whoops. Sorry about that. But I never thought I'd hear you say that. So what you scared of? Oh, wait a minute. I get it. You been pussy-footing around, haven't you, holding back. Because of me. But now there's no need to. And he knows it, and you know it. So you're in for it, buddy, aren't you?"

"Er, that's about right," said Hutch.

"Being scared ain't nothing to be ashamed of," Starsky grinned. "I'd be absolutely petrified."

******

"Look, I said I was sorry," said Starsky miserably.

"It doesn't matter," said Charlotte with exasperation. "This is the second time this week! If you don't fancy me, I can soon find someone who does!"

"Oh, c'mon, it's not like that. Don't walk out on me!"

"I'm sorry," Charlotte told him, more gently. "But it's not working. And life's too short, Dave. I'm going home, and don't call me, please. It's time to move on."

Starsky felt he hadn't got the energy to argue. He didn't want her to go, but that was only because he didn't want to be alone. If she was going, he couldn't stop her. She said goodbye pleasantly; it sounded very final. Starsky closed the door and leaned his back against it, let himself slide down until he was sitting on the floor with his knees bent up in front of him. He covered his face with his hands, but it was no use. The images he'd been seeing all night came back with a vengeance as soon as he was alone. Images that had come between him and Charlotte, knocked him senseless, robbed him of passion and allowed him to let her walk out on him, unsatisfied. When had he ever treated a girl like that? It was unbelievable. But the images wouldn't even let him dwell on his own failure. All he could see was Hutch in Stephen's arms. They were naked, and smiling at each other. Starsky groaned, and hit the floor with his fist in frustration.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted, though he didn't know who he was talking to.

He dragged himself to his feet, went to get a beer from the fridge. Get drunk, he thought. That might help. You'll get used to it. You never batted an eyelid when you knew he was in bed with some woman, why the hell is this so different?

The beer helped a bit. It's because he was scared, thought Starsky. I'm just being over-protective, like he is sometimes. Once he's got used to it, once he's happy, I'll be OK. But what the hell are they doing? His imagination was roaming over things he didn't want to think about. OK, he was a cop, he'd been around, he wasn't naïve. He knew what gay men did to each other. In theory. But God, surely it hurt? He'd better not be hurting Hutch...was that what Hutch had been scared of? Scared he couldn't handle the pain? Or scared he wouldn't like it? But then he remembered Hutch's defiant statement of what he wanted. Oh, he'll be liking it, all right, he thought angrily. Probably having a great time. So what the hell are you getting stressed about! he told himself. He opened bottle after bottle, rationalising his feelings, coming up with all sorts of answers. Everything but the truth.

******

"We will respond," said Hutch to the radio, and Starsky turned the wheel hard, sweeping the powerful car across the traffic and heading south, fast. Hutch slammed the light on the roof, and the siren wailed. Other cars drew aside as they passed, a blur of red and white, until they screeched to a halt outside a bar. They leaped out, guns ready, to see a little huddle of people giving first aid to a man on the ground.
"He ran for it!" one of them called. "Down the next street!"

A bar-room brawl, and guns had been pulled. One of them was down, though not dead, by the look. His attacker was running, armed and probably panicky.

"Take the right," said Starsky, and Hutch nodded. Starsky ran slowly at first, to give Hutch a start, then speeded up as he turned into the street on the left. He thought he could hear footsteps ahead of him for a moment. Then they stopped. Starsky slowed down, moving more cautiously. He pushed over a garbage can, to see if anyone was behind it. Nothing. He walked forward, and threw himself down as a shot whined past him. Close... but he had the angle now, he knew where he was, doorway further down. He rolled, took the cover of the wall, moved in. Then he ran across to draw fire, knowing that Hutch would take him from the other angle as he came out to take his shot. But Hutch wasn't there, wasn't in position. Starsky swore, and dived again. Had to repeat his actions, making the second run much more risky. But his time, it went down as it should have done. Hutch had him cold, and Starsky ran up to slam the cuffs on him. But there was no joy, no exhilaration on his face. He spoke coldly to Hutch, ignoring the gunman, speaking in front of him as if he didn't matter, as if he wasn't there.

"You were late."

A cold, accusing statement in itself, and masking even more, unspoken words... you let me down - I could have been killed - where the hell were you?

Hutch was very shaken, he knew he'd taken a few seconds longer than he should have done. There'd been a reason, but he didn't feel that mattered. Starsky was fuming, and Hutch didn't blame him. But his overwhelming feeling was relief, relief that Starsky hadn't been hit.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. He didn't think there was anything else he could say.

Starsky just glared at him, then roughly pushed his attacker along in front.

"Move, you," he snarled, and the man moved, wishing with all his heart that he'd never pulled his gun. Just his luck, he thought, to get cops in a bad mood.

In silence, they marched their catch back to the bar. A black-and-white had arrived, manned by a good pair who seemed to know already what the argument had been about, so they handed him over and went back to the Torino. Starsky leaned against the car before he got in.

"Why didn't you call in sick?" he demanded.

"What?" said Hutch.

"You heard me. If last night was too much for you, and you can't run properly, you had no business coming to work."

Hutch couldn't believe his ears. He looked around, his mouth half-open, trying to find an answer to the unanswerable.

"Are you crazy? That's not winding-up, it's offensive! You're assuming that I'm not fit - and that you know why!"

Hutch was angry himself, now, his lips hard and set, and his eyes blazing. Anyone else would have backed down at once. But Starsky wasn't scared.

"Are you denying it?"
"Yes! Something slowed me down, true...but not what you seem to be implying!"

"So what was it?"

"What the fuck does it matter, now? You're convinced I'm capable of risking your life - out of embarrassment or something! If I was feeling rough, I would have said so, and you know it!"

Starsky began to feel he might have been a little hasty. But he was still furious, he couldn't let go of his anger. He didn't know where it was all coming from. After all, it hadn't been that dangerous, he knew he ought to be calming down by now.

"Oh, get in the car," he said.

"No thanks," said Hutch. "I think I'll walk."

"You're miles from home, don't be stupid."

"I'm not going home, I'm going to Emergency. I think I need a couple of stitches. In my head!" he added, with a glare.

"What?"

"Some helpful citizen took a swing at me with a broken chair leg. I think it had a nail sticking out. Anyway, it's still bleeding, and like I said, I think I need a couple of stitches."

Starsky's face dropped, his anger disappeared as if it had never been. That's what had happened...and he'd only let it stop him for what, five or six seconds.

"Did you ever feel as small as a beetle?" said Starsky. "God, I'm sorry. Please get in the car, Hutch, you've made your point."

"OK."

Starsky took a quick look at the damage. There was blood on the blond hair at the back of his head, it was wet, but it wasn't pouring.

"I think you'll live," he said gravely, and Hutch smiled.

Their tempers had cooled. They both knew that Starsky blaming Hutch for being late when he couldn't help it, didn't matter a scrap. But the reason his mind had jumped to, that mattered...and they both knew that, as well.

"I am trying," said Starsky, with a swallow.

"I know," said Hutch. "God, I know you are, and I'm damned grateful. But stop pretending it's easy."

******

The nurse remembered these two, they often needed patching up. Not because they were both so good-looking - though they were - no, it was the way they took care of each other. Whichever one needed treatment, the other one was always getting in the way, as if he wanted to be doing the swabbing and stitching himself.

"There's a chair over there," she remarked pointedly to Starsky.
"So there is. D'you have to cut so much hair off, don't scalp him!"

"It won't even show...here, make yourself useful if you won't sit down...slip these gloves on, and hold his hair out of the way while I swab the wound...thanks."

"Looks pretty nasty, Hutch," said Starsky helpfully.

"Don't make him laugh!" said the nurse. "Keep still now, very still, just a couple of sutures will do the job...there, perfect. Keep it dry for a couple of days, don't swim or get your head wet in the shower, and it'll heal perfectly."

"Thank you," said Hutch, giving her a smile, and they sauntered out with their hands on each other's shoulders.

Starsky had called in that they were standing down as soon as he knew Hutch was hurt, and it was gone six, no need to return to work.

"What you doing this evening?" Hutch asked. "D'you want to come out with me and Stephen? I said I'd call for him if we got off before seven, and I said I might be bringing you."

"Was he OK about that?"

"Yeah...nervous, but, yeah."

"What's he got to be nervous about? I'm normal!"

"Starsky," said Hutch patiently, "you are not even remotely normal. So try not to scare him, OK? And besides..."

"What?"

"He knows damn well that if I had to choose between you, it'd be you."

This is one hell of a set up, thought Starsky. I bet there's nothing in the etiquette books that tells you how to behave when you're meeting your partner's boyfriend, who's probably jealous sick of you. So I mustn't act jealous, he thought, that's what Hutch is saying. Well, that's easy enough, because I'm not.

Starsky stayed with the car while Hutch went for Stephen. His apartment was in a nice old house, a bit shabby now, that had once been a classy residence. He waited quite a while for them.

Oh, put him down, Hutch, he thought, and get a move on, I'm hungry.

Hutch opened the door of the Torino, and Stephen slid in. Starsky realised Hutch was hesitating, not sure where he should sit.

"Get in the back, Hutch, don't be shy," grinned Starsky, looking over his shoulder. "Hello," he said warmly, crinkling his eyes. "I'm Dave Starsky."

"Behold, the half was not told me," said Stephen. "Nice to meet you."

"So, where we going?" said Starsky, wishing he'd read more books. People who talked in quotations made him nervous.

"Mexican," said Hutch firmly.
"Really?" said Starsky. "You hate Mexican!"

"It's not that bad," said Hutch. "I know you both love it...least I can do."

Not a bad start, thought Starsky. He's not so dumb, our Hutch.

Discussing food kept them going until they all had some beer inside them, and by then they were all beginning to relax. Hutch felt a bit nervous when Stephen asked Starsky what he liked to read, but Stephen never even missed a beat. He could talk as knowledgeably about Marvel comics as about Dante or Shakespeare, and he obviously took it just as seriously. Starsky was enchanted. They were deep in a discussion about the significance of green goblins when the food arrived.

Hutch was well out of the loop, and very pleased about it. If they could just forget about him, and get to know each other, everything would be all right. It was going well. The only trouble was with Hutch himself. He'd been so concerned about both of them, he hadn't thought about what it was going to do to him, seeing them side by side. His mind was wandering a bit, he felt, and his body was on fire, his emotions all over the place. He wanted to lie down in a dark room for a while, not sit with these two powder-kegs in a noisy restaurant eating spicy food.

Stephen invited them both back for coffee, as his home was the nearest, and they piled back into the car much more cheerfully than they had to start with. They were all just a little drunk, and feeling happy and friendly. Starsky pretended not to notice that Hutch had his arm round Stephen's waist. They'd only driven a few hundred yards when the police radio crackled into life.

"All cars, all cars," said the radio. "Officer down, Odeon cinema parking-lot."

"Zebra Three, we will respond," said Starsky. "Sorry about this, Stephen, slight detour."

"Hang on tight," said Hutch, as the Torino swept into an impossible swerve.

Stephen's eyes widened as he felt the powerful car respond and start screaming along. Hutch tipped himself over the seat into the front, and put the light on the roof.

Well! thought Stephen, I didn't bargain for this! But I know what 'officer down' means, you have to respond to that. He watched with deep interest. The mood in the car had altered completely, they were focused, professional, ready for action. They all took in the scene before them, two crashed cars, one a black-and-white with steam escaping from its crumpled hood. Over its steering-wheel a police officer was slumped, radio danglin' from his limp hand. Another officer was on the ground, and four men were standing over him. They were laughing as they put their boots to use. They weren't laughing for long. As one, Starsky and Hutch leaped from the car and almost soared through the air onto two backs. Stephen ran to the crashed car, and saw the massive head wound that was still bleeding heavily. He tore his shirt off and tied it tightly round the wound to stop the bleeding, then ran over to help the other officer, who was trying to stand. Stephen supported him, watching over his shoulder as Ken and his partner left two of the thugs reeling on the ground, and took off after the other two.

Look at the speed of them! he thought. My God, they can run! Then one of the thugs pulled a gun, fired it wildly behind him as he ran. He saw them dive for cover, glance at each other, and move. They had their guns out, though Stephen hadn't seen them do it. Hutch ran low, with Starsky covering him, wide to get around their quarry, then Starsky ran too. It was as if they could read each other's minds; moving closer and closer in, they closed them down, then Hutch had them.

"Freeze!" he shouted, and they dropped their guns, all the fight gone out of them. Their hands were wrestled behind their backs, and they were pushed back across the parking lot. Another police car arrived, and
tackled the first pair, who were only just getting to their feet.

They all waited for ambulances to arrive for the injured officers. By then there was plenty of help on the scene, so they slipped away.

******

Stephen was a bit quiet on the way home, thinking about what he'd seen, but he made an effort when they went inside, found a clean shirt, made them all some excellent coffee, and looked after both his guests very well. But he could see that Hutch was nearly asleep, and so could Starsky. Their eyes met, and they smiled.

It's gonna be OK, thought Starsky, because we both love him.

"C'mon, sleepy-head, let's get you home," said Starsky. He stood up, and stretched, and Hutch raised his head a little off Stephen's shoulder.

"Where's your bathroom, Stephen?" said Starsky. "Thanks. You got ten minutes," he warned. "Make the most of it."

They were still kissing when Starsky came back. He watched them for a moment. It was beautiful, in a way, he had to admit. Then they realised he was there, and tore themselves apart.

"Sleep," Starsky insisted. "You had a blow on the head today, remember, and charging round that parking-lot won't have done it any good."

"I'm coming," said Hutch, a little drunkenly. "Thank you both for a beautiful evening."

Stephen smiled and said all the right things, but inside, he was sad. He'd known how close they were, how much Ken loved his partner. But he hadn't realised until tonight how much his partner loved him. He knew it wasn't going to be all right at all. Not for him. But in a strange way that he didn't quite understand yet, he was beginning not to mind. He waved them off, and went inside.

Once they were on their own, Starsky decided he'd been good long enough. It was time to get back to his proper job, winding Hutch up.

"Something wrong with your jeans, Hutch? Bit tight, are they? They do shrink, I know."

"Shut up and get driving," said Hutch, trying to get comfortable. "You're too damned observant, you are."

Starsky gave him a wicked grin.

"So, what d'you think of him?" asked Hutch.

"You got better taste in men than you ever had in women."

"Nice," laughed Hutch. "God, I'm tired. I'll just check how Ingerson and his partner are."

Control informed him that they were both comfortable in hospital, and Hutch leaned back happily.

"Lucky we were so close," he said.

"Yeah, definitely. Bit hard on Stephen, though."

"How come? It didn't take long, and he was a lot of help."
"Having to watch us in action. Together. Think about it."

"Oh," said Hutch, thoughtfully.

"Hey, don't worry about it, he'll cope. I coped with seeing you kiss him, didn't I? It's no different."

"Starsky," said Hutch, "you're the wisest man I know."

"Get away! Just a fool, a clown, guilty but insane."

Starsky pulled up outside the little house by the canal.

"The wisdom's all underneath," smiled Hutch. "You coming in?"

"No, you gotta go to sleep. You don't seem quite with it, Hutch. But I'm expecting a goodnight kiss too, you know."

It was only meant to be a wind-up. Even years later, Starsky would still insist it was only ever meant to be a wind-up. But it didn't seem like that at the time, to Hutch. Starsky had such a beautiful smile as he said it, his lips were smiling and so were his eyes. Hutch wasn't worried, because he knew he was dreaming. He'd had this dream before.

"Of course," he said softly, and pulled Starsky towards him. Their lips met, their eyes closed, Hutch was floating in the joy of it, this was the dream. Starsky would stiffen...shocked, tense, afraid...yes, just like that...then he'd push with his lips, so soft, but then harder, responding, kissing him back, yes, that way...then their mouths opened, their tongues touched, their hands on each other's faces, drowning in love, until they had to stop for breath. Hutch smiled, and whispered,

"I love you, Starsk," then stumbled out of the car and into his house.

******

"What do you mean, you don't know where he is!" shouted Captain Dobey.

"I mean that he wasn't at the gym, so I went to his house. And he wasn't there. But neither was his car. So I thought for some reason he'd come straight here. But he hasn't. So the next thing was to ask you, did he come in early and you've sent him somewhere, did you know where he was?"

"Not seen him this morning at all. Has anyone? Ask in the office, I'll phone down to the gate."

"Nothing, Cap," said Starsky as he came back in.

"No, his car's not been seen. I'll get control..."

He punched in some numbers.

"Dobey here. Has Hutchinson responded to any calls so far this morning? No? Thank you. Try to get him on the radio, please, and patch me through at once if he responds."

"This isn't like Hutch," worried Starsky. Unless he'd done a runner, afraid of what had happened last night. That was what Starsky was really afraid of, and how the hell could he tell Dobey about that?

"Exactly. So there'll be some reasonable explanation. Take a drive, his car may have broken down, he may have stopped some place - go look for him."
"On my way, Cap."

Starsky had brightened at the mention of a breakdown - nothing more likely with that old wreck, why hadn't he thought of that? - and cheerfully covered Hutch's routes. But there was no sign of him, he wasn't at Merle's, he wasn't at Huggy's. Thoughtfully, he went back to Stephen's. Nothing. He checked the hospital. Finally, he went to Stephen's book store. Stephen noticed him at once, and came over.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"I can't find Hutch anywhere," he said quietly. "You seen him?"

"Not since you two left last night. Where've you looked?"

"Everywhere. This isn't like him, not to get in touch."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Stay near a phone. And tell me if he calls - look, here's the number - he doesn't have to speak to me, just let me know he's safe."

Stephen looked up sharply at the implication that Hutch might not want to talk to Starsky, but he didn't pursue it.

"Understood. And you let me know, too, if you hear anything."

"Sure."

Their eyes met, in mutual worry. Starsky turned and left.

******

"You gotta put out an APB," Starsky told Captain Dobey.

"That's a bit drastic. Why? Why are you so worried? Just you level with me, Starsky. Hutch has some problem I don't know about, doesn't he? What is it? A girl?"

"No...I'm sure it's not that."

"Then what? Has he been drinking too much? Is it money? Has some case stressed him too much?"

"No, no, it's none of those things," said Starsky helplessly. "It's...I think he was confused. He was acting a bit confused last night. As if he didn't know what he was doing."

"Wait a minute... you two helped when those officers were attacked last night, didn't you? Did that upset him?"

"No, he was pleased we were on the scene. Except when one of the thugs banged his head against the wall. Right on top of his stitches."

"Stitches? What stitches?"

"They were from the afternoon. Someone hit him on the head with a chair leg."

Captain Dobey's mouth became a tight line.
"And did he seem unusually sleepy last night?"

"Yeah...now you mention it, he did. That's why I wanted to get him home, he was stumbling a bit when he got out of the car."

"Starsky, you need your brains examining! Your partner receives two head injuries in one day, seems confused, is tired, and stumbles! And the words 'delayed concussion' do not enter that space between your ears!"

Starsky closed his eyes. Oh, God, how had he missed that one?

"Double check with every hospital - twenty mile radius. And if no-one's got him, we'll need to speak to a doctor. Find out exactly what he's likely to be doing."

******

"Normally, a person with concussion will remain where he is," the doctor explained fussily. "But rational thought is suspended, and when that occurs, any great stress the subconscious mind is feeling will emerge, causing the person to act without knowing what he is doing. People have found their way to their desks, or home to their families, without being aware of how they got there. Depends how strong the fixation is. Once a man even managed to find his way to a lake a long way from his home, because his subconscious mind firmly wanted to be there to take place in an angling contest!"

Dobey got Starsky outside before he hit the doctor.

"You're going to have to tell me," he said. "What's on Hutch's mind so much that it's taken him from home with concussion?"

"Like I said, confusion," said Starsky simply. "He's trying to escape from a situation that's doing his head in. He'll have headed out, out of the city, that's for sure."

"I'll put out the APB, and alert the local sheriffs to look out for his car. But I think you'd better go home. If he comes to his senses, he's more likely to suddenly turn up than to phone. So go and wait for him."

"Yes, Captain," said Starsky.

He didn't think it would do much good. He had a nasty feeling he was one of the things Hutch was trying to escape from. But he phoned Stephen, then returned to his house to wait.

After all, he might come here, thought Starsky. If it wears off...he might want to talk. He might not even remember. But hours passed, and nothing happened. No cars had seen him. Frustrated, Starsky decided to go round and check Hutch's house again. His heart gave a great lurch when he saw there was a light on, and he charged inside, and the disappointment on his face was mirrored on that of the man who turned so eagerly at the sound of the door opening. It was Stephen.

"Oh," they both said at once.

Starsky slumped onto the sofa.

"Damn. I thought..."

"I know. So did I."

"Come on, this is crazy! Where the hell can he be?"
"You tell me. You're the detective. Wandering about under some fixation? What fixation? He was happier than he's been for weeks!"

"Not so sure about that," Starsky mumbled.

"Yeah? Why's that? You have a row last night, or something?"

Starsky didn't answer. He wanted to say, mind your own business, but it was Stephen's business, he couldn't deny that. But he didn't want to tell him, either.

"Something happened, didn't it? What? Did it get too much for you, pretending you didn't mind?"

"I wasn't pretending!" Starsky shouted.

He jumped to his feet, strode across to the window.

"I didn't mind! I was only winding him up!"

"Oh, terrific. What did you do?" said Stephen, in a resigned voice. "Why do people always think joking makes it OK?"

"Cut that out, you don't understand. I tease Hutch about everything, everything, d'you hear me? NOT to make jokes would really have hurt him, can't you see that? It would have been letting it make a difference, you dummy."

"OK," said Stephen slowly. "OK, I buy that. In your case, I'll make an exception. But last night, when he had concussion...and maybe his sense of humour wasn't working properly? Did you upset him?"

"He didn't seem upset. He seemed happy at the time...but I can see that it maybe could have seemed a little confusing later, if you had concussion..."

"WHAT?" demanded Stephen.

"I was only joking! But, well, I said I wanted a goodnight kiss too. And he must have been feeling confused, 'cause he gave me one."

Stephen looked as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"You idiot."

"What d'ya mean, idiot? Just an affectionate wind-up, he was supposed to say, go to hell, and laugh, or something."

"Dear God," said Stephen, covering his face. "How bloody cruel is that? I thought you were supposed to know him, to understand him? I don't get you, I don't get you at all."

Starsky just stared at him.

"Are you saying you don't know?" said Stephen incredulously. "It's obvious how much you love him, and you don't know how much he loves you?"

"Hey, 'course I know Hutch loves me, what's that got to do with it?"

"I'm beginning to see why. You are quite sweet, in an innocent sort of way. And combine that with stunning
good looks and awesome fighting power, and that's quite a heady mixture. You're the dummy, Starsky. Pin your ears back, and listen good. He doesn't just love you, he's in love with you. He fancies you, it was realising how he felt about you that made him realise he wasn't ever really hetero in the first place."

"What?"

"Of course, he wouldn't tell you, because he was convinced you were straight. So he suffered in silence, and tried to keep going out with girls, but it wasn't working. He couldn't tell you, and it was killing him, watching you going out with loads of women. Then he met me, and when I heard about all this, I tried to convince him that second-best was better than nothing. And he liked me, I knew that. I could have made him happy. But even then he was thinking of you, whether you could handle it. And when you said you could, he was so happy. So...at peace. And we both tried hard, last night, you and I, to make it work, for his sake. So will you just tell me why the hell you had to go and ruin EVERYTHING by saying such a stupid, crass, thoughtless, cruel thing!"

"Oh, shit," said Starsky. "Stephen, you've gotta believe me, no way would I ever have said that if I'd known!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't believe you didn't know. There's no excuse for you not knowing! He's utterly transparent! Haven't you seen the way he looks at you!"

Starsky just stared at him, he couldn't believe he was having this conversation.

"You must really hate me," he whispered. "I don't blame you."

"Funnily enough, I don't," said Stephen. "I think you've both done me a big favour. When we find Hutch I'm going to bang your silly heads together, tough as you are."

"Don't get hasty," said Starsky. "Don't walk out on him, please. Not because of me. I've learned a lot I should maybe have known already, but I'm a fast learner. I won't get in your way, I won't tease him, or anything. You know I love him, you said so yourself. Give me credit for wanting him to be happy."

"I know you do," said Stephen more kindly. "So you make him happy."

"I can't...like you can. If he's gay..."

"Let's get one thing straight. He's not gay. Oh, yes, that's what the ordinary world would call it. That's the label he'll have to carry. Like we all do. But technically, he's bi. Bisexual."

He looked Starsky firmly in the eyes.

"And so are you."

Starsky's eyes opened as wide as they'd go.

"No, I'm Jewish," said Starsky.

Stephen burst out laughing.

"Quit hedging, and admit it. You fancy Hutch, don't you?"

"I don't, it's not true! Yeah, OK, I can see he's beautiful, I can appreciate that - so are you - doesn't mean anything."
"So how come you're not married?"

"Oh, it's the job..."

"Lots of married policemen, I think. What's the longest a girl's ever stayed around?"

"Couple of months, I think. But that's what you'd expect, girls who want a bit of fun don't hang around, they get bored."

"So you're only interested in the ones who want a bit of fun? Not the nice girls who want a partner for life, a father for their children?"

"I'm only twenty-eight!"

"I didn't realise you and Hutch were exactly the same age. It's not as young as all that. Lots of people are looking, if not to settle down, then at least to have a settled partner, by that age. I am, and I'm only twenty-four. Everything you're saying is only convincing me more and more that I'm right."

"You're not right. What you're doing is putting a very strange interpretation on what is perfectly normal behaviour."

"Normal behaviour? Right. Normal behaviour when a close friend tells you he's gay is to be shocked, appalled and get the hell out of there. But you didn't do that. So maybe you're the one-in-a-million 100% hetero male who genuinely doesn't mind. Unlikely. Or maybe you're gay. But it can't be that, because you like women - up to a point. So that only leaves one thing - like I said, you're bi."

"No, Stephen, you've got it wrong. I would've been shocked, all that stuff you said, if it was anyone but Hutch. It's different because it's him, can't you see that? He means so much to me, it took my reactions out of their normal...what's the word when things go in a round and round path thing?"

"Huh?" said Stephen, completely thrown by this. He wasn't used to Starsky's ways of thinking yet.

"You know, like the moon," said Starsky helpfully.

"Oh...orbit?"


"Hmm," said Stephen. "It's quite convincing. And I can see you really believe it yourself. But it's Hutch's happiness I'm thinking about - and yours, too. If we don't help each other, no-one else will, that's for sure."

"You've lost me now."

"I'm trying to help you. Both of you. Hutch knows how he feels. I did tell him he ought to tell you, that he might be surprised at your reaction, but he wouldn't hear of it. He was convinced you were 100% straight. But after last night, d'you think he'll still feel sure of that?"

Starsky didn't answer. The planets weren't just out of orbit, they were whizzing about the universe as if they were on speed.

"Asking for a kiss could easily be a wind-up. He'd know that. But he had concussion, so he gave you one. Gave you what he's been dreaming of for so long. And what did you do, Starsky? Did you say, stop it, I was joking? Did you push him off you? I know you didn't. You kissed him back, didn't you?"
The universe in Starsky's head quivered to a halt.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Good. You followed your heart. Good for you. Be honest with yourself. It's no use hiding it, believe me. I've seen more misery come from that, than from anything else."

"Stephen," said Starsky quietly, "I'll tell him I'm very sorry, and that I didn't mean it..."

"He won't believe you. He loves you too much, knows you too well. He'll wait...till you're ready. Don't forget, he's been through all this. He knows how hard it is to accept that you're different, that you'll never have what you thought you wanted."

Starsky collapsed on the sofa. All the fight was going out of him. He could hardly think, let alone speak. Hundreds of tiny things were chiming together in his mind, forcing him to consider what they meant, but he rallied for one last try.

"When I saw ...you and Hutch...in the park. I was shocked and angry and all that. My heart was banging in my chest like a drum, I wanted to run out and shout at you!"

"Oh, Starsky, you weren't shocked. You were jealous. You didn't want Hutch in someone else's arms. I knew you were pretending all along. I thought at first you were pretending not to mind, for his sake. But now I know you were pretending not to be jealous."

"No I wasn't, I wanted Hutch to be happy! I wasn't sure of you, I didn't know if you'd take care of him..."

Starsky stopped, realising perhaps that whatever he said was only going to strengthen Stephen's argument.

"I don't want to push you," said Stephen gently. "It's hard on you, when these ideas are so new to you. But it might be kinder in the long run...OK, Starsky, so you're not jealous? So let me tell you what we did the other night, Hutch and I. Let me tell you what his body feels like, how he responds. What he likes. What he let me do to him..."

"SHUT UP!" shouted Starsky, and pinned him against the wall. "Don't you dare speak to me like that! Don't you ever, ever lay a finger on Hutch again, do you hear me? He's mine, mine, I love him and he loves me, and that's all there is to it, that's all that matters, in this world or the next, and why the hell am I crying?"

"QED," said Stephen, calmly. "I'm sorry I had to push you that far, but it worked, didn't it? Come on, finish the good work and tell the truth. You were jealous, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Starsky, and laid his head on Stephen's shoulder, unable to stop himself crying, overwhelmed by all these strange feelings.

Stephen held him tight, comforting him, helping him. He wasn't unhappy. He understood his own feelings, and knew what he was doing. They stood there quietly, holding on to each other, and neither of them heard Hutch come in. He stood still for a moment, amazed, then chuckled to himself.

"Well, I suppose that'd be one solution," he said.

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Starsky lifted his head at once at the sound of Hutch's voice, and Hutch saw his face all wet with tears.

"Hey," he said gently, "what's up?"
"Where you been, Hutch? We was worried sick!"

"Just a minute," said Stephen. "Does anyone else know you're home?"

"No, I just drove in...why?"

"Dobey's got an APB on you," said Starsky. "You gotta phone him at home if you come back, and I'm supposed to take you right to a hospital."

"Oh," said Hutch. "Damn. Still, I suppose it's nice to be missed. Hang on, I'll give him a call."

Hutch reached for the phone and dialled.

"Hello, Captain, yes, it's me...sorry to worry everyone. Yeah, it must have been concussion, I can see that now...no, honestly, I don't need a hospital, I really am OK."

He was silent for a few moments, listening, and Starsky knew Captain Dobey was telling him to get his ass round to that hospital, now! Like he always did. And he knew Hutch wouldn't.

Hutch managed to get a word in edgeways.

"Yeah, I must have driven out to the forest without even knowing where I was going. I certainly remember trying to work out what I was doing there, but it was too difficult. I remember lying down on the grass, and I must have fallen asleep, and slept for hours, because when I woke up, it was dark. But my head felt clear, and I realised what had been wrong, so I headed back."

Hutch pulled a face at Starsky as he listened again.

"OK, Cap, I promise I'll go to hospital if I feel dizzy. But I'm sure I'll be in work tomorrow. Yeah, thanks. See you."

He put the phone down gently, and rubbed his face.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You've been worried. My fault...running away from things. Asking too much of everyone."

"Rubbish," said Starsky. "Get in the shower, Hutch, while we fix some food. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"Food," said Hutch. "That sounds like a very good idea."

"Pizza and beer, fifteen minutes," Starsky promised. "I'll be back before you know it."

"I'll come with you," said Stephen, and they disappeared before Hutch could speak. What the hell was going on there, Hutch wondered, as he stepped thankfully under the hot water. They'd struck up some alliance, he could tell, and that couldn't be a bad thing. He had a shave, found fresh clothes, and was ready to let them in by the time they got back. He was feeling fit and refreshed now, and very curious.

They piled round the table, too hungry and thirsty at first to talk much, but in a while they slowed down a bit. Hutch had been watching both of them. Stephen looked calm, but detached, somehow. Starsky looked a bit shell-shocked.

"So what gives?" he asked. "What's up, Starsk? Even you must have figured by now I only had concussion and I'd turn up when my brain unscrambled itself. It's not like you to lose it over something like that."
"'Course I knew you had concussion," said Starsky. "Least, after Dobey spelled it out to me in words of one syllable. If you think I wasn't worried though, you're wrong - I know you're not safe out there without me."

"Yeah, right," smiled Hutch, knowing there was more to come.

"You think your brains were scrambled, you should see mine. Stephen bullied me to death and turned my head inside out. You think you're good with a gun? This guy could mangle an army just by talking."

Stephen started laughing then, and Hutch was even more puzzled. He just couldn't see how any sort of deep conversation between these two could end in laughter. Unless they'd both had enough of him. Maybe that was it. But Starsky was talking again, saying words that turned his thoughts to trembling joy.

"I think you're pretty hopeless, Hutchinson, actually. All this time you've known me, and you never told me that I was gay too... sorry, use the right words, bisexual. But this guy had me sussed in a day. And...he kinda let slip that it wouldn't exactly be bad news to you."

Hutch stared at them both, looking from one to the other, trying to take it in. He swallowed, and swallowed again, then got out,

"So I wasn't dreaming? Last night, in the car...that really happened?"

"Felt pretty real to me," said Starsky.

"Pair of dummies," said Stephen affectionately. "Listen now, I want to tell you a story. Bear with me, and try to understand. When I first came here from 'Bama, it was enough just to be free. Didn't expect more. So when a guy asked me out, I was pretty excited. Didn't matter that he was old and not too good-looking. It was more than I'd hoped for. But he was boring, you know. And after a while, I realised it didn't have to be like that. I didn't have to take the first offer. So I said goodbye, nicely, and moved on. Next I was with someone my own age, and that was even better. It was fun, it was exciting, and I thought there was no more to ask. But he ditched me, and that hurt. He didn't love me, and I realised there was even more to ask for. I could look for someone to love. That's when I met you, Hutch."

Hutch looked up, surprised. Stephen had never called him Hutch before. Only Ken. It meant something...but he wasn't sure what. He listened carefully.

"I thought I had everything," Stephen continued. "I was so happy, I thought I was in love, everything was wonderful. But then I saw what love really was. I saw you two in action. I saw a perfect partnership, real love hand in hand with complete understanding. I'm sorry, Hutch, but second-best isn't good enough any more. I want more. I want to love someone that much, and I want him to love me that much. And I'm going to go out there and find him."

"That's what you meant?" said Starsky. "When you said we'd done you a favour?"

"That's what I meant. You showed me how much more there was to look for. And when I find it, it'll be as good as what you've got. It'll be different...not mind-reading firing angles! But just as good. Maybe...someone who knows what it feels like to create something, who knows the burning desire that won't let you sleep till you've made this thing in your head come alive."

"You're far too good for second-best," said Hutch. "I never wanted you to accept that. You'll find him. He's out there, somewhere, and when you find him, we want to meet him."

"I'm going now," said Stephen. "You two have a lot to talk about. But come round for dinner, both of you, in a week or so. I want to know how it's going."
"Thank you, Stephen," said Hutch. "Thank you for everything."

They stood up, and Hutch took Stephen in his arms for the last time, and kissed him long and tenderly on his mouth.

They smiled at each other, then Stephen smiled at Starsky too, and Starsky wrapped his arms round him.

"If we've helped you, that ain't nothin' compared to how you've helped us. You been a real friend, and I don't ever let go of friends, d'you hear me?"

"Thanks," grinned Stephen, hugging him back. "I'll see you both soon."

He stepped back and looked at them, standing side by side.

"Perfection. Meant to be," he smiled. "You don't need telling to take care of each other. You already know more about that than most people learn in a lifetime."

He slipped out, and left them alone.

For a moment, they were utterly still. Then Starsky said,

"That is one special guy."

"Mmm," said Hutch. "Sure is. But..."

He turned, and laid his hands lightly on Starsky's shoulders.

"...you? Tell me," he said.

Starsky's face was solemn, and his dark blue eyes were fixed on Hutch.

"I love you," he said. "I'm only now realising just how much."

Hutch's smile came from the depths of his heart, it shone out like the sun at dawn, making him glow like a golden sky, until Starsky shivered at the sight of so much beauty.

"Starsh," he said huskily. "I love you too. You know that. But I've been in love with you for so long, I can't believe I'm allowed to say so, that I don't have to hide it any more."

"Come and sit down," said Starsky, "before my knees give way under me. But I told you many a time, you dummy," he added, as they collapsed onto the sofa in each other's arms, "I told you there was nothing we two couldn't sort out somehow. You gotta promise me, Hutch, that you won't ever go keeping secrets like that from me ever again."

"Promise," said Hutch. "And I'll promise you something else. I can guess how weird you're feeling right now. I'm not going to rush you, ever. I'm still me."

"Yeah," Starsky admitted. "I do feel kinda confused. I'm going to go home soon, Hutch, before we get carried away. Not because of me, but because of your head. You've got to have rest, and peace, not all this excitement."

"OK, Starsh. Whatever you say, goes."

"Can I have that in writing? It might come in useful next time I have a bright idea you don't think is too
Hutch started laughing, and Starsky squirmed round to face him, lying across his body.

"Oh, Hutch, that's real nice. You haven't laughed like that in a long while. I've missed it."

He reached up, hesitantly, to touch his face.

"So you're not sure if last night was real or not? I think we need to refresh your memory."

"Oh, Starsk," sighed Hutch, and bent his head to meet the lips that were waiting for his kiss.

But it wasn't like last night, it wasn't like the dream. It was a million times better. There was no resistance or shock, only a mutual blinding passion that shook them both to the very core of their souls, as they locked together with hard-pressing lips and tongues that pushed and licked, giving everything, demanding everything. When they finally stopped to breathe, they were both panting and rock-hard. They could feel each other's rampant erections through their jeans, and knew they had to stop, right now, or they'd go all the way, and they both had their own reasons for holding back from that tonight.

"You have got to rest," said Starsky.

"And you, my love, have got to have time to think," said Hutch breathlessly. "You got to take it slowly. Get used to the idea. Get used to being kissed by a man. Get used to being touched, and stroked, and fondled. But when you are...my God, when you are..."

"...I'm in for it?"

"You said it, buddy. You scared?"

"What, of you? 'Course not. I'm absolutely petrified. But," he added, "I was kinda hoping you'd say that."

He gave Hutch a wicked grin as he slid off the couch.

"Don't get up," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

Then he cupped his hand round the bulge in the front of Hutch's jeans, and squeezed him gently.

"And that," he whispered, "is a taste of things to come."

He left quietly, leaving Hutch lying there wondering if it was possible to die of happiness.

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"You don't look too bad," Captain Dobey admitted grudgingly. "But Starsky here was saying you had something on your mind. You want to talk, son, I'm always here, you know that."

"Thank you, sir," said Hutch quietly. "I appreciate that. But the situation's resolved itself, and I've never felt better. I really am fit for duty."

"OK. But you take it easy today, I need a pair on a stake-out, and it might as well be you. We had a tip-off someone was going to hit the big jewellery store on Main, and Robbery are up to their ears and begging for men. So you two can go and have a nice quiet day."

"Oh no, Cap, not a stake-out," said Starsky.
"Quit moaning, Starsky, that's an order. Your partner needs a rest."

"Needs a rest!" Starsky complained, as they headed out to the car. "Very restful, that, stuck in the car all day, with nothing to do but talk. And look."

"Might not be such a bad thing," said Hutch. "We can talk without getting carried away, because we can hardly get carried away in the car."

"Don't you believe it," said Starsky. "This car's seen some action."

"I'm sure it has," Hutch laughed. "But what you can get away with on the beach, after dark, with a girl, and what you can get away with on Main Street in broad daylight with your partner, are two different things."

"Yeah, I don't really want Vice to come and arrest us," said Starsky, swinging the car out into the traffic. "You want to pick up some breakfast on the way?"

"Sounds good. What d'you want? Coffee, bagels, doughnuts?"

"All of the above. Plus chocolate, for later."

"You shall have it," Hutch promised, sliding out as Starsky swerved in to the kerb near a decent take-away.

Starsky was a bit surprised. Hutch didn't usually let him eat whatever he wanted, at least not without some criticism. But the goofy look on his face when he got back in the car gave the game away.

Oh, I get it, thought Starsky. I know that feeling. When you're just feeling so soft about someone, you'd do anything for them, anything. He smiled, happily.

"Have you any idea how good that makes me feel?" he demanded.

"What, the food?"

"No...seeing that soppy look on your face, and knowing it's for me."

"Hell, Starsk, that's terrific...but you're worrying me."

"How come?" asked Starsky, sneaking the Torino skilfully into a parking space with a good view of the jewellery store.

"That's why...we've got a job to do. I'm floating so high I'm not sure I can switch back fast enough."

"I know what you mean. But I think it'll be OK, once the action starts...sort of automatic. The danger might be messing the timing up 'cause we didn't notice something quickly enough."

"Right. We've got to keep looking out. But I can't see anything happening this early, can you?"

"No, they're lazy sods, criminals. Can't get up in the morning. That's why they're criminals, I suppose. Too lazy to do an honest day's work."

Once again, Hutch found himself impressed by his friend's wisdom. What a knack the man had for pinning down simple truths.

"Now you and me," Starsky continued through a mouthful of bagel, "always get up for work, no matter how rough we feel. 'S'like a point of honour. That's why I knew something was up, yesterday. You'd never just
not turn up."

"It was spooky, that. Hate concussion. It's weird to think you can do something like drive ten miles without knowing you're doing it."

"How the brain works is a very mysterious thing. Especially yours."

Hutch choked on his coffee.

"Listen who's talking! How weird is your brain, to be able to hide something this big from yourself!"

"Maybe that's why...just because it is so big. Oh, I didn't sleep a wink last night, Hutch. Just kept thinking of all the things I should have noticed about you, about myself. Felt such a dummy. D'you know, the other night, when I was with Charlotte and you were with Stephen, I couldn't do a thing. She got fed up with it, and walked out on me. And I didn't care, all I could see was you...and still I didn't get it."

"I would never have done that if I'd known how you really felt," said Hutch guiltily.

"Ah, no, don't say that. I'm glad you did, honest. For one thing, you owed the guy that much."

Starsky's eyes twinkled at him, beguilingly, and Hutch swallowed, hard.

"And for another thing?" he asked, knowing there was more to come.

"Well, you know what to do now, don't you? You can teach me."

Hutch looked alarmed.

"It's all a bit of a blur, to be honest," he said. "I'll do my best, but...well, we'll have to learn together."

Starsky smiled, liking the sound of that, and slipped back happily in his seat, with his hands behind his head.

"That's how it's always been," he said approvingly. "Right since the Academy. And why shouldn't we be as brilliant at this as we are at everything else?"

"There is that," Hutch agreed. "We've come a long way."

"I liked you the first day we met," said Starsky. "Just knew we'd fit, somehow. Just knew you felt the same."

"Too right. Then in uniform, when we weren't always together on duty, but we always were, off duty. And then we made detective, and partners...two years, now...oh, it's been good."

"And something tells me it's about to get even better," Starsky grinned. "So lemme ask you something, Hutch...when did you first realise, you know, that you had the hots for me?"

That made Hutch laugh. Starsky could always find outrageous ways to phrase things.

"I knew I loved you the first time you got injured," Hutch admitted. "Knew then just how much you mattered to me. More than anyone else ever has, or ever will. I was frantic about you, and it was only a graze from a bullet, I bet you don't even remember it."

"Don't think so," said Starsky. "But I remember feeling like that, too. When you got hurt."

They smiled at each other, thinking of how quickly their teamwork and partnership had turned to real love and caring.
"That was love," said Hutch. "I knew it, and it didn't worry me. It seemed so natural, so right. But the rest of it...that just hit me over the head one night, like being slugged with a baseball bat. It was nearly a year ago, now...we'd gone out to some bar with a couple of girls, can't even remember their names. It was you I was looking at. You were wearing this blue top, and it made your eyes look so blue. And it was clinging to your chest so tight, and your jeans, God, like they'd been moulded on you, and your beautiful hair, all shining in the light. I just wished like hell that no-one else was there, so I could just look at you all night. I didn't want to take my eyes off you. It was a bit of a shock, I can tell you, I mean. I'd never got hard looking at a man before, but that's how it was. And that was how it stayed. I couldn't imagine it away. I tried to, because I felt I was betraying you, somehow. That I shouldn't be feeling like this about my partner, it wasn't right. But no way would it go. So it seemed at the time that the best thing was to put up and shut up. Grin and bear it."

Starsky shook his head in amazement.

"I never guessed. You hid it pretty well. But what d'ya mean, Hutch, my hair? My hair! It's like a bird's nest! When yours is like gold, spun gold, it's beautiful."

"It's a nice enough colour...but it's so thin. Yours is all thick and curly, it drives me insane, I just want to bury my hands in it, and by the way, you've got beautiful legs too, and that reminds me, what the hell was all that shit about me not wanting someone dark and skinny? Was that ridiculous description meant to be you, by any chance?"

"Er, well, I suppose so. Didn't reckon much to my looks, compared to you and Stephen."

"Crazy. I always said you were crazy. Starsk, you're beautiful. Every inch of you is beautiful beyond compare, and if we don't stop talking like this, I am going to explode."

"I know what you mean. I ain't too comfortable myself, it really turns me on, hearing you talk like that."

That finished Hutch. He had to close his eyes, and try to remember to breathe.

"What time is it?" he panted.

"Nine-thirty."

"It's going to be a hell of a long day."

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"One thing's for sure," said Hutch, as Starsky parked the Torino outside a big drugstore that neither of them usually frequented. "You can forget spontaneous. It doesn't work like that anymore. No just tearing off your clothes and getting on with it. You have to prepare. Take a shower, for instance. Get everything you need."

"Doesn't that spoil the fun?"

"It's a different sort of fun. No will-she, won't-she. You know exactly what you're going to do, and that's very exciting."

Starsky took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

"I'm beginning to see what you mean. But right now, one of us has to go in there and buy some oil, or cream, or something?"

"Yep."
"I can't, I'd die. They'll know! Look, you know those remarks I made about being as brave as you, they weren't true. You are much, much, braver than I am."

"Hmm. I suppose it wouldn't be so bad if you bought a couple of other things too. Is there anything we need?"

"Sticking plasters are always useful, we never have any when we want them."

"Good thinking. Right, I'm going. But don't watch, OK? Just stare out the window or something."

"You got it, Hutch."

When Hutch got back in the car, he was laughing. Starsky pulled out into the traffic before he turned his head and asked,

"So? How did it go?"

"It was easy, I don't know what I was worried about. Everything's on display, you don't have to ask, and you just take a basket, like in a supermarket. I just tossed in a few promising-looking things, added some plasters and a bottle of vitamins for cover, and there you go."

"A few things?"

"Yeah, well, I wasn't going to stand around reading the labels. We've got a bit of choice, we can...experiment."

"Good," said Starsky approvingly. "The sooner the better."

"Are you sure?"

"Stop asking me if I'm sure, Hutch! You been making me be patient for over a week now, and I ain't too good at patient. You keep me waiting any longer, and I'll be asking you if you're sure!"

"OK, OK! I get the point. Go to your place, then, Star, we got everything we need to cook dinner, we can do that just as easily there. I just want you to feel in control of what's happening."

"Fine, but it doesn't worry me. Not that I didn't like all the nice things we been doing - I did. I liked them so much, that I know I'm ready, I want this as much as you do."

Hutch made a strangled sort of noise, deep in his throat. He closed his eyes, and sank back into the seat. His hand reached out to touch Starsky's thigh, and squeeze it.

"Was it something I said?" Starsky teased. Without taking his eyes off the road, he reached across and fondled Hutch's bulging groin.

"Ah, Hutch, you're desperate," he said sympathetically. "I keep forgetting how long you been waiting for this. Which is my fault, for being so dim. We're gonna do something about this as soon as we get in, before we even make the dinner."

He sneaked a look across the car, and grinned.

"You sure look beautiful, Hutch, when you're desperate. You got this smouldering look in your eyes, and your mouth looks so soft. Nearly at my place now. You sure about that? 'Cause you're not going home afterwards, I want you all night. Will the jungle be OK?"
"They'll survive," Hutch got out. "I'm not sure I will.

"Oh," groaned Starsky, "I love it when you can barely speak. I wish I could get my jeans off, they feel so tight I can hardly breathe."

"I wish I could get your jeans off, too," said Hutch. "I don't know how you get the damn things on, I think they're moulded to you."

"Yeah, well, we're going to get yours off first, so I can do something about this."

He squeezed him, and Hutch just moaned softly. He was dying, and he didn't care. This was wonderful.

They were both giggling uncontrollably as they went up the steps to Starsky's door, trying to walk normally, trying not to drop their shopping. They dropped the things on the worktop, along with their jackets and guns, and fell into each other's arms, covering each other's faces in kisses, while their bodies were grinding together, full of the pent-up passion of a day at work. Hutch was being pressed against the worktop, and as Starsky pushed into him, he cried out, almost in pain.

"You've suffered enough," said Starsky softly. "I'm going to do you right here. Stand still while I get your jeans off."

He eased the zip down so slowly and carefully, not wanting to hurt him, and slipped his hands inside Hutch's shorts. Gently, he worked everything down past his thighs, then sat on the floor. He pulled off the shoes and socks, then tugged everything else down to follow them. Then he looked up. Hutch was holding on to the worktop's edge, and his head was a little back. All he had on now was his t-shirt, and he looked utterly desirable and beautiful, and Starsky told him so.

"What I'd like to do," he whispered, "is kneel up, and put my hands over yours, and slip my mouth around your beautiful cock, and suck it, and lick it. Does that sound nice, Hutch?"

Hutch's reply was just an incoherent noise.

"I'll take that as a yes. But you're allowed to move, Hutch, you can jerk about as much as you want, my mouth's big enough. It's not going anywhere until you've come right down my throat."

"Oh, Starsk, oh..." moaned Hutch, as he felt the moist lips touch the tip of his cock, squeezing it with a kiss, then the hot wet tongue licking him. Then his lover's mouth engulfed him, and Hutch was lost in a crescendo of sensation. Starsky's hands were holding his firmly down, as if to say, relax and enjoy it, this is for you. His mouth was moving with a perfect rhythm, and he was making lovely noises deep in his throat, letting Hutch know how much he liked the taste of him. It was too much, it was overwhelming, and Hutch surrendered to the inevitable, and let himself move, jerking forcefully into Starsky's mouth, and crying out loud with blissful release as he poured himself down his throat.

"Oh, Starsk... oh my love," Hutch got out. "You OK down there? Let me help you up."

He heaved Starsky to his feet, and pulled him into his arms again, and Starsky allowed himself to be held against that firm, broad chest, feeling Hutch's arms around him. Of all the new feelings, this was the strangest, the feeling of being held by someone who was bigger than he was. But he liked it.

"You feeling better now, Hutch?" he teased.

"More than a little. How are you feeling? You can have anything you want, you know. You're in charge."

"I'm saving up for later," Starsky said sincerely. "All I need right now is a beer. And I can have that while I
get the food going. Why don't you go and shower now, Hutch, seeing you're half undressed already?"

"OK," Hutch grinned. "Pass me a beer too, will you? I'll take it in with me."

Starsky turned with a smile when Hutch came back in, but the smile died on his lips. He set down a pan with trembling hands, and just stared in wonder, his face very serious. Hutch was so beautiful, fresh from his shower, his hair was just dry and slightly tousled, soft wisps curling forward. He'd put some shorts on, a pair of Starsky's that were a bit too tight for him. They were white, and so was the shirt that hung open over his chest. The tiny golden hairs on his legs and chest curled like soft down.

"I'm not hungry," said Starsky. "Don't want food. I just want to stroke you. I have never seen anything in my whole life I wanted to touch more, than you right now. You look so beautiful in white. You put those things on just to look nice for me, didn't you?"

"Yep," said Hutch, kissing the tip of his nose. "But we're not going to waste your cooking. Why can't you touch and eat at the same time? Is it done? Dish up then - we can sit real close, no-one's watching."

"Maybe you're right...yeah, no-one's watching, I like that. We can do anything we want. Anything. We make the rules."

"Lovely, isn't it? Here, give me the pasta to drain. You dish up your sauce, it smells great."

They sat at the breakfast bar side by side, with their legs in very close contact, and Starsky found it was very nice to be able to stroke Hutch's leg whenever he wanted to. He even managed to enjoy his food, Hutch was calmer now and as always, some of the calmness passed over to him, soaking into him, just as he could calm Hutch when it was his turn to lose his cool.

"Mmmm," Starsky purred, in great contentment, pushing his plate away. "You want some ice-cream?"

"No thanks," smiled Hutch, and put his elbows on the counter, cupping his chin in his hands. "Like to watch you eating some, though."

"Weird...but interesting," said Starsky. He wriggled off his stool and went to the freezer, and came back with a bowl of vanilla and a spoon. He didn't look at Hutch at first, just enjoyed his ice-cream, but after a few mouthfuls, he stole a glance. Hutch was sitting there with such a soft smile on his face, it made Starsky's heart turn over. He carried on, more slowly, but he couldn't look away, now. Hutch's gaze had him trapped, and after a few mouthfuls more, he just stopped.

"I'm putting you off," said Hutch softly. "Sorry about that."

He took the spoon from Starsky's hand and lovingly scooped up the next spoonful, and held it out. Starsky opened his mouth, and Hutch slid the spoon inside, so slowly and lovingly. He did it again and again, until the bowl was clean. Then just as gently, he wiped Starsky's lips with his own finger, and kissed him.

"Wow," said Starsky, huskily. "Oh, Hutch. You are really something special."

"Look what I've got to inspire me," said Hutch, meaningfully. "Come on, let's do the dishes while the coffee brews."

"Doing the dishes isn't very romantic," Starsky complained.

"Don't you believe it. Doing it together will be a whole new experience."

And so it was. It was very nice standing at the sink when your partner was standing right behind you, with
his arms around your waist, squashing against you so he could reach into the suds too. Very nice when he decorated your face with bubbles then kissed them off. Very nice to be doing the drying when you got a kiss for every dry pot you handed over to be put away.

Starsky was so happy he was nearly in tears. Hutch noticed, of course. When they sat down on the couch with their coffee, he didn't put the TV on, he just curled up at the opposite end, and looked at Starsky.

"Is it too much?" he asked. "Too much, too soon?"

"No. No, it's not that. It's just so beautiful...so romantic. Just messing about together. I've never felt so relaxed."

Hutch smiled. "We can relax because we already know each other so well. There's nothing to be afraid of. At least...."

"What? Somethin' bugging you, Blondie?"

"Well...I guess I'm feeling it's up to me to make it good. Bit scared of messing up, perhaps."

"Hey, you can forget that!" Starsky exclaimed. "I know it ain't easy, and I'm not expecting miracles. If we mess it up, we mess it up, OK? And we'll just have a good laugh about it, and try again some time, right?"

"Right," laughed Hutch. "You're wonderful, you are. Always say the right thing. D'you want some more coffee?"

"No thanks. Give me your cup, though, and I'll get you a refill on my way to the shower."

When he heard the water being turned off, Hutch felt a huge surge of excitement, and tried not to think too hard about Starsky getting out of the shower dripping wet. He heard his lover singing a little as he got dry, then heard him go into his bedroom and start opening and closing drawers. He could tell by the cry of triumph when he'd found what he was looking for. He thought his heart was going to stop, though, when Starsky came back into the room, glowing, and shyly smiling. He was wearing an old blue t-shirt, very tight and very skimpy, the one he'd been wearing the night Hutch had realised he was in love with him. Just that, and absolutely nothing else at all.

Hutch just stared, unable to take his eyes off so much beauty, unable to find the words to respond to the love that had thought of that, the one thing above all he would love to see his partner wearing. Dimly, he realised he'd probably got his mouth open, probably looked very silly, but Starsky didn't seem to mind. He seemed quite pleased with the reaction he'd produced.

"Hey," he said.

"Yeah?" Hutch got out.

"You got more clothes on than me. That ain't fair. Get those shorts off."

Hutch took an enormous breath, hoping it might be enough to manage a sentence with.

"Don't mind if I do."

He wriggled out of them, and stood up, crossed the room and went straight into Starsky's arms. Their mouths met, their legs, chests and bellies met, their cocks rubbed against each other.

"How did that go, Hutch? Two cocks throbbing together? Thought that sounded good the first time I heard
it. You were right. You were so right."

"D'you remember the rest?" Hutch whispered.

"All the hot places they can go? Too right I remember."

"This is when you get to find out what that feels like, hotshot. Into the bedroom with you, while I get the cream."

Starsky pulled all the covers off his bed, so all that was left was a smooth sheet beneath them, and some pillows, and Hutch sat down beside him, with a jar in his hand.

"Let me see it," said Starsky seriously, and Hutch handed it over.

Starsky unscrewed the lid, and sniffed.

"Nice. Looks very thick."

"It's supposed to be thick. The skin is very delicate, you don't want it to tear. It easily can, the first few times, however careful you are."

Hutch spoke very gently, but firmly, so Starsky knew exactly what to expect.

"I get you. And you're going to put this stuff inside me?"

"Yeah." Even more gently and quietly. "I'm going to get some on my fingers, and open you up, so slowly and carefully. First one finger, then two, then three. And I'm going to rub it all over my cock, too - or you can, if you're feeling up to it - and then...then I'm coming inside you. And it'll feel horrible at first. You'll want to push me out. But don't panic. Push a little, then hold it. Then breathe. Force yourself to breathe. I'll wait for you to relax. Doesn't matter how long it takes. That's the part that can hurt, my love, so if it's too much, you've only got to say so. Just say, 'stop', and I'll stop, I promise. But if you can get over that part, you won't believe how good it gets next - if I can do it right! If I can, I promise I'll make you fly."

Starsky gave him a brilliant smile, and put the jar down on the table beside his bed.

"That's right," said Hutch approvingly. "We don't need it just yet. We've got all the time in the world, and I want to taste every inch of you."

"Who says you get first taste?" grinned Starsky.

As Hutch leaned against him, Starsky grabbed his arms and pushed back, trying to turn him over. Hutch laughed in wild delight, and fought back with spirit, as they wrestled and tussled with each other, matched strength for strength, revelling in the chance to be as wild and as rough as they liked without the fear of doing any damage. They turned over and over, with first one on the top and then the other, snatching fierce kisses and laughing the whole time. Then the fight went out of Starsky as his emotions overwhelmed him, and he sunk back into the bed and let Hutch take what he wanted.

Starsky was getting more and more light-headed as Hutch covered his body with kisses, all over his chest, his arms, his legs. Everything Hutch did to him sent him wild, the slightest touch was enough to make him quiver with desire. He didn't know how he was ever going to cope with more than this. When he felt Hutch lick his cock he jerked convulsively and almost sobbed.

"Is it starting to feel good?" Hutch murmured.
"Starting to? You been driving me crazy for hours. Just looking at you...ah, Hutch, don't, that's too, too good, I'm right on the edge."

Hutch was sucking him now, squeezing so hard with his lips and letting his tongue wrap itself lovingly round the swollen tip.

"You can handle a bit more yet," Hutch told him.

He slipped his mouth away and rolled himself over, so he was kneeling between Starsky's legs. Then he lowered his head and started licking lower and lower down, licking his balls, licking the shivering skin of the sac, until his mouth couldn't reach any lower. Then he looked up, and smiled, reassuringly.

"Pillow," he said, and held his hand out.

Starsky whimpered with trepidation, but he passed the pillow down the bed as he was asked. Hutch lifted him up, taking his time about it, groaning with pleasure as he felt Starsky's ass in his hands, then pushed the pillow in below his back, and lowered his head again. Starsky felt Hutch's strong hands, so gentle, pulling his cheeks apart, and the warm moistness of his tongue licking his ass. It was the most exquisite thing Starsky had ever felt, and he tried to say so.

"OH!" was all he managed, but he felt sure Hutch would get the idea.

"Like that, do you?" said Hutch softly. "That's good, because I absolutely love doing it to you."

"Hutch, I gotta touch you, my hands are empty," Starsky pleaded.

"Mmm...that'd be nice. I'll just wriggle round a bit, so you can reach, and I can still reach your beautiful ass...oh, Starsk, God, that's nice...."

His voice died away as he felt his best friend's strong hand enclose his cock and rub it hard and slowly. Then he tried to gather his wits; he wasn't too bothered about himself, more than anything he wanted Starsky to have happy memories of his first time. He reached for the cream.

"If you liked being licked, you'll love this," he promised. "Take a deep breath..."

Starsky's eyes widened as he felt the cool slipperiness invade his ass.

"Wow," he stammered. "Oh, Hutch. This is better than girls."

Hutch nearly laughed. He did smile - that was so Starsky, coming out with something so unexpected and so true.

"'Course it is. Because it's us. Because whatever we're doing, we're still us."

He slipped another finger inside. He couldn't believe how relaxed Starsky was. When he thought about it, he realised it showed just how much Starsky trusted him, and that thought made him feel so tender he started kissing him again, everywhere he could reach, all the while moving his fingers gently, firmly, until three were inside and Starsky was beginning to writhe and moan.

"Hutch, I'm getting so desperate, I'm gonna come, it's too nice, I want you inside me, and I know it's gonna kill me 'cos that's not flesh and blood, it's granite, and will you look at the size of it, but I don't care if it kills me so long as it's soon..."

Those words sent Hutch nearly crazy himself, he knew he had to use every bit of self-control he'd got so he
wouldn't just tear into him and nail him to the bed.

"Look at me," he said, and Starsky's eyes, full of love and trust, met his.

"I love you," said Hutch. "David."

Wonder filled Starsky's face at such a gesture, that seemed more intimate than anything physical. He was quick to respond. He lifted his left hand to his partner's face, and caressed it.

"Ken," he said, revelling in the strangeness of saying his name, "I love you, too."

Overwhelmed with emotion, he rolled over and spread himself as wide as he could. As one, they pushed together, then gasped with shock, Starsky at the unbelievable fullness inside him, and Hutch at the incredible tightness and heat. They both paused, both thought of each other, both remembered to breathe. Slowly, so slowly, as Starsky began to relax, Hutch pushed. He could hardly think, the sensations were making him dizzy, but nothing made him forget his overriding concern not to hurt his lover, but to make it good for him.

"You're touching my heart...from the inside!" Starsky panted. "Is it all the way in yet?"

" 'Bout half way," whispered Hutch. "You're doing so fine, real fine...just breath, lover, that's it...does it hurt?"

"Not hurt...just so strange...aah!"

He cried out as a spasm took him, and his hands clutched out. Hutch kept as still as he could, though sweat was pouring off him, and whispered comfort. Then Starsky went so still Hutch was afraid he'd passed out.

"Are you OK? Speak to me!"

"OK...hanging on...keep going..."

He took a huge breath, and suddenly sighed with relief as he managed to relax completely, but his sigh was quickly followed by another gasp as he was filled even deeper.

"All the way," Hutch murmured. "You've taken the whole damn thing."

"I'm a natural," Starsky managed to get out. "Now stop being so careful of me, and enjoy yourself. I mean it. Go for it, Hutch. I want to feel you come inside me."

"That won't take long if you keep talking dirty," said Hutch, and Starsky chuckled wickedly.

He found a rhythm he thought he could hold without coming too soon, and with every thrust he tried to get a slightly different angle. Stephen had known just what to do, just where exactly did you have to press to give that incredible pleasure? He was almost despairing of getting it right when suddenly his arms sagged a little, forcing him lower, and Starsky nearly pulled right off him.

He was bucking and trembling beneath him, nearly choking as he tried to say how good it was, nothing would come out but deep, deep moans of pure ecstasy.

Hutch grinned with joy. He'd done it...found that perfect spot, whatever it was. Relief flooded through him. He took all his weight on his right hand, and pushed his left around Starsky's front and grasped his cock firmly, pumping it with smooth, deliberate strokes.
Starsky went rigid as the fluid surged through him and burst out over Hutch's hand, and the muscles in his ass tightened so hard. They squeezed Hutch into oblivion, he jerked convulsively, and Starsky felt the fountain burst inside him. Their cries were in unison, almost sobs, as the red mist filled their minds and their trembling bodies collapsed together.

They couldn't speak at first. Hutch managed to open his eyes, but he still wasn't sure which way up the room was. That damned mirror on the ceiling didn't help. Nice reflection, though...was that really them, Starsky and Hutch, Homicide's finest, lying entangled and naked and hopelessly in love? It was too good to be true, but the reflection was showing him how real it was. He tried to move a little, in case he was stopping Starsky from breathing.

Carefully, Starsky rolled over and grinned at him in the mirror.

"Wow," he said, with great feeling. "We did it."

"Was it good?"

"It was more than good, Hutch." He turned his head away from the reflection and looked into his partner's eyes. "That was beyond anything. I never felt so whole, so complete. I belong to you, like you're a part of me, and I'm a part of you, and I never want to let you go."

Hutch swallowed, hard, but he knew it didn't matter that he was nearly crying.

"If you belong to me, I belong to you. Everything I am, is yours. Forever."

They were both sniffing a bit, giving each other's faces snuffly little kisses, laughing and crying at the same time, until Starsky tried to move round a little too quickly, and Hutch saw the slight grimace on his face before he could hide it.

"What am I thinking of?" he said. "I'm sorry, Starsk, I should be running you a bath. Keep still, I'll be right back."

Starsky heard the taps go on, and closed his eyes in contentment. If that was the next thing, he wasn't going to argue. Sounded like a good idea. But then Hutch went into the kitchen and got the salt.

"Salt! What's that for?"

"To put in your bath."

"Won't it sting?" asked Starsky nervously.

"No, it'll help, honest. You'll feel good. Have another in the morning and you'll be as fit as a flea. Even be able to run."

He grinned at him and slipped back into the bathroom. Starsky managed to lever himself off the bed and followed him in. He fastened his arms round Hutch's waist.

"Don't go reminding me of that mean thing I said," he said reproachfully.

"Hey, didn't mean it like that," Hutch smiled. "I meant, that's just something we can joke about, now. And anyway, you'd have been quite right...you would find it hard to run, next day...unless you'd been very well looked after. Like I was. Like you're going to be. There, that feels right. In you go."

It didn't sting, but he could feel what a difference it made, the salt was tightening up his skin and making
him feel less cautious of moving. And it was wonderful being washed by Hutch, having a hot washcloth squeezed over his chest, being helped out, being rubbed with a warm dry towel.

"I feel terrific," said Starsky, pulling on his robe that was hanging on the door. "Don't worry 'bout me, Hutch. See to yourself, now...you're all sticky and messy, too - wouldn't you like another shower?"

"I wouldn't mind," Hutch admitted.

"Good," said Starsky. "This time I get to watch."

Hutch had to leave the shower door open so Starsky could get a good view, but he didn't stay in long, just had a hot rinse. Starsky took the towel off him, though and insisted on being allowed to dry him as lovingly as Hutch had dried him.

"I'll have to wrap you in a dry towel," he said. "I don't have another robe. You're gonna have to keep some stuff here, Hutch, and I'll keep some at your place."

"It's a good idea. We'll go shopping on the weekend and double up on the basics."

Warm, dry, clean, and for the moment utterly satisfied, they leaned their hands on each other's shoulders.

"Beer?" said Starsky.

"Two minds with but a single thought."

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"We ought to take him a present," said Starsky. "It's polite to take flowers or chocs when you're invited out to dinner, so it'd be OK to take a present for someone who's been so kind to us."

"That's good, so long as we can think of the right thing," Hutch frowned. "The wrong thing'd be worse than nothing at all. You got any ideas?"

"Not yet. But I'll keep thinking. Maybe I'll get a good idea at the mall."

A couple of weeks of going to work in each other's clothes had galvanised them into trying to get their lives organised. They actually got their laundry sorted and took it in, then went to buy groceries and all the bits and pieces they needed. But they couldn't think of anything for Stephen. Books were no use, he could get them at work. He didn't care for sweet stuff. Flowers were too girly. Wine they'd take anyway, that wasn't enough of a present. They did linger at the flower store, though, Hutch was never going to be dragged away from plants and green stuff.

"How about a plant, though?" asked Starsky suddenly. "That's not girly. What about that hefty specimen there?"

"It is nice," said Hutch. "A laurel in a pot...yes, he's got a bit of a balcony, it'd do well there. That's a really nice idea, Starsk, because looking at the label's just reminded me - that's what his name means. In Greek, Stephen is garland, and laurel's what they made the garlands from."

"Hey, whaddya know!" exclaimed Starsky, delighted. "Go for it, Hutch. How much is it...oh."

His face dropped when he saw the price tag.

"Forget it, Starsk, we can afford it. Help me heave it to the counter."
When they got back to the car, Hutch put a hand on the steering wheel to stop Starsky driving off.

"Just a minute, Starlk, there's something I want to tell you."

"What?" said Starsky, alarmed. "You sure look serious, Hutch. You ain't gonna tell me to get lost, are you?"

"Quit fooling, turkey, and listen. I should have told you this ages ago, but you keep telling me not to keep embarrassing secrets from you, so I'm going to tell you one now...and, what I want to do about it."

"I'm listening."

"It's just, well, I think we ought to have a joint bank account. Don't laugh. I'd really like to think we could share everything that way. Not my money and your money, just our money. How d'you feel about that?"

"The idea's good - the sharing - but how you gonna feel when the Torino eats up the utility bills?"

"Yeah, it'd mean sharing the debts as well as the cash. But I'm OK about that."

"Well, if you are, so am I. You got more sense than I have, you might help me get more responsible. Which I need, I know. Damned phone nearly cut off again last month. Yeah, if you're happy to take the risk, I've got no complaints."

"Good. You remember, now, you agreed."

"What is this? You trying to tell me you've got a load of debts or something?"

"Or something, yes."

Hutch pulled his bank passbooks out of his pocket.

"That's my current account," he said. "Same as yours, I guess. Salary goes in, you spend it. Sometimes it lasts, sometimes it doesn't. But this is my deposit account. I never use it, but...well, take a look."

Puzzled, Starsky glanced through, then tried to focus on the balance.

"Holy Moses," he whistled. "Hutch, you're rich!"

"Yeah."

"But how?"

"Inherited. From my grandfather. I've never touched it. Just keeps growing. I don't know what to do about it. But, I don't want you worrying about small amounts of cash when I've got all this."

"But I can't share this! Hutch, you bamboozled me into agreeing to share before you told me this!"

"Well of course I did, you wouldn't have said yes, if I'd told you first, would you?"

"Of course not! And I'm going back on it, 'cos you didn't give me all the facts."

"Oh," said Hutch, his face sad. "I thought you'd agreed. Let's go home."

"Which one?"

"Mine, please, the jungle will be thirsty."
Starsky drove off, wishing he knew why Hutch had made him feel he was being mean, when he was just trying to stop him being silly. When they got to Venice Place, he tried to explain.

"Look, Hutch, it's not that I don't want to share..."

But Hutch interrupted him, with a smile.

"Hey, forget it, doesn't matter. It was too much to ask, forget it, please. Look, d'you want to help me water? The sooner it's done, the sooner we can get to the beach."

"OK, if you trust me," said Starsky dubiously. "Last time you were in the hospital, you told me off for nearly drowning one."

"You can do the good swimmers," Hutch grinned. "Try that big sucker there, you can't drown that."

"What's its name?" Starsky enquired, pouring water around its roots.

"Gunnera monstera."

"Not its Latin name, its own name," said Starsky. "Is he Fred, or Peter, or Albert Einstein?"

"Huh? You think they have names?"

"You mean they haven't? Which one shall I drown next? That one? Right. Hutch, you talk to your plants! And you don't know their names! That's terrible."

"Well, what would you call it?"

"Let's see...the monster gunner can be that English guy in the war...Winston Churchill. And this little beauty can be Alexander."

"Why?"

"It's a nice name."

He came and peered over Hutch's shoulder.

"That's an ugly little sucker you got there, Hutch."

"Interesting, though, don't you think? And I'm very fond of it. How about calling this one Huggy?"

Starsky fixed the plant with a baleful glare.

"What's the word on the streets?" he demanded. Then he turned to Hutch, frowning. "You know the trouble with your plants, Hutch? When you talk to them, they don't answer back."

Hutch put his watering-can down and caught Starsky around the waist.

"That's because when you're around, they can't get a word in edgeways."

"So shut me up," said Starsky, with a lingering smile. "I think you know how."

"Sure do," Hutch whispered, and drew him even closer.

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It was all so familiar, and yet so different. Going to the beach together on a free weekend was something they often did. They got burgers and coke at a beachside café, then strolled down the beach for a snooze in the sun. They stripped off down to their shorts, and spread their towels out. Starsky lay down and tipped his hat over his eyes. Hutch had to rub some sun cream onto his arms and shoulders, he knew he couldn't sit in the sun for too long without burning. He lay on his side, propped up on one elbow, listening to the sound of the Ocean, and watching the people around them, enjoying themselves. It was relaxing, it was lovely, and it all felt the same as ever.

"Except for one thing," thought Hutch. "Us. We're different. We won't be eyeing up girls in bikinis today, that's for sure. I don't even have to pretend."

He tried hard to feel a balance in his mind, to let the Ocean soothe him into equanimity. All his dreams had come true, so what was he still worried about?

"Afraid it's too good to be true? No, it's true all right. Unbelievable, but true. Unsettled because it's all so different? Maybe a little. I should be more like you, buddy," he thought, looking down fondly at his sleeping partner. "You take everything in your stride. I mean, look at you. To you, it's been more sudden, much more of a shock, and yet you're sleeping like a baby. Maybe I'm just scared it won't last."

And he knew then, by the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, that he'd hit the nail on the head. That was what was still bugging him. But now he'd identified the problem, he could deal with it.

"Right, so maybe it's not forever. Maybe one day, sooner or later, he's going to get smitten by some pretty face and decide he likes girls better after all. Or it could happen to me. It's hard to imagine, right now, but it could. OK, then. Suppose that happens. We still got the love. That's never going to change. And we'll have had something wonderful. Something that a month ago I would have said could never happen, has happened, and no-one can ever take that away."

He'd imagined the worst, and found there was consolation even there. And there was no reason to assume the worst had to happen. Suddenly feeling much happier, he let himself down lower and blew on his partner's cheek to get his attention.

"I'm asleep," said Starsky, without moving his lips.

"There's a couple of pretty girls over there playing beach volleyball, and they do keep looking this way," Hutch told him.

"Not interested."

"Well, there's a great-looking guy in really tight shorts just going down to the water. Get an eyeful of that."

Starsky opened his eyes and gave Hutch a glare.

"Roll over," he said. "Just lie on your stomach so you can't see, and behave yourself. I'm really shocked at you, Hutch."

He wriggled up and looked down the beach.

"So where's this hussy flaunting himself in front of other people's partners?" he demanded, but Hutch just started laughing.

"I only said that to wake you up," he said. "Come on, let's swim!"

"You...." Starsky began, and got to his feet to chase Hutch into the water. But Hutch was already ten feet in
Starsky caught up with him at the water's edge and knocked him off his feet into the waves, but Hutch reacted fast and grabbed Starsky's wrist as he fell, pulling him over into deeper water. Starsky swam further out, then disappeared, then Hutch yelled as he felt his legs being grabbed from under the water. Starsky got one of his arms behind his back so he couldn't move, and held him flat on the surface. He was waist deep, and he had his balance. Hutch was stuck.

"Got you!" Starsky grinned wickedly, shaking the water out of his eyes. "Confess, Hutch, or you drown, head first. You're just a big, teasing flirt, aren't you?"

"Yep."

"And you deserve to drown, don't you?"

"No way! Argh, no, Starsk, not head first...OK, OK, you got it."

"That's better. And you love me, don't you?"

"Oh, that's an easy one. Yes, a million times."

He relaxed in Starsky's arms, and the wild fun and laughter drained out of both of them. More than anything, Starsky wanted to lean down and kiss him, and they both knew it. But they couldn't. They were on a crowded public beach. Starsky's face dropped.

"This stinks," he said, setting Hutch gently on his feet again.

"I know," said Hutch quietly. "How can the world hate something that seems so right? It beats me."

"It didn't ought to be like this, Hutch," said Starsky sadly. "I could kiss any two-bit girl I'd only just met on this beach, and nobody would give a damn. But if I kiss you, that I love more than my life, they'll call the cops."

"Which wouldn't be much fun. Cheer up! Race you out to the diving platform."

"Yeah, OK...you ready? Go!"

They plunged into the water and shot through the waves, and the exhilaration of the exercise cut through Starsky's momentary sadness, especially as he managed to win. They heaved themselves out, panting, and sat on the sun-warm wooden platform that gently bobbed in the tide.

"Things are starting to change," said Hutch. "Some people are beginning to make a fuss. Demanding to be accepted, insisting that society recognises gay relationships as valid."

"Yeah...never took much notice of stuff like that before. It's a bit weird to think we're a part of it now."

"Do you want to be a part of the fight?"

"Ah, that's a hard one. Part of me doesn't want to back down from a fight - any fight. But part of me says no. Because what we are is nobody else's business, only ours. What do you think yourself?"

"I'd say we ought to join in the fight, if we were really gay. But we're not. It's hard enough telling people you're gay. But telling people you're sort-of gay is impossible. And what job you're in matters. I think we have to leave the first attack to the people whose jobs are a help, not a hindrance. You know what I mean...in some jobs, it's actually a plus."
"But not the police."

"No. I don't know if they'd sack us just for being gay. But they'd sure as hell get rid of us somehow if we started kicking up a fuss about it. And that'd be the city's loss, 'cos we're good at what we do. We have enough battles of our own to fight."

"Yeah...bit selfish, maybe, to fight for what we want, if the price is more killers and dealers and pimps on the streets. Needs a lot of thinking about."

"There's no rush. And in the meantime, don't forget that though we have to put up with some disadvantages, we've also got a lot of advantages."

"How come?"

"Well, see the guy there in red shorts with his hand on his wife's shoulder...they can touch, but look at the squabbling kids they've got to ferry home, and clean and feed and entertain, before they can think about each other."

"I'm beginning to get the idea..."

"Yeah, and look at those two college kids swarming all over each other. No privacy. Back of a car if they're lucky."

"Mmm. Tell me your thoughts, Hutch."

"Another swim, I think. Then lie in the sun and dry off. And think how nice it'll be to get home...your place, I think. The shower's bigger."

"The shower?"

"Yeah, it's big enough for two. Just think how nice that'd feel, to be in the shower with my hands running all over you..."

"Aw, stop it, Hutch, that's too good. I kinda like that program, but you missed one thing out."

"I did?"

"My ice-cream! I always have an ice-cream when we come off the beach."

"So you do. That'll make the anticipation last even longer. Especially when with every lick you'll know I'm thinking about licking you."

Starsky pushed him in the water, and jumped in after him, and they swam off. But not before their loving hands had touched and felt each other's bodies under water...

...under water, but now the water was warm, cascading over their bodies, so close together. They relaxed, in the bliss of being alone, and naked, and together. Starsky smiled and raised a finger to Hutch's face, traced his jaw, his neck, and lingered over the contours of his chest, so hard and so alive, the tautly-muscled body moving gently with every breath. Hutch stood still, watching him, loving the sight. Starsky's hand moved lower, and he looked down, watching his own fingers touching Hutch's cock, delicately stroking. It was so hard, so erect, and so was his own. Without a trace of embarrassment, he touched his own too, and wriggled even closer, so he could hold them both side by side.

"You're bigger'n me," he said.
"Just a little," Hutch agreed. "Bit bigger all over, stands to reason."

"Means your hands are too. I was just wondering...I don't think my hand's quite big enough, but maybe yours is...d'you think you could do us both together? With one hand?"

"Wow," breathed Hutch, coming over all faint at the idea. "That's a good one."

He kissed him passionately to show him how much he liked the idea. They were so relaxed their mouths opened to each other straight away, and they had to spend a long time tasting each other's tongues before they finally stopped to breathe.

"Get comfy," said Hutch. "I don't want you to slip. Let me put my other hand round the back of you. Oh yes, that's nice."

Starsky grinned as he felt Hutch's hand on his ass.

"Admit it, Hutch, you really like my ass, don't you?"

"I love your ass, it's the most perfect thing in the universe, I just feel sorry for you because you can't see it properly yourself. But the more I touch it, the more you'll understand what a perfect shape it is."

He fondled it lovingly, kissed him again, then held his hand up for it to be kissed. Then he wrapped his hand around both their cocks together. It made them both shudder, the electricity of the contact, and the double sensation of being rubbed in two ways.

"God! This is amazing...tell me if you want it faster, or slower..."

"Whatever feels good to you will feel good to me," murmured Starsky. "I want us to be together, to feel the rhythm together, and come together."

"Oh, yes," Hutch shuddered, excited beyond bearing at hearing Starsky talk like that, melting inside as blood surged and swelled his cock. His eyes held Starsky's as his strong hand pumped slow and hard, melding them together into one. Their hearts beat as one, and the warm water cascading down their backs drew a veil around them. They pressed hips harder and harder against each other, both bucking slightly into Hutch's hand. Then Hutch felt his balls were being drawn up inside him, and he knew when Starsky smiled at him that he was feeling the same thing. Their eyes glazed a little, though they were still looking at each other, and they throated joyful groans and dizzy whispers as they spatred together, laughing and gasping as they both looked down to see their fluids mingle all over Hutch's hand before the waterfall washed it away.

"Oh, God, I'm gonna die," gasped Starsky. "That was incredible. Everything you do, Hutch, is just so much more amazing, so much more real."

"It's not my doing," Hutch panted. "It's us. It's the love that makes the difference. Don't you think?"

"You got a point there, you beautiful blond boy. I was never in love before."

"Me neither," Hutch agreed, as they staggered out of the shower and began towelling each other dry. "It's a damn nice feeling. But it's a good job we're so good at undercover work."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Look in the mirror," said Hutch, turning them both around so they could both see their faces in the glass, side by side.
"Ah," said Starsky. "Yeah, I get you. Walking into the squad room wearing sappy grins like that would be a bit of a give-away. But we'll manage. Like you said, we're good undercover. It's just acting, really."

"True," said Hutch, giving Starsky's hair a hard rub, and making him yelp. "If they find out, and fire us, we can always go on the stage. Or get a job in TV."

"More money in that," said Starsky. "We could be in a cop show..."

Dinner at Stephen's had been lovely. He'd been touched and delighted by the splendid plant, and the warmth of his welcome had dispelled any lingering awkwardness. All three of them had quickly relaxed in one another's company, and enjoyed the good wine Starsky and Hutch had brought, and the meal Stephen had cooked for them.

"That was gorgeous," Starsky groaned appreciatively. "You're a good cook, you are."

"Repetitive, though," Stephen smiled. "I can only do three things, and that was one of them, so if you come over as often as I hope you will, you'll soon get bored of it."

"It'd take a long time," said Starsky sincerely. "You want a hand with the dishes?"

"No, leave them," said Stephen. "If you can move, I'd like to take you both out to a club I know."

"A gay club?" asked Hutch, and as Stephen nodded, smiling, Hutch added, alarmed, "Not the Green Parrot?"

"God, no," laughed Stephen. "Though that's quite good fun if you're in the mood. No, this place is much more normal. More peaceful. It's more like a refuge, really, from the world outside. The doorman's got a good memory for faces. No-one gets in who doesn't belong. I want to give you the entry there, so you'll know there's one place besides home where you can be yourselves."

"That's nice," said Starsky. "I already noticed what a damn nuisance it is, watching what you do and say all the time. It's a kind thought, Stephen, and if I can actually move, I actually will."

He made as if to move, but nothing actually happened. Hutch and Stephen had the table cleared and their jackets on, and still Starsky hadn't managed to move away from the table.

"Hmm," said Stephen, surveying him with a smile. "Is he ticklish?"

"'Fraid not," said Hutch. "I'm the one who's ticklish. You've given me an idea, though."

He picked up Starsky's jacket and fished in the pocket for the keys to the Torino.

"If he can't move, he can hardly be expected to drive. So I'd better do it. I'll just go down and start the engine, rev it up a bit, clunk the gears around..."

Starsky was up, and had the keys out of his hand in a flash, but Stephen stopped him.

"Let's take my car," he suggested. "Yours is a bit conspicuous to be parked outside a place like that. I know you've got to be careful."

"He's got a point," said Hutch. "Patrol car going past would soon spot the tomato."

"OK," Starsky agreed cheerfully. Sounded like a good idea to him. Get Hutch inside that beautiful car and he might start thinking of getting a better one for himself. Well, maybe that was an impossible thought, but Starsky was nothing if not optimistic, and he knew now that impossible things could happen, and did.
The club was called Alexander's, and was marked only by a discreet brass plaque on the wall outside. Inside was a long bar of polished oak and brass, and heavy chairs and tables in dark wood. There were pictures and brasses on the walls, and red brocade curtains made it feel cozy and kept prying eyes from seeing inside. It was cheerfully lit, neither too dark nor too bright, and there were a few garishly coloured modern fittings, a juke box playing Desmond Decker, and a couple of pool tables, where a group of young men and women were gathered together laughing.

Starsky was surprised to see women, just for a moment, but it quickly made sense when he thought about it. Hutch was more struck by the variety of the clientele. Summing up the room with a few glances, as he would at work, he noticed straight away that there were people here of every age, class and colour. Some were couples, with eyes for no-one but each other, some were groups of friends out for a good Saturday night. Starsky and Hutch weren't stared at or made to feel uncomfortable in any way. They followed Stephen to the bar, and he introduced them to the bar-tender and owner, an Englishman called Alexander.

"Nice name," said Hutch. "Nice place you got here, too. How long have you lived in the States?"

"D'you know, it must be all of twenty years now. Time flies. Keep saying I'll pop home for a visit, but I never do."

Starsky was still smiling at Hutch's first remark, when a thought struck him.

"The beer's not warm, is it?" he asked in some alarm.

"Yours isn't," laughed Alexander. "Here you go, properly chilled, yank-style. I do have real English beer on draught for those that want it, though. You want to try some?"

"Er, rain-check on that, I think, thanks," grinned Starsky, and followed Hutch and Stephen to a table.

They'd hardly got settled when someone squawked behind them, in triumphant recognition.

"Starsky and Hutch! It's you!"

Their eyes met, in astonishment, and they turned their heads together, a little nervous at the thought of being recognised here, but their faces relaxed into smiles.

"Hiya, Joseph!" said Starsky. "How's it going? You still got that job?"

"You bet, a wonderful thing happened the other day."

He smiled at Hutch too, a knowing sort of smile that said he wasn't a bit surprised to meet the two of them in here, then looked at Stephen.

"You two met?" asked Hutch. "No? Stephen, this is Joseph Colarelli, who was a material witness in a case of ours before he'd been here a week. Joseph, this is Stephen Danvers."

"Hi," said Joseph, with his dazzling smile.

He sat down to join them, his pool cue still in his hand.

"So what's this wonderful thing that happened?" asked Hutch.

"Oh, it was great! This old couple came in, wanted an angel for their deceased sister, and their faces fell when they saw the prices. My boss tried to talk them into something they could afford, but they weren't having any, they were going to try someplace cheaper, it had to be an angel. So I piped up that I'd do them
an angel in my own time, if the boss would let me, so he could charge minus labor, and everyone was happy about that. I'd only been allowed to do rough shaping and lettering up till then, you see. So I worked hours and hours on that angel, man, it was beautiful. Not soppy and girly, you know? All fierce joy and quivering with strength. And my boss hated it, he said the customers would reject it and I'd have to pay for the stone myself. But they loved it! They were crazy about it! And they told the whole story to their grand-daughter, who works on the local paper, and she got the story in the paper, with a picture of my angel, and since then my boss has had loads of orders for angels 'just like that one in the paper!' How about that!

"That's fantastic!" said Starsky. "Talk about a lucky break! I hope your boss is paying you a better rate for it?"

"Yeah, he gave me a raise, he was well pleased. Still at that cheap boarding-house, though - it's all going in the Send Joseph to Art School fund."

"You don't sound as if you need much Art School," said Hutch.

"There's always more to learn," said Joseph. "And you get the connections you need to exhibit, and win commissions."

"Joseph!" someone shouted. "You stop banging on about your bloody angel, and get your ass over here! It's your shot!"


Starsky had been wanting to give Hutch and Stephen a few minutes on their own, in case they had anything private they needed to say to each other, and this gave him the chance to do it naturally.

He wandered over to watch the game, glass in hand, really glad that Joseph had obviously found his feet, made friends and was making his way in his chosen career.

Next time he was waiting to shoot, Joseph came and stood next to Starsky, and glanced back at the table.

"Who's Stephen?" he asked. "Is he a cop, too?"

"No, he's Hutch's ex," grinned Starsky, thinking how weird that sounded. "Very recent ex."

"Really? I'd have thought you two had been...never mind," he finished in some confusion.

"Don't worry," said Starsky. "My fault. Sounds like you're another one who sussed me out before I knew myself. Stephen did, and very unselfishly pushed me into Hutch's arms, where I belong. Nice-looking guy, isn't he?"

"You're not kidding," said Joseph, flushing a bit, and glanced back at the table again.

"Finish your game," grinned Starsky, "and come and join us, OK?"

When Joseph joined them, Starsky and Hutch went to the bar to get another round. William, the elderly doorman, ambled over to join them, obviously hoping for a chat, and while Hutch was answering his question about what they both did, Starsky took Stephen and Joseph their drinks and went back to join his partner. Hutch was leaning against the bar, and the doorman had perched beside him on a bar stool. Starsky dragged another stool over and perched on it.

"I never forget a face," William was proudly telling Hutch. "Doesn't matter if it's a year, two years, before you boys come in again, I'd remember you."
"Very useful, that," said Hutch. "That's a thing we're trained to do, in the police, but it must be great if it comes naturally. You always here, then?"

"Almost always. All my friends are here. I'm on my own now. My partner died five years ago. Twenty-five years we were together."

"Wow," said Starsky, impressed. "That sure is a long time."

"He was my best friend," said William simply. "We served in Normandy together, kept each other safe through the war. But before we left for Europe, there was this girl we'd been fighting over. We came home determined to let her choose, and whoever lost would make the best of it. Then we found she'd upped and married someone else. So we cried a bit, and laughed a bit, and realised we didn't want anyone else but each other, really, and the rest is history."

"That's...that's beautiful," smiled Hutch. "Sounds as if you both had a lucky escape."

William laughed.

"Oh yes, it's not easy," he said. "Lots of people think it must be good fun if you swing both ways. How wrong can you be?"

Starsky shot a nervous glance at Hutch, and William caught it.

"You're very young," he said. "Maybe that's what you think? If you do, think again. It's not a thing you can control. You can't just choose to be one or the other. It chooses for you. You can go along happily for weeks, or months, then suddenly everything switches round."

Starsky and Hutch had gone very quiet, and the kind old man realised he had put his finger on their deepest fear.

"When it happens to you both at once, that's bad enough. But when it happens to just one, it's hell. There's only one way to cope. You have to promise each other, promise yourselves, that you'll never act jealous, no matter what. Because he can't help it. And next week, it could be you, needing that same understanding. D'you follow?"

"I'm not sure," said Starsky. "Are you saying that's how it was with you and your partner, even after you'd chosen to be together?"

William looked from one to the other with great sympathy in his eyes.

"Yes, that's what I'm saying. I'm sixty-five years old, and I've seen a lot. My advice to you two would be to realise it's going to happen, and be ready for it."

Hutch's eyes widened, and he let out a long breath.

"You're a damed fine judge of people, William," he said. "I don't mind admitting that the possibility scares the hell out of me. And you're talking as if it's a dead cert!"

"So how do you cope?" asked Starsky, his eyes sad.

"Don't see it in terms of unfaithfulness," William advised. "Faithfulness means no other man. Bear it, remembering you've still got your best friend, that the love's still there, and that will never change. And it won't, so long as you don't let any nasty jealous feelings creep in - not even once."
Starsky looked at Hutch.

"I will if you will," he said.

"You got it, partner," Hutch smiled, then looked at William.

"You've been very open and honest with us, and we're grateful for the advice. Can I ask you something, from your own experience?"

"Anything you like, son," smiled William. "If we don't help each other, no-one else will."

"That's what Stephen said to me," said Starsky. "Sounds like it ought to be the motto of this place."

"I think it probably is," William agreed. "So ask away."

"Did you ever manage to get it under control, so you could be what you wanted?"

"Yes, we did. It took a long time. Four years of patience, and love and understanding. But we did it, and you can do it too. Nurture the side where the love is, boys, nurture the side where the love is."

Joseph put his glass down, and looked across at Starsky and Hutch. He was startled to see how serious they looked.

"What's up with those two, d'you think?" he asked Stephen.

"I reckon William's telling them what they're in for. I hoped he would. Forewarned is forearmed, and it'll come better from someone who really knows what it's like. It must be hell," he said sadly, and shook his head.

"They'll be okay," said Joseph. "I gotta good feeling about those two. D'you want a game of pool?"

"Sounds fun, but I don't know how to play," said Stephen.

"You kidding?" said Joseph incredulously. "How come?"

"Where do you find pool tables?" Stephen retorted. "In bars. If you'd ever seen the bars in Alabama you would not ask that question."

"Ah," said Joseph. "I get the idea. So why don't you learn in here? I'll show you."

"Thanks for the offer, but not on a Saturday night, with so many people in the place. I don't want to make an exhibition of myself. But if you're ever in during the week, I'll take you up on that."

"Good," said Joseph. "Don't leave it to chance. Let's fix a day. I bet Mondays are quiet."

Stephen met his eyes. Sparkling green, under that mop of flame-coloured hair, and above that dazzling smile. He swallowed, hard.

"Yeah, OK," he said, trying to sound casual. "Monday it is."

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Starsky and Hutch were a bit quiet on the way back to Stephen's, but that didn't surprise him. They thanked him warmly for the evening, and he knew that included giving them the chance to talk to William. What they needed now, he knew, was the chance to talk privately to each other. He saw them into the Torino, then
went inside. For a while, all his thoughts were with Starsky and Hutch, wishing them well, hoping they'd be able to forge something that would see them through the inevitable and out the other side. But it wasn't long before his thoughts turned back to the man they'd introduced him to, and that was where his thoughts stayed. As he fell asleep, he seemed to be dreaming of an angel. Except that this angel wasn't carved from stone, and its quivering, male strength was topped by feathery red hair.

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"I thought it was too good to be true," said Starsky dismally, as he slumped onto his sofa and toed off his blue sneakers. "That William was a nice old chap, and I know he was only trying to help us, but I feel really depressed now."

"Why, Starsk? You surely don't think I'd ever stop loving you?"

"I know you wouldn't, no more'n I'd ever stop loving you. But what we got is so nice, I don't want it to change, not even...temporarily. Why can't you just get a grip on yourself, and not let it rule you?"

"I think he was saying you can...but it takes a while. S'pose each time you get back together, you're stronger for it, and even closer than before. And that'd make it just that bit harder for anything - well, let's be honest, here, for any woman - to come between you the next time."

"It's going to be damned hard, Hutch, not to act jealous."

"God, I know. The very thought of it...oh, don't let's think about it, it hurts too much."

"We gotta think about it. We're back at work tomorrow, Hutch. It could happen tomorrow. We have to be ready."

"You're right," Hutch sighed.

He was sitting on the floor by the sofa, and he reached over and took Starsky's hand.

"Let's promise each other that we'll be open and honest. If it happens, it happens. But I want to know, I want it in the open. Tell me straight, tell me you've got a date with a girl. I'll wait for you. But don't let me find out by accident."

"You got it, Hutch, and I know you'd do the same by me. No nasty shocks. We gotta be real patient with each other. But I can't see it'd do any harm to keep reminding each other that we're there, you know what I mean? I don't mean any jealous stuff, or even trying to win you back, I just mean winks and smiles and stuff, you know?"

"That's good. Like reassuring us both, that however heavy it seems to be getting, we both know where our hearts really are."

"I hope we do. What really scares me is the thought that you might fall in love so much that you'd get married. You already did once, so you must have thought you were in love then."

"Oh, Starsk, I know what you're saying. What if I only think I'm in love with you? I know I am, but how do you know? Only time will prove it's true. Tell you what, we give each other a veto over getting married. I can't get married unless you say so. And you'd only say so if you were totally convinced I loved a woman more than I loved you, and that it was forever."

"Yeah, and if that did happen, I would say OK - because I love you enough to want your happiness. Yeah, that's a good one, Hutch, because you ain't too sound in your judgement sometimes when you fall in love.
With women, anyway. You're giving me the power to save you from yourself, if necessary."

Starsky sat up, smiling and pulled Hutch onto the sofa to sit beside him.

"Feeling better?" Hutch asked.

"Yeah, some...but I feel like wanting to make you some kinda promise...can't help feeling it's more likely to be me causing trouble than you, somehow."

"Not so sure about that," said Hutch shrewdly. "But however it goes down, we'll cope. William and his partner did, and so can we. And you know why they did? Because they were so used to fighting side by side, looking out for each other. Nothing's going to beat a foundation as strong as that, and we've got that too."

"Maybe Joseph's grandfather did, too," said Starsky thoughtfully. "Maybe there was someone he cared for that much...someone who got killed, maybe, so he came home and lived an ordinary life. But it gave him the understanding to see what's so fine about Joseph, who's got the courage to be who he is."

"You might be right there. Oh, man, I nearly died when he yelled out our names! Just thinking, who the hell's recognised us in here!"

"I know, so did I," laughed Starsky. "What an evening. I went out thinking that people like Joseph and Stephen have it harder than we do, and I came home thinking completely the opposite."

"Thanks to Stephen, and William, we know what we're in for."

"Yeah. A long haul. And what's at the end of it? When we've won, they won't even let us get married."

"Don't go getting depressed again! That's not like you. Where's my cheerful, optimistic Starsky?"

"Sitting here, having a bright idea!"

"Spill it," Hutch demanded.

"Well, you know you said we should have a joint bank account? Let's do it. Not your inheritance, you keep that, for the day you come to your senses and buy a decent car. But we'll save up, together, equally, all the time, no matter what. And when the day comes, Hutch, that we know we've won, and we'll never be led astray again, we'll have enough."

"Go on! What for?"

"For our house. The house we'll buy together, to live happily ever after for the rest of our lives."

"Something to work for, to aim for, to look forward to. Starsk, you're a genius. Did I ever tell you how much I love you?"

"Not since this morning," grinned Starsky. "Come here, Blondie, and let me get a taste of your hot lips. Because whatever bad times are coming, they ain't here yet. And just in case they do arrive tomorrow, let me remind you there's one way we haven't done it yet. So I think we better get cracking, just in case..."

The End