

## Crosscurrents

by Keri Mera

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*October 1980*

I

Sometimes it felt as if he'd never been away.

As he crouched in the dust and the darkness, gripped by the familiar fusion of alertness and boredom that was a byproduct of every uneventful wait for action, it was almost too easy to take it all for granted.

Not that he was likely to. Five months back on the job, and a small rush of satisfaction still percolated through his veins every time they logged in for duty.

Starsky cast another look around. The place was deserted, and had been for hours. Thistly growth covered the parched hillside. In the distance, the hum of the ever-busy freeway hovered on the breeze, but below, the junkyard at the foot of the hill was a dim and silent space in the night.

He ducked behind a row of prickly shrubs and crawled back to the top where Hutch lay propped on his elbows, concealed by shadows and the foliage of a small tree, binoculars trained on the space below.

"No sign of him, huh?" he whispered when he'd covered the last foot to the drop.

"Nothing," Hutch whispered back, not taking his eyes off the road.

"Maybe he ain't gonna show. It's two-thirty. He was supposed to be here at midnight."

"Well, when did you ever see a punctual perp?" Hutch dug his elbows a little deeper into the soft ground. "Take it easy. He'll be here. He's just running late."

"I wish he'd show up. We'll never get a chance like this again. He may not be the brightest bulb on the tree, but he's not gonna fall for the same setup twice."

"I know. Relax. Why are you so antsy? You got something better to do?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact." Starsky tried a small whine. "I had a hot date with a leggy blond."

Hutch didn't even blink. "Tough luck. Why don't you make it up to your, uh, leggy blond this weekend?"

"You know, maybe I will." The thought was proving distracting. He moved a little closer to his partner, careful not to jog the hand that held the binoculars. "Four days off work, Hutch! I can hardly remember what that feels like. You realize we haven't had a day off in over two weeks?"

"Yeah, I realize it. It's hard not to, with you reminding me of it every five minutes."

"Hey, no need to get cranky."

"Cranky? Who's cranky? You're the one who hasn't stopped bitching in three whole hours."

"I can't help it. These damn bugs have it in for me." The whine was for real this time. "Anyway, you'd be bitching, too, if you had sand stuck all over you. I'm itching in places I didn't even know existed."

"Should've listened to me. I told you not to wear your tightest pair of pants to work toda—"

The way Hutch tensed and gripped the binoculars could only mean one thing. Starsky leaned forward, following Hutch's line of vision. Knew before he even saw the furtive shadow in the yard below that their quarry had taken the bait.

Excitement surged up inside him. The switch to action was instant. He inched away from the drop and came to his feet, hauling Hutch up, too. And then they were running, racing, sliding down the far slope of the hill in an avalanche of sand and dust, aiming for the car.

"C'mon, c'mon, hurry."

The LTD sputtered to life and shot forward, shadows scattering like cockroaches in the beam of the headlights.

"He's seen us," Starsky shouted, both hands gripping the dash. "Go, go, go! Step on it, dammit! He's gonna get away."

"I'm doing the best I can," Hutch shouted back. "Where the hell did he go?"

"There. Behind that crane. Turn right. He's going for the fence."

Starsky hung on as Hutch took the car into a tight right-hand turn, tires screeching. On the far side of the yard, their prey made a dash for the chain-link fence, changed his mind half-way, and bolted into the maze of crates and shipping containers instead.

"Other side!" Hutch yelled and accelerating past them. "Around the back!"

Starsky gripped the door handle, watching, counting. One row. Two. Three.

"Now!" he roared.

Hutch hit the brakes.

Starsky threw himself out of the car, rolled, came to his feet, and ran. Heard the car speed away behind him. He kept going, into the maze. Metal containers loomed on either side, dark shapes in the twilight.

There was a movement on the left, two rows ahead.

*Dennison.*

"Stop! Police! You're under arrest!"

The man ignored him. He ran, arms flailing. Cast a hectic glance over his shoulder, tripped over an empty cardboard box, and almost fell. He recovered and stumbled on, making for the patch of dawn light and the exit beyond.

Ahead, the dented shape of the LTD roared into view and squealed to a halt in a cloud of dust, blocking the light and the end of the row like a cork in a bottle. The running figure windmilled to a stop, looking wildly around, then ducked into the only other opening, the gap on the left.

*Gotcha!*

Starsky skidded around the corner, took one look, and relaxed. Fifty yards away, Hutch stepped into the opening, a deliberate, almost casual move. He leaned against the nearest container, arms folded, and watched their man approach.

Dennison saw him, too. He stumbled to a halt. Reversed directions again, running on blind panic now. Crashed into Starsky and went down.

*Never underestimate the stupidity of the criminal mind.*

Starsky shook his head as he wrestled the man's arm behind his back and sat on him.

"Do the honors, Hutch, will ya? I'm sick of the sight of this creep."

"Sure." The click of the handcuffs was a sharp, clear sound in the night. "Robert Jay Dennison, I arrest you for the rape and murder of Ana Maria Suarez and Consuela Martinez in Mexico City in July this year. You have the right to remain silent...."

oooOOOooo

"You got him?" Captain O'Rourke glanced up from behind a desk piled high with files and folders, and pulled hard on his cigarette. "About time. He crossed the border a month ago. The Mexican consul is ready to throw a fit."

Starsky studied the carefully arranged strands of his superior officer's comb-over through the dense tobacco fumes.

"Aw, Capt'n," he said. "You know we would've had him a week ago if San Diego hadn't let him slip through their fingers. We had to set up a whole new trap for him. We couldn't have done it any faster."

"All right, all right." O'Rourke gestured as if shooing a couple of buzzing insects away. "Get on with the paperwork and make sure there are no loopholes."

"All done. Booked and processed. Here's the report." Starsky stepped forward and placed the folder on top of a stack of papers teetering between an overflowing ashtray, a greasy rag covered in gun oil, and several old hamburger wrappers complete with half-eaten remains. Wondering what Dobey would make of the dump

his office had become, he stepped back. "If that's all, we'll sign out now. It's been a long night."

O'Rourke ignored the comment. He flicked some ash into the general direction of the ashtray, missing it by several inches.

"The Armadale case," he said. "I had to take Burke and Zuckerman off the case. That means you're in charge of the investigation. I suggest you go back to the beginning and start from scratch. The files are on your desk. I expect an interim report tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's our day off, Captain," Hutch reminded him. "Friday, too. Captain Dobeey approved it a month ago."

O'Rourke's head came up for the first time. Frosty blue eyes bored into Hutch, as the temperature in the room dropped another few degrees.

"Dobeey isn't around," he said. "I'm in charge of the department now, and that means things are going to be different around here. I won't tolerate the laid-back attitude to police work you've all become accustomed to."

Hutch bristled. "Captain Dobeey runs a very tight ship. *And* he gets results. We have one of the highest conviction rates in the force, and that has everything to do with the way Captain Dobeey runs this department."

Starsky shifted ever so slightly closer to Hutch, a barely noticeable maneuver. *Lemme handle this.*

Hutch backed off.

"We could really do with the time off, Capt'n," Starsky said with what he hoped was a disarming smile. "We still got lots of work to do at our new place. We haven't even unpacked the boxes yet." He gave a one-shouldered shrug. "You know what it's like."

If O'Rourke was swayed by the charm approach, he showed no sign of it. He stubbed out the cigarette, shook a fresh one from a crumpled pack and lit up, inhaling deeply.

"No, *Sergeant*, I don't know what it's like, and I don't give a damn about your personal problems. Let me remind you that with the trial coming up, all eyes are going to be on this department, and especially on you, Hutchinson. We can't afford to look anything less than perfect. That's an order from the Chief."

He leaned forward and pointed a finger at a spot halfway between Starsky and Hutch. "I know all about you. You're mavericks. You think the rules don't apply to you. Well, not under my command. While I'm in charge here, I expect every officer to pull his weight and do things *precisely* by the book. Am I making myself clear?"

Starsky resisted the urge to glance at Hutch. He said, "Yes, sir. But what's that got to do with our request for time off?"

O'Rourke eyed him narrowly. "I expect you'll need time off for the trial next week," he said, and dragged on his cigarette. "I'm just wondering when you're planning to put in some actual work around here."

Hutch opened his mouth in outrage and stepped forward. "I think you're forgetting, *Captain*, that we've been on duty for two weeks straight, and have pulled double shifts for the last three days 'cause half the department was off with that stomach bug."

If looks could kill, Starsky thought, Hutch would be a prime candidate for the morgue right now. He moved another inch closer to his partner.

"Oh yes, I almost forgot," O'Rourke said in a voice dripping acid. "All right. Take time off if you must. I expect you back on Monday at eight o'clock sharp. Maybe you could manage to be on time for a change."

He bent over his paperwork again, the dismissal clear.

Hutch muttered something dark and inaudible, and Starsky hastened to take his volatile partner by the arm and hustle him out the door.

oooOOOooo

In the hallway, Starsky released Hutch's arm, sagged against the wall, and heaved a theatrical sigh.

"Tell me again, Hutch. How many days?"

"Eight down, twenty-nine to go." They traded resigned looks. "Can you believe he's only been gone for a week?"

"Feels more like a year."

"Yeah. But what can we do? He needed a break. He was flirting with a major heart attack."

"I know. I'm just sayin'." Starsky pushed himself away from the wall. "Let's move it before Mr. Stickler-for-the-rules-must-make-a-good-impression-on-the-Chief changes his mind and hauls us back in. I can't wait to get outta here. I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry." Hutch poked him in the back. "Why don't you admit it? You can't wait to get back to the house and gloat over the view from the bedroom."

"Gloat? Whadda ya mean, gloat? Who's gloating? You're the one who can't stop prowling around the garden lookin' like you never saw one before."

"Well, I never owned one before."

Starsky pushed through the door into the stairwell, his eyes on Hutch. "You don't own squat. The bank owns most of it. Anyway...."

He turned to see Menendez and Stanton jog up the stairs toward them, and the words crumbled from his lips at the sight of Stanton's face. There was a large purple bruise on his cheekbone, and his left eye was almost swollen shut.

Starsky gave a low whistle. "Jesus, Mike, what happened to you? A perp got the better of you?"

Roberto Menendez, the older, more measured of the two, made a face. "Nothing like that. There was a fight down in the canteen last night, and Mike was in the thick of it."

"Rob, shut up!" Stanton growled.

"You got into a fight with fellow cops?" Hutch said, incredulous. "What happened?"

"Rob, if you say *one* word, I'm gonna—"

"You might as well know," Menendez said over his partner's protests. "Word will get around soon enough. It was about you two, actually."

"About *us*?" Starsky shared a look with Hutch. "You're kidding. Who was it? What did they say?"

"Just some uniforms at the table next to us. They were, uh, talking about you."

"They were calling you names," Stanton said darkly. "I had to shut them up."

"What kinda names?"

"Just...names." He looked away. "On account of you moving in together and all that."

Hutch frowned. "Oh, come on. Everyone knows why I moved in with Starsky. He needed help, and we couldn't afford to keep two apartments going."

"Sure, everyone knows that," Menendez said. "But that was over a year ago. Starsky is back on the force, as good as new, and you're still living together. And now you bought a house together...." He shrugged. "They're just wondering, that's all."

Hutch's temper flared. "And that's a good enough reason to go around calling people names? Maybe if everyone minded their own goddamn business around here, we could all get on with—"

Starsky shifted on his feet, a silent warning, and Hutch broke off, his face dark with annoyance.

"They will from now on," Stanton assured him. "I set them right on a coupla things."

"They were a bunch of morons," Menendez said. "Paper pushers and losers. They don't know shit. We should've just told them to shut up, but Mike here jumped right in to defend your honor."

"Thanks, Mike." Starsky touched his younger colleague on the arm. "What's the other guy look like?"

Stanton suddenly grinned, a lopsided grimace on the colorful face. "Worse. It was that new guy, Travis, from IA who started it all. He's been spreading lies about you for weeks—how you don't have girlfriends and never go out dating. Well, I sure set him right on that one!"

"IA, huh?" Starsky said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. He works with Simonetti. Same methods. I'm telling you, he had it coming to him."

"Look, the next time you hear someone going off at the mouth about us, tell 'em to come and give it straight to us."

Menendez shook his head. "Oh no, they wouldn't do that. They'd never say anything to your face. They wouldn't dare."

"Why not? They're not scared of us, are they?" Starsky snickered.

"Well, maybe not exactly scared. More like...in awe, if you know what I mean. After all, you died, Starsky, and survived, and then you came back on active duty against some damn near impossible odds. That's pretty awesome stuff. And Hutch, you took down Gunther—"

"With the help of half the department—"

"—and then you pulled that stunt against Vic Monte and the Shark. Everyone knows about that, especially now that the trial's about to start and the Gunther case is splashed all over the papers again. You guys are larger than life. Not many would dare mess with you."

"Rob's right," Stanton said. "Most guys here think you walk on water. They'd never in a million years believe that you two are...I mean, c'mon, everyone here knows you're getting more action in the girl department than the rest of us put together. There's no way you'd ever—" He broke off, annoyed, then roared, "I mean we all *know* you're not a coupla fucking queers!"

"We have to go," Menendez said firmly and gripped his partner by the arm. "We're late."

Stanton allowed himself to be steered away from the embarrassing situation.

Starsky watched them go until they were alone in the stairwell. He risked a glance at Hutch. A steep crease marred his partner's forehead.

"Well, looks like the rumors are back," he said. "I'm surprised it's taken this long."

"Why the hell can't they leave us in peace?" Hutch exploded. "It's nobody's damn business how we live our private lives."

"Hey, c'mon. We both knew this would happen. It was just a matter of time."

"But rumors are just the beginning. What next? We can't keep this up forever. One of these days, the guys aren't gonna buy it anymore."

Starsky shrugged. "Then maybe one of these days, we're gonna have to tell them."

"And lose everything we worked so hard to achieve? Going back on the streets, being partners again? You know as well as I do that the day we come out with the truth is the day IA is gonna have our badges. And we'll go from larger than life down to rock bottom zero. No one is gonna remember Gunther or the Shark when they find out we really *are* queer."

"Aw, Hutch, we're not queer. We're in love with each other."

The words had a near magical effect on Hutch. The crease on his forehead unfurled, and he almost smiled.

"Goofball," he said. "That's bound to make all the difference when they finally figure out the truth."

oooOOOooo

It was late in the afternoon when Starsky surrendered to the demands of his aching body. He yawned, almost dislocating his jaw in the process. Night shift was murder on the system, but a double shift followed by a day of hauling furniture through the house wasn't just murder—it was as close to suicidal intent as he could imagine. He yawned again, couldn't seem to stop now that he'd started.

Wearily he debated the pros and cons of getting his butt off the floor and finding a more comfortable spot for it. The cons won. He slumped another impossible inch lower, rested his head on the edge of the couch, and surveyed the room through half-closed eyes.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Very acceptable, in fact.

The living room was definitely the best feature of the house. Now that the eye-popping wallpaper with its swirling patterns of orange and green was a thing of the past and the walls painted a cool white, the large room was transformed into a bright, airy haven. French doors led to the porch and garden, and there was even an ornate old fireplace that would come in handy on those chilly winter evenings. A flood of sunlight danced through the room.

Starsky closed his eyes and took a mental tour of the rest of the house. Behind the archway lay a kitchen with crumbling fittings, a hallway with ominously creaking floorboards, and a staircase with half the struts missing. The second floor boasted bedrooms with window frames in various stages of dry rot, and a bathroom with a plumbing system noisy enough to wake the neighbors at night.

The place was falling apart. But at least it was *their* place. And as Hutch had pointed out at the time, it had *potential*.

Starsky stretched luxuriously. *A place together*. Mortgage payments. Joint purchases of furniture. Discussions on the relative merits of floorboards and carpet tiles, for crying out loud. When had they become so *domesticated*?

Once he thought he'd have this with a girlfriend or a wife. Who would've thought that the person he ended up sharing his life with was his best buddy and partner at work?

He turned his head and eyed the partner in question. Hutch lay sprawled on the couch behind him, eyes closed, one arm draped over his face and the other flopping over the side of the couch. He looked smudged and disheveled and damn sexy. He also looked completely done in.

Starsky suppressed a grin. *Told you not to overdo it, you big lug. But you wouldn't listen to me, would ya?*

He leaned closer and blew into the ear he found within a few inches from his lips. Hutch's nose twitched, but he didn't open his eyes.

"Hey," Starsky said.

"Hmmm?"

"Hey!"

"What?"

"You still worried?"

"About the rumors?"

"No, dummy. About the trial."

Hutch finally opened his eyes. "Why do you think I'm worried about the trial?"

"'Cause you've been acting weird all week, ever since you got the summons."

Hutch emitted a small sigh and rolled onto his side until he was face to face with Starsky.

"Yeah, I'm worried," he said. "Can't help it. So much can go wrong. He could still walk. He's already been cleared of so many minor charges, and he has the best defense team money can buy. Anything could happen."

Hutch's shirt had ridden up, exposing a couple of inches of firm, tanned stomach. Unable to resist, Starsky reached out and trailed his fingers over the warm, smooth skin.

"Well, I'm not," he said. "Worried, I mean. Those charges of conspiracy and perverting the course of justice were a joke. 'Course he got cleared. Murder charges are different. He's not gonna walk on those. There's far too much evidence against him. So quit worrying, will ya?"

"He might. Or he might get away with manslaughter. We've got no idea what holes his lawyers are going to pick in the evidence, or how many witnesses they've bribed. I don't want him to walk away with a three-year sentence, and twelve months off for good behavior. I want him put away for life."

Starsky's fingers stopped their advance.

"Look, you did everything you could to make the charges stick," he said. "You worked with the prosecution. You went to the pre-trial hearings. You even vetted the jury list, for Chrissakes. You couldn't have done any more. Now you have to trust the prosecutor to do his thing."

Hutch looked away. "It's not just that. I mean I knew I'd have to testify, but I'd no idea they saw me as some sort of a star witness. What if I screw up on the witness stand? The defense is going to exploit the slightest weakness. They could make me look like a complete idiot, and that'd do more harm than good."

Starsky almost laughed. "Hutch, you moron, you're not gonna screw up. You'll do great. You always do when it counts. Anyway, I'll be with you every step of the way. I'll be right there in the front row, watching you."

"I know. I'm counting on it." Hutch hooked a hand behind Starsky's head and tugged him closer until they were mouth to mouth. Their lips met. Starsky's weariness dissolved. He closed his eyes, almost purred when the tip of Hutch's tongue caressed the sensuous inside of his upper lip.

*Looks like I'm not as tired as I thought I was.*

He leaned into the kiss and had just started getting into his stride when the phone rang—a shrill, still unfamiliar jangle from a new handset.

Hutch groaned and broke away.

"Your turn," Starsky said and wriggled an eyebrow at him, and Hutch reluctantly unfolded his long limbs, clambered to his feet, and hunted the sound down to the kitchen. Starsky took the opportunity to claim the couch for himself and stretched out with a sigh.

Hutch was gone for a long time. When he finally walked back in, still clutching the phone and trailing the long cord behind him, the steep crease was back on his forehead.

Starsky looked a question mark at him.

"That was Kathy," Hutch said with a helpless shrug. "She asked if she could come and stay with us for a few days."

"Kathy?" Starsky sat up. "Hey, that's great! But I thought Geoff didn't like LA."

"Geoff isn't coming." The crease deepened. "Nor are the boys."

Starsky raised an eyebrow. Hutch's sister was welded to her kids. One of the many reasons she'd never managed to make it to California before. "You mean *Geoff* is looking after the kids?"

"No. She's parked them at Aunt Wilma's. She says she needs to get away for a while to get her head together." He added, "She'll be on the first flight tomorrow morning."

"Spit it out already, will ya? What's the crisis?"

Hutch sighed. "Geoff's been two-timing her. She kicked him out. She says she's filing for divorce."

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## II

The airport was crowded, the temperatures already in the mid-80s, and Hutch was worried.

He hadn't seen Kathy in over two years. Everything in his life had changed in those two years. And although she had known about them for some time and had expressed support and understanding, she'd never been confronted with the reality of the situation. Now she'd be sharing a house with her gay brother and his lover.

Hutch grimaced. Kathy was a *nice girl*, the epitome of middle-class respectability. Poster image of a housewife and mother, and of good, clean, wholesome America. They'd never been close, even as children. They didn't really have much in common at all.

Beside him, Starsky bounced on his feet and craned his neck to catch a better view of the flood of arrivals streaming through the gate, looking as excited as if a member of his own extended clan was due to descend on them. Not that that was ever going to happen now.

Something inside Hutch warmed at the sight of his irrepressible partner, the bittersweet joy of their togetherness. So many sacrifices. So many losses. Starsky's, mostly. He himself had yet to acquaint the wider family with the truth.

"There she is."

Starsky pointed excitedly and surged into the crowd to meet her, and Hutch couldn't resist hanging back for a moment to observe the meeting. Kathy wasn't the touchy-feely type. No more than he'd been, years ago. Before the whirlwind called Starsky had exploded into his life, and nothing had ever been the same again.

Now he watched with a mixture of pride and amazement as Starsky enfolded her in a bear hug, and she capitulated before the onslaught and melted into the embrace. She still spoke in exclamation points.

"Dave! Oh, Dave, how wonderful to see you again! Let me take a look at you. You look fantastic! Just like before...before you were...."

"Before I was shot," Starsky said firmly, hooked an arm around her waist and steered her toward Hutch. "You're not lookin' so bad yourself. Must be all those refined Hutchinson genes." He winked at her, and Hutch stared when he saw her wink back.

And then she stood before him, all five foot two inches of her, and smiled up at him.

"Hello, big brother."

They gazed at each other. Handshake? Peck on the cheek? How d'you do, ma'am? Then Hutch laughed, shook his head, and pulled her tiny frame into his arms, and she wrapped her arms around him and hung on tight.

*Starsky, you have a lot to answer for.*

And just like that, the ice was broken.

"My big brother. I can't believe it's been two years!"

Starsky was amused. "*Big* brother? But you're three years older than him."

"Well, look at him." Kathy measured her diminutive stature against Hutch's towering height. "Does he look like a *little* brother to you?"

Starsky grinned. "Point taken."

"He's always been more like a big brother to me. Always defending me against bullies and taking my side against Dad. I haven't been much of a big sister to him." She gazed up at Hutch, and then at Starsky. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you last year. I really wish I could've been here."

"You got three kids to look after," Hutch reminded her. "*Lively* kids, from what I remember. So you're forgiven."

Penetrating mother's eyes looked him up and down. "You look different, Ken. I'm so glad you got rid of the long hair and that awful mustache! They made you look so droopy! But it's not just that. You look...I don't know...like a man in love." She smiled up at him. "Dave must be good for you."

A heat wave washed over Hutch, and he felt his ears turn pink. *Dammit.*

He bent to retrieve the suitcase from the cart, heard Starsky's soft chuckle behind him. Felt the brief warmth of Starsky's hand on his back through two layers of clothing. He straightened and said, "Shall we go?"

"Oh, yes, let's go! I can't wait to see your new house. I want to know everything about it. I'm just bursting with curiosity!"

oooOOOooo

"It's not finished," Hutch warned as he ushered Kathy through the front door.

"It's an ongoing project," Starsky elaborated and set the suitcase down with a thump. "At the rate we're going, we'll be drawing our pension before we got this baby fixed up."

"It's all we could afford." Hutch said, on the defensive. "And it's not as bad as it looks. It's old, but sturdy. And the garden is enormous."

"Garden?" Starsky snickered. "You mean that weed-infested jungle out there? The one where you need a machete to get from the porch to the shed?"

Hutch cast him what he hoped was a withering glance. "Don't listen to him. He's just jealous 'cause I'm spending all of my spare time out there now."

"Well, I think it's wonderful," Kathy said, surprising Hutch. "Very bohemian. The porch, and the view. Look, you can even see the hills. And it's so quiet around here. I can hardly believe we're in LA."

"You mean you like it?"

"Well, it has a lot more character than the stuffy museum we grew up in, or our prefab in Hollyhills. I think it has potential."

Hutch tossed a triumphant glance at Starsky—who rolled his eyes at him—and hoisted the case again. "C'mon, I'll show you to your room. Careful on these stairs. And watch out for that beam."

"Don't worry. I'll pretend we're back on gramp's farm and playing in the attic."

A shaft of sunlight lit the upper hallway. Kathy moved along, peeking into the open doors on either side with unabashed curiosity.

"Oh, that's a nice room!" she said when she'd reached the second door on the left. She advanced into the large sun-flooded space, looking around. Hutch saw her take in the wooden beams, the brass bed pushed against the wall, the packing boxes that served as temporary night stands. Starsky's most faded pair of jeans hanging over a chair. The shirt Hutch had thrown aside that morning....

"Oh!" Kathy stopped as if she'd walked into a glass door. Her hand flew to her mouth as color flooded her cheeks. "Oh, this is *your* room."

The plural hung awkwardly between them. Two seconds went by, then Starsky jumped feet first into the silence.

"Yep," he said with that lopsided grin that never failed to ignite the strangest yearning in Hutch's nether regions. He slung an arm around Hutch's shoulders. "This is it. Best view in the house."

Kathy's face wore an expression Hutch couldn't read. She walked to the window and gazed down into the garden. Her slender hands moved over the windowsill, a restless journey. There was a narrow circle of pale skin on the third finger of her left hand. For a moment he thought she would burst into tears.

He stepped forward, breaking the silence and Starsky's hold. "Kathy, you okay?"

She turned. The look in her eyes was light, composed, and maybe just a little wistful. There was no hint of grief. Not a single tear.

"You guys are so lucky to have each other," she said. "This isn't just a house. It's a home." She smiled at Hutch. "I didn't think you'd ever settle down again like this. Not after the fiasco with Nancy."

Hutch's heart lurched at the reminder.

"You must be the only one still calling her that," Starsky said behind him.

"I could never get used to calling her Vanessa. What was wrong with Nancy? It was too homely for her, I think." Kathy paused, looked at Hutch again. "Nancy was so wrong for you. God, that pretentious apartment you lived in! But this feels right. This house. You and Dave." She gazed from one to the other. "Know what I mean?"

Hutch nodded and reached for Starsky again. "Yeah, we know what you mean."

oooOOOooo

"So," Hutch said much later when they'd settled down on the porch with its prime view of untamed greenery, a bottle of wine and a large bag of potato chips on the table between them. "You want to talk about it?"

"About Geoff, you mean?" Kathy took a long sip from her glass and shrugged. "Not really. It's over, and that's all there is to it. Our marriage has been a farce for years. I only stayed with him because of the kids."

"I'd no idea," Hutch said, taken aback by the bluntness of the statement. "You never said. I always thought you were happy."

"I was." Kathy's fair head swayed a little. "At first. But things changed. *He* changed. You wouldn't recognize him now! Sometimes I look at him and I ask myself, what's that stranger doing in my house? And now I find out he's had this woman on the side for months...." Another shrug. "I tried to keep it going for as long as I could, I really have, but I can't do it anymore, not even for the sake of the kids. I just want him out of my life."

Hutch exchanged a look with her. "But you still love him, don't you?"

"Oh, Ken, I knew you'd ask me that! No, I don't love him anymore. I don't feel anything for him anymore. Don't look at me like that. I can't help it. It's not like he's still madly in love with me, either. We drifted apart, that's all. Happens to a lot of people. I guess I just don't care enough anymore to make it work."

"But Kathy," Starsky said with a puzzled frown and leaned forward. "When I first met you, you were crazy about him. You were head over heels. Everyone called you a dream couple—made for each other and all that. How can that have changed so quickly?"

Hutch experienced a small upwelling of warmth in his heart. No, Starsky wouldn't understand. Starsky loved with everything he had, and the love he gave was forever. Hutch smiled and hugged the warmth to himself.

"I don't know," Kathy said, hands fluttering like a couple of startled birds. "It just did. We're so different from each other. And he can be a real bastard sometimes. I just didn't see it before. I mean, you never really know someone, do you? Not even when you're living together."

"Maybe you need some time apart," Hutch suggested. "Maybe you could—"

Kathy shook her head, making her fine blond hair fly around her face. "No, Ken. It's over. There're so many things wrong between us. We're not—what's the word?—*compatible* anymore. Not even, you know, *in bed*."

A pink glow crept into her cheeks. She reached for the bottle, tipped the last of the wine into her glass, and downed half the contents in one go.

"He's into kinky stuff these days. Bondage and that sort of thing." The color deepened. "And that's not really my thing."

"*Kinky stuff?*" Hutch said, surprised. "Geoff? Look, he didn't make you do anything against your will, did he?"

"He tried. But no, not really. He went to some floozy, instead." Her voice hardened. "So even if I still loved him, I could never really trust him again."

Beside him, Starsky stirred, and Hutch felt his unease like ripples in the still evening air.

He said, "I wish we'd known. Maybe we could've helped."

Kathy leaned over and patted his arm, a curiously maternal gesture. "There's nothing you could've done, bro. We had to work it all out for ourselves. I didn't want to say anything until it was a done deal."

"What about the boys?" Hutch said.

"They're too young to understand. Geoff and I worked it all out. I'll keep the kids and the house, and he's promised to find a place in town so the boys can visit him on weekends. It's all settled."

Her eyes met his and Hutch detected a glint of firm Hutchinson determination there. "Look, Ken, I didn't come here to justify myself. Anyway, you of all people should understand. You fell out of love with Nanc—Vanessa. You know what a loveless marriage is like. You can't wish that for me. Or for the boys."

There was a small silence, broken only by the sound of crickets and the muted hum of an engine in the distance. Hutch glanced at Starsky, was surprised to see a deep, troubled look on his face. The look he'd expected to see on Kathy's face, but didn't.

"Let's talk about something else, okay?" his sister said. "I just want to forget about the whole mess for a while. That's why I asked if I could come to LA. I knew you guys wouldn't give a hard time." She made a face. "I mean, I couldn't exactly go to Duluth, could I? There would've been no end of discussions and recriminations."

Hutch looked at her. "How did they take it? You called them, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I called them. And no, they didn't take it well, which is an understatement. Dad thinks I'm a stupid cow for throwing away my financial security, and Mom's worried about appearances. Well, you know her. Another divorce in the family—the scandal! And of course they think it's all my fault. Dad even said I should've been more accommodating! Can you believe that? I almost hung up on him. Let's just say I doubt I'll be spending much time there in the near future."

"Kathy, you can stay with us for as long as you want. You know that." Starsky flashed her one of his broad, patented grins, but Hutch thought he was probably the only one who noticed the small strain in the smile. "If you don't mind sleeping in a room that only has a bed and a chair in it."

Kathy smiled. "Still the same old charmer. A bed is all I need. You won't believe how much I've been looking forward to a break. Oh, and by the way, I'm planning to earn my keep around here."

She leaned forward and pointed a stern finger at Hutch. "That kitchen looks like it could do with a good old-fashioned scrub. This place needs a woman's touch!"

"Oh no, we can't allow that," Starsky said, shaking his head. "You didn't come here to work."

Kathy laughed, no sign of a broken heart. "Are you kidding? It's gonna be fun. When am I ever going to get the chance again to help you guys move into a house together? We can hang pictures together and stuff. Trust me, I'm going to have the time of my life."

oooOOOooo

"All right, you want to tell me what's going on in that mushy brain of yours?" Hutch asked much later when Kathy had given in to the combined effects of jet lag, wine and heat, and gone to bed, and he was alone with Starsky in their large, lofty bedroom. He kicked off his shoes and pulled the shirt over his head. "You were pretty quiet out there in the end."

"Was I?"

Hutch pointed a finger in Starsky's direction. "Yes, you were. And don't give me that look. I know your mind was about as far from the conversation as Dobby's is from his next diet right now."

Starsky produced a soft snort. "Just tired, that's all. We worked like slaves these past two weeks."

"Hm." Hutch cast him a searching glance, then decided to let it pass. He pulled back the bedspread and crawled under the sheets.

"Looks like Kathy's made up her mind," he said.

"She sure knows what she wants," Starsky agreed as he started the familiar wriggle out of his favorite pair of jeans. "She's coping amazingly well. No tears, no dramatics, no accusations. You never told me your sister was such a tough cookie."

Hutch stuffed a pillow behind his back and leaned back to contemplate the view. It *was* a great view. Especially of Starsky.

"And Geoff," Starsky went on, oblivious to the look. "Can you believe he's into kinky stuff? Respectable Geoff?"

He stopped in mid-wriggle, and Hutch saw the gleam of a new idea sparking in his eyes. He gave it three seconds.

"Hey, Hutch, have you ever wanted to try that? Kinky stuff, I mean?"

Two and a half. Not bad.

"What, whips and chains? Can't say I have. The way I see it, we get enough rough stuff on the streets every day. I don't need that in my private life, too." Hutch hesitated. "Vanessa was into it."

"Vanessa wanted to be tied up?" Starsky's face was a picture of amazement.

Hutch laughed. "No, she wanted to tie *me* up!"

"I might've known." Starsky rolled his eyes. "Did you let her?"

Hutch shook his head. "That was one of the twenty-five reasons for the divorce. I wouldn't give her what she wanted."

"Why not? Bondage ain't *that* kinky."

"I never trusted her enough." Hutch wriggled an eyebrow at the trim figure before him. "You could tie me up any time."

"Really?"

"Uh huh. But no handcuffs. I don't like mixing work and pleasure. And now c'mere, cocktease, and stop tormenting me with those moves."

"What moves? Oh, you mean *these* moves?"

"Get in here. Now!"

"Who can resist a romantic offer like that?" Starsky took the bed in one leap, making the joints groan in protest, then stopped in mid-move. "Um, you think we should? What about...?" A meaningful glance at the door completed the question.

"Kathy is a grown woman. She knows the score. She wasn't fazed when she saw the bedroom, was she?"

"Not much." An evil grin transformed Starsky's rugged features, the troubled expression from earlier evaporated in a sudden blast of heat. He crawled over and ripped the sheets from Hutch's naked body. A hot shiver of excitement curled Hutch's toes as his dark-haired demon lover bent over him with a predatory look in his eyes.

"All right, cowboy. You asked for it. Just try and keep your voice down."

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III

"Where to next?" Starsky shouted above the din his two passengers were creating on the seat beside him. Hutch was in the middle of regaling Kathy with the story of Fireball's arrest several years ago, ad-libbing shamelessly. Fireball's little black dress had become an evening gown, the sensible shoes high-heeled stilettos. Apparently, Fireball had also been scaling the fence in fishnet stockings and the latest scent in Chanel. Kathy was laughing so hard, she'd started to hiccup.

"Where to next?" he repeated when Hutch had completed the comic version of their work as street cops. "How about Venice Beach?"

"How about City Hall?" Hutch countered. "Or the History Museum?"

"How about a restaurant?" Kathy said dryly. "I'm starving."

Starsky blew her an air kiss. "A woman after my own heart." He steered the Torino into the freeway rush hour traffic. "And after that, how about a movie? We could see *The Empire Strikes Back*. That's a terrific movie."

"And we saw it twice already," Hutch reminded him more tetchily, Starsky thought, than the situation called for. "I'm *not* sitting through a third time. Why don't we take Kathy dancing? The Metropole is nice. Or that new disco on Vernon and Fifth—"

"Stop it. For goodness sake, stop it," Kathy groaned. "You guys are tireless. Don't you ever stop? We've been on our feet all day. Hollywood, the Observatory, the Tar Pits, Chinatown, the Canyons...."

"The zoo!" Starsky said. "Don't forget the zoo."

"How could I? That's where you two talked me into going on an elephant ride."

Starsky cast her one of his wacky grins. "Nothing but the best for a first time visitor to LA."

"Okay, but do we really have to see *everything* today? You're wearing me out. And there won't be anything left to see the next time."

"All right," Hutch said. "Let's get something to eat and then take it from there."

"Sounds like a plan," Starsky said. He changed lanes, squeezing between a Chrysler and a truck, and made the exit with barely a yard to spare. "There's one place you gotta see before you leave. It's called The Pits."

"But we already saw them."

Hutch grinned. "Not the Tar Pits. The *Pits*."

Kathy looked dubious. "And that's what? A restaurant?"

"Best restaurant and bar in town," Starsky lied, "run by a very special friend of ours."

"All right then. But only if you let me pay."

"Out of the question," Hutch said and pointed a finger at her. "You spent half the weekend helping us move in. The least we can do is buy you dinner on your last day in LA."

oooOOOooo

Two hours later—settled in their favorite booth, filled with a triple order of the Huggy Special, and with a growing collection of empties on the table between them—the enthusiasm for more action had abated noticeably.

"I like it here," Kathy slurred through her third or fourth glass of wine and waved a hand around. "It's a dive, but I like it. And your Bear friend, too."

"Huggy," Hutch said. "His name's Huggy."

"Your Huggy friend."

"I think Kathy's had enough," Starsky teased. He was sitting by himself, a rare state of affairs, facing the siblings on the other side of the table. "One more glass and your sister's gonna provide the musical entertainment."

"I might." She giggled and leaned against Hutch, clearly enjoying herself. Starsky had never seen her this relaxed before. "But first, I need another one. This wine is ec-excellent."

"Whoa, Kath," Hutch said. "Maybe you should put the brakes on, huh?"

"Oh, c'mon, you guys. I gotta make the most of my few childless days. Tomorrow night, I'll be elbow-deep in diapers and plastic toys again. This is my last chance to let my hair down."

"She's right, Hutch," Starsky said. He turned around and signaled Anita for another round. "Go for it. You only live twice."

"I thought it was once."

"Nah. Twice. After the hangover wears off, you feel like you're born again."

"Well, you should know, goofball," Hutch said. "You must've been born again at least a few hundred times."

There was a small silence, then Kathy said, suddenly sober, "You guys have changed. Really, you have. I know you've always teased each other, but something's different now. There's...I don't know...there's less bite in it. Know what I mean? I can't believe no one else has noticed it."

Starsky aimed a glance at Hutch and bit back a grin. *Less bite, huh? You should see the hickie your brother gave me last night. A vampire has nothing on him.*

"They have," he said, "but they're putting it down to the shooting."

Kathy giggled. "Oh, I know—you did it all the wrong way around! The last time I saw you, you were bitching at each other like an old married couple, and now it's like you're on your honeymoon."

Starsky laughed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Oh yeah! But I'm in the know. Maybe it's different for those who aren't. I mean, you were always tactile, long before you—I mean, *years* ago. That's what annoyed Dad so much."

Kathy drained her glass and looked at Hutch. "Remember when you and Dave were in Duluth a few years ago? Thanksgiving, wasn't it? You were still on crutches after that awful man ran you off the road in your car. And you and Dave were all over each other the whole time." She laughed. "God, you couldn't keep your hands off each other, even then! It drove Dad nuts! He clenched his teeth so much, he must've worn out a whole set of dentures." Her giggles collapsed into a helpless hiccup.

"Hey, I was just helpin' Hutch to get around," Starsky said, indignant. "There wasn't anything goin' on between us at the time."

Kathy reached for the bottle and slopped more wine into her glass. "I know. But for Dad, that was a tough one. The Hutchinsons don't touch in public."

She leaned forward, her hand curled around the glass as if it were a lifeline. "So," she said and pierced first Hutch and then Starsky with a determined look. "When are you going to tell them?"

Starsky returned his beer glass to the table. Across from him, Hutch did the same. They shared a look.

"We can't tell them," Hutch said, and Starsky wondered if Kathy saw, recognized the look of regret in Hutch's eyes—so obvious, really, so easy to understand when you knew the language.

Kathy opened her mouth, and Hutch held up a hand. "We can't tell them, but not for the reason you think." He took a deep breath. Something in his voice changed, hardened, like a lake freezing over.

"If we did, Dad might think it's his duty to inform Internal Affairs of the fact." The ice on the lake thickened. "And that would mean the end of our careers."

Kathy's jaw dropped in comic slow motion, and her eyes turned large and round. "Oh no, Ken! No. He wouldn't do that. Surely not. He wouldn't go that far."

Hutch produced a ghostlike smile. "He might. I'm sure he would at least consider it. You know how much of a control freak he is. It would be too good a chance to pass up. Of course, he would say that he only had my best interests at heart."

Kathy sighed. "Maybe you're right. He could use the knowledge to get back at you for all the times you defied him. God, he hated it when you did that. You were the only one in the family to stand up to him. Remember the fights you used to have? He's never forgiven you for going your own way in life."

Starsky gazed at his partner with a sudden powerful swell of affection in his heart.

*My Hutch. Always the rebel. Doing the right thing even if means pissing off your dad.*

He said, "Hutch is right. We have to keep this quiet if we want to hold onto our jobs. The fewer people know, the better."

"Well, I'm glad you trusted me enough to let me in on the secret," Kathy said. "But can you really live like this for the rest of your lives?"

Hutch lifted his head, and his eyes were so blue, so beautiful. Starsky felt as if he was looking inside him, right into his soul.

"I'd tell the whole world about us tomorrow if I could," Hutch said. "I'd take out a newspaper ad and announce it on the radio. But we love our jobs, and while we have a chance to do them, we have to keep our private lives under wraps."

A comfortable warmth spread through Starsky. "It doesn't matter," he said, speaking only to Hutch. "I'll live with you in the closet for the next fifty years if we have to. If that's the only way."

Hutch's gaze lingered on him, and for the smallest moment, Starsky thought he'd lean over and kiss him—right there, in the bar, in full view of everyone. But then Hutch's gaze slipped sideways, over his shoulder. Starsky saw him focus, saw his eyes go wide with sudden stunned surprise. Starsky whipped around, his hand on his gun, pure reflex.

The bar behind him was full of people, but he saw her at once. She stood alone, looking straight at him, and the sight of the familiar face felt like a knife driven clean into his heart.

Time stretched and stopped. His vision narrowed, and everything in his view grew small, small, as if he were gazing the wrong way down a telescope. He found himself on his feet, unaware that he'd stood. Moved forward a slow step at a time, his eyes on the figure advancing toward him. Met her halfway. Somehow, he managed to make his mouth work.

"Rosey," he said.

A hesitant smile hovered on the pale, sweet face he remembered so well.

"Hello, David."

oooOOOooo

The next few minutes oozed like molasses. Starsky felt he must have stood and stared for what seemed like an eon. From somewhere far away, he heard Hutch stepping up and inviting Rosey to join them.

Then they were sitting again, Rosey beside him, facing Kathy and Hutch. Introductions crossed the table and there was an attempt at some light-hearted small talk. Kathy launched into a comic tale of the elephant ride at the zoo. Rosey laughed and contributed a funny anecdote about a donkey ride in Mexico.

All that time, Starsky still hadn't really looked at her, although he was acutely aware of her presence, her voice, her perfume, familiar still from so long ago. He couldn't believe it. Rosey Malone. The woman he'd fallen in love with almost exactly three years ago.

The woman who'd broken his heart.

Starsky's mind swirled. How could she suddenly reappear like that? She was supposed to be in Mexico. She had no business being in LA!

Kathy's searching look made him realize that he wasn't pulling his weight in the conversation. Then he snapped to full attention when Hutch suddenly kicked his leg under the table. He looked up, annoyed, only to see his partner aim a meaningful glance across the room.

"That's Travis over there," Hutch hissed. "Can you fucking believe it?"

*Travis?*

"The IA guy Mike had that fight with. Simonetti's new sidekick. Damn, he's seen us. He's coming over. Jesus, look at his face. Mike must've really laid into him."

Starsky looked and agreed. Travis' face displayed colorful evidence of his run-in with Stanton's fist—a split and swollen lip, a bruised jaw, an angry-looking cut on the side of his face.

"Starsky. Hutchinson." Travis' gaze took in first Kathy, then Rosey. There was an awkward pause, and an expression on the narrow face that might almost have been embarrassment. "Out for a date, huh?"

"So it would seem," Hutch said coolly. He draped an arm around Kathy, a casual move, and she melted against him with a dreamy smile. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Of course not." Travis coughed and nodded. "It's, uhm, good to see you. Very good." He coughed again. "I guess I owe Mike Stanton an apology."

Hutch was silent, a significant silence, and Travis shifted on his feet, uneasy.

"Look, no hard feelings, huh?" he said and rubbed a hand over his colorful face. "I mean, how was I to know?" He hesitated again, opened his mouth, closed it—a fish out of water. "You wouldn't believe how many of the guys.... I mean, it's an easy mistake to make, the way you guys act around each other. I could've sworn...."

The awkwardness grew thick enough to carve into chunks. Starsky almost felt sorry for the man.

Travis took a deep breath. "Anyway. That's all I wanted to say. You girls have a good time now." An awkward nod, and he ambled away to rejoin his party.

"What was all that about?" Rosey asked.

"Oh," Hutch said, "he was just happy to see us. We have that effect on people."

Starsky almost laughed. Trust Hutch to know how to rescue a situation!

He still hadn't recovered from the shock of seeing Rosey again—her smile, her hair, the sparkle in her eyes when she laughed. His mind was alive with the memories of their brief courtship, doomed before it had a chance to flourish.

Hutch reached across the table and touched him on the arm. "Starsk, I think I better take Kathy home. She's had it. It's okay, we'll take a cab. You stay and catch up. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about."

Starsky looked at him and their gaze locked. Hutch nodded and smiled. His fingers tightened briefly on Starsky's arm, then withdrew.

"C'mon, Kathy, let's get you home. Rosey, it's been good to see you again."

Across the room, Starsky could see Travis' gaze following Hutch and Kathy all the way to the door.

Then he was alone in the booth with Rosey.

oooOOOooo

For a long moment, they sat in silence. Finally, Starsky shifted his gaze from the door and looked at her, really looked at her, for the very first time.

She was as beautiful as he remembered. Her flawless complexion glowed in the lamplight, and her long hair flowed around her shoulders like a ripple of silk. She'd cut it a little shorter, but the style suited her and gave her a touch of sophistication and class. And her eyes...light brown with flecks of green, alight with life, and love, and laughter.

They'd haunted him for months, those eyes. In dreams and daydreams. Long after she'd disappeared from his life. Now those haunting eyes were aimed straight at him, and the laughter had died from her beautiful lips.

"David," she said. Just that. She reached out and put a hand on the spot where Hutch's touch still lingered warm on his arm. Time went into slo-mo.

*Rosey.*

"Three years, David," she whispered. "I can hardly believe it. How are you? Are you all right? They told me you were shot."

Starsky found his voice again. "I'm okay, don't worry. I was off duty for almost a year, but I'm all right now." The toughest fucking year of his life, summed up in two sentences of platitudes. It was crazy, and necessary. There was nothing else to say. "What about you? What are you doing back in the States?"

Her face changed. Even the color of her eyes seemed to change.

"He's dead, David," she said in a voice leached of emotion. "Daddy died two months ago. He had a blood clot in his brain, but by the time they found it, it was too late." Her voice held the smallest quaver. "He's buried in Veracruz. In the south."

"I'm sorry." He meant it. He hadn't liked Frank Malone, but he meant it.

The two words were enough to crack her self-control. Tears welled up and spilled—a small flood of grief. She didn't look away.

"He's gone, David. He's left me. And I miss him so much. God, I miss him!"

"I know." Starsky reached out for her, pulled her close, unable not to. "I know you do."

Her body felt as lithe and slim as three years ago, and it fit against his own just the way he remembered. Starsky held her until her quiet sobs ceased. Then he eased her away and gazed into her face. She wiped her hands over her cheeks, fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief.

"I had to come back," she whispered through its lacy folds. "I couldn't stay in Mexico after Daddy...after he.... I had to come back home, you know?"

"I know. I understand." Starsky squeezed her hand. "What are you going to do?"

"In LA?" She gazed at him, red-eyed. "Trying to pick up my old life again, I guess. Fortunately I don't have to worry about money right now. Daddy's left me enough to live on for a while. Maybe I'll open the gallery again. I don't know yet."

She put the handkerchief away, gazed at Starsky again and tried for a brave smile. "But what about you? Are you...are you still a swinging bachelor or...did you find someone?"

The small urgency in her voice, the minute tension in her face gave her away, and Starsky knew the real reason why she was there, in LA, in the Pits, waiting for him.

His heart ached as he looked at her and nodded. "Yes, Rosey, I found someone. I'm living with someone." He gave her hand another squeeze. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, David, I'm so happy for you. I mean it. I really do. What's she like? Are you very happy together?"

"Yes, Rosey. We're very happy." He paused. The truth. Only the truth would do. She deserved at least that much.

"But it's not a she. It's a he." He held her with his eyes. "It's Hutch."

Confusion froze the smile on her face. "Hutch? What do you mean? I-I don't understand."

*Neither do I, sweetheart. Neither do I.*

"I found out two years ago that Hutch was in love with me," Starsky said, the memory still both painful and thrilling. "Took me a while to realize that I felt the same way about him. We've been together ever since."

"In love? You mean...?"

"Yes. We love each other. We're together."

"But...you can't be! He's a guy. How can you—?" Her gaze flicked away from him, flicked back, blank with incomprehension. "This is a joke, right?"

"No, no joke. I wouldn't joke about a thing like that. Hutch is the most important person in my life. He was there for me after the shooting and all the way through my recovery. He's the reason I lived, and that I got well enough to go back to work."

"So you're grateful to him. Of course you are. He's your best friend. He was there for you when you needed him. Of course you love him for it. But, David, that doesn't mean you're *in love* with him. That's something completely different. I mean, you're not...and you were never...." She broke off, confused, helpless.

Starsky gave a one-shouldered shrug. "You're right. I never looked at a guy before. Until Hutch. But it wasn't gratitude. We were together long before the shooting."

She stared at him, her face a riot of emotions. "You're serious, aren't you? You and Hutch...Good God, you and Hutch! I can't believe it."

Her gaze wandered erratically around the room, and back to Starsky.

"Okay," she said, "okay. So you guys are doing it with each other. That's okay. Really, it is. I guess a lot of guys are doing that these days, trying out new things. It's a bit of fun. I understand that."

Rosey put both hands on Starsky's arm and leaned forward. Her voice turned low and intense. "But you can't want that for the rest of your life. A leopard doesn't change his spots. I know you, David Starsky! I know you love women. You are a woman's man. You think a woman can't tell?"

Starsky opened his mouth. Didn't know what to say. Closed it again.

"I also know you still love me," she whispered. "I knew it the minute you set eyes on me."

Starsky looked at her sweet face, the warm, green-flecked eyes, the luscious lips he remembered so well. He couldn't deny her charge. He still loved her, and she saw that admission somewhere in his eyes. She let go of his arm and wiped a hand over her face.

"God, it's my fault!" Her voice was thick with misery. "It's all my fault. I should never have left you. It's because of me that you turned to Hutch, isn't it? I hurt you so much that you lost all faith in women, didn't you? So you turned to Hutch. And he was in love with you already, and—"

Starsky's voice hardened. "Stop right there. What Hutch and I are to each other has nothing to do with you. Nothing, you hear me? He loves me, and I love *him*, more than anyone in this whole world. The sooner you accept that, the better."

"I love you!" she cried. "And you loved *me*! You wanted to have a life with me. Marriage, house, kids—the whole package. You said so."

"Rosey, you *left* me! You had to make a choice between your father and me, and you chose your father. You walked out of my life and you didn't give me any reason to hope." His voice rose against his will. "You broke my heart, Rosey! Do you realize that?"

"David, David, please, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't make this so hard for me. I had no choice. I had to go with him—"

"No, you didn't. You could've stayed, and you would've been safe here with me. You went with him 'cause you loved him more than me—"

"That's not true, David! I loved you with all my heart! I still love you. So much. I came back as soon as I could. That's the reason I'm here. I wanted to see you again. I wanted to find out if you still felt the same way about me. And if you do...if you still want me...I'm here for you now. I—"

"That can never happen now. It's too late for that."

"Don't say that, David. This is all happening too fast. You need time. I understand. Maybe when you've—"

Huggy materialized beside them like an unwelcome specter out of thin air.

"Hey, Starsky. Is everything all right here?" His keen eyes raked over Rosey's distraught face, and his own probably no less agitated expression.

Starsky looked away from him. "We're fine, Hug. Everything's under control."

Huggy retreated, and Starsky got to his feet.

"I can't see you again, Rosey. You have to understand. I'm with Hutch now."

Rosey dug her fingers into his arm and looked up at him with her huge beguiling eyes. "But you love me! I know you do. I can see it in your face."

Starsky hesitated for a long moment. He looked down at her and something inside him started to hurt very badly.

"Yes," he said, a heavy sound between them. "I still love you. But it's too late for us now. We both moved on. You made your choice, and so did I."

He disengaged himself. "C'mon, I'll take you back to your place."

They didn't speak as he drove her through the night. When he pulled up outside her apartment, he left the engine running.

"Come upstairs," Rosey pleaded. "Please. For a drink. We should talk about this."

Starsky shook his head. "I can't. I have to go home. And there's nothing to talk about."

Rosey was silent. Her fingers played with the clasp of her bag—open, shut, open, shut. A single tear quivered on her long lashes. It fell, leaving a small moist trail on her cheek.

The tear did what her words couldn't. It transfixed Starsky to his seat, a spell stronger than any word. He didn't pull away when she brought up her hand and touched her fingers to his cheek. The touch was as warm as the rest of her.

Reality dissolved. He reached out and lifted a strand of her soft hair from her shoulder. When he looked into her eyes, he saw that they were full of love, and yearning, and promise.

The air grew heavy between them. The memory of their first kiss—the time and place a mirror image of the present—hovered like a living creature between them.

Rosey's eyes held a curious mixture of seduction and vulnerability. Her hand caressed his cheek as she leaned toward him. Her beautiful lips, half parted with longing and invitation, were so close that Starsky felt her breath warm on his face.

At the last moment, Starsky blinked and turned away, and Rosey's kiss ended up somewhere between his ear and his jawbone, breaking the spell. Starsky pushed her hand away, pulled out of her reach.

She drew back as if slapped.

"I don't understand," she said, bitter disappointment in her voice. Her hands came alive in the air between them. "I just don't understand. What did Hutch do to you? How did he get you to do this...this *filthy thing*? You were a normal guy before. It's wrong what you're doing. *Wrong!* You know it is!"

Anger erupted from nowhere. Starsky grabbed her wrists, stilled her arms. "Now listen to me. Hutch didn't get me to do anything. If anything, *I* came on to *him*. Before we got together, Hutch was no more gay than I was. And it's none of your business, but what we're doing is neither wrong nor filthy."

He released her and fell back in his seat. "I think you better go now."

He didn't offer to walk her to the door.

She opened the car door and got out. Hesitated and looked back at him. Her face looked raw with a jumble of emotions. Then she shut the door without another word and walked away into the lamp-lit entrance of the building.

Starsky sat for a long time with the engine running, battling a flood of memories and "what ifs". Finally, long after Rosey had left, he put the car in gear and drove away.

Home. To Hutch.

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## IV

Hutch had no problems getting Kathy home. The cab dropped them outside their house—*our house!*—and he half guided, half carried her upstairs. She was so small. So light. How could this be his big sister, mother of three kids?

Once, he'd had a thing for wispy, feather-light girls who could be carried effortlessly up a set of stairs. He grinned. Well, not anymore. Carrying Starsky's muscular body any distance these days would probably break his back, even if Starsky would consent to let him try. He grinned again.

When he was sure Kathy could negotiate the bathroom under her own steam, he went downstairs with the book he never seemed to get around to reading these days, and settled on the couch. His thoughts strayed to the conversation they'd had on the cab journey home.

*"Aren't you worried," Kathy said to him, "leaving Dave alone with an old girlfriend of his?"*

*Hutch laughed. "Course not. Why would I be?"*

*"You said he's been in love with her. Did you see the way she looked at him? She still has a thing for him. Oh yes!"*

*Hutch shrugged. "Well, that's too bad for her. She left him, you know. It took him a long time to get over her. I can't feel all that sorry for her."*

*"I wasn't thinking about her. I was thinking about you. What if Dave is still sweet on her?"*

*He shook his head, amazed at the direction of her thoughts. "You really don't know him very well, do you?"*

*"He's a guy. He loves girls. You both did. What if he still does? It's not something you can switch off just like that."*

*"Kathy, stop it. Starsky would never fall for a woman again. What we have between us is too special."*

*"Yeah, that's what I used to think about Geoff and me."*

*Geoff and Kathy? The comparison was laughable.*

*"Don't worry," he said and squeezed her hand. "Rosey hasn't got a chance."*

*"So you're not the teensiest little bit worried at all?"*

*"Nope, my nosey sister. I'm not one teensy little bit worried."*

*Then the cab pulled up outside the house, and Hutch fumbled for his wallet. If he hadn't dropped the ten-dollar bill and leaned toward her to retrieve it, he probably would have missed her next few words entirely.*

*"Maybe you should be," she muttered, mostly to herself. "I think you should be."*

oooOOOooo

When Starsky failed to put in an appearance by midnight, Hutch decided to call it a night and went to bed.

Which felt odd, because he rarely did this on his own these days.

As he lay on his back between the cool sheets, hands behind his head and very conscious of the empty space beside him, he couldn't help thinking with a hint of regret what he might be doing this very minute if Starsky wasn't halfway across town in a bar with an old girlfriend.

His cock seemed to approve of the direction of his thoughts and gave a small twitch. Hutch shifted under the sheets, reaching down to coax the neglected appendage to life. It wasn't difficult. An image of Starsky wearing his tightest pair of jeans and the special smile reserved just for him soon had his dick standing to attention. Hutch wrapped his hand around it and started stroking himself.

A tingle ignited in his groin and made a leisurely journey into his cock, causing a fuzzy warmth to spread through his veins—nice, but nothing like the wild flare of sensation he'd come to take for granted when Starsky was an active participant in the action.

He tightened his grip, moving his hand faster, root to tip. Small tendrils of fire licked at his cock. The tingle grew as he brought himself closer to the brink.

But it wasn't enough. Something was missing, a vital element.

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut and conjured up a recent memory of his lover as he wriggled out of his pants with those seductive, feline moves of his. Hutch saw him turn away with a grin and a glint of midnight blue from under lowered lashes. He watched, breathless, as Starsky inched the pants down over the swell of his perfect ass, no underpants, to reveal those luscious curves, and a glimpse of his already swelling cock....

The breath caught in Hutch's throat. Heat rushed through him and pooled in his cock, as he came with a groan and a sudden weightless sensation in the pit of his stomach. Warm fluid spilled over his hand and onto the sheet, a small homage to his absent lover.

Then it was over, much too soon, and Hutch sighed and went to clean himself up.

As he stood under the shower and let the warm water cascade over his back and shoulders, the whole effort seemed suddenly pointless. Jerking off didn't seem to do it for him these days; only Starsky did. He closed his eyes, turned his face into the stream, and reflected on making love to Starsky.

Sex between them had become so good, so wonderful. They'd come a long way since that mind-blowing first time, that glorious night in the mountains.

Even then, he should have known that it was going to be a wild, inventive adventure. In their first six months together, they'd tried everything their inspired minds had managed to come up with, until Gunther had put a dent into their activities for the

better part of half a year. But although Starsky had long since recovered to the point where he was ready to tackle new territory, they'd never tried anything kinky.

If anyone was to blame for that, Hutch thought, it was him. He had no illusions on that point. Bondage was one thing, pleasure through pain quite another. The mere thought of inflicting physical hurt on Starsky, even as part of a consensual sexual act, deflated him faster than a punctured balloon. Starsky had suffered so much pain in his lifetime already. Hutch knew he was incapable of adding to it.

Nor did he relish the idea of being at the receiving end of the act.

That wasn't to say that their lovemaking didn't often get pretty rough. But even the fiercest of their sexual encounters had at its roots something that Hutch often thought of as undiluted mushiness.

He smiled to himself, warmed by the thought.

Oh yes, loving Starsky was a wild, exhilarating experience that far eclipsed any encounter he'd had with the many women in his life—Vanessa, Abby, Gillian, and all the others. They'd been fun, no doubt about it. But sex with Starsky...nothing could compare to it.

Sometimes he was amazed at how few of their friends and colleagues had caught on. Wasn't it blindingly obvious to the entire world how he felt about Starsky? How Starsky felt about him?

They didn't do undercover work anymore. Instead, they were undercover every day now, as soon as they stepped through the door into the world outside. So far, they hadn't blown their cover yet, helped by the fact that women still played a large part in their lives—as friends, colleagues, dancing partners. They still even flirted with them, often for no better reason than that many women seemed to expect that from them.

The water ran cold. Hutch turned it off and reached for a towel. The house was dark and quiet when he made his way back to the bedroom and crawled into the empty bed for a second time that night, feeling restless, and no less deserted than before.

*Starsky, where are you? When you are coming home?*

This was simply no fun without Starsky around.

oooOOOooo

He must have dropped off to sleep at some point, because the next thing he knew was the sound of Starsky rustling quietly out of his clothes in complete darkness. Then the mattress dipped and a familiar body crawled under the sheets beside him. Hutch felt a hand reaching for him, finding his back, then his shoulder.

"Hutch. You awake?"

Starsky's voice was deep and low in the darkness. Hutch considered feigning sleep, knowing almost at once that the idea wouldn't fly. He hauled himself through the layers of his drowsiness and turned over, resigned. "I am now."

Instead of a response, Starsky rolled on top of him and took his mouth into a rough, almost violent kiss. Startled into full awareness, Hutch responded almost instinctively. The kiss tasted of beer and burger and Starsky, and it roused him like nothing else. He felt himself go hard again.

Starsky released him only when they'd both run out of oxygen. Then he rolled away without another word. He didn't even comment on the wet spot.

"What brought that on?" Hutch said, struggling for breath. "Or is that your way of saying you missed me?"

Starsky didn't reply. Hutch reached for him, found the curve of his shoulder, the long slope of his back. He encircled the narrow waist with his arm and pressed himself close.

"I hope you have plans to follow that up with something more substantial," he whispered as he traced the landmarks on Starsky's chest like a blind man reading from a book long since committed to memory.

Starsky sighed, a deep, heavy sound. He turned in Hutch's arms until they were face to face, separated only by the inky blackness that clung to every surface like clumps of clay.

"I love you," he said. "You know that, right?"

"Mm, yes, I think you told me so once or twice."

There was nothing flippant in Starsky's voice. "And you know I will, no matter what, right?"

"Course I know. You mean you woke me up just to tell me that?" Hutch moved his hips suggestively. "You better get ready to finish what you started."

There was no response to that. Starsky lay very still. He seemed to have no immediate plans to take him up on the offer. He was so close, wrapped up in Hutch's arms. At the same time, he seemed a thousand miles away.

Hutch's erection was beginning to wilt. He frowned and decided to try a different approach.

"So, how did it go with Rosey?"

This time, the silence stretched just about forever, a loud noise in the darkness. Finally, Starsky shifted awkwardly and turned over again. Away from Hutch.

"D'you ever think about it?" his muffled voice came from the far side of the bed. "Bout what Kathy said? All that stuff about falling out of love and becoming like strangers and all that?"

Hutch decided Starsky was a cocktease. "Is that what's bothering you? You can't be serious, waking me up just to ask me that. Can't we discuss it in the morning?"

"No, tell me. How could she stop loving him? Geoff, I mean. A few years ago, she would've walked through fire for him. I just don't get it."

More rustling in the dark. Starsky seemed to have trouble finding a comfortable spot. After more awkward maneuvering, he settled on his side, facing Hutch again.

"See, I'd understand if she hated his guts," his voice came through the darkness. "Especially since the stupid bastard cheated on her. But how can she stop caring about him? She says he means nothing to her anymore. How can that happen, huh? Can you explain that?"

Hutch struggled to focus. His brief excitement had faded and made way for a bone-deep weariness that dragged at his limbs and eyelids with leaden weights. His lover's words merged into a jumble and the cadences of his voice took on the qualities of a lullaby.

"No, I can't," he mumbled. "Least, not at this time of night."

"But do you think...I mean, did you ever wonder if maybe that could happen to us one day?"

Hutch considered rolling his eyes, but remembered the darkness and opted for an exasperated snort instead. Trust Starsky to come up with one of his "what if" scenarios slap bang in the middle of the night!

"Course not. Jesus, are you out of your mind? What's the matter with you?"

"No, seriously, Hutch. Think about it. If it can happen to Kathy and Geoff, and...and to you and Vanessa, and me and Helen..." The mattress bounced as Starsky shifted and flopped onto his back again. "Why shouldn't it happen to us one day?"

"You really *are* a nutcase. It can't happen to us. Look, can we talk about this tomorrow? It's two in the morning. We gotta get some sleep."

"Why not? Why can't it?"

"Cause we're different, that's why. We're special."

Starsky made an inelegant sound in the darkness. "You have any idea how corny that sounds?"

Hutch groaned, turning away to pull the sheets around his ears. "Sure, it's corny. It also happens to be true."

"You think so?"

"I know so. And so do you." Hutch felt his eyes drift shut. His body entered the peculiar state of paralysis that accompanied the transition from wakefulness to sleep. He could hardly make his tongue work. "Look, it's late, I'm tired, and O'Rourke's gonna make us work through three stacks of witness reports tomorrow. I need to get some sleep."

"But what if we've got it all wrong? What if we're just like everyone else? If it can happen to them, it can happen to us."

"If you say so. Can we go to sleep now?"

"But what if—"

"Go to sleep, moron."

"Yeah, but—"

"Go to sleep!"

"Okay, okay."

The mattress shook again as Starsky rolled away and lay still, but Hutch knew, on that deep level of understanding he shared with no one else in the world, that Starsky was wide awake. He experienced a small tug of guilt at having brushed him off so lightly. Just before oblivion erased all consciousness, he resolved that, come the next day, he'd get to the bottom of whatever was eating his partner.

In fact, he'd do it first thing in the morning.

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## V

Starsky woke to a rotten mood.

He knew it, he hated it, and he had no idea what to do about it. A restless night interrupted by the weirdest dreams had left him exhausted before the day had even begun. He barely managed to pull himself together long enough to give a bleary-eyed Kathy a decent farewell hug.

"You gonna be all right? Sorry we can't take you to the airport."

"Of course I'm gonna be all right. Don't worry, I'll call a cab. And I'll lock up and leave the key under the flowerpot." Kathy hugged her brother. "I had a wonderful time. Thanks for everything. Go now, you're gonna be late."

Things went straight downhill from there.

The Torino stalled and died in the driveway for no apparent reason, and they had to take Hutch's clanking rust bucket to work. Starsky's mood soured, and he made sure Hutch knew it. The thermometer was already nudging the ninety mark, and a hot wind scoured the city, fanning the far plumes of wildfire that licked the southern sky. Metro was an oven of sweltering temperatures. Everyone was cranky as hell.

Including Hutch.

"For Chrissakes, Starsky, will you shut up about my car?" Hutch snapped as they pushed through the doors into the squad room. "What the hell is wrong with you? You're a pain in the ass today."

"Oh yeah? Well, you're not exactly Mr. Sunshine yourself," Starsky snapped back, feeling out of sorts with everything and everyone.

Especially Hutch.

*Kathy was wrong. The honeymoon's over and we're back to sniping at each other.*

But that was just the beginning.

"Hutchinson, my office!"

Hutch, who had just settled down at his desk, came to his feet again, resigned. Starsky mirrored the movement. But as he stepped into Dobey's office, O'Rourke pierced him with a rare look and held up a hand.

"Not you, Starsky," he said. "I said Hutchinson."

Starsky bristled. "We're partners. What concerns him, concerns me."

"That's for me to decide. This is a job for Sergeant Hutchinson. No need to waste your time. Get started on the Armadale files. And close the door on your way out."

Furious, Starsky marched from the room and kicked the door shut behind him.

By the time Hutch emerged from the office ten minutes later, Starsky was close to steaming. Hutch shut the door, carrying a thin file in his hand and a pissed off expression on his face.

Starsky eyed him narrowly. "What?"

Hutch slapped the file on the desk. "You're not going to believe this—San Diego is fighting Dennison's extradition. Seems they have a prior claim on him. For robbery and assault."

"*Robert* Dennison? They can't be serious. The guy raped and murdered two little girls. They can't hold him for *robbery*, for Chrissakes."

"And assault. Don't forget assault." Hutch didn't bother to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

"Oh, sure. Assault. They've gotta be fuckin' kidding!"

"O'Rourke seems to think it's their right. US soil and all that. And you know—if it's in the rule book...."

"Damn."

"Yeah. Unfortunately, Chief Ryan agrees with him. He wants me to take Dennison to San Diego today."

"*What?* Why you? That's a job for county jail, not homicide."

"The SDPD has a string of questions for the investigating officer. And that was me, if you remember."

"Cause you got a three-day head start into the case?" Starsky's temper frayed. "That's ridiculous. It wasn't my fault I got stuck with that damn bugging operation for so long. Anyway, what do you have to go down there for? Can't they talk to you on the phone?"

"They want me to go over the evidence with them again. There's some confusion over the statements by the Mexican police. Anyway, I *want* to go. I want to tell them *exactly* how Dennison killed those two girls, and what he did to them before they died. I want them to check out the autopsy reports and the pictures of the murder scene. And then I want to see if they're still refusing to have him extradited."

There was a dangerous gleam in Hutch's eyes. Starsky knew it well. He pitied the poor shmuck who'd have the misfortune to stand in the firing line of Hutch's anger.

"All right. But you still need two officers to transfer a perp. O'Rourke should be the first to know that."

"It's all settled. Mitchell Carlyle is getting transferred to San Diego today. O'Rourke arranged for us to pool resources with Central. They jumped at the offer. Seems they're just as shortstaffed as we are."

Starsky digested that. "Terrific. When're you leaving?"

"Now. In fact, I'm late. Ben Lawson is giving me a lift to Central at ten, and I still need to get the paperwork from Admin."

A rush of annoyance assaulted Starsky. "I can't believe you agreed to go without me. I thought we were partners. This is *our* case, not *yours*."

"Christ, Starsky, stop acting like a five-year old. What did you want me to do? I could hardly refuse a direct order from the Chief."

"I don't think you even tried. You realize that with you gone, I'll be stuck in here all day with the freakin' paperwork?" Starsky threw down his pen. "You sure got a knack for gettin' outta the chores around here."

Hutch went cold and still. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that. I don't know who's pissed on your parade today, *buddy*, but I'll be damned if I let you take it out on me."

He gathered the file, his holster and his jacket. "I gotta go. See you tonight. I hope you're in a better mood then."

The door fell shut behind Hutch. Starsky kicked the chair and cursed. Everything was going wrong that day, even his celebrated connection to Hutch.

Nursing a black cloud of discontent, Starsky bent over the file again. Maybe he'd crack the Armadale case in Hutch's absence. That would show him.

oooOOOooo

Eight hours, fourteen files, and an interview later, Starsky's destructive mood had simmered down to a dark annoyance directed not so much at the world at large as at himself for having been such a jackass.

He couldn't explain it. What the hell had gotten into him today? He'd already snapped at Babcock, roared at Stanton, and made himself unpopular with pretty much everyone else. Even Minnie was giving him a wide berth.

Worst of all, he'd managed to piss off Hutch.

The typewriter keys jammed again, and Starsky gave the machine a forceful whack. Damn, he hated being stuck in the office!

He wished he could talk to Hutch, reconnect with him, but Hutch was out of town and unreachable.

Every time the phone rang, Starsky snatched it up, only to find Records, or a snitch, or a crime lab technician at the other end. Hutch seemed determined to let his partner stew.

Starsky's mood sky-dived again. He ripped the completed form from the typewriter and signed it with a scrawl.

The phone rang again and Starsky reached for it with impatience. "Starsky," he barked.

There was a brief silence, then Hutch's voice, soft and low.

"Hey."

Just that. *Hey*. A sound with a thousand meanings.

It was enough. The tightness inside Starsky's gut uncurled and softened. He cast a quick glance around the squad room. Stanton and Pirelli occupied a desk at the back of the room, and a couple of uniforms manned the phones at the front. Other than that, the place was empty.

Starsky shifted the phone to his other ear, hunched over it to deter prying ears.

"Hey yourself," he said, just as softly.

A warm silence spread in the line between them, more eloquent than words. Starsky felt the tension of the whole miserable day ebb away from him. He relaxed into the phone.

"Where are you?" he said. "When are you getting back?"

Hutch sighed. "I won't. Not tonight, anyway. I'm still in San Diego. The whole case has blown up sky-high. The Mexican Consul has kicked up a stink and petitioned the Supreme Court. Captain Gatts in Robbery has issued a statement supporting the court's decision, and the Mayor is right behind him. And now the press has got hold of the story and run wild with it." He sighed again. "There's going to be a court hearing in the morning. I have to stay the night."

"Shit."

"I know. But maybe this way I get a chance to convince the Federal prosecutor that they have to give him up. I want the bastard tried for murder in Mexico, not for robbery in San Diego."

"Yeah." Starsky nodded grim agreement. "But what about the trial? Jury selection finished today."

"My testimony won't be until the afternoon. I'll be back by then."

"But you're gonna miss the opening statements." Hutch was going to miss the beginning of Gunther's trial. That wasn't right. After everything Hutch had done to get Gunther to this stage, that simply wasn't right. Hutch deserved to be there. He deserved to sit in the front row of the courtroom and watch Gunther go down in flames.

"Well, nothing I can do about that." Hutch sounded as annoyed as Starsky felt.

"Okay, look," Starsky said. "Don't worry. I'll be there for the both of us. I'll even take notes for you. You can catch the highlights on the news, and I'll fill you in on the details when you get back. Deal?"

"Deal."

Another small silence filled the space between them. Then Hutch cleared his throat.

"So, you solved the case yet?"

Starsky harrumphed. "In a day? You're askin' for a miracle. The forensic files alone are gonna take a week to plow through, and you need a science degree to make sense of the damn things. The case is one big mess. O'Rourke was right—we gotta go right back to the beginning."

"Hey, look, I'm sorry you had to ride a desk all day. I know how much you hate that. I promise I'll do my share when I get back."

"You better, 'cause I'm goin' stir-crazy in here. If it hadn't been for Micky 'The Punk', I would have been stuck in here all day."

"Micky called? What did he want?"

"To tip us off on the hooker case we were working this summer. And this time, he actually came up with the goods. I think we finally got a lead on Julio Ramirez."

"No kidding? What did he say?"

"That Eddie Lane's in town." Starsky gripped the phone harder when he recalled the brief hour of unexpected action that morning. "That's *Lane* as in *Crazy Eddie*, Ramirez' former bodyguard. Micky said he knew where he was holed up, so I got my ass over there as fast as I could—"

"You went to see Crazy Eddie?" Hutch interrupted, incredulous. "*The Crazy Eddie?*"

"The one and only. And he said—"

"And he *talked* to you? Eddie Lane doesn't talk to the cops. Everyone knows that."

"Well, he talked to *me*." Starsky's voice hardened. "I didn't exactly give him much choice in the matter. I wasn't in the mood to take 'no' for an answer."

There was an odd sound in the line, as if Hutch was choking on the mouthpiece. "Let me get this straight," he said in a narrow voice. "You mean you went to see Eddie Lane *on your own*?"

"Well, I had to, didn't I?" Starsky said, on the defensive. "Seeing as my partner's in San D—"

"You went to see Crazy Eddie *alone*? Without any backup? Have you gone completely insane?"

Starsky's brief moment of contentment melted away. "What else was I supposed to do? Wait for you to get back? Eddie would've been in New York or Miami by then. I was lucky to catch him when I did—"

"You could've taken Babcock or Simmons with you," Hutch shouted. "Or Stanton, or any of the other guys—"

"He wouldn't have talked to me if I'd shown up with a whole police squad. You know he's paranoid to the point of—"

"The man's a goddamn psychopath," Hutch roared. "He's a killing machine. He eats cops for breakfast. We *know* he killed Hobart and McPherson, even if we can't prove it. Dammit, Starsky, you promised you wouldn't go on any more solo missions. You can't go and take stupid fucking unnecessary risks like that while I'm away."

Starsky bristled. "It wasn't an unnecessary risk. It was a one-shot opportunity. Anyway, I had him covered the whole time. He had no chance to get at me."

Hutch didn't seem to hear him. "You do *not* go and see that man alone, goddammit! What the hell's wrong with you, Starsky? I told you before, and I'm telling you again—no more working alone! Understood?"

Starsky's brittle patience snapped. "Now wait a minute. Wait just one goddamn minute. I think you're forgetting who you're talking to. I'm not some green rookie fresh out of the Academy! I don't need you to tell me how to do my job. Yes, I went to see Crazy Eddie. *And* I got him to dish the dirt on his boss. I'm gettin' results here. So get off my back, will ya?"

Not waiting for an answer, Starsky slammed the phone down, resentment bubbling like a dark, evil brew in his veins. Goddammit, Hutch could be such a pain in the ass! Who the hell did he think he was, bossing his partner around like that?

"What the fuck are you lookin' at?" he snapped at Sandford and Watson, who were staring at him open-mouthed. "You got a problem?"

The two desk officers hastened to lower their heads to their paperwork.

The phone rang again.

oooOOOooo

*Hutch*, Starsky thought, riled, as he yanked the receiver from its cradle.

But it wasn't.

"David," a hesitant, almost timid voice said. "It's me. Rosey."

Her voice swept through him like a current. The name alone caused his heart to skip a beat. *Rosey*.

He'd thought he'd never hear from her again, that she was out of his life for good. Yet here she was on the other end of the line, talking rapidly, and just this side of coherent.

"David, please don't hang up. Listen to me, please. I had to call, and I didn't know where else to reach you. I wanted to tell you how sorry I am. For what I said in the car last night. I don't know why I said all those ugly things to you. About...Hutch and you. Please, I want to apologize."

Starsky's irritability crumbled under her tearful voice. To his surprise, his voice came out soft, almost gentle.

"It's all right, Rosey. Don't worry about it. I understand."

He did and he didn't. But they were the only words he could say.

"No, David. It's not all right. I said some terrible things to you last night. I want to apologize properly. Please come. Just for a moment. That's all I'm asking." She swallowed audibly. "I was so hoping we could stay friends."

Starsky sighed. Why did women always want to stay friends after a breakup? Didn't they realize it never worked out that way?

"There's nothing to forgive, Rosey," he said. "I know you're going through a rough time right now. You were upset last night and said things you didn't mean. I understand. I don't think it's necessary for us to meet again."

"David, please," she cried with a dangerous quaver in her voice. "We can't leave things the way they are. You mean too much to me for that. I have to see you and know you've forgiven me. I have to see it in your eyes. Please. After that, I promise, I'll never call you again."

Oh dammit, why was he always such a sucker for female tears?

"All right, Rosey. Don't cry now. Okay, I'm coming over after work. But only for a few minutes."

It wasn't as if he had anything better to do that night. Besides, maybe that way he could finally get Rosey Malone out of his system.

oooOOOooo

Rosey lived in a five story condominium two blocks from her former neighborhood in a leafy area of town—not exactly swanky, but light years away from the squalor of downtown streets Starsky was accustomed to seeing in his line of work every day.

He parked the LTD across the road, pushed through the glass doors into the lobby, and rode the elevator to the top floor, home to a single apartment. The door opened before he even had a chance to knock. Rosey hurtled through and flung herself into his arms.

"David. Oh, Dave, I'm so glad you came! I feel terrible about the things I said to you last night. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. Please say you forgive me."

She looked even more stunning than the night before. She'd tied back her hair to show off her slender neck and high cheekbones. A dress of some kind of floaty material in shades of blues and greens hugged her tiny waist. Her perfume surrounded her like an aura.

Starsky didn't hesitate. "Of course I forgive you. Anyway, there's nothing to forgive. I know it must've been quite a shock."

"I guess it was. When you told me...it was so unexpected."

She was standing very close. Starsky took a step away, a move that brought the saddest little smile to her lips. His heart did a funny thump.

"Come in, come in." Rosey urged him over the doorstep. "Sit down, David. Oh, I'm so glad you're here."

Starsky took a seat on the edge of the couch and surveyed the room. The small space was furnished in the bland style common to hundreds of furnished rental apartments, but Rosey had already made her mark on the place. He saw a colorful Mexican blanket draped over the back of the couch, a couple of Huichol Indian yarn paintings on the wall, displays of pottery and artifacts on the shelves and table.

A door led to what had to be the kitchen, and through an archway in the living room, Starsky glimpsed a double bed covered with a colorful quilt. A soft jazz tune drifted through the apartment.

Rosey settled on the couch beside him, a warm smile on her lips. "I can hardly believe you're here. Three years, David! Has it really been so long? I have so much to tell you. We have so much catching up to do."

"I'm not staying, Rosey." Starsky told her as gently as he could. "I came to make things right between us. But I can't stay long."

"Of course. I understand." She tossed back a fan of hair that caught the light. "But surely you have time for a drink? Just one? Please? For old times' sake."

Starsky relented. What harm could it do? "All right. Why not?"

The blinding smile he received for that almost took his breath away. There was something about the way her entire face lit up, and her eyes....

*Dammit, Rosey Malone, you're one beautiful woman.*

Starsky smiled back and relaxed for the first time that day. He leaned back and watched her movements around the room as she lit a couple of corner lamps, got glasses and bottles of beers from the kitchen, and put a new LP on the stereo. Fats Domino this time, his favorite. He was a little touched that she remembered.

Then she was back on the couch beside him, an arm's length away, and passed a tall glass to him. Tequila, of all things. Just like on their first date. He smiled at the memory.

"I found the record in Mexico City," she said, nodding at the music. "You played it when we spent the night at your place, remember? When I saw it in the shop, I just knew I had to get it. I listen to it all the time." She laughed. "I played it so much, a Mexican friend once asked me if I couldn't afford to buy any others. She thought I only had this one, 'cause I never played anything else."

Her mood had much improved, Starsky was relieved to see. She was animated, buoyant even. And more chatty than he remembered.

He didn't mind. What might have been an awkward situation turned out to be nothing of the kind. He was almost beginning to enjoy himself. He tried, but couldn't remember the last time he'd spent an evening alone in the company of an attractive woman.

Feeling more relaxed than he had all day, he set his empty glass on the table and reached for a beer chaser, as did Rosey. Starsky raised his bottle to her and drank, savoring the sensation of the cool liquid sliding down his throat.

Rosey kept up a steady stream of conversation, as if she feared a gathering silence might drive her visitor to the door, but Starsky found little to contribute. His life revolved around Hutch, and Rosey was unlikely to be interested in *that* part of his life.

So he listened, nodded, interjected the odd comment. Helped himself to more beer, didn't say no to a refill of tequila.

Time flowed by. Fats Domino gave way to Aretha Franklin. Rosey's voice floated around him, soft and sweet, the way only a woman's voice could be. She talked about Mexico, the land, the people. A trip to Europe. Her work among the Huichol Indians.

Starsky allowed himself a small smile. Still the fighter for social justice. Beautiful both inside and out. He'd once said that to her, hadn't he?

He couldn't remember. The three years that separated them might have been thirty, or three hundred. Three years ago, he'd been a different guy—a guy who'd loved women, who'd still believed in the American Dream of a wife and two point four kids. Who'd felt that dream slipping a little further away with each successive failure, breakup, death, separation. Whatever.

Starsky's mind began to wander as Rosey's voice became a stream somewhere in the back of his mind. He leaned back, nursing another bottle of beer while the rhythm of her voice washed around him.

Women. Amazing creatures. Strange and mysterious. Not like Hutch, whom he knew inside out, better than himself almost, no secrets, no surprises.

Women were...different from men. Deeply unknowable. Wildly unpredictable. And often utterly irresistible.

When Terri died, he'd buried the pain deep, in a secret place not even Hutch was allowed to enter in those grief-filled days of loss. It took him months of meaningless dates and one-night stands before he fell that heavily again.

For Rosey.

And lost again.

The fall that time was just as long, the impact just as hard. Harder. That time, it had taken him almost a year to recover. And to fall again.

For Kira.

A fatal choice, destined for failure from the start. Kira, he'd known it even then, had been his last chance, his last, almost desperate attempt at making the American Dream come true.

But it hadn't. And he'd finally understood that the dream wouldn't work for him. Instead, he'd settled for something, *someone*, so different from that dream, that sometimes he was overwhelmed, even now, by the changes inside him that had allowed him to take that step into the unknown.

Oh yes, he'd been a woman's man once. Never doubted it. Never imagined that could ever change. He hadn't looked at a woman in almost two years now. A long time, an eternity in many ways. He looked at Rosey now, let his gaze wander over her face, her hair, her mouth. Her breasts.

With a start, he realized that Rosey had stopped talking and was looking at him with large, liquid eyes and a small knowing smile.

"David," she said. Just that. *David*.

The use of his name made the hair curl at the back of his neck. Few people called him that these days. It was Starsky for the guys, and Dave or Davey for the girls. But David? That was Rosey's name for him. Some of the time. Important times.

Like now.

Rosey's eyes were all over him. "David," she said again, a low whisper. She reached out, hesitated. A small tremor shook her hand before she completed the gesture and resting her slender fingers on his leg. Her eyes, pools of light and warmth, drew him in. "Oh, David."

She was sitting very close. Too close. Starsky pushed her hand away, gently, not wanting to hurt her feelings. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth; his mind struggled to find the right words. He cast a glance at the assortment of drinks on the table. How much of the damn booze had he had? Somewhere along the way, he'd lost count.

He said, "Don't do this, Rosey. It's over between us. I told you. Why won't you believe me?"

There was something almost hypnotic in the way she looked at him and speared his heart with a single glance of those honey-colored eyes.

"Because I can see it in your eyes that it isn't," she said. "You love me."

He knew he should be leaving. Right now. He should get up and walk out, forget about her, never come back. Knew he shouldn't allow her to sit so close, and let her hand move up and down his thigh with a soothing caress.

"You love me. I know you do." Her eyes roamed over Starsky's face. "And I love you. I want to show you how much. Give me a chance. Please."

Every cell in his body told him to protest, to get up and put an end to this right now—but the words wouldn't come, and his limbs refused to obey the orders of his brains. Instead, he was acutely aware of her closeness, her seductive, intoxicating perfume swirling around him.

Women. Their scent. Their curvy contours. Their beguiling gentleness. They could drive you wild. Crazy. They could take you to heaven and burn you in hell.

Rosey.

She was a riptide in the sea. He couldn't resist her pull. She pressed herself against him again, and this time he didn't push her away.

Her lips tasted as sweet as he remembered.

"David. David." Her lips were all over his face, her hands all over his body. He found that they were lying on the couch, side by side. He'd lost his shirt somehow, and Rosey's hands were on the scarred landscape of his chest, exploring. He could see no sign of revulsion or pity on her face. Just desire, and yearning. Emotion flickered over her face as she lowered her head and pressed her lips to the lowest scar.

The current took hold of him, carrying him sideways, away from everything he'd known the past two years. He blinked and shook his head. Refusal? Denial? Protest?

"Touch me," she said. She was naked. When, how? Starsky wasn't sure. He'd lost all sense of time, of reality. "Touch me."

She placed his hands on her pale, smooth breasts. He remembered them so well—small, but perfectly formed. They fit into his hands as if made for the occasion. The nipples were hard and round, and he remembered that they tasted of Christmas, of ginger and cinnamon.

She moaned and arched into his touch. Starsky shook his head again, a token gesture. Reality was slipping away, away. He was in a dream, a forgotten fantasy from years ago. He thought he swayed, but maybe it was the room that swirled around him.

"Come," she said and stood. "Come to bed."

She took his hand and lead him through the archway. Through the haze before his eyes, he saw a goddess. A dream from the past. Beautiful, so beautiful.

"Make love to me," the goddess said. She pulled him down on the bed and kissed him again.

The current swept him away, into her arms. There was nothing he could do to stop it. He gave up the fight. The world fell away around him.

Then there was only Rosey.

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## VI

Hutch never did get the opportunity for that talk he'd had in mind. From the time of waking, everything had conspired against it, not least Starsky himself, who'd been moody as hell, not himself at all.

Having to go down to San Diego hadn't helped, either.

And now he was still here, late at night, holed up in the squad room of the SDPD's Robbery department and no nearer a resolution than ten hours ago. He wasn't even sure where he would spend the night. Some flea-pit motel, probably.

"I understand your concerns, Consul," Captain Gatts said, not for the first time. "But you need to understand ours. If we extradite Dennison, we have no guarantee that he'll be prosecuted, let alone convicted by the Mexican courts. We've already established that the murder evidence against him is flimsy. If we prosecute him here, at least he's certain of a custodial sentence."

"For robbery, he will get maybe two or three years." Consul Hernandez's flawless English vowels sounded strained. "That will not be much consolation for the parents of Consuela Martinez and Ana Maria Suarez. They want to see their daughters' murderer doing hard time in jail."

None of this was new. They were going over old ground.

Hutch allowed himself to switch off for a moment and let his mind wander. It didn't roam far before homing in on the subject that was never far from his mind.

Starsky. What the hell had gotten into him that day?

A part of him was still mad as hell at Starsky's actions. Facing Crazy Eddie without backup was just the type of damn stupid risk they'd decided months ago they wouldn't take anymore.

Another part of him acknowledged that, had the roles been reversed, he probably wouldn't have hesitated to do precisely the same.

But that wasn't the issue. Hutch frowned, trying to decide what the issue was. He was missing something vital, and the sooner he got back to LA to get to the bottom of it, the better.

Sergeant Marcotti, one of Gatts' men, stuck his head in the door. "Capt'n, it's on the news now."

Everyone scraped their chairs back and filed into the adjourning room where a small black-and-white television set flickered uncertainly in the corner.

*"...controversy following the arrest of Robert Jay Dennison in Los Angeles last week...accused of the violent rape and murder of two school girls...extradition request denied...outrage in the Mexican capital...diplomatic attempts at..."*

In a follow-up interview, a distraught Mrs. Suarez delivered a tearful appeal to the US courts to release the murderer of her daughter to the Mexican justice system while the somber-looking journalist beside her nodded in earnest agreement.

Captain Gatts slapped his thighs in annoyance. "Manipulative reporting—that's what I call it. Looks like you've got the press on your side, Consul." He stood. "I don't see what else we can accomplish here tonight. It's almost midnight. I suggest we call it a day and meet again in the morning."

In the background, the news droned on.

*"In Los Angeles, the trial of James Gunther—already dubbed the trial of the century—is due to begin tomorrow following four days of jury selection. James Gunther stands accused of..."*

"Hey, Hutchinson," Marcotti called out, still sprawled on his chair before the set, his feet propped on the stand. "Aren't you a witness at this trial?"

"He's the star witness for the prosecution," his partner Berkeley said before Hutch could open his mouth. "Don't you remember? He was the arresting officer."

Captain Gatts, already on his way out, stopped and directed a sudden keen glance at Hutch.

"Dammit, that's right," he growled. "Gunther shot your partner, didn't he? The trial starts tomorrow? So what the hell are you still doing in San Diego? You should be in LA right now."

Hutch almost smiled. "Your orders, sir. You wanted me to stay for the court hearing in the morning."

"But dammit, man, why didn't you say something? You can't miss Gunther's trial. That would be a crime in itself. Forget about the hearing. Marcotti here has your statement and all the details of the case. No need for you to stay. Go on, get your ass back to LA. You still got plenty of time to make it."

"Thank you, sir, but my ride went back to LA hours ago, and I won't be able to rent a car until tomorrow morning anyway."

"I'll drive you," Berkeley boomed without even a second's hesitation. He held up a hand when Hutch was about to protest. "No problem. Wouldn't want you to miss the trial of the century."

Hutch looked from one man to the other. The mood in the room had changed, softened. Even Captain Gatts' tough shell appeared to have melted a little.

*Cops united against a common enemy.*

He nodded. "Thanks, Captain. Sergeant. I appreciate it."

"Go nail the bastard, Hutchinson. He deserves it."

oooOOOooo

Berkeley dropped him outside the house just before three a.m., refusing Hutch's invitation to come inside for coffee, beer, food, and/or a bed to sleep in.

"I gotta get back," he said. "Got my own court meeting to go to in the morning. Good luck with the trial. And don't worry about Dennison. No matter what the judge decides, he's gonna do time in jail."

The house was dark and silent when Hutch let himself in, weary beyond exhaustion. What he needed now was a beer, a slice of cold pizza, if Starsky had left him any, a shower, and four solid hours of sleep. In that precise order.

And Starsky, of course. First, before anything else, Starsky.

No matter what had gone down between them that day, now was the time to set it all aside. Hutch needed that. Needed Starsky.

He shed his shoes and jacket, stripped off gun and holster, stepped noiselessly into the dark living room. Drew back when an eerie red light winked at him through the darkness like an evil eye, and rolled his eyes when he realized that it was only the new-fangled answering machine every homicide officer in the department was now required to have.

Hutch ignored the hypnotic twinkle and tiptoed upstairs, careful to avoid the creaky step in the middle.

The bedroom door stood open; the room was bright with the light of a waning moon. The blinds were up, the bed the muddle of twisted sheets they'd left in such a rush the previous morning.

Frowning, Hutch turned on the light. The bedroom was empty.

Hutch shelved his weariness and checked the other rooms. No Starsky. He retraced his steps downstairs and gave each room a cursory glance. No Starsky. Garden, garage, shed—no Starsky.

Hutch pursed his lips, went back upstairs, and subjected the place to a closer scrutiny. The shower cubicle was dry; the laundry basket minus the clothes Starsky had worn that day. Knowing his partner's habits as well as his own, it didn't take long to establish that Starsky hadn't been back since morning.

Outside, the Torino had gone from the driveway, but that was hardly much of a clue. Most likely, Merle had towed it away for repairs.

Hutch descended the stairs thoughtfully.

The answering machine's evil eye drew his attention, and reluctantly, Hutch went to confront it. Then stopped. Why would Starsky leave a message for him, knowing his partner wouldn't be back until the following day?

Still, maybe there was something.

The tape held four messages, none of them from Starsky. First was Merle with a lengthy, largely incomprehensible analysis of the Torino's woes. Then Huggy with a stern injunction to call him. Kathy with a breathless account of her flight to Chicago and reunion with her sons. Finally, Huggy again, skating close to the edge of impatience now.

Hutch frowned. A small tingle of unease traveled down his spinal cord. He shook it off impatiently.

*Work, probably. Some last minute stake-out.*

Hutch picked up the phone and dialed Starsky's extension. No reply. He tried Babcock's, then Stanton's. No reply. Finally, he got the crisp young voice of the night duty officer on the line.

"No, sorry, sir. My records show Sergeant Starsky signed out at six-thirty last night. No, he wasn't called back in. No, he's not on the roster for any stake-outs. No, sir, I'm afraid I can't tell you where he is."

The spike of fear erupted suddenly, without warning, stabbing Hutch to the heart like a scalpel, bright and sharp. Possibilities roared awake inside his mind, shadows from the past—kidnap, assault, accident, assassination....

*Relax, idiot! Maybe he's out for a drink with the guys. Or following up a lead from a snitch. It's not like we never had late night calls from snitches before.*

A new idea muscled in. He dialed Dispatch. "Ronny? It's Hutch. Any messages left for me or Starsky since yesterday?"

A long moment went by while the older man leafed through the day's records. "Just one. Contact the man named Huggy Bear. Message left at 10:13 last night."

*Huggy.*

Cursing himself for being a fool, Hutch dialed the number for The Pits. No reply. He took a measured breath, wondering what was wrong with his brain, and tried

Huggy's home number instead. To his surprise, his friend picked up after only three rings.

"Huggy, it's me."

"Dammit, Hutch, where've you been? I been waiting all night for one of you to call."

"I didn't get your message until just now. What have you got? Is it about Starsky?"

There was a pause. "How did you know?"

"'Cause he didn't come home last night, and I don't know where he is. He's not on a job, and he hasn't left word." Hutch thought he sounded like a fretful housewife. But Huggy of all people had to know how unusual a state of affairs that was. "Maybe something's happened to him."

Huggy's silence confirmed his darkest fears. "Well, dammit," Hutch erupted. "Talk to me! Did you see him? Or hear from him?"

"Easy, man. Easy. No, I ain't seen him, or heard from him." Huggy's dipsy twang sounded muted, always a bad sign. "Okay, listen, I got a call from this dude last night. Must've been just after ten. Guy with a southern accent. Never heard his voice before. He gave me a message for you. No, scrap that. He gave me a message for Starsky."

"For Starsky?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well, dammit, what did he say?"

"He said, I quote, 'Tell that dark-haired cop friend of yours to keep his paws off the broad or he's gonna be in trouble.'"

"*What?*"

"He said, 'Tell that dark-haired cop—'"

"I heard you. I heard you."

*Tell that dark-haired cop friend of yours to keep his paws off the broad or he's gonna be in trouble.*

What the hell was that supposed to mean? And who was "the broad"?

"You sure the message was for Starsky?"

"I only got one dark-haired cop among my friends, Hutch."

"Okay, okay. Just checking. Did he say anything else?"

"Yeah. He said, 'Did you get that, you dumb nigger?'"

Hutch took a careful breath. "Sounds like a pleasant guy."

"Yeah. Hold on a sec." A faint sound rustled through the line, followed by a woman's sleepy complaint and a muffled reply in Huggy's unmistakable drawl. There was some more rustling, the sound of footsteps, and a door closing. Then Huggy was back on the line.

"Listen, Hutch, this guy sounded like he meant business. He wasn't just some drunk shootin' off at the mouth. I stake my reputation as a bartender on it. Could be he's plannin' to go after Starsky."

"Maybe he already has. I can't think of any other reason why I can't find him."

"So what're you gonna do?"

"Let me think. He said for Starsky to keep his *paws off the broad*. What broad is he talking about?"

"I been wonderin' 'bout that. How about the looker you guys were hanging out with the other night? When your sister was here?"

Hutch wanted to slap himself. *Of course!*

"Hug, you should be a detective. You're right. She's gotta be the one."

"She one of Starsky's old flames?"

"Yeah. She's Rosey Malone, Frank Malone's daughter. Remember we worked his case a few years ago? She's just come back to LA. The guy who phoned you must be a jealous lover. He's probably seen them together and jumped to the wrong conclusion."

Hutch was on his feet, reaching for his holster. "I gotta go see her. She must know who he is."

"You know where to find her?"

"Not yet. But I will." Hutch slammed the phone down, picked it up again.

"Records? Sergeant Hutchinson here. I need you to get me the current address for one Raymond Milligan Shelby...yes, at once...no, it's urgent...yes, I'm holding."

oooOOOooo

By the time the eastern sky was turning pale, Rosey's address was safely engraved on Hutch's memory.

Ray Shelby, Frank Malone's former competitor and default heir to the Malone empire, hadn't been too thrilled to be hauled out of bed in the middle of the night, and Hutch had been forced to pull his best "bad cop" routine to obtain the information he needed.

Shelby, as it turned out, not only knew Rosey's whereabouts; he himself had provided the apartment for her.

"I owed him," Shelby told him and tightened the belt of the bathrobe he wore over his pajamas. "It was the least I could do for his daughter when she turned to me for help."

"What else did you do for her?" Hutch snarled. "Put any hit men at her disposal lately?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm warning you, Hutchinson, I'm clean. I gave you Rosey's address in the spirit of cooperation. If she's in trouble with the law, it's none of my business."

Hutch eyed him. Shelby was and always had been a thorn in their eyes—a criminal too oily to grasp and too clever to leave incriminating evidence. But this time, Hutch believed him. Shelby had nothing to do with Starsky's disappearance, probably didn't even know about it.

He would have to go and see the person who held the key to the mystery.

oooOOOooo

Ashgrove Avenue lay a thirty-minute drive away in a trendy part of town. Hutch steered the green sedan he'd borrowed from the Metro car pool down the wide, tree-lined street, checking house numbers.

Number 1545 turned out to be a modern apartment block that tried hard to look classy, but succeeded only in pulling off a look of flamboyant tackiness. Hutch drove by slowly. Felt his heart miss a beat when the sight of his dented LTD jumped out at him from the line of cars parked at the curb.

The surge of relief in his veins was short-lived. The car meant nothing, only that he was on the right track.

He parked around the corner, got out, and gave the neighborhood the quick, instinctive scrutiny perfected in years of police work. The deep hush of pre-dawn hung over the street. A paper boy cycled past with a stack of the morning editions on the handlebar. A block to the east, a jogger crossed the road and disappeared down a side street.

Casting a final look around, Hutch entered the building. The lobby lay drenched in sleep; even the concierge's cubicle was deserted. Ignoring the elevator, he climbed the stairs to the fifth floor.

Hutch approached the place as he would the den of a convicted murderer. His back to the wall, the Magnum a reassuring weight in his hand, he tried the door knob, frowning when it turned easily in his hand and the door swung noiselessly inward.

Every fiber inside him yelled alert. Tense, the gun held in a tight grip, Hutch slipped through the door, making no sound.

The apartment lay in heavy silence, dark, every curtain drawn. A dense, almost stifling blanket of heat smothered the room, a startling contrast to the freshness of dawn that cooled the street outside.

Hutch stood motionless, letting his eyes adjust to the twilight. The room seemed empty, the only sounds the soft hum of a refrigerator and his own heavy heartbeat pounding in his ears. A vision of Starsky, bound and gagged, beaten and broken, flashed through his mind like some subliminal horror image projected by an overactive, sleep-deprived brain.

He elbowed the image aside as he stepped forward and squinted into the gloom. He made out a bookshelf, a TV stand, a kitchen door. Slowly, details emerged. A couch covered with a patterned blanket. A coffee table littered with empty glasses and bottles.

Starsky's blue windbreaker hanging over the back of a chair.

Hutch caught his breath and snatched it up, realizing at the same moment that there were clothes scattered all over the place. Familiar clothes. Starsky's striped t-shirt, bunched up in a corner of the couch. His blue sneakers, tumbled on their sides under the coffee table. Even his gun was there, complete with holster, discarded on the floor.

But that wasn't all. There was a dress hanging over the arm of the couch with a lacy bra draped over the back. On the floor lay a pair of panties, spread open like an invitation.

Hutch stood quite still and took in the details, mechanically, like snapshots from a cheap Polaroid. A few feet away, the pants Starsky had worn to work the day before lay tangled on the floor, the legs pulled inside out. And beside it a pair of tiny red briefs Hutch would recognize just about anywhere.

The trail of discarded clothes led to a dark alcove and a large double bed. Hutch stepped closer. Dimly, he made out two shapes wrapped around each other.

Making no sound, he approached the bed and looked down at the two occupants. Starsky lay on his side, his face buried in the pillow. He had one arm tucked under his body; the other was thrown out at an awkward angle and hanging over the edge of the bed. A thin sheet twisted around his legs. He was naked.

Rosey lay curled around him, her bare breasts pressed against his back, an arm hooked around his waist. A veil of her long bright hair obscured her face.

Hutch stood for a long time, just looking. His mind was empty of thought. The heat of the room pressed down on him like the hand of some large demented creature pushing him under water. He struggled for breath, hauling in a lungful of precious oxygen. The room tilted, tipping him sideways, but his eyes never left Starsky's face.

Unable to help himself, he reached out and touched the curly head, feeling the warmth there, under the thick curls. Evidence of life, if he still needed it.

Starsky emitted a drowsy groan. The long lashes trembled and his eyes opened—slowly, laboriously, as if a twenty-pound weight rested on his lids. For a moment, he

blinked up at Hutch, dreamy and unfocused. Then his gaze cleared, and his lips curved into a smile of sleepy recognition.

"-utch...."

The left hand reached out, flailing aimlessly, and missing him by almost a foot. Hutch's heart gave a funny little lurch. Then the hand gave up the quest and flopped back over the side of the bed. Starsky's lids fluttered and dropped shut. A moment later, he started breathing deeply and regularly.

Hutch stood staring at his comatose partner for another long moment, his mind in uproar, wondering what to do.

Starsky was clearly in no shape to get up, let alone go anywhere. He would need at least a couple more hours to sleep it off. But the trial started at eight, and time was running out. Hutch recalled that he needed a shower and a change of clothes if he wanted to look his best on the witness stand that afternoon.

As he stepped back, he noticed that he was still clutching Starsky's jacket. Taking a deep controlled breath, he bent down and placed the garment on the floor beside the bed.

He cast a final look around the claustrophobic confines of the alcove, and retreated from the room, the apartment, closing the door very quietly behind him and making sure the lock was engaged so that the apartment was secured. Turning away, Hutch descended the stairs with a heavy tread.

He would only just be able to make it.

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## VII

Starsky surfaced through the distorted layers of an alien dream, a landscape filled with twisted images and melting colors. Slowly, the images faded, but the sense of strangeness remained. For a moment he lay with his eyes closed, his mind and limbs leaden with sleep, and tried to put his finger on it.

There was something odd about the place. The mattress was too soft, the room too close and stifling. For some reason, he'd fallen asleep on the wrong side of the bed. He also felt like shit. Someone was wielding a jackhammer behind his eyes, and the taste in his mouth reminded him of slimy things living at the bottom of sewage tanks.

*Damn, Hutch, where the hell are we? And how much booze did we knock back last night?*

He yawned. Still half asleep, he rolled over and reached for Hutch. His hand connected with an arm, a shoulder. The warm skin felt like silk under his calloused fingers as he traced its softness from the shoulder over the swell of a shapely breast to a small hard nipple—

Starsky's eyes flew open. He snatched his hand away and jerked upright as if zapped with a cattle prod. Awareness was instant and complete. Shock froze the breath in his lungs as he stared at the figure beside him.

Rosey.

Naked.

Asleep in bed beside him.

Starsky launched himself from the bed like a rocket and had his back to the wall before he was even aware that he'd moved. Sunlight filtered through a gap in the drapes and pooled on the bed. He only needed a second to take in the situation, and to realize that he was as naked as she was.

Ignoring the explosion of pain in his head, Starsky stared wildly around, taking in the array of empty bottles on the table, the stink of stale beer in the air. His eyes fell on a scatter of clothes, both his and Rosey's, in a jumble all over the room. He snatched up his briefs and pulled them on, then struggled to untangle his jeans and draw them over his legs and hips.

In the bed across the room, Rosey stirred and opened her eyes. Starsky stared at her, struggling to keep a rising panic at bay. What was he doing here? What the hell was going on?

"David," Rosey mumbled, smiling sleepily in his direction. "What's the matter, Dave? Come back to bed."

Starsky recoiled. A wispy memory assembled inside his head. He and Rosey, sitting on the couch, talking. Drinking beer and tequila.

And then? What had happened then? The memory was dodging him, but he already knew that it was something terrible. He took a step toward the bed.

"What's goin' on, Rosey?" he said, his voice tight. "What...happened here?"

Rosey rolled over and stretched, as languid as a cat, and completely at ease in her nakedness. "Oh, David, you're such a tease. Don't tell me you've forgotten already. After that great time we had last night."

Starsky's stomach heaved. What was she saying? What the *hell* was she saying? Surely they hadn't...?

"Just answer the question!" he barked. "What happened?"

"What happened?" She laughed a happy, carefree laugh. "You made love to me, Dave, that's what happened. And it was wonderful! You made me fly, Dave. No one has made me feel that way in three whole years."

Starsky's world twisted off its axis.

*This isn't happening. This isn't real.*

Rosey pushed herself upright and lowered her feet to the rug. The thin robe she pulled on emphasized rather than obscured the curves of her body. She walked across the room toward him, the joyful smile now tinged with a look of puzzled concern.

"What's wrong, Dave? You're not having second thoughts, are you? Please don't. What happened last night was wonderful. It felt so right. Just like three years ago." She reached for him. "Don't feel bad about it. You needed it. You needed a woman so badly."

A cold wave of horror flooded the pit of Starsky's stomach. He reeled. This was a nightmare. This couldn't be happening. Couldn't. Maybe he was still asleep.

When Rosey's hand connected, Starsky stepped back, unable to bear her touch.

Hurt flickered in her eyes. "I don't understand," she said. "We had a great time together. You were wild in bed. You wanted it so much. Don't you remember?"

Starsky pressed his fingers to his aching temples. He remembered...yes, he remembered...*something*. Rosey sitting close to him on the couch. Rosey's hand on his thigh. Her voice. Her perfume. The look in her eyes.

The memory was as hazy as a dream. And after that—nothing. Nothing at all. Just a vast, dark, empty space.

"No, I..." He shook his head, the pounding behind his eyes a demented counterpoint to his racing heart. "I don't know."

"David, you were here with me. You were with me all night. You mean you really don't remember? Oh, I *knew* we shouldn't have had so much to drink! But I thought it would do you good. You were so tense when you got here, and so angry because of Hutch, and—"

*Hutch.*

Starsky reeled as another memory hit him like a punch in the solar plexus. *Oh God, Hutch!*

"Hutch was here," he said in a voice he didn't recognize. He grabbed Rosey by the arms and shook her. "He was here, wasn't he? I remember. I saw him!"

"David. David, let go of me. You're hurting me."

"Tell me! Hutch was here, wasn't he? He was standing beside the bed. He saw...."

*He saw. Hutch saw us. He was here and he saw....*

Starsky's legs turned to rubber. He groaned. He let go of Rosey and clamped his hands around his aching head again.

Somehow Hutch had managed to get back from San Diego in time. And missing his partner at home, he'd tracked him down to Rosey's. And seen...the unforgivable.

*Ohgodohgodohgod.*

Rosey rubbed her arms, looking ready to cry. "I don't know. I don't know if he was here. He couldn't have been. The door was locked and he wouldn't have...."

Starsky stopped hearing her, stopped seeing her. The voice he'd once loved so much suddenly cut his tortured head like a metal saw. The sight of her made his stomach churn.

And it wasn't even her fault. It was his. All his fault.

The walls closed in on him. He couldn't breathe.

Away. He had to get away from the cloying confines of the room, the evidence of his actions, Rosey's high pleading voice. He pushed his arms into the sleeves of his t-shirt, his feet into the sneakers. Slinging his holster and jacket over his arm, not taking the time to put them on, he backed away to the door.

"David, wait! Please." Rosey reached for him, a beseeching look on her face.

Starsky turned and fled the scene. Like a perp. Or a hit-and-run driver. He took the steps three at a time, fueled by horror and guilt, and a painful pounding of fear in his throat.

But these, he knew, he wouldn't be able to outrun so easily.

oooOOOooo

A dented black-and-white parked outside the door was the first thing that met his eyes when he bolted from the building. A uniformed figure lounged in the driver's seat. Starsky stumbled to a halt when he recognized patrolman Collins, one of Metro's new batch of rookies. Collins became aware of him two seconds later, spilled from the car, and snapped to attention.

"Sergeant Starsky, sir!"

"Collins. What're you doing here?"

"Sergeant Hutchinson's orders, sir. He told me to make myself conspicuous outside this building. He said to radio for backup if I saw anything suspicious."

The words didn't make sense. *Hutch had me under surveillance? But how did he know?*

"Sir, will you still be needing me? Sergeant Hutchinson said I could go when you'd finished in there."

Starsky stared at him with incomprehension. *Finished in there?*

He forced himself to speak coherent words. "Yes, you can go now, officer. Thank you."

Collins' ridiculously young face split into a grin. "Glad I could help. I can't believe I got to work a case with you. I've never been on a stake-out before. Or would you call this a look-out? It sure made a change from traffic duty."

Starsky wondered why he was speaking in Mandarin. He nodded stiffly, and Collins slammed the door and took off with a swerve and a screech.

Starsky walked to the LTD, every step suddenly an effort. An elephant seemed to be resting on his chest, making breathing an Olympic effort. The LTD, the object of his frequent and recent ridicule, felt like a sanctuary, and he leaned against its solid metal, head down, hands clenched to fists around the objects he was still holding. Acid churned in his stomach. For a moment, he thought he was going to be sick.

Maybe none of this was real. Maybe someone was playing a goddamn fucking joke on him. Maybe he'd woken in some kind of a parallel universe where all the realities of his life were turned upside down.

*Who the hell are you kidding? You saw the fuckin' evidence all over the room.*

He'd slept with Rosey. Somehow, fueled by alcohol, frustration, and a latent attraction to the female sex, he'd done what he'd thought himself incapable of. He'd betrayed his partner.

Starsky moaned. Terror made his knees go weak. He pulled at the car door, fell into the seat, and pressed his aching forehead to the wheel.

*How did this happened? How could I have done this? How...?*

They were questions without answers. He couldn't even finish the thought. Couldn't bend his mind around the situation, the enormity of his actions. The consequences. The whole fucking nightmare.

He shuddered. He had to find Hutch. All that mattered now was Hutch.

oooOOOooo

The house on the hill looked dark and lonely. Starsky sat hunched in the car and gazed up at his home, dreading what he might find inside.

Maybe Hutch had left already, full of hurt and anger. Maybe he was still there, pacing, waiting for his partner's return and a chance to blow up. Or maybe he was in there, licking his wounds, and quietly falling apart.

The cold hand of fear clutched his heart. *God, what have I done?*

With a single mindless act, he'd destroyed everything his life depended on. He'd hurt the one person he'd give his soul to keep from harm. He couldn't even recall how, or even why it had happened. Had no idea what had possessed him to do what he'd done.

*Unforgivable.*

He swallowed. More minutes passed before he managed to scrape together the courage to get out of the car and walk up to the front door.

The door was locked. The house was empty.

Inside, there were signs of Hutch's earlier presence everywhere—the clothes he'd worn the day before, damp towels in the bathroom, the Dennison file on the table. Hutch had come and gone.

Not stopping to do anything else, Starsky shed his clothes as if they were radioactive, walked into the shower, and turned the water to the highest setting he could bear. Near scalding water descended on him, but he ignored the pain. Welcomed it, even. Using the nail brush, he scrubbed at his body with hard, vicious strokes. Anything to wash the scent of Rosey off his skin. He didn't stop until the water ran cold, and his skin felt raw and flailed, and dizzy spots danced before his eyes.

He pulled on fresh clothes, shoved the others into the trash outside. And then he stood, alone on the porch, swaying on unsteady legs. His hands found the wooden railing and curled around it, holding on.

The objects in his view distorted, then reappeared with crystal clarity, looking absurdly mundane against the backdrop of horror to which he'd woken. There, beside the porch, stood the wheelbarrow Hutch had acquired with much fanfare not two days after moving in. A spade and pitchfork leaned beside it, equally new, but already caked with dirt, evidence of energetic labor among the weeds.

His throat tightened when he recalled Hutch's excitement over these simple purchases, and he squeezed his eyes shut. God, when would this nightmare end?

But it wasn't a nightmare. Or a dream. This was real. The sooner he accepted that, the better. He'd gone to see a former girlfriend. He'd sat on her couch and drunk her beer. And then he'd taken her to bed and fucked her.

And Hutch knew. He'd seen. And left without a word. Hutch had left him.

Starsky groaned.

*I didn't mean to do it. I swear I don't know how it happened. God, Hutch, I never meant to hurt you.*

Yeah, great. The words of every adulterer after the fact. The same old words, same old excuses. Empty and meaningless. They never changed anything. They certainly wouldn't cut any ice with Hutch.

An image of Kira surfaced in his mind, and with it a memory of Hutch's own descent into the world of betrayal—so long ago now, it seemed to belong to another lifetime.

With a shudder, Starsky remembered severing all ties to Hutch. Remembered a darkness in his mind so profound it had allowed him to chop apart the bonds that had held them both together.

*Can't work with a man I can't trust,* he'd told a white-faced Hutch. And later, when his former partner had stood swaying on his doorstep, his face distorted with grief, he'd said, *Love can die. Sometimes a betrayal is too great, and it kills the love.*

Starsky felt sick. Had he really said those cruel words?

There was no consolation in the fact that he'd been disastrously wrong at the time.

*Pay-back time,* he thought distantly. *Not that you don't deserve it.*

Was there anything he could say in his defense? His mind was blank. There was nothing. He was guilty, guilty, guilty. Of the ultimate betrayal of trust.

*This is going to kill him.*

To Hutch, the situation would be crystal clear. After two years of fucking a man, his lover had rediscovered his inner machismo and taken advantage of his partner's absence to recapture the simple pleasures of women.

*But I didn't! I wouldn't have. I don't love her that way anymore. I love Hutch. Only Hutch.*

But Hutch wouldn't know that. Might not believe him. Might never trust him again. Might see his love wither away to nothing, like Kathy's love for Geoff.

The sound that forced itself from Starsky's throat this time had all the hallmarks of a sob. For a moment, he stood with his head bowed and his hands clenching and unclenching around the splintered wood, rocked by the dull pounding of fear in his heart.

Then he opened his eyes, hauled in a heavy breath, and wiped both hands over his face.

He'd slept with Rosey. He'd betrayed his lover. Now all he could hope for was Hutch's forgiveness.

But first, he had to find him.

oooOOOooo

Parker Center was its usual hive of activity. Starsky found a space for the LTD and went inside, dragging feet of lead. He paid no attention to the curious glances aimed at him by the uniformed officers in the hall, but couldn't ignore the slim dark-haired woman who stepped into his path.

"Starsky! What're you doing here?"

"Minnie, did you see Hutch? Is he upstairs?"

Minnie eyed him with astonishment. "He's at the trial. Everyone's at the trial. Even Chief Ryan. Isn't that where you should be right now?"

*Christ, the trial!*

How could he have forgotten about the trial?

"I thought O'Rourke had given you time off," he heard Minnie chatter on. "I wish I could go, too, but I'm stuck in here with this pile of narco reports. Of course, I'm getting the news on the radio, but that's not the same, is it?"

Hutch was at the trial. Starsky took a shaky breath. He'd promised to be there, for his testimony, to back him up. But would Hutch still want him there?

"Starsky." He found Minnie's hand on his arm and her searching gaze on his face. "Are you all right?"

He hardly trusted himself to reply as he checked his watch. 12:30 already. Court would be in recess for lunch.

He nodded, forced out something that was meant to be reassuring, some platitude, he wasn't sure what. The last thing he saw before he tore from the building was Minnie's puzzled look.

oooOOOooo

By the time he'd negotiated the busy downtown streets, racking up several traffic offenses in the process, court was in session again, and the doors to the courtroom were closed and guarded.

Starsky flashed his badge and gained access to the visitor's balcony. The room was packed, every seat taken. He found a spot at the back, behind a marble column, and let his gaze roam the room below. He took in the dark-suited lawyers and legal aids, the jury's attentive faces, Judge Akinte's trademark wrinkled frown and tightly-curled gray hair, the rows of eager journalists. Familiar figures dotted the crowd—Huggy, Mardean, Simmons, Stanton.

At the stand, a bailiff was in the process of swearing in a witness. For a second, Starsky almost didn't recognize him.

Hutch was wearing full formal uniform including every medal he'd ever been awarded in his career. The dark jacket, crisp and immaculate, hugged his figure like a second skin. He'd placed the peaked cap on the stand in front of him, and his short bright hair, brushed to a high sheen, surrounded his tanned face like a halo.

Starsky blinked back a rush of emotion. Hutch looked stunning. Distinguished as if he'd just stepped from the pages of a society magazine. Millionaire businessman, or royalty, or something.

*God, Hutch. You could be anything, anyone. You could be rubbing shoulders with the best of 'em. What are you doing hangin' out with a scarecrow like me?*

He couldn't make out Gunther from his spot in the back. In all these months, years even, he'd never met, never even seen the man responsible for so much pain and heartache in their lives, and he'd been eager to catch a glimpse of him. Before. Now he didn't care if he never laid eyes on the man in his life. All he saw was Hutch.

He stood and watched his partner fight for the conviction of the man he'd sworn to put behind bars for the rest of his life.

"Please describe in your own words what you saw at the residence of the defendant in San Francisco on May twenty-eighth last year."

Hutch sat tall, completely in charge of himself. He answered the questions clearly, calmly. His cool, strong voice reverberated through the room, lending conviction to his words. There wasn't a hint of a stammer. Hutch held the courtroom in the palm of his hand, using no more than his voice.

Starsky swallowed. *Aw, Hutch, I'm so proud of you.*

"And would you say that the defendant was aware of the fact that the man in the armchair was dead?"

"It seemed to me that the defendant was very much aware of the fact."

"Then how do you explain that the butler, Thomas Delaney...."

Starsky's vision wavered. *My love. My life. You mean everything to me. Have I lost you?*

The answer struck like a revelation, and Starsky knew, suddenly, without a single doubt, what he should have known all along if the misery in his heart hadn't blinded him to the truth.

Hutch loved him. Hutch would never stop loving him. He couldn't. Not after everything they'd gone through together. Starsky knew it with a sudden, fierce certainty and a hot rush of hope in his veins. Hutch's love was too deep, too strong. Built on a foundation so solid, it could withstand any storm.

But maybe his love could fade. Ever so slightly. Leached of its brilliance by the smallest measure of doubt, and hurt, and maybe a trace of fear that what had happened once, might always happen again.

Trust once broken....

The warmth congealed into a cold, hard lump of dread in his heart. Starsky closed his eyes. The thought of losing Hutch's trust, even the smallest part of it, was unbearable.

The courtroom, the droning voice of Gunther's defense attorney, his partner's succinct answers reached him through a waterfall of noise in his ears.

"Any further questions?"

"No further questions, Your Honor."

"The witness is excused."

Hutch rose fluidly, stood for a moment and surveyed the room, eyes sweeping right and left. Then he stepped down, walked to the witness section, and sat down.

Above him, Starsky turned and quietly slipped out the door at the back.

oooOOOooo

Outside the courthouse it was hot as hell—a place Starsky had become intimately acquainted with in the past few hours. He hung around the doors for a while, restless. After some time, he found a low wall near the top of the steps and sat on the edge of it. Minutes later he was on his feet again, pacing.

There was nowhere to go. Nothing to do but wait.

Time crept. He spoke to no one. No one spoke to him. He might have been invisible. An hour went by. Two. He stopped checking his watch. Time didn't matter. He'd stay there all day if he had to, keeping watch, waiting for his partner to emerge.

Lawyers, judges, and court personnel walked purposefully by. Cops and witnesses and members of the public.

There was no sign of the only person Starsky longed to see.

A cool breeze stroked his cheek, and the sensation was so unexpected, so *alien* on that baking day, it might have been the product of a fevered mind. He looked up. Far out over the sea, dark clouds had bunched together to form a dense swirling brew, propelled by a westerly wind—tantalizing promise of a downpour and an end to the interminable heat.

*Rain for the garden*, he thought absurdly. *Hutch'll be thrilled*.

He started pacing again. More time passed, stretched like a torture victim on a rack. He knew just what that felt like. From the distance, the low growl of thunder rumbled across the sky.

It was only when the TV crews arrived and the steps began to fill with reporters, cameramen, and passersby curious to catch a glimpse of the story that Starsky detected the flaw in his plan. He'd been hoping to converge with Hutch as he left the building. But instead of the solitary encounter he'd envisaged, the place was beginning to resemble Grand Central Station. How could he hope to face Hutch in the presence of such an audience?

He edged away to the side of the steps and averted his face. The last thing he needed right now was to be recognized by the press or an inquisitive acquaintance.

A trickle of people emerged from the building, causing a ripple of excitement to flow through the waiting crowd. As if on cue, the trickle swelled until a whole flood of men and women pushed through the doors and cascaded down the stairs.

This had to be it. No other case had attracted this much attention that day.

The press corps surged forward. Spectators jostled for vantage points, but Starsky hung back and watched as a whole stream of people poured past him and to the street below, familiar faces and strangers both, trying to catch a glimpse of Hutch.

And then he saw him, tall and gorgeous at the top of the courthouse steps, dominating the crowd like a beacon. In his immaculate uniform, the peaked cap, the firm set of the jaw, Hutch looked cool and stern and utterly formidable, a stark contrast to the rumped, sweating hacks pushing close on all sides. Only the small grim lines around the mouth and eyes gave him away. Starsky knew them well. Behind the composed façade bubbled a dark inner turmoil, and a cold, barely contained anger.

Fear spiked inside him as he watched his partner approach. Two men walked beside him, and Starsky had to search his memory for their names. Oh yes, Meriott and Cabe, state prosecutors. He'd only met them once, but Hutch had worked closely with them during the pre-trial hearings and the run-up to the trial.

Starsky watched as Meriott leaned toward Hutch and said something in a low voice. Hutch listened with a frown, and nodded. The three men descended the stairs together, ignoring the maelstrom of shouts and questions.

Now. It had to be now. Starsky pushed forward, elbowing through the throng of people in front of him.

"Hutch."

Hutch heard him despite the commotion. He stopped and turned, and the stream of humanity parted and flowed around him like a river around a semi-submerged obstacle. Meriott and Cabe stopped, too, but Starsky was hardly aware of them.

"Hutch," he said again. What else was there to say? He gazed at his partner longingly, willing for their connection to burst into life and bridge the awful abyss he sensed gaping between them.

A glacial Hutchinson glare swept over him. So cold. So distant. Starsky shivered.

"I can't talk right now," the chill Hutchinson voice said to him through the noise. "I'll be busy for a couple more hours." No details, no explanation. "Go home. We'll talk later."

*Dismissed.*

If Hutch had stepped up and punched him in the face, right there on the courthouse steps, the result couldn't have been more devastating. Starsky stumbled back, stricken.

The crowd surged forward, separating them. The noise rose to painful levels. Hutch turned away, adjusting his cap, and muttered a few words to Meriott and Cabe. They moved away together. Cabe approached the waiting microphones at the bottom of the stairs and gave a short, clipped statement. He refused to answer questions.

A white Chrysler with tinted windows pulled up by the side of the road. Cabe exchanged a few words with the driver before all three men got inside—Cabe in the front, Hutch and Meriott in the back—and the car slid away from the curb.

Starsky stood staring after it, frozen by the look of cold contempt on his lover's face. He stood until the crowd had dispersed, and the street lay empty under a suddenly darkened sky.

That's when the drops began to fall—slow, light, wispy drops. Not a downpour, more a pathetic drizzle. Looked like the thunderstorm had bypassed LA.

oooOOOooo

Two hours later, it was still drizzling, a miserable trickle that did nothing to lift the sense of gloom that had invaded the city. An early twilight crept through the streets, dragging darkness.

Starsky couldn't bring himself to return to the empty house. Instead, he found himself in a near deserted backstreet, walking aimlessly while his meeting with Hutch replayed over and over in his mind.

He knew now what hell looked like. Hell wasn't some kind of a fiery pit. Oh no. Hell was a cold and lonely void, and the glare from a pair of frosty blue eyes that had once looked at him with the heat of love and passion.

*How can we fix this, Hutch? Can a thing like this be fixed?*

A car cruised up beside him, slowed right down. Two muscle-bound heavies, all leather and biceps and tattoos, peered out and eyed him with proprietary interest. Starsky ignored them. A moment later, the car accelerated and sped away.

This was stupid. A cop prowling the seedy underbelly of the city in the dark without backup was a stupid sonofabitch. This was where lowlifes with a grudge against the law hung out. Anyone might recognize him here. He was asking for it.

Did it matter? Did anything matter at this point?

The rain started falling in long, tattered sheets as if it had needed time to get into its stride. Starsky hunched into his damp jacket. Why the hell was it always raining when his world was falling apart?

A movement beside him. "Hi, sugar. Care for some company?"

A lady of the night, dressed to kill in a leather miniskirt and a blouse with a plunging neckline, the effect spoiled somewhat by a green umbrella with a Mickey Mouse design on it. Except for the East coast vowels it might have been Sweet Alice—long blond curls, beguiling huge, blue eyes. Endless legs. The kind of fallen girl Hutch had a soft spot for.

*God, Hutch...*

She looked as lonely as he felt. Not many customers out on a night like this.

"Sorry, honey," he said. "I'd be poor company for you tonight."

*Or any night.*

She shrugged, taking the gentle rejection in her stride. For a while, they stood side by side until a sudden gust of wind brought a squall of rain down on them, and she shivered in her thin clothes.

"At least let's get out of the rain. C'mon." She caught his arm, pulled him into the dark entrance of an apartment building. He let himself be pulled, hardly aware of her presence, hardly aware of anything at that point.

Footsteps came their way; a tuneless whistle carried through the night. A male voice. His East Coast Alice glanced at him.

"Gotta go," she said. "A girl's gotta make a living. Nice to meet you."

"Watch out for yourself," Starsky said. "It's not safe around here."

"I'll be all right."

She sashayed over to the man, balancing the ridiculous umbrella at an angle against the rain. He stopped. She spoke. He nodded, grinned, a flash of white teeth in the neon-lit twilight. They walked away together. The last thing Starsky saw was the umbrella swaying green across the road before it disappeared around a corner.

oooOOOooo

Starsky went home. The house was dark and empty. Hutch hadn't returned.

He wandered through the rooms of their home, a restless journey. Shadows loomed in the corners. The house without Hutch was just a house. A body without a soul.

He should have been hungry, couldn't recall the last time he'd eaten, but the thought of food was nauseating. He filled a glass with water from the faucet and drank it down. It didn't make him feel any better.

*This is how a perp on death row feels on the day of his execution.*

Mirthless laughter welled up and choked him. *Great, Starsky. Very funny.*

A chill numbness had invaded the pit of his stomach. He sat down at the kitchen table, put his head in his hands, and waited.

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## VIII

Hutch's day passed in a blur of whirlwind action. After speeding through the streets of LA in his borrowed sedan, he found that he'd arrived at the courthouse with time to spare. Despite the early hour, the place was milling with press reps and visitors eager to procure a seat with a view.

"Goodness, Hutch, aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

Free from static, the familiar voice sounded clipped, unreal. Hutch turned to the gray-haired figure of Metro's longest-serving radio dispatcher.

"Hello, Mildred. Glad you could make it."

"Well, I figured, the more the merrier. Let's go give the bastard what he deserves. Where's your partner, by the way? Ain't he gonna be here?"

"He's a little late. He'll be here as soon as he can."

"Hutch. There you are." Mike Stanton pushed through a group of people to seize and pump Hutch's hand with both of his own. "Good luck. I'm sure you'll do great on the stand. Did you know Gunther's ex-wife is here today? She wants him nailed as much as we do. Hahaha."

The imposing figure of Chief Ryan parted the crowd. "Sergeant Hutchinson. I expect you will perform well during the cross-examination. Much depends on it."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Simmons was next. "Hey, Hutch. Ready for the ride? Don't worry, we'll get him. He has nowhere to run."

He leaned closer and dropped his voice. "Listen, me and Julie are going to the harvest dance on Sunday. Wanna come? You and Starsky? I can set you up with a couple of her girlfriends." He winked. "*Hot* girlfriends. You'll like them."

"Um, thanks, Sims, but maybe not this Sunday. We still got a lot of work to do on the house."

"You guys are getting too domesticated. It's time you started dating again."

*Really.*

And finally Huggy, decked out in a multicolored vest and enormous bellbottoms with insets in a mindboggling shade of pink. He had Mardean on one arm, Mardean's mother on the other, and her extended family hovering expectantly behind them. Huggy lost no time settling his charges in the nearest row, grabbed Hutch by the arm, and steered him aside.

"Well?" he said. "What happened? Did you find him? Is he all right?"

"He's fine," Hutch assured him. "Nothing to worry about. Simple case of miscommunication."

"C'mon, man, talk to me! Where was he? Why didn't he leave a message? What happened?"

*Yeah, what happened?*

"I'll tell you later, okay? Don't worry, he's all right."

Huggy's perceptive eyes roamed the room. "So where's he now? Why ain't he here?"

The image of his partner, curled up in a dark, disheveled bed with a naked woman spooned around him, flashed before Hutch's eyes.

"I'll tell you later," he said firmly and imprisoned the image in a box in his mind. The matter of Starsky would have to wait. Only the trial was important right now.

Court personnel started filing into the room. The noise level dropped in expectation. Hutch took the opportunity to detach himself from his inquisitor and find a seat in the witness section, grateful that as a cop and arresting officer he was exempt from sequestration. Bailiffs ushered in a few latecomers. The doors closed.

A side door opened and admitted the defendant, flanked on either side by a prison guard. A dead silence fell.

*Gunther.*

Hutch eyed him keenly. The sixty-year old walked tall and with his head held high. Dressed in a simple suit and muted tie, he managed to pull off a look of quiet dignity and composure. A benevolent expression mixed with a dash of long-suffering patience hovered on his face.

Hutch's heart sank. He looked like everyone's favorite uncle. Not a hint of the ruthless drug lord he knew was sheltering behind the benign façade.

Gunther took the chair indicated and settled down, every movement exuding confidence and ease.

"All rise for Judge Akinte."

Everyone rustled to their feet. Akinte entered with customary gravitas and took his seat behind the bench.

"Please be seated."

Everyone sat.

"The court is now in session."

oooOOOooo

The opening statements filled much of the morning. Predictable stuff, no surprises.

Hutch could hardly take his eyes off the back of Gunther's head. Now and then, he turned to scan the crowds for a dark, curly head of hair before he returned his attention to the expensively-styled gray one two rows in front of him.

At lunch recess, Hutch evaded the well-meaning inquiries from friends and colleagues as to Starsky's whereabouts, made a beeline for the phone in the lobby, and called home. There was no reply. He hung up without leaving a message. Then Meriott buttonholed him in the corridor, and Hutch accepted his invitation to lunch with something resembling relief.

When court resumed, there was still no sign of Starsky.

"The prosecution calls Detective Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson to the stand."

Hutch stood, tugged his jacket in place, set his jaw and shoulders, and walked forward.

oooOOOooo

The bombshell fell much later in the day, dropped by the most unexpected of sources—Redd Russell, one of Gunther's former associates.

Hutch hadn't seen him in eighteen months, not since the day he'd held a cold gun into the terrified man's face, deep in the bowels of a hospital garage, and forced the all-important name of Jenny Brown from his lips.

What he hadn't known at the time was that Redd Russell wasn't just another hit man. Russell, it turned out, had dealings with Gunther that went far beyond that of an ordinary employee.

Released on bail and re-captured two days after Gunther's arrest, Russell had quickly accepted the inevitability of his situation and started cooperating enthusiastically with the prosecution. Yes, he'd done the dirty work for Gunther. Yes, he knew Welles and Bates had, too. Oh yes, Gunther was neck deep in the drug business with fingers in every pie from Venezuela to the poppy fields of Afghanistan.

Russell had turned state's witness. In fact, he was a prime witness for the prosecution.

Now he was exposing himself for the double-dealing bastard he really was. Hutch listened with growing disbelief as Russell punctured the fabric of their case against Gunther with a few well-chosen words.

"No, Mr. Gunther never asked me to do anything I'd consider illegal...no, I took my orders directly from Mr. Bates...no, I never had reason to suspect that Mr. Gunther had connections to the trade."

Hutch could hardly believe his ears. What the hell was Russell playing at? What kind of a shady deal had he pulled with Gunther behind their backs?

And it got worse when the defense gleefully picked up the thread during the cross-examination.

"Mr. Russell, you stated earlier that you didn't think the defendant was involved in the drug trade. Why did you say that?"

"Mr. Gunther had nothing but contempt for dealers. His daughter died from a heroin overdose ten years ago. If he'd known Welles was dealing behind his back, he would've had his balls."

"Are you referring to the defendant's former lawyer Mr. Jonathan Welles? The same Jonathan Welles who committed suicide in his cell while in police custody last year?"

"Yes, that's him."

"And are you implying that it was Mr. Welles who masterminded the murders the defendant is charged with?"

"I know he did. He and Simon Bates. They worked together."

"Thank you, Mr. Russell. So in your opinion Mr. Gunther was entirely unaware of the criminal elements operating in his company?"

"Yes, I'm sure he was."

"Mr. Russell, would you describe the defendant as a man with a strong sense of civic duty?"

"Yes, I would. Mr. Gunther was always a big supporter of local charities, and he was a major sponsor of the drug rehabilitation program and the fight against inner city poverty."

Hutch almost groaned with frustration. This was a nightmare. Russell had played them all for fools. And they'd fallen for it, like amateurs.

And Russell was clever. He didn't whitewash Gunther, didn't deny his business dealings with Judge McClellan or his connections to DA Clayburn. He couldn't. There was too much evidence for that.

All he did was sow the seeds of doubt. Bates and Welles were dead. Much of the truth had died with them. *Reasonable doubt*—that was all Russell had to instill in the men and women of the jury. And judging by the thoughtful expressions on the twelve faces, the approach seemed to be working.

A wave of blind fury assaulted Hutch. The bastard! The double-dealing, backstabbing sonofabitch! How, *how* had he managed to pull this off?

Clearly, Redd Russell had had a better offer from the other side. Who knew what strings still tied him to his former boss? Or what safeguards Gunther had put in place to protect himself against just this kind of accusation?

Two rows in front, Meriott and Cabe had their heads together in urgent consultation. The flurry of activity at their table, if nothing else, demonstrated how rattled they were.

"No further questions, Your Honor."

"Court is adjourned."

A babble of voices erupted around him. Hutch got to his feet, shaken by the turn of events. He hadn't expected the trial to go smoothly, not by a long shot. But this was a bad start to the proceedings. The worst possible start, in fact.

"Detective." Jim Cabe's portly shape appeared at his elbow as Hutch stepped from the room into a crowded, noise-filled corridor. "We'd like you to come back to the office with us. We have to come up with a new strategy as a matter of urgency. Your input would be appreciated."

"Sure." He should have expected it. They all seemed to regard him as the ultimate authority on Gunther. He looked around all the familiar faces again for the one face he knew should be there, but wasn't.

"Let me make a phone call," he said.

"No time for that." Meriott's crisp voice cut through the commotion. "You can use the phone in our office. Come on. We have a car waiting outside."

A cloud-laden sky greeted them as they walked through the courthouse doors. The noise outside was even more deafening. Journalists crowded close, shouting and pushing microphones in their direction.

"They'll want a statement from us," Cabe pointed out with a nod at the straining press hounds.

"Of course," Meriott said, annoyed. "Okay, do it, but keep it short. We got work to do. We have to get the whole team together. We *have* to come up with a new approach. Tonight. We simply can't afford to concede the first battle to the defense."

His sense of urgency was infective. So little time, and so much work to do. Hutch clenched his teeth as renewed anger at Russell's betrayal pumped through his veins.

"Hutch."

Just one word, faint, almost inaudible above the clamor, but Hutch heard it anyway, in the way he would always hear this voice, even if an ocean and a mountain stood between him and its owner.

*Starsky.* So maybe he'd been there after all. He stopped and turned. Saw a white face in a sea of faces. A crowd of people jostled between them.

Beside him, Meriott pulled at his arm and made impatient noises. There was no time. Starsky would have to wait.

"I can't talk right now," he said to his partner. "I'll be busy for a couple more hours. Go home. We'll talk later."

oooOOOooo

But a couple of hours later, he was still cloistered in one of the building's cavernous meeting rooms in the company of the prosecutors and half a dozen legal aids, huddled around a table littered with books, and files, and half-drunk cups of coffee, no nearer a solution.

"We should never have trusted him," Meriott said as he trod an agitated path between window and table. He'd already said it twice before. "We should've realized he was still in Gunther's pocket. Somehow we have to convince the jury he's lying."

"But I thought we had enough evidence for a conviction," a junior aid ventured.

"Sometimes evidence isn't enough." Meriott turned and faced the room. "This is an emotionally charged case. If we want a unanimous verdict, we *must* have the jury's sympathy on our side."

"We'll have to put you on the stand again, Detective," Cabe said. "First thing tomorrow morning. It's going to be your word against his, but yours carries a lot more weight. The jury believes you."

Hutch nodded. "All right. But I still think you should consider my original suggestion."

"Which one?"

"Put Jenny Brown on the stand. She set up the hit. She knows Russell's lying. Her testimony could make all the difference."

"Jenny Brown refused to testify. You know that. The death threats she received made sure of that. We could subpoena her, of course, but I wouldn't advise it. She tends to contradict herself. Her testimony could make matters worse, not better."

"Maybe that's a risk we're going to have to take. We don't exactly have a lot of options at this stage." Hutch paused. "Maybe what she needs is an incentive. Let me talk to her. She knows me. Maybe I can make her change her mind."

"Now?"

"Right now."

Meriott exchanged a look with Cabe that reminded Hutch forcefully of similar exchanges between him and his partner. Cabe nodded.

"All right," Meriott said. "It's worth a try." He picked up the phone and dialed. "She's in Central. I'll see if we can get you in tonight."

oooOOOooo

Central was one of Hutch's least favorite places on the globe. The stark, bare walls of LA's prime correctional facility and the sinister clank of metal-barred doors slamming shut behind him never failed to give him a shiver. Too dark and oppressive. Too many memories.

Prudholm. Solkin. Humphries. Marcus. Gunther and whole a clutch of his former associates—all held in different parts of the sprawling complex.

Jenny Brown was in B block, a wing that should have been torn down decades ago, but was still doing time despite its overcrowded cells, crumbling fittings and intermittent water supply. When he entered the interrogation room, she was already there, dressed in the standard two-piece prison wear, sitting behind a small wooden table, her hands twisted in her lap.

Hutch took the seat opposite her. He hadn't seen her for months. When he'd arrested her, she'd been young, pretty. Prison had made an old woman of her. Or maybe not old. Hard was a better word. Cynical.

And suspicious.

"What do you want?" Even her voice had aged, roughened by bitterness and too many smokes.

Hutch outlined the situation.

"You want me to testify against Gunther?" She gave a harsh laugh. "Not a chance. I'd rather stay in this hellhole for the rest of my life."

Hutch shook his head. "Not Gunther. Redd Russell. He lied under oath to protect Gunther, but we can't prove it. You can discredit his statement."

The hard expression didn't waver. "You got a cigarette?"

Hutch dug into his pocket for the crumpled pack he carried for just this kind of situation. He placed the pack in front of her and leaned forward to offer her a light before leaning back again.

She inhaled deeply. "What's the deal?"

"Your testimony in exchange for dropping all charges against you." Hutch held her eyes. "You testify against him, and you're free to go as soon as the trial is over."

"Free to go, huh? That baby won't fly, Detective. You know my life ain't worth living outside these walls if I turn state's witness. I wouldn't last a day. You think you got Gunther's crooks behind bars, but believe me, there are still plenty of them out there, and they really, really don't like whistleblowers."

Hutch played his trump card. It was all he had.

"I'm authorized to offer you full witness protection—new identity, new place. New life."

She stirred, and Hutch knew he had her attention. "How does Florida grab you?" he said. "The sunshine state. Or maybe somewhere cool? Take your pick. I hear Montana is beautiful at this time of year."

"Don't try to trick me, man. We both know I'm not worth enough to spend that kinda federal money on. I'm just a small fish."

"A small fish to catch a big one. You know how these things work."

She was silent for a long moment.

"Full protection? The whole package?"

He nodded.

"I got your word on that?"

The fish had taken the bait. Now all he needed to do was reel it in. Nice and slow.

"You got my word."

Another long moment went by. Hutch could almost see the cogs grinding away in her head. He sat back, giving her the illusion of space. He didn't take his eyes off her.

"I want a house," she said. "Not a trailer. With a garden."

Hutch nodded. He didn't speak. He'd made his pitch. Let her talk, don't interrupt. Let her believe that she was pulling the strings.

She dragged on her cigarette.

"And a decent job. Not as a waitress in some greasy spoon. I trained as an accountant, believe it or not. That's what I want. A nice, comfortable job in an office somewhere. With perks. That's the deal."

Hutch nodded again. Waited again. More time went by. Jenny Brown leaned her head back and stared at the ceiling as if looking for answers scratched into the flaking paint. She stayed like that for a long time, hardly blinking.

Then she sat up, looked at her dead cigarette, and flicked the butt into the corner.

"Okay. So what d'you want me to say?"

Hutch suppressed all signs of elation. He leaned forward, offering her the pack again.

"The truth," he said. "Just the truth."

oooOOOooo

It took another two hours to hash out the details, and then another urgent consultation with the Feds before Hutch was finally free to go. Meriott and Cabe could fine-tune the details. He had done his bit.

It was still drizzling when he stepped from the building. The street outside glistened with puddles pitted with the impact craters of droplets. Hutch rubbed a weary hand over his face, trying to remember where he'd parked the car.

His body was screaming for rest. Five hours of sleep in three days—dammit, he was getting too old for these capers.

But his day wasn't over, not by a long stretch. A mental snapshot of a pale face in a crowd of raucous people leapt out at him from the jumbled images of the day, vivid with sudden urgency.

Maybe he'd been too hasty to turn from it. Maybe there was something he should have said or done, right there, right then. To hell with Meriott and Cabe.

He'd let the moment slip by, propelled by a greater need, certain Starsky would understand. Now he wasn't so sure. He checked his watch, suddenly uneasy.

10:45. Too much time had passed since that morning. The whole day had slipped away in a frenzy of activity. Hutch released a slow breath and started walking toward the car.

It was time to go home and face Starsky.

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## IX

Starsky had no idea how long he'd sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands and his heart in purgatory. Minutes? Hours? A day and a night? The memory of his encounter with Hutch had replayed in his mind so many times, it had worn a groove into his heart.

*What are we going to do, Hutch? Where do we go from here?*

He both dreaded and longed for Hutch's return, but when the sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway finally reached his ears, Starsky knew he wasn't ready for this, and never would be.

He sat up slowly. In the drive, a car door slammed. The garden gate creaked in protest, then fell shut with an ominous crash. Hutch's familiar footfall sounded on the porch. The front door opened and closed.

Starsky stood. He noticed to his surprise that his hands were shaking. He clenched them to fist and took a deep, fraying breath. The kitchen door opened.

The moment of truth. The moment that would decide maybe everything in their lives, their future. He swallowed. Forced himself to look up and meet his partner's eyes.

Hutch stood just inside the door and looked at him, and for a terrible second that dragged on for a lifetime, Starsky couldn't make out the expression on his face. Couldn't see *Hutch*. Couldn't read him at all.

Slowly, like a dense mist parting, his vision cleared, and he saw with a stab of confusion that there was a smile on Hutch's lips, and that the blue eyes weren't cold at all, not cold at all, but warm—*God, so warm*—and filled with familiar tenderness.

Starsky went weak at the knees.

Hutch opened his arms, and he walked blindly into them. The arms closed around him and held him fast.

Heaven. It was heaven. A small chunk of paradise. Hutch's hands on his back, his warm breath on his cheek. Starsky squeezed his eyes shut and simply hung on. He wanted to melt into his partner's solid frame, hold onto that wonderful warmth and never let go. Never.

"Hey," Hutch said into his hair. "It's all right. Everything's all right."

A sound escaped Starsky's throat, like a small creature trying to get out, and the arms tightened in response, a firm hold. A large hand roamed over his back and shoulder, burrowed into his hair and pulled him close.

"Shhh," Hutch said. "It's all right. I'm here now. I'm here. Sorry it took so long."

"Hutch...." There was a crack the size of a seismic fault in his voice, but he didn't care. All that mattered was the solid warmth of Hutch's body, the love in his voice, the overwhelming sense of safety in his arms. He swallowed again, trying to dislodge the boulder stuck in his throat.

"Easy now. Easy." Hutch pressed a kiss to his temple, and Starsky almost lost what was left of his self-control. "What's all this about, anyway, huh? You didn't think I'd believe it, did you?"

A second went by. Then Starsky's eyes snapped open.

*What?*

Hutch's hands released him and went around his face instead. Eyes the color of a high summer sky anchored his gaze.

"I didn't believe it," Hutch's eyes and lips said. "Not for a second. I know you didn't do it."

Cold despair swept through Starsky. *God, he doesn't know! He doesn't realize. He thinks....*

He would have to tell him, come clean. He closed his eyes for a moment. Forming words had never been this difficult.

"You don't understand," he said in a voice he hardly recognized. "How can you say that? You were there. You *saw* us. You must know what happened."

"Yeah, I saw you. You were asleep in a bed."

"You mean you didn't see—?"

"Rosey? Sure, I saw her. She was stuck to you like a leech. It was hard to miss her."

Starsky groaned. "Oh God, I'm sorry, Hutch. I'm so sorry. I don't know how it happened. I never meant for it to happen. Please, you've gotta believe me. It meant nothing. *She* means nothing. I don't love her anymore—"

"Whoa, whoa. Hold it right there." Hutch had his arms in a grip and his eyes in a lockdown. "What are you talking about? Didn't you hear what I just said? I said I don't believe you did it. And no matter what it looks like, I'm never gonna believe it."

Starsky stared at him. Something was terribly out of sync here. Were they even talking about the same thing?

"What do you mean you don't believe it?" he said, helpless. "I was in bed with a naked woman. A woman I once loved above all. You saw me there with your own eyes. And you're telling me you don't believe I-I slept with her?"

Hutch gazed at him with those impossibly blue eyes. He said very, very softly, "Are you saying you did?"

*God, Hutch, stop killing me.* This was terrible. This was so much worse than he'd feared.

"I don't know," he said miserably. "I-I can't remember. We had a lot to drink, and I just...don't know what happened."

Hutch gave him that look that said, *See? Told you so.*

"But Rosey said we did. She remembers. And she said that I...that we..." He couldn't complete the sentence. Couldn't bring himself to look at Hutch again.

"And you believed her? You mean you think you actually slept with her?" Hutch's amazement tipped into dismay. "And you carried that around with you all day? Aw, Starsk! No wonder you look like shit."

He reached for his partner again, an instinctive move.

Starsky pulled away. "Dammit, Hutch, you saw us. We were in bed together. Naked! You don't need to be a detective to know what that means."

"All right, that's enough now," Hutch said, not letting go. "I don't know what you were doing in her bed, or how you got there, but I know you didn't do the horizontal tango with her."

"What do you mean, you *know*? How can you know? You weren't there. You've got no idea what happened."

"Well, apparently neither do you," Hutch said pointedly. "In any case, I don't *need* to know what happened. I only know one thing in this whole world, and that's you. And I just *know* you couldn't have done it, even if you were drunk out of your skull."

"But you *can't* know that. Are you out of your mind? How can you possibly *know* a thing like that?" Starsky found he had the front of Hutch's jacket twisted in both fists, and that he was shaking him. Because Hutch couldn't know. Not for sure. Not for absolutely certain.

"How can *you*?" Hutch countered. "You just admitted that you can't remember. Anything could've happened. Personally, I can think of a dozen different explanations for why you were in bed with her, and none of them involve fucking her."

Starsky's head was spinning. *Hutch, are you crazy? You really think I didn't do it? 'Course, I did. It's obvious.*

"Rosey said we did. Why would she say that if it wasn't true?"

"I don't know. Maybe she imagined it. Maybe she wanted it to be true."

"Oh, c'mon, that's ridiculous. She's not a nut case; she doesn't go around imagining things."

"Well, have you considered the possibility that she's lying?"

"She wouldn't have. Why would she lie about a thing like that?"

"I can think of a few reasons," Hutch said darkly. He released his grip on Starsky's arms, looked him in the face. "Maybe you better tell me what exactly happened at her place. There could be a perfectly simple explanation for all this."

"I don't know! I don't know what happened. I told you, I can't remember."

Hutch shrugged. "So if you can't remember, why assume you did it?"

Starsky stared at him. Shook his head and tried a steadying breath. For a second, the kitchen walls went wavy around him. The next moment, there was a steadying arm around his shoulders, and a concerned voice in his ear.

"Hey, you okay?" Hutch maneuvered him in the direction of the living room. "Maybe we better sit down. You don't look so good. Have you eaten anything today?"

Starsky allowed himself to be guided to the couch, feeling dazed.

"Here, drink this." A glass of orange juice appeared at his elbow. Starsky took it obediently and drained the contents. At least Hutch wasn't insisting on spooning soup down his throat or something. Food was the last thing he could handle right now.

Hutch walked around the room, turning on lights and lowering the blinds. Then the couch dipped as he settled beside him, and there was the reassuring warmth of his hand on Starsky's thigh. "Feeling better?"

"I'm fine. Quit fussing."

"All right," Hutch said in the voice he used to good effect in the interrogation room. "Let's look at this from a different angle. Tell me what happened when you got there. *Before* you got smashed. Surely you remember that?"

Starsky nodded. "We talked, that's all. We sat on the couch, and she got out all those drinks, and we talked." He looked away. "But that's all I remember."

"Okay, but during that time, do you remember making any moves on her?"

"Course I didn't. On the contrary, I—"

"And you didn't have the hots for her?"

"No! I mean, she looked great and all, but..."

"But she didn't turn you on?"

"No."

"And you didn't kiss her, say, for old times' sake?"

"No."

"And you didn't want to take all her clothes off and screw her through the mattress?"

"No! 'Course not. Jesus!"

Hutch shrugged. "Well, there you are."

*Case closed.*

A wave of annoyance surged through Starsky. How could Hutch be so damn casual about all this? He wasn't treating this crisis with the seriousness it deserved. Instead he was sitting there with that infuriatingly smug Hutchinson smile on his face as if he'd been granted exclusive rights to one of the secrets of the universe.

"Then what was I doin' in her bed with no clothes on?" he demanded miserably. "You got an answer to that, too? And don't tell me I was simply crashing at her place. You said she was all over me. How do you explain *that*, huh?"

"I can't. No yet, anyway. Maybe we'll figure it out later."

"Why don't you just face it? The evidence is overwhelming. You're the one who keeps telling me that evidence is everything. That we can bring any perp to justice even without a confession so long as we have the right evidence."

"But you're not any perp." The interrogator's mask slipped, and there was Hutch again, with the warm smile and the light in his eyes. "You're my partner. I trust you."

*God, Hutch, what are you doing to me?*

Maybe Hutch was in denial.

"Then why did you leave?" Starsky said, helpless. "When you were at Rosey's? You were there, in the middle of the night. I saw you. And then you left. I thought...."

The memory was crystal clear, not like the others of that night. Hutch standing beside Rosey's bed, and himself drowsy with sleep, but still acutely aware of the presence of Hutch. *Only* of the presence of Hutch. The memory contained no trace of Rosey.

Hutch gave a one-shouldered shrug. "The trial was about to start. I didn't want to miss the beginning. I couldn't have done much for you anyway. You were out cold."

Starsky gaped at him. "But when I saw you outside the court, you refused to talk to me. You were so cold and angry, and...and you looked at me as if—"

"Angry? I wasn't angry. I was fucking furious! But not with you. With that sonofabitch Russell and his false testimony. The bastard committed perjury! He said—"

"You mean you weren't furious with *me*?" A weight the size of Mount Rushmore lifted off Starsky's chest. He hauled in a deep, giddy breath.

"Hell, no, I wasn't furious with you. You must've imagined that." Hutch suddenly grinned. "Typical sign of a guilty conscience."

Starsky stared at him, trying to recapture the moment outside the courthouse doors. Had he really misread Hutch so badly? Was that even possible?

"But you got Collins to keep surveillance on me. Why did you—?"

"Collins? Oh, *Collins*. Yes, I told him to sit outside the house and make himself look big. But that was just to stop Rosey's jealous boyfriend from going after you. I thought the sight of a cop in a black-and-white outside her place would do the trick."

"Rosey's *boyfriend*?"

"Or lover, or whatever. The guy left a threatening message with Huggy. I didn't want to leave you alone up there, but I didn't have time to hang around and wait for you to sleep it off."

Dammit, Hutch had an answer to everything, even if most of them made absolutely no sense at all. But that wasn't important right now. What mattered was that Hutch still loved him, still trusted him, believed in him despite all the evidence to the contrary.

The strength of Hutch's belief was contagious. For the first time since the horror awakening that morning, Starsky allowed himself the luxury of a doubt. Maybe Hutch was right. Maybe—please, God!—maybe he really hadn't done it.

The surge of hope in his chest was overwhelming. Hutch must have seen it, too, because he reached out and pulled him close again.

"Poor Starsk. Rough day, huh?"

Starsky cracked. He wrapped his arms around Hutch and held on until he thought he could hear Hutch's ribs creak in protest.

"I thought this would break us," he said, blinking back a treacherous film of moisture.

"You thought I'd stop loving you?" Hutch said, horrified.

"Never." Starsky eased his grip a fraction. "I knew you wouldn't. You couldn't. But if you stopped trusting me, even just a little...God, Hutch, that would've changed everything. 'Cause what we have is all about trust. And how could you ever trust me again after a thing like this?"

He released Hutch and looked him in the face. "Admit it. I had motive *and* opportunity. That stupid argument we had. And you were supposed to be away all night. And...you know how much I loved her. It's a clear-cut case."

Hutch regarded him with a curious mixture of exasperation and affection.

"Jesus, Starsk, for a sharp guy like you, you can be pretty dense sometimes. You really thought I'd fall for that? That you'd hop into bed with a woman you haven't wasted a single thought on in two whole years, just 'cause we've had a small disagreement? You've gotta be kidding. Don't you think I know you better than that?"

"But that ain't good enough. There's a mountain of evidence that says I did it, the kinda evidence that gets you convicted in a court of law. Kathy had a lot less to go on when she suspected Geoff of cheating."

"We're not in a court of law. And you know perfectly well we're not like everyone else. You can't measure what we have with the same yardstick we apply to Kathy and Geoff, or...or Vanessa and me, or even to you and Rosey. What we have is special. And trust is the biggest part of it. Evidence doesn't come into it."

"But what more evidence do you need? You saw me in bed with her."

Hutch heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Starsky, I could find you in bed with an entire harem of sex goddesses, and I wouldn't believe it. I know how much you love me. You wouldn't do that to me. To us. You just wouldn't."

"What if I couldn't help myself? It happens. People do all sorts of things under the influence."

"Letting your cock rule your head? Honestly, Starsk, I'm beginning to think you don't know the first thing about yourself. Can you give me *one* example when you've ever let that happen? That's right, never. 'Cause you don't have it in you to do that sorta thing."

"And if you had proof? Real proof, I mean? Or if you saw it with your own two eyes? If you were right there in the room and you saw me doing it?"

Hutch rolled his eyes. "Then I'd assume you'd been drugged, or hypnotized, or remote-controlled, or blackmailed, or whatever. I'd be wondering if you were acting under duress. Or if your life depended on it. Or maybe mine. I can think of a hundred scenarios where you wouldn't have a choice."

"You're out of your mind! That's impossible. What kind of a superhuman do you think I am? How can I live up to that? You honestly believe I'll never make a mistake? Then you're blind, Hutch. Deaf and blind."

"Christ, Starsky, you really don't get it, do you? We're not talking about mistakes here, or about human error. We're talking about *you*."

Hutch pointed a finger at him. "Look, it's very simple. I *know* you. All right? I know everything you're capable of, and everything you're not. You'll blow up a coupla lowlifes in revenge for gunning me down. You'll take the law into your own hands to get justice for someone you care about. You'll make a deal with the mob if that's the only way to ensure my survival."

"What the hell has that got to do—"

"But I'll never believe in a million years that you're capable of betraying me, or our trust in each other. And if you do, if you *ever* do, I'm gonna assume you had a damn good reason for it."

The finger advanced and poked him in the chest.

"I love you," Hutch said, sounding as if he wanted nothing so much as to grab his partner by the neck and throttle some sense into him. "You got that? I trust you. Blindly. Deafly and blindly. To the end of the world, as I remember you once said to me. You could blindfold me and push me off a cliff. You could strangle me with your bare hands and I wouldn't stop trusting you. Now is that clear enough for you or do you need a few more examples?"

*Christ, Hutch. Holy Christ.*

Starsky was reeling. To be understood so well, loved so unconditionally, trusted so absolutely—it was both overwhelming and exhilarating, and it simply took his breath away.

"Yes," Hutch said as if he knew exactly what was going on inside him, and most likely he did. His voice softened. "I know everything about you, the best and the worst of you. And I know how much you love me. More than any of the women in your life. Amanda, Helen, Rosey. Even Terri."

And that was the truth. Even Terri. The only woman he'd ever proposed to—an offer born not of conviction exactly, but of guilt, and the agony of impending loss.

Starsky found his voice again. "You can't compare the two. I loved Rosey and Terri, I really did. But it wasn't the same. I never really knew them. I didn't think you could—know a person all the way down."

"Until you fell in love with me."

"Yeah."

"See, that's what I mean. If I'd found Vanessa in bed with another guy, believe me, she would've had an awful lot of explaining to do to convince me that they were just sharing the bed for warmth. But you...."

Starsky brought a hand up to Hutch's face and pulled their foreheads together. "I know. We're weird, you and me. Scares me sometimes to think how much I love you."

Hutch drew away and gazed at him with eyes that looked unnaturally bright in the lamplight.

"Show me," he said.

oooOOOooo

Time slowed as the air grew thick and warm. The connection, that eerie lifeline that held them both together, was a sudden powerful force between them, deep and vibrant as if it had never been away. And maybe it hadn't.

It was overwhelming, and Starsky couldn't get enough of it. Something deep inside him realigned itself. Hutch was here. Hutch loved him, trusted him like no one had any right to be trusted.

The certainty of Hutch's convictions almost blew him away. And took his power of speech. So he wrapped his hands around Hutch's face instead and tugged the fair head forward.

The kiss was both wild and sweet, breathless and seemingly never-ending. Starsky simply couldn't let go, as if somehow, by that small connection alone, he could fuse their bodies, be a part of Hutch, like an arm, or an eye, or a vital organ.

But he wanted more. Needed more. He wanted Hutch naked, wanted to run his hands all over his gorgeous body. Wanted to love him like no one had ever loved him before. But when Hutch pulled away and reached with already trembling fingers to undo the buttons on his jacket, Starsky put a hand over his and stopped the motion.

"Let me?" he whispered. "I want to."

Hutch understood without the need for more words, like he always understood these things. He nodded. Starsky got up and pulled Hutch to his feet. Stepping back, Starsky took a long hungry look at him.

The sight of Hutch in his dark uniform with its golden insignias, all severe and formal, and exuding a commanding air of power and authority, had a sudden unexpected effect on his nervous system.

*Holy fuck. How come I never realized this uniform thing could be such a turn-on?*

He wondered what Hutch saw in return. In his ratty pair of jeans and faded shirt, barefoot, disheveled, and with a darkly bristled chin, Starsky suddenly felt like a bum. A bum who'd been given permission to undress the Chief of Police. The fantasy fueled a slow-burning fire of excitement in his groin.

He unveiled Hutch slowly, enjoying each new revelation as if it were the first time.

The jacket and tie were the first to go. Starsky hung them over the back of the chair. Next was the black standard issue shirt. He tugged it free and unbuttoned it from the top down, taking the time to admire the well-defined contours of what lay beneath, thrilled that Hutch didn't go in for undershirts these days. When the shirt hung free, he couldn't resist running his hands over the expanse of smooth skin before slipping the fabric off the muscular shoulders.

Hutch shivered a little, but he didn't move, and he didn't speak. He simply stood and allowed Starsky to proceed at his own pace. The heat in his eyes could have melted a small glacier. Starsky's heartbeat increased.

He dropped his hands to Hutch's belt, undid the buckle, and pulled the leather from the loops. He knelt and flashed his lover a quick smile. In response, Hutch's hands came up and burrowed into his hair again.

Quickly, Starsky opened the laces of the polished black shoes, lifted first one, then the other foot, pulled off shoes and socks, and set them aside. He looked up again. Hutch's hands were around his face now, and his eyes on Starsky's, and the love and desire Starsky saw there put the lump back in his throat.

He unbuttoned the button of Hutch's pants and lowered the zipper, trying to ignore the bulge that lay beyond. Still on his knees, he tugged the pants down Hutch's endless legs until they pooled around his ankles. Hutch stepped out of them and pushed them aside with his foot.

Underneath he wore a bright blue pair of briefs that barely managed to hold its growing contents. Starsky hooked his fingers into the elastic and freed the straining cock from its cotton prison. Hutch purred with relief and eagerness.

But Starsky didn't suck him, didn't even touch him—and it was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He tossed the underwear aside, got to his feet and stepped back. Stood very still and soaked up the breathtaking sight.

Golden Hutch. Beautiful Hutch. All smooth, and lean, and gorgeous. Strong, too. Starsky knew only too well that the deceptively slender build hid the wiry toughness of an athlete. The lamplight threw the details of the perfect body into high relief—the small hairs on Hutch's abdomen that curled just so. The firm globes of his ass. The velvety tip of his shaft that looked so incredibly soft and lickable.

Starsky's throat was tight with longing. He wanted Hutch. God, how he wanted Hutch! The want was like hunger, like the desperate thirst of a man lost in a desert. It was a need only Hutch could fill. Only Hutch.

It took less than five seconds to discard his own shirt and strip off his jeans and underwear. Then they stood, a foot apart, facing each other in the muted light, drinking each other in, until finally Starsky couldn't take it any longer, and pulled their bodies together.

It was bliss, that simple touch. Pure ecstasy. His cock, pressed tight against Hutch's, pulsed to life at the touch—a sweet, throbbing ache. He felt he could roam his lover's body forever, using just his hands and lips, exploring the secret places only he had permission to explore.

He looked at Hutch. *What do you need? What do you want? Tell me.*

Hutch produced a rueful smile. "Let's keep it simple, huh? I don't think I have a long session in me tonight."

No kidding. Hutch looked ready to crumble. Tenderness traveled through Starsky, riding on a large leisurely wave of joy. He leaned in and kissed Hutch's lower lip, nipped the soft flesh with his teeth. Made Hutch shiver with want, in spite of his weariness.

"You got it," he said. "You lie down here and relax. I'll do the rest. My treat."

He'd make this an experience Hutch wouldn't forget in a hurry.

But Hutch had different ideas. "No," he said. "Not like that. Together."

Starsky opened his mouth to protest, saw the look of need on Hutch's face, and closed it again. How could he refuse a plea like that?

"All right. Together. Lie down already. I got an idea."

Hutch measured the couch with his length, and Starsky molded himself against him, mouth to mouth, not mouth to cock, because that would require Hutch's equal participation, and he wanted Hutch to relax and enjoy. Just to enjoy. Hutch wanted *simple* and *together*, so that's what he would get. Judging by how close to the edge they both were, it might just work.

He pushed a knee between Hutch's legs, nudged him to spread them wider. Wiggled closer until he was almost on top of Hutch, and his lover's big, blond shaft lay snug against his own thick, dark one. The throbbing ache grew into something fierce and demanding. He started moving, rubbing their shafts together.

Hutch released a sharp breath. His cock strained against Starsky's, and then both moved together, sliding against each other, cushioned between their bellies, already moist and slippery with sweat. A sound of want forced itself from Hutch's lips.

"Do it, Starsk. Please. Touch me. Now."

Starsky eased away a little and shifted his weight to his hip, careful not to lose the precious contact. He reached into the small space between them and wrapped his hands around both cocks, wishing he had Hutch's long pianist's fingers.

"Christ!" Hutch gasped, and his cock jumped in Starsky's hand.

*Must be doing something right.*

He started sliding his hands up and down over their shafts, squeezing, stroking, applying the sweet pressure where he knew it would do the most good. Heat exploded inside his groin and spread in ripples right through his body.

*God, this feels so damn good.*

Shifting his hold, he rubbed his thumbs over the wet tips, gratified when he felt both cocks move in tandem. The wave of joy lifted him up again, buoyed by something else this time, an urgency that caught his breath and made him shiver with an almost painful anticipation.

Beneath him, Hutch was slowly losing it.

*Hold on, baby, hold on. Not yet. Not yet.*

Trying not to lose the rhythm, he eased the pressure on Hutch's cock, stepped it up on his own, catching up, keeping the balance. Hutch uttered a groan of frustration. His left hand abandoned its grip on Starsky's shoulder and reached to help. Starsky growled, and the hand withdrew.

"Starsky, please." Hutch had reached the begging stage. "Please now."

Starsky relented. Hutch didn't deserve a long torture session tonight, however sweet. He changed his hold again, brought Hutch back to the brink. Felt him shudder under his touch. He was close, so close.

*Okay, babe. This is it. Go for it.*

Hutch's fingers dug into his back, hard. His breath caught somewhere in his throat. His whole body went rigid as he came.

"S-tars...."

The small broken sound of want and love and joy, the whispered half-name, was all Starsky needed to follow him over the edge, carried away by a different kind of current that held both of them in its powerful pull.

He felt Hutch's arms tighten around him during the final shudder, holding him through the swirling waters until the last ounce of strength seeped out of him, and he went limp next to his lover's hot, slick body.

A few years went by. Or so it seemed. The sound of ragged breathing filled the room. Gravity hung in suspense, and Starsky was grateful for the anchoring arms that held them both together.

He'd been meaning to follow the hand action with something a little more substantial to bring Hutch to boil, but that hadn't been necessary. Sometimes he forgot how receptive Hutch was to his touch.

Just a hand job. Amazing how something so simple could be so deeply satisfying.

Beside him, squashed against the back of the couch, Hutch finally stirred. Still floating, Starsky dropped a kiss on his bare shoulder. He didn't want to move, wanted to stay like this forever, but Hutch would be paying the price if they spent the night on the couch. He peeled away with a moist, sticky sound and clambered to his feet.

"Let's go upstairs before we fall asleep down here. Time to tuck you in." Starsky extended a hand and pulled his partner up. "You look like you haven't slept in a week."

"Wanna shower," Hutch mumbled, vowels slurred with drowsiness and contentment, and leaned into him.

"Okay, shower first."

"With you."

Starsky felt a smile lift the corners of his mouth. He kissed Hutch again. "You got it."

oooOOOooo

The room was dark and silent. Starsky lay awake and listened to Hutch's even breaths. His lover had gone out like a match in a rainstorm, drained by three near continuous days of non-stop action, but Starsky found that he was unable to drop off himself, despite his own exhaustion.

There were still so many questions. No answers. And only one certainty. Hutch.

He wanted to believe him. He really did. Hutch's instincts had saved the day more often than he could remember. He'd learned to rely on them, no questions asked.

But this was different. How had he ended up in her bed? What had happened after that last fatal drink? Why had Rosey lied to him?

And had she? Had she really?

He needed answers. And proof.

Hutch was a warm and reassuring presence beside him, his one defense against the doubts creeping out again from a murky pit in his mind. Starsky pressed closer and inhaled deeply of his lover's heady scent, marveling at the miracle of Hutch.

*You're still here, still a part of me. What would I have done if I'd lost you?*

---

**X**

"Hutch. Wake up, Hutch. C'mon, open those blue eyes for me."

Hutch drifted to life to the enticing aroma of fresh coffee, blueberry pancakes, and Starsky's musky aftershave. He cracked open an eye. Daylight flooded the room.

He jolted awake. "Oh, shit. What time is it?"

"Relax. We've got plenty of time."

Hutch obeyed and flopped back on his pillow, feeling great in a way only a good lay and several hours of uninterrupted sleep could ensure. He reached for the vision before him, found a bare leg and ran his hand up along the inside of it.

Starsky swatted his hand away.

"Hey, no hanky-panky. You'll spill the coffee. Anyway, we've got things to do."

Hutch groaned. "Aw, no. Look, can't we skip the gym this morning? Just this once?"

Starsky hadn't exactly become a fitness fanatic since his return to active duty, but the morning session at Vinnie's rundown studio had, much to Hutch's lasting amazement, become something of a minor ritual.

"Hm, yeah, okay."

Well, that was odd. Starsky didn't usually give in so easily. Hutch opened the other eye and squinted at his partner perched on the edge of the bed, a mug of coffee like a peace offering in his hands.

"What are you doing up so early anyway?"

"Couldn't get back to sleep."

Hutch took a closer look at him. Dark smudges lurked beneath the midnight blue eyes. He sat up and frowned.

"Hey, did you sleep at all?"

"A little."

*Read: Not much.*

He sighed and took the mug. Starsky gave him a tight smile before getting up and turning the closet upside down until the hunt yielded a clean, if faded pair of jeans. He wriggled into them. A red t-shirt, the ever-present holster and gun, and a striped cotton shirt completed the outfit.

Sitting back against the brass bars, Hutch sipped the extra-strong brew and followed his partner's movements around the room through half-closed eyes.

Starsky had been put through the grinder the day before, and it had taken all of his skill to put him back together again. His only regret was that he hadn't done so sooner—court, testimony, and Redd Russell's backstabbing turnabout notwithstanding.

He knew they had to talk. He also knew that Starsky still wasn't convinced.

He drained the mug and swung his legs out of bed. "All right then. Let's talk."

"Get dressed and come downstairs. I made pancakes."

oooOOOooo

Downstairs, a subdued Starsky was sitting at the kitchen table, absorbed in the process of applying oil to the chamber of his Beretta. The component parts of the gun were laid out on a dishtowel next to the coffee pot and the pancake plate.

Hutch bit his tongue. Starsky knew he hated it when he cleaned his gun at the breakfast table. It was an indication of the extent of Starsky's distress that he did so anyway. For himself, when in doubt, report a plant. For Starsky, when troubled, clean his gun.

Hutch sat and helped himself to a pancake. The sight of the nimble fingers handling the brush and barrel with deft, economical movements proved more distracting than it should have. He recalled the night before, and those skilled fingers working their magic on a barrel of a different type....

He blinked. "So, you still worried?"

Starsky's hands stilled. "Yeah." He looked up. "Can't help it."

"You mean you don't believe me?"

"Yeah, I believe you. I know you trust me. Trouble is..." He looked away. "I don't trust myself."

"That's all right," Hutch said around a mouthful of pancake. "I got enough trust for both of us."

"Stop making fun of it. This ain't a joke. I gotta know, you understand? I gotta know what happened."

"All right, all right. Calm down. We're detectives. We'll get to the bottom of this. First of all, why don't you tell me what you were doing there in the first place? I mean, why did you go and see her?"

Starsky leveled an astonished glance at him. "Didn't I tell you?"

Hutch shook his head.

"She called me at work and said she wanted to apologize." A troubled look crossed Starsky's face. "See, the other night at Huggy's...she asked me if I was seeing someone, and I told her about us. I thought she deserved to know."

"Let me guess: She didn't take it well."

"You can say that again."

"Okay, so she got you to drop by her place after work, and she apologized for whatever she said to you the night before. And then she asked you in for a drink."

"Tequila, actually. Some kinda moonshine she brought back from Mexico. Powerful stuff. A few glasses would knock the stuffing out of anyone."

"Okay. And then?"

"I told you; we talked. Well, actually, she did most of the talking—a lot about Mexico and her father." His gaze strayed to Hutch's face again. "He's dead, you know. He died of a brain tumor a coupla months ago. That's why she's back in LA."

But Hutch refused to be sidetracked. "Never mind that right now. How long did you talk?"

"Hard to tell. I didn't check the time. An hour? Two? Maybe more."

"And then?"

"That's the problem. There is no 'then'. There's just this huge, empty space in my head."

Hutch sighed and decided to change tactics. "Okay, how much of the tequila did you have? Surely you remember that?"

"Two, three glasses? And a few bottles of beer. That's all I remember. But that don't mean anything. I must've had a lot more than that. When I woke up, there were empty bottles all over the place, and you can bet your ass it wasn't Rosey who put that lot away. In any case, I had the hangover to match when I woke up the next morning."

"Well, don't you think it's odd that you had so much? You hardly ever knock it back like that these days."

"I was angry—"

"Why?"

"Because... 'cause everything that whole fuckin' day went wrong—"

"Did it? I don't remember that. That wasn't the first time we had to work separate cases, and it never made you mad before. Your car breaks down occasionally, and you don't normally lose it."

"We had that fight," Starsky reminded him.

"You call that a fight? That wasn't a fight. That was a case of general grumpiness. We have them all the time. We wouldn't be human if we didn't." Hutch eyed his partner across the table. "Not everything went wrong that day. You got that lead on Ramirez. That was pretty good work."

Starsky stared at him. "That's not what you said on the phone. You chewed me out 'cause I went to see Crazy Eddie without backup." He held up a hand. "And you were right. Shouldn't have done that. It was stupid."

"Yeah, we're both kinda stupid that way."

"You mean...? Oh!"

"Yeah. *Oh!* Anyway, my point is that yesterday was an ordinary crummy day no different from other crummy days we have on a regular basis. Certainly not crummy enough to explain why you drank yourself into oblivion."

"Then why did I, huh, Mister Know-It-All? You got an answer to that, too?"

"Not yet," Hutch said. "I mean, it's pretty obvious that Rosey's return got you all stirred up, but that doesn't explain why you suddenly decided to hit the bottle. But let's forget about the booze for a minute. It doesn't matter how much you've had. You could've drunk a whole barrel, and I still wouldn't believe that you slept with her."

Starsky flinched and Hutch hastened on. "Okay, listen. I got an idea. I want you to close your eyes and relax. Go on, close your eyes."

He got a puzzled look for that, before Starsky shrugged and obediently squeezed his eyes shut.

"All right," Hutch said. "And now I want you to think back to your last memory on that couch. Imagine you're sitting there with a bottle of beer in your hand. Rosey is sitting beside you, talking to you. Now concentrate. What happened then?"

Starsky took a moment to answer. "We were on the couch," he said finally. He hauled in a long breath. "Then Rosey went into the kitchen and got refills. When she came back, she sat down real close to me. Yeah, that's it. I remember her perfume. It was so strong I was gettin' all headachy from the fumes."

"All right, and then?"

"And then...."

Starsky's face looked strained as if he were groping a dark path through a forest of misty memories. For a moment, he sat very still, eyes closed, head bowed, and a frown of intense concentration on his forehead. The next moment, the frown collapsed and the living hue drained from the already pale face. His eyes snapped open, and he was on his feet, alive with horror.

"We kissed! God, Hutch, I just remembered. That's what happened. She sat down beside me, and she had her hand on my arm, and...I'm sure we kissed!"

Hutch got to his feet, too. "You mean you kissed her?"

"I-I don't know." Starsky fell back into the chair. Dug his fingers into his hair and groaned.

Hutch grabbed him by the arm, pulled him back up, and shook him. "That's enough of that. Get a grip on yourself, will you! You've gotta remember. It's important. Did you kiss her?"

Starsky stared at him, wild-eyed, his chest heaving. Hutch stared back, holding him with his hands and eyes, willing him to trust, to believe. Starsky swallowed. Some of the tension drained out of him. His eyes turned inward again.

"No," he said slowly. "I think she kissed *me*. Yeah, that's it. She kissed me." He looked up. "But I didn't stop her, Hutch. I didn't do anything to stop her."

Hutch heard the misery in his voice. "All right. So she kissed you. What happened then?"

"I tried to push her away. I think."

"And then?"

"We...we kissed again."

"And after that?"

"I...don't know. I was on the couch, I think. She was leaning over me, and...oh God, Hutch, I think she was naked!" The memory made him groan again, and he twisted in Hutch's hold.

"Take a deep breath," Hutch said, not letting go. "C'mon, babe, don't fall apart on me now. Close your eyes and think again. Maybe you remember something else."

"There *is* nothing else, Hutch! When are you going to accept that? We were making out on the couch. One thing must've led to another, and we ended up in that bed together." Starsky twisted out of Hutch's hold and raked an agitated hand through his hair. "God, I wish I could remember. But the whole thing is just one big blur. I was dizzy from the booze. I couldn't breathe 'cause it was so hot in the room. I couldn't even think straight—"

"Wait a minute. You said things were blurred and you felt dizzy. What kind of dizzy?"

"Just...*dizzy*. Drowsy, woozy. What difference does it make?"

"And how did you feel the next morning?"

"Like shit. I told you. How do you *think* I felt after all that booze? Just face it, Hutch—I was drunk. Simple as that. And maybe I did something I wouldn't have done if I'd been sober."

Hutch waved him silent. He stared at the pancake plate and tried to recapture the thought that had flitted through his mind just microseconds before.

What was it he'd said to Starsky the night before? *'I'd assume you'd been drugged, or hypnotized, or remote-controlled....'*

Jesus!

He said carefully, "I can think of one other explanation for the symptoms you've just described."

Starsky stared at him. "What're you saying? Drugs? You think she drugged me?" He shook his head. "Oh, c'mon, that's ridiculous."

"No, think about it. It could've been some kind of a sleeping pill. It would answer a lot of questions. Why you felt so dopey. Why you didn't get up and walk out."

"I *am* thinking about it. And I'm tellin' you, she couldn't have. I would've known. Sleeping pills don't work like that. In case you forgot—I had my share of experience with drugs. The effects are unmistakable. You don't seriously believe I can't tell the difference between being drugged and being drunk."

"Maybe it's something new," Hutch suggested, a stab in the dark. "Something less detectable."

"There ain't no such thing! We'd know if there was. Believe me, this felt like no drug I ever had before. Not when Monique, or Harry, or whatever she called herself put angel dust in my drink. And nothing like the stuff Bellamy shot me up with. I *knew* then I'd been drugged."

"Okay, let's assume for the sake of argument that there *is* such a drug. Could she have spiked your drink without you noticing?"

Starsky hesitated. "The tequila. If she did, it must've been that first glass of tequila. She brought it on a tray. She *gave* it to me—I didn't pick it. And after that...."

He concentrated. "After that, she brought a whole pitcher of it from the kitchen. She couldn't have spiked that. Or the bottles of beer I had." He shook his head. "Damn, I wish I could remember more, but that whole evening at her place feels like some kinda dream. I can't even remember half the things she said to me. Her voice was so soft, she almost sent me to sleep."

"Well, that sure doesn't sound as if you were in the grip of passion there," Hutch pointed out. "I mean, would you really have felt sleepy if you'd been horny and about to hop into bed with her?"

Starsky opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Hutch pressed his advantage. "She did *something* to you, Starsk. I'm sure of it. There's simply no other explanation."

"That ain't enough, Hutch! I'm a cop; I need proof! Something. *Anything*. I don't care what it is."

"Well, there *is* one other thing." Hutch wiped a hand over his face, not quite sure how to put it. "But I'm not sure if you'd call it *proof*."

"Well, what is it?"

"Your, um..." He gestured vaguely in the direction of Starsky's crotch. "If you'd really slept with her, don't you think you would've seen some evidence of, uh, recent activity down there when you woke up in the morning?"

Starsky went pop-eyed. "*Evidence?*"

"Yes, dammit. Evidence. I happen to know from first-hand experience how sticky you get down there when you—" Hutch felt himself go hot behind the ears. "Anyway, I bet you a year's salary there wasn't any."

Starsky took a long moment to answer.

"No," he said at last. "There wasn't. At least I don't think there was." He looked up. "But that doesn't prove anything. She could've just cleaned me up. Afterward."

"That what she used to do?"

Another long moment went by. Starsky looked suddenly shattered.

"No," he said slowly. "She never did that before."

Hutch's heart went out to him. Starsky looked so very bereft. He wanted to put his arms around him and pull him close, but something told him that this wasn't the right moment for that. Starsky was struggling to wrap his mind around the possibility of deception on an unaccustomed scale, and for that he needed space.

Hutch knew it was hard for him. Starsky, despite everything he'd gone through in his life, still saw many things in shades of black and white. He trusted Rosey. He'd loved her once, had raised her on a pedestal so high that a fall would crush not only his trust in her, but might shatter his belief in mankind altogether. He was also wary of falling into the same trap twice.

No wonder Starsky wasn't ready to entertain the possibilities that Hutch, with his more cynical worldview, had no trouble embracing.

Maybe it was time for a change of scenery. Hutch checked his watch.

"Starsk, I think we better make tracks. I don't want to be late for court. Meriott wants me on the stand again this morning."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Why do you think I'm wearing this damn uniform again? That bastard Russell tried to pull a fast one on us yesterday. That's why I came home so late. I had to go and see Jenny Brown in Central. C'mon, let's go. I'll fill you in on the way."

oooOOOooo

Hutch was worried—and not just about Starsky. To say that he harbored misgivings about the course of action he'd initiated the night before was putting it mildly. Calling Jenny Brown to the stand, without briefing, without preparation, without even a single rehearsal, smacked of an act of desperation. That Meriott and Cabe had even managed to push the deal through at such short notice was a minor miracle. What strings they'd pulled to accomplish that, he would probably never know.

Was it worth the risk?

But his fears melted away soon after Jenny took the stand. Galvanized by the prospects of a new beginning and the knowledge of having evaded charges of conspiracy to murder, Jenny had transformed herself from jaded jailbird into a witness whose performance, though not what Meriott would have called star material, was straightforward and believable in its simplicity. She handled the prosecutor's questions with ease and even managed to get through the cross-examination without losing her cool more than twice.

All she did was tell the truth, and somehow that made for the most convincing performance of all. Hutch hoped it would be enough.

During the brief morning recess, he excused himself and went into the lobby to make a couple of short phone calls.

Then it was his turn again on the stand, and he went and did what he could to substantiate Jenny Brown's statement and discredit Redd Russell's testimony of the previous day.

When he took his seat again, it was in the knowledge that they'd done everything possible to mitigate the damage done by Russell. Time would tell how successful they had been.

Meriott and Cabe appeared to be of the same opinion, as they moved to tackle the case from a fresh angle. Hutch listened with half an ear as Cabe took the jury on a tour through the maze of Gunther's business connections. Nothing new there.

Beside him, his partner managed to take fidgeting to a new level. Hutch didn't need to glance at him to know that Starsky's mind wasn't on the proceedings, either.

"Sergeant Hutchinson?"

A court clerk holding an envelope had appeared at Starsky's elbow. Hutch gave her an appreciative once-over. She was cute. Masses of dark hair, a perfect figure, a pair of dazzling blue eyes, and a hint of a flirtatious smile aimed squarely at Starsky.

Starsky barely managed to raise a tired smile. "He's Hutchinson," he said, inclining his head. Hutch noted with a twinge of sadness that he didn't look at her twice.

He took the envelope with a nod of thanks, extracted a single sheet, and scanned the contents. Saw with disappointment that none of the substances Stanton had shortlisted from the drug database for him remotely fitted the bill.

He passed the sheet to Starsky, who cast his eyes over it, curled his lips sardonically, and passed it back without a word.

Hutch sighed. He glanced at Cabe, who was still trying to elucidate the convoluted paths of Gunther's shadier activities, pursed his lips, and came to a decision. To hell with the trial. His part in it was done. He nudged his partner and tipped his head in the direction of the door. Starsky cocked an eyebrow at him, surprised, but followed his lead nonetheless. They rose and tiptoed to the exit.

"What's the matter?" Starsky said when the door had closed behind them. "You sure we can just split like this? What if Meriott and Cabe want you again?"

"We're cops. They'll assume we're on a case." Hutch passed the ridiculous cap to Starsky to hold, shrugged out of his jacket and pulled off the hated tie. "Anyway, they've had me on a leash for long enough."

"But don't you want to hear what Calumbani and Foster have to say?"

"No, we got something more important to do."

"We do?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

"Where to?"

"To see Cheryl at the University."

oooOOOooo

Cheryl d'Souza, née Jennings, Associate Professor of Chemistry, hadn't changed much since her crime lab days at Metro. She still favored a conservative cut of suit, an unflattering hairdo, and a pair of enormous glasses that rode the tip of her nose like a jockey the back of a Shetland pony.

Hutch hadn't seen her for years, not since she'd left the force to pursue a career in higher education. Secretly, he was glad of her departure. Her face never failed to stir up memories best left undisturbed. Bellamy. A night call. *Hutch. Help...* A day of frantic activity spiraling into an abyss of despair. A dark rooftop. A life saved at the price of another.

Starsky's warm weight collapsing in his arms.

He rarely thought about those nightmarish hours anymore. They had been superseded by other, even more horrific nightmares, and by perpetrators that made even Cheryl's father and his crazed actions pale by comparison.

Cheryl received them in the office she shared with another junior academic, but when they walked in, Hutch saw that the other desk was empty and that they had the room to themselves.

"I don't know why I was surprised when you called, Hutch," she said when they had settled in a set of molded plastic chairs in a cheerful shade of gray. "After all, you two are among the few of my former colleagues who are still on speaking terms with me."

"That bad?" Hutch said, feeling like a hypocrite.

"Well, most of them found working with the sister of a dead junkie and the daughter of a mad scientist and convicted felon a bit much to take."

Hutch winced. "And is university life treating you any better?"

She shrugged. "This is academia. Crime and insanity are teaching subjects here, not the real thing. Of course, Dad's old university won't give me the time of day, but UCLA has been good to me. The dean thinks I'll make tenure in a couple years' time. Don't worry about me. I found my niche."

Hutch decided he had it all wrong. She *had* changed. A lot, in fact. Gone was the nervous hand wringing, the pinched, slightly hysterical voice. Instead, Cheryl d'Souza looked at ease, sure of herself and her place in the world.

Hutch relaxed. "Cheryl, what have you got for us? Did you find anything?"

"I think I might have." Cheryl leaned back in her chair. "By the way, is there any reason why you didn't take this to Edgar? I hear he's head of Forensics now. He's an expert on drugs."

Hutch glanced at Starsky, but his partner appeared to have developed an absorbing interest in the jars of pickled specimens adorning Cheryl's desk and seemed content to let Hutch handle the situation.

"This isn't a police matter," he said. "We can't go through formal channels. Anyway, I seem to recall that you're no slouch at drugs yourself. Isn't that your main field of research in this department?"

"You're well informed. Yes, a fascination with illegal substances seems to run in the family. I'm just continuing a good old Jennings tradition."

Hutch didn't know what to say. She produced a ghost of a smile and checked the tiny gold watch clasping her bony wrist. "Look, I really want to help you guys, but we better make it quick. I have a class at two."

Hutch nodded and glanced at Starsky again. Received a slight dip of the long lashes in return, a wordless go-ahead. He looked back at Cheryl.

"Thanks, Cheryl. As I said on the phone, we're trying to identify a drug we think was used in an assault. We don't have much to go on, but we think it could be something new, something more sophisticated than a street drug."

"So you said. I have your description right here. Undetectable by taste, mimics the effects of alcohol, drowsiness, memory loss, *et cetera*." Cheryl folded her long fingers in her lap. "It's clearly a sedative of some sort, probably of the benzodiazepine group. I narrowed it down to the most likely candidates, but before we go any further, I need to know a little more about the victim of the assault. Gender, age, physical condition—that sort of thing."

Starsky sighed and spoke for the first time. "No need for that. It's me."

The change on her face was almost comical to watch. "You? Again? You're pulling my leg, right?"

Starsky shook his head.

"I can't believe it. How did you—? Oh, never mind. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. The effects wore off long ago."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

Starsky shook his head again.

"Well, you should've. Christ, Starsky, you of all people should know what drugs can do to you. You should've had a full set of tests done. That drug could've caused all sorts of damage."

Starsky held up a hand. "Look, Cheryl, until this morning we didn't even realize I might've been drugged. I thought I had too much to drink. Anyway, this is personal. I don't need this on my medical record on top of everything else."

"I see." Cheryl pressed her lips together. "Well, if I'm right and it's one of the drugs I'm thinking of, you should be fine. But next time, Starsky, you really have to go and get yourself checked out."

*Next time?*

"What did you find out, Cheryl?" Hutch said quickly. He'd be damned if there was going to be a next time.

"Several possibilities, most of them hypnotic sedatives—prescription drugs, you understand. Based on what you told me on the phone, we can probably rule out most of them. Two possibles are still in the experimental phase, and unavailable unless you're working in the field."

"Okay."

"That leaves us with four broad options. There's gamma-hydroxybutyrate; it's used for the treatment of sleep disorders. It fits the description, but it has a noticeable salty aftertaste. Of course, if your drink was naturally salty, you wouldn't have tasted it."

Starsky shook his head. "No. It was tequila pure. No salt. I'd have noticed."

"All right. Another possibility is Midazolam, a sedative with a very short window of effectiveness, too short in a case like this, I think. Too unreliable if it was meant to incapacitate. And then there's Temazepam—Restoril—which is the drug the Russians use as a truth serum."

"What's the problem with that?"

"It's not readily soluble. Given the amount you must've had, you should've noticed a residue."

Starsky shook his head again, and Hutch suppressed a sigh. "Okay, what about the last one?"

Cheryl opened a drawer and produced a glass bottle full of chunky pills. Hutch sat up straighter. Beside him, Starsky did the same.

"Your best option," she said. "Rohypnol, a new prescription drug from Switzerland and one of the most powerful sedatives on the market. It fits all the criteria you've described. It's soluble in water, tasteless, and very fast-acting. Most important, the effects are almost indistinguishable from those of heavy alcohol intake."

"You mean you can't tell if you've been drugged or just had one too many?" Hutch cast a meaningful look at Starsky.

Starsky evaded the look. "What *are* the effects of Roenol...Ropnol...?"

"Rohypnol. Ro-hyp-nol." Cheryl placed the bottle on her desk. "As you would expect, it triggers sleepiness, but side-effects include impaired motor skills and cognitive functions, memory loss, loss of resistance, disorientation—"

"What do you mean by loss of resistance?" Starsky interrupted.

"Apathy. Diminished willpower. A decreased ability to make decisions and act on them." She spread her hands. "Rohypnol works much like other stimulants in this way, but the effects are magnified. Take memory loss. With increasing dosage, or taken in conjunction with alcohol, it can lead to blackouts and even amnesia."

"Amnesia!"

"Yes," Cheryl said, in her element. "You can also be expected to experience confusion, dizziness, and a certain level of respiratory distress." She eyed Starsky. "You did have trouble breathing, didn't you?"

Starsky nodded, shook his head, looked away.

"How long before it wears off?" Hutch said.

"Four to eight hours, depending on the dosage and the patient's metabolism, but the effects can linger for up to twenty-four."

"It all fits, even the time frame. Starsky, this has to be the one."

Cheryl held up a hand. "There *is* one problem with it."

Hutch experienced a sinking feeling. "What?"

"You can't get hold of it in the US. It's practically unknown over here. It's sold legally only in Europe. There are plans to start producing it in Mexico, but at present, it's not available on this continent. There isn't even a black market for it—yet." She shrugged. "So unless your perpetrator has connections to Europe or to someone who had the drug prescribed there recently, I don't see how he could have—"

Starsky sat up so abruptly, he almost knocked the nearest jar from the desk.

"She did," he said. "Hutch, she did! She was in Europe this year. She told me."

Hutch and Cheryl stared at him. Starsky stared back with eyes that looked huge in a face stunned into a sudden ghostlike pallor.

"She went there with her father," he said. "They traveled around for months. England, France, Italy. That's when she must have got it."

He fell back into the chair, looking dazed. An awkward silence filled the room.

Finally, Cheryl said, "Look, don't pin me down on this. I could be completely wrong. To be certain, I'd need to analyze a sample."

"Would a urine sample do?" Hutch asked. He had trouble concentrating on Cheryl. All his attention was on Starsky. His partner looked gray as if bled dry from a thrust to the heart. Hutch ached for him.

Cheryl shook her head. "If the drug was administered over twenty-four hours ago, it'll be out of your system by now." She checked her watch again.

Taking his cue, Hutch stood, and Starsky rose like his shadow. Hutch eyed him with concern. Something was brewing behind the stunned façade. A storm of hurt and anger was about to break. He had to get his partner out of there.

"Thanks, Cheryl. You've been a huge help." He planted a hasty peck on her cheek. "We'll be in touch."

"Glad I could help. Call me if you need more details."

Hutch nodded, caught hold of his inert partner's arm, and maneuvered him through the door into the crowded hallway. Starsky went with him in a daze, but Hutch knew it was a deceptive calm. He steered him around a corner and down an empty corridor. Looked right and left. No one around. Leaned his partner against the wall and stood well clear.

Starsky hit the roof.

oooOOOooo

"She conned me. She set me up. The whole thing was a goddamn setup!"

Starsky was a study in motion. Up and down the narrow hall, hands balled like a star fighter in the ring. His voice shook with the force of his fury. Hutch thought he could almost see plumes of smoke rising from his ears.

"She played me from start to finish. She had it all worked out. The phone call. The apology. All just a ploy to get me into her apartment."

A fist punched the wall, denting the plaster.

"And when I got there, she pushed that damn tequila on me! She knew perfectly well I couldn't refuse." A kick against the base of the wall accompanied the insight. "No wonder she was so upbeat when I'd finished that drink."

Hutch watched the eruption with a deep sense of satisfaction. Elation, even. He'd take a healthy dose of Starsky's fury over his extended guilt trip any day. Under different circumstances he might even have joined in. Rosey had put his partner through hell, and for that, Hutch's own anger ran no less deep.

But they couldn't both go off the rails at the same time.

"And when I was completely out of it, she went in for the kill. She knew I couldn't stop her. And, of course, she knew I wouldn't remember anything afterward. All she wanted was to get me into that bed."

So he watched and hovered, ready to jump in, in case his partner decided to take his anger out on the glass display cabinet or one of the concrete wall supports.

"And the next morning—all those empty bottles. They were just props. To make me believe I was too pissed to know what I was doing." Another punch against the wall. Another dent. "I can't believe I fell for it."

Hutch moved closer. Too many dents would be hard to explain away on their expense sheet. A couple of students rounded the corner, took one look, and backed away with speed.

"And then she had the fucking nerve to pretend that *I* was the one who came on to *her!*"

"Yeah." What else was there to say?

"And I believed her! When she told me that we...that we...."

"Yeah."

"She conned me into believing that I...."

"Yeah."

Starsky ran dry in mid-flow and stood still, a hand propped against the wall, head down. His chest was heaving beneath the striped shirt. When he finally straightened up and turned, the look on his face was one of pure bewilderment.

"Why, Hutch?" he said. "I don't understand. Why would she do that to me?" The broad shoulders sagged. "I thought she loved me."

Hutch went to him at once, drawn as if by invisible strings. The heart-rending cry allowed only one response—that of his closeness. He pulled his partner close, no words needed. Starsky felt warm and solid in his arms. He held on until his breathing softened and the frantic heartbeat against his chest slowed to a healthier pace.

They broke apart and Hutch took a step back to gaze at him.

"Feeling better now?"

Starsky nodded.

"And you believe me now? That you didn't do it? That it wasn't your fault?"

Starsky nodded again. He even attempted an approximation of a smile.

Hutch brushed his knuckles across Starsky's cheek. "Great. In that case, let's get outta here before someone calls the cops."

Starsky produced a soft snort, then stared when Hutch quietly pointed out the dents in the wall.

"Damn! Did I do that?"

"'Fraid so. Let me see your hand."

Starsky held it out for inspection. Blood oozed from scraped and torn skin, but there appeared to be no broken bones. Hutch dug into his pocket for a handkerchief.

"Moron," he said, shaking his head, as he wrapped it around the small injury. "You're lucky these aren't brick walls. We better go home and get this mess cleaned up."

They left the building in silence. Hutch was nudging the LTD into the rush hour traffic when Starsky finally spoke.

"Hutch?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks."

"What for?"

"Figuring out the truth. Finding the evidence." He stared out the window and heaved a sigh that seemed to come all the way from his toes. "At least we got some answers now."

"Yeah, but let's get one thing straight," Hutch said. "I wasn't doing it for *my* sake; I was doing it for yours. You're the guy who said he needed proof."

Starsky finally turned to him. "And you really didn't?"

"Nope."

"You're one crazy bastard, you know that?"

"I know. How else would I put up with you?"

The eye-roll he got for that wasn't quite up to the usual Starsky standard, but it was a start. More silence ensued. They had almost reached the turnoff when Starsky heaved another soul-deep sigh.

"You know something else?" he said.

Hutch braced himself. "No. What?"

"I'm hungry."

It was the best news Hutch had heard all day.

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## XI

Vinnie's was a quiet place at the best of times, and never more so than at seven in the morning.

Starsky set the barbell down with a thump and straightened. He flexed his shoulders, stretching his right arm up and back as far as it would go. Held the position for a few seconds. Nothing. Not even a twinge. Feeling smug, he removed the plates and returned them to the rack.

Across the room, Hutch laid into the punching ball as if it were Gunther, or maybe Redd Russell. Starsky grinned and took a moment to observe the assault.

If truth be told, watching Hutch sweat *was* a high point of his day. He'd always thought so, but until a certain time a couple of years ago, he'd rather have burned at the stake than said so.

He walked over. "Keep goin', Blintz. That's it. Harder. C'mon, put some beef into it."

"And who made you my personal coach?" Hutch panted. "Go do another ten reps if you've got nothing better to do with your time."

He'd enjoyed the show for years. These days, the only drawback to that small pleasure in the mornings was the fact that not only was Hutch sweating in the gym, but so was he.

"Hey, I got a busted hand here. Gotta take it easy today."

"Busted hand, my ass! I saw you with that hundred-weight when Belinda and Kelly walked by just now. Didn't look like your hand was giving you much trouble *then*."

Of course, the reward for all the hard work came *after* the workout, in Vinnie's crumbling communal shower room—the only reason Starsky had vetoed a defection to the new state-of-the-art fitness center around the corner, which boasted an admittedly impressive array of hi-tech equipment, but lost points for the deplorable decision to put in a row of separate shower cubicles. With curtains. Where was the fun in that?

Today they had the room to themselves, an opportunity Hutch lost no time exploiting to his advantage.

"Dammit, Hutch, will ya stop that? Someone could walk in here any minute."

"What are you talking about? I'm just taking a shower."

"Don't give me that choirboy look. You know it drives me crazy when you do that."

"Do what? This, you mean?"

"Huuuutch! Damn you, I'm gonna get you for that!"

So after he'd endured the sight of Hutch as he soaped and rinsed and ran his hands all over his glistening chest and belly, and did that thing with his balls that almost always brought Starsky to the edge of insanity just *watching*, he took his revenge, turned his back on Hutch, and bent down to give his legs an extra good soaping, taking his time over the task, until Hutch choked audibly behind him and told him to get the hell moving, they were running late.

Oh yeah, the gym was one hell of a way to start the day.

Even better was the next stop on the way—Merle's. When he slid behind the wheel of his baby and heard the engine roar to life and felt the sweet purr of power under his hands, he knew that another small part of his life had just realigned itself along a familiar axis.

None of which meant that he was all right. Really all right. Rosey's actions had cut too deep, and he still didn't have all the answers.

Hutch, he was grateful to note, made no mention of recent events. Instead, he kept up a running commentary on the dismal performance of the Dodgers.

"Coming upstairs?" Hutch said as they pulled up in front of Metro on their way to court. "I won't be a minute."

"Might as well."

The squad room was filled with stale tobacco smoke and the acid voice of Captain O'Rourke that carried through the half-open door of his office.

"...don't give a damn how Dobey does it. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm running this department now, and while I do, I expect everyone to stick to the rules, including you two. Next time I'm having your asses for insubordination. Is that clear?"

A moment later, the room spat out an annoyed Simmons, followed by a fuming Babcock.

"One of these days, I swear...." Babcock muttered to no one in particular as he stomped past Starsky.

"Couldn't you have kept your mouth shut?" Simmons grumbled. "You just set him off."

"I couldn't help it. He's such a pompous ass. And he was just plain wrong about the stakeout. It would've been a fucking waste of time."

"Yeah, but did you have to tell him that? Because of you we're having to pull overtime again—"

O'Rourke's clipped vowels sliced through the room again. "Menendez! Stanton! My office. Now!"

Two figures pushed themselves up from their desks, every movement oozing reluctance. The casual cool on Menendez's face convinced no more than Stanton's shrug of comic despair as they disappeared into the lion's den.

Starsky surveyed the room, the unsmiling faces of its occupants, the heads bent low over forms and statements. A grim tenseness hung in the air, very unlike the atmosphere of energy and purpose that permeated the room when Dobey was in residence. He sighed.

"Tell me again, Hutch," he said. "How many days?"

"I lost track. Twenty? Twenty-two?" They traded resigned looks.

Hutch started sorting through the messages on their desk. Starsky watched him for a moment, decided the task was in capable hands, and ambled over to the water cooler. When he got back, slopping water from an overfull paper cup, he was just in time to see the note in his partner's hand meet an untimely end as he balled it up in disgust, and Starsky didn't need mind-reading skills to know that the news wasn't making Hutch happy.

*The Dennison case. They've denied extradition.*

The look on Hutch's face confirmed the diagnosis.

"He's already been charged." Hutch tossed the crumpled ball of paper on the desk and fell into his chair. "Robbery and assault. Apparently the judge decided on *careful consideration* that the evidence was insufficient for a conviction on murder charges."

"That's bullshit," Starsky said. "There was plenty of evidence for a murder conviction. They just didn't want to give him up."

"Well, nothing we can do about that now." Hutch's lips set into a thin line. "Win some, lose some. Right?"

Starsky took the seat opposite. "Aw, Hutch, I'm sorry. I know how much that case meant to you. But, look, it's not the end. They'll apply again. He can still be extradited when he's served his time in jail."

"That'll be years down the line. It may never happen." Hutch retrieved the message, smoothed it out, re-read the words, and balled it up again.

"What's the point of all this, Starsk, huh? We bust our asses getting scum off the streets, and some judge with his head in the clouds lets them back out on a technicality, or 'cause the jails are full, or some politician's playing some *goddamn* fucking power game. I mean, what are we doing here? What the *hell* is the point? Huh? We might as well pack it all in and find ourselves a job that doesn't involve getting shot at on a daily basis just to get some lowlife off the streets...."

Starsky hated to see him like this. Hutch didn't usually let these things get to him; no cop on active duty could afford to. But sometimes, just sometimes, a case got too close and sucked you in. He reached out to pick a small piece of fluff from Hutch's sleeve, letting his fingers linger on his arm.

Hutch took a long breath and finally looked at him.

"I just wanted justice for the girls and to give their families some answers," he said. Something on his face shifted and smoothed away the harsh angles, and he looked suddenly tired, and defeated. Vulnerable, even. "I thought it would make a difference, you know?"

Starsky looked back at him. "Yeah. I know."

*What about justice for us, Hutch? What if Gunther walks free? What will that do to you?*

He drained the cup in one go and came to his feet. "C'mon, Hutch, let's go. There's one murderer out there we'll be damned if we let him slip through our fingers."

Another deep breath lifted Hutch's chest. A long moment went by. Then he nodded, tossed the note into the trash, and followed his partner out.

oooOOOooo

For once in his career, Starsky was glad to be in court. Not only was it the perfect place to take Hutch's mind off things, it also provided him with the opportunity for some much-needed reflection.

So while Hutch hung on the ballistics expert's every word, pen poised over a notebook already densely filled with notes and queries, Starsky listened with half an ear and let his mind wander. Not to Rosey, or what she had tried to do, but to Hutch.

Hutch had believed in him from the start. Blindly. Which was more than could be said for himself when their roles had been reversed.

*When I saw him at Kira's that day, I never doubted for a moment that he'd done it.*

His reaction then had been pure betrayed male—hot flaring anger, and a punch in the gut where it would hurt the most. He hadn't stopped to question, to find an explanation for his partner's aberrant behavior. The pain of betrayal had blinded him to everything beyond his own profound sense of loss.

*But that was before everything changed between us. Before we grew so close.*

Then Rosey had re-appeared on the scene and turned his life upside down by asking for something Starsky was no longer able to give her. And somewhere in the process, every instinct and analytical faculty acquired over years of detective work had gone out the window.

Starsky squirmed. He'd taken Rosey's story at face value—unquestioning and without a single doubt. Instead, he'd been ready to believe himself capable of the worst kind of betrayal, based on no more than her word and a load of circumstantial evidence.

The speed with which he'd condemned himself was disturbing.

But that wasn't the worst. What was by far the scariest thing in the whole sordid mess wasn't his doubt in himself, but his lack of faith in their partnership and the strength of their connection. It was almost a betrayal of a different kind—the way he'd caused that connection to fail so spectacularly at the critical moment.

Starsky felt cold at the memory. He still didn't understand how he could have lost that all-important link so quickly, misread his partner's mind so badly, out there on the courthouse steps. A wall of misery and guilt had blocked the signals he normally received so effortlessly.

Somehow on that roller-coaster day of horrors, he'd managed to forget everything their partnership stood for. The trust between them hadn't just fallen into their laps. They'd earned it. Everything they'd gone through together over the years had lead up to this—a bond that extended even into death.

Hutch, of course, had known it all along. Hutch knew everything about him. It shouldn't have come as a surprise to find that the reverse also held true.

*I know him inside out, but he can still take my breath away.*

Starsky cast him a sidelong glance. His partner was on the edge of his seat, eyes fixed on whoever was on the stand this time, wholly absorbed in some technical point presented in fluent legalese. His pen scratched over the paper—comments and suggestions destined to be dissected with Meriott at the end of the session.

A warm fuzzy glow spread through Starsky at the sight of his friend, partner, soulmate, lover. Hutch looked so...*intense*. Completely focused, committed to the task. Giving his all, as always. There was no sign of the disillusioned cop who had wanted to pack it all in, only a couple of hours earlier in the squad room.

He wanted to reach out and smooth the frown lines from the tense face. *Later*, he told himself. Later there'd be a whole lot of things he'd be doing to his partner.

With an effort, he turned his thoughts to Rosey.

Why did she do it? Go to such extremes to get him back? Was it jealousy, the hurt of rejection, a desire for revenge? Or did she truly believe she wanted the best for him, liberating him from an association that couldn't fail but end in heartbreak, one way or another?

He would probably never know. Maybe she didn't even know herself.

One thing was for sure—the elaborate setup was evidence of a cool and calculating mind not above employing devious means to achieve a desired end. It was the work of a woman he didn't recognize. And even though he'd accepted long ago that he'd never really known her, he was still shaken by the extent of her unknowability.

For the hundredth time, Starsky went over the details. The drink, the drug, the kiss. The lightheadedness masquerading as an advanced effect of alcohol, the gaps in his memory. Cheryl's revelations and all they implied.

He could see no flaw in their reasoning. And yet...something was still missing from the picture. Something still didn't add up.

There was the one thing they'd overlooked: Hutch was Rosey's victim, too. In more ways than one. The Rohypnol was only a part of the truth. In fact—

"Hey."

A nudge jolted Starsky from his thoughts, and he looked up, surprised to find Hutch standing over him, and a stream of people jostling down the aisles to the exit. Oh, recess.

"Welcome back," Hutch grinned, looking surprisingly upbeat. "Where were you? Did you hear a single word anyone said this morning?"

"Uh...."

Hutch gave him one of his patented Hutchinson looks. "Well, lucky for you I took notes. Jamison contradicted himself twice, but everything else he said was pure gold. The jury lapped it up. But you really should've heard Meriott just now when he took that smug bastard in Gunther's defense team down a peg or two." Hutch started steering him to the door. "Let's go."

"Where to?"

"The diner around the corner. Meriott wants to talk to us. Come on, you can buy me lunch."

Damn, Hutch looked like the proverbial cat after it got the cream. The trial had to be going well. Starsky almost wished he'd paid attention. He eyed his partner and came to a decision.

"All right," he said. "I'll buy you lunch. I'll even fork out for some of that godawful rabbit food you like so much. But only if you promise to come with me tonight. There's someone we gotta go see."

"Rosey, huh?"

"Yeah. I think it's time we paid her a visit."

oooOOOooo

Night had fallen over LA by the time Rosey's apartment building loomed into sight.

"The lights are on," Starsky said as he pulled the Torino into an empty space. "She must be in."

"You sure you want me to come with you?"

"Sure I'm sure. This is your business as much as mine. Besides, I might need the backup."

Hutch seemed to take that literally, and Starsky was amused to see him flatten himself against the wall beside the entrance to Rosey's apartment as if they were about to break down the door to Crazy Eddie's basement lair. He hid his smile and knocked.

The door opened and a vision in white appeared before him, long hair flowing, bright eyes widening with that glow of joy and excitement that had always made Starsky's heart skip. Before.

*Beautiful, oh yeah. At least on the outside.*

"David!" She had her arms around his neck, holding on with all her strength. "You came back! Oh, Dave, I thought I'd lost you. I thought I'd never see you again—"

Hutch chose that moment to step from the shadows—a soundless, almost ghostlike move. The effect couldn't have been more dramatic. Rosey jerked back as if she'd spotted a tarantula on her landing.

"Hutch." Wide eyes flicked to Starsky and back. "Wh-what are you doing here? Why...?" She took a deep breath and looked at Starsky again as if hoping to find an answer somewhere on his face.

"Rosey, we'd like to talk you," Starsky said. "Can we come in?"

Rosey pulled herself together with a visible effort. "Of course. Come in. It's...uh...good to see you. Both of you. I—"

Starsky pushed past her into the room, tired of the whole thing. "Save it, Rosey. The show's over. You can stop the act now."

Hutch ambled in after him, looking cool and casual, and shut the door as if he owned the place.

Whatever Rosey had become in the years they'd been apart, in the hours since their reunion, it certainly wasn't stupid.

"What's going on, David?" she said and folded her arms. "Why are you here?"

"Don't play dumb, Rosey." Starsky wandered around the room, taking a good look around, not surprised to find that the place looked as innocent as thousands of other living rooms in the city. "You know why."

The look on her face shifted, a slide to the opposite spectrum. "I can guess. It's about the other night, isn't it? You told Hutch nothing happened between us, right? And now you want me to confirm that. 'Cause he doesn't believe it, coming from you."

Strange how the passage of a few short days could alter a man's perception. How could he have missed that edge of resentment in her voice before, of hostility even? An unexpected sadness washed over him and swept away the remnants of anger still festering in a corner of his heart. It was time to put an end to all this.

"On the contrary," he said, softer than he'd thought himself capable of under the circumstances. "Hutch has never *not* believed it. He knew all along this whole thing was a farce."

"How can you say that?" she said. "How can you pretend it didn't happen? You made love to me, Dave, right here in this bed. That's a fact. And you loved it! I know you did."

She walked up to Hutch, looking him straight in the face.

"He loved it, you hear me?" she said. "He was out of control. You should've heard him shout my name when he came. He loves me. He needs a woman in his life. If his happiness meant anything to you, you would let him go."

She'd staked her claim. Issued her challenge. She stepped away, still looking at Hutch. "Just 'cause he doesn't remember doesn't mean it didn't happen."

The thought occurred to Starsky that maybe she really believed it, and labored under a delusion of monumental proportions. But a look in her face was all he needed to recall the intent of her meticulous setup, the true depth of her deception.

"Nice try, Rosey," he said. "But you're wasting your breath. We can even prove it to you." He looked at his partner. "Hutch?"

Hutch detached himself from the door and ambled over with a dangerous smile on his lips that put goose bumps down the back of Starsky's neck and caused Rosey to take another step away. He reached into the pocket of his leather jacket and brought out a small bottle full of pills.

"Recognize this?" he said pleasantly and held it out to her. "Rohypnol. A prescription sedative. Not long on the market in Europe. We know you put this in Starsky's drink to knock him out."

She frowned at him. "What do you mean? I don't do drugs. I never have. I don't even take aspirin."

Hutch's anger blew with the suddenness of Mount St. Helens. "Stop playing innocent, Rosey. We know you picked these up in Europe. They were for your father, weren't

they? He never finished them, but they came in handy when you started looking around for a way to get back at your former boyfriend."

"You're crazy. I don't know what you're talking about." She walked past him toward the door. "I think you should go now."

"Not so fast." Hutch reached out, gripped her by the arm, and hauled her back. "We have a few questions for you. Now you can either answer them here, or we can haul your sorry ass to the precinct on charges of attempted murder. The choice is yours."

"Murd—what are you talking about?" The blood had drained from her cheeks.

Hutch pulled her close, shaking her, and she twisted away from the force of his anger. "Yes, murder. I'm talking about the pills you put in Starsky's tequila. You have any idea what you did? You could have killed him! He could've died right here in your bed. He's damn lucky to be alive!"

"Oh God, no! I—"

"But maybe that's what you wanted, huh?"

"No!" she cried. "That's crazy. You're out of your mind."

"Tell the truth, Rosey. That's what you wanted, didn't you? To get back at him for rejecting you."

"No, no—"

"Don't try to fool us. You *knew* what these pills could do. You knew they could be fatal. You put at least six of them into that drink. Six pills, Rosey! Enough to kill a goddamn ox. It's a miracle he's alive—"

"That's not true! Three. I only used three. I knew it was safe. I swear I would never have harmed him—"

Hutch sighed and released her, and the look he tossed at Starsky as he ambled away said more clearly than words that this had really been far too easy.

Rosey stumbled back, realizing she'd been tricked. Angry color flooded her cheeks, and Starsky caught a flash of something he'd thought he would never have to see on that flawless face. Hatred. Aimed directly at Hutch.

*She hates him. 'Cause I love him more than her.*

Starsky stepped up, and she put up no resistance when he guided her to the couch. He didn't sit down beside her.

"All right, now tell us the whole story."

She was silent. Tears welled in her eyes, matting her long lashes, but the approach no longer worked its magic on Starsky. He pulled up a chair, straddled it backward, and leaned his arms on the back.

"Or how about I tell the story and you correct me if I'm wrong?" He glanced at Hutch, got a raised eyebrow in return. He turned back to Rosey. She hadn't moved, hadn't looked up.

"You set me up," he said to her. "You wanted me back by any means. By trickery, if necessary. You thought one night in your bed would soon cure me of my deluded attachment to Hutch. How'm I doin' so far?"

No reply. Starsky hadn't expected one. He leaned closer.

"But that's not all. You had an ace up your sleeve, didn't you? Just in case Plan A didn't work out. To be on the safe side, you decided to set Hutch up as well."

Another glance at his partner. No cocky eyebrow this time. Oh yeah, that was news to him all right.

"She conned us both," he said, eyes on Hutch's astonished face. "In fact, the whole show was put on just for you. First she made sure I'd be convinced I slept with her, and then she arranged for *you* to come around and catch us in the act."

He looked back at Rosey, taking her silence for assent.

"Of course, you were hoping I'd wake up in the morning and realize I was still madly in love with you," he said. "But just in case that didn't work out, you made damn sure you'd wreck things between me 'n' Hutch. You figured he'd dump me, and then you'd be there to pick up the pieces."

He shifted his gaze back to Hutch. The familiar crease of concentration had reappeared on his forehead, and Starsky could almost hear the wheels churning in his head. As he watched, the crease smoothed, the stunned expression faded to be replaced by something very dark and cold, and Starsky knew his partner was with him.

"The guy who left that message with Huggy," Hutch said in a very tight voice. "Not a jealous lover, huh?"

Starsky shook his head. "Wouldn't have thought so. She needed someone to tip you off. Could've been some loser she picked up in a bar. Who was it, Rosey? C'mon, tell us. What's his name?"

"Hank," she said, sullen.

"Hank what?"

"I don't know. Just Hank."

"How much did you pay him to pass that message to Huggy? Speak up, we can't hear you. How much?"

"Fifty bucks."

"You got his number?"

"Just a phone booth number."

"Where you called him after you'd knocked me out. He's long gone, of course. It doesn't matter; he's not important. He just had a bit part in the show."

Hutch started wandering around the room and into the alcove. He stared at the bed, then wandered back in. Starsky followed him with his eyes, at the same time never quite leaving Rosey out of his line of vision.

"So Hank left that message with Huggy," Hutch said slowly, "the only purpose of which was to get me to drop by her place and catch you in the act."

"Yep."

"But, Starsk, what if I hadn't shown up? I wasn't supposed to be in LA that night."

"Ah, but she didn't know that. I never got around to telling her. If you hadn't shown, she would've had to drop Plan B, but it didn't matter in the end, 'cause you *did* show up, even if it was a lot later than she'd expected."

"Okay, let me get this straight." Hutch started wandering again. "While you were dead to the world in her bed, she called her accomplice..."

"Hank."

"...Hank, to give him the go-ahead. And while she was waiting for me to turn up—"

"She set the stage for you—"

"The unlocked door, the trail of clothes, the empty bottles—"

"To make it look as if we'd had this wild drinking session—"

"That got out of control."

"Yeah. And when she heard you coming—"

"She draped herself all over you and pretended to be asleep."

Hutch came to a standstill. They locked eyes. Starsky nodded and even managed a small smile.

"She wanted to break us," he said. "She *wanted* you to know. The only way to do that was to make sure you saw us together and came to your own conclusions."

He turned back to Rosey. She still hadn't moved, still sat with her hands in her lap, and her eyes on her hands. A veil of her long hair obscured her face.

"But your plan didn't work out," he said. "Wanna know what went wrong? You underestimated Hutch. He didn't believe it. He turned up as planned, he saw what he was meant to see, but he didn't believe it. You didn't count on that, did you?"

She looked up at last. Her tears had left dark trails of mascara on her cheeks, but it was her eyes that drew Starsky's gaze—wide, tearful eyes with an expression so distraught, so full of misery, it couldn't possibly be fake.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I really am. I don't know why I did it. I never meant to hurt you. I love you. Please, you've gotta believe me."

"I do. I know you love me. In a twisted kinda way."

"And I thought you still loved me, too."

Starsky heaved a sigh. "I did," he said. There was a small, sharp ache in his chest. "I really did. But not in the way you thought. Hutch is the most important person in my life. Nothing could ever change that."

He didn't tell her that his love for Hutch was an exhilarating, powerful force that eclipsed all other kinds of love he'd known before.

Rosey misunderstood. She slipped off the couch to crouch beside him, capturing his arm with both hands, and gazed up at him with those huge, expressive eyes.

"Don't say that, David," she pleaded. "Please. It doesn't have to be this way. You don't have to do this if you don't want to. This thing, it's a disease. You can get treatment for it now. There are doctors, psychiatrists, who specialize in this kind of thing. They can help you."

Starsky went cold inside. Christ, she really believed it. That his love for Hutch was some sort of illness that could be cured with the aid of pills and shock therapy.

"You can be normal again, David," she cried, oblivious. "Please, at least think about it. I only want what's best for you."

He got to his feet and stepped away. "Do you really, Rosey?"

She couldn't miss the chill in his voice now. Her hands dropped by her side as a whole range of emotions flowed over her features—realization, grief, hurt, bitterness. And finally, anger. A cold, hard, tightly controlled anger. It was a terrible transformation like the distortion on the face of a wax doll left out too long in the sun.

She stood, a vision in white, still beautiful despite the dark smudges on her cheeks.

"You never really loved me," she said, cold as a steel blade. "It was a lie from the start. Daddy was right. You were just using me to get at him."

"That's not true, Rosey. You know it isn't. I thought we'd settled this."

"He warned me of you," she said, ignoring that. "Daddy told me not to trust you. He always said there was something weird about you guys. The way you looked at each other. The way you touched. He thought I was an idiot for crying after you. He laughed at me when I did. But I didn't listen to him."

She walked into the middle of the room, then turned and looked at Starsky again. Anger made her voice go low and harsh.

"All this time, David, all these years I had to live in Mexico with him, the memory of you was the only thing that kept me going. You thought I loved living there? I'll tell you the truth. I hated it! I hated every day I had to spend in exile because of him. I hated *him*, too, for making me choose between you and him. But I had no choice; I had to go with him. I tried to explain all that to you, but you didn't understand. You have no idea the kind of power he had over me."

The words were thick with resentment. Directed at him? Her father? Or Hutch?

"I wanted to leave him so bad and come back to you, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't live without him. I thought you understood. I thought you were on my side. But I was blind. I should've known three years ago that I couldn't rely on you."

"Rosey, you're making no sense," Starsky said, torn between sorrow, pain, and pity. This was terrible. How could it have come to this? "You left me. You walked out of my life, and I never heard from you again. What the hell did you expect me to do?"

She ignored that, too, as she wrapped her arms around herself. Her eyes went to Hutch, and back to him.

"You're a fool, David, if you think this is going to last," she said, no longer bothering to hide her disdain. "One of these days, he'll grow tired of you. You know that, don't you? These things don't last. He's using you. He'll take what he can and when he's had enough of you, he'll dump you."

Starsky didn't reply. What difference would it make?

"I want you to go now," she said and tossed her long hair back. "Unless you're still planning to take me in for *attempted murder*." A mocking smile curled the corners of her mouth. "But you're not going to do that, are you? If you did, it would all come out. Everyone would find out the truth about you. Your colleagues. Your captain. Your mother, David! The whole world would know what you've become."

There it was, the veiled threat. The bitter scorn that betrayed the hot turmoil bubbling beneath the cold exterior. Starsky sighed, wishing it hadn't come to this.

Hutch was at his elbow, almost but not quite touching.

"It's no good, Rosey," he said. "You're wrong if you think you can blackmail us. We're not afraid of the truth. Go ahead, tell the whole world about us if you must. But that's not going to get you Starsky back. Oh, and by the way...." He smiled at her. "Dobey knows. And so does Starsky's mother."

Hatred wasn't quite the right word for the emotion that flashed on her pale face now. It was an expression that made Starsky want to hustle Hutch out of the apartment, for fear she'd set a blowtorch to him, or something.

He caught Hutch's eye and cast his gaze across the room. Hutch nodded and they moved to the door.

Rosey's restraint cracked. Her voice rose for the first time, thick with hurt and fury, and directed only at Hutch.

"Yes, go. Go! Take him! You're welcome to him. What woman would want him now, anyway? He can't get it up for a woman anymore. He's completely useless in bed. Believe me, I tried everything. I don't know what you see in him."

The parting shot was intended to maim, and three years ago, the impact would have been devastating. Now, Starsky couldn't have been more ecstatic. He held the door for his partner, warmed out of all proportion by the brief touch on his back as he passed, took a final look at the slim figure standing alone in the middle of the room, and closed the door behind him.

oooOOOooo

He was wild in bed that night. Couldn't get enough of Hutch. Fucked him so hard, he made Hutch cry out in ecstasy. Got fucked back so good, he knew he'd have trouble sitting down the next day.

He needed it, so much. They both did. They barely made it through the door before they were on each other, mauling each other's mouths, tearing at clothes, going completely insane.

God, the incredible closeness of Hutch.

Coming down from the high took just about forever. And even then, every part of him was still humming with the music Hutch's expert hands and tongue and cock had played on his body.

Starsky finally stirred under the hot, twisted sheets. Every part of him felt sticky and smelled of Hutch. He blinked at the warm body sprawled beside him. Hutch looked drowsy, but awake, afloat somewhere in that dreamy never-never-land between rapture and reality. Unable to resist, Starsky reached out for him again.

"Hutch?"

Maybe he'd get away with a remark or two before his partner told him to shut up and go to sleep.

"Hmmm?"

"Who said that 'hell has no fury like a woman scorned', or something like that? Shakespeare or Dickens or one of those guys?"

"Not Shakespeare," Hutch mumbled, as relaxed as water under his touch. "Marlowe, I think, or maybe Congreve. And the quotation goes *'Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned'*."

Starsky got up on an elbow, suddenly wide awake. "That's it, Hutch! That's it exactly. *No rage like love to hatred turned*. This guy, whoever he was, he could've written that with Rosey in mind."

He gazed down at the familiar planes and angles of Hutch's face, struck as always by how the fine lashes seemed to go on endlessly when his eyes were closed, and how the small crease on his forehead melted away when his features were at rest.

"She's messed up, Hutch," he said softly. "I had no idea. This thing with her father.... It's like an obsession. Some sort of love-hate thing. I don't know why I didn't pick up on it three years ago."

"You only knew her for a couple of weeks," Hutch said. "I got a feeling she wouldn't have left him in a million years, no matter how much she loved you, or how many opportunities she had to leave him."

"But what's she gonna do now? She needs help."

"Yeah, but not from you. I'm not letting you within a mile of her. That woman is lethal."

Starsky sighed. "I just wish there was something I could've done."

Hutch finally opened his eyes. "Hey, you're not still blaming yourself, are you? Don't. There's nothing you could've done. None of it was your fault."

"Says the guy who carries the weight of the world on his shoulders...."

But he knew that Hutch was right. In the end, it had been her choice, and hers alone. Whatever the deal was with her father—his power over her, her need for him, that inexplicable dependence that was so unlike the strong, confident woman he thought he knew—he would probably never understand.

He propped his chin on Hutch's chest, hmm-ed with approval when Hutch's hand came up behind him and embarked on a leisurely journey over his back.

He said, "You ever wonder what would've happened if she'd stayed with me three years ago?"

Hutch sighed. "For one thing, Kira would never have happened."

"And us? Would *we* have happened?"

"Yeah, we would," Hutch said without hesitation. "I think it was inevitable."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." Hutch's fingers described lazy circles on his back. "Just think about it. All those women in our lives—they weren't for real. Something always happened to take them away, almost as if they weren't meant to happen. But you and me...."

"So you're saying we're for real, for good?"

"You know we are. You're not still worried about that, are you?"

"Not anymore." Starsky suddenly grinned "You realize that none of this would've happened if you'd been a woman?"

The look he got for that was a genuine Hutchinson glare.

"No, really," Starsky said. "She was okay when I told her I was seeing someone. Disappointed, but okay. I mean she must've been expecting that. It was only when she found out it was you that she went completely off the rails."

"So not just a case of being scorned, huh?"

"No. It was being upstaged by a *guy* that got to her." Starsky trailed a fingertip over the small, now almost invisible scar on Hutch's left arm, a reminder of another scorned woman whose twisted love had turned to hatred and knife-wielding rage.

"If that's true, then she never really loved you," Hutch said. "True love wants the best for the beloved. Her love was as selfish as...as...."

"As hers," Starsky said meaningfully, and kissed the scar.

"Yeah." Hutch made a face. "We sure knew how to pick them."

"Well, I dunno about you, but I'm doin' all right with my latest pick."

"You are, huh?"

"Uh huh."

That earned him a special kiss, which Starsky returned in a spirit of generosity.

"I better make the most of it," he said. "I suppose one of these days you're gonna get fed up with me and dump me for a fresher model, huh?"

"We-e-ll," Hutch said, as if he really needed to think about that one. "If this was only about the sex, you'd probably be right."

"Hey!" Starsky said and poked Hutch in the side. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Stop that. That tickles." Hutch caught the offending hand in both of his. "It means I didn't fall for you for the sex alone. I loved you before I fell *in love* with you."

He gazed up at Starsky. "All those women in my life? They were a mystery to me. I couldn't figure them out. Even Vanessa. But you...I *know* you."

"So you're sayin' I'm a safe option."

"No. I'm saying you were my partner first, and that's made all the difference."

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## XII

"Hey, Cap'n, how was the vacation?"

Harold Dobby looked up from a gleaming desk still exuding the strong tangy odor of furniture polish, and quickly brought a spreading smile under control.

"A pain in the neck," he barked. "Edith had me on starvation rations the whole time. We went hiking and cycling, for crying out loud! You call that a vacation?"

Starsky tried not to laugh. "You're lookin' real good, Cap'n. The slim look suits you."

"Hmph. By the way, I'm sorry I had to miss the trial. I wanted to be there for your testimony, Hutch, but Edith put her foot down. She said if I came back for the day, I'd probably get roped into some crisis and get stuck in the office for a week."

"She was right, Captain," Hutch said. "You probably would've."

"And don't worry 'bout Hutch's testimony," Starsky added. "He did good."

"So I heard. We did get TV reception *and* newspapers up north, I'll have you know!"

Dobby's customary growl sounded muted, and Starsky saw that Hutch wasn't taken in by it, either. He suppressed a grin.

*Bet you a week's paycheck he had the time of his life. Harold Dobby on a bicycle. What next?*

He said, "Well, at least you got back in time for the verdict."

"Yeah, I put my foot down on that. What's the latest news?"

"The jury's still out," Hutch said, immediately looking worried. "I don't know what's taking them so long. They should've reached a verdict by now."

"Relax," Starsky told him. "It can't be much longer now. Meriott said it should be today sometime."

Dobby nodded. He leaned back and gazed around the room with a distracted frown, clearly overcome by the reunion with his office.

"Anything else happen while I was away that I should know about?"

Starsky exchanged a glance with Hutch. *Apart from O'Rourke taking the department to pieces?*

"Um, nope, Cap'n."

"Nothing at all, Captain. Just...business as usual."

"I'm glad to hear it. And now get me the reports from the last five weeks. I've got a lot of catching up to do."

"Reports comin' up, Cap'n."

Starsky swung the door open for Hutch and ushered his partner through with a flourish. Before he pulled it close behind him, he stopped and leaned back in.

"Cap'n?"

"What?"

"It's good to have you back." Starsky put on his widest grin. "We missed you."

"Get the hell outta here!"

oooOOOooo

"All rise."

Everyone rose. A churchlike hush hung over the courtroom as Judge Akinte strode into the room.

"Please be seated."

Everyone sat. Endless moments went by while the jury filed into the room and took their seats amid much rustling of clothes and paper.

"The court is now in session."

Starsky thought his heart couldn't possibly beat any faster. After all this time—years of police work, months of bringing the case to trial—Gunther's fate would finally be decided today.

He craned his neck to get a better view. The courtroom was packed. And because they'd been in the process of running Julio Ramirez to ground when Akinte had recalled the court, and because Ramirez had resisted arrest all the way to the door of the holding cell, they'd arrived late as usual and been forced to squeeze into the back row of the public balcony.

Hutch had been ready to throw a fit.

He rested the fingers of his right hand on Hutch's jeans-clad leg. Tension radiated through the fabric. He rubbed his hand up and down Hutch's thigh, a light caress, and the tense leg relaxed a little.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor."

A collective sigh went through the room.

"Please pass the verdict form to the bailiff."

Judge Akinte received the slip, read the words, and handed back the form. His creased face gave nothing away. Somewhere in the room, a wasp bumped against a window pane on a futile quest for freedom, again and again, creating a dark and angry sound in the breathless hush of the courtroom.

"Will the defendant please rise?"

James Gunther got to his feet. Starsky stopped breathing.

"Will the foreman please read the verdict?"

The foreman, a thin, frail-looking man, stood and fumbled for his glasses as if he really needed to read the words. The paper trembled in nervous fingers.

"On the charge of possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute," he read in a faint, almost inaudible voice, "we the jury find the defendant James Marshall Gunther not guilty."

Starsky felt the words like a punch to the gut.

*Not guilty. Not guilty.*

Hutch's hand found Starsky's and held on, a crushing grip. An endless second went by before Starsky realized that the foreman, in his excitement, had managed to garble the correct order of charges.

The old man cleared his throat. "On the charge of three counts of conspiracy to murder, we the jury find the defendant guilty. On the charge of murder in the first degree...." He raised his head. Lowered the paper, and drew himself up. "We find the defendant...*guilty.*"

The silence broke apart like shattered glass. A sound like gushing water roared through the room, like a dam broken or a tidal wave overwhelming a beach, but Starsky took in only a single word: Guilty.

Guilty. Guilty of all charges of murder.

Gunther was guilty.

Through the rushing sound in his ears, he heard Akinte's gavel attempting in vain to restore order to the room. At the front, he saw Gunther sway and fall into his chair. Then snatches of Akinte's voice, barely audible above the din, reached his ear again.

"...defendant...remanded back into the court's custody. Sentencing...next week...." A final bang of the gavel. "Court is adjourned."

The courtroom erupted. Everyone was on their feet, a heaving mass of people, cheering, yelling, throwing arms around each other. The noise was overwhelming.

Starsky found that they were standing, facing each other, and that he couldn't move because Hutch's hand was like a vice around his, and that it didn't matter. Hutch looked stunned. Utterly overcome.

A fuzzy warmth flowed from the pit of his stomach into every extremity. He brought his free hand up to Hutch's face and locked eyes with him.

"We got him, babe," he said softly. "He'll get at least two life sentences. He'll be in prison for the rest of his life."

Hutch gazed at him bright-eyed. A small pocket of silence bloomed around them—a space within a space, or a time out of time—there, but separate from the cheering crowd as if cloaked in the thinnest of membranes, like a bubble.

His hands came up and burrowed into Starsky's hair. His eyes anchored Starsky to the ground. And then he hauled him close and kissed him.

Full on the mouth, tongue and all. Right there in the courtroom, in the public gallery, in full view of Gunther, Akinte, a host of lawyers, a crowd of spectators. Half the members of the homicide unit. Simmons, Babcock, Dobby.

A wild succession of thoughts galloped through Starsky's mind like a herd of excited zebras.

*Wow, Hutch, I didn't think you had it in you...good thing we're in the back row...hope everyone's attention is on the bench...holy shit, maybe we should do this more often....*

Then he stopped thinking and fell into the kiss.

On the periphery of his senses, he noted that some commotion had broken out in the courtroom below. There were yells and scuffles at the front, security guards rushing to the scene, James Gunther's voice rising to a crescendo of outraged disbelief. He sounded demented, all pretense of aloofness stripped from him in the aftermath of the devastating verdict.

They broke apart. Hutch's face wore an expression of dazed ecstasy. Starsky cast a quick glance around. As he'd suspected, every face was turned to the uproar below, to Gunther.

Every face but one.

Mike Stanton's horrified eyes were staring straight at them across the gallery. His mouth hung slack in a face white with shock and disbelief. He looked as if someone had just delivered a punch to his jaw, and he was still too stunned to remember to fall down.

As Starsky watched, the appalled expression melted from Stanton's face and gave way to a complex mixture of outrage, hurt, disgust. Revulsion. Before Starsky could move, or think of something to do, or do anything at all, Stanton had torn his eyes away, shouldered roughly past a surprised Babcock, and slammed out the door at the back.

oooOOOooo

"God, I don't know what came over me," Hutch groaned for the third or fourth time. He sat huddled in the passenger seat of the Torino, his head in his hands and his ears flaming with mortification, a picture of misery. "I completely forgot where we were. I-I looked at you, and you had this look on your face, and...I just couldn't help myself."

"You were happy," Starsky said comfortably beside him. "Nothin' wrong with that."

"But don't you understand? I ruined everything. All your hard work to get back on the force, all the shit we went through last year—all for nothing."

"We don't know that yet."

Hutch looked up. "Dammit, Starsk, how can you be so cool about this? Aren't you worried?"

Starsky shrugged. "Well, maybe a little. But there's no reason to jump to conclusions. We've got no idea what Mike's gonna do."

"Maybe we should talk to him."

"Can't hurt." He put the car in gear. "C'mon, I'll buy you a drink. You look like you need one. And then I'll give Mike a call, see if he wants to meet with us."

oooOOOooo

"Let me do the talking, okay?" Hutch said several hours later as he swung his long legs out of the Torino. "After all, I got us into this mess."

"Okay. But it seems to me I was a willing accomplice in the deed." Starsky eyed the dilapidated exterior of the Blue Tavern with astonishment. "Jeez, Hutch, I'd no idea Mike hangs out in gin joints like this. Look at those goons. You can almost smell the testosterone. I wouldn't have thought this was his scene."

"I think he picked it 'cause no one knows us around here, and it's about as different from a gay bar as you can get."

"Gay bar? He thinks we go to *gay bars*?" Starsky snickered. "Maybe he thinks we're into cross dressing, too. And maybe some group sex on weekends."

Hutch tossed him a will-you-get-serious-about-this-this-ain't-funny look and walked past him through the weather-beaten door into the near empty, smoke-filled interior. A handful of professional drinkers of both sexes propped up the bar. Puddles of what Starsky hoped was beer glistened on the linoleum floor.

Stanton sat in a booth by himself, as far from the bar as possible, and he didn't look up from his glass when Hutch slid into the empty bench. Starsky signaled the waitress and squeezed in beside him. Then almost kicked himself when he caught Stanton's baleful eye, and shifted a couple of inches away from Hutch.

"Let's make this short," Stanton said in a frigid voice when the waitress had set two more glasses of beer on the table and departed. "I'll ask the questions, and you'll tell me the truth. The *complete* truth. Understood?"

Hutch nodded slowly. "Okay."

"You're queer? Both of you?"

Hutch nodded again, not taking his eyes off Stanton.

"And you're doing it with each other?"

Another nod.

A small muscle twitched on Stanton's young face, and Starsky suddenly understood that he'd been hoping, up until that moment, that maybe he'd got it all wrong, and jumped to a hopelessly wrong conclusion.

Mike Stanton controlled himself with an effort. "How long?" he said.

"A while."

"I said *how long?*"

"Couple of years."

"Don't lie to me, Hutchinson! Some guys at work had you pegged for faggots ten years ago. They're saying you had your hands all over each other from the day you were partnered."

"I'm not lying. Starsky and I have been together for two years. Before that, we were only interested in women."

"Bullshit! Don't tell me you didn't get it on with other guys before."

"Not that it makes a difference, but, no, we didn't—"

"Shut up!" Stanton roared. "Shut the fuck up! You take me for an idiot? I know that's not the way it works. Once a queer, always a queer. So who else in the department did you fuck? Go on, tell me! I gotta know."

"If by 'fuck' you mean guys, then no one else."

Hutch sounded so calm, so reasonable, as if conducting conversations about his sexual preferences was part of his daily routine. Starsky cast him an admiring glance, then almost kicked himself again when he realized that Stanton had intercepted that one, too.

Stanton got a grip on himself.

"Girls then," he said through narrowed eyes. "You're still doing girls, right?"

Hutch inclined his head. "No, Mike. Not anymore. You don't understand. We're exclusive. There's been no one else for two years now."

"Hypocrites!" Stanton erupted. "You fucking pair of hypocrites! Exclusive, my foot! That doesn't stop you from playing the field for some pussy when it suits you. Don't deny it. Travis saw you. He said you were out on a foursome. Real cozy you were, he said. And when things got hot between you, *you* left with your date, and *you* stayed behind with yours. What was all that about then? Undercover job, huh?" His voice dripped sarcasm. "Or just a bit of deception to keep your reputations intact?"

Starsky spoke for the first time. "Mike, calm down. It's not what you think."

"No? Well, what do I think, huh? Maybe you're gonna tell me. Travis said Hutch left with a girl. He said he had his hands all over her—"

"Mike—"

"He said it was obvious to a blind man that they were heading for the sack. So don't you fucking tell me you're exclusive and—"

"Mike, listen. Kathy is his sister. His older sister."

"His *sister!*"

"Yeah."

"Oh, sure. And I suppose the other one was your mother."

"No. She really was my lover, three years ago. We split up long before Hutch and I got together."

Stanton glared at him. "That didn't stop you from kissing her right there in the bar. Travis saw you."

Starsky sighed. "I didn't kiss her. I gave her a hug, that's all. She'd just told me her father had died. She broke down in tears. What would *you* have done?"

Under the table, he felt the tip of Hutch's foot nudging his sneaker in reassurance. He relaxed and nudged back.

Emotion worked on Mike Stanton's homely face.

"Fuck!" he said darkly. The remnants of his self-control slipped away quite suddenly, a small landslide, and he was on his feet, a fist punching the air. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Heads turned at the bar. Starsky got to his feet. "Mike, sit down, will ya—"

"You were my heroes!" Stanton roared, and shoved him back down. "I looked up to you, right from my first day in the Academy. You were the two cops everyone talked about. You got no idea how thrilled I was when I got my transfer to homicide and a chance to work with the famous Starsky and Hutchinson. And now I find out you're fakes. All this time you lied to us. You deceived us—"

"We never lied," Hutch cut in sharply. "We kept it quiet, yes. We had to. But we never set out to deceive. The evidence was there for anyone who cared to look."

"My rotten luck to be the first to figure it out," Stanton sneered.

"You're not the first. Dobey figured it out long ago."

"Dobey knows?" Stanton said, incredulous. "And he didn't report it?"

Hutch nodded, shook his head.

"Who else?"

"We think Minnie Kaplan probably has a pretty good idea. And maybe a couple of other guys."

"Other faggots, you mean." Stanton's young voice was scathing.

"Maybe. We didn't discuss it."

"So all this time I've been in the department, all this time we worked together, you were fuck buddies. Travis was right all along. And I beat him up for telling the truth. I almost broke his nose! I can't believe I didn't see it sooner. I...*Goddammit!*"

Stanton gave the table a vicious kick, turned on his heel and stormed from the bar.

Starsky shared a resigned look with Hutch as he got to his feet and threw a couple of bills on the table. Together, they followed Stanton out.

"Mike. Wait."

Their young colleague froze beside his Chevy. They went to him, but Stanton wouldn't look at them. His hands were shaking with rage, fingers clenched around his keys. His anger surrounded him like impenetrable armor, and Starsky had no idea what to do to break through it, to get to the man underneath. For a moment, no one spoke.

Finally Hutch said, "So what're you going to do?"

Stanton's head snapped up, and the look on his face was pure contempt. "What do you mean, what am I gonna do? Are you worried I'll spill your dirty little secret to IA? Then you don't know me very well." His lip curled with disdain. "I'm no snitch. Your secret is safe with me, don't worry."

"I never thought you would," Hutch said quietly. "Snitch on us, I mean."

"Don't read too much into it. I just don't want to have it on my conscience when the backup don't show when you need it."

Stanton unlocked the car and got in, but Starsky stepped forward before he could slam the door.

"Mike."

Stanton froze for a second time, his hand on the ignition.

"You're right," Starsky said to him. "We should've told you. I wish we could have. But you're wrong about one thing."

Stanton simply looked at him.

"Me and Hutch, we ain't fuck buddies. We never have been. We love each other. Just 'cause we're two guys doesn't mean our feelings for each other are less valid than

the feelings you have for Chrissie. You know what it's like to love someone. Don't you think it's worth flying in the face of convention for?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Stanton's face grew hard and cold.

"Don't you dare compare your vile fornication with what Chrissie and I have between us. We're normal. Not like you sick freaks and perverted cocksuckers! Get away from me, don't touch me!"

Starsky snatched back the hand he'd extended without even noticing. Stanton slammed the door, turned on the ignition, and threw the car into gear. The Chevy jerked to life and shot forward, almost swiping Hutch.

Starsky didn't need to look at his face to know that Hutch was deeply troubled. He went to stand beside him, not too close in case the testosterone-hyped regulars inside were onto their case, but not too far away, either. Just close enough to take the edge off Hutch's tension. Together they watched as Mike Stanton accelerated out of the parking lot without another glance in their direction.

"God, Starsk," Hutch sighed when the car had disappeared. "First Rosey, now Mike. Where is it gonna end?"

"Maybe he'll come around when he's had a chance to cool off," Starsky said, not really believing it.

"I don't think so. I never realized how much of a bigot he is."

"He's a man. He's spooked by the idea. Hell, we were like that once."

"Not like that. Never like that."

They started walking toward the Torino, a gleaming beacon in a parking lot filled with assorted jalopies. On the way, Hutch slung a casual arm around Starsky's shoulders.

"What about our celebration? We said we'd go for the biggest steak in town when Gunther gets convicted."

"I don't know. 'M not really in party mood right now. Let's just go home, okay?"

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## Epilogue

Winter, or what passed for it in these southern latitudes, had invaded LA with the suddenness of a Minnesotan snowstorm. In Californian terms this equated to a moderate dip in temperatures, an occasional thunderous downpour, and the need for an additional sweater. Nonetheless, the evenings of living on the porch were definitely over.

Clutching his load with both arms, Hutch toed off his boots and put his shoulder against the door until it squeaked open to a blast of pounding music. He pushed inside and let the door slam behind him, wondering why the downpours occurred without fail every time it was *his* turn to get firewood from the shed.

He dumped his armful of logs in the basket beside the fireplace, noting, impressed, that the fire Starsky had coaxed to life earlier still had a tenacious grip on life and only required the addition of a couple of logs to get it blazing.

He attended to that before he unzipped the voluminous orange plastic cape Starsky had picked up at some jumble sale for the outrageous sum of \$4.95, and pushed back the hood. Only the hood's drawstring refused to yield. Somehow on the short journey between back porch and wood pile, the damn thing had managed to twist itself into mysterious knots.

Fumbling with the cord, he turned to face the room, and an unexpected swell of satisfaction rolled over him when he viewed the results of their recent efforts.

The last of the packing boxes had finally been dispatched to the attic, and their respective possessions taken up residence all over the place. His piano shared a wall with bookshelves full of Starsky's esoteric reading matter. The stereo that used to be his was a snug fit beside the TV that used to be Starsky's. His jazz and classic records formed a happy mix with his partner's chaotic choice in soul, blues, and rock.

And plants, of course. They were everywhere—on the floor, the shelves, the table. The window sills were crowded with them.

*Time to get that greenhouse up.*

Hutch gave the drawstring another tug, a move that succeeded only in tightening the tangled mess. He was trapped.

His gaze homed in on the corner where the Christmas tree they'd just finished decorating amid intermittent tinsel fights had pride of place. Or rather, it homed in on his partner who, at that moment, stood balancing with one foot on a chair and the other on the window sill, reaching to adjust the star at the top of the tree.

As he watched, Starsky jumped down and came to stand beside him to admire the view.

"There. Whadda ya think? Isn't that terrific?"

The thought that had been rolling around Hutch's head for the better part of a month crystallized to sudden resolution, solidifying as swiftly as the urgent need to blurt it all out. So he did.

"Starsk, I've been thinking."

"Ooh, dangerous...."

Hutch refused the bait. "Let's go to Duluth," he said in a rush. "In January, after the holidays. Just for a few days. We can use our Christmas and New Year overtime." He added, "Kathy is going to be there, and the boys."

There, he'd said it.

He tore at the ridiculous cape again, annoyed, and was on the point of cutting the damn cord with his pocket knife when Starsky came to his rescue, quickly untangled the knotted mess, and freed him from his plastic shroud.

"Duluth, huh?" he said.

"Yeah." Hutch crunched up the dripping cape, looking everywhere but at Starsky. "I think it's time to tell them."

"Why now? This because of Mike?"

"Mike. Rosey." Hutch's hand described a vague circle in the air. "It doesn't matter. I should've told them a long time ago. All this time, I was worried that dad might blow the whistle on us. But that's ridiculous when you consider how many people know about us already—"

"Oh, c'mon, there're not *that* many."

"Yes, there are. Think about it. It's not just Dobby and Huggy anymore. Your entire family is in the know, courtesy of Al. Not to mention Rosey, Kathy, Mike, Edith—"

"Antonio," Starsky joined in. "Minnie. Linda." He started ticking them off his fingers. "Dr. Patel."

"The Martins and the Rosenthals."

"Merle."

"Jackson."

"Sugar and Billy Jojo. Chrissie, too, now, I suppose." Starsky looked up. "You're right. I didn't realize there were so many."

"Exactly. And not all of them approve."

"But some of them know and they're still our friends."

"I know. My point is that we can't keep this quiet forever. Too many people know, and half the rest of them suspect. Guys like Travis. It's just a matter of time before IA gets wind of it, too." Hutch shrugged. "I might as well tell my folks. I'd rather they heard it from us than through the grapevine."

"From *us*?" Starsky gave him the eye. "It's *your* family, last time I checked."

"Oh, definitely from us. You didn't think I was going to do this by myself, did you? And don't give me that look. We both know there's no chance in hell you'd let me face the music on my own."

"You make it sound like you're going in front of a firing squad."

"Well, it ain't gonna be pleasant."

A look passed between them. The corners of Starsky's mouth lifted.

"Sounds like you need some backup," he said. "Look no further. I'm your man—no pun intended. As long as we're not going until *after* Christmas, *after* Hanukkah, and *after* Huggy's New Year party. And now c'mere. I wanna show you something."

Hutch went with him at once.

"Look up."

He looked up and saw the mistletoe a microsecond before Starsky pushed him against the wall, and he felt warm lips on his mouth, and a tongue pushing for entrance, and he was swept away, and nothing else mattered, and everything was worth it, and he'd always known it, and only wondered why it had taken him almost ten goddamn years to realize it.

And then he stopped wondering and forgot all about Duluth, and how long it was going to take IA and the department and everyone else in their lives to get the drop on them, and they'd lose not only their families, but their jobs and friends and probably their home, too, because none of it mattered as long as Starsky was there. Because Starsky was all that mattered.

They broke apart. His lips tingled with the sweet pressure of Starsky's kiss. He found that he had his fingers tangled in Starsky's curls, and that his heart was thumping in his throat. God, that smile! He'd walk a hundred miles for a flash of that smile.

"I wish..." he forced out.

The heat in Starsky's eyes could have rivaled the energy output of a medium-sized power plant. "I know. Me, too. How much time we got?"

"Not enough. The first ones will be here soon. You know the Dobeys are never late for a party."

They shared an amused look. And another kiss.

The door bell rang.

"Damn," said Hutch. He didn't want to let go, wanted to bolt the door and tell everyone to go away.

"I suppose we better let them in," Starsky said with a grin and pulled away. "Can't leave them out there in the rain."

The grin was infectious. "I guess not."

They moved to the door.

"Hey," Starsky said just before Hutch could throw it open to welcome their friends inside. His voice turned low and full of promise. "Later?"

Hutch felt his lips stretch into a smile. He nodded.

"Later."

— END —

Note: Rohypnol is a prescription sedative developed by Hoffman-La Roche in Switzerland. In the late 1980s, Rohypnol became known as the date rape drug with abuse cases reported in countries around the world. The drug has since been modified to make it more detectable in drinks. It remains illegal in the USA.