

## **Interference**

by Keri Mera

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### **November 1978**

Starsky was angry. Very angry.

He'd never known anger quite like this before. It seared through his veins like molten metal, consumed all rational thought in its destructive path, and burned his insides with a liquid fire that was almost, but not quite successful in obliterating the fierce stabbing pain of loss and betrayal.

His first reaction had been one of pure amazement, followed by disbelief and a fleeting self-admonition not to jump to conclusions. Hutch's car had been parked outside, and it hadn't come as a surprise to find the man inside. The only surprise was the sight of his best friend emerging from his girlfriend's bedroom, adjusting his clothes, with all the implications that simple action conveyed.

The disbelief crumbled before the look on his partner's face, a curious expression Starsky had never seen on those familiar features before, an expression that managed to convey—in the briefest of moments—a complex mixture of guilt and regret, a dose of apprehension, and maybe the smallest hint of defiance.

Then, with the impact of a sledgehammer, the realization hit home that the situation couldn't possibly be mistaken for anything other than what it was, that the man he called best friend and partner had just committed the ultimate betrayal of trust—by fucking the woman he loved.

Starsky reeled from the shock of that realization, and for an eternal second he stood swaying on the edge of a sheer cliff above a wild, grey ocean of hurt and pain. Then the solid ground he had taken for granted for so many years fractured and crumbled beneath his feet, and he was in free-fall, helpless, nothing to hold onto, no one to catch him, utterly alone, and still too stunned to be afraid.

The icy waters closed over his head, and for a moment, he was drowning, drowning in the pain. But almost instantly, instinctively, he knew that he couldn't allow the pain to take hold, that it would destroy him if he did. The pain would encase him in an armor of lead and drag him to the bottom of the murky depths. And this time, there would be no helping hand to pull him out of danger; this time, he was alone.

There was only one way out. A surge of red-hot anger inflated around him like a life jacket, holding him, carrying him up through the turbulent waters—and he clung to that anger with the despair of a drowning man who has just been thrown a life preserver.

At first, the anger overwhelmed all else. The impact and the fury of that dark, violent emotion almost took Starsky's breath away. Punching Hutch couldn't even begin to dull the edge of it. Driving around aimlessly for hours afterward only served to fuel the blazing fire in his gut.

He went home eventually, knowing he would have to face Hutch soon, and be professional about it. But when that moment came, sooner than expected, at the murder scene that afternoon, and he heard the cutting Hutchinson voice lashing out at the world at large, the anger flared up hot and bright, nearly blinding him with its intensity, and it was all he could do not to punch the man again.

By evening, Starsky had tempered the red-hot fury to a slow-burning glow and had brought himself under sufficient control to do the job at hand. He wasn't even surprised to find that their smoothly honed teamwork was still functioning like a well-crafted piece of machinery. They read each other's intentions just like always, and when Hutch kicked the grenade from Joey's hands, Starsky was in place to receive it and hurl it the way he'd hurled many grenades in the hills of Vietnam.

When it was all over and the dust had begun to settle, Starsky sensed Hutch's eyes on him, felt the look they'd shared so many times after a crisis—the look that said *You all right? Everything okay?*

But for the first time, Starsky couldn't bring himself to return that look. And for the first time after a near escape, there was no adrenaline-fueled euphoria, no sense of relief, of gratitude for being alive. There was only that low-simmering anger, a riot of confusion, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

Somewhere beneath the anger, tucked away in a pocket of his heart, crowded a tightly contained chaos of emotions that Starsky knew he had to keep at bay at all cost if he wanted to continue functioning. There was the sweeping hurt of betrayal. There was total incomprehension and numbing bewilderment. There was even a spark of hot grief and a flicker of cold fear. Grief at the loss of something so precious, so utterly priceless that he would have given everything, *anything*, to hold and preserve it. Fear at the thought of having to face a life without that precious, priceless gift of Hutch's friendship.

Because the foundation of that friendship was their trust and Hutch had taken that trust and thrown it in his face.

He left the dance hall without a word or a look at his partner, or at Kira—not caring who, if anyone, escorted her home that night.

For three days, he waited. Waited for a word of explanation from Hutch. A reason, an answer, an apology maybe. Waited for Hutch to make the first move.

For three days, he waited for the anger to subside and for his love for Hutch to surface from the depths. Waited for the compassion that made forgiveness possible to emerge from the turmoil in his heart.

For three days, he waited in vain.

For three days, Hutch tiptoed around him in intricate, skillfully executed maneuvers designed to avoid a confrontation. There was no indication that Hutch planned to do any talking any time soon. He didn't even look contrite. Hutch, it seemed, had washed his hands of the affair.

Slowly, painfully, the knowledge grew in Starsky that nothing would ever be the same again between him and the man he had cared about so deeply for so many years. Because how could a thing like this be fixed?

How could anything like this ever be fixed?

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## Chapter One

Hutch's love for Starsky went back a long way.

Buddies and best friends at the academy, fellow cops in uniform for two years, partners for almost seven. Laughter, companionship, friendship, trust—different manifestations of a love that had grown into a powerful source of light and happiness for one blond Midwesterner reared on a diet of indifferent affection and cool reserve.

Even in the beginning, Hutch had occasionally dreamed of Starsky, in dreams filled with shadowy images that Hutch rarely remembered in the morning. Sometimes a faint echo of the dream stayed with him during the day and brought a light to his eyes that Starsky teasingly called his "being in love" eyes.

Hutch couldn't recall when the nature of those dreams had changed. Weeks, months, a year ago? Now he dreamed of Starsky all the time, and the images were no longer shadowy, but filled with haunting visions of midnight blue eyes and a crooked grin beneath a halo of wiry dark curls.

In his dreams, Hutch would reach out and close the distance between them until it became nothing, and the resulting closeness was, at the same time, the most natural and the most extraordinary feeling in the world. He would wake up, amazed at the rush of pure love and joy that filled his heart—and dismayed to find it had just been another dream.

It took Hutch longer than it should have to realize that the Starsky in his dreams was more, so much more than just a buddy, pal, and partner.

It took him even longer to identify the need to touch, the need for closeness as physical attraction and desire. Desire for his tough, masculine *male* partner.

It took the longest time of all to explore the depth of those frightening new feelings and to discover that they went so deep that he couldn't see the bottom.

*I love him.*

*God, I love him!*

The realization opened the floodgates to a wild torrent of emotions, alien, frightening, and exhilarating—feelings of an intensity he'd never known before and had no idea how to handle. Deep and strong and powerful, they clawed at his soul with a hunger impossible to tame. It was a longing for a forbidden closeness, a yearning to fuse their bodies, hearts and minds into a single entity. It was a desire for a love that transcended all boundaries of space and time. It was pure insanity.

*I need him, want him. I crave him like I once craved heroin.*

*I'm addicted to Starsky.*

They were destructive longings, eating away at his heart and mind, impossible to satisfy, but capable of devastating everything Hutch valued most—Starsky, and his friendship with Starsky.

It was time to take action. Maybe he could fight the cravings, go through withdrawal. It had worked before, why shouldn't it work again?

But before, Starsky had fought the demons alongside him, shoulder to shoulder, always watchful, always by his side.

This time, he was on his own.

But he knew that he had to battle the addiction if he wanted to survive as a cop on the streets, as Starsky's partner and equal. As Starsky's friend.

It would all be so much easier if only he could share the burden with the one person who had always been his anchor and his refuge in a crisis. But if the power of his newfound feelings overwhelmed and scared Hutch, the possibility of his partner finding out about them terrified him to the very core.

The thought of seeing the love and respect in Starsky's eyes turn to distaste and loathing was the stuff of Hutch's darkest nightmares. Worse still would be Starsky's pity, and the distinct possibility that Starsky might offer to give him what he thought his partner needed—out of kindness, out of compassion. That he would be willing to prostitute himself in a bid to save their friendship.

Hutch would die before he let that happen.

No, there was no doubt in Hutch's mind that he had to keep this from Starsky at all cost. There was no other option. This was too fundamental, too powerful a shift. If these raw new feelings got out in the open, they would cause irreparable damage to the finely tuned balance of their relationship and tip their friendship over the edge.

On the other hand, keeping a secret of this magnitude violated the very essence of that friendship, the very structure and fabric of their extraordinary connection.

It couldn't last, of course. Sooner or later, he was bound to give himself away. And then he would lose Starsky, one way or another, and that was the most terrifying thing of all. The best he could hope for was to delay that moment for as long as he possibly could.

So Hutch built a fortress around his heart and surrounded the stronghold with a moat designed to keep Starsky at bay. He worked carefully, methodically, raising the walls a little higher every day, digging the moat a little deeper. Every stone he added hurt like a missile fired at his heart. Every inch of distance he created tore at his mind until he couldn't think straight and their unique connection was stretched to breaking point. Even the dreams that had sustained him for so long turned to nightmares, taunting him with their unobtainable visions and impossible promises.

Being with Kira eased the pain a fraction. Kira became his gateway to Starsky, a backdoor to Starsky's affections, because Kira was close to Starsky in a way Hutch could never hope to be. But now he had gone a step too far, and he knew it, had known it even as he hovered possessively above her and took her more

fiercely than he had intended. He hadn't planned to go that far, couldn't have planned it, had wanted to resist it, but it had happened anyway.

It had been an act of desperation, and he knew it.

Soon he would have to face Starsky's anger. He couldn't avoid the confrontation much longer. He dreaded the meeting. How was he going to handle it?

Should he play it down, play it cool, draw out his partner's anger until Starsky exploded and the rage dissipated in a rush of energy? He could handle an angry Starsky. Facing that anger was a small price to pay, after all. Maybe Starsky would punch him again. Fine. That was fine.

But then Starsky would calm down and forgive him, and they would make up as they always did. Things would simmer down and get back to normal—or what passed for normal these days—and he would live to see another day of fighting demons, but also another day of basking in the presence of Starsky.

And that was the only thing that mattered.

oooOOOooo

The Torino screeched to a halt outside Venice Place. The steps to Hutch's front door had never looked steeper or less inviting, but Starsky took them three at a time and hammered his fist against the upstairs door.

"Hutch! Open up! I know you're in there!"

The door opened with a hint of reluctance, and Starsky pushed his way inside and slammed the door behind him.

Hutch scowled at him. "Sure, walk right in! It's open house today."

Starsky could see that Hutch had all his defenses up—the sarcasm, the cutting voice, the hostility—effective barriers at shutting out unwelcome visitors.

*Not effective enough, this time. I'm here, and I'm not leaving until we've hashed this out.*

"Hutch, we've gotta talk."

Hutch ambled over to the fridge, opened it and inspected its contents.

"You want a beer?"

"No, I don't want a beer. I want answers." Starsky stalked across the room to face Hutch. "I've been trying to get some sense out of you for the past three days. I wanna know what the hell you think you're playing at. Why did you do it? You better tell me before I shake it out of you."

Hutch raised an eyebrow at him. "You should work on your bad cop routine. You sound a little rusty."

"Cut the crap, Hutchinson! Just tell me."

Hutch opened a can of beer for himself, took a measured swig and placed the can on the table. He shrugged. "C'mon, it wasn't a big deal. Why make such a fuss about it?"

"Not a big deal? How can you say that? I tell you I love her and five minutes later you're screwing her. That's not a big deal?"

"Okay, okay, call it a big deal if you want. But it really didn't mean anything."

"Oh sure, so that's supposed to make it all right? Maybe it didn't mean anything to *you*, but it sure meant something to *me*. You hurt me, Hutch. You betrayed my trust. And that doesn't mean anything to you?"

"Oh, quit the dramatics. You sound like a five-year old with a tantrum."

"And you sound like a complete jerk!"

They glared at each other, eyes challenging each other. Then Hutch shrugged and turned away, but Starsky was beside him with two long strides, and in a single fluid movement grabbed Hutch by the front of his shirt, slammed him against the kitchen wall, and pinned him with strong hands.

"I want an explanation, Hutch."

Hutch was silent. He stared straight ahead and put up no resistance.

Starsky leaned into him, his voice rough with anger. "Tell me why you did it. Just give me *one* good reason."

Silence.

Starsky shook the unresisting body. "Tell me you love her. I'd understand that."

Silence.

"Tell me there was a reason. *Any* reason!" Starsky shook him so hard that the back of Hutch's head knocked against the wall and the blond strands fell in a tangle all over his face, but Hutch made no move to defend himself or react in any way.

It occurred to Starsky that only a few months ago, none of this would have happened. A year ago he would have sensed what was on Hutch's mind, would have known instinctively in which direction a problem could be located. A year ago, he could have read Hutch like the pages of the LA Times. A year ago—when they had been so close, when they had worked together as a team, not against each other in rivalry over a woman.

Suddenly defeated, Starsky let his arms fall by his side and stepped away.

"What's happened to us, huh?" he said softly. "I just don't understand. Where did it start goin' wrong?"

He ran a hand through his thick hair, walked to the window and gazed out for a moment. Finally, he turned to look back at Hutch.

Hutch hadn't moved. He was leaning against the wall, head tilted back, staring across the room, avoiding his partner's gaze. Starsky shook his head in confusion.

"We used to care about each other, not hurt each other, for Chrissake! What's happened to all that?"

Hutch didn't answer, didn't move.

"Now it seems we're just pretending at being friends."

The silence was a solid wall between them.

"Hutch? Aren't you gonna say something? Anything at all?"

Hutch finally turned to him, and the ice-blue gaze was cold and shuttered, admitting no entry. Starsky had no idea, no idea at all, what Hutch was thinking. He was facing a stranger.

"Don't you think you're overreacting a little?" the stranger said. "It was nothing. Why don't you just get over it?"

"I trusted you!"

"Just forget it. It didn't mean anything. How many times do I have to say it?"

"Forget it? Just like that? Are you crazy? With no explanation, no reason? No apology?" Starsky broke off, hesitated, then added softly, "You've never even said you're sorry."

Hutch whipped around, his voice as harsh as his eyes. "Is that what you're after? An apology? Okay, I apologize. I'm sorry. It won't happen again. That what you wanted to hear?"

Starsky just stared at him as if he'd never seen the man before. "What's happened to you, Hutch? I feel like I just don't know you anymore. You stab me in the back and you can't even admit it? You can't even see what this has done to us?"

"Dammit, Starsky, grow up, will you. We've dated the same woman before, *and* at the same time. Why's this any different?"

Starsky's anger soared.

"Fuck you, Hutchinson! I *told* you I love her. *That's* what made the difference. Dammit, a casual *acquaintance* would've had the decency to keep his hands off her after that. But you... God, Hutch, you're my best friend. I trusted you."

A shadow slipped over Hutch's face, and his voice grew cold and distant. "Don't you think you're taking all of this a little too seriously? I've never known you to be so possessive. Maybe you should've put a 'keep out' sign on her. You know, she's quite capable of making her own decisions. I didn't rape her, in case you were wondering."

Starsky could hardly believe they were so much at cross-purposes.

"Kira's not the issue and you damn well know it! This is between you and me. No, I didn't put a 'keep out' sign on her because I never for a second imagined that was necessary. Not where you were concerned. Are you telling me that all that's changed?"

Hutch shrugged again, pushed himself away from the wall and picked up his can of beer, avoiding eye contact. "Of course not. Don't be silly. You're completely overreacting."

Starsky stared at him, and the seed of fear sown days ago stirred deep within his heart. This was all wrong, but Hutch showed no sign that he knew or cared. Starsky's fear increased, and for a terrible moment, he wondered if maybe there was no reason. Maybe—he struggled against the thought—maybe Hutch simply didn't care anymore.

He invaded Hutch's personal space and felt the other man's immediate unease like a slap in the face.

*He can't even bear to be near me anymore!*

He dug his hands into Hutch's arms and held him in an iron grip. "I want you to look me in the eye and tell me why you slept with her after what I told you."

Hutch shifted uncomfortably in the close proximity of the other man.

"Jeezus, Starsky, you're making a mountain out of a mole hill. Look, it just happened, that's all. She's attractive, she turns me on. I got carried away, can't you understand that?"

"No. I can't. Not when it's clear that a quick fuck means more to you than our friendship."

"That's just not true..."

"Was this just another one of your games? Another competition? Or is this your idea of a practical joke?"

"No, it wasn't like that."

"No? What was it like then? Huh? You drove straight over there to see her, right after I told you. Why, Hutch? What did you have to prove? You could see that I was happy. Why did you have to destroy that?"

"Damn you! I don't have to explain or justify my actions to you. Kira isn't private property. I've had about enough of this inquisition. Just give me a fucking break, will you!"

For an endless moment, only the harsh breathing of the two men filled the room. Slowly, an alloy of fear and pain solidified into a tight clasp around Starsky's heart. It was true, then. He couldn't deny that truth any longer. Hutch simply didn't give a damn. Didn't care enough to make their friendship work.

The realization cut deep, and the pain was almost more than he could bear. Anger—hot, blinding anger—rushed into the breach again and buried the pain before it could overwhelm him. He pushed Hutch away, roughly, violently, causing him to stumble awkwardly into the chairs behind him.

"If that's the case then you can take this friendship and stuff it, Hutchinson. 'Cause I've had enough of you and your games." A harsh voice he recognized as his own cut the air between them, and Hutch flinched. Starsky saw it, and it felt good to know that he, too, had the power to get to Hutch, if only with a few well-chosen words.

"You don't mean that."

"The hell I don't!"

"Hey, look, you wanna punch me again? Go ahead. Punch me if that'll make you feel better. Then maybe we can put this whole thing behind us."

"You don't get it, do you? Can't even see the consequences of your actions when they're staring you in the face. I trusted you like I've never trusted anyone in my life. You've taken that away, and there's no way you can return it."

"Aw, c'mon, don't be stupid. You're angry, you're not thinking straight. Wait until..."

"Stupid, huh? You mean, not quite your equal in the brains department, huh? You've been saying that a lot lately. And you know what, *college boy*? You're right. I *am* stupid. Too stupid to see what's right in front of my nose. Too stupid to understand why you're going out of your way to hurt me."

"No, I..."

"But I'm finally getting the message. Should have seen long ago that you were gettin' fed up with this partnership." Starsky's voice turned low and dangerous. "Should have just said so, Hutchinson! There was no need to screw my girlfriend to make your point."

"That's not what happened..."

"Sure as hell looks that way to me. I've had it with you and your attitude. You wanna be rid of me? You got it. Go find yourself another moron to push around!"

"Starsky, wait..."

"Go to hell!"

oooOOOooo

The door of his apartment slammed shut, and a few seconds later, the familiar roar of the Torino shook the neighborhood.

Hutch stood rooted to the spot and fought a sense of rising dread and the terrible realization that his strategy had backfired on him. How could he have misread Starsky so badly? Had he really thought his partner was going to forgive him so easily? Forgive a betrayal that amounted to the ultimate breach in trust between two friends?

The enormity of his actions suddenly hit home, and he saw the implications, not through the fog of his own tormented mind, but through the eyes of his best friend.

For Starsky, the situation was clear-cut and straightforward. It was all right for them to compete over a woman, but as soon as the magic words "I love her" were spoken, she became sacrosanct and out of bounds. So easy. So simple.

It worked the other way round, too. By the same principle, Starsky had been prepared to forgive him. All he'd had to do was say the magic words.

It would have been an easy way out. He could have claimed temporary insanity due to being hopelessly in love with Kira. Starsky had offered him that way out, and he had refused to take it. It would have been one lie too many and would only have led to further deception. It had to stop. It had all gone too far already.

He was on a slippery slope of falsehoods and half-truths and couldn't see his way down.

Worse, the walls he'd erected had begun to interfere with his once acute perception of all things Starsky. Starsky was beginning to slip away from him. He couldn't even predict Starsky's reactions anymore.

He saw his mistake now. Instead of provoking Starsky—an action that had become a habit lately—he should have apologized, pleaded for Starsky's forgiveness. But apologizing meant explaining, and how could he possibly do that without putting at risk everything he treasured most?

Hutch groaned and collapsed into a chair.

What on earth had possessed him to fall into bed with the woman Starsky loved?

He knew why. Of course he knew. The need to be close to Starsky, to soak up his presence, his warmth, his optimism, had become an overwhelming, overpowering desire. If he couldn't have the real thing, at least he could have it by proxy, by courting the one person closer to Starsky than he himself could ever be.

He'd tried to maintain the delicate balance between keeping Starsky at arm's length and not pushing him away too far. It was obvious that he hadn't been very successful.

Hutch resolved that first thing in the morning, when Starsky had had time to cool off, he was going to drive over to his place and apologize for real. It wasn't the first time that Starsky'd been angry with him. He'd been furious after the amnesia stunt Hutch had pulled on him a while ago, but in the end he'd forgiven him, and their friendship hadn't suffered any long-term damage.

A glimmer of hope ignited in Hutch's chest. Maybe things would blow over like they always had in the past. Maybe Starsky's forgiving nature would come to the rescue as it had so many times before. There was no other way. After everything they'd been through, it was inconceivable that Starsky would throw away nine years of extraordinary friendship.

Wasn't it?

oooOOOooo

Starsky never knew how he managed to get home in one piece. His hands were shaking, and there seemed to be something wrong with his vision. Only the fact that he could have negotiated the familiar route between their two apartments blindfolded ensured that both he and the Torino arrived outside his place without a scratch. With barely suppressed anger still boiling in his veins, Starsky jogged up the stairs, slammed the door behind him, pulled a can of beer from the fridge and collapsed on the couch without even taking his jacket and holster off.

Had he really just ended his friendship with Hutch? How, *how* could he have done that?

How could he not, after what the sonofabitch had done to him?

The incredible scene at Hutch's apartment replayed in his mind. Every one of Hutch's words, the look on Hutch's face—the whole sordid scene was etched in

his memory, and he went over it again and again, wondering if he had missed something, hoping to find a flaw in his reasoning. But no matter how he looked at it, he kept arriving at the same conclusion.

Hutch had done everything to push him away—had lied to him, deliberately hurt him, abused his friendship, and ultimately betrayed his trust.

There could only be one explanation: Hutch simply didn't give a shit anymore.

That conclusion was so scary, so unthinkable, so *enormous* in its implications that it sent a chilling fear through Starsky's veins. Then the anger flared up again, bright and hot and destructive, and suddenly he was on his feet, the empty beer can went flying against the wall, followed by the phone book, and then the phone itself—and then there was no stopping and he went completely berserk, tossing books and objects, knocking piles of magazines off the table, sweeping mugs and glasses onto the floor. Hurling Hutch's belongings across the room.

He'd never really noticed before how many of Hutch's possessions had somehow found their way into his apartment over the years.

The last thing he sent flying was the framed picture of Hutch and himself, the one where they had their arms around each other's shoulders, eyes on each other, laughing, goofing around at the police barbecue a couple of years earlier. In a different life.

The frame cracked on impact with the coffee table and a few shards of glass scattered over the carpet, but the picture—as if to mock him and his rage—stayed firmly in place, and there was Hutch's sweet face laughing up at him, relaxed and happy, next to his own curly-haired self with a similar carefree grin on his face.

As suddenly as the rage had taken hold, it evaporated completely, leaving Starsky drained and helpless in the midst of the debris he had created. He took a ragged breath and slowly sank down onto the only remaining cushion on the couch. His hand reached out of its own volition and picked up the broken picture from the floor.

For a long, long moment, Starsky held the picture in his lap and stared at the familiar features of his partner—the laughing eyes, the pale golden hair that reflected the sun like a mirror, the firm chin, the full lips. The strong arm wrapped around his partner's shoulders. He took in the closeness, the friendship, the love that radiated from the picture—and for a moment he ached to climb into the splintered frame and slip into the place of his own image and retake his rightful place beside his friend.

*Oh, Hutch! What happened? What happened to us? I just don't understand.*

A drop fell onto the picture, followed by another, and another—and Starsky realized to his astonishment that he was crying. The anger—his one defense—was gone, and there was nothing left to shield him from the pain that crushed his heart like an iron fist. Despair welled up, submerged him and carried him away on a wave of hot grief and terror.

*Hutch, oh, Hutch! What am I gonna do without you?*

The picture fell unnoticed from his hands. Wrapping his arms tightly around his body and rocking to the motion of his grief, he gave himself over to the darkness in his heart.

oooOOOooo

He had no idea how long he sat there, surrounded by the chaos that was his apartment, with his head bowed, and hot, bitter tears sliding silently down his cheeks. He sat until he was completely drained and there was nothing left inside him except a vast empty space where Hutch used to live. Then it took another long moment before he managed to rise and stagger into the bathroom and splash cold water in his face in a futile attempt to erase the evidence of his despair.

He fell into bed, was asleep within seconds and hardly stirred all through his dreamless night. He woke the next morning, knowing at once that something had changed inside him. A deeply ingrained sense of self-preservation, carefully honed in the fields of 'Nam, but rarely called into service since, had taken control and frozen the part of his soul that was causing irreparable damage to its owner.

The anger was gone, and so were the pain and the grief. All that was left inside him was an echoing void and a vast soul-chilling coldness that encased his heart in a solid block of ice.

The coldness in his heart allowed him to survey the chaos in his living room with utter indifference and to head for the bathroom without a second glance. The cold, hard eyes of a stranger stared back at him in the mirror, but Starsky ignored them, as he had ignored the broken picture on his living room floor. It meant nothing to him anymore. He took a shower, picked out a set of clean clothes and left the battlefield without another glance.

He had come to a decision.

David Starsky drove to work, parked the car, walked into the squad room without a word or a look at anyone, helped himself to a form from a drawer in the cabinet, filled it out and slapped it on the desk in Dobby's empty office.

The part of his life that had Hutch in it had come to an end. No trust meant no friendship, and no friendship meant no partnership. There could be no middle ground. He had to draw a line beneath that period of his life and get on with what was left of it.

There was simply no other way.

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## **Chapter Two**

Dobby was stunned. Some days, he knew, Murphy's Law reigned supreme. And usually disastrously so. Today, it seemed, was such a day.

Not enough that he had two officers in the hospital, one in a critical condition. The Barruda case was going from bad to worse and the press was having a field day with the evidence. His car had broken down on his way to work, and the commissioner had been a pain in the neck all morning.

And now, to top it all, a bombshell had landed on his desk that he had no idea how to diffuse.

He sighed and rubbed his neck, trying to think. He'd known for a while that something was out of alignment between his two favorite detectives. They argued more. They snapped at each other. They worked more and more cases apart.

Dobey wanted to blame burnout and long working hours except that his star duo had always coped unusually well with the stresses of the job—far better than other teams. Dobby was in no doubt that this was due in large parts to the extraordinary closeness between the two men—a relationship that defied definition, an exquisite support structure built on trust and a high degree of mutual understanding.

It had never failed in the past, least of all in a crisis. It had been a given, a constant in the daily chaos of his work, so much so that even Dobby had on occasion drawn his strength from the seemingly endless supply of—what—*love*? that seemed to glue the pair together.

And now that glue had come unstuck.

Starsky had requested a new partner.

Impossible. Unthinkable.

He glanced at the rigid figure leaning against the wall beside the water cooler. Hauling Starsky in for answers hadn't done much good, far less provided any explanation for this extraordinary turn of events. Starsky had simply closed the shutters and refused to elaborate.

"Hutchinson! Get in here!" Maybe the other half of the team had the answers to the riddle.

"Captain?"

"What's the meaning of this? Huh? You wanna explain this to me?" He waved the request form at Hutchinson.

A part of him desperately wanted this to be nothing more than an elaborate hoax of the kind the two had often played on him in the past. Another, more sober part of him registered the tension in the room, the expression of cold indifference on the face of the senior member of the team, the look of uncertainty on the face of the other as he glanced at his partner—and Dobby knew that this was bad.

"What is it, Captain?" Hutch looked and sounded as if he hadn't slept all night, and there were shadows on his face Dobby had never seen there before. Hutch took the paper and glanced at it. Dobby saw him take in the words "request for reassignment", and then, at the bottom, the signature—the familiar scrawl of David Starsky.

For a moment, Hutch stood completely still, a stunned expression on his face, eyes fixed on the piece of paper that signaled the end of a friendship and partnership. Then his knees gave way and he fell into the chair behind him, his face grey with shock. The paper slipped from his fingers and floated gently to the

floor. With what appeared to be a supreme effort, Hutch raised stricken eyes to his partner. His lips moved, but no words emerged.

Starsky was leaning against the wall, looking back at him coolly and dispassionately, and it seemed to Dobey that there were light-years of space and eons of time between them.

Dobey cut in, and he heard the outrage in his own voice. "Hutch, you didn't *know* about this?" Then to Starsky, "You mean you haven't even *discussed* it?"

Starsky was halfway to the door, not looking at Hutch.

"He knew," he said coldly. "I told him. And there's nothing to discuss. If you need a reason, call it irreconcilable differences."

He opened the door to the hall. "Cap'n, I have to get going. I'm due to see the DA in half an hour." A nod at Dobey and he was gone.

"Starsky!" Dobey bellowed. "Get back in here!"

He rounded his desk at a speed that belied his hefty bulk and was making for the door when Hutch lurched out of his chair, pushed blindly past his captain, and staggered into the hall in pursuit of his partner.

Dobey watched him go, feeling helpless. He had always feared that if the solid foundation of the pair's friendship ever failed, it would fail spectacularly and irreparably. And he had no doubts that if that happened, it would destroy a vital part of them both. They shared too many ties to be able to function apart.

Making a quick decision, he closed the office door and hurried to the elevator.

oooOOOooo

Hutch raced after the disappearing figure of his partner with terror in his heart.

"Starsky! Starsky, wait..."

He caught up with him at the entrance to the stairwell, gripped him by the arm. Starsky whirled around and fixed Hutch with eyes that were as cold and grey as granite. Hutch clutched at Starsky's arms to steady himself, still reeling from the blow a simple piece of paper had just dealt him. He swallowed and turned anguished eyes on the other man.

"You... put in for a new p-partner?" he whispered. *It's a mistake. It's gotta be a mistake. Starsky wouldn't go that far. Oh, please, he wouldn't...*

The dark, cold eyes never wavered. A quick movement broke Hutch's grip and made him step back a pace. Fear surged up inside him. Starsky looked him straight in the eyes as if readying an invisible dagger.

"That's right, Hutchinson," he said in a harsh voice that drove the blade straight into Hutch's heart. Hutch flinched and staggered backward against the wall. Starsky took the hilt and twisted the knife.

"Can't work with a man I can't trust."

Hutch drew a sharp breath. He stared at Starsky, his beloved Starsky—friend, partner, brother, the man he loved oh so much—and saw nothing but a sweeping iciness in the chiseled features, the cold eyes. Hutch stared at those eyes, his fear submerged by a pain greater than any he had ever felt before, and a sea of despair rose up to engulf and drown him.

*This can't be. Can't be happening. Can't be. Please, Starsk, don't let this happen...*

He opened his mouth, but couldn't speak, couldn't even make a sound, wanted to beg—for forgiveness, for Starsky's friendship—but couldn't, not to save his life. The life Starsky had held so casually in his hands and tossed aside without a second glance. Hutch drew a raw breath and reached out in a silent plea, knowing already that the gesture was futile.

Starsky held his gaze for just another moment. Then he stepped back, turned and walked away, leaving the knife embedded in Hutch's heart. Hutch stood for another long minute, swaying on his feet and gazing after the leather-clad back. His mind was a vast empty cavern except for one echoing thought.

*Starsky is gone. Starsky has left me.*

*I've lost him. And it's my fault. All my fault...*

He found that he was shaking, and that his legs were unsteady beneath him. Slowly, numbly, he lowered himself onto the top step of the stairs and sagged against the railing.

The sound of footsteps faded in the distance. Two floors below him, the door to the stairwell clicked shut.

Then there was only silence.

oooOOOooo

Starsky strode from the building and a path opened before him where the officers in his way shrank from the hard, forbidding look on his face.

Only one officer wouldn't budge.

Dobey planted himself squarely in front of the Torino and nothing short of gunning him down was going to make him give way.

"What do you want, Cap'n? I told you, it's private."

"Starsky..."

"We just can't work together anymore."

"Starsky!"

"I can take this up a level if you don't wanna deal with it."

"Dave!"

"Yes, Cap'n?"

"Look, I don't know what's happened between you two, and I'm not gonna pry. But I have this one thing to say."

"Yeah?"

"This is Hutch we're talking about. It's *Hutch* you're doing this to. Did you see his face just now? You never really told him, did you? You just pulled this stunt out of the blue. I thought he was gonna faint with shock. What on earth has gotten into you?"

Starsky's face looked like it might have been carved of stone, but Dobey ploughed on regardless. "It's *Hutch*, your best friend. You owe him your life, for heaven's sake! You were always so close, I thought nothing could ever come between you."

He shook his head, pulled out his most authoritative voice. "Look, I don't know what Hutch has done, but I know a knee-jerk reaction when I see one. Now you listen to me: I want you to think this over for a few days before you make a final decision! Go to Hutch, talk to him. You'll figure a way out of this mess—whatever it is."

Ice-blue eyes stared him down. "Have you finished? Good. Now *you* listen. You may be my superior officer, but that doesn't give you the right to lecture me on my private life. Things happen that can't be undone and can't be fixed. And for the record, I've repaid my debts a few times over—as you well know! I don't owe him anything. Now are you gonna let me go and do my job?"

"Good Lord, Starsky, what's happened to you? Are you listening to yourself? Okay, okay, go. Go! But I'm telling you, I don't wanna see your face in here while you're in this... this destructive mood. Go home. I'm taking you both off the roster for a few days. Come back when you've discussed this with your partner."

"You done, Cap'n?"

"And that *form* of yours—I'm gonna sit on it until you come to me and tell me that this is what you really want, you hear me? And until that day, Hutch is your partner!"

A dark expression centered on Starsky's features, and for a moment, Dobey thought he would argue the point. Then the younger man shrugged.

"Sure, Cap'n. If that's what you want."

As Dobey watched the familiar red car tear out of the parking lot, he wondered how much of what he'd said had actually sunk in. Knowing Starsky, there was a good chance that he hadn't heard a word he'd said.

Shaking his head in sorrow, he made his slow way back into the building to deal with the rest of the day's emergencies.

oooOOOooo

Hutch's world was falling to pieces all around him, and he had no idea what to do about it.

Somehow he groped his way down the stairs, located his car and collapsed into the front seat, drained and shaken. Somehow, much later, he managed to start the car and guide it blindly out onto the street, moving on autopilot. By the time he realized where he was going, he was already halfway down the hauntingly familiar route to a much-loved apartment that had been like a second home to him for so many years.

*Nine years of friendship, Starsk. Seven years of watching each other's backs. All that's supposed to be over?*

Maybe if he'd had the chance to talk to Starsky that morning, to apologize, to make amends, maybe everything would have turned out differently. But Starsky had been skillful at avoiding him. The first time Hutch had actually seen him that day was in Dobey's office.

*How many times did I almost lose you? More times than I want to remember. To Terry Burton's car bomb when we were still in uniform. To Mad Manny's henchmen in our first year as partners. To crazy Joey in that Italian restaurant. And a year later to Simon Marcos' followers. That was a close one. We made it. But only just.*

Hutch's hands tightened on the steering wheel.

*But the worst was Bellamy's poison. The creeping death. The ticking clock. Time running through our fingers, chasing leads into dead-ends. And you were in such pain, and I couldn't do anything, could only hold you when the pain got so bad, you were shaking in my arms...*

*And then, on that rooftop—I couldn't shoot him, the Magnum would've killed him, and we needed him alive. And then you shot him. To save me. Dear God, the way you looked at me when you collapsed into my arms! You were still breathing, but we were on borrowed time already. You were slipping away, and I couldn't hold onto you. And the look in your eyes, in the hospital, when we were struggling to say goodbye...*

*I'll never forget that look, not until I die. Sometimes I still have nightmares about that day.*

Hutch hauled in a jagged breath. The view through his windshield blurred before his eyes.

*So many near misses, so many moments of fear. Explosions, bullets, poison, kidnappings, accidents, fire... we took it all, and we coped. Because we were together.*

*Never occurred to me that I could lose you like this. Through my own fault...*

The dread and fear in his gut solidified into a cold, hard lump.

*I can't lose you, Starsk, I just can't.*

*You're so much a part of me. How can I possibly live without you...?*

The sudden ear-splitting blast of a horn jerked him from the pit of his misery to full startled awareness, jump-starting his heart as a 50-ton behemoth of a truck loomed large in his windshield and thundered past mere feet from the hood of his

car. Hutch slammed on the brakes, the car skidded sideways and screeched to a halt with barely an inch to spare before impact.

An angry cacophony of honks and squealing tires erupted around him, and he was amazed to find himself in the middle of an intersection. He'd obviously just run a red light.

Dazed and shaken, Hutch sat gripping the wheel, staring straight ahead as a stream of cars cautiously detoured around him.

When the lights changed again, Hutch edged the car over the intersection, pulled into the nearest driveway and killed the engine. For a moment, he simply sat, eyes closed, shaking all over, trying to breathe in and out, in and out, and let the adrenalin subside. So close. Too close. Only a second away from being crushed under a heavy-goods monster of metal and steel.

What if he had?

What if...

What if he *did* have an accident? What if he was taken to the hospital, injured, possibly dying? Would Starsky come to him?

What if he did? Would they have an emotional reconciliation?

For a wonderful second Hutch saw the scene clearly in his mind, himself on a hospital gurney, bleeding, fighting for breath, trying to whisper Starsky's name, and Starsky clinging to his hand, begging him to hold on...

It was a sweet vision, and Hutch longed for it with all his heart.

But what if he didn't? What if Starsky didn't come?

An alien sound, half sob, half hysterical laughter, forced its way past his throat. *What if...* One of Starsky's favorite mental pastimes. What if we were outlaws in the old Wild West? What if we quit and bought a farm in Oregon? What if one of us had never moved to California? What if we'd never met?

*What if I'd never slept with Kira?*

Despair engulfed him and sucked him down to the darkest, coldest part of his soul.

*God, if only I could turn back time... Now it's too late. Too late.*

A wild, desperate thought clawed its way to the surface of his consciousness. No, damn it! It wasn't too late. Maybe something could still be done to patch things up. He had to make one last attempt. Maybe if he talked to Starsky, apologized for real this time, if he tried to explain, really tried to explain...

But that would mean telling the truth, all of the truth.

What did he have to lose? Nothing much, only Starsky. Only his life. And he'd already lost that. It hadn't taken a collision with a 50-ton juggernaut, either. Only two words on a piece of paper, signing their friendship away.

*Dammit, Starsky! How could you have done that? How could it not have killed you to do that? Isn't this hurting you as much as it's hurting me?*

*You were very quick in tossing me out of your life. Well, I'm not going quietly. I'm gonna fight for this friendship and if I have to lay it all on the line for you.*

oooOOOooo

It was growing dark by the time the Torino pulled up outside the building. Ken Hutchinson, huddled in the front seat of his car half a block away, watched with a renewed stab of pain as the familiar figure of his partner ascended the stairs to the first floor apartment with a heavy tread completely unlike his usual graceful, panther-like movements.

Hutch sat for a few more minutes, trying to collect himself. The shaking had stopped a while ago, but there was a peculiar sense of numbness in his hands and legs that had nothing to do with the fact that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. A look in the car mirror revealed the face of a madman—pale, haggard, disheveled, with haunted eyes and an anguished expression etched into the corners of the mouth.

Finally, he hauled himself out of the car and set one leaden foot in front of the other until he stood before the well-known door where in the past he'd always been sure of his welcome. Now, he wasn't sure of anything anymore. Even the words he'd rehearsed in the long hours of waiting deserted him completely when faced with the reality of Starsky opening the door in response to his hesitant knock.

Starsky eyed him without surprise, without emotion, without any visible reaction at all.

"Hutchinson," was all he said. Cool, neutral, polite. He might have been addressing a casual acquaintance. The pain in Hutch's chest tightened another notch.

"Starsk," he said, and it came out in a whisper, "C-can I come in? I'd... like to talk to you."

Starsky was a solid, immovable presence inside his doorway. "You have two minutes. What is it?"

Hutch hadn't counted on that, hadn't for a second imagined that Starsky would refuse him entry, would leave him to plead his case standing outside on the landing. He took a steadying breath.

"Starsk," he began, and then didn't know how to continue. Starsky simply stood, cool eyes regarding him dispassionately. "Starsk, I want to apologize. And to explain. I... I'm sorry about what happened, I really am. I... don't know what I was thinking. It was... wrong what I did. Please, forgive me?"

There was no noticeable change in Starsky's stance or demeanor. He gave a curt nod. "All right. I forgive you."

The words didn't produce the hoped-for rush of relief. They were just words. They didn't change anything.

"And... are we still p-partners?"

A chill emanated from the other man. "If you've come here to salvage our partnership, forget it. It's over."

"I've come here to salvage our *friendship!*" Hutch cried out in despair. "I've come to explain, to... try and save something of what we had. What we had was... extraordinary! We can't just throw that away."

"Seems to me you did just that."

"I didn't mean to! I never meant to harm our friendship. Please, Starsk. I'm sorry. I really am. Please, just give me another chance."

"Should have thought of that before. You can't undo what you've done. And I think I've given you plenty of chances in the last few days. Right now, I really don't give a damn."

Hutch could see no glimmer of the Starsky he knew underneath the composed, uncaring exterior. He shook his head in denial.

"No! I don't believe that. I *can't* believe that. After everything we've gone through together? What we've meant to each other..."

There was a flicker of regret in Starsky's eyes. "Yes, Hutch, after everything we've meant to each other. That happened in a different life. You better get used to the idea."

"Just let me explain. You'll understand... Please, let me come in and talk to you..."

"You didn't hear me," the indifferent voice said. "I'm not interested in your explanation. It's no longer important." The look in the dark blue eyes signaled finality and an end to the conversation.

A terror greater than any he had felt before squeezed Hutch's heart. He spread out his hands in fear and desperation.

"Please, don't let it end this way. I promise, I'll never pull anything like that again. I'll never hurt you again. I promise. It'll be different now. Please, let us try just one more time." It was a cry from the heart, a desperate plea for Starsky's friendship. "I love you, Starsky. You mean everything to me. You gotta believe me!"

Something dark and indefinable flared up briefly in Starsky's cold eyes.

"I loved you once, too, Hutch," he said. "You meant everything to me, too." For a second, their eyes met and Hutch saw the truth of that statement reflected in the blue depths before the protective layer of cool, refined indifference turned the look to stone. "But love can die. Sometimes, a betrayal is too great, and it kills the love."

Tears were falling from Hutch's eyes. He knew it, and he didn't care. He didn't even wipe the moisture from his face. He had no pride left. Let the world see him cry. Starsky's love for him had died. What did anything matter now?

Starsky was unmoved. "You better go now. Go home. And don't come back here." It wasn't a threat, nor a warning. It was a dismissal.

The door closed gently but firmly in Hutch's face.

Hutch stumbled backward, stricken to the core of his soul. Grabbed the railing, held himself upright by sheer power of will. Set a foot on the first step and found his unsteady way down to the street. Stumbled blindly to his car. Fell into the front seat. Sat numb and motionless for long, long minutes, his face hot with tears and grief.

Finally, he leaned his forehead against the cool glass of the window and closed his eyes in defeat.

*Oh, Starsk. Starsk...*

*What am I gonna do now?*

*Oh God, what am I gonna do?*

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### **Chapter Three**

The clink of the empty beer bottle as it rolled against its equally empty siblings on the floor roused Starsky marginally from a dense alcohol-induced stupor.

*Empty again? T'rrific. How 'bout 'nother expedition to the fridge? Okay, here we go. Oops, steady.*

*Fridge. Empty. Great.*

*Whaddo I do? Go out for more? Nah, can't. Too much... to drink. I think.*

*(...)*

*Hey, look here, a bottle of whiskey. How come I own a bottle of whiskey? Leftover from the last party? Yeah, that'll be it. Not that it matters.*

*Nothing matters.*

*(...)*

*No apartment, no job...*

*No, hang on, you have an apartment. It's just messed up. And you have a job. Just no partner to go with it. So? So what? What're you tryin' ta say?*

*Nothing matters? Yeah, that was it. What's happened? Can't feel a thing...*

*Anesthetics, that's what it is. 'M in the hospital.*

*(...)*

*Aw, hell, that's not right. 'M at home. But something's happened here. Someone's broken in and smashed up my place.*

*Aw, who cares? No one cares.*

"I don't care, ya hear me! I don't give a shit!"

*Whoa, who're ya talkin' to? There's no one here.*

*Oh, right. Should be someone here, though. I remember... I remember... Hell, what? Where'd he go? Why... why'd he go away? Why...?*

"Why? I just don't understand. Why'd ya do it?"

(...)

*Nothin' left, jus' whiskey. Hey, great stuff, whiskey. Never realized that before. Let's have some more. Now, where was I? Where was I? What's goin' on?*

*Shit, you think too much...*

*Oh, really? No one's ever said that to me. Hutch always said... Hutch said...*

"Hutch?"

(...)

*Dammit, it's just not workin'. Fuck, can ya believe it? Everyone else, they drink to forget. And what's happenin' ta me? I drink an' I can't stop thinkin'. Yeah, yeah, maybe by the time I've finished the bottle, I'll be Einstein...*

*Lemme get that... damn! What... Where's the damn couch? What'm I doin' on the floor? What the fuck's happening?*

(...)

*Okay, use your brain then. Looks like nothin' else is workin'. Yeah, good idea, use your brain...*

"Why, why did he?"

*Why did he what?*

"Why'd he do it, of course. Wha' else?"

*No, wait. That's not the question, is it? The question is... the real question is... dammit, wha's the question?*

*The question is, why's he stopped carin'? Yeah, tha'sit.*

*Is it really?*

(...)

*Hutch.*

*Cryin'. Outside my door.*

*Hutch was cryin'. I'll be damned.*

*And I sent him away.*

(...)

"Why, why, why?"

*What happened? What changed? What the hell's goin' on?*

(...)

*You're the detective. You figure it out.*

"Oh, yeah?"

*Yeah.*

*Okay, I will then. Maybe tomorrow...*

(...)

(...)

"Starsky! Starsky, ma man, what the hell happened? Looks like a battlefield in here."

"Hey, Hu... Huggy, wha're ya doin' here? Wha...?"

"Jeezus, are you all right? You look terrible. Man, don't tell me you demolished that whole bottle all by your lonesome? No wonder you're plastered. C'mon, man, lemme give you a hand."

"Wan' some whishkey? 's great shtuff..."

"Take it easy, man. No, I don't want no whiskey. Here, let's get you up and to bed."

"Bed. Oh, g-good idea. Yeah, tha's better."

"What on earth happened to you? You get mugged? Damn good thing I came by. What were you trying to do, get alcohol poisoning?"

"Nah, was tryin'... tryin' ta figure out..."

"Whatever it is, it'd better wait until tomorrow. Here, drink this. It's okay, it's just water. It'll make you feel better."

"Don' wan' water. Don'... Just lemme..."

"You better drink it. Yeah, that's right. Now lie down. C'mon, lie down. That's better. You all right there? Look, I gotta go, but I'll come by tomorrow, make sure you're okay. Night, Starsky."

"Night, Hutch... ah, Hu-Huggy... Huggy."

oooOOOooo

Ten hours later, Huggy watched with concern as a pale, semi-conscious Starsky with bloodshot eyes and a wild disarray of curls sat at his kitchen table clutching a mug of industrial-strength coffee with one hand and his head with the other.

"You look like shit," Huggy pointed out unnecessarily. "You sure tied one on. Want more coffee? Aspirin? How 'bout some breakfast?"

Starsky shook his head a minute degree. "No, thanks."

"I've brought you some of Huggy's patented morning-after hangover cure. Guaranteed to put you on your feet in no time at all."

A pause.

"Uh, yeah, maybe later."

"So you wanna tell me what happened here? Someone break in and ransack this place?"

Another pause.

"No, I did that. I had to let off some steam. Just leave it, Hug. I'll clean up as soon as I feel human again."

"Talk about feeling human..." Huggy poured himself a mug of coffee, topped up Starsky's, sat down at the table and fixed the apathetic-looking man with a hard stare, "... you need a shower."

"Yeah, I guess."

They sipped their coffees in silence for a while. Finally, Huggy couldn't stand it any longer.

"Starsky, what's buggin' you? You smash up your apartment, you hit the bottle, you look like the picture of the living dead in my Aunt Minnie's books on exorcism—what's the matter with you?"

"Rough week, that's all."

"Don't gimme that. You look like someone ate your favorite canary."

Starsky lifted his eyes from the mug and looked at Huggy for the first time that morning, and Huggy recoiled from the dull, empty gaze in the normally so vivacious blue eyes. Starsky looked as if a vital part had been scraped out of him and the rest wasn't quite capable of holding it all together.

Huggy's concern increased a notch. He flicked another thoughtful glance at Starsky and decided to change tack.

"Ain't you ever gonna ask what I was doin' at your place in the middle of the night?"

Another pause. A shrug. "Okay, what were you doin' here?"

"I got some stuff for you on that punk you were lookin' for some time back, Ray Mochino? Figured you'd want to know at once. Went over to Hutch's first, but he wasn't in. So I came over here, and the light was on and the door was unlocked, so I looked in and found you practically passed out on the floor. Gave me a real scare, if you know what I mean, the room trashed and you lyin' there. Where's Hutch anyway? He's the one s'pposed to look after you."

An even longer pause. An indifferent shrug. "I've no idea."

"Hey, he's your partner. Ain't you s'pposed to know where he is?"

Starsky's eyes were back on his mug. "He ain't my partner no more."

Huggy stared at him in amazement. "What? Why? What happened? Did Dobey reassign you?"

"No. I put in for a new partner." Distant. Uncaring.

Huggy felt his mouth drop open. "You can't be serious."

"Never been more serious in my life."

"You... *you* broke up the partnership? Why, Starsky? In God's name, why?"

"Look, I don't wanna talk about it. It's over. It was good while it lasted, but now it's over. That's all."

"But why? Starsky, talk to me. Don't fob me off like that. You can't drop a bombshell like that and not tell me what's goin' down. I'm your friend, too. And Hutch's. Tell me."

There was a minute shake of the head. "There's nothin' to tell. It's over, finished, can't be fixed. And you wanna know something funny? I don't even give a damn."

"Yeah, right. And that's why you've been trashin' your place and tryin' to drink yourself into an early grave? C'mon, you gotta do better'n that. What happened?"

Starsky heaved a big sigh. He suddenly looked old and tired, and his reticence crumbled away.

"God, Hug, I wish I could tell you," he said wearily. "But I just don't know. Hutch... he's changed so much lately. He's pulled stuff he's never pulled before. Seems like all he wants to do is hurt me. Push me away. And a few days ago something happened that made it crystal clear that none of this—our partnership, our friendship—means anything to him anymore."

"I don't believe that for a second," Huggy stated quietly. "No more than I believe that you no longer care."

"You better believe it," Starsky said, his voice low and even. "I've looked at it from every angle. Something's been wrong for a long time. This was just the final straw."

"What did Hutch say? You must've talked to him?"

A flicker went over the rugged features, and the hand on the mug tightened.

"Yeah, I talked to him. Fat lotta good *that* did."

"Maybe he..."

"Huggy, leave it. Just leave it. Don't you see? It doesn't matter anymore." Starsky sighed and heaved himself up from the table, using both hands for leverage.

"I better take that shower and start cleaning up this mess," he said. "Uh, don't take this the wrong way, Hug, but don't you have a joint to run? It's already past one." He hesitated. "Look, maybe I'll come down to The Pits later on, okay?"

Huggy regarded his friend worriedly, then nodded and got to his feet. At the door, he turned and spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Look, if there's anything I can do...?"

"I'll let you know. No, really, I will."

"Yeah. Okay. You look after yourself, y'hear me? Oh, and about Ray Mocchino..."

"Yeah?"

"I called Babcock this morning, seein' as you were... shall we say *unavailable* for a while, and he said he'd go down with Simmons and pick him up."

"Oh, good."

"And Starsky?"

"Yeah?"

"If you wanna talk, you know, the Bear's always there for you."

"I know. Thanks, Hug."

oooOOOooo

A shower and a shave later and with some of the chaos brought under a semblance of control, Starsky found himself once more sitting on the couch, nursing another mug of coffee and staring through the French doors at the expanse of deep blue sky that arched above the tree tops.

The resolution he'd made at the height of his inebriation the night before tugged at him, and he pulled it out reluctantly and examined it by the light of day.

*D'you really wanna do this? Dig into all this shit again?*

A good question.

*Why not? I've always been a sucker for a good mystery. Why else did I become a detective?*

He nodded to himself. Okay. Okay then.

He would have to work it like a case. With a cool, objective mind. Pull together the facts. Interview witnesses. Shake down snitches. Formulate a working theory and test it against the evidence. Take it from there. It was as good a way of dealing with the situation as consuming the better part of a bottle of Scotch.

He leaned back and let his thoughts drift for a while.

*Why did he do it?*

The great mystery.

Even more intriguing—why had he stopped caring?

A quick image flashed uninvited through Starsky's mind: Hutch at his door, tears in his eyes, pleading for his friendship. *"Please, give me another chance... I love you, Starsky. You gotta believe me!"*

He shifted uncomfortably. Maybe he should revise the original theory. The sight of that frantic Hutch at his door simply didn't fit. Hutch had to be caring on some level.

*Then why did he do it?*

*And do I really wanna find out?*

*What if I can't handle the answer? What if knowing the answer would only make the problem worse?*

Starsky groaned and massaged his aching temples. This wasn't getting him anywhere. This was no way to run an investigation.

*Start at the beginning. What do I know?*

Hutch had changed. How, when, why?

For starters, he looked different. The long hair, the mustache, the loose-fitting clothes. He often didn't sleep well. He'd stopped working out, was living on junk food and was generally letting himself go. That in itself was worrying.

Then there was the attitude. When had Hutch become so... *cynical*? Dishing out snide, sarcastic comments all the time, playing nasty jokes, instigating strange competitive games?

When had he stopped touching the way he used to?

*When did he start pushing me away?*

They'd definitely been all right a year ago when Hutch was recovering from the plague. And they'd been okay throughout the winter. Then the changes had crept in slowly, one by one. Had it started with the accident when Hutch was hurt by his partner's reckless driving and had chosen to take it out on him in the cruelest possible way, by claiming not to remember their friendship? It had been such an alien thing for Hutch to do.

Starsky realized that Hutch hadn't been himself for a long time, had been acting out of character for quite some time.

*For a lot longer than we've known Kira.*

Which meant that whatever the problem was, maybe it had nothing to do with her. Maybe Kira was a symptom, not the cause.

So what was the cause? Burnout? The pressures of work? No, that would have been obvious. External threats? Blackmail? Family problems? Debts? No, no. Hutch would have come to him with those. It had to be something else. Something much closer to home. Something that went to the heart of their relationship. How else to explain the gulf between them, the crazy mind games, the insane competitive behavior?

Did Hutch feel he had to have Kira because he, Starsky, was seeing her? Was it simply due to a warped sense of competition?

Starsky ran a hand through his curls, frustrated. Somehow, he simply didn't get it.

*Maybe he's in love with her after all?*

But then, why hadn't he said so?

*Maybe she came on to him. Maybe he really just lost his head.*

Starsky mulled that over for a bit and reluctantly discarded the idea. No, Hutch was too much in control of his love life. He'd never allow his cock to rule his head.

That left simple jealousy. Hutch's love life had really been the pits lately, and all his relationships had turned sour before they'd had time to flourish, the most recent example being Marianne.

But no, that didn't wash either.

*Jesus, he can have any woman he wants, they're crazy about him. He doesn't even have to work at it.*

So why, *why* did it have to be Kira?

Kira!

Starsky gave a start. Dammit, Kira! He'd forgotten all about her. Hadn't called her, seen her, or even thought of her for days. In fact, he'd almost forgotten she existed.

Instead, his mind had been filled with Hutch.

But Kira had also betrayed his trust. That betrayal should cut as deep as Hutch's.

Except she hadn't, because he'd never trusted her that way, and it didn't, because... well, because Hutch had meant so much more to him than a woman he'd known for only a few weeks.

*I thought I loved her, but now...*

Kira had never been the issue. In fact, he didn't really care who she slept with. But Hutch...

*Now wait a minute. Where's this thought taking me? Am I saying I care who Hutch sleeps with?*

*If I don't care who Kira takes to her bed, then why do I go ballistic when I find out it's Hutch?*

He sighed and ran a weary hand over his face. All this introspection wasn't normally his thing. That was Hutch's department. But Hutch was gone, gone from his life. Now he would have to play both their roles if he wanted results.

Suddenly claustrophobic within the confines of his apartment, he heaved himself up from the couch, feeling like an old, old man, and reached for his favorite leather jacket on his way to the door.

It was time to interview his first witness.

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## Chapter Four

"Dave! Come in! Where've you been? I've been waiting for you to call me all day. And yesterday. And the day before. Dobby said he'd given you a few days off."

She was tall and blond and gorgeous. She was fun and smart and good company. She was great in bed. Five days ago, Starsky had been ready to declare his love to her. Now he was strangely immune to her charms. He returned her embrace, but evaded her attempts to draw him into a loving kiss.

"Kira, I need to talk to you. It's important."

"Dave, what's happened to you? You look terrible. Come, sit down, I'll get you a drink."

"No, thanks, no drink. Kira, I need to ask you a few questions about the other day when Hutch was here."

Kira had the grace to look embarrassed. She recovered quickly and put on a mock pout. "Hey, is this my boyfriend Dave dropping by or is it a professional visit from Sergeant Starsky?"

Realizing he had charged in like a cop with an arrest warrant, ready to grill her like a prime suspect in a federal case, Starsky eased up a fraction.

"Sorry. Didn't mean it to come out like that. Hey, is there any chance of a cup of coffee? I've a killer headache."

"Killer hangover, more like it," she said knowingly, but moved into the kitchen to comply with his request. He followed and watched her pensively.

An awkward silence ensued. Finally, Kira turned to face him.

"Dave, I know you're upset about what happened on Monday. Look, it really didn't mean anything. Hutch must have told you that."

For a moment, Starsky's detachment wavered.

"I find my girlfriend and my best friend and partner in bed together and everyone tells me it doesn't mean anything. It damn well does mean something. It means I can't trust my girl and I can't trust my partner. So stop telling me it doesn't mean anything!"

He stalked from the kitchen, struggling for control.

A few minutes later, Kira joined him in the living room, carrying two mugs of coffee. She quietly set them down on the table and took a seat on the couch, looking sexy, seductive and utterly desirable. Yet somehow, the magic had stopped working for David Starsky. He wandered over to the bookshelf, picked up a book and leafed through it in a distracted manner. Finally, he turned and looked at her squarely.

"I need to know. Do you love him?"

"Yes, Dave."

"You said you loved *me*."

"I love you both. It *is* possible to love more than one person at a time, you know. That's what I told Hutch. I love all the men I sleep with."

"Maybe it depends on your definition of love."

"My definition is the same as yours, Dave, same as yours. Take your pleasure where you can, have as much fun as you can, don't worry about commitment." She grinned at him. "I hear you're quite a guy for the ladies. Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about."

This was a discussion, Starsky thought, that they should've had weeks ago.

Was he really as shallow as that? Did he use women merely for his own end, as Kira seemed to be implying? In many cases, yes, he'd done that. But he'd also been ready to commit. To Helen. To Terry. To Rosey. To Kira, even. But they had all left him, in one way or another.

How sad was that, he wondered. Here he was, desperately chasing the American dream, increasingly aware of the passage of time, many men his age already married and raising a family. He was 31. How much longer was it going to take before he found the woman to share his life with? Someone to love and to hold, who didn't leave, who stuck it out through everything life could throw at you? Someone to live and to laugh with, to trust and to rely on for the rest of his life? Someone to love more than life itself?

Kira's hand on his arm brought him out of his musings, and he remembered the purpose of his visit.

"What about Hutch? Do you love *him*? Really *love* him?"

"You mean, is he the one for me?" She cocked her head and smiled that smile that had first attracted Starsky to her.

"No, he isn't." Her smile gentled. "And neither are you at the moment, 'cause that's what you were gonna ask me next, weren't you?"

Starsky just looked at her.

"Dave, you're the sweetest guy and I'm sure you'll make some woman a terrific husband, but I'm not ready to settle down just yet. I'm having way too much fun playing the field." She became serious. "But make no mistake. When I'm ready, I'll be a faithful, loyal wife to some lucky guy, you better believe it."

"Yeah, I believe you."

They gazed at each other in mutual understanding, but the spark of attraction was gone, and Starsky was amazed to think that only a few days ago, he had been trying to convince himself that Kira was the woman he had been looking for to share his life.

"Will you tell me what happened here on Monday? It's important, Kira. I need to know. Is he in love with you?"

An expression composed in equal measures of resignation and annoyance flashed across her flawless face. "What is it with you guys? You are so... hung up on each other. What woman can possibly compete with that?"

Starsky blinked, and she sighed. "Look, it really meant nothing. He's never been in love with me. I knew that from the start. I mean, we've only seen each other for the past couple of weeks or so."

*Ever since Hutch realized that I was serious about her.*

"Yeah, I gathered that."

"I never really knew what he wanted from me," she said. "I'm sure he loved the sex, but there was something else, something desperate about him. I can't put my finger on it. And on Monday, he came in here like... I don't know, like a lost soul."

"A lost soul?"

"Yeah, somehow on the edge, if you know what I mean. He asked me if I loved you. I told him what I've just told you, that I love you both. At first, he was gonna leave, but I don't think he really wanted to. In the end I just kissed him and things went from there. He was wild in bed. I've never seen him like that before. Look, I can't explain it."

"But you're saying he's not in love with you."

"No, I think he needed something I couldn't give him. I felt a little sorry for him. He was so obviously in pain."

"In pain?"

"Or afraid of something. I don't know. I'm not a shrink. Christ, all I wanted was to have a good time! If I'd known you guys would turn out to be so much trouble, I'd have kept a mile away from both of you."

*Hutch in pain, afraid of something. Behaving like a lost soul. And what the hell does he do? He goes to some woman for comfort. Why didn't he come to me?*

*And why do I care? All that is water under the bridge now.*

"I'd still want to see you, Dave," Kira broke into his thoughts. "We had a good thing going. I'd hate to lose that. And you never know, maybe it'll develop into something more." She wrapped her arms around Starsky and tried to pull him into a kiss.

Starsky shook his head and gently disengaged himself. "No, Kira, I don't think so."

"Is it because of what happened on Monday?"

He considered the question carefully, not because he was unsure of his reply, but because he wanted to give her as full and as honest an answer as he could.

"Yes, in a way, it is. But not in the way you think. I don't blame you for wanting to have fun. You're right; I've done the same. But having a good thing going is simply not enough anymore. I want it all, you know. The whole shebang. And I want it with someone who's willing to commit all the way."

He looked at her and was relieved to see that she wasn't going to burst into tears or argue the point. Instead, she nodded thoughtfully. "You're lucky you've reached that point. I really hope you find the right one."

They walked to the door where five days earlier, Starsky's fist had gut-punched Hutch into the wall. A memory of that moment flared up like the dying flicker of cooling embers and briefly illuminated the echoing void in his heart. On the doorstep he turned to Kira and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Bye, Kira. See you around."

"It's been good, Davey. I'm sorry it didn't work out."

He nodded and walked down to his car and drove away without looking back.

oooOOOooo

Hours later, he was still driving.

Still thinking. Still wondering.

Still no closer to an answer. Further from an answer than ever before.

His head was filled with glimpses of the past.

Hutch in the academy, a rebel at heart, but molded into conformity by upbringing and social setting. Hutch in uniform, idealistic and passionate, eternal defender of the downtrodden. Hutch as his partner, strong, capable, reliable in every situation. Hutch as his friend, laughter and fun, caring and sharing, protective and vulnerable, a rock to lean on in times of chaos.

The memories kept taunting him and wouldn't go away.

Hutch holding him in an iron grip when the agony of the poison ripped through his guts. The horror in Hutch's eyes when he realized that Bellamy was dead. Hutch leaning into him, lending him strength and comfort as he lay, bleeding, on the floor of a restaurant office. Hutch close to panic, pulling him into a rough embrace while Marcus' followers were being rounded up and hauled away all around them.

There had been real love at one time.

*D'you really think that's something he's suddenly switched off?*

Dammit, not so long ago, Hutch had dragged himself out of the hospital with a bullet wound in his chest to come to his and Joan Meredith's rescue. He surely hadn't done it for Meredith's benefit. He'd done it for his partner, because he cared. There could be no other explanation. He cared.

And how had he, Starsky, repaid him? By implying that a replacement for Hutch wasn't difficult to come by. Okay, it had been a joke, but a joke that had hit Hutch in a vulnerable spot.

*Yeah, you better face it. You're just as good at dishing up the crap as he is.*

Was that the answer? *Was it something I did?*

Starsky knew he could be an irritating companion whose boisterous manners and exuberant behavior had frequently driven his peace-loving partner to distraction—and not always unintentionally. Feeling uncomfortable, Starsky recalled several occasions when he'd goaded Hutch for the simple pleasure of seeing him blow his top.

*But we've always done that to each other. That's the way our friendship worked.*

So maybe something had changed that meant that the old approach no longer worked. What was it? What had changed? And why?

And where did Kira come into it? Because in the end, it came down to just one thing—Hutch screwing his girlfriend, committing the ultimate betrayal between friends, throwing away the trust and the friendship they'd nurtured for almost a decade for the sake of a quick fuck.

Why?

Weariness settled on Starsky's shoulders like a heavy cloak. Too many questions, too few answers. And what difference did it make now, anyway? Was it worth pursuing this line of investigation? Maybe he should just get on with his life, go home, get a good night's sleep, report to work the next day, and put the mystery along with everything Hutch out of his mind once and for all.

A small voice inside him piped up mockingly. *What, you givin' up?*

Dammit, there was an answer there somewhere. Maybe if he knew why, maybe he'd be able to feel something again. Even if it was just anger.

There was one source of information he hadn't tapped yet. Fueled by a sudden surge of determination, he took the Torino into a U-turn and pointed it in the direction of The Pits.

*I'm gonna get to the bottom of this and if it's the last thing I do.*

oooOOOooo

The Pits on Saturday night was heaving with people on the quest of a good time, and Huggy surveyed his crowded bar with satisfaction. Oblivious to the ear-shattering din, he moved easily among his customers, exchanging a few words here, smoothing a complaint there, wise-cracking with a group of punters there. As always, he was completely in his element, totally at ease, but with his eyes and ears everywhere, alert for any kind of news, constantly receiving and imparting information, hearing and seeing everything, missing nothing.

The talent of gathering and processing information that made Huggy such a valuable mine of information ensured that he was usually at least one step ahead of the rumors on the streets. It was a skill he'd nurtured through long years of rough and unpredictable living. Knowing that his gangly form would never be a match for the heavy muscle on the street, he had decided early on to make his living by his wits instead.

The strategy had long since paid off. The restaurant was now hardly more than a front. Huggy's real business was conducted behind the scenes and involved the buying and selling of information of various kinds.

Given his success of the information business, it was more than a little galling—in fact, it was downright annoying—to realize that there was something going on with two of his best customers that he simply couldn't put his finger on.

Huggy knew it involved a woman—ironic, really—but his informant's instinct told him that there was more to the matter than simple jealousy. After all, the customers in question weren't simply any two ordinary guys. For one thing, they were also his friends. For another, there was nothing simple or ordinary about them, especially when taken as a package. And that's what they'd always been—a package deal.

Until last night, apparently.

Through the evening, Huggy kept a steady look-out for one or the other of the pair, preferably both of them together. He'd developed one or two interesting theories on the matter with evidence to match. However, as closing time approached and the staff was getting ready to toss out the last boisterous group of drunks, Huggy was beginning to think that his services weren't going to be needed after all.

A short while later, he cast a final look around the empty bar, shrugged into his jacket, switched off the lights and let himself out through the back door.

The brightly colored car parked a few yards away drew his immediate attention. It was another three seconds before he located the shadowy figure of the car's owner, who sat hunched up in the entrance to a neighboring property.

"Starsky!" Huggy hastened over at well twice his usual speed.

"Hey, Hug," came the tired response out of the shadows.

"What on earth're ya doin', sittin' out here in the dark? Why didn't you come in?"

"I meant to, but..." The rest of the sentence trailed away.

Huggy sighed. "You been here long?"

"Coupla hours."

"Didn't think I'd see you here tonight."

"Told you I'd drop by, didn't I?"

"Aw, man, you're really somethin', you know that? C'mon, let's go back inside. I swear it's cold enough to freeze your nuts off out here."

Back inside the bar with its forlorn atmosphere of a place designed to be filled with music, noise and people, Huggy poured them both a moderate measure of whiskey, pushed one glass toward his companion and leaned back in his chair, subtly encouraging confidences without appearing to, waiting for the information to come to him.

"Can I ask you something?" his visitor said after a lengthy pause.

Okay, so sometimes you had to give in order to receive.

"Hey, man, it's Huggy! 'Course you can ask me anything you like."

"You seen... ah... Hutch in here lately? I mean, with a date?"

A small light went on inside Huggy's head. "Funny you should say that," he said, striving for a neutral tone.

"Why?"

"Well, it's seems either all or nothin' with Hutch these days, if you know what I mean. Either I see him with a different girl each time—and I wouldn't exactly call them *dates*—or he's in here on his own, making love to a pitcher of beer and turning stunning beauties away who want to throw themselves at him."

"That so?"

"Yeah."

They lapsed into silence. Starsky toyed with the tumbler in his hand, not looking at him, and seemed to have exhausted his store of vocabulary. Gently prompting, Huggy said, "Used to be, he'd only come in here in the company of a certain curly-haired partner of his. Used to be, you'd never set foot in this fine place without a certain tall, blond beauty by your side."

Starsky's head came up. "Used to be, Huggy. Used to be. We've been goin' our separate ways for a while now."

*Ah, now we're gettin' somewhere.*

"How come, Starsky? You've always been welded at the hip, before."

"Don't really know," Starsky said in a detached manner and a far-away look in his eyes. "It just happened bit by bit. Hutch started coming up with different excuses... I thought at first maybe it was a girl he wasn't tellin' me about. Turns out in the end, that's exactly what it was."

His gaze dropped to the tabletop. "I just didn't think it'd be *my* girl..."

He said it quietly, matter-of-factly, without bitterness or anger, without any kind of emotion at all, only with a mixture of puzzlement and confusion that went straight to Huggy's heart.

Tentatively he offered, "Maybe he's in love with her?"

"He isn't. I know he isn't." There was an almost imperceptible catch in the voice, and the blue eyes came up to meet his own. "I think he... did it on purpose. To make sure I stay away from him. Maybe even... to hurt me."

"You can't possibly believe that!"

The hollow look Starsky directed at him was almost more than Huggy could bear.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Starsky said. "All I see is the evidence. I just can't figure out the motive."

Huggy had been a bartender long enough to know when to keep his mouth shut and listen. Starsky swirled the golden liquid in the tumbler round and round before finally raising the glass to his lips and downing the contents in one go. He

sat the glass on the table and leaned back in his chair, and when he spoke, his voice was dull and gravelly.

"I think maybe we were gettin' too close to each other. Maybe Hutch was afraid that we'd drown in each other, lose our identities or something. Maybe he just needs more space. Hell, we were practically livin' on top of each other. I mean, how many people d'you know who spend all day working together and then go and spend the evening and every weekend and vacation together?"

"I know a few, 's a matter of fact," Huggy stated and Starsky raised an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, take my cousin Marbelle and her husband. They run this business together and I swear, they spend about every minute of the day in each other's company..."

"Aw, c'mon, that's different."

"Is it?"

"What're you tryin' to say? That Hutch and I were like an old married couple? Sorry, Hug, but you're not the first to make that comparison. Anyway, seems the old couple's just had a divorce."

"Because he's cheated on you?"

Shutters came down over Starsky's eyes, and Huggy realized with a sinking heart that his attempt at light-heartedness had gone off in the wrong direction.

"Sorry. Poor choice of words."

Starsky shrugged. "'S okay. Doesn't matter now anyway."

"Yeah, so you keep tellin' me. You're tellin' me it doesn't matter, you don't care, but here you're sittin' askin' a buncha questions about Hutch. That makes no sense."

There was no reply, and Huggy wasn't even sure if Starsky had heard him. He contorted his mobile features into a gargoyle's grimace of indecision, then sighed with resignation.

It was time to roll out the heavy artillery.

"Starsky, I'm gonna let you in on something I've promised on my grandmother's grave to keep to myself."

Starsky glanced at him without much interest. A brief silence ensued while Huggy battled his conscience into submission.

"Remember my birthday bash?" he said. "When you and Diane were up on the stage singin' that ridiculous song and contortin' yourselves in somethin' you thought was dancin'?"

"Just spill it, will ya!"

"Hey, look, this ain't easy. I promised Hutch I'd keep my mouth zipped, and here I am like the worst gossip, can't wait to spill the beans... Okay, so I was sittin' over there, next to Hutch..."

"Yeah?"

"He was gettin' plastered on that cocktail. He was pretty far gone—well, we all were—and he was lookin' at you kinda funny."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It was the way he looked at you—kinda *intense*, like you were gonna vanish in a puff of smoke or somethin'. It just got to me. And then he must've realized that I was sittin' there, watchin' him, and he was still starin' at you, and he said to me... I thought it was strange at the time, but now... Anyway, he said, '*Huggy, promise me, if anything ever happens to me, you'll look after him for me.*' And the way he said it was so... *sad* somehow as if he thought something was really gonna happen to him."

He glanced at his companion and saw that he had Starsky's full attention.

"So I asked him, '*Hutch, why'd you think something's gonna happen to you?*' And he sorta hesitated and then he said, '*In our line of work something can happen anytime.*' And then..."

"And then what?"

Huggy squirmed a little. "And then I said, '*You really love him, don't ya?*'—Hey, look, I dunno why I said that. I mean, what a dumb thing to ask. I mean, I had a few too many, too, and..."

"What did he say?" Starsky interrupted.

"He said... he said, '*More than anything.*' Or something like that. And then he said, '*Just promise me, Hug.*' So of course I did. And then he suddenly looked around as if he was comin' out of a trance or something and he got all businesslike and put on his bad cop look and said, '*Don't ever tell him I said that. This is just between you and me!*' and I said, '*Sure, Hutch,*' and that's when he got up and walked out."

There was a long, long silence during which Huggy didn't dare meet Starsky's eyes. Finally, Starsky took a deep breath and said in a husky voice, "I was wonderin' why he left without saying anything."

He hesitated. "Thanks, Hug. Thanks for telling. It's another piece in the puzzle. Maybe one of these days I'll figure out where to put it and what the whole damn picture looks like."

"You do that. Just so long as you don't tell Hutch I told you what I told Hutch I'd never tell you, you understand what I'm tellin' you?"

The look Starsky shot him was a pale version of the sparkle Huggy was used to seeing in those normally so animated eyes. Huggy recalled Starsky's startling revelation and almost wished he hadn't been told. It shattered too many illusions. About friendship. About trust.

It was the curse of knowledge. Sometimes his information came at far too high a price. Huggy was a realist, and he had lost most of his illusions a long time ago. The realist in him couldn't quite see how a rift of such proportions could ever be fully bridged. It was the carefully concealed romantic inside him who decided to

put his money on the power of the love he suspected was still lurking under the glacier of Starsky's heart.

He'd done what he could, and all he could hope for now was that his approach had succeeded in putting a small chink in the ice.

There wasn't really much else he could do.

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## **Chapter Five**

Starsky was running.

He was running through the silent shadows of the city at night. Running down dark, deserted alleys and past empty, derelict warehouses. Running with a growing fear in his heart, adrenalin pumping in his veins, frantically looking, desperately searching for something, someone.

*I gotta find it, gotta find him.*

Time was running out and everything depended on him. Panic was rising in his throat like bile, his heart pounding painfully in his throat, hands clenched with barely contained terror.

He had no idea what he was so desperately trying to find.

There! Far down the alley stood a man with a blaze of bright hair and the saddest expression on his face. *Hutch*. Relief rushed through Starsky. He'd made it on time. He'd found him. Yes, this was what he'd been looking for. He ran toward the silent, unmoving figure.

An impenetrable mist rose from the sewers, crept out of shuttered doorways and began to obscure the view. Renewed terror clutched at him. If he lost the man from his sight, he'd never find him again, and Hutch would disappear forever.

He tried to run faster, but found that he couldn't move, legs mired in treacle, the fog closing in all around him.

Slowly, the dark shadow of a man merged with the haze and faded from view.

"Hutch! Don't go! Wait... wait for me! HUUUUTCH!"

His own scream hauled him from the depth of his nightmare, shaking, disoriented, tangled up in sheets. Heart pounding. Gasping for breath as if he'd really been running.

A dream. Just a dream.

An old familiar nightmare.

Gradually, his racing heart beat slowed. After a while, he got up, groped his way into the kitchen and got a drink of orange juice from the fridge. Then he crawled back under the sheets, still shaken by the terrors of the dream.

It was a nightmare he'd had many times before, in many different guises, each a variation on a theme. In each of them, the missing element was Hutch.

Each of them was a race against time, a race to save Hutch's life.

Sometimes he'd find Hutch pinned under a car in a canyon. Sometimes collapsed against a wall in a filthy alley. Sometimes slumped in the front seat of a car. Sometimes laid out on a hospital bed, a sheet already drawn over the cold white face.

Each time, he'd come too late.

Starsky shuddered.

Each time, he'd wake up, profoundly grateful to find that it had just been another dream.

In the past, the nightmares had always hit after the crisis was over, when the pressure was off and Hutch was already safe. Alive and safe and, as often as not, asleep on the couch in the room next door.

This time was different. This was the first time he'd woken to find that reality offered no hint of relief, that reality was a nightmare all in itself.

oooOOOooo

Sleep wouldn't come again, and the cool November dawn found Starsky standing on his balcony with the view of the dusty hills. He was gripping the railing, eyes unseeing, staring into the distance.

He stood there for a long time, just standing, his mind in turmoil, unable to fully shake off the effects of the dream.

Throughout the morning chores—getting the Torino tuned, shopping for groceries, mechanically going through the motions of a normal existence—the feeling grew in him that he was close, so close to the hazy outline of an idea that hovered just outside his reach. Something was lurking at the edge of his mind, unwilling to emerge into the light of day, eluding all attempts at capture.

On impulse, he dragged out the cardboard box containing the broken remains of his brief burst of violence, still waiting to be dumped. Near the bottom, under broken china, torn magazines and dented ornaments, lurked a splintered picture frame containing a dog-eared print. Carefully, he detached the photo from its frame and smoothed the crumpled edges before turning it over.

He looked at the picture as if years had gone by since he had last set eyes on it.

*Hutch.*

Something subtle shifted inside him and another chip came out of the walls of his icy prison.

It always came back to just one thing. Hutch.

*I miss him.*

The thought came out of nowhere, taking him completely by surprise.

Yes, he missed Hutch. Missed the friendship, the closeness they'd had a year ago. Missed the fun and the banter, the affection and the unspoken support

they'd both come to take so much for granted. Missed it all with a sudden ferocious yearning that he hadn't been aware still lurked inside his chest.

Be honest with yourself now, he thought bitterly, 'cause you can't deny it any longer. You still care about the bastard. After everything he's done to you.

*Yeah, but that doesn't mean I'd ever trust him again or that we could ever be friends again like we used to be...*

Hutch's anguished voice rang in his ears.

*"I love you, Starsky. You mean everything to me. You gotta believe me."*

Starsky sat on the floor beside the box and stared at the picture in his hand. There was so much love in that picture. Maybe he'd been looking at the situation from the completely wrong perspective. Maybe his assumptions were all wrong. Maybe it wasn't a case of Hutch caring less.

He gave a sudden start. What if just the opposite was the case? What if Hutch had begun to care *too much*?

*"I love you, Starsky. You mean everything to me..."*

What if... ? What if his love had grown, not diminished?

But by last year they'd already been as close as two people could possibly be.

*"I love you, Starsky..."*

Unless... unless...

Time slowed to a crawl. The noise of the distant traffic dimmed and faded away. The room wavered and dissolved into nothing until the only thing that remained was Hutch's voice, now as low as a whisper.

*"I love you..."*

The parts of the puzzle shifted and realigned themselves. Stray pieces fell into place and filled the gaps. Realization hit, and Starsky held his breath and froze into complete immobility for fear of scaring the thought away.

*He loves me...*

*My God. Hutch loves me! It's the only explanation.*

*He's fallen in love with me!*

Starsky sat, staring numbly at the picture.

For a few seconds, his mind was a complete blank, then a flood of memories rushed in, a jumble of blurred images and half-remembered moments in time from the past few months. Hutch in the car, staring at him with a strange gleam in his eyes before abruptly turning away. Hutch in the squad room, moody and sullen in response to Starsky's latest conquest tale. Hutch in the Pits, lashing out at him when the conversation strayed to dating. Hutch in his greenhouse, shrinking from his touch.

It all made sense now. Hutch was in love with him!

Something jumped inside him and ignited a tiny spark of joy. The spark fell on drought-stricken ground and turned the desert of his heart into a raging fire storm that melted the solid ice in his veins, spread warmth through his frozen core, and filled the vast void in his heart with a happiness that was so profound that Starsky felt dizzy from the beauty and the perfection of it.

*He loves me. Hutch loves me.*

His vision blurred as he traced the outline of the smiling face in the photo with his finger.

My Hutch, he thought, overcome. My beautiful Hutch! And I thought you didn't care about us anymore...

Joy pounded within him. Unable to sit still any longer, he jumped to his feet and strode the length of his apartment, arms hugged tightly around him as if to keep the happiness from escaping.

*God, I love him, too. Always have. Never stopped. Took a nightmare to make me realize it.*

The pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place and the whole picture was laid out on a table in his mind. It all made sense, all the changes of the past few months—Hutch's altered appearance, his withdrawn behavior, the many-layered attempts at keeping his partner at arm's length, the widening gulf between them—all defense mechanisms designed to hide a truth too terrifying to acknowledge. The lack of dates, his lack of interest in women, and of course... Kira.

*It must have killed him when I said I loved her.*

*Oh, Hutch!*

When had it happened? How long had Hutch carried this on his own, this one secret he hadn't shared, couldn't share with his partner? Months? A year maybe?

*How in hell did he keep this from me? Why didn't I suspect something? I thought I knew him inside out...*

He had to go and see Hutch, talk to him, reconnect with him.

oooOOOooo

Starsky was on the point of tearing out of his apartment when a new thought stopped him dead in his tracks.

*What am I gonna say to him? What the hell am I gonna say?*

He slowly sank down on the couch, confused, puzzled and exasperated with himself all at the same time. What had he been thinking? Of course, he couldn't simply charge in and confront Hutch with his own truth.

*"Hi, Hutch, I've figured out what's wrong, but not to worry, it's no big deal, and by the way, I'm so glad to know that you still care."*

No, that wouldn't do. It didn't solve anything, least of all Hutch's problem.

Hutch's *problem*? What exactly *was* Hutch's problem?

Hutch had fallen in love with him. That meant Hutch was attracted to him. Physically.

*He wants to have sex with me!*

No, that wasn't quite right.

*He wants to make love to me.*

Yes, that was better. Love was a big part of the equation.

Hutch wanted to make love to him. How did he feel about that? Could he work and be with Hutch knowing how Hutch felt about him? Knowing that Hutch was...

*Gay?*

The mere thought of the word propelled Starsky from his seat and made him stride around the apartment in an agitated manner.

Hutch was gay. Dammit! How... when...?

*Don't be an idiot! Hutch is no more gay than I am. As if I wouldn't have known.*

No, Hutch had simply taken the next step in a relationship that was already so close that it had nowhere else to go.

The simple truth of that thought stopped Starsky abruptly in his tracks. Of course. They already loved each other like brothers. They were best friends, soul mates. Sometimes they could even read each other's minds. The only aspect left unexplored was the physical expression of that love.

The realization of that truth brought him up to a new, unexpected hurdle.

*What about me then? Do I love him, too?*

*Do I love him that way?*

The question stunned him into temporary paralysis.

The next moment, he was in motion again, pacing the apartment like a tiger in captivity.

*Sex with Hutch! How can I even think about it? I must be out of my mind. I don't swing that way.*

David Starsky had always thought of himself as a fairly liberal-minded, live-and-let-live sort of guy. John Blaine's secret had affected him not because the man had been gay, but because he'd lived a lie to even his closest friends. Starsky himself had always been secure in his own heterosexuality. Making love to a man wasn't something he'd ever consciously thought about.

*Well, think about it now. It's no big deal. Just try to imagine it.*

What would it feel like to kiss Hutch? To touch Hutch's naked body? To feel Hutch's hands caressing his own naked skin?

For a moment of extreme unease, his mind shied away from the image. Too many years of social conditioning and preconceived notions on homosexuality stood like an unscalable wall between him and the idea of himself in an intimate relationship with a man.

Then he shook himself angrily. Hutch wasn't just any man. Hutch was Hutch, the one person he loved more than anyone else in the world—as he had only so recently realized. Why should the physical shape of that person matter?

One thing was certain—this wasn't a time to get freaked. Time was an unaffordable luxury right now. Hutch needed him. Needed his love, his understanding. Not his fear and his unease. He had to search his heart and mind—not to mention his body—for an honest answer. He had to bare his soul to himself.

Could he feel that way about Hutch?

Hutch had come this way months ago, alone, scared, knowing there was no way back. Hutch had gone ahead to a frightening new place, and if he wanted Hutch back, he'd have to follow.

Starsky closed his eyes and took the wall in a blind leap of faith.

He imagined Hutch as he appeared in the picture. Laughing, carefree, happy, an arm wrapped around his partner's shoulders, both deep in each other's personal space. Then he imagined Hutch holding him in a tight embrace, bodies touching closely. He imagined Hutch's hands moving over his back. Tried to conjure the deeply familiar essence of Hutch's scent. Imagined Hutch's fingers tangled in his hair. Imagined Hutch's beautifully shaped lips descending on his own and wondered briefly if they would feel as soft as they looked. Imagined returning the kiss.

That wasn't so bad. Not bad at all. He could easily imagine kissing Hutch.

The image of Hutch in the nude surfaced from nowhere. Hutch, golden Hutch, with the bright blaze of platinum hair and those perfect, slender limbs tanned and glowing. He imagined reaching out for the golden body, caressing the silken strands of hair, trailing his fingers over the smooth skin of Hutch's muscular chest, brushing against a nipple...

Starsky's heart beat increased.

The Hutch in his daydream bent forward and trailed hot lips over the broad expanse of his own curly-haired chest, kissing, sucking, exploring. The tongue found a nipple and circled lazily, skillfully, around it.

Starsky was breathing harder.

In his imagination, he moved his own hands down over the smooth torso and the slim hips to the hard lean globes of Hutch's ass. Imagined Hutch's hands sliding down over his own broad back. Imagined him pulling their naked bodies together, imagined their most intimate parts meeting and touching, Hutch reaching to take a hold of him *there*...

... and Starsky was suddenly, unexpectedly, achingly hard.

For Hutch.

*I'm hard for Hutch!*

For a moment, Starsky was too stunned to move. Then the enormity of that revelation sank in, and he had to lean on the back of the chair for support.

*I want him. God, I want him, too!*

He was throwing a rod for his partner, and all he'd done was think about him. And now that he'd come this far, the vision of holding Hutch in his arms simply wouldn't go away, and he found himself overwhelmed with a sudden wild rush of love and want and desire.

For Hutch!

Where had those feelings come from? How long had they been lurking in that hidden corner of his soul he'd never allowed himself to explore before?

Love.

It was love.

It was want, and need, but most of all it was love. It was the missing piece in the equation. The missing link in their connection. The one thing to make their unique bond complete.

He was suddenly laughing, his heart pounding with a joy he hadn't felt in years.

He was in love. In love with Hutch.

As simple as that.

The seeds of that love had been sown years ago. And they'd both had blinkers on all that time. The only difference was that Hutch's blinkers had come off months before he'd finally shed his own.

*God, all that wasted time. All those meaningless conquests, those women we chased and competed over when all the time, what we really needed and wanted was right there beside us.*

*"Someone to love and to hold... who stuck it out through everything life could throw at you... someone to live and to laugh with, to trust and to rely on... someone to love more than life itself..."*

It was so obvious. The only one who fit that description, who had ever fit that description was Hutch.

Joy danced through him again.

*I have to go to him. I have to tell him.*

He was snatching up his jacket, reaching for his keys...

*I'm coming, Hutch! Sit tight. Everything'll be all right.*

...when a sudden terrible realization froze the joy in his heart and crystallized the molten heat into the cold grey granite of horror and fear, and he stopped dead still in the middle of the room.

*Oh God.*

*Dear God. How can he love me now?*

*Oh, Hutch! How can you love me now, after what I've said and done to you?*

The events of the past few days came into sudden sharp focus and Starsky saw his actions clearly for the first time. The blood drained from his face, and he swayed on his feet, stricken.

*I ended our partnership. I ended our friendship.*

*I told him I couldn't trust him anymore.*

*I told him my love for him had died!*

*Oh Christ-oh God-dear God!*

The horror of what he had done hit him like a fist in the gut and felled him to his knees.

*God, what have I done?*

*What have I done?*

Images shackled deep inside his memory broke free and paraded before his horrified eyes. Hutch in his living room, trying to hold everything together without giving his lethal secret away. Hutch in Dobey's office, ashen pale and speechless with shock. Hutch in the stairwell, frantic with fear. Hutch outside his door, swaying under the burden of his terror and his guilt.

Pain lashed out at Starsky, and he let out a low moan.

*How—how could I have hurt you like that?*

*How could I have done that to you, trying to rip you out of my life? That's impossible. You're the most important part of it.*

Grief reared up inside him like a wild creature and clawed at his heart with talons of steel and fire—grief for the loss of a friend, a love, and a lost opportunity.

He knelt on the floor for what seemed like an age, blind and deaf to all but the memories of his own words and actions that played over and over in his mind like a film on a continuous loop.

When the spool finally came to an end, Starsky rose stiffly, dragged himself to the couch and crumpled in on himself, feeling more tired than he ever had in his life.

*I've lost him.*

*Oh God, Hutch. What have I done?*

Had he killed the love he'd only just discovered? Had he extinguished that vital spark of their relationship that depended on unconditional love? Or could something still be done to steer their friendship back on its old track? Could anything be done to set things right?

He had to go and apologize. Maybe Hutch would forgive him...

His head came up as hope entered his blood stream like a drug.

He had to go to Hutch, talk to Hutch. Maybe... maybe they could still work this out. Maybe...

He was on his feet again with a renewed sense of urgency, his course of action clear.

*I'll do anything to make things right between us. I'll go down on my knees if I have to. Just... please, forgive me. Forgive me, Hutch.*

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## **Chapter Six**

The Torino had never eaten up the distance between their two apartments faster than on that dull hazy November day, and Starsky resorted to mars light and siren without a twinge of a guilty conscience. Rules be damned! He turned off the noise and hauled in the light when he was within two blocks of Venice Place. No need to give Hutch a heart attack.

The precaution turned out to be unnecessary. Hutch's car was gone and therefore so was Hutch. Starsky was on the point of driving on, with a vague notion of flushing him out at a place like the beach or Huggy's, but a sixth sense he had long ago termed his "Hutch radar" stirred for the first time in many weeks, and he turned the engine off and jogged upstairs.

After a cursory knock, he let himself in with the key he was grateful he still possessed, closed the door behind him and surveyed the small familiar space. Something felt wrong right away, and Starsky pushed aside the memories of his last visit and switched to detective mode, letting his eyes roam over every surface, taking in every detail.

It only took a minute to realize that key items were missing.

Lurching into motion, Starsky tore open the bathroom door. Hutch's shaving gear and toothbrush were gone. So were the duffle bag and the small backpack from under the bed. Empty, half-open drawers with clothes removed wholesale spoke of a hasty and uncoordinated departure.

In the greenhouse, plants were drooping on parched, arid soil. This, more than anything, confirmed the awful conclusion that Hutch had left LA.

Starsky's heart was beating heavily in his chest.

*He's gone! Hutch has left.*

*I've come too late...*

He ran an agitated hand through his curls and strode the length of the apartment, his mind spinning.

Where, when did he go?

And when would he come back?

It was only then that he saw it—the gap on the bookshelf beside the bed where a picture in a carved wooden frame had always had pride of place among the few knick-knacks Hutch permitted to clutter up the place. Not a large print, nor a very good one, with a slightly out of focus background, but one that had captured Starsky to perfection—bright warm grin, twinkle in the eye and all.

Now the picture was gone. And in its place, there was Hutch's badge.

Starsky snatched it up, his stomach clenching as his brain jumped to the only possible conclusion.

*He's left for good. He's not planning to come back!*

Starsky sank down on the rumpled bed, paralyzed.

*He can't have. He can't have just left.*

Why not? taunted a small voice inside him. You haven't exactly given him much of a reason to stick around, have you?

Starsky groaned.

*Oh Hutch. What have I done?*

*And what'm I gonna do now?*

Clutching his partner's badge like his ticket to salvation, Starsky forced himself to subject the apartment to another, more thorough search. The results made his heart sink. Hutch had taken a random selection of clothes. He'd taken the folder that contained his passport, documents and writing materials. He'd taken the picture from the shelf.

He'd left everything else behind—furniture, guitar, books, plants. His badge. His gun. His partner and his life.

There could be no doubt—Hutch wasn't planning to come back.

With a feeling of dread, Starsky sank onto the couch and enfolded the small piece of plastic and metal in both of his hands.

*I gotta go find him. Maybe he's not gone far. Maybe...*

The vision of Hutch disappearing into the mist of his dream suddenly took on a terrible new reality. What if Hutch didn't want to be found? How long would it take to catch up with him?

Every day Hutch was out there, alone with the shattered remnants of his life, was a day too long, a day of unnecessary misery.

*I gotta find him. I have to.*

Starsky snatched up the phone and dialed.

oooOOOooo

"Edith, it's Starsky. I gotta speak to the Captain.... Cap'n? Cap'n, Hutch is gone! Hutch... is gone. He's left LA."

"Yes, Starsky." Dobey's voice was firm and unhelpful.

A pause.

"You knew?"

"Yes, Starsky."

Another pause. A deep breath.

"Where? Where, Cap'n? Did he say where he was goin'?"

"No, Starsky."

"Cap'n, please! D'you have any idea where he might've gone?"

"No, I don't, Starsky. Anyway, it's hardly your business what your former partner does with his spare time."

For a moment, Starsky thought he was going to be sick. Shakily he said, "Cap'n, you didn't... you said... I mean you haven't..." He closed his eyes and collected himself.

"Cap'n? Cap'n, listen, please. I've been an idiot, and you knew it all along. *Please*, tell me that you haven't processed that form yet. I don't want a new partner. I... I just want Hutch back."

Dobey's voice regained some of its customary gruffness. "D'you think I've nothing better to do with my time than to deal with every bit of fool paperwork my detectives leave on my desk? Of course, I haven't processed it! It's at the bottom of a pile two feet high!"

Immense relief rushed through Starsky. "Thanks, Cap'n. I owe you. Look, I need your help. Hutch is gone, and I've gotta find him. Gotta apologize. Can you tell me anything at all? When did you talk to him? What did he say?"

"He called me at home a couple of days ago and requested a leave of absence. For personal reasons, he said."

"When? What time was it?"

"Just after 8 pm on Friday, I'd say. We were just getting ready to go out."

Friday? That was the day when he'd taken his pain and grief out on Hutch by requesting a new partner. And that same evening Hutch had come to see him, to explain, to apologize, to beg for a second chance. And he'd refused to listen, and instead he'd sent Hutch away. *Driven* him away.

Starsky ran a weary hand over his face. *Oh, Hutch, I'm so sorry!*

"Did he give you any clue at all? Where we was going?"

"He said he had to get away for a while. I asked him where he was going, in case we needed to get in touch with him, and he said he didn't know yet. Somewhere quiet. He said he had some thinking to do."

"Cap'n, I need some time off. I gotta find Hutch and try and set things right between us."

"You have three days. Then I expect to hear from you. But you know, it's not as if he's disappeared. He just needs a few days off. He'll be back soon."

Starsky closed his eyes. If only that was true. He doubted it, but that wasn't a conclusion he could share with Dobey.

All he said was, "That'll be too late, Cap. What I have to say to him can't wait that long. I'll stay in touch. If you hear from Hutch, will you... will you tell him that I'm lookin' for him and that I wanna talk to him?"

"Okay, Starsky, I'll pass it on *if* I hear from him. How're you gonna find him? We can't put out an APB out on him, if that's what you were planning. I can't let you use police resources to track him down. This isn't a police matter."

"Yeah, I know. I'll think of something. But I *will* find him, and if I have to turn the whole country upside down."

"I can't say I'm not pleased to hear that. I hated to see that rift between you, and I'm glad you've come to your senses. Good luck, and keep me informed, you hear me!"

"Yeah, I will. Thanks, Cap'n."

oooOOOooo

A string of phone calls to potential informants—Huggy, Minnie, Kiko, Kathy Hutchinson even—and a hasty interview with Helene from downstairs later, Starsky was no nearer to pinpointing the whereabouts of his partner. Hutch had simply vanished without a trace. Struggling to keep a rising panic under control, Starsky paced the apartment, thinking furiously.

*He's been gone two days. How the hell am I gonna find him? He could be anywhere by now. Christ, he could be in Mexico or Canada or halfway across the country to New York!*

No, wait a minute. Hutch wasn't like that; he didn't drive around aimlessly, taking his problems on long rides. Hutch needed a destination. *That's what I would do—take the Torino and run. But Hutch...*

Think, think! What would Hutch do?

Hutch hated long drives. And he disliked driving at night. In any case, his old banger would struggle to make it to the state border, never mind any distance beyond.

*Helene saw him leave just before 9 pm. Where would he go at that time of night?*

*Dammit, how should I know? He could've gone anywhere!*

Starsky slammed his fist on the kitchen counter in frustration.

*C'mon, try to think like Hutch. Pull together all your knowledge of Hutch. You know you can do it. You know how his mind works...*

Starsky sank into a chair and took a couple of deep breaths in a conscious effort at calming the storm in his mind. Then he leaned his forehead on his hands, closed his eyes and concentrated.

What would Hutch do?

Hutch wanted somewhere quiet, a place to think. A place where he could try to pull his life together. Somewhere remote, lonely. A refuge. Somewhere away from the city. Yes. But not a long car ride away.

A beach? A seaside resort?

No. Beaches were for happy times. Hutch was drawn to the open spaces of the seaside when he was in a relaxed or a pensive mood, when he had a problem to solve or a decision to make. This was different. Hutch had just lost the ground under his feet. He'd be in freefall. He'd be at the end of his wits.

Starsky groaned and buried his head in his hands. *Oh, Hutch! Forgive me. I'll do anything I can to make it up to you. Please, give me a chance... I love you... Where are you, Hutch? Please, just give me a hint.*

Where would Hutch go to lick his wounds? Not the beach. The mountains then? The woods?

Starsky felt a jolt of excitement. Yes, that was it. Hutch would be drawn to the solitude of the woods and lakes. It was a place he loved, a place of healing, a place he would turn to in an emotional crisis.

Which mountain, which wood? Pine Lake? Too many memories. San Bernadino? Too close, too familiar. Great Bear Lake? Too crowded. Yosemite? Sequoia? Christ, there was no end of possibilities.

No, wait. Hutch had once mentioned a place he'd heard about... somewhere up north... off the beaten track. Some sort of exclusive resort. Insider tip, he said. Virtually unknown.

Starsky jumped up, agitated, as memories flooded back.

*He wanted us to go there on vacation. Only then Pine Lake happened, and after that he never mentioned the idea again.*

Damn it, where was the place? What had Hutch told him about it? C'mon, c'mon, think! Somewhere up north. Past Fresno? In the Sierra? Yeah, he'd definitely mentioned Fresno. But what was the name of the place? Had Hutch ever mentioned it? If it was a private resort, it wouldn't be listed. And that meant it would be virtually impossible to find without a contact name or number.

*Damn it, why didn't I ask the name of the place?*

A new thought materialized. If Hutch had left LA at 9 pm, he wouldn't have had time to make it into the High Sierra. Hutch wouldn't have attempted to negotiate the tricky mountain tracks in complete darkness. He would have stopped for the night somewhere on the way. Somewhere near Fresno?

*I need more information.*

*Sorry, Dobe, but I'm gonna have to use some police resources after all.*

He pocketed Hutch's gun, reverently slipped his partner's badge next to his own inside his jacket and was already rushing from the apartment when he remembered something. Quickly, he darted back into the greenhouse and spend a few precious minutes dousing the thirsty plants with water.

At least, he wouldn't have Hutch's beloved jungle on his conscience.

oooOOOooo

"Are you crazy? My shift is over in 10 minutes and you want me to do *what?*"

"Minnie, please, I need your help! I can't do it alone."

"Lemme get this straight. It's got nothing to do with police business *and* Dobe doesn't know anything about it?"

"Yeah, that's about it. So, will you help me?"

"Looking for a needle in a hay stack."

"I know. It's a long shot, but it's the best I've got. I've simply gotta find him."

The small dark-haired woman cocked her head and eyed Starsky speculatively. "This about Kira?" She had never made a secret of her dislike for her female colleague.

Starsky sighed. "You know, you were right all along. I never did love her. And she didn't love me, either. But it's messed things up with Hutch. I've gotta find him and talk to him. It can't wait. You're a wizard with that computer. I couldn't get the information I need without you."

"Hmm. Flattery will get you anything. You're lucky that I have a soft spot for your partner."

"You mean, you'll help?"

"I'll give it a shot. Tell me what you need."

"Minnie," he whirled her around and kissed her on the cheek, "you are beautiful!"

"Yeah, yeah, that's what they all say. Now, what is it you want?"

"For starters, names and phone numbers of all the motels along Highway 99 in and around Fresno. I also need names and numbers of national parks, mountain resorts, lakes, private lodges—anything in the High Sierra that's secluded and remote."

"And you're sure this can't wait until he comes back?" She was already tapping information into her console.

"Very sure."

*By the time he comes back it may be too late. If he comes back at all.*

A nearby printer began to clatter and inch out a densely printed ribbon of paper.

"Here's the first lot of motels, hotels and guest houses. There are... um... 117 so far. More to come. Now what're you gonna do?"

"Phone them up. See if Hutch stayed at one of them."

"All of them? You're nuts! That'll take you hours. And after midnight, most front desks will be closed."

"Well, that'll give me 6 hours. I better get started."

Starsky settled down at an unused desk in R&I, hooked the phone between ear and shoulder and started dialing.

oooOOOooo

Three hours and 79 fruitless phone calls later and David Starsky was trying hard not to let a series of doubts derail him from his purpose.

*What if...? What if Hutch hadn't stopped near Fresno? What if he'd stopped somewhere else entirely? What if he'd never stopped at all? What if he'd simply crashed in his car that night and kept on driving the following morning?*

*What if Hutch was in a different part of the country altogether by now?*

Too many ifs. Too many possibilities. Too many factors to take into account. And all he had was his intuition and his knowledge of Hutch.

Only a few short months ago, he'd boasted that he'd be able to find Hutch anywhere and had promptly let Hutch goad him into a hare-brained scheme of hide-and-seek. The game had turned sour and almost claimed his partner's life. Afterward, Starsky had wondered why they'd chosen to spend a precious weekend pitting their minds against each other, trying to outdo each other in mindless competition, instead of simply spending time together as they would have done just a few months earlier. Now Hutch's subconscious motivation made a lot more sense—*Prove your love to me. If you really love me, you'll find me.*

*I will find you, babe!* He promised himself and reached for the next printout. *And if I have to phone every goddamn motel in the state.*

"Here, I got you some coffee and a sandwich," a soft voice drawled into his ear, and a mug and a paper bag appeared in front of him.

"Minnie!" Starsky looked up in surprise. "What're you still doin' here? I thought you'd gone home hours ago."

"Nah. I used that phone over there. Didn't you see me? Checked out the places on these two lists. Here. I've ticked the ones I've done. Thought two of us would get this done twice as fast."

Starsky was temporarily speechless. "Minnie, I don't know what to say. That's really above and beyond. Why're you doin' this?"

She regarded him seriously. "You know, you and Hutch, you've always been special. We all know that. A lot of us here hated to see what was happening between you. They say if a friendship as tight as yours can't make it, what hope is there for the rest of us? So we've all been hoping to see you fix it up. I just wanted to do my bit."

Starsky swallowed hard. He got up and on impulse pulled the small woman into a warm hug. "Thanks, Minnie. You're priceless. And that's no flattery."

"It's okay, you're welcome. Hey, we have a few more hours. Let's get back to it, shall we?"

"Minnie, I really should insist you go home, but to tell the truth, I can use all the help I can get."

"Well, you got it. But remember, when Dobey hauls my ass in for using police lines for personal business, *you made me do it!*"

Starsky smiled for the first time in days. "It's a deal!"

oooOOOooo

When the breakthrough finally came, Starsky had all but given up hope. He was down to his last printout, and if those numbers yielded nothing, he would have to widen the search beyond the Fresno area. It would make the haystack so much larger and his chances of finding Hutch very much smaller.

Another number, another dead-end. He hung up and rubbed his tired eyes when he heard Minnie urgently hissing his name. He spun around. She was still on the phone, listening, but shot a meaningful glance at him and gave a quick thumbs-up.

Starsky almost overturned his chair in his haste to reach her side.

"What?"

She put the phone down and let a smug grin spread over her face. "Got it!" she said and circled a name on her printout. Starsky snatched it from her.

"Motel Highway 99?" he said incredulously.

"Yeah, some people have no imagination."

"Minnie! Is that where...?"

"It's where Hutch was staying two nights ago. It's in downtown Fresno. Guy called Bart Bentley confirmed Hutch's name and license number. Hutch only spent one night and left the next morning, so of course he's long gone now."

"At least I'm on the right track. What else did he say?"

"He couldn't remember any details. He said the motel was busy with weekenders. I told him to have a good think about it and to find out who was on duty when Hutch checked out and to be available first thing in the morning 'cause an officer was coming out to talk to him."

Starsky stared at the small woman in amazement. "Minnie, d'you ever think of taking the detective's exam? You've more wits about you than half the guys in my department. I don't know how to thank you."

"Just go and fix things with your partner. Go on. Get outta here! And, Dave?"

"Yeah?"

"Good luck!"

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## Chapter Seven

Hutch managed to hold himself together all the way to Fresno.

He couldn't remember making a conscious decision to leave the city. One moment, he was sitting in his car in the ruins of his shattered life, the next he found himself driving north through endless miles of suburbia with only the distant mountains as his guide. Whatever had happened in between—driving to his apartment, talking to Dobby on the phone, stuffing clothes in a bag—had already blurred to a jumble in his mind.

After giving ten years of his life to LA, it took no more than an hour to leave it all behind.

But staying was not an option. LA simply held far too many memories for his splintered soul. He had to get away.

He drove slowly, cautiously—not out of a particular concern for his life, but because the world around him had taken on an oddly distorted appearance that called into question both the reality and the solidity of the objects in his field of vision. Heroin had once done that to his mind. Now it seemed that grief had similar powers of distortion.

He got to Fresno before he even knew where he was going, vaguely surprised to find that it was almost midnight and that the streets had emptied of traffic. Still on autopilot, he stopped at the nearest motel, procured a room, parked the car outside it, stepped in, dropped the bag, and mechanically closed the door behind him.

And then he simply stood, like a toddler's wind-up toy that had run out of power of locomotion.

Breathe, he told himself. Breathe. Pull yourself together. Life goes on.

*What life?*

*What life have I got without him?*

A tightly-coiled band of steel wrapped itself around his chest and squeezed the breath from his lungs. The last ounce of strength oozed out of Hutch, and he moved jerkily to the bed, lowered himself onto it and stretched out on his back, empty of all but the bleak, crippling despair in his heart.

An hour later, he was still staring at the same discolored ceiling tile.

*I've lost him.*

*I have to face a life without him.*

He finally closed his eyes, but knew that sleep was an impossibility. The shouts and laughter of drunken revelers returning from a Friday night on the town filtered through the thin walls of his room and reminded him that the rest of the world hadn't stopped when he had. One voice soared above the others as it

launched into a raucous drinking song, a song he'd heard Starsky sing in The Pits not so long ago.

The next thing he knew, he'd bolted from the room and was walking at a rapid pace away from the motel, the highway, the cars and the people. He walked, like a man in a nightmare, on and on, past bars and restaurants and deserted malls. He walked, down unfamiliar streets, dark lanes, past ghostlike warehouses in a deserted industrial district, through an empty park, over a bridge—blindly, uncaring, just walking, never stopping, his body suddenly seemingly immune to the requirements of food and drink and rest.

Once, his step faltered when a car screeched past him—a red shape, candy apple red, with a white stripe along the side. For a second, his heart lurched dangerously in his chest before he realized that it was a Chevy, and that the stripe wasn't anything like the familiar aerodynamic shape on another car he knew so well.

And once, he stopped dead in his tracks when a snatch of a hauntingly familiar tune spilled from the windows of an apartment building where a party was obviously still in full swing.

Bruce Springsteen. One of Starsky's favorite songs.

*Oh Starsky, Starsky...*

He never recovered his stride after that, just staggered on, and on, oblivious to everything around him. And alone. Alone in a town of so many.

He'd never really been alone before, had never really known what loneliness meant.

He knew it now. Loneliness was the empty cavern in his heart that had once been filled with laughter and companionship. Loneliness was the terrible ache of shame and guilt that ate away at his guts, and the cold fear of a future so bleak and dark, it seemed like a gaping jaw ready to devour him. Loneliness was knowing that he'd never know true happiness again.

He had no idea how many hours he'd wandered the streets of Fresno, had no idea where he was and where he was going. He'd left the livelier downtown area long ago. Now he was walking through quiet suburbs and dark, nameless back roads. The rapid stride had long ago slowed to a walk, and then to a mere shuffle. Any moment now, the police would pick him up for creating a public nuisance. He almost laughed at the thought.

A church loomed in the shadows, set in park-like grounds surrounded by a low wooden fence. The place looked serene and peaceful in the dark silence of pre-dawn.

It would feel good to stop for a while, he thought. Maybe there was a place inside where he could sit and rest. Then he would go on walking.

The ornate gate that led to the garden bore the ancient Jewish symbol of the six-pointed star of Israel. Not a church, then. A synagogue.

The symbol on the gate drew him closer, and he reached out and ran his fingers over the intricate metal work. Back in the academy, Starsky had worn the symbol of the star on a silver chain around his neck.

The Star of David.

*David. My David.*

The band in his chest tightened unexpectedly to form a crushing ring of steel around his lungs, and he was suddenly swaying, light-headed with exhaustion and grief. His hands found the gate, blindly, and he clung to it, forehead pressed against the cool metal, struggling to haul in a breath.

If only he could cry, maybe it would ease the terrible pressure in his chest. But all that emerged were a couple of strangled sobs that grated in his throat like sandpaper.

*Can't even mourn our friendship properly. Can't even cry...*

As quickly as the pain had gripped him, it eased and faded, leaving Hutch weak with relief, clutching the gate for support, unable to move for a many long minutes.

*Can't stay here. Can't... What right have I to take my grief to this place of worship?*

Gathering all his strength, Hutch released his grip on the gate, took a deep breath, and started walking again.

oooOOOooo

"Hey! Hey, mister!" A rough hand shook Hutch from unconsciousness back to the unwelcoming reality of a new morning. "You gotta git movin', mister. Y'all know you cain't be layin' aroun' the park!"

Hutch pried open an eye and looked blearily around him. The light of a cool, grey dawn found him in a park of some sort, and he realized that he had fallen asleep on a wooden bench. A large burly man in park keeper's overalls loomed over him and shook him to full awareness.

"Go on! Git movin'! Fin' som'ere else to sleep it off!"

Mortified, Hutch came to his feet and backed away from the man until he was almost running in his haste to escape the look of suspicion and disapproval on the weather-beaten face. He thought he heard a muttered "goddamn hobos!" in his wake.

He was halfway down the street before he realized that he had no idea where he was or which motel he had checked into. The key tag in his pocket provided a name that meant nothing to him, but an early morning taxi conveyed him swiftly back to his own car and motel room.

"Some party, huh?" the driver said with a knowing leer at his bleary and rumpled-looking fare when Hutch handed over some cash.

"Yeah."

"Good for you! Keeps the bar economy going. Haha!"

The taxi eased away, and Hutch found his way into his room to shower and change, and to try to take control of his life again.

A look in the mirror confirmed that the park keeper couldn't be blamed for mistaking him for a homeless drunk. Hutch snorted mirthlessly. He'd known long-term alcoholics living rough on the streets who looked in better shape than he did that morning.

*Christ, what did you think you were doing, Hutchinson? Falling asleep on a bench like a down-and-out bum? You're losing your mind, along with every shred of common sense. You'd better pull yourself together before someone takes you to Cabrillo.*

A memory of Starsky with his hair on end and his arms secured in a straight-jacket swam into his mind, and he pushed it away with all the mental strength he still possessed.

Pain was throbbing behind his eyes.

He wasn't fit for human company, he realized that now. Even his ingrained cop instincts seemed to have deserted him. He needed to find a place where he could stay, undisturbed, and think. Hadn't he said as much to Dobey?

He couldn't remember. Couldn't remember much at all about the nightmare of the previous day. Only the parts that had Starsky in them, and those would be haunting him for the rest of his life.

He needed to find a place where he could attempt to get his life back on track or let himself go to pieces on his own terms.

Lake Mirror Falls was the immediate thought in his mind, and he suddenly wondered if he had subconsciously taken the route to the mountains with just that aim in mind.

Lake Mirror Falls. Remote, secluded, a sheltered haven. It would be the perfect hiding place for a bruised soul.

oooOOOooo

The plump, grey-haired woman who had taken over the command of the front desk obligingly pushed the phone across the desk, then continued entering figures in a ledger as Hutch placed calls to the operator and the ranger's office in Fresno. It only took minutes to obtain the information he needed, and when he put the phone down after his third call, he felt for the first time in many days that he knew what he was doing.

After requesting and receiving directions to the turnoff for Diamond Creek, Hutch was back on the road, heading toward the mountains.

Despite the lateness of the season, the road into the Sierra was busy with weekend traffic, and it took Hutch the better part of two hours to reach the address he'd procured. He parked the car in front of a small wooden building in a street lined with similar small wooden buildings, got out and knocked on the door.

"Mrs. Tulsa? Ken Hutchinson. We spoke on the phone this morning."

"Mr. Hutchinson, nice to meet you. Call me Marigold, or just Mari, if you prefer. As I said on the phone, I look after some of the private resorts around here. Come in, come in! Come into the office. Sorry about the mess. Here, have a seat. Now, you were asking about... uh, Lake Mirror Falls, that right? You realize that you need a personal invitation from an owner to be able to stay there? Oh, but of course you do! What was the name of your contact again?"

She was a petite black-haired woman with a breathless, distracted manner and a barely contained abundance of nervous energy.

"Brian Wiltshire of Harman, Cole and Wiltshire in Chicago."

"Oh yes. I'm gonna have to double-check with him, of course. Unless you have something in writing? No? Are you a business associate of Brian's, Mr. Hutchinson?"

"Please call me Hutch." Starsky had first called him that, and now he would always be Hutch. *He's given me everything, even my name.* A wave of dizziness washed around him, and he was glad that he had accepted Mari Tulsa's offer of a chair. The pain behind his eyes intensified.

"No, we went to high school together," he said. "We lost touch for a few years, then met by chance in Duluth last year. When he heard that I'd moved to California, he offered me the use of his cabin. He said it stood empty most of the year."

"A lot of the luxury cabins up there do," she said with disapproval and incomprehension. "Rich people. They come up here maybe once or twice a year on a fishing trip. The rest of year, those private resorts are practically deserted. Especially at this time of year. Well, all the better for you, uh, *Hutch*. You should have the whole place to yourself."

She dug into a drawer for a form, then hunted through the piles of paper on her desk for a pen. "You on vacation? You've left it late in the season. The fishing's not too bad right now, but the weather can be unpredictable at this time of year. It's not unusual to get snow in the middle of November. We're certainly expecting a good deal of rain in the next few days."

"It doesn't matter. I just need a quiet place to stay for a few days."

"Yeah, you look like you could do with a break," she said, eyeing him critically. "Here, if you could fill this out. And I'll need to see some form of ID." She looked around distractedly. "I don't know if Brian mentioned it, but there's a charge for using the cabin, for maintenance and cleaning. I hope you don't mind."

"No, no, I... Of course not."

Hutch wrote quickly, skipping the section "next of kin" where until two days ago he would have set down Starsky's name, and returned the form together with some bills.

"Well, I sure hope your car's gonna make it," Mari said. "It takes about half an hour to get to the turnoff from here, and then it's another 10 mile drive on a

pretty rough track. You'd better stock up on food and everything else you need before you leave Diamond Creek. It's quite a trek."

"I'll be all right."

*Liar, liar, liar.*

"Okay, here's your key to Sequoia Lodge, and that's the key to the boat shed. Brian's is one of the nicest cabins up there. A real love nest. Comfortable and not at all pretentious like some of the others. And the view! To die for. Right, here's a map of the area. That's Lake Mirror Falls here. Watch out for the right junction when you turn off the road. There's no sign post. Don't take this one by mistake or you'll drive miles out of your way. And you better avoid this track here. I don't think your car would like it. And drive carefully, especially when it's wet. You wouldn't believe how many cars go off the road all the time."

Another flurry of activity brought forth a stack of leaflets and folders.

"Here, take these. There are details on hiking paths and fishing and directions to the hot springs. There you go. Any questions you have, or if you need anything at all, just gimme a call. The nearest phone booth is at the turnoff for Warberry Lake."

After a few more rapid-fire, well-meaning suggestions, she waved him good-bye and hurried away to answer an insistently ringing phone, leaving an exhausted Hutch in her wake. He rubbed his aching eyes and forehead.

Only a little longer, he told himself. Just a few more chores to do, and he would finally be able to cave in on himself.

oooOOOooo

An hour later, Hutch had successfully negotiated the twisting road and various turnoffs and was heading up to the lake on a dusty, pot-holed dirt track more suitable for a 4WD than his low-slung Ford with the dodgy suspension.

*Starsky would have gone ballistic if we'd come up here in the Torino...*

Pain stabbed at him, and he wondered how long it would take to reach a point where not every action and event was punctuated by a cherished, but painful memory of Starsky. Then he wondered if he ever wanted to reach that point and realized that he probably never would. The memories were all he had left, and he was going to cling to them until his dying breath.

After what seemed like an interminable drive, the trees thinned to give a first glimpse of a wide, clear lake fringed with dense forest still gloriously clad in blazing fall colors. A weak November sun filtered through the canopy of the trees and reflected off the smooth surface of the blue-tinted glacial lake completely unlike the murky pond behind Dobby's cabin. In the distance, the snow-capped peaks of the High Sierra rose above the tree tops.

Six compact cabins, each surrounded by a lush nest of greenery, were dotted along the lake front. Following the map to Sequoia Lodge, Hutch coaxed the LTD down a narrow, overgrown track that ended at the back of one of the wooden structures, turned off the ignition and got out.

Immediately, the fresh, spicy scent of fall foliage was all around him. The air was crisp and sharp and carried a breath of winter. Gentle waves lapped lazily at the shore a mere stone's throw from the cabin's porch. There was no evidence of anyone else around. It was very still. The sense of isolation was absolute.

At any other time, the beauty and tranquility of the wilderness retreat would have been a source of endless delight to the nature-loving Minnesotan. As it was, the peaceful setting only served to emphasize the devastation in Hutch's heart.

*I once wanted to bring Starsky here.*

Before. Before his feelings and everything else had changed and the thought of the two of them sharing a small cabin had transformed the prospect of a fun-filled vacation into a vision of the nether-regions of hell.

Starsky certainly would have approved of the amenities, Hutch thought as he looked around the beautifully designed and furnished interior of his temporary home. There was a single large room with picture windows and French doors leading to a wide, sunny porch. There were a comfortable-looking couch, deep armchairs and a coffee table arranged in front of a fireplace of impressive dimensions. There was a dining corner beside a large window with a view of the lake. An alcove housed a king-sized bed covered with a colorful quilt. An open archway lead to a small, but well-equipped kitchen, and a door hid a bathroom complete with shower, a tub the size of a small swimming pool, and—the pièce de résistance—a small sauna.

Outside, a couple of rowboats were moored at a small private jetty, and there was even a stretch of secluded sandy beach and a shallow bay of clear cool water perfect for swimming on a hot summer's day.

It was a far cry from the rustic simplicity of Dobey's weekend retreat. It deserved the name luxury cabin.

oooOOOooo

Hutch took it all in at the margin of his awareness.

Inspecting the property and storing his few belongings and the few hastily purchased food items only took a few minutes. After that, there was nothing to do but to think.

That was what he had come for—to think. To contemplate his options. To figure out what to do with the rest of his life. Instead, Hutch's thoughts invariably strayed to the past, to the job he'd loved, to the city and the people he'd come to care about, and to the man with whom he'd worked side by side, shoulder to shoulder, all those years.

Hutch walked down to the lake and leaned wearily against a tree, gazing unseeingly at the sparkling water, oblivious to the beauty around him.

They'd made a good team, he thought. A damn good team. They'd made a difference. That was more than most people ever got the chance to do.

They'd gone through some dark times, but there'd always been fun, too. Laughter, banter, friendship of a kind that only happened once in a life-time, if at all.

It was the unique combination of an instant bond, mutual trust, and shared danger in life-threatening situations that had meshed the two different men into the tight unit they'd become over the years.

*And then I had to go and fuck it all up.*

With the clarity of hindsight, Hutch understood for the first time what he'd been trying to do.

He'd been trying to push the boundaries of his bond with Starsky, like a child experimenting to see how far he could push the limits. Trying to see how far Starsky's love for him would stretch. Trying in so many, too many different ways to make Starsky prove the extent of his commitment, again and again.

There were more examples than Hutch cared to remember. The amnesia stunt that had gotten so terribly out of hand. That silly game of hide and seek. The competitions and rivalries.

And then there were the mind games, the sarcastic comments, the condescending lectures, the constant put-downs—oh God, so much hurt he had inflicted. And Starsky had taken it all, and learned to give back as good as he got.

*I taught him that. What a great achievement. He took it all, and there was never a hint that he loved me any less, no matter what I threw at him.*

But cumulatively, it had all added up. And Kira had been the last straw.

*Well, you've discovered the limit now, haven't you? You've finally reached the limits of his forgiveness. Satisfied?*

*Why, why did you have to go so far?*

Deep down, Hutch knew the answer to that perfectly well.

Despite their closeness, there'd always been invisible boundaries, too—taboo areas where not even a best friend was allowed to trespass. It was the irony of their culture that in many ways, Starsky's bed bunnies—women he might have known for no more than a few hours or maybe days—had greater rights and privileges in Starsky's life than a best friend and partner who held his life in his hands every time they hit the streets in their occupation as cops.

*I've loved him for almost a decade, but any woman he picks up in a bar and takes home to his bed knows him on a level more intimate than I ever will.*

You never asked for that much, his inner voice protested. That was never to be, you've always known that. Love? Don't be ridiculous. You know what happens to the ones you love. You lose them. All you could ever hope for was his friendship.

*And now I've lost that, too.*

Was there any consolation in the thought that—as things stood—maybe Starsky was better off without him?

The thought produced a fierce, unexpected stab of pain.

They'd always needed each other so much. For companionship, for protection on the street, for support and comfort in a crisis. Hutch had taken for granted that no one could possibly fill that role as well as himself.

*You idiot! Did you really think Starsky would need you forever?*

Friendships fell apart every day, and people learned to cope. They hurt for a while, felt anger, sadness, or regret—and then they picked themselves up and carried on with their lives.

In fact, Starsky had already done that. Soon, Hutch would be just one of many individuals who had shared David Starsky's path in life for a little while.

*Yeah, Hutchinson, you better face it—no one is irreplaceable.*

A strangled sound forced its way out of Hutch's throat, half sob, half groan, but still he was unable to weep, or to accept that it was really all over.

oooOOOooo

On the third day, the long expected rain began to come down in thick, steady sheets of water, forcing Hutch indoors.

In a deliberate attempt at normality, Hutch showered, shaved, lit the fire, and made the bed in which he had tossed and turned all night.

Then he sat at the table, his head in his hands.

He was so damn tired.

And he had no idea what to do, where to go. For almost seven years, his work, his partnership with Starsky had been his guiding star. Without Starsky, he was drifting, a ship without a rudder.

It took Hutch the better part of the day to realize that he had unfinished business to attend to. If he wanted any chance of moving on, he would first have to tie up the loose ends he'd left behind.

Because it slowly dawned on him that he'd been wrong on at least one account—Starsky wouldn't just let it go. He'd be wondering why. He'd be hunting for answers.

Starsky had to be told the truth.

Maybe that way, they could both find some closure.

And Kira. He had to tell Starsky about Kira. None of it had really been her fault. She was just another casualty of the escalating situation, caught between the rising tide and the quicksand. Her only crime had been to fall for them both, as so many women had done in the past, attracted in equal measures to the yin and yang of their contrasting personalities.

Starsky loved her, and maybe, maybe there was still hope for that love to flourish. It was one last thing he could do for his friend—absolve Kira from all blame.

Hutch got up and walked to the French doors, staring blindly at the lake through the wall of falling water.

It had been a mistake to come here. He realized that now. The beauty, the serenity, the soul-deep peacefulness of the place clashed too violently with the uproar in his heart. He'd come to find peace, and rest, and perhaps to understand the nature of the emotions that had made his life hell for so many months. Instead, he sat in a prison of his own making.

He couldn't stay here.

He'd write the letters he needed to write, and the next day he'd drive into town, send the letters on their way, return the cabin keys, and then take the car and keep on driving, somewhere, anywhere.

It didn't really matter.

oooOOOooo

It took several attempts to produce a piece of writing so rambling and disjointed and full of soapy sentiments that it would have made the old Hutch cringe with embarrassment. Now he was past caring. He'd lost his pride a lifetime ago. All that mattered now was that he had to tell Starsky the truth, and if it meant putting his heart and all its contents on a platter for all to see.

*Dear Starsk,*

*There is every chance that you will throw this letter out unopened and that you will never read these lines. If you have read this far, I hope you will go on reading, because there is something you should know, something I should have told you a long time ago, but didn't have the courage to say to your face. By writing this letter, I am taking the coward's way out, because I don't know how else to tell you why everything went so horribly wrong in the end.*

*There is no easy way to say this, so I will just come out with it. Some time ago, I realized that my feelings for you were changing and that friendship alone was somehow not enough anymore. I wanted, needed, longed to be closer to you than a friend and partner has any right to be. I wanted to be closer to you than a lover. Starsky, I have no words for the feelings I have for you. I love you. I am in love with you. I dream about you, about us, together. I dream of making love to you.*

*There, I have said it.*

*I can't imagine what you will be thinking right now. You will probably cast your mind back over the years and ask yourself if you have ever really known me. We were so close once. We thought we knew each other so well. Now you will be wondering if, like John, I have kept a dark secret from you all these years.*

*Will you believe me when I say that I have never felt this way about a guy before? I have never felt this way about a woman before, either. I*

*don't know why my feelings for you have changed this way. They just did, and there was nothing I could do.*

*I have always loved you, as a friend, right from the start. But this—this is different. It has been tearing me apart these past months, loving you, wanting to be close to you, wanting to touch you so bad, knowing that I couldn't, knowing that if I did, it would destroy everything we had, our friendship, our partnership. So I pulled back and tried to keep away from you. But like that proverbial moth I couldn't resist your light, your warmth, your brilliance. I had to come back for small doses of what I craved so badly, just to get me through another day. It was such a fragile existence—and I knew it was just a matter of time before something would give and the house of cards would collapse around us.*

*God, Starsky, I know you once loved me, too. You were ready to give up your chance of life for me when you shot Bellamy on that rooftop. You pulled me through withdrawal with no more than your power of will and your immense capacity for love. You were ready to sacrifice your career and risk imprisonment for aiding a murder suspect when Vanessa was killed. And I know how scared you were for me last year when I was so ill and we were separated by that glass wall. I know you loved me then, and I will always keep the memory of that love inside my heart.*

*We were so close after I came home from the hospital and you stayed with me for a while and looked after me. We were so close. We even shared a bed—in all innocence—when the nightmares hit and we both needed to feel that closeness. And it felt so good—so right, somehow—to be so close to you, to feel your warmth, your strength, your eternal optimism. I wanted to wrap my arms around you—in all innocence—and hold onto you forever. When you moved back to your place, you left a gaping hole in my life and I think it was then that my feelings for you were beginning to change.*

*I fought those feelings for a long time. For a while I honestly thought I could make it—keep my addiction to you in check and carry on being your friend and partner. But it just didn't work. I was living a lie, and it showed in so many ways. I was terrified that you would find out, terrified of losing your friendship. And I was terrified of the day when you would find that special someone to love and share your life with. I knew it was only a matter of time before that happened. And then she would be the center of your life. I would have had to accept that. After all, that's the way things should be.*

*And believe me, Starsk, all I have ever wanted is for you to be happy. I want you to find that special woman and make a life with her. But when it came to it and you told me that you loved Kira—God, Starsk, my whole world just caved in. I just didn't know what to do anymore. All I knew was that I was losing you. I think I was going a little crazy. Somehow I ended up outside her house, somehow I ended up in her arms—and it felt that it was the only way left for me to get close to you, sleeping with the woman you love.*

*It was a terrible, selfish, unforgivable thing to do. I feel more ashamed than I can ever say. With that one mindless act I have destroyed*

*everything that meant so much to us—the trust and love between us. Because you were right when you said that there could be no trust after a betrayal of this magnitude.*

*Even worse, my actions have come between you and Kira. I hope and pray that your love for her survives this crisis and that she turns out to be the one for you. What happened that day was my fault, and mine alone. She has never been in love with me. I think she was responding to the need she saw in me, and trying to make the pain go away for a while. Please don't hold that against her. She is a good person. She has the power to make you happy. I wish you that happiness with all my heart.*

*I realize I am not doing you a favor by laying this burden of knowledge on your shoulders. Perhaps you would be better off not knowing. But you deserve to know. You have a right to know. And you were asking me why, and I couldn't give you an answer then. This is the only answer I have. I am so sorry about everything, sorry we couldn't go on the way we had, so very sorry for all the pain I have caused you.*

*We probably won't see each other again. I am resigning from the force and will leave California.*

*I love you, Starsk. I will never stop loving you. The years we spent together were the best and brightest of my life. You were my light and my warmth, my strength, my conscience and my will to live. You were—you are—everything. Thank you for those many years of love and friendship.*

*I know it's more than I can ask for, more than I deserve, but maybe you will think of me sometimes and remember what we once meant to each other.*

*Hutch*

It was the most difficult letter Hutch had ever written, and the writing of it was punctuated with moments of profound and abject grief. Writing it all out only brought home to him the true extent of his feelings for the beautiful, intelligent, strong, caring man in his heart.

*I love him. I love him so much.*

*How can I go on without him?*

He already missed Starsky desperately. He missed the fun side of him, the irrepressible vitality, the laughter, that mischievous grin, the casual, but so expressive touches. He missed their connection, the way their minds worked in unison, complementing each other in a way that was often eerie, sometimes even scary. Most of all, he missed the love and the trust that were a reflection of the compassion, honesty, and integrity of the extraordinary man called Starsky.

Hutch had realized long ago that his partner had many more layers and complexities than his sometimes brash exterior suggested, and that the quirky, often childlike behavior concealed the uncharted depths of an old soul and an ancient wisdom in a young heart.

*He also has the sharpest mind I know. Why have I never told him that? Why have I never told him that a college education means nothing compared to a mind as quick and agile as Starsky's?*

Their different backgrounds, different personalities, different outlooks on life had never really mattered because on the inside they were very much alike.

*He's my counterpart, my soul-mate. We're equals in everything that matters.*

*Without him, I'll never be whole again.*

Hutch stared at the letter before him, then folded it quickly and sealed it in an envelope before he could change his mind about the contents. His last connection to Starsky. A small part of him couldn't help wondering how Starsky would react to this final message from his partner. *Former* partner. Would it touch him in some way? Would it stir up feelings of compassion? Of regret? Or pity?

Or would Starsky be sickened by the news?

Hutch would never know. The decision to leave LA was final. In fact, he intended not to return at all. Letters to Dobey, his landlord, his bank and other institutions had yet to be written, but that was a mere formality. Huggy or Helene would arrange for the sale of his furniture and belongings. He wanted none of them. The picture of Starsky was the only reminder of nine years of his life worth taking away with him.

*Who will watch your back now? I hope it's someone good, someone who cares about you.*

He shivered.

*I wonder where you are now.*

A terrible thought occurred to him and he stiffened.

*Maybe Dobey's found you a new partner already. Maybe you're on the streets right now, without me, maybe with a rookie as your back-up...*

Another part of his already shredded insides fell to pieces, and grief welled up to fill the place.

*Oh Starsk, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'd do anything, anything to change what happened. What if you get hurt because I'm not there...?*

The thought was too much. A shudder ran through his exhausted body and a blanket of darkness descending on his troubled mind. Sagging forward and closing his eyes in bone-deep weariness, Ken Hutchinson put his arms on the table and his head on his arms and let himself be swept away by the tidal wave of cold despair in his heart.

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## **Chapter Eight**

Starsky's journey north passed in a blur of suburbia, neon-lit truck stops, and shadowy orange groves. He had no eye for any of it. The night streets were deserted, and he floored the gas pedal and let the powerful car eat up the miles

that separated him from Hutch. Fear of missing Hutch raced his heart. Maybe Hutch had changed his mind, maybe he'd kept on driving, maybe he was in Oregon or in Nevada or halfway across the country by now.

But luck had decided to stay on his side. Starting at the run-down Fresno motel, Starsky had no difficulty picking up the clues Hutch had left behind, immensely grateful that Hutch had seen no need to be secretive about his movements. He'd left a trail as wide as a cattle track.

*He didn't think anyone'd come lookin' for him.*

From a surly Bart Bentley and an older, more communicative member of staff, the trail led to the local ranger and from there to a resort manager in Diamond Creek.

Starsky clutched the piece of paper with the vital information and breathed a massive sigh of relief. He'd been right; Hutch was up there in the mountains. Now all he had to do was track down the place where he was staying.

It was at this stage that his luck began to run out. First, there was no reply at the number he'd been given. Second, there was no one in the office when he pulled up outside the wooden building, tires screeching, just over an hour later. Third, a frail-looking old man sitting on the porch of the house next door informed him that due to a family emergency, Marigold Tulsa had driven to Bakersfield and wasn't expected back for at least a couple of days.

"She left early this morning," he said in a brittle voice. "You may even have passed her on your way up."

"T'rrific," Starsky muttered. He eyed the wooden building. "Who else looks after the place? There's gotta be someone here who can tell me if anyone's rented a cabin from her lately."

The man looked him up and down. "You looking for someone?"

"Yeah, I'm lookin' for my p... for a friend," Starsky said. "It's important. I think he's staying at one of the cabins up here."

A few heavy drops plopped onto the porch roof, and a minute later, the low-hanging clouds opened and sent a deluge of water to earth. The temperature plummeted immediately, and there was suddenly a definite winter chill in the air. Starsky was glad that he had opted to bring his warm winter jacket, and equally glad that he'd thought to stop off at Venice Place to pick up some of Hutch's cold-weather gear, as well.

"Well," the man said, looking thoughtful, "the way I see it you can wait for Mari to come back, but if it's important you'd be quicker checking for yourself if your friend is in the area. Mari only has three resorts to look after. If you ask at the gas station, Karl will tell you how to get there."

Right.

"Thank you, sir," Starsky said, relieved. "You've been a great help."

At the only gas station in town, he topped up the Torino and received a lengthy and somewhat garbled route description from the attendant. Then he was back

behind the wheel, aimed the car through the downpour in the direction of the first and nearest of his three destinations, and put his foot down.

The narrow road wound its way deep into the mountains. Dense woods crowded close to the road and obscured the view of the snow-capped peaks. Each turn of the twisting road took him a little higher. And higher. Closer to Hutch.

*I'm coming, Hutch, I'm on the way. Just sit tight.*

The turnoff for Warberry Lake was clearly sign-posted and Starsky guided the Torino up the pitted track with hope, fear and uncertainty vying for equal living space alongside the turmoil of other emotions in his chest. What if...

No. He couldn't afford the luxury of any more "what ifs". Gripping the wheel with grim determination, Starsky pushed all doubts aside and focused on keeping the Torino on track.

It took almost an hour to reach the lake, and another 20 minutes to ascertain that neither Hutch's decrepit Ford nor Hutch himself were anywhere in the vicinity. Cursing under his breath, Starsky took the car into a U-turn and made his slow way back to the road.

The next destination on his list proved to be elusive, and Starsky had already traveled a few miles down an unmarked, but promising-looking track when it petered out unceremoniously near a ramshackle, overgrown old shack in the middle of the woods.

"Damn, damn, damn!"

Starsky turned the car around with difficulty, ignoring the overhanging branches on either side of the track that scraped long scratches into the paint work of the Ford. There were more pressing problems to worry about. It was mid-afternoon already and if he didn't find the right place soon, he'd have to return to Diamond Creek for the night.

He simply had to find the place. Today. Tomorrow might be too late. Because there was no telling what his partner was capable of doing in his distress. Because there was nothing to prevent Hutch from packing up and moving on at a whim. And if that happened, Starsky knew, he wouldn't be so lucky in tracking him down a second time. It would be days, maybe weeks, before he'd catch up with Hutch again, and by then, who knew what, if anything, could be salvaged of their friendship?

Spurred on by a mushrooming fear, Starsky stepped on the gas.

Another turnoff, another possibility. Another bumpy, badly maintained dirt road. Rain was coming down in sheets, turned the surface to mud and collected in large puddles that concealed treacherous pot-holes. Peering through the windshield and the furiously flapping wipers, Starsky pushed the vehicle to the limit until the Torino was churning through the mud like a demented beach buggy.

At last, an open stretch of road. Impatiently, Starsky put his foot down, and the car shot forward.

A bend in the road, and Starsky took it at speed. The soft edge of the road registered a millisecond before he felt the rear tires slipping in the mud. The car slid sideways, already out of control, tree trunks looming large on the side of the road. The edge of the road gave way under the weight of the car and the Torino slid heavily into the water-logged ditch, crushing branches as it went, grazed the nearest tree and came to rest with a crunch, a squeal, the sound of splintered metal, and the dying groan of the engine.

The crash threw Starsky across the seat against the passenger door, but he came around at once and scrambled out of the driver's door into the open.

One look at the car, and Starsky knew that it wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. The Torino sat solidly wedged in the depression, covered in mud and twigs and pine needles, and no amount of muscle-power would get it back on the road again.

"You damn piece of junk!" Starsky kicked the nearest tire in frustration. "D'you have to do that to me now?"

He leaned both hands against the tilted car and stood head down, breathing hard. Rain pelted off his back and soaked his hair and jacket. Impatiently, he pushed the dripping curls out of his eyes, thinking furiously.

He had two choices. He could continue on foot, hoping that the track would lead him to Hutch. If it didn't, he'd be stranded miles from civilization in the middle of the woods, in the rain, without food, or shelter. Or he could back-track to the road a couple of miles back, hitch a lift to Diamond Creek and return the next day with a tow truck. That would be the sensible option.

Starsky stood undecided for just a moment while his instincts and his common sense battled the issue. His instincts won.

He cast a final glance at his stranded vehicle and the way he had come. Then he turned his back on the sensible option, pulled up his jacket collar and started walking.

oooOOOooo

What would have been a pleasant stroll on a bright summer's day soon took on some of the qualities of Starsky's most deeply hidden nightmares about the wilds of the woods.

Contrary to Hutch's long-held assumption, Starsky's aversion to the great outdoors had nothing to do with his upbringing as a city kid, and everything to do with memories of night patrols in the jungles of Vietnam.

Now the water soaking through his clothes, the gloomy aspect of the forest, even the mud clinging to his feet served as unwelcome reminders of encounters with cunningly hidden incendiary devices and enemy soldiers.

This is California, you idiot, he admonished himself and shoved the thoughts away.

Instead, he thought about Hutch.

*Hutch. I've fallen in love with Hutch.*

*Incredible.*

A small fire lit up inside him and warmed his wet and wind-chilled body.

Then he pictured Hutch in his lonely refuge, and the flames flickered in a sudden blast of arctic wind.

What had all this done to Hutch?

Fear and joy tore at Starsky from different directions. Spurred on by a sudden powerful sense of urgency, he broke into a run, slipping and sliding on the rain-slick, muddy ground.

*Hutch, please be there. Please be all right!*

The track went on for miles, and more endless miles, but just as hope was shriveling in his chest, at last, *God, at last*, the track widened, and there was a glimpse of a lake and a string of sturdy cabins along the shore.

Starsky stumbled to a halt, doubled over with his hands on his knees, and hauled in a great lungful of breath, never taking his eyes off the small wooden structures.

A lake resort. Private, by the looks of it. This had to be the place.

*Be there. Please be there!*

His heart hammering wildly in his chest, Starsky ran the last few hundred yards through the lashing rain and the gathering wind down to the first cabin.

Hutch's LTD was parked outside the third one.

He stumbled toward the familiar dented car and, light-headed with relief and an immense sense of gratitude, leaned against the cold metal as if to assure himself that it wasn't a hallucination.

He'd found Hutch. His instincts had guided him right.

Starsky's eyes traveled from the car to the cabin. A dim light escaped through uncurtained windows, speaking of occupancy. Slowly, and almost curiously reluctant after the long mad dash through the woods, he climbed the steps to the porch and stood outside the door.

He hesitated.

The problem was that he hadn't given any thought to this encounter. All his energy had been directed toward finding Hutch. And now that he had, against all the laws of probability, he had no idea how to proceed. Talking to Hutch had never been a problem before. For years, they'd been each other's first port of call in a crisis. But this was different.

Everything—their friendship, their happiness, and their future—depended on the next few moments. Would Hutch forgive him? Did Hutch still love him? Could anything be salvaged from the ruins of their relationship?

Maybe Hutch had managed to come to terms with the situation. Maybe their roles would be reversed; maybe Hutch would turn him away just like *he* had turned Hutch away in the hour of his greatest need.

Starsky swallowed as fear settled heavily in his guts. *It would serve you right if he did.*

His heart thumping in his throat, Starsky moved to the nearest window and peered cautiously inside, hoping the gathering darkness would hide him from view.

He saw a large, attractive room and caught a fleeting glimpse of the furnishings. There were shelves full of books along one side of the room. There were colorful rugs on a polished wooden floor. There was a large stone fireplace containing the dying embers of a fire.

And there, sitting at a table with his back to the window, writing, was Hutch.

*Hutch!*

Starsky's throat constricted as he drank in the sight of his partner. *Thank God! Thank God, you're safe!*

He stood there for a long moment, oblivious to the cold, the wind and the rain, and his own drenched condition, unable to move, unable to do anything but gaze hungrily at the man inside the cabin.

Hutch looked rumpled and disheveled, and he moved like a tired, old man. He'd finished writing and was folding some sheets of paper into an envelope.

Starsky watched him longingly, wondering what to do.

*I want to tell you how much I love you, how much you really mean to me.*

But the first priority was to mend their connection and heal the rift in their friendship. Everything else would have to wait.

Still, he hesitated. There was so much at stake, and if he got it wrong, there'd be no second chance.

Hutch half turned toward the window, and Starsky recoiled in horror at the sight of his partner's face. Deep, dark shadows haunted the pale face, and there were sharp new lines marring the handsome features. When the blond head turned toward the light of the lamp, Starsky saw that the look in his eyes was dull and bleak.

As he watched, horrified, Hutch crumpled in on himself and sagged against the table. A small tremor traveled through his lanky frame, and Starsky realized that Hutch had reached the very edge of his endurance.

The sight of Hutch's misery galvanized Starsky into action. He'd waited far too long already. He had to get in there and try and set things right.

It was time to face the truth.

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## Chapter Nine

Starsky took a deep breath, turned the handle and pushed the door open, and the sounds of the driving rain and piercing wind entered the cabin with him. Quickly, he slipped through the opening and closed the door firmly behind him. Hutch stirred at the sound and wearily lifted his head, like a man, Starsky thought, who no longer cared what was going on around him, because he no longer cared what was happening to him.

Hutch looked up and their eyes met across the room.

For an eternal moment when all time seemed on hold, Hutch sat frozen and stared at Starsky in utter disbelief and shock. Then he shot to his feet in a single jerky movement, Starsky's name on his lips and a wild, frantic look in his eyes, when the blood drained from his already ashen face, his hand went to his chest, and he swayed with sudden dizziness.

"Hutch!" cried Starsky and darted forward to catch him as he fell.

Wrapping his arms around his partner and pulling the warm, solid weight against his chest was the most wonderful thing Starsky could remember doing in a very long time. He lowered the inert body to the floor and pillowed the blond head on his shoulder. Hutch's forehead felt hot, almost feverish under his hands. Starsky gathered him close and locked his arms around him.

"Hutch," he whispered into the golden strands of hair, "Hutch, it's me. I'm here. God, Hutch..." A small boulder lodged in his throat, and he swallowed hard.

Hutch stirred in his arms and dug his fingers into the front of Starsky's jacket.

"S-tarsk?" he whispered and lifted his head to stare into Starsky's face with wonder and confusion. "Starsk?"

"Hutch, it's me. I'm here, I'm here. I've done a terrible thing to you, but I wanna make things right again if you'll let me..."

"Starsk? Starsk? How can you b-be here? I thought I'd never s-see you again. I thought..." Hutch's voice was choked with fear, and his grip tightened on Starsky's jacket. "I thought you hated me..."

"I didn't mean it! God, Hutch, I didn't mean what I said. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

Hutch made a terrible choking sound somewhere between a sob and a moan. He pulled away from Starsky's encircling arms to gaze at him in utter misery.

"*You're* sorry?" he stammered. "What're *you* sorry for? It was all m-my fault. I-I'm the sick bastard who... I went and... I..." Hutch's voice cracked and broke, and he drew a ragged breath. Tears matted the fair lashes, and he looked away, unable to meet Starsky's eyes.

Starsky's heart twisted in his chest. *God, what have I done to him?*

"Shhh," he said softly and pulled the distressed man close again. "It's gonna be all right, Hutch. I promise..."

"Oh God, oh God, Starsk" Hutch moaned, his head moving restlessly against the rain-drenched fabric of Starsky's jacket. "I'm so sorry for what I did. God, what I did! Unforgivable... unforgivable..."

Hutch was shaking and clinging to Starsky's jacket with the terror and despair of a man hanging over the crumbling edge of a cliff. Starsky held him in a tight grip and said in as steady a voice as he could manage, "Hutch, I forgive you. D'you hear me? I forgive you with all my heart. Hutch, please, can you forgive me, too?"

"Forgive *you*? Whatever for?"

"For hurting you," Starsky said, his throat tight. "For tellin' you I couldn't trust you anymore. For tellin' you... tellin' you I didn't love you anymore. That was a terrible, cruel thing to say." He took a steadying breath.

"It's not true, you know," he said softly. "I trust you, like I always have. I trust you with my life. With my soul. I'd trust you to the end of the world."

He drew another deep breath and said the one thing he knew would convince Hutch that he was forgiven. "I love you, Hutch. Never stopped lovin' you."

Hutch went completely still within the protective circle of Starsky's arms. Then a small shiver ran through his exhausted body, his arms went around his friend, and he clung to Starsky with a desperate grip, as the tears finally fell, a small waterfall, and he lost it completely, in a way Starsky had never seen him lose it before.

"It's okay. It's okay. It's gonna be okay," Starsky chanted, gently rocking the trembling body back and forth. He was struggling to keep his own tears at bay. He had to pull himself together and be strong now. Hutch needed him. He tightened his hold another notch. "Everything's gonna be fine. Trust me, huh? We'll be fine."

"Starsky, Starsky, Starsky," Hutch whispered raggedly, repeating the name over and over like an incantation. "Don't leave me. Please, don't leave me. I'll do anything..."

A hot wave of love and compassion washed around Starsky. He closed his eyes and rested his cheek on top of the blond head.

"Shhh, it's all right. I won't leave you, Blintz. I'll never leave you. I promise you. We're gonna be okay, d'you hear me?"

Gradually, Hutch calmed under Starsky's skillful hands and soothing words and grew still, eyes closed, arms locked tightly around his friend, face buried in the folds of Starsky's jacket. For a long time, they sat on the floor clinging to each other in a desperate need for closeness, physically and emotionally drained.

Starsky felt that he could sit like that forever, with Hutch warm and peaceful in his arms, breathing in Hutch's unique scent, stroking his friend's sweat-damp hair and feeling his body so close to his own.

Hutch felt good in his arms. In all their years of friendship, he'd never felt closer to Hutch than at that moment. All the barriers his partner had so carefully erected between them were gone, swept away by powerful torrents of raw need

and emotion, and it was suddenly the most natural thing in the world to run caressing fingers over Hutch's pale face and the tangled strands of hair. Deep inside himself, Starsky felt a gaping wound closing up and beginning to heal. Experimentally, he dropped a soft kiss on Hutch's forehead.

At the touch, Hutch stirred in his arms and sat up a little straighter. Starsky shivered a little, and Hutch looked at him as if he hadn't really seen him before.

"Your hair's dripping," he suddenly exclaimed in a voice still rough with tears, and reached up hesitantly to touch the rain-wet, wind-swept mop. His eyes darted up and down the figure in his arms and took in Starsky's wet and muddy appearance. "You're completely soaked. And you're shivering!" he added in dismay. "What on earth..."

"It's raining," said Starsky, who suddenly felt very, very cold, indeed. Hutch was right—he was shivering. "In fact, it's pretty much a downpour."

"But..."

"Car got stuck a few miles back, so I walked," Starsky explained. "It's no big deal, 's just a little water." As if to contradict him, his physical condition suddenly caught up with him, and he began to shiver violently.

Hutch looked horrified. His first impulse was to wrap his arms around Starsky and warm him with his own body heat and sheer willpower, but he saw the futility of that course of action almost immediately. He pushed himself up from the floor, pulled Starsky to his feet and took charge of the situation.

"You gotta get out of these wet things and take a hot shower. Did you bring any spare clothes?"

"Left everything in the c-car..." said Starsky, teeth chattering as he shed his soaking jacket.

"I'll get you something of mine." Maintaining his hold around Starsky, Hutch gazed around the cabin as if he'd never seen it before. "Christ, it's freezing. What's happened to that fire? And why is it so dark in here?"

He looked so amazed that Starsky would have laughed out loud if he hadn't been shaking so badly. All of a sudden, he was utterly chilled to the bone. His hands felt like lumps of ice, and his fingers fumbled ineffectively with the buttons on his wet shirt when Hutch took matters in hand, quickly and efficiently divested Starsky of the dripping shirt and T-shirt, yanked the quilted blanket from the bed and wrapped it around the chilled body.

Then he gently pushed Starsky down on the couch, slipped off the muddy shoes and wet socks, pulled him to his feet again, unfastened the button of the clinging pants and peeled them off, along with the underwear.

*T'rrific*, Starsky thought absently as he huddled into the warmth of the quilt. *Only just got here, and here I'm already gettin' my pants off. That's not how I'd imagined it.*

But he was too cold to care, and anyway, he and Hutch had seen each other in the nude lots of times. Hutch certainly gave no indication of being anything other than a concerned friend and partner, and for a horrible moment, Starsky

wondered if he'd been disastrously mistaken. Then he mentally slapped himself. This was hardly the moment Hutch would allow himself to be sidetracked in his purpose by his partner's naked body. This was a crisis, and as always, Hutch surpassed himself in a crisis.

Hutch disappeared, and there were sounds of a shower being started. Then he was back and Starsky felt strong hands rubbing warmth into his arms and back through the quilt.

"Come on, let's get you in the shower," Hutch said shakily and steered him toward the bathroom. "What the hell were you thinking? You could've caught pneumonia or something."

"Had to g-get here. Had to try and make things right b-between us. I was s-so scared I wouldn't f-find you."

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and a glow of happiness spread over his face. "Go on, get in there," he forced out. "The water'll be hot now."

"kay." Their eyes met, and Starsky felt a stab of overwhelming joy when he sensed a tendril of their lost connection snaking across the void between their souls, re-establishing the familiar, long-lost link. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world. He smiled.

oooOOOooo

When the bathroom door had closed behind Starsky, Hutch stood motionless for a long moment and stared at the wooden barrier, drained and raw with emotion. Then he leaned his forehead against the warm wood and took a deep, shuddering breath.

On the other side of the door was Starsky.

*Starsky.*

*Here.*

Starsky was here.

Could that really be true?

A moment's doubt stabbed at his brittle soul, and he glanced around him in a panic. There, on the floor, lay a pile of familiar clothes that Hutch would recognize anywhere. He took a step toward them, went down on a knee and picked up a muddy Adidas shoe, irrefutable evidence of Starsky's presence.

Starsky had found him.

Starsky had come for him.

Starsky still loved him.

Something expanded in Hutch's chest as the sudden breathtaking possibility of hope entered his heart. Hope—because Starsky was here, was somehow, unbelievably, here, as if the nightmare of the last few days had only been a dream.

But there was so much he didn't understand, so many questions to ask. How had Starsky found him? What had changed his mind? And where would they go from here?

Then Hutch resolutely shut the door on the analytical part of his mind. The questions could wait. All that mattered now was that Starsky was here. Clutching the blue sneaker in his hands, Hutch gave himself over to the renewed hope in his heart and the possibility of a new beginning.

oooOOOooo

When Starsky emerged from the bathroom, revitalized, a towel wrapped around him, and a cloud of steam in his wake, there was a roaring fire crackling in the fireplace and the cabin had warmed up noticeably. Starsky's wet clothes hung neatly draped over various chairs, and his blue sneakers, cleaned of all traces of mud, sat drying in front of the fire. Hutch had switched on the corner lamps and drawn the curtains against the darkness, and what had been a dreary refuge with an atmosphere of cold despair suddenly felt warm and inviting.

Hutch was piling more wood on the fire. He had found time to wash his face and comb his hair and exchange his damp T-shirt, a casualty of Starsky's wet embrace, for a soft blue cotton shirt. He turned and gave Starsky a shy smile.

"I've put some clothes on the bed for you," he said, and Starsky quickly slipped on the underwear, the cords, the woolen shirt and the thick pair of socks he found there. When he was dressed, Hutch came over, picked up the quilted blanket from the bed where Starsky had dropped it and wrapped it around his friend for an added dose of warmth. Then Hutch's arms hesitantly went around the whole bundle and held on tight. Starsky leaned into him and returned the hug.

"Better?"

"Yeah, much better."

They pulled apart and gazed at each other. Hutch's eyes were still a little red, but the misery in his face had given way to a look of such gratitude and joy that Starsky's heart gave a little lurch. He knew they still had a lot of talking to do, but for now they had achieved a fragile sense of peace and renewed understanding, and that was enough for the beginning.

"C'mon, sit down." Hutch pulled Starsky toward the couch where the fire was throwing out a ferocious heat. "I'll heat up some soup—if you're hungry?" He shrugged apologetically. "There's only canned tomato soup and some bread. Didn't bring much food..."

"Jeez, Hutch, you've come out all this way to the back of beyond and you didn't bring any *food*? What were you gonna live on?"

The look Hutch gave him told Starsky more than a thousand words that food had been the last thing on Hutch's mind when he had sought the solitude and isolation of the woods.

"Aw, Hutch, babe," he said and took a step toward his friend. "When's the last time you've eaten, huh?"

Hutch—still dangerously close to tears and emotionally fragile despite the brief show of strength in the face of Starsky's need—felt a hot shiver of joy running down his spine at the sound of the endearment, and the love and concern reflected in Starsky's eyes. The lump in his throat threatened to choke him again, and his deep steadying breath came out sort of ragged. By that time, Starsky had already taken him firmly by the arms and guided him to the couch. Hutch sat, arms hanging limply at his side, and blinked up at his friend.

"Stay there, don't go away. I'll be right back." Starsky, energized, threw off the quilt and took matters in hand. Several minutes of brisk activity later, he emerged from the kitchen with a tray bearing two steaming bowls of soup, a few thick slices of bread, two glasses of orange juice, and a mug of coffee each.

A moment later, they were sitting companionably side by side, spooning the thick hot liquid and sipping Starsky's extra-sweet brew, and it felt to Hutch as if they had gone back in time a year or so to happier days when their friendship had been simpler and uncomplicated by the yearning of his hungry heart.

And Hutch resolved there and then that his longing would never get in the way of their friendship again. He would lock those feelings in a vault in his heart and keep them there for as long as he lived, and he would never ask or yearn for more of Starsky's love than his friend was willing to give.

He knew now that he wasn't going to make it without Starsky in his life, somewhere in his life, and that the smallest scrap of his friend's affection was better, so much better than a life without. He knew now that he would be content with whatever small part of Starsky's life his friend was willing to let him share, would be content with Starsky's friendship—pure and simple—for the rest of his life, and never look back.

And when Starsky found the real love of his life, be it Kira or someone else, Hutch would do everything to smooth the path of his happiness. Hutch would be best pal, best man, best friend all rolled into one, and when the little Starskys arrived, he would be the best goddamn uncle in the entire country. And he would never, *never* allow the madness in his heart to derail Starsky's happiness again.

Starsky, glancing at him, picked up the thoughts in Hutch's mind as if they were being broadcast on his own private radio channel. He placed his empty bowl on the coffee table and edged a little closer to the blond. Hutch hadn't taken his eyes off him yet, as if he feared the wonderful image would suddenly dissolve into smoke and shadows.

"Hutch? Will you forgive me? I gotta know." Starsky knew that Hutch would probably do anything for him at that point, but he needed to hear the words. He needed Hutch's forgiveness.

Hutch looked incredulous. "There's nothing to forgive. You had every right. After what I did..."

"Don't say that, Hutch. I said and did some terrible, cruel things to you. I never thought in a million years I'd be capable of doing that to you. All I could think of was how to hurt you."

"Starsk, I know why you did. And I understand. I really do. What I don't understand is..." he trailed off, then met Starsky's eyes with a renewed sense of wonder, "... why you're here. What changed? The last time I saw you..."

The memory was too powerful. Starsky saw its cold shadow pass over Hutch's face and felt the chill to the depth of his own soul. Then Hutch caught himself and smiled weakly. "What happened?"

Okay, Starsky thought. Here we go.

"I did a little detective work," he began, but the statement seemed to confuse rather than to enlighten Hutch. He had to start at the beginning. He tried again.

"Until earlier this year, we had something special between us. Y' know, a real connection."

Hutch nodded.

"Then somehow in the past months, everything went jumbled, like there was some sorta interference or something."

"Interference?"

"Y' know, static in the line. I couldn't figure you out anymore. I felt as if we were drifting off to different wave-lengths. And when Kira happened..."

Hutch flinched, and Starsky put a reassuring hand on his arm, and it felt wonderful to be able to do that again. "... it felt as if the line had gone dead. As if... as if our friendship just didn't matter anymore."

"No. Never!" Hutch shook his head, looking distressed, and Starsky flashed him a reassuring smile.

"Yeah, I know. I was on the completely wrong track. But it was the only explanation I could come up with at the time." He paused, not sure how much of the whole story Hutch really needed to hear at this stage.

"But it didn't make any sense," he continued. "And then you came to my place, and you were so... completely cut up, and that got me thinkin'. Later, I mean, not right away, 'cause when you were there, I didn't... I wasn't... I-I couldn't *feel* anything. Nothin' at all. I wasn't even angry anymore. Just... empty, y' know. And... and at the time I couldn't..."

Hutch turned to him as if he had suddenly realized that Starsky was struggling with demons of his very own that hadn't been laid to rest yet. Hesitantly, he reached out and put a hand on top of Starsky's clenched fist.

Their eyes met and locked, and for a long moment, neither could look away. Slowly, the fist uncurled, but their hands seemed reluctant to move apart. A warmth that had nothing to do with the heat of the fire spread from their joined hands into Starsky's body and wrapped itself around his heart like a cozy blanket. The warm blue pools of Hutch's eyes drew him closer, and closer. His heart beat slowed to a low, dull pounding in his throat.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly.

Finally, looking flustered and confused, Hutch tore his hand and eyes away and jumped up under the pretense of putting another log on the fire.

For Starsky, it was the final confirmation of the truth he'd inferred back in LA. Any lingering doubts he might still have harbored regarding his own feelings had evaporated completely when faced with the physical reality of Hutch. He eyed the slim figure of his friend with the kind of appreciation he'd formerly reserved exclusively for the female half of the population—a lifetime ago. He'd always known that Hutch was a looker, but that had never really mattered before. Now, it felt as if he saw his friend, really saw him, for the very first time.

*God, Hutch, you're so beautiful! And I love you. I want you. Want you so much.*

The realization did unexpected things to Starsky, and the borrowed cords suddenly grew uncomfortably confining around the groin. Before his discerning partner could become aware of his predicament, Starsky had bolted from the couch and retreated to the kitchen under the pretext of clearing the dishes away.

*Dammit. This is what Hutch has had to put up with all these months? No wonder he's gone to pieces trying to keep it from me. I couldn't keep it a secret for a day.*

The ball was in his court. He hadn't answered Hutch's question yet and knew Hutch needed to know. On the other hand, this was hardly the perfect moment to spring the news on him. Hutch looked exhausted to the point of collapse and needed a good night's sleep and a few proper meals inside him. The rational course of action would be to leave all explanations until the following day.

*Yes, but when has love ever been a rational thing?*

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## Chapter Ten

Conscious of Hutch's puzzled gaze on him, Starsky began to roam restlessly around the cabin, hunting for inspiration. There were a couple of letters stacked on the table ready for mailing and the top one bore his own name and address. Starsky picked it up in surprise and turned to Hutch.

"You wrote me a letter? Can I read it?"

Hutch was off the couch in an instant and snatched the envelope from Starsky's hand. "No!" The harsh cry erupted from Hutch's throat and shattered the tranquility in the quiet room.

"Hutch," Starsky said gently, not moving. "We're gonna have to talk about this."

Hutch stood half turned away from him, breathing heavily, fists clenching and unclenching. When he finally turned to face Starsky, all the fear and misery, so recently purged, were back in his eyes.

"Can't we just leave things as they are?" he pleaded. "We're fine now. We're back to the way things were before. It'll be all right now. I swear I'll never play stupid games again. I'll never hurt you again. Please, just leave it."

Starsky's heart went out to him even as he shook his head and said quietly, "It's not gonna work. I don't think we can ever go back to the way things were before. Too much has happened between us."

Hutch turned away abruptly. He took a step to the window, parted the curtains like a hunted creature seeking an escape route, and stared at the wind-tossed lake, twisting the letter in his hands. Then he leaned his forehead against the glass and closed his eyes. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I know," he whispered. Fear radiated from him like heat from the fire. He took a deep, deep breath.

"There's something I have to tell you," he said in a low voice, head bowed, his back to the room.

Starsky looked at the tall man by the window. Through the glass, he could just make out the dark outline of the forest that fringed the lake. The wind had picked up, and the trees were bowing under the force of it. Rain lashed the window and obscured the view. The flames of the fire reflected in the glass and cast a shimmering outline around the golden head. A wave of tenderness and compassion flooded Starsky's heart.

This wasn't right, he thought. Why should Hutch be the one to stick out his neck when he, Starsky, already knew or thought he knew the answer to the riddle?

*But what if I'm wrong? What if I've come to a completely and horribly wrong conclusion?*

"I've something to tell you, too," he said, coming to a decision. "Want me to go first?" He took a step toward Hutch and the window.

Something like relief at the brief respite seemed to ripple through Hutch. "Okay," he whispered, not turning around.

Starsky took another step toward him. And another. He was so close that their bodies were almost touching. Then it was his turn to take a deep, steady breathing.

"Hutch," he began and was surprised to hear the quaver in his voice. He reached out and put a hesitant hand on Hutch's shoulder.

Hutch slowly turned at the touch and looked at him, puzzled. "Starsk? What's wrong?"

Starsky blinked and a small part of him took the time to pause and admire the silvery outline of his partner and the blaze of bright hair bathed in firelight.

"Maybe nothing," he said softly. "Maybe everything. I'm not sure." He looked at Hutch and their eyes locked, drawing each other in.

Hutch exhaled slowly, and the troubled look in his eyes softened. Starsky stood close, not touching, but he could feel the heat radiating from Hutch's body. Could smell the faint fragrance of soap and wood smoke, and overlying these, the light, familiar scent that was uniquely and unmistakably Hutch. The connection between them metamorphosed into something he'd never known before. The room suddenly grew hot and airless.

Hutch gulped for breath. "Starsk?"

"It's true," Starsky said softly, "we can't go back to the way things were. But maybe we can go forward. To a new place." He hesitated.

"I've done a lot of thinking these last few days. And I think I've discovered what the problem was. I think... our feelings for each other have changed. I think we want us to be... more than friends."

Hutch blinked. "What do you mean? What..."

Instead of an answer, Starsky brought his hand up to Hutch's face and, still holding him with his eyes, let his fingers trail over the smooth cheek, tracing the small crease in the corner of his mouth with his thumb and finally grazing the soft lips with a feather-light touch. Hutch's eyes grew large with shock and amazement.

"I love you," Starsky said into the sky-blue gaze, his voice husky in his throat. "I *want* you."

Hutch opened his mouth, closed it, shook his head in confusion. "I don't understand," he said, helpless. "What...?"

Starsky felt the corners of his mouth curve into a wide smile. "I love you, Hutch," he repeated, and he put every ounce of his love and his desire into the words. "That's what I'm tryin' to tell you. I'm in love with you, you big lug."

"*You...*" Hutch's voice wavered dangerously, "... are in love with *me*?"

Starsky saw the struggle in Hutch's mind, but he also saw beyond it, saw the hunger deep inside his friend's eyes, a longing matching his own, and the overwhelming love that had been locked up inside Hutch's despairing heart for so long.

He reached out and cupped Hutch's face with both of his hands. Leaned in and placed a soft, chaste kiss on the full lips, registering in passing the strange new sensation of a mustache brushing against his lips.

Hutch trembled under his touch. "Starsk? Starsk..."

It was almost a whimper, the cry of a tortured man unable to comprehend that he has been set free. Starsky took pity on him and moved in for a second kiss. He caught the soft lips with his own, sucked a little on the bottom one, then ran the tip of his tongue just below the sensuous curve of Hutch's upper lip. A small sound escaped Hutch's throat, and Starsky's heart gave a thump of joy when he felt Hutch's arms closing around him and the lips parting to welcome him in.

*I was right. It's all right. We're all right!*

Then, with the suddenness of a flash of lightning, Hutch had pushed him away and stepped back a pace, leaving Starsky feeling cold and bereft.

"No, Starsky, don't. Don't!"

Starsky froze. Slowly pulled away, looked into Hutch's eyes. Saw fear, doubt, love, and such a terrible longing in their depths that his heart twisted in sympathy. A deep struggle was taking place inside Hutch's soul.

He reached out again, not touching, just letting his eyes roam over the beautiful planes of the face he knew so well. "What's wrong, Hutch? We love each other. That's all that matters."

Hutch stared at him helplessly and closed his eyes, struggling for control. Starsky swallowed, and a deep, cold, aching sensation of dread began to spread in the pit of his stomach. Something was terribly wrong. *I was wrong. But that's impossible. I was wrong?*

"Hutch?" The merest whisper, a barely audible plea. *Dear God, how could I get this wrong?* He had to find out, now, at once, know the worst, know the extent of the damage he'd done.

"I thought you were in love with me, too. I thought you wanted this..."

Hutch's eyes snapped open, dismay in the bright blue depths. "You thought that I... ? And that's why you... ?"

Starsky couldn't stand it any longer. "Did you, Hutch? Did you want this? Just give it to me straight!"

Hutch reeled. "No... I mean... No! Oh dammit!"

A cold wave of darkness flooded Starsky's heart, and he bowed his head and swallowed a painful lump in his throat. But Hutch grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled him close, buried both hands deep in Starsky's mane and tipped his head back up.

"No!" he said fiercely, anchoring Starsky with his eyes. "You don't understand. It's more, it's *so much more* than being in love! What I feel for you... God, there's no word in the English language that describes what I feel for you. To say I'm in love with you is like saying the ocean is a swimming pool. That's the kind of love I once had for Vanessa, and Gillian. The kind of love you fall into and that you can fall out of again. But this... this thing for you—I can't explain it—this is something that won't ever change. It... scares me to think how much I love you, how much I want you, every part of you..."

Hutch was shaking him in an almost uncontrollable frenzy, the words were pouring out like flood waters from a crack in the dam.

"Don't you see? If it was only *that*, I could've handled it. That's what I thought it was, at first. I thought I'd fallen for you. And it scared me half to death. But I could've handled it, and you would never have known, and it would never have put our friendship in danger. But then I realized that it was so much more than that, and that falling in love with you was only the tip of the iceberg."

He shuddered, and his hands tightened painfully around Starsky's head.

"God, Starsky, you've no idea what you mean to me. You're... *everything*. You're my life, my soul, my sanity. Sometimes I don't know where I end and where you begin. Without you, it's... like I'm drowning. It's so c-cold out here, and... and you're so warm... so full of life and strong and caring. Yes, I want you, Starsk, all of you, your heart, your soul—and yes, your body, too. I want every part of you, Starsk, d'you understand? I want to crawl inside your skin and never come out. I want to *own* you."

Hutch drew a shaky breath. The fire in his eyes died down, and he released his grip on Starsky.

"We can't do this," he whispered. "We can't take this any further. If we did, I-I'd crush you. I'd *consume* you. I need you so much—I'd take everything you have to give and then go on taking and taking until you'd only be an empty shell. I'd drain you of every scrap of love you've got."

Despair made his voice go hoarse. "God, Starsk, I never meant for you to find out. And now... I don't know what to do anymore. I just don't know what to do."

He swayed with exhaustion. Slowly, he turned away, back to the window. Leaned his hands on the sill, and his head against the glass. The secret he'd guarded for so many months was out in the open, and his fate, his life and happiness were in Starsky's hands. He closed his eyes and awaited the verdict.

Starsky stood very still for an eternal minute, stunned by the outburst, and the terrible yearning in Hutch's soul he couldn't even begin to understand, or to remedy.

Or could he?

He looked at the man before him. They'd gone through so much together, meant so much to each other. He would give up his life for Hutch. Was there anything more he *could* give? Could he give Hutch what he needed? Could he give all of himself, irrevocably, take his soul and give it to Hutch to keep?

The answer came to him at once, easily, beautiful in its perfection.

*I love him. How can I not give him what he needs?*

"I love you," he said, and the joy flooded back into his heart. He stepped forward, wrapped his arms around Hutch's waist, rested his cheek on the warm back. "I belong to you. All of me, heart and soul, everything I am. I think I've always belonged to you."

He tightened his hold. "And you don't *ever* have to worry about draining me 'cause you can't. I've more love for you than you can ever drink up. I'm never gonna run out."

Hutch's heartbeat was a low, pounding thump against his cheek, under his hands. A small eternal moment went by, filled only with the crackling sound of the fire and the light patter of rain drops against the window. Then Hutch turned around in his arms and looked at him, dazed.

"But..."

"No but. That's a fact." He slid his hands around Hutch's waist again. "And anyway, you love me, too. You just said so. In no uncertain terms. You've so much love inside you. For me. So don't you think you're gonna give back as much as you take, huh? You ever think of that?"

He shook the lanky form affectionately. "You ever think that you're gonna give me just as much or maybe even more? Did that even occur to you, mushbrain? Huh? Huh? No, I didn't think so. Okay, I'm glad we've sorted this out. And now, for Chrissakes, will ya kiss me already or am I gonna have to beg?"

oooOOOooo

They gazed at each other.

There was a happy, crazy light dancing in Starsky's eyes that was so infectious that Hutch felt a corresponding smile spread over his own features. The tightness in Hutch's chest uncoiled and made room for a liberating rush of joy and wonder. Starsky pulled him into his arms and Hutch melted into them.

They stood together, gently swaying on their feet, drawing strength and comfort from each other, until an unfamiliar sensation, an unmistakable hardness pressing against him, made Hutch pull away in renewed astonishment.

"But when...? How...?"

"The physical thing?" Starsky's voice shook with glee and laughter.

"You've never... I mean, you can't just suddenly switch that on."

"Aw, Hutch, my big blond beauty," Starsky laughed, locked his hands around Hutch's neck and stroked the smooth cheeks with his thumbs. "I didn't have to. It was already switched on when I started lookin'. It must've been there all the time. I just never allowed it out of its box before."

He hesitated. "Y' know, I did a real good job of hidin' the truth from myself."

"The truth?"

"That I love you. Want you. Wanna do things with you I've never done with a guy before."

Something deep inside Hutch's soul unclenched and let go of the last lingering remains of doubt. He looked at Starsky, and the love shining in the deep blue eyes made him go weak in the knees.

An infinitely subtle message passed between them on a level so deep, it rendered all other forms of communication obsolete. The time for words was over. There were no more doubts, just the knowledge that their love for each other had outgrown its old home and needed a new place to house it. For what seemed like an eon, they stood gazing at each other, drinking each other in, knowing that they were standing on the threshold of a wonderful, exciting new world, full of unknown possibilities, and that they were going into it together, as partners and as equals.

A swell of hot love surged up from its hiding place deep inside Hutch's heart and flooded unrestrained into every part of his body. Slowly, deliberately, and with a joy of an almost painful intensity, he brought his hands up to his lover's face and let his fingers skim lightly over the beloved features. Slowly, so lovingly, Hutch's hands burrowed into the tangle of curls, steadying the dark head, as he closed the short distance between them and covered the soft, kissable mouth with his own eager lips.

Starsky's lips parted, and they fused together in a kiss of such perfection that the shockwaves rocked them on their feet. For an eternal moment, the earth stopped moving, their hearts stopped beating, and nothing, nothing existed outside the

glorious, exhilarating, overwhelming sensation of pure love and closeness as they melted together into a single being.

Time and space ceased to have meaning after that as the world around them dissolved into a dreamscape, and their mouths and tongues and hands and bodies struggled to find ways of getting closer, closer to each other.

Starsky's hands worked their way under Hutch's blue shirt and ran exploring fingers over his back, and Hutch arched into the touch, alive with joy and wonder, every trace of his exhaustion evaporated in the fierce heat of their closeness. Starsky tugged at his shirt, impatient, and Hutch ducked his head to allow him to pull it off. But when Starsky reached to undo the buttons on his own shirt, Hutch stepped close and stilled his hands with his own.

"No," he said softly. "Let me. Please?"

Starsky's hands dropped by his side. "'kay," he whispered, shivering a little with anticipation.

Slowly, almost shyly, Hutch opened the buttons and slipped the shirt from Starsky's shoulders, exposing the curly-haired chest and broad shoulders. Starsky moaned under his touch, and it was the most delicious sound Hutch had ever heard. Trembling with love and fear and desire, Hutch's hands fastened onto the slender waist, and the simple connection was almost enough to send him over the edge. His fingers brushed the waistband of the borrowed cords.

Starsky pressed against him. "Take 'em off," he begged in a strangled voice. Hutch obeyed with alacrity, and this time, there was no need to hide his eagerness and hunger as he removed his partner's pants for the second time that evening.

When he was done, Hutch stepped back and simply looked. Drank in the sight of the exquisite naked body, the firm contours of the muscular torso, the downy fluff on the lean belly, the slight curve of the powerful legs, and finally allowed his eyes to rest on the beautifully sculptured, gloriously aroused part of Starsky's body he'd only ever glimpsed before.

"Starsk," he whispered, completely undone by the sight. "Oh, Starsk..."

Starsky stood in all his glory, not in the least self-conscious, and let Hutch take his fill. The light of the fire was dancing over his skin.

"So beautiful. God, you're so beautiful!"

Starsky smiled at that—a seductive, deeply erotic smile that lit up the rugged features with a warm and happy glow. Hutch swallowed thickly and reached out—helpless, almost delirious with the longing to touch and explore and kiss and rub himself over every inch of that delicious body, knowing that something would shatter inside him if he didn't.

Starsky came into his arms willingly. They connected in a deep, wild, hungry kiss—and suddenly there was no stopping, and they were clawing at each other, urgently, frantically, their bodies coming together with the force of a storm surge breaking through river defenses and submerging the land—Hutch's hands roaming over Starsky's back, Starsky's fingers entwined in Hutch's hair, mouths locked together, drowning in each other, drowning...

At some point, they found themselves sprawled on the couch, the heat of the fire warm on their naked limbs, attacking the items of Hutch's clothing that still separated their bodies.

Still later, Hutch found that they had somehow bridged the short distance between couch and bed and that nothing stood in the way of reaching the closeness they both so desperately longed for.

Hutch had dreamt of that closeness for so long, but even his most mind-blowing fantasy couldn't come within a fraction of the reality of holding Starsky in his arms. To be allowed to touch in this way, to let his hands roam over what had been forbidden territory, to explore the tender, sensual places of the man he loved so very, very much—it took Hutch's breath away.

Starsky—warm, loving, eager, passionate, utterly uninhibited Starsky—his lithe, powerful body coming alive, writhing under Hutch's eager hands and hungry lips, aroused to the point of frenzy—it was a miracle, it was pure rapture. To hear the beloved voice, hoarse with excitement and raw emotion, shout out his name in ecstasy—it was the end of the world as Hutch knew it and the beginning of a new life in a bright and entirely different universe.

Making love to Starsky had been Hutch's deepest, most secret fantasy, but nothing, *nothing* had prepared him for the magic, the glory, the utter devastation of the things Starsky did to him in return. Starsky's naked body snug against his own, Starsky's kisses scorching his skin, Starsky's fingers making his body sing, Starsky's lips exploring parts of his body that had never been explored quite like this before. Starsky's tongue finding his most secret pleasure zones and sending spasms of ecstasy through his body, bringing him to the brink of insanity...

... until Hutch cried out, drunk with the taste and the closeness of Starsky...

"Starsk... oh God, Starsk! You touch me now, I'm gonna explode."

"Me, too. 'M a second away."

"Together... together then?"

Their sweat-slick bodies came together in a tangle of arms and legs, crushing their throbbing members between them, their weeping tips caressing each other, making love to each other... and then they were at the edge, shuddering, and beyond, hurtling into space together, falling, falling, in freefall again, but together, as they erupted into a place of light and heat and infinite perfection...

oooOOOooo

The journey back seemed to take forever. Hutch didn't want it to end, didn't want to leave that place of heat and closeness. But in the end, it was the moment they came floating back down to earth that etched itself indelibly into his memory—the moment when the warm body of his lover stirred in his arms and he felt Starsky's shoulders quiver under his touch.

"Hey," Hutch whispered. "You okay?"

There was a barely perceptible brush of long lashes against his cheek, light as the touch of a butterfly's wing, and the dark head came up, and Hutch saw laughter and amazement dancing in the dusky blue eyes.

"How did you know?" Starsky said, his voice light and bright.

"I didn't," Hutch whispered. "I'd no idea it'd be like this."

The curly head settled back down and Hutch leaned in and kissed him on each eye lid. Starsky smiled.

Hutch's last conscious sensation before he entered oblivion was of Starsky cleaning them both up with a towel and pulling the sheets, blankets and quilt over their naked forms.

His last conscious action was to wrap his arms tightly around the warm body nestling against him and to plant a final kiss on the delicate skin behind Starsky's ear.

His last conscious thought—no, there were no coherent thoughts in his mind, only the fleeting notion that there would be no nightmares that night. For either of them.

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## **Chapter Eleven**

Hutch woke to the sounds of early-morning birdsong, sunshine slanting through half-drawn curtains, and an arm full of Starsky. Sometime during the night they'd shifted, and Starsky now lay facing him, his head buried against Hutch's shoulder and his right arm draped possessively over his partner's naked body. Their legs were entwined under the blankets.

For what seemed like an age, Hutch simply lay there, gazing at the dark curls, the muscular shoulder, the furry chest that lifted gently with every breath, and his heart was beating so hard with happiness, he was surprised it didn't wake the man he held so lovingly in his embrace.

Starsky. Here. Back in his life.

Memories of the day before swam into his mind. Was it really only a day ago that he had lain in this same bed with a heart so full of despair that he'd wanted to die? A day of endless hours filled with so much grief and pain and guilt and a hopeless attempt at getting a grip on a life that had already shattered into so many pieces of glass. And then suddenly, unbelievably, Starsky had appeared, like a mirage, but solid and warm and loving and forgiving. And Starsky had taken the pieces of glass and glued them back together again into the shape that was Hutch, had filled the empty vessel with love and breathed life into it.

Starsky. Here. In his bed. In his arms.

Solid. Warm. Breathing steadily. Hutch could feel the soft breath against his naked skin. Not a dream. Not a figment of his grieving mind.

Hutch thought of what they'd done together the previous night. They'd flown so high, had touched the stars. And it had felt so right, so perfect, to be together in that way. Hutch thought he could be content if he never made love again in his entire life. On the other hand, it seemed unlikely that Starsky would allow that to happen.

A swell of tenderness and gratitude lifted his heart, and he gazed at the visible portion of his lover's face with a lump in his throat.

*My Starsky. My David.*

Tears threatened to spill again, tears of joy and happiness. Hutch felt as if he had cried a lifetime's worth of tears in the space of a few days. He simply couldn't seem to stop. Soon he was going to dissolve, and there'd be nothing left but a puddle on the ground.

Cautiously, reluctantly, he extricated himself from the body entwined with his own. Starsky mumbled a sleepy protest and groped for the disappearing source of warmth. Hutch whispered a quiet "Be right back" in his ear and slipped away to the bathroom.

When he returned, Starsky latched onto him with more determination and success and drew him back under the covers. With the warm, solid body of his partner wrapped around him, and strong arms holding him in a way no lover had ever been able to hold him before, Hutch subsided back into a much-needed sleep of healing and renewal.

oooOOOooo

When Hutch finally came around a second time much later that morning, he was greeted by a tantalizing smell of coffee, the sensation of warm fingers on his forehead, and the breathtaking sight of a pair of dark blue eyes gazing down at him with love and amusement. Starsky sat propped against the headboard, a mug of coffee in one hand and a smile on his face that was entirely unlike his usual cocky grin.

"Morning."

Hutch rolled over to get a better look.

"Morning yourself," he whispered back.

"Thought you'd never wake up."

"Maybe I haven't. Maybe I'm still dreaming."

"Want me to pinch you?"

They grinned at each other. Starsky extended the mug to Hutch, and Hutch levered himself up on an elbow to take it and gulp down a sip of the heart-startingly strong brew.

"You should've woken me," he said.

"Nah. You needed it. Sleep well?"

"Best night's sleep I've had in months."

It was true. An almost forgotten, utterly delicious sensation of supreme well-being had crept into every corner of Hutch's mind and body, and he felt at peace for the first time in what seemed like forever. After another sip he returned the mug, slid back under the covers and gazed up at his companion.

"Starsk, last night... Did we really...?"

"We sure did," Starsky grinned, and his hand strayed into Hutch's hair. "Don't know where we got the energy from."

Hutch smiled. "We were inspired."

"Makes you wonder what we can do when we're in top form. *And* when we've had some practice at this sorta thing."

Hutch felt that his whole world had been stood on its head and all its contents rearranged. The new layout was still almost too much to handle. So much had changed in so short a time. Starsky's matter-of-fact voice told him that, amazingly, his dark-haired demon lover had already come to terms with the new situation. Of course, Starsky had always been quick to adjust to changes in his life. It usually took Hutch a little longer.

Starsky twirled a strand of blond hair round his finger and said thoughtfully, "You know, we didn't really *do* much."

Hutch choked. "What? You took me apart and blasted all my atoms out to space, and you say we didn't really do much?"

Starsky grinned. "What I meant was, we didn't really *have* to do much. All you had to do was touch me. God, I haven't come like that since... oh, maybe since I was thirteen."

"Hey, I almost came and you were only *looking* at me."

Starsky shifted beside him, and Hutch was suddenly acutely aware of their relative positions, the proximity of Starsky's blanket-covered thigh, the unmistakable bulge under the covers. A thrill raced through him. Maybe he could...?

Feeling daring, he placed his hand on the warm skin of the leg pressing against him, and, encouraged by Starsky's appreciative noises, slowly moved it closer to the eager and straining part of Starsky's anatomy. Starsky gasped when his hand connected, and Hutch couldn't restrain himself any longer and dived under the covers to give his full attention to that part of Starsky that was still so much unknown territory to him.

The velvety texture, the living warmth, the musky scent that was pure Starsky—Hutch couldn't get enough of it, wanted to learn everything at once, wanted to drink him in, greedy like a man in a desert who has unexpectedly stumbled across an oasis. Then it occurred to him that he could do just that. Heart pounding with anticipation, he got busy taking Starsky to the edge, while Starsky dug his fingers into his hair and hung on for dear life.

"Hutch! Christ, Hutch!"

Starsky erupted, and Hutch did what neither'd had the chance to do the night before. He swallowed, swallowed again, drinking Starsky in, draining him of his essence—a part of Starsky a moment ago. A part of Hutch now.

"HU-U-UTCH!" Starsky's surprised yell shook the mattress.

There could be no greater reward, Hutch thought, thrilled, than hearing his lover shout his release with that glorious celebration of his name. He maintained that belief for only as long as it took them to roll out of bed and gain the bathroom for a much-needed clean-up, and he found himself at the receiving end of Starsky's attention.

First, Starsky surprised him by climbing into the shower with him and commandeering the soap.

Next, Starsky began a slow, thorough session of soaping and rinsing and kissing his way over every inch of his body, leisurely working his way south until Hutch was writhing and moaning like a soul tortured over a slow, agonizingly delicious fire. Just when he was certain he wouldn't be able to hang on for another second, Starsky did what Hutch would have staked his life he'd never willingly do, back in the days when "cocksucker" was the worst insult anyone could direct at Starsky and hope to get away unscathed.

He was doing it now, going down on Hutch, sucking cock, making love to Hutch's cock with the fervor and the inventiveness of a true convert.

The sight of his partner kneeling before him, the dark head bobbing up and down, made Hutch let go completely, and with a strangled cry of "Starsky!", he thrust into the warm, wet cavity.

Starsky welcomed him in like someone who belonged there. And when Hutch came with a shudder and a groan, Starsky was ready and gulped down the acrid fluid as naturally as if he'd been doing it for years.

"You... you..." Hutch sputtered, overcome, gasping for breath while the hot spray of water washed all around them.

"I was gettin' hungry." A mischievous Starsky grin was aimed in his direction. "Thought I wouldn't wait for breakfast."

Hutch sunk his hands into the dripping curls, and a bubble of wild laughter welled up from a newly discovered source of joy, and erupted from his throat.

"God, Starsky, Starsky," he choked out as he pulled his lover to his feet and into his arms. "What're you doing to me? You're driving me insane."

"Yeah, you've been tellin' me that for years."

"Not... like this. Never... like this..."

"Want me to stop?" A big grin.

"Never. Don't ever stop. I want you to drive me crazy every minute of the day."

"Well, that can be arranged."

They looked at each other. And finally they kissed, fiercely, wildly, at length, all else forgotten, and they were still kissing when the water abruptly changed from hot to freezing. They broke apart, laughing, cursing, and jostling each other in their haste to escape the ice-cold deluge until Starsky found the controls and turned the water off.

They dried each other off, lovingly, playfully, acutely aware of one another, attuned to each other in a way that was both startlingly new and aching familiar. Each seemed to know exactly what the other needed, wanted, intended, so that every action that morning took on the form of something resembling a well choreographed, familiar little dance.

They brought the fire back to life, raided the fridge of its meager contents, and climbed back into bed where, giggling like children, they took it in turns to feed each other toast with peanut butter, a couple of squashed candy bars, slices of a wrinkled apple.

The memories of the past few days receded, and new memories crowded in to fill the space. Hutch tried to store them as fast as he could so that he'd be able to take them out again and enjoy them at some later point. Like this one—Starsky leaning toward him and delicately licking a trace of peanut butter from Hutch's lips.

Hutch looked at him, joy fluttering inside him like the wings of a small bird. "Can you die of an overdose of happiness?"

"You'd better not. I need you alive." Starsky trailed his fingers over the smooth expanse of Hutch's chest, brushing a nipple. "I have plans for you."

The husky voice filled with so much love and desire made Hutch shiver all over, and he was suddenly overcome by the implications of the recent events, by the closeness of Starsky, the strength of the connection between them.

It wasn't just the mind-blowing sex. It was so much more than that. Hutch had no idea how to describe it. He felt as if Starsky had reached inside him and cupped his heart in both of his hands, and his heart felt warm and secure and protected.

*I'm home.*

*David Starsky is my home.*

No one, *no one* had ever made him feel that way. He wished he could do the same for Starsky. For despite everything Starsky had said to him the night before, Hutch knew deep down that Starsky didn't, couldn't possibly love him the same way that he loved Starsky. Hutch had no illusions on that point. And in a way he was glad. His own brand of obsession with its addictive qualities was something he wouldn't wish on anyone, least of all on Starsky. Starsky was a free spirit and must never be shackled with chains of need and dependency.

It didn't matter. After everything that had happened, it simply didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that Starsky loved him. And Hutch would take that love on any terms.

He reached out for the delicious, naked body sprawled beside him and closed his arms around it, wishing he could hold onto it forever.

oooOOOooo

"Hutch, I love you, but we can't survive on love and five cans of tomato soup. C'mon, we need to do some grocery shopping and rescue the Torino." Starsky

was bounding around the cabin dressed in nothing but his skin, picking up clothes that were scattered all over the floor.

Hutch, who was following his lover's every move with a never-ending sense of amazement, said in surprise. "You don't wanna head back to LA then?"

"What, and give up our chance of a long overdue vacation? Dobey said to call after three days—that's tomorrow—and I'm sure if I tell him that we need a little more time, he'll give us a few more days off. Hey, it's not as if we haven't earned it." Starsky gave him a quick peck on the cheek that sent a small shockwave of pleasure right down to Hutch's toes. "Don't you like the idea?"

"I love the idea!" Hutch enfolded Starsky in his arms and ran eager hands over his naked back. "God, Starsk," he groaned. "I just can't keep my hands off you."

"Don't want you to, either," grinned Starsky and leaned into him. "Anyway, we've a lotta catchin' up to do. Can't believe we've wasted so much time..."

"Starsk, how did you...?"

"Shhh," Starsky placed two fingers on Hutch's lips. "Tell you everything later. Right now... well, I've a better idea for right now."

It was a considerable time later that they finally managed to pull apart long enough to slip on some clothes.

"I'll pop these things in the laundromat," said Starsky, gathering up his muddy clothes, "and maybe we'd better take those sheets, too."

Hutch looked and had to agree. "Yeah, maybe we'd better." They grinned at each other.

Starsky shrugged into his still damp jacket and made for the door when he suddenly stopped and reached inside his pocket. When he pulled out his hand, Hutch saw that he was holding a badge. *His* badge. His heart skipped a beat.

Starsky held it out wordlessly, letting his eyes convey the emotions he felt. Hutch looked at the badge and then at Starsky and finally took it solemnly.

"I thought I'd left all that behind," he said softly. Starsky wrapped his arms around him and pulled him close, and they stood for a moment, savoring their new beginning.

"C'mon, let's go, *partner*," Starsky finally said. "I'm starving. I'm gonna treat you to the best goddamn lunch money can buy. You need some proper feeding. Gotta keep up your strength, if you know what I mean."

He grinned, and Hutch actually felt his ears go hot.

oooOOOooo

The rain had given way to the kind of brilliant crystal-clear morning only an early winter storm could leave in its wake. The downpour had left the dirt road in an even worse state than before, and it therefore took almost 20 minutes before the forlorn shape of the Torino came into view. Hutch stopped the LTD beside it, and they both got out and surveyed the situation. The car leaned into the ditch at a rakish angle, the front right fender was dented and the side mirror snapped off.

Hutch was incredulous. "You *crashed* the Torino? I thought you were just stuck." *You risked your beloved car on this demolition derby track? And walked eight miles in the pouring rain?*

"C'mon," he said. "Let's try and get it on its wheels again."

"Never thought I'd see the day when your old jalopy has to come to the rescue of my car," grumbled Starsky when they had the Torino on the road again and Hutch detached the tow cable.

"I've a confession to make," said Hutch, feeling a little sheepish, and pinched his nose. "I love the Tomato. Always have."

Starsky threw an arm around Hutch and laughed with delight. "Yeah, I know! Always have." Hutch hugged him back and joined in the laughter, and life felt simply wonderful.

An hour later, they had changed the front tire and coaxed the Torino to the garage in Diamond Creek where a mechanic promised to get the car into shape for the drive back to LA.

"Lunch first, chores later," said Starsky when he had retrieved his bag from the trunk and they were driving into the center of the two-store town.

"There's a taco stand," Hutch pointed out. "Or how about that burger bar?"

Starsky shook his head. "Uh uh, no tacos and no burgers today. Here, how about that?"

"The French Connection? You wanna go to a French restaurant?"

"Sure, why not? We've something to celebrate, don't we? Can't do that with a burrito. C'mon."

Bemused, Hutch followed him inside and was relieved to find not a suit-and-tie, be-on-your-best-behavior establishment, but a small, almost intimate little place with appealing décor and friendly service. The restaurant was barely half full, and they managed to grab a corner table with a measure of privacy.

Scanning the menu, Hutch realized for the first time that he was ravenous. He tried, but couldn't remember the last proper meal he'd eaten. The perceptive eyes of his partner were on him.

"Hungry?"

"Starving! You?"

"Could eat a horse."

"I don't think they have horse."

"Well, maybe I'll try the turkey."

"Hey, watch who you're calling a turkey!"

They grinned at each other. The situation was so unusual that it was easiest to slip back into established patterns of behavior—some teasing, some easy banter. For a minute, Hutch could almost imagine that they were back in LA, just two

cops on a lunch break, or two friends sharing a meal. Then he looked at Starsky's happy face and knew that everything between them had changed forever and that they were out in the real world not as cops or friends, but as partners in the full sense of the word.

They ordered, and ate in near silence, glancing at each other every now and again.

In between long moments of comfortable silence, furtive looks and secret smiles, they talked a little about Starsky's journey of discovery.

"We've a lot of good friends back in LA," said Starsky thoughtfully when he'd related his side of the story. "Dobey, Huggy, Minnie... In their own ways, they were all conspirin' to get us back together again."

Then they talked a little about Hutch's journey into exile.

By unspoken consent, neither brought up the more harrowing moments of the long, dark hours of their separation. That topic would keep until some other time.

Finally, having demolished an appetizer, main course, side dish, salad, and a massive plate of caramel chocolate pudding each, even Starsky had to admit that he had probably reached full capacity. Sighing contentedly, he pushed his plate away and gazed at his partner. Hutch looked back at him and smiled, and a flare of hot desire erupted in Starsky's eyes.

He threw his napkin down and stood abruptly. "C'mon, let's pay and get those groceries. I can't wait to have you all to myself again."

oooOOOooo

Starsky had already loaded the shopping cart with cartons of juice and piles of fresh fruit and vegetables when Hutch returned from his foray down another aisle with an armful of popcorn, chocolate cookies and other assorted snacks. They gazed at each other's selections for a moment, looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"We're gonna have to stop doin' this," said Starsky, wiping his face, as Hutch dumped his pile of junk food in the cart, "or before we know it you'll be into horror movies and I'll start enjoying nature trails."

Hutch grinned. "Maybe it'll wear off after a while."

"Hope not. If we keep this up, you'll be volunteering to wash my car next. And that's something I gotta see."

"Hey, I'll do it if you come back to my place afterward and cook us both a vegetarian meal with all the trimmings."

Starsky cast him an evil grin. "You're on! Soon's we're back in LA."

oooOOOooo

Hutch was putting the freshly washed sheets on the bed while Starsky stowed the groceries and opened a couple of bottles of beer. As he carried them to the coffee table, he noticed the crumpled envelope lying on the floor beneath the window

where it had fallen the night before. He picked it up and held it uncertainly in his hand, then handed it to Hutch. Hutch took it, and his eyes flicked to Starsky's.

"Do you still want to read it?" he asked quietly.

"Not if you don't want me to."

"I... don't mind. I mean, you already know what's in it."

"You sure?"

Hutch nodded.

Starsky looked at him and was struck by the transformation the last few hours had wrought in his friend. Hutch looked... radiant. Suffused with happiness. Shining, glowing, every pore exuding a joy that was simply too powerful to contain. Starsky thought that in all the years he'd known him, he'd never seen Hutch quite like this before.

*Starsky was suddenly overcome with emotion. My Hutch! You're so beautiful. And you look so happy. All because of me. God, I wish I'd known sooner.*

He drew Hutch down on the couch and pulled him close. The French doors stood open to the unseasonably warm sunshine and gave a breathtaking view of the lake and distant mountains. Small waves lapped leisurely at the shore mere yards from the porch. The scent of late fall foliage invaded the cabin, and a deep sense of peace and isolation hung over the place. Beside him, Hutch sighed in contentment. For a while, they simply enjoyed the tranquility, gazing out at the view, taking long swigs of beer and feeling the nightmare of the past days receding further and further into the distance.

Finally, Starsky fingered the envelope, cast another questioning look at his friend and received a small affirmative nod in response. He extracted the four sheets of paper covered in Hutch's familiar hand writing, unfolded them and started to read.

Starsky's initial curiosity soon turned to seriousness, and the seriousness to distress and growing sorrow. He knew that Hutch had gone through hell, but to have the definition of hell spelled out in words was almost more than he could bear. His hands shook as he turned the pages, and he had to force himself to continue, appalled and horrified by the pain and the bleak sense of hopelessness that cried out from the words on the paper in his hand.

*I did this to him! God, so much pain. And I never knew...*

oooOOOooo

Hutch watched him quietly as he read. A whole range of emotions passed unguardedly over his friend's face, culminating in an expression of such grief that Hutch instinctively tightened his hold around Starsky's shoulders.

"Oh, Hutch," Starsky whispered. "I'm so sorry! I'm gonna try and make it up to you, I really am. God, I'm sorry..." He gazed unhappily into Hutch's face, and Hutch was startled to see the pain in his lover's eyes.

"Hey, hey," he said and pulled Starsky against him. "What're you sorry for? You gotta stop saying that."

He kissed Starsky on the ear and the temple and the cheek and the side of his mouth and several other accessible parts of Starsky's anatomy until his efforts drew a tiny smile from his lover, although they couldn't quite extinguish the shadow of sadness in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't see how much you were hurting. Sorry I didn't realize something was wrong. Sorry you went through that whole nightmare alone. I should've been there for you. We should've gone through it together. I mean I knew something wasn't right, but I didn't do anything about it. I just let it happen." Starsky looked down at his hands and added in a small voice, "I always knew when you were in pain. Before."

"Shhh, it's all right. It's all right. You gotta stop beating yourself up over this." Hutch ran loving fingers through the thick mane and kissed the smooth forehead, still marveling at the new-found freedom that allowed him to do so.

"You didn't know because I was doing everything in my power to keep it from you," he said. "I was using all my skills to keep you at a distance. It was like an undercover job. I'd never have told you even if you'd asked me at gun point. If you hadn't figured it out for yourself... I mean I never imagined... if I'd known you would... God, never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that you..."

The words caught in his throat when the enormity of the recent events once again threatened to overwhelm him. Starsky turned to him and kissed him tenderly.

"... that I would want this," he completed. His face lit up with the smile Hutch was beginning to recognize as the special smile reserved just for him. Then the happy expression in the dark blue eyes faded.

"But when you came to see me that evening, you were gonna tell me, weren't you? If I'd listened to you then, you wouldn't've had to go through all this..."

"I don't know, Starsk," Hutch said thoughtfully. "I think maybe you needed to find out for yourself. I mean, what would your reaction have been if I *had* told you that night? We were both hurting so much. Maybe it would've made the situation even worse."

"What could possibly have been worse than what I said and did to you that day?" Starsky said miserably.

Hutch took him by the shoulders and kissed him firmly on the lips. "Listen to me, what happened that day is in the past. It's over. It's not going to cast a shadow over today. Or tomorrow. Or the rest of our lives. You hear me?"

Starsky gave him a crooked little smile, and Hutch couldn't help himself and kissed him again. Starsky sighed and leaned into Hutch.

"I just don't understand why it took me so long, or why the alarm bells didn't go off."

"Interference," Hutch suggested.

Starsky snorted. "Yeah, interference... But you know, once I'd started diggin', it wasn't all that difficult to figure out. I mean, the answer was right there, starin' me in the face. I must've had this massive blind spot all this time, or else why didn't I see it sooner? Some detective, huh?"

He hesitated. "But I think you're right, anyway. I needed to get there under my own steam. Made me realize all sorts of things. What's really important. What you mean to me. How much I love you."

He looked at Hutch. Both moved at the same time, and they were in each other's arms, kissing as if the world was falling to ruins all around them.

They toppled over, mouths welded together, and began to vie for top position on the couch. After a short, but vigorous tussle, Starsky had Hutch wedged beneath him and was taking full advantage of his weight and muscled torso to keep his lover pinned to the cushions. Hutch gave in without much resistance and relaxed into Starsky's arms.

"Always knew you had a thing about soapy scenes," he teased.

"Yeah, well, soapy is allowed on special occasions."

They grinned at each other. Starsky pushed his fingers into Hutch's hair and caressed the tanned forehead with his thumbs. Their eyes met and locked. Something indefinable lurked in the depths of the dark blue eyes, and with the new kind of connection between them, Hutch picked up on it at once.

"Hey, what is it?" he said softly. "Something's still bothering you, isn't it?"

The long lashes swept down and up again, and the blue gaze bored a pathway down to Hutch's very soul. Starsky's voice was husky when he spoke.

"Hutch? In your letter... what did you mean by '*you were my will to live*'? You weren't thinkin'... ? I mean, you weren't gonna... ?"

Hutch's hand came up and lightly stroked the face above him.

"I wouldn't have. I couldn't have done that to you. Even when I thought you... you'd stopped loving me, I knew it would do something terrible to you if I..." He faltered, but there was no need to finish.

Starsky closed his eyes and dropped his forehead on Hutch's chest to hide the sorrow showing in his face. "God, Hutch," he groaned, "the things we do to each other."

"No one can hurt us like the ones we love," Hutch whispered almost to himself. But Starsky heard him anyway and propped himself on an elbow to look Hutch squarely in the face.

"No more! No more hurting each other. Ever. We're pulling on one string from now on. On the same side, not on opposite ends. We're more important than anything else."

"More important than our families? Our friends? Jobs? Reputations? 'Cause what we've started here is gonna endanger all that."

Starsky suddenly smiled again. "Much more important than any of that."

Hutch pulled him back down on top of him, savoring their closeness, the delicious tickle of wiry curls on his cheek, their hearts beating in a synchronized rhythm.

"And another thing," said Starsky and blew softly into Hutch's ear that happened to be just within reach of his lips. "No more secrets. I couldn't stand another year like the last one."

"No more secrets," Hutch agreed solemnly. He tightened his hold around the warm weight pressing down on him and, with a quick, decisive movement, rolled them both over in a sudden determined bid for freedom, causing them both to lose their balance and crash to the floor in a tangle of limbs and a scattering of couch cushions.

They picked themselves up laughingly, the seriousness of the moment shattered. Hutch hauled the lithe, firm body of his partner close again, feeling as if the entire set of unspoken behavioral rules that had governed their previous relationship had been re-written for their sakes.

"Hey, how about those steaks now?" Starsky suggested at last. "You still have some catchin' up to do in the food department." He stroked Hutch's cheek lovingly. "You look so thin. Gotta fatten you up a little."

He picked up the four scattered pages of the letter and smoothed them out. His eyes sought out Hutch's.

"Can I keep it?"

"You want to?" Hutch asked in surprise.

"Yeah. It's a love letter, really, isn't it? Course I wanna keep it." A familiar grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Besides, how often d'you think I get to read about *my light, my warmth and my brilliance*?"

"I guess I'm never gonna hear the end of that one, huh?" groaned Hutch in mock despair.

"Too right, lover boy," grinned Starsky and swatted Hutch playfully on the rear. "And now let your *brilliant* partner handle the dinner preparations. You can make the salad, if you like, but the steaks are my responsibility."

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## Chapter Twelve

"We really gotta call Dobby today," said Starsky sometime the following morning. "And Huggy, and Minnie. They'll be wondering what's happened to us."

He bent to slip on his sneakers. "Lucky there's a phone booth on the road. Wouldn't want to drive all the way into town again." He straightened and noticed that Hutch was making no attempt to get ready. "Aren't you comin'?"

Hutch glanced up, and Starsky thought he looked a trifle evasive. "No, you go. It won't take you long, will it?" he dug in his trouser pocket for his car keys and threw them to Starsky who caught them one-handedly.

"What? Tired of my company already?" Starsky teased.

The corners of Hutch's mouth twitched. "Never."

Starsky looked his partner up and down. "Okay, spit it out. You're plannin' something. I can tell."

Hutch produced a slow, delicious grin. "It's a surprise."

Starsky cocked his head. "Hutch, what're you up to?"

The grin grew wider. "Not telling."

Hutch looked so much like a little boy with a daring plan to raid neighbor's apple tree that Starsky could only shake his head in fond amusement. He kissed Hutch, was kissed back at length, and managed to get out the door before the stirrings of his body could put an untimely end to the phone booth expedition.

Jogging down the steps to the car, he wondered what Hutch had in mind. Knowing his partner, it would be something utterly and hopelessly romantic. He grinned to himself. Then he thought of his own, decidedly lustful plans for the blond that he hoped to put into action before long. The thought made him bounce with anticipation.

The anticipation kept him bouncing through all three phone calls and the short drive back to the lake.

The moment he got inside the door, he was assaulted by a tall blond who jumped out at him from behind the door and wrestled him to the floor. Homecoming, Starsky thought, would never be the same again.

"Missed you," Hutch whispered into his ear when he had pinned his victim to the rug.

Starsky snorted with laughter. "I've only been gone an hour."

"Too long. About 59 minutes too long."

"Told ya. You should've come. Would've been worth it just to hear Minnie squeal. And I swear Huggy almost squealed, too."

"What did you tell them?"

"Just that we're partners again." He wriggled a little and moved his groin suggestively against Hutch's, enjoying the exciting sensation of Hutch's growing hardness rubbing against his own. "But y' know, I think Huggy's on to us already."

Hutch's sparkling eyes looked down at him with so much tenderness and desire that Starsky thought he would melt under the heat of that gaze. He pulled the fair head down and fastened their lips together and for a long while, there was no room for words or coherent thought.

Finally, they separated long enough to exchange the rug for the infinitely greater comforts of the couch.

"What about Dobey?" Hutch enquired breathlessly.

"He wants us... back on duty... on Monday morning," Starsky informed his lover distractedly while punctuating the information with a trail of little kisses that ran from Hutch's ear to his jaw and the delicate skin just above the collar bone. "Both of us, he says... And he didn't sound very surprised... at all."

Starsky began to toy with the buttons on Hutch's shirt, playfully opening one after another until the whole silky-smooth expanse of chest was revealed.

"That means we have three more days."

Something in that short statement—the merest catch in Hutch's voice, the faintest note of wistfulness—caught Starsky's attention, and he interrupted his exploration of Hutch to glance sharply into his lover's face. What he saw there made him sit up for a better look. There was such a brilliant glow radiating from Hutch's every fiber that Starsky almost missed the merest hint of a shadow in the depth of the bright blue gaze.

What was going on in that complicated Hutchinson brain?

It was true, they hadn't talked much about the future yet. Coming to terms with the past and savoring the present had taken all their attention. But surely Hutch didn't think that this was all they were going to have together—a few magic, charmed days in the remoteness of the woods? The only place where Hutch would have his lover all to himself?

"Three more days?" Starsky repeated, struggling between laughter and confusion. "What exactly d'you mean by three more days? I want three more decades with you. Six, if we can get them."

"Six *decades*...?" Hutch gulped.

"Yes, you moron! Don't you get it? This is the real thing. The till-death-do-us-part thing."

Hutch blinked at him, and Starsky laughed with delight.

"Don't see you lost for words very often." He hugged the other man. "C'mon, babe, what is it? What's goin' on in that empty head of yours? Look, I know it won't be easy. Are you worried about how the world sees us when this gets out?"

Hutch found his voice again. "God, Starsk, no! When have we ever cared what the world thinks? It's always been us against everyone else." Their eyes met and reaffirmed the truth of that statement in a wordless pact of alliance.

"Then what, Hutch?" He reached up and cupped one side of the golden-hued face with his hand. Hutch sighed and leaned into the caress. Then he lifted his head and gazed deep into Starsky's eyes.

"What about... Kira?" he said. "What about women? You've always loved seeing women. You can't stop that just because..."

The look on Starsky's face made the words shrivel on Hutch's tongue.

*Kira*. The one topic they'd managed to skirt around for two entire days. Starsky reached out, gripped Hutch by the shoulders, fingers digging in, hard.

"I thought we'd settled all that the other night," he said, his voice rough. He resisted the urge to shake some sense into the man. "Or didn't you believe what I told you? That I belong to you? Only to you? I didn't just say that because that's what you needed to hear at the time."

"I know," Hutch exclaimed. "I know you meant it. And I love you so much for it. And I want... God, you know what I want. I want you, all to myself, always, yes, for six decades if we can get them..."

He took a deep breath. "But it's too much to ask, and I won't ask for it. You've already given me so, so much. So much more than I deserve. You've made me happier than I ever dreamed possible. Starsk, I love you. But if... if you wanna see other people, women I mean, it's... all right. Honestly, I would understand..."

Starsky's heart melted. At the same time, he felt more exasperated with the man than he could say. He wished he knew what had happened in Hutch's past that would explain the hidden vulnerability in this wonderful, strong, caring and compassionate man, so confident and tough and sure of himself as a cop on the streets. More than he deserved? Where had that come from?

And what, Starsky wondered, did he have to do, *what did it take* to convince Hutch?

He tightened his grip on Hutch's shoulders, glared into the impossibly blue eyes.

"Hutch," he said. "Look at me and listen to me and don't interrupt. I love you! You understand? I love you like I've never loved anyone before. Not Helen or Rosey or even Terry, and certainly not Kira. You are what's been missing in my life all these years. You make me whole. You're everything I need and want. There'll be no more women, no more dates. Just you. You understand?"

He let his eyes wander over the familiar planes and angles of the other man's face before capturing his gaze again and holding it with his own. Hutch's eyes were bright with a new light of understanding. Starsky reached up and brushed a strand of blond hair from the high forehead.

"I'll never let you go, I swear," he said. "And I'm gonna give you everything in my power to give. Heart, body and soul. All yours. For the next six decades. Longer."

He tugged the unresisting head forward and caught the soft lips in a gentle kiss to seal the pledge.

The kiss that followed was different from any they had shared before. It was slow and sweet and full of promises, and as it deepened, it seemed to open a pathway of light between them, allowing Starsky a glimpse of something so fierce and powerful in the depth of Hutch's soul, it would have terrified him had he sensed it in anyone other than Hutch.

Hutch put everything into that kiss, gave all of himself, held nothing back, as if he had finally accepted that it was safe to reveal the true extent of his feelings.

The glimpse left Starsky dazed by the power of Hutch's love for him. Dazed, and overwhelmed by the intensity of that wild, sweeping emotion. It was a force composed of the brightest and the darkest parts of Hutch's soul, a force so powerful that once unleashed, it could be dangerous. Destructive. Uncontrollable.

And Hutch had given him, Starsky, the keys to that power.

Starsky was suddenly afraid—not of Hutch, never of Hutch, but of the crushing responsibility that had been placed on his shoulders. Hutch had given him his love—after Starsky had dragged it out into the open, against Hutch's better judgment—and now it was in his hands, forever his.

Was he really strong enough to bear the burden of Hutch's love? Could he handle being in charge of so much power?

The next moment, the fear ebbed away as quickly as it had engulfed him, retreating before a sudden surge of grim certainty.

*I'm strong. I can take it. For Hutch, I can take anything.*

*I have to.*

The discovery of that hidden reservoir of strength gave Starsky a brief, unique insight into the nature of his bond with Hutch. It was a bond forged of love, and trust, and something else strange and mysterious that went deep, very deep into uncharted territory.

At the same time, he was acutely aware of Hutch's reassuring presence all around him, his strength, his love, his commitment. This was the Hutch he knew so well: the strong, caring, capable Hutch. The determined Hutch. The Hutch who would walk to the end of the world for him.

And suddenly, just like that, Starsky knew it was going to be all right. Whatever it was, that weird connection they had between them, they'd cope with it together—as they always did.

oooOOOooo

They surfaced from the depth of the kiss like mediums from a trance. First Hutch, then Starsky.

Hutch wanted to have more arms to wrap around his friend, more hands to run over the beloved body that contained within its perfect shape everything that Hutch would ever want, desire, treasure.

"Starsky, Starsky..." Joy welled up inside him and spilled out in a rush of words. "I love you. God, you've no idea how much I love you."

To Hutch's surprise, Starsky went completely still in his arms, and when he finally looked up, Hutch was alarmed to see the strangest mixture of exhilaration, confusion and fierce protectiveness in the dark velvet eyes.

"I know," Starsky said quietly. "Love you, too. So much. But... it's more than that, isn't it? What we have between us... It's something so much more."

Hutch's heart missed a beat, then started hammering wildly in his chest. *He knows. He knows. He feels it, too!*

He wasn't alone anymore in that alien place of power he'd battled for so long. Starsky was right beside him, just like always. Starsky was there. Starsky knew.

"It's all right," he said softly. He drew the curly head toward him and placed a reassuring kiss on the smooth forehead. "It's a different kind of love, babe. Stronger. More powerful. It's something there's no word for."

Starsky looked into his eyes, searching for something, and—finding what he was looking for—gave a small nod. Hutch felt the tension go out of his friend as he relaxed into his arms.

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## **Epilogue**

"We're becoming experts at soapy scenes."

"Really. Can you imagine what that's gonna do to our tough image?"

A shared look, a shared grin. They were back in the real world where the sun was slanting into the room and a mild breeze was rustling through the bronzed leaves of the trees.

Hutch tore his eyes from Starsky and nodded toward the exit. "You ready for the mystery tour?"

Starsky followed Hutch's gaze and saw Hutch's duffle bag and small rucksack sitting beside the French doors, packed to the brim, ready to go.

"Where're we goin'?"

"You'll see." Hutch shouldered the rucksack, picked up the bag, and half pushed, half pulled Starsky to the door. An awful thought occurred to Starsky.

"Aw, Hutch, you're not gonna make me go on a hike or something, are you?"

"Hmmm, maybe! C'mon, it'll be fun."

Starsky stalled. "Aw, no, Hutch! I bet you it's gonna start rainin' again soon. Look at those clouds! Why don't we stay in, get the fire goin' and..."

Hutch maneuvered himself in front of Starsky. "D'you trust me?"

One look at Hutch's face and there could only be one response to that query. Starsky grabbed the heavy bag from Hutch and strode to the door.

"Okay, let's go. Lead on, Macduff!"

Grinning broadly, Hutch led the way, not into the woods as Starsky had feared, but down to the pier where a small green rowboat was gently bobbing on the waves.

"I could swear that one wasn't here before," said Starsky as he dumped the bag in the boat.

"It's Brian's. I got it out of the boathouse while you were away. Go on, get in, let's go."

"Go where?"

"You'll see."

Hutch took up the oars and guided the small vessel out onto the lake. For a while, Starsky was content to enjoy the view—especially that of Hutch—and let himself be rowed. But when it became apparent that Hutch was taking them all the way across to the other side, he tapped his partner on the knee and wiggled an eyebrow at him.

"Scoot over, lover boy, and gimme that oar."

A moment later, they were sitting shoulder to shoulder, hauling at their respective oars in familiar unison, energetically propelling their little craft toward the opposite shore and a stretch of sandy beach that provided a perfect landing site. A trail led from the beach into the forest and up the side of the mountain. Starsky eyed it with resignation, but didn't protest when Hutch led the way.

To Starsky's relief, they didn't have far to go. A short climb later, a small clearing containing a simple wooden shelter opened before them. Clouds of steam drifted across the open space and curled lazily skyward.

"Hey, someone's barbecuing!"

Hutch laughed that deep, rich laugh Starsky loved to hear. "Sorry, Starsk, no such luck. We're the only ones around. But I promise, I won't let you starve."

Starsky cuffed him on the shoulder, then wrinkled his nose and frowned when a sudden malodorous scent wafted past him.

"Jeez, d'you smell that? That's awful. Definitely no barbecue... more like rotting eggs. Hutch, what's this place? Where've you taken me?"

"You'll get used to it. In another minute, you won't even notice it."

"What d'you mean? I'm not gonna be around in another minute."

"Oh," said Hutch innocently. "I thought we'd spend the rest of the day up here."

Starsky glared at him. Hutch laughed that beautiful, carefree, happy laugh again, and Starsky thought that he would gladly spend the rest of his life in the woods, with the stench of rotting eggs in his nose, if it meant hearing that joyful sound every day. Hutch hooked an arm around Starsky and kissed him.

"It's the hot springs, dummy," he said. "The smell is from the sulfur in the water. They've built a shelter over the springs and channeled cold water from the stream into those rock pools so it's just the right temperature for bathing. It's gonna be fun. Trust me."

"Bathing? But it's freezing out here!"

"The water's *hot*. They're *hot* springs. I promise you, you'll be too hot, soon."

"Already am, with you around," muttered Starsky and hefted the bag he was carrying. "Last one there gets to do the dishes!" he shouted, and sprinted toward the shelter. Hutch followed, grinning, at a much more leisurely pace.

oooOOOooo

Hutch was right, Starsky admitted to himself some time later when they were reclining luxuriously in a steaming rock pool, surrounded by trees and mountains,

open sky above them, a massive fire crackling in the rock-lined pit beside the shelter. Below them, the crystal lake spread out like a glittering sheet of metal. In the far distance, they could just about make out their cabin where it nestled into the surrounding greenery.

Hutch was right; this *was* fun. In fact, it was a lot more fun than it had any right to be, considering that they were deep in the wilderness of the Sierra, light years away from the luxuries of civilization.

Not that Hutch hadn't brought a good share of luxuries. He'd packed a couple of blankets, towels, spare clothes, a flash light, not to mention half the contents of the fridge—sausages to roast over the fire, potato salad in a plastic dish, fruit, cookies, a flask of coffee, bottles of wine, hell, even marshmallows.

Starsky took another sip of wine from the bottle, passed it back to Hutch, and sighed with abandon. The firm, water-slick body of his partner settled against him with equal lassitude, and he wrapped an arm around it. Together they leaned back in the water and gazed up at the clouds making their unhurried way across the sky.

Hutch's hand brushed over the downy hairs on Starsky's belly, and Starsky's cock twitched in response, in spite of the deeply soporific effects of the hotpool.

"So what d'you think?"

"It's t'rrific!"

"You like it?"

"Love it! Never done this before. You?"

"Hm, lemme think. Fooling around with a naked guy in a rock pool in the middle of a forest... yeah, I do that on a regular basis."

"You're hopeless, Blintz."

Starsky relaxed a further impossible degree. "Y' know," he said lazily, apropos of nothing, "I kinda like this place. Never thought I'd say that. Hey, why don't we quit and spend the next six decades up here?"

Hutch snorted. "Cause they don't do pizza deliveries up here. And you'd have to trade the Torino for a pick-up truck."

"Oh right. Can't do that, now that we've established that you're in love with the Tomato..."

"Turkey!" said Hutch fondly. "I'll show you just who exactly I'm in love with. So that you'll never confuse the two again."

"That a threat?"

"That's a promise!"

Hutch gathered his lover close and proceeded to fit action to his words. Starsky grinned. It looked like it was going to be a long pool session. And he hadn't even started to put in motion his own ambitious plans for Hutch.

Well, there was no rush. They had six decades ahead of them.

Then Starsky forgot all about his ambitious plans as Hutch's efforts intensified, the world dissolved around him, and they fell together toward the light.

- End -