

Turbulences

by Keri Mera

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Monday night

Starsky was floating.

It was a wonderful, delicious, weightless feeling of bonelessness. Only one person in the world knew how to make him fly like this. Lazily, he let his hand drift over the equally boneless body sprawled beside him.

"I'm floating," he told the ceiling. "I think I'm floating away. Then what would you do?"

"I'd hold onto you. I wouldn't let you float away."

"Promise?"

"Sea scout's honor!"

"Hold me now, will ya?"

Hutch rolled over and faced his partner.

"What's the matter?"

"Just... hold me, Hutch. Can you do that?"

"Sure. C'mere."

Willing arms wrapped themselves around him, and Starsky burrowed close to the living warmth and breathed deeply of his lover's familiar, always exciting scent. Hutch purred with pleasure and rubbed his cheek against Starsky's chin like a big, blond cat.

A lion, perhaps, Starsky thought affectionately, or a large mountain cat. He dropped a kiss on the tousled mane and felt the strong arms close more tightly around him. He sighed with contentment.

"Promise you won't let me go."

"Hey, what is it with you today?"

"Promise?"

"Course I promise. I'll never let you go. You know that."

"That's all right then."

They lay silently for a while, Hutch's head in the crook of Starsky's neck, Starsky's hand in Hutch's long hair, bodies molded together. Starsky could feel a gentle pulse beating under his lips where they rested against the soft skin of Hutch's temple. He kissed the spot with great tenderness.

"You know that I love you, don't ya? That I'd never leave you, no matter what? You know that, don't ya?"

Hutch raised his head and looked at him, puzzled.

"Starsk..."

"Just wanted you to know that, that's all."

"Yeah, I know. It's the only thing I'm sure of."

Starsky smiled as Hutch settled back down against him. "Good. Let's get some sleep, huh? We'll be on the streets all day tomorrow."

"I still don't see why the place needs painting at all."

"At least we won't be cooped up inside with the paperwork."

"That's true."

"Night, Hutch."

"Hmmm. Night, Starsk."

Hutch was asleep within seconds, arms loosely wrapped around his companion.

Starsky lay awake for a while longer, fingers of one hand entwined in the silky strands of blond hair, savoring the moment of perfection, the sense of safety within the protective circle of Hutch's arms, the never-ending joy of their closeness, until finally he, too, fell away into the velvet folds of oblivion.

Part I : Tuesday morning

It had all the hallmarks of one of Hutch's dreams—fragmented scenes, disjointed sequences, unconnected images. The peculiar juxtaposed with the mundane against the familiar backdrop of the station. A time and place as surreal as the melting clocks in a Dali painting.

A squad room stripped of furniture. A small army of painters at work. Absurdly, a ping pong table in the middle of the room, a telephone balanced on the edge of it. Starsky with a ping pong paddle, something Hutch had never seen before.

It was a classic dreamscape where everything felt wrong, wrong, wrong, but where, in spite of that, everything made a bizarre kind of sense.

A fluid change of scene. They were now in the parking lot. It was a bright, sunny May morning. More dream elements—for no conceivable reason, a locked Torino. Starsky uncharacteristically fumbling with the keys. Some easy banter, verbal sparring. A feeling of lightness and well-being.

Then the abrupt change from dream to nightmare, light replaced by darkness in the space of a heartbeat.

A squad car in motion. The dull thud of a collision. One look and a flash of sudden understanding. A screamed warning.

Concrete rough under his hands as he fell to safety. The staccato burst of machine gun fire. Glass fragments raining down all around him.

The gun in his hand. Pure reflex.

The scream in his throat. Pure panic.

Two shots.

"Starsky!"

Two more.

"STARSKY!"

Two more.

"STARSKYYYY!"

The echo of the shots faded. The roar of the engine died away in the distance.

Then an eternal moment of silence.

Dead silence.

ooOOoo

The silence was the loudest sound that morning.

Not the screeching tires or the grating sound of metal scraping metal. Not the deafening shots, the shattering glass. Not even the roar of his own gun, his own voice yelling his partner's name.

No, the loudest sound that morning was the silence screaming from the other side of the Torino.

It reverberated around Hutch's head, a roaring echo in his mind, louder than the rushing noise in his ears, the screaming of his heart. Time slowed, crawled. It took an eternity to reach the other side of the car.

It didn't matter. The silence told him everything he needed to know. Even before he got there, in those endless seconds of wading through the quicksand of his nightmare, he *knew*.

He saw...

Starsky.

Lying crumpled on the ground. Not moving.

Curled on his side, head in the wheel well of his car. Eyes closed. The right arm trapped beneath his body. The left arm stretched out at an angle, palm down on the tarmac.

And blood. Small rivers of it. Welling from gaping chest wounds. Pooling beneath the dark, still body.

... and he knew.

He *knew*.

They said that in the moment of death you'd see your life flash before your eyes. Hutch wasn't the one dying. He wasn't even scratched. But in that timeless moment between seeing and knowing, when he stood frozen to the ground, paralyzed with every fear he'd ever known, the scream strangled in his throat, he saw his entire life condensed into a single flash and saw what he'd always known—that it was inextricably interwoven with a million separate strands connecting him to Starsky.

Starsky.

My life. My home.

Never again.

Starsky...

Terror choked the air from his lungs.

No. God, no. Please no.

The gun dropped unnoticed from his hand.

Please... Not like this.

There were miles between them, and his feet were cemented to the ground.

Don't leave me like this.

A chill numbness gripped his heart.

We didn't even get a chance to say good-bye...

That's when he saw the movement. The tiniest movement. So small that he almost missed it.

Then he saw it again. The fingers of Starsky's left hand. Moving almost imperceptibly, a minuscule motion. Trembling, straining as if reaching out. Reaching out for Hutch.

Hutch's heart lurched in his chest. A small sound escaped his lips, a moan, a plea, he wasn't sure—and then he could suddenly move again, and he was free, and running. Time accelerated, and everything began to happen real fast.

It only took an instant to demolish the distance between them, to fall on his knees beside the prone figure, to ease the warm, familiar weight away from the car and into his arms. Starsky's head lolled sideways, then settled into the crook of Hutch's arm, and Hutch's hand curled around the forehead to anchor the curly head against his shoulder.

There was a faint, almost imperceptible pulse beating in the temple beneath his hand.

Alive. Oh God. Still alive. Still breathing.

"Starsk..."

The long lashes fluttered, and Starsky's eyes opened slowly. They were deep and dark and unfocused, and looked huge in a face leached of all color. For a moment, Starsky's gaze wandered aimlessly over Hutch's face, focusing with difficulty. Then his eyes found Hutch's and locked onto them.

Hutch's insides constricted as he drank in the sight of the dark, blue pools of life. Starsky looked dazed, bewildered, and his eyes were full of confusion. They clung to Hutch's with a desperate grip. Hutch's hold tightened around the dark curls and his other hand found Starsky's left hand and clutched it to his chest.

"I'm here, babe. I'm right here."

A part of him knew exactly what he should be doing. First aid. Check the wounds, apply pressure, stop the bleeding. Start CPR, if necessary. Do all the things necessary to give the injured man a chance of life.

Another part of him already knew that the effort would be pointless. Starsky was slipping away, and there was nothing he could do. All he could do was hold him, be with him. He mustn't break eye contact, not for a second. For some reason, nothing was more important than that.

"I'm not leaving you. Look at me, Starsk. C'mon, look at me! Don't let go, don't. Just... look at me."

Starsky's breath came in short, ragged bursts, and each time, more blood surged from the jagged wounds in his chest. Vaguely, indistinctly, Hutch was aware of a growing commotion around them—shouts, movement, people—someone kneeling on Starsky's other side, someone's hands on Starsky's chest, tearing at the clothing, trying to still the flow.

He ignored it. He ignored everything around them. His field of vision had narrowed to just one point, and nothing could exist outside that charmed circle. Every fiber, every part of his being, everything he had was focused on the dark, deep liquid pools of Starsky's soul.

"Yeah, babe, that's right. That's good. Don't close your eyes. Keep looking at me."

It was the only thing he could do, holding onto Starsky with everything he had, holding him with his eyes and hands and words. There was so little time left and so much left to say. Somehow, he had to make the final minute last forever.

Starsky looked back up at him with so much trust, so much love. Unable to move, unable to speak, but still holding on. Still here with him. Still here.

A hollow rattle was coming from Starsky's chest, a terrible sound from deep within his body. Starsky's lungs were filling with blood. He was drowning. Drowning in blood. Hutch tightened his hold. He must hold onto Starsky. He must not let him fall into the darkness.

"Starsky? Starsky! C'mon, Starsk, stay with me, stay with me. Don't let go. You hear me? Don't let go."

As if their unique connection was enough to hold Starsky in the land of the living. To keep Starsky by his side.

"I'm here with you. I got you, babe. I got you. You're safe."

The body in Hutch's arms was beginning to shake, fighting for breath. Starsky was losing too much blood. Was going into shock. The warm, living skin was turning grey and cold; a sheen of moisture glazed the clammy forehead.

And all Hutch could do was hold on for as long as he could, hold the shaking body close to his own, whisper meaningless words of comfort.

"I'm here. I'm here."

The light in Starsky's eyes was beginning to fade. Hutch wanted to fall into their liquid depth and drown in them. A million ties vibrated between them, ready to snap, overstretched, every connection between them at breaking point.

Take me with you. Don't leave me here alone.

God, don't leave me...

Hutch pressed his lips to the cold fingers of Starsky's hand, let his lips linger on the clammy skin, never breaking eye contact, unblinking, willing the link to last forever.

Whispered words of love meant only for Starsky's ears.

"I love you, Starsk. Love you... so much."

The light in the dark eyes flickered and dimmed.

A wave of despair washed around Hutch. Starsky was going to die, he knew he would. And when Starsky died, so would he. Even if his body went on living, the rest of him would die with Starsky. Because their souls were linked, and wherever Starsky went, he'd follow.

There was almost a measure of comfort in the thought.

Hutch held his lover, waiting for the light to go out in the midnight blue eyes.

ooOOoo

Starsky was floating.

This was strange. A second ago, he'd been unlocking the Torino, engaged in a verbal ping pong match with Hutch—back and forth across the roof of the car.

And then—what? A screamed warning. A black-and-white accelerating toward him, flashes of light. The staccato burst of gun fire.

Shot. I've been shot.

Oh, Christ, Hutch! Are you all right?

The familiar blast of the Magnum eased his mind a fraction although the sound seemed to come from somewhere far, far away. He had to get there, had to back up his partner. He tried to call out, sit up, look around, but somehow couldn't get enough air in his lungs to make that work, couldn't seem to move at all.

Instead, he was curiously adrift in a dense fog that grew more impenetrable all the time. What was going on here?

Starsky wasn't quite sure. He did what he always did in moments of uncertainty—he reached out for Hutch.

Hold me, Hutch. Hold onto me. I'm floating away...

And then Hutch was there. Holding him. Locking eyes with him. Drawing him back from the brink. Everything was all right. Hutch wouldn't let him go.

He sighed, safe in the comfort of Hutch's arms, in the light of Hutch's eyes. Hutch looked so... scared. He tried to smile, to reassure his partner.

Couldn't make that work, either. Couldn't seem to breathe. Couldn't even see very clearly anymore.

"Starsk..."

Hutch? Hutch, what's happening? Don't leave me...

"I'm here, babe. I'm right here. I'm not leaving you. Look at me, Starsk. C'mon, look at me! Don't let go, don't. Just... look at me."

Hutch is my light. He'll keep the darkness away...

"Yeah, babe, that's right. That's good. Don't close your eyes. Keep looking at me."

Sure, Hutch. Anything you want, Hutch.

But I feel so tired...

"Starsky? Starsky! C'mon, Starsk, stay with me, stay with me. Don't let go. You hear me? Don't let go."

Hutch? Where are you? It's so dark. I can't see...

Can't breathe.

Can't...

"I'm here with you. I got you, babe. I got you. You're safe."

I feel so strange.

Help me, Hutch... Hold me...

"I'm here. I'm here."

Don't... go away...

"I love you, Starsk. Love you... so much."

I know. Love you, too.

(...)

Hutch?

(...)

Hutch...

(...)

ooOOoo

It was pure coincidence that Harold Dobey was anywhere near the parking garage at the time.

If it wasn't for the paint fumes giving him a royal headache, he would never have considered running his errands so early in the morning. As it happened, he left the building only minutes after his two detectives had walked through the same door.

He stepped into a scene of controlled chaos, the air heavy with the noise of shouts and sirens, the open area a blur of running figures. Dobey took in the scenario as a series of rapid snapshots—two, no, three black-and-whites revving up and pulling out with flashing lights and howling sirens; O'Bryan from Vice yelling into his car radio; Menendez, one of his own, yanking the first aid box from the trunk of his car; Harris from R&I staring open-mouthed and motionless at a spot just outside Dobey's field of vision.

Nguyen, a patrolman, came running toward him, a look of stunned amazement on his face. "Sir, officer down! A hit right here at the station!" A beat. "I think it's Starsky."

Something clenched up tight inside Dobey before his cop training smoothly took over.

"Make sure someone's called an ambulance!" he shouted and shouldered past the man, breaking into a trot when he spotted the familiar red car.

On the periphery of his vision, he took in the shattered windows, the blood on the ground, the small throng of officers and by-standers hovering in helpless fascination. But his focus was on the three people huddled beside the car, and he knew it was a scene that would be etched in his memory for the rest of his life.

There was Hutchinson, on the ground beside the car, his hair in wild disarray around a face as grey and fractured as weathered rock. He was cradling his partner in his arms, bent low over the prone figure, the curly head resting in the crook of his arm and anchored in place by a hand on the ashen forehead.

Starsky lay limp in his partner's arms, eyes fixed on the face above him, blood pumping from ragged wounds on his chest. His right arm was stretched out on the tarmac, the left arm held at an angle, the fingers clutched tightly in Hutch's large hand.

DiMare, a rookie just out of the academy, was on her knees beside the injured man, her hands on his chest, wadding gauze pads from a first aid kit into the wounds, applying pressure. Despite her efforts, blood was welling up, flowing in a stream over her hands, pooling beneath her.

It only took a single glance at the horrific injuries to know that this was very bad. Starsky was dying. In fact, it was amazing that he was still alive. And conscious.

Dobey whipped off his jacket and fell on his knees beside the rookie.

"Go!" he told her. "Clear a way for the ambulance!"

She ran, and Dobby took her place, ancient first aid skills surfacing, hands moving mechanically, his entire being focused on stemming the flow of blood. Doing everything in his power to keep Starsky's life blood from draining away, in spite of the hopelessness of the task. Behind him, he heard Menendez clearing the area of the idle and curious, O'Bryan reporting the ambulance on its way.

There were at least two, maybe three exit wounds, Dobby registered in passing. Clustered on the right side of the chest. Starsky was struggling for breath, the hollow sucking noise in his chest painful to hear. The torn body was beginning to shake.

Surprisingly, Hutchinson made no move to assist with the first aid, took no part at all in the efforts to contain the flow of blood.

Dobby risked a glance at them.

They were locked in a cocoon that shut out everything and everyone, sealed in a world that held only the two of them, as if nothing and no one existed outside that invisible boundary. Close together, heads almost touching, eyes only on each other. Oblivious to everything around them.

Dobby doubted they even realized he was there.

He watched, mesmerized and shaken, as Hutchinson fought to keep his partner's spirit alive. There could be no other word for it. Their eyes were locked on each other, and the connection between them was so strong, so powerful, Dobby thought he could almost feel it vibrating between them, holding them together.

Dobby knew he was witnessing something extraordinary. There was no doubt in his mind that the only reason Starsky was still breathing was that Hutch wouldn't allow him to slip away.

Then he heard the words. Hutch's whispered words of love and comfort. Intimate. Tender. And so loving. Dobey felt like an intruder, an unwitting voyeur. He tried to shut out the words, but he was too close to make that work. He couldn't leave, but at least he could give the dying man and his partner a small measure of privacy.

"Menendez. O'Bryan," he called out over this shoulder. "Move back and make sure there's plenty of room for the ambulance." The space around them grew as the two officers fell back.

The two men beside him never noticed. They had locked out the world, totally absorbed in each other. They were saying good-bye. Dobey's heart went out to them. Starsky was dying, but Hutchinson would be the one to pay the real price of the hit.

At last, the ambulance. Paramedics rushed to the scene, taking charge, shattering the cocoon.

Starsky was lifted from Hutch's arms and taken away on a stretcher.

"Go with him, Hutch," said Dobey, feeling drained and weary. "I'll meet you at the hospital."

As if any power on earth could have kept the man out of the ambulance.

Dobey stood, arms hanging by his side, and followed the vehicle with his eyes as it hurtled out of the compound. Starsky's fate was out of his hands. Now Hutchinson was the one who was going to need his support. He picked up his jacket, pocketed the Magnum O'Bryan had retrieved, took a precious minute to place the investigation of the shooting into the capable hands of Menendez, and hastened to his car.

Tuesday afternoon

The nurses wouldn't let either of them anywhere near the ED waiting room.

...not like that... covered in blood... can't allow it... health factors... other visitors to consider...

Dobey thought they had a point. He himself had escaped lightly, despite kneeling in a whole pool of blood. A uniformed officer was dispatched to pick up the spare pair of trousers Dobey kept in his office.

Hutchinson, covered in his partner's blood, was a different matter. In the end, a nurse provided a clean set of scrubs and took the stained jacket, shirt and jeans away to the hospital laundry. Being a police captain had its privileges.

Hutchinson took no part in the arrangements.

Hutchinson had switched off. He sat still, too still, staring at the floor of the waiting room, his eyes empty of life, like a ghost's. The white scrubs only emphasized the ashen pallor of his face. Even his hair looked leached of color.

Shell-shocked, Dobey thought. Pushed over the edge.

The doctors had nothing encouraging to say.

...massive damage... major blood loss... not much hope... should know more after the surgery... miracle he's alive... should have died at the scene... best to notify friends and family...

Dobey wasn't sure how much of that information registered with the ghost of a man beside him.

He went and made the calls he needed to make, *friends and family*, belatedly also remembering to leave a message for Huggy Bear.

Then they sat in silence—a familiar, much too familiar waiting game.

Police officers came and went, bearing messages and cups of coffee.

Doctors and nurses hurried past, avoiding his questioning glances.

At some point, hours later, a nurse came bearing a stack of laundered clothes, and Hutchinson mechanically changed back into them.

Then they sat in silence once more.

There was no news from the surgery, no word on Starsky at all.

Time passed slowly. Dobey thought he'd never endured a longer day. Not even when Cal was born and Edith had gone into her second day of labor.

All attempts on Dobey's part to draw his detective out of his shell ended in failure. Nothing, it seemed, could penetrate the walls behind which the man was sheltering.

How often had he sat like this, Dobey wondered, for one of his officers? But more often than for anyone else, he'd sat like this for one of the two members of his top team of detectives. They'd always had a knack for attracting trouble. But they also had an amazing knack for recovery, had bounced back from injuries and traumas that would have spelled the end of a career for many other officers he knew.

Not this time, Dobey thought wearily.

He glanced at the blond man beside him, a man he liked and respected, a man he valued, not only for his outstanding abilities as a cop, but on a personal level, for his compassion, his commitment, his sense of justice.

There'd been a time, a year ago, when that image of the white knight had become frayed at the edges, when Dobey had feared that the man was on the long downhill slide where cops went who'd seen too much, been on the streets too long.

Then, six months ago, the situation had exploded in the most unexpected way, tearing the team apart and leaving devastation in its wake.

Both detectives had disappeared for a week, and when they returned—together and united in a way that was both startlingly different and satisfyingly familiar—the light on their faces could have rivaled the energy output of a minor power station. Dobey had been so relieved, he'd completely forgotten to berate them for the length of their absence.

They'd thrown themselves back into their work with an enthusiasm Dobey rarely saw, not even in the idealistic type of rookie the academy turned out these days. They'd made short work of their assignments, breezed through their cases—it seemed that nothing could stand in their way, that they couldn't put a foot wrong. Their arrest record had rocketed.

They'd managed, more or less single-handedly, to dismantle one of the most extensive and powerful drug networks operating on the Pacific coast. Mighty heads had fallen, entire distribution channels been taken apart, supply branches chopped off. The prison population had swelled.

There'd only been a single glitch in the entire time, and that was when a friend of Huggy's had been killed in their custody. It had shaken them up so badly, they'd actually quit the force. Together, of course.

But even then, without guns, without badges, they'd been unable to stop doing what came naturally to them, what they were born to do—protecting and serving the community.

Now they were paying the price for that commitment.

Dobey studied the man beside him. He hadn't moved, hadn't spoken. The mask-like face was empty of all expression, the eyes unseeing, all the senses shut down. Hutch had withdrawn inside himself. Dobey had no idea what was going on in his mind.

A nurse finally brought the news that Sergeant Starsky had come out of surgery and was being settled in an observation room.

Dobey heaved himself to his feet. Beside him, Hutchinson did the same, slowly, like a man in a trance. Together, they followed the nurse to the ICU and an observation window. Stood side by side and watched as doctors and nurses fussed over a body too obscured by tubes and cables and life-preserving IV lines to be recognizable as Starsky.

The doctor who finally came to speak to them had nothing encouraging to add.

...did everything we could... emergency surgery... coma... miracle he's made it this far... not looking very good... body can only withstand... go in for a few minutes when Dr. Freeman comes out...

So they sat and waited again, Hutchinson close to the window, hands folded as if in prayer, eyes fixed unwaveringly on the prone figure in the bed.

Dobey heaved a deep sigh. It was clear what they were waiting for.

They were waiting for Starsky to die.

A chill descended Dobby's spine. The silence from the other man was beginning to press down heavily on him, and he felt an almost indecent rush of relief when he saw the approach of the lanky figure of Huggy Bear.

Tuesday evening

Huggy was the first to voice the possibility of hope.

"There's a chance," he said, uncertainly. Hearing the hesitation in his voice, he said it more forcefully. "There's always a chance."

Dobey latched onto the idea with alacrity. "Of course there's a chance! There's always a chance."

Huggy knew he had no idea what he was talking about. The message had reached him hours after the event. He couldn't even imagine what had gone down in the meantime. But Hutch's first words had shaken him almost as much as the news of Starsky's shooting.

"He's dying," Hutch had said in a voice devoid of emotion, but filled with the certainty of a man who'd seen a glimpse of the future. A future without Starsky.

Huggy was shocked. He'd expected distress and anguish. Grief and fear. Anger. Frantic pacing, maybe. Railing against fate.

But not this. Not this open, chilling certainty. There was something disturbing and almost inhuman in Hutch's resigned acceptance of the situation. Almost as if Hutch had rid himself of all emotions and there was nothing left, not even a *possibility of hope*.

So Huggy had said the first hopeful thing that came into his mind.

...there's a chance... there's always a chance...

Dobey took the idea to heart at once, but for Hutch, the very thought of hope appeared no longer to be a survival option. Huggy could see that in the dull, leaden sheen in Hutch's eyes, the look of defeat on his face.

"That was the first thing he's said in hours," Dobey told him when the doctor had emerged and Hutch had walked stiffly into Starsky's room.

They watched him anxiously through the glass. For a moment, Hutch stood motionless beside his partner's bed, gazing down at him. Then he slowly lowered himself into the chair beside the bed and stared empty-eyed at the man before him. Huggy noticed that Hutch made no attempt to touch him. That small omission was almost as painful to observe as the lifeless figure of the man in the hospital bed. It spoke volumes about Hutch's state of mind.

"How long's he been like that?"

"Pretty much all day."

The two men exchanged a worried look. Huggy shook his head in sorrow and looked away. There wasn't really anything else worth saying.

ooOOoo

But then, in the flash of a single moment, everything changed.

Huggy, rounding the corner with three paper cups of coffee in his hands, was just in time to catch the tail end of the action—Hutch in a scuffle with a white-coated orderly, Hutch sprawled on the ground, the orderly running for the swing doors, pursued by a couple of officers.

As if a bubble had burst, the purposeful, subdued tranquility of the ICU shattered into a flurry of activity. Within minutes, there were cops pouring into the unit, Dobey barking into the phone, doctors and nurses running to crowd around the body of their colleague. Suddenly, no one wanted coffee anymore.

But the most amazing change was Hutch. The ghost-like figure was transformed as Hutch exploded into action like a tiger unleashed, the empty look in his eyes replaced by a dark, cold blaze of single-minded determination.

Huggy saw the change in every word, every movement. In the way Hutch questioned staff and officers, demanded answers, issued orders. In the way he set up police protection for Starsky's room. In the way he checked the Magnum and reloaded with a cold deliberation that made clear that he wouldn't be caught unprepared for a third time that day. He saw it in the cold, chilling look in his eyes.

Huggy was not unfamiliar with that look. It was Hutch's fierce and determined side, the part that took over when Starsky was in danger, abducted or poisoned, injured or with his back against the wall. It brought out Hutch's strongest, most powerful qualities.

But he'd never seen Hutch quite like this before. This time, there was a darkness in Hutch's eyes that sent shivers down Huggy's spine. It was a look untempered by hope or fear or grief, the dangerous look of a man who had nothing left to lose.

Huggy couldn't imagine anything standing in Hutch's way now.

And certainly not Dobey.

While an improvised investigation room took shape in the waiting area, the two men stood face to face, tempers fraying, engaged in an escalating shouting match.

"...I know what's going on on the streets better than you!" Dobey roared untruthfully at the height of the exchange.

"...don't wanna sit around here," Hutch interrupted heatedly, "and wait for them to make another move."

Huggy, trapped between them, looked from one to the other, trying not to get caught in the cross-fire.

He could see Dobey's point. Someone was out to get both Starsky and Hutch. Dobey wasn't going to risk losing another one of his officers. But Dobey's dilemma was clearly the last concern on Hutch's mind. His voice rose above the confusion.

"...gotta take the offensive!"

"How?" Dobey yelled.

"We go out there," Hutch yelled back, "and find them!"

"...can't go out there on your own," Dobey bellowed. "At least wait until I find you a new partner!"

A sudden dead, chill silence fell. Hutch stood as if he'd been slapped in the face by his captain. Huggy drew in a shocked gasp. Even Dobey looked suddenly uneasy. The words hung between them for an eternal second during which Huggy didn't dare move or speak. Glancing at Hutch, he braced himself for the explosion.

The explosion never came. Instead, Hutch turned deadly calm with eyes as hard and chill as ice on a glacial lake.

"I don't need another partner," he said in a low, dark, dangerous voice that sent an icy surge of fear through Huggy's veins. "I already got one."

He turned and left, and Huggy doubted that anything could have stopped Hutch at that point. Hutch was on a crusade.

Huggy was only just in time to catch up with him.

ooOOoo

Inside the elevator, sealed from the rest of the world, Huggy contemplated his options. He had his speech ready, the upbeat one, the one that had convinced Dobey. The one he produced no matter how hopeless the situation. Had produced on many occasions in the past.

...something will turn... we'll find him, you'll see... he's gonna be OK, don't worry... he's come through worse... there's a chance... there's always a chance...

Hutch forestalled him.

"Starsky's gonna die, Hug," he said tonelessly, staring at nothing, his head leaned back against the wall. "And there ain't nothing anybody can do about it."

The voice allowed no doubt, and no room for upbeat speeches.

"But I'm still here," Hutch continued in the same monotone. "They haven't got *me* yet. And there damn well better be something *I* can do!"

Huggy almost reached out to touch him, thought better of it and withdrew his hand. He shook his head in denial. "You can't give up yet. He's alive. And he's already come through surgery. He can still make it."

Hutch turned to him then, and Huggy recoiled from the bleak knowledge reflected in the despairing eyes.

"He was shot with a 9mm automatic submachine gun," Hutch said tonelessly. "At close range. He took three bullets in the back. He was ripped apart." There wasn't even a catch in Hutch's voice as he recited the facts. "He's gonna die. No one can survive that."

The icy feet of premonition tiptoed down Huggy's back. "How can you say that?" he whispered. "How can you be so sure?"

The knowledge of the truth burned in a wild, eerie, unnatural light in the blue depths. "I don't know how," Hutch said softly. "But I know he will. I *know!*"

The elevator stopped. The doors opened and Hutch stepped out. He turned and looked at Huggy, maintaining eye contact for a brief moment, the light of his knowledge dark on his face.

Huggy was suddenly terribly afraid. For Starsky. For Hutch. Especially for Hutch. Afraid of what the shooting had done to Hutch, to his mind and soul.

He wished he knew what to do, what to say. But before he could think of the right words, the right gesture, the moment had passed. The doors closed between them, and Huggy was alone.

Sighing deeply, he pressed the button for the ICU floor. His place was with Starsky while Hutch was out there alone. It was the best he could do for both of them.

ooOOoo

Hutch crossed the hospital garage with purpose, glancing around for Dobey's car, the darkness in his heart tightly contained behind a dam of cold determination and self-control.

An orderly and a patient in a wheelchair blocked his way, and a deep instinct honed to perfection in a decade of police work jumped to high alert inside him.

Five seconds later, they were on him.

Assassins!

Here.

Again.

Hutch parried the thrust, and the knife destined for his heart glanced off and sliced into his left wrist instead.

You killed him!

You killed my partner!

The dam of his self-control cracked and shattered into a million pieces of rubble, releasing a flood of cold, black fury that swept away every value Hutch had ever held dear—compassion, justice, integrity. Took him to the edge. To the limit of his self.

The dark rage invaded every part of his being, spread to every cell in his body. Lent him a power he'd never known before. He felt it expand within him. Sensed its fire coursing through his veins.

He felt alive. Strong. Powerful. *Dangerous*. Filled with a terrible, righteous anger and a fierce, blazing need for answers. And revenge. Sweet revenge.

Hutch knew he was invincible. No force in the world could withstand him now. Here was the information he needed, and he would get it, no matter what. He knew it.

So did the assassin. Hutch saw it in his eyes. Saw the naked fear etched in a face frozen with terror.

It didn't take much to make the man talk.

And then Hutch was on the trail. He had a name and a lead. It was all he needed. Cool air enveloped him as he plunged into the night city on the hunt for his partner's killers.

It didn't matter how long it took. If it took years. Hutch would find them.

And then he would make them pay.

ooOOoo

(...)

Floating. He was floating.

Drifting in the current of a gentle stream.

It was warm and quiet. Peaceful. A fog of nothingness pressed around him. Strange, but peaceful. Relaxing.

He floated for a while, aimlessly, unconcerned.

(...)

Nothing happened for a long time. When he tried calling out, looking around, he sensed only the dense fog and the lazy current. He was alone.

Alone? I thought... I remember...

He remembered strong arms supporting him, blue eyes holding him, a beloved voice. The memory was as hazy as the view. Then it dissolved, leaving just nothingness. A strangely familiar nothingness.

I know this place. I've been here before.

There were turbulent waters ahead, and the last time, they'd almost swept him out to sea. Away from the shore. He frowned, trying to recapture the memory.

(...)

Darker. It was getting darker. The stream became a small river, and the current was gathering pace, carrying him steadily downstream.

Closer to the sea.

Tuesday night

The empty squad room lay in semi darkness; the night shift was working out of adjacent offices while the redecoration was in progress. It was after 11 pm and unnaturally quiet in the room. No ringing phones, no clattering typewriters, no voices raised in laughter or conversation. An aura of unreality still clung to the place.

Hutch stood beside the table in the center of the room, fingertips lightly touching the scarred surface. He stood completely still, completely contained.

He wasn't sure why he'd come here. He'd booked Jenny Brown and her associates, arranged for their transfer to County jail, made out the paperwork, conferred with Menendez, put in motion a series of investigations—taking great care to follow procedure to the letter.

The sympathetic stares and concerned smiles from fellow officers bounced off him like ping pong balls off a table. The squad room was a refuge, a temporary respite from the present, despite its memories of the past.

Hutch let his fingertips trail along the edge of the table. Deep inside him, his connection to Starsky lay coiled in anticipation of its rupture.

The light never *had* gone out in the midnight blue eyes. It had still been there, right to the moment when the paramedics had pumped his partner full of drugs and Starsky's lids had dropped in response.

But it made no difference. Hutch knew that Starsky was dying, knew that this time there could be no last minute miracle. This time—he knew it with an absolute chilling certainty that would have shocked him if he'd still been capable of such an emotion—this time Starsky was going to die.

He knew it because he'd seen it in Starsky's eyes, felt it bone deep, in every fiber of his body, in the pain in his own chest, in the link between them that stretched and frayed like an overused bungee.

He knew it because a part of his soul had already died. The bright, the warm, the happy part of him. The part of him that Starsky had loved and nurtured and tended until it had blazed like a beacon in a dark, desolate place.

It was only fitting that Starsky should take that part with him, on the long journey into the night. To warm him, and light his way.

It didn't matter that all he had left for himself was the darkness in his heart—the cold and dangerous part. The part that screamed revenge and burned him to the center of his soul with the chilling, powerful desire to take down with him as many of those who had dared to hurt the one person he'd ever truly loved.

There was no room left for the principles he'd once valued so highly.

I would've killed him. Right there in the hospital garage. If he hadn't given me the name, I would've shot him. In cold blood. And I wouldn't have cared. If he hadn't talked, I would've made him...

The thought didn't disturb him. He was past that kind of caring. Past all caring. Past every emotion he knew he should be feeling—grief, fear, pain.

Hutch thought he probably knew why that was.

Six months ago—six short months ago—he'd thought he'd lost Starsky for good. The pain and grief and despair of those endless three days had almost

broken him apart. Starsky had arrived only just in time to put the pieces back together again.

I can't do it again, Starsk. Can't go through all that again. I just can't. Not now, when there're still things I need to do.

Hutch thought of his lover as he lay dying in the sterile surroundings of the ICU.

He hadn't wanted to leave. But there was nothing he could do there. They wouldn't even let him sit with Starsky. Five minutes were all they'd allowed him to spend beside Starsky's bed.

It didn't matter. They'd said their good-byes on the rough tarmac in the police garage. He could sit in the ICU waiting room, or stare at his dying friend through a pane of glass. But that wouldn't help Starsky. Nothing could help Starsky now.

There was only one thing he could still do. For Starsky. And for himself.

Forgive me, Starsk. Forgive me for what I'm about to do. I'll find out who did this. And then I'll take them down, one by one. And if the law stands in my way, I'll do it on my own. With my bare hands if I have to.

He didn't question the destructive longings in his heart, the powerful craving for revenge. Didn't know and didn't care what black pit deep inside his soul they had crawled from. All he knew was that he needed to finish this task before he was no longer capable of functioning. Nothing was more important. And that didn't leave him much time.

It wasn't a conscious decision at all. It was simply the only course of action open to him.

ooOOoo

Dark. It was almost completely dark now. And the river had become wide and deep and swift. Soon, the current would reach the ocean and sweep him out to sea.

Time to get back then. Hutch would be getting worried.

Hutch!

The blanket of fog was ripped away and he suddenly remembered. Everything. And knew what was happening. The current was taking him away from Hutch.

No! Can't let that happen.

He began to fight the flow, but a powerful undertow took hold of him and pulled him into a rush of chaotic waters where the river met the sea. The turbulences were wild and strong, and he was helpless against them.

The swirling waters embraced him, held him, rushed him away from the shore. He lost all sense of time and place. All sense of direction. The ties that linked him to the land were snapping off, one by one.

A wild pain shot through him and he thought he cried out.

The mist closed around him.

Darkness fell.

ooOOoo

Street lights filtered into the room, illuminating the scaffolds, the table, the ping pong ball sitting beside the phone, looking forlorn and out of place. Hutch picked it up, gripped it tightly in his hand. Walked to the window and glanced at the empty street below.

He felt strangely restless, uneasy, like a wild creature sensing an approaching storm, or an imminent earthquake. The silence in the squad room deepened to an eerie calm.

And that's when he felt it. His connection to Starsky. It stirred within him, stretched. Pulled at him.

A sudden sharp pain in his chest made him gasp.

And he knew.

It's happening. It's happening now...

He'd been expecting it, had known it would happen, had even imagined he was ready for it, but nothing had prepared him for the onslaught of terror in his heart when it finally did.

The terror brought down an avalanche of grief and fear, and Hutch staggered under its weight. Everything gave way before it. The walls of his darkness crumpled, the black rage in his mind was swept away, the crippling anger in his heart shattered until all that was left was the fear and the pain and the horror of their separation.

Starsky.

He's leaving me.

Oh God, Starsky...

He had to know, to make sure. He snatched up the phone, dialed the number with shaking hands.

It took an eternity for Dobby to come on the line.

"How is he?"

As if he didn't already know.

"I think you better get down here right away, Hutch."

One simple sentence—a world of meaning. Hutch reeled as the truth was confirmed.

Starsky is dying. He's leaving me. And I'm not there!

In a flash, everything that had seemed of such overwhelming importance only a moment ago dulled to utter insignificance. Revenge? Retribution? God, what had he been thinking? Starsky was dying. And he wasn't there.

Dear God, what am I doing here? Why am I not with him?

I gotta be with him.

Hutch dropped the receiver. Dropped the ball. Ran.

Knowing he wouldn't make it, that he'd get there too late.

ooOOoo

In the moment of darkness, he saw light. Saw visions and truths he knew he shouldn't be able to see.

In the moment of death, he saw... life. Lives.

Lives upon lives. Hundreds and thousands, stretching into the past and away into the future. And layers. Layers of lives in every direction, branching out into tree-like structures of what was, what would be, what might have been.

Possibilities. Choices.

He saw, in the brief flash of light, his life as it was, as it might be, as it might have been. He saw the choices he'd made in the past branch out into different futures. Everything was there. Every decision he'd ever made, every choice, every action he'd taken—each one the start of a new branch. So many branches. So many possibilities.

And all of them in some way connected, intertwined with Hutch's.

No. Not all of them. There were branches where the connection was broken, separate strands leading to separate futures—vivid reminders of what might have been. What ifs, suspended in time.

...what if Hutch hadn't recovered from the plague... if I'd died from the poison... if Hutch hadn't found me on time at the zoo... if we'd lost each other, six months ago...

The branches lead to bleak and lonely futures.

What if I can't make it back? Will Hutch's future look like that?

In the moment of confusion, he saw answers.

He saw... Hutch trapped in shadows. Alone. Torn apart. Imprisoned in a place without light and joy and happiness. A future where the shadows had claimed every happy thought, every bright memory, every warm feeling.

It's Hutch's dark side. And his light is here with me.

If I give up, I'll take his light with me and he'll fall into the darkness. And I'd never find him again.

I'd lose him forever...

Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe he could still make it back. Maybe he still had a choice. Wasn't there a possibility of a future that contained both him and Hutch?

There might be, the voice of his knowledge told him. But a future with its own darkness. There will be pain. More pain than you can imagine. And maybe worse.

I don't care.

I can't leave him. I don't care what it takes.

He renewed his struggle against the flow, frantic now, desperate. But he couldn't do it. The currents were too powerful and he was getting weaker. And Hutch was so far away.

Hutch. Where are you? I need you.

Help me.

Hold me.

I can't do it alone.

Then, suddenly, somehow, like a spell, Hutch was there again. Just like that. A strong, familiar force connecting him to the shore. Holding him. Lending him the strength he needed to break away from the current. His anchor. His lifeline. The one link to the shore that had never been broken.

Always there when I need you, huh?

Slowly, he fought his way out of the turbulence, back into calmer waters. The connection to the shore felt strong and durable. He relaxed. Everything would be all right. Hutch wouldn't let him slip away now.

In the distance, a warm, familiar glow broke the darkness like a lighthouse beacon, showing the way. He lay back and let himself drift toward the light.

ooOOoo

Hutch flew down the stairs, into the street, to the car. Revved the engine, raced the vehicle through the empty streets. Took corners at a tilt. Starsky himself couldn't have done it better.

But I'm not gonna make it. It'll be too late. Too late...

It would take at least ten minutes to get there.

I should've been there. Should never have left him. Why? Why did I leave him? My place is with him.

His vision narrowed, allowing only fleeting glimpses of the world, forever frozen in his mind, flies entombed in amber. The hospital entrance, corridors, an elevator, and finally, the ICU, a crowd of people.

He ignored the crowd, rushed toward the window, almost collided with the man who stepped from the room and into his path. One of the surgeons. Freeman? Morgan?

A buzz of words, of voices. Hutch couldn't make them out. He clutched the man's arms, trying to push past him into the room.

"...he's alive. I'll be damned if he isn't alive..."

Alive?

"But... he *died*."

"Cardiac arrest. He had no spontaneous heart beat for almost three minutes. Yes, in a way you could say he died."

"You mean he's... he's..."

"He's alive. I was sure we'd lost him, but then he suddenly responded."

He's alive. He's alive.

Hutch was shaking, hardly aware that Huggy and Dobey were supporting up on either side. Only one thought penetrated to the small pit in hell he'd called home for the past 14 hours.

He died. I knew he would.

But he came back.

He came back.

A wild rush of hope assaulted him with a force powerful enough to knock him off his feet. He swayed, and the hold on his arms tightened. He was being pushed into a chair, steadying hands on his arms, a glass of water pressed against his lips.

Starsky died. And he came back.

I never thought there was a chance he'd come back.

"He died," he whispered, brushing the glass away, trying to struggle to his feet again. Insistent hands held him down, forced the glass back to his lips. "And he *came back!*"

He blinked, took a ragged breath, looked up into the faces of the men he knew, and the others, strangers. Wonder made his voice go hoarse.

"He came back," he whispered to the blur of faces. "He's alive."

It was a miracle. A resurrection. Starsky had come back to him.

My God, he's alive!

Voices swirled around him, and he had no idea what they were saying. He felt free, liberated, drunk with hope. Starsky had died and come back. Starsky was alive. Hutch leaned back his head and laughed. Or maybe it was a sob. He wasn't quite sure.

A deep, unfamiliar voice filtered through his euphoria.

...still in a coma... take him back to surgery now... re-opened some stitches... more damage... amazing will to live, but... no guarantee he is going to make it...

Hutch shot from his seat and had his hands entwined in a white doctor's coat before anyone could stop him.

"He came back," he exclaimed to the unknown face before him. "He's alive. He's *gotta* make it now. He's gotta." He shook the man in the coat.

Soothing hands detached him from his target. The blurred vision cleared, and Hutch found himself face to face with a man he'd never seen before. There was an expression of compassion and understanding on the smooth Asian face.

"Mr. Hutchinson, please listen to me. I am Dr. Patel. Your friend has suffered a cardiac arrest. My colleagues have managed to bring him back, but he is in critical condition. We are taking him back to the operating theater right now. Maybe we can tell you more after the surgery."

Wrong, Hutch thought. So wrong. They hadn't "*managed to bring him back*". Starsky had *come* back. His choice. His decision to come back.

"But I think you should not raise your hopes too high," the cultured, faintly accented voice continued. "We cannot be sure at this stage, but we think that one of the bullets grazed his spine. Even if he recovers, there is still a chance of paralysis."

Hutch's head snapped up. Paralysis?

Dark eyes gazed at him sympathetically. "I also think you should prepare yourself for another possible outcome." Patel hesitated for a fraction. "His brain was starved of oxygen for nearly three minutes. It is a remote chance, but until he comes out of the coma, we won't know if there is any damage..."

Hutch stared at him in horror. What was the man saying? What was he trying to say? Brain damage?

Oh, my God. Brain damage?

No. No, no, no. Please, no. Oh please, no.

Not possible. Not that. Not brain damage. Please, no...

The brief-lived blaze of hope died down to a glimmer as Hutch exchanged one set of nightmares for another, equally terrifying one.

Brain damage? Paralysis?

Dazed, Hutch sank into the chair behind him, the faces around him congealing to a blur of shapes and color. He looked up with an effort.

"Can I see him?" he whispered.

"Maybe for a few minutes when he comes out of surgery."

ooOOoo

More waiting. More hours of sitting and staring at smooth white walls. But something was different. Hutch was different. He could feel it, and he knew the others felt it, too. He'd reached and crossed a watershed.

Before, he hadn't been able to afford to hope. Now he knew that despite everything, he couldn't afford not to.

Starsky had come back. For him. There was no doubt about that in Hutch's mind. There was only one thing Hutch could do in return. Hope. He had to hope, had to cling to that hope for dear life. His own. And Starsky's.

Starsky's return had made that hope possible.

When he was finally allowed into Starsky's room again, in the early hours of the new day, he felt the change in everything around him—in the air, in the low-pitched beeps of the heart monitor, the rhythmic sounds of the respirator, in the beating of his own heart.

For a moment, he stood beside Starsky's bed, looking down at the pale still face, letting his eyes wander over the familiar features. So still. So frighteningly still. But alive.

Awe welled up inside Hutch as he gazed at the beloved face half obscured by the paraphernalia of life-sustaining machinery.

You came back.

You died and came back anyway.

He felt numb. Stunned.

They'd taken the chair away, but Hutch didn't need one. He crouched beside the bed on Starsky's left side—his good side, his undamaged side—and simply looked at his friend in wonder. After a long moment of hesitation, he reached out and took Starsky's hand in both of his own.

The hand was cold. So cold. So unlike Starsky.

But alive. Alive.

I thought death would be the end. I thought...

He took a deep shuddering breath. Slowly, he reached out to brush his fingers over the cool forehead, smooth out the tangle of dark hair.

You cheated death. For me.

He let his fingers linger in the wiry curls.

And brought me back from the edge. Again.

A hard lump settled in his throat.

How, how did you do that?

Hutch pressed his lips to the cold hand, stroked his thumb over the tender skin at Starsky's temple. Felt a faint pulse under his fingertips, evidence of a beating heart.

And at what price?

God, at what price?

He squeezed his eyes shut and rested his forehead on Starsky's hand, willing the thought away.

There were firm footsteps behind him, a hand on his shoulder like a silent command, and he rose obediently. One last look at the unnaturally pale figure, one final touch of the cool cheek, and then he was out in corridor again and the door closed between them.

Part II : Wednesday

At two in the morning, Huggy finally managed to persuade Hutch and Dobby to go home for a while.

"I'll stay," he assured the exhausted detectives. "There ain't nothin' you can do right now. No point in all three of us sittin' here all night. I'll call you if there's any change."

The doctors had pronounced him stable. In a coma. Critical. But stable. Whatever that meant.

"Come on, Hutch, I'll take you home."

Dobby dropped him at Venice Place, and Hutch didn't have the heart to tell him that this wasn't home right now. Without going in, without even glancing at his apartment, Hutch got into his own car and drove over to Starsky's place.

He let himself in, locked the door behind him, dropped gun, holster, jacket on the nearest chair. Stumbled wearily into the middle of the room. Looked around, vaguely surprised to find that nothing had changed even though his entire world had broken to pieces.

For a moment, he felt dizzy, lightheaded. Detached from everything, even from himself. His hands found the back of the rug-covered couch and dug in for support.

Starsky's place...

Starsky's was a place of many things. A place of fun and laughter, music and pizza, late night monopoly and re-runs on TV. A place of love and companionship. A place of safety away from the harsh realities of their working lives.

Lately, it had also been the place of some spectacular love-making. In fact, only last night...

Last night. Only a day ago.

...Starsky hovering above him, gazing down at him, laughter in the clear blue eyes...

...Starsky swooping down for a quick kiss before running expert hands over his lover's chest, his stomach, down to his straining cock...

...Starsky stroking his balls, his cheeks, caressing the tight entrance with the fingers and the tongue of a master, making him feel so good, so good...

And finally, when he'd been close to screaming with need and want and frustration, finally, the touch he'd been longing for, the moment when Starsky's tip stroked the sensitive skin of his opening and Starsky slipped inside him, slowly at first, slowly, until Hutch pushed back against him in desperation...

Ah, it was heaven. It was paradise. Nothing, nothing compared to having Starsky inside him, feeling so close, so close.

Tough, strong, loving Starsky. Young and wild and full of life.

He could still hear Starsky's voice, crying out in ecstasy. And his own as it mingled with Starsky's at the height of their passion.

Only last night. A lifetime ago.

Then he heard Starsky's voice again, different this time. Softer. Another memory of the night before.

'Hold me, Hutch. Promise you won't let me go...'

And Hutch's stomach gave a sudden, violent lurch that forced a moan from his throat, and he only just made it to the bathroom. Retching up what little food Huggy had managed to get down him earlier that night—helplessly, painfully—arms clutched around his heaving stomach, reeling with the shock of a sudden, terrible realization.

I gave up!

I gave up on you!

Horror flooded through him.

I promised I'd never let you go. But I did.

I did.

Never even gave you a chance...

The strength went out of his legs when he realized what he had done, and he collapsed against the tiled wall.

I wasn't there for you when you needed me most. I should've been there, fighting alongside you.

Instead, I left you alone.

To die.

He groaned with despair and buried his head in his hands.

And I wasn't even there with you when it happened.

Grief filled the hollow spaces in his heart.

Oh God, Starsk, I'm sorry. I'm sorry...

He crouched on the bathroom floor, his head on his arms, drained and sick at heart, while the events of the day passed in a jumble before his inner eye. But they made no sense. Nothing made any sense at all.

Finally, wearily, he pulled himself to his feet, splashed cold water on his face, walked unsteadily into the bedroom and toppled onto the bed like a felled tree. The bed, like everything else in the apartment, was permeated with memories of Starsky. Hutch buried his face in Starsky's pillow and inhaled the familiar scent.

I gave up on you.

And you came back anyway.

Hugging the pillow, he dropped into a fitful sleep. Slowly sank down through the layers to the deepest part of himself where his connection to Starsky had its home.

But the place was empty. Starsky wasn't there anymore.

Jerked awake, shaking, covered in sweat and strangled with fear. Until reason reasserted itself, and memories of the day before, and hope made his heart beat again.

He's alive.

There's a chance. Maybe there really is a chance.

ooOOoo

At 5.30 in the morning, he was back in the ICU. Back in Starsky's room, on a hard-backed chair beside the bed.

Stared at the respirator, the heart monitor, and all the other machines that fought to keep Starsky from sliding away again. Gazed hungrily at the face more familiar to him than his own. Moved his thumb in gentle circles over the back of the lifeless hand held fast in his own.

Fear and hope were pulling at him from different directions. The certainty of Starsky's death had brought out a darkness Hutch hadn't known he possessed. The uncertainty of his recovery brought out demons of a different sort.

Paralysis? Brain damage?

Starsky in a wheelchair? Starsky's quirky mind dimmed forever? His memory shrouded in fog? Maybe never recognizing him? Never knowing Hutch again?

Hutch couldn't take it in. Couldn't wrap his mind around the concept.

He'd never felt more helpless, more frightened in his life. Starsky could still die. After everything, they were right back to square one.

With one difference: Starsky's spectacular return from the netherworld had ransomed what Hutch had already thought lost forever: his soul, his life, his humanity. The bright part of him, the part that allowed him to hope, to fear, to grieve. The part he'd wanted Starsky to take away with him. And Starsky had refused to do so.

You've given me back myself.

Hutch clutched the hand more securely.

And now?

Anything could happen now. Starsky could still be taken away. Or worse...

He had to hold onto the hope, cling to it with everything he had. Starsky was still fighting, and this time, Hutch would be right beside him.

He wouldn't let Starsky down again.

ooOOoo

The nurse, seeing that he did no harm, ignored the five minute rule and let him stay.

"You should talk to him," she advised instead. "It may seem strange, but coma patients often hear what's going on around them. Imagine what that must do for them—hearing the voice of someone they love?"

Hutch gave a start. Starsky could hear him?

He looked at the closed eyes, the pale face—unreceptive, motionless. Starsky was far, far away in limbo between two worlds. How could a voice from the land of the living reach him?

Still, he'd do anything, try anything if there was a shadow of a chance that it might make a difference.

Hutch started talking. He told Starsky about the investigation, the assault in the hospital garage, the leads on Jenny Brown, before he interrupted himself. Maybe this wasn't what Starsky needed to hear right now.

So when the nurse left the room, he talked about the past instead, starting with Lake Mirror Falls. He talked about the cabin, the lake, the hot springs. The evenings before the fire. The long leisurely hours spent exploring each other, discovering each other.

The past came alive before Hutch's eyes.

...Starsky engaged in a playful impromptu strip tease laid on for the benefit of an appreciative Hutch...

...Starsky stretched out on the rug before the fire place, gloriously naked, the flames of the fire drawing shapes of light and shadow on the muscular body...

...Starsky in his arms, his tough, masculine body molded against his own, at times soft and yielding, at times rough and wild, but always exciting. So exciting...

Hutch recalled the moments wistfully.

No matter what happened, Lake Mirror Falls would always be a small piece of paradise trapped forever in Hutch's heart. Nothing could take that away.

"And remember the journey back?" he whispered to an unresponsive Starsky. "In our two cars? You told me to drive in front because you were worried my car would conk out on the way back. But I think the real reason was that you could keep an eye on me. Every time I checked the mirror, I could see you looking at me." Hutch smiled to himself. "I don't think either of us paid much attention to the traffic that day."

It had taken forever to get back to LA, due mainly to the frequent stops on the way. First for gas, then for coffee, then again for lunch. Any excuse, really, to leave the isolation of their separate cars and come together, lock eyes, touch, sit close together in a booth in a diner.

They'd finally reached Venice, and there'd never been a question of driving on to Starsky's. Too far. Too long. They'd only just made it inside the door before they were on each other, starved for each other.

That night was the first of so many spent in each other's arms at one apartment or the other.

You wanted us to have six decades together. And we've barely had six months.

Six glorious, deliriously happy months. Ended in just a few seconds. In a hail of bullets.

It couldn't last, could it? In the end, there's always a price to pay.

But did it have to be Starsky? a voice cried out inside him. Why, why did it have to be Starsky?

My beautiful, strong, vibrant Starsky. So alive. So full of the joy of living.

Pain clawed at Hutch and he bowed his head under the force of the assault.

Why Starsky? Dear God, why couldn't it have been me? I'd have paid the price. Gladly.

The pain was a living, hungry beast in his heart.

I'd do anything, anything at all to have you back.

I'd sell my soul to the devil...

"If you can really hear me, Starsky, then hear this. You promised me six decades. I take you at your word. I want those six decades! So don't you dare give up on me now. Just come back. Come back to me."

ooOOoo

At 10 am, Dr. Freeman invaded the room accompanied by a small troop of medical students, interns, specialists and nurses, evicted Hutch from his spot beside the bed and told him not to come back for a couple of hours while they performed essential medical and nursing tasks. Hutch lingered for a while outside the window until they drew the curtains and shut him out.

Reluctantly, Hutch went in search of his captain. In the small investigation room, Huggy was trying to interest a preoccupied Dobey in a selection of food items. The room was filled with the smell of them. Hutch's empty stomach churned and he turned away, feeling sick.

Two minutes later, he felt even sicker.

Jenny Brown had been bailed from prison by persons unknown.

In a flash, he knew what he had to do. Starsky's return had saved him from a desperate, suicidal drive to bring the perpetrators of the crime to justice. But that didn't mean that Hutch had given up the case. No.

Menendez was a capable officer. The investigation was in good hands and while Starsky needed him, Hutch was content to let other cops do the leg work. But Menendez knew, and Dobey knew, and everybody else in the department knew

that Menendez was only filling in. This was Hutch's case, and no one was in any doubt about that.

This matter was something he could deal with himself. *Had* to deal with himself. This, he sensed, was important. The visit to the bail shark would only take an hour. He'd be back before the doctors had finished.

Leaving Starsky felt... *wrong*. Pure and simple.

And having Huggy by his side felt like another betrayal.

But in the end, it was Huggy who hit pay dirt, Huggy who obtained—by means not usually open to a cop—the phone listings that blew the case wide open.

And gave them a lead on one of the most powerful men in the United States.

ooOOoo

Roberto Menendez, his much younger partner Stanton hovering at his elbow, received the torn pages with amazement.

"How did you get this? Gunther? *Madre mía*, you mean *the* Gunther?"

Hutch nodded.

"Damn, Hutch, what the hell did you do to piss him off?" Menendez asked, awed.

"That's what we need to find out."

They were clustered together in the small waiting room at the ICU. The captain, Hutchinson, Stanton and himself. They'd driven straight over when Dobey had called. *New evidence*, he'd said.

Oh yeah. Not evidence that would stand up in court, that much was clear, but nonetheless evidence that pointed squarely at one man. James Marshall Gunther, the man who might have been president.

Menendez glanced at the other two men. Their captain looked disheveled and haggard with anxiety. And Hutch... Hutch barely looked human. Menendez hurt simply looking at him.

He saw a man on the edge of his fear, barely holding on through the layers of his pain. Imprisoned in a nightmare with very little hope at the end of it. And despite that, he'd gone out, following a lead, and had gotten results within minutes. It was hard to believe.

"I've started goin' through your recent cases," Stanton said tensely, looking at Hutch. "To see if there's a connection."

Menendez suppressed a grim smile. The kid had a serious case of hero worship. Ever since they'd started handling the case, he'd been on a high. And he wasn't the only one. There was only one current topic of conversation at the station—the assassination attempt on the legendary Starsky & Hutchinson team.

"Take a look at the McClellan case, and at our recent drugs busts," Hutch suggested.

"Federal judge McClellan?" Dobby frowned. "Why d'you think he was involved?"

"Call it a hunch."

Not blinking an eye, Dobby nodded at Stanton. "OK. Check it out." Dobby had obviously learned to trust in Hutch's hunches.

They spent a few more minutes tossing ideas around and finally broke up the meeting. Stanton pocketed the evidence, Dobby got on the radio to raise Collins, and Hutch was on his way out the door.

"Hutch!" The blond man hesitated and looked back. Menendez followed him into the hall, Stanton like a shadow behind him.

"Hutch, I hate to do this, but I need to ask. Is there anything else you remember about the two guys in the car? Ages, appearance, anything? Did you get a look at them at all?"

Hutch's face looked grey in the harsh glare of the overhead lights. So did his eyes, the vivid blue faded to a smudged dull hue.

"Never got the chance," he said. "It was over in seconds." The pain-filled eyes turned inward and Menendez knew that Hutch was back at the scene, reliving the moment of the shooting.

"I only got a glimpse of them. The driver was young, mid-20s, white. The other was older, late 30s maybe, white, light colored hair. Sta..." He faltered. Took a shaky breath and pulled himself together in a way that was painful to see. "Starsky had his back to them. He... didn't see them until I called out."

Madre de Dios, Menendez thought and shivered.

"I got down," Hutch continued tonelessly, "and he took the heat."

There was a small silence.

"But if you called out," Stanton finally ventured hesitantly, "why didn't he get down?"

Grief flooded across Hutch's face. "He had nowhere to go," he whispered. "He knew they'd get him. They were so close. They'd've gotten him even if he'd dropped."

He looked up, straight into Stanton's eyes. "But if he had, they might've just got me, too, y'see?"

Stanton's blinked at him, speechless.

Hutch's gaze dropped away from him. "Excuse me," he said in a tightly controlled voice and walked stiffly away. Down to Starsky's room.

Menendez took a deep breath and looked at Stanton. His young partner looked stunned.

"Christ Almighty, d'you believe that?" Stanton said. "That he did that? I mean that's what he said, right? He said that Starsky... I mean, I knew the bullets could've gone through the car, but... Jesus Christ!"

Menendez sighed. He could already imagine the story making the rounds in the station, growing with each telling. Starsky was already everyone's idol. Now he would be elevated to status of demigod.

He shrugged. If anyone deserved it, it was the dark-haired New Yorker. Menendez had a healthy amount of respect for the man. But to go to such lengths to protect one's partner? He cast another glance at Stanton, his partner of only two months' standing. Remembered Lorenzo, his old one recently transferred. No, he couldn't imagine it.

"They're more than partners," he said. "They're friends. They're closer than any other team I know. Not surprising after everything they've gone through. I could tell you stories..."

"Yeah?" Stanton asked eagerly.

"Oh yeah. They've been shot, stabbed, poisoned, kidnapped, survived car crashes, explosions, assassination attempts and even that plague virus last year—you must've heard about that? And that's just the official cases. No one knows how much more was hushed up."

Stanton's face was a picture of amazement. "Jeez..." he said, uncertainly.

"Yeah, those two have gone through stuff you wouldn't believe. Stuff they don't tell you about at the academy. They've cheated death so many times; some say they must've made a special deal with the grim reaper. And mark my words—this isn't over yet. He's tough, Starsky. I wouldn't be surprised if he came around and amazed us all."

ooOOoo

It was Wednesday evening. Hutch sat hunched over on a chair in the corridor, shut out once again from Starsky's presence.

His mind was locked in a re-run of the previous day's events.

You only had a second to make up your mind, and that's what you decided, didn't you? To do what you could to protect me.

A sudden irrational burst of anger shook his frame.

I told you to get down, goddammit! Why don't you ever do as you're told?

Because Starsky was Starsky. Because Starsky thought for himself. Because Starsky did what was necessary to keep Hutch safe. Because Starsky loved him.

Hutch's anger fell apart.

I was so arrogant. I thought that I could keep you out of danger just by being there and watching your back. I thought no one else could do that as well as I. But they gunned you down right in front of me, feet away from me, and there was nothing I could do. On the contrary. Maybe if I hadn't been there...

That way madness lay, and Hutch closed his mind to the thought.

But he couldn't stop the memories. Of the seconds of the shooting, of the surreal dream as it turned into the nightmare from hell. Relived the moment again and again. The black-and-white. The collision. The sudden, heart-stopping knowledge of impending disaster. The next few seconds completely at the mercy of reflex and instinct overriding all conscious thought.

The glass. The gun. The fleeing car.

The silence.

The blood.

Starsky warm in his arms, looking up at him, dying.

Except he didn't die.

He didn't die!

Hutch leaned his forehead against the observation window and took a deep shuddering breath.

Oh, Starsk. Where are you, babe?

Come back to me. Please come back.

I love you. I need you...

ooOOoo

"Hey, brother, how're y'doin'?"

Huggy. Sounding uncharacteristically muted. Hesitation in his voice. Hutch looked up and saw his lanky friend hovering beside him like a specter.

"Night shift's here. You wanna go home for a while?"

"Night shift?"

"Yeah. Thought I'd take over for a while. You been here all day."

Something inside Hutch melted at the sight of his friend. Dependable. Always there. The hard lump in his throat grew a little bigger. Soon, Hutch wouldn't be able to breathe around it anymore. He blinked up at the other man.

"God, Hug," he said softly. "How do we deserve a friend like you? Every time there's a crisis, you drop everything and you're there for us. The things you've done for us over the years... Even when we cock up..."

"Hey, you goin' soft on me now?"

Hutch smiled weakly. "Trying not to."

They gazed at each other for a moment. Finally, Huggy dragged another chair over and settled down with a sigh. They sat in silence for a while.

"I was serious, you know," Hutch glanced at Huggy. "I haven't even thanked you for your help this morning, have I? Or for being there yesterday? For always being there when we need you?"

Huggy looked embarrassed. "Aw, man, cut it out. 'Course, I'm there when you need me."

"Yeah, and when it's the other way round, we let you down."

A small silence.

"You mean Lionel," Huggy finally said flatly. "We've talked about that. It's in the past. I've long since forgiven you for that. You know that."

"For a while, we thought we'd lost your friendship for good."

"Yeah, for a while, so did I. But then I realized that for Starsky, it was a choice between you and Lionel. And that ain't a contest. Starsky couldn't *not* have gone after you when he saw you in danger. It was a human thing to do."

"It was an unprofessional thing to do. Fact is—we screwed up."

"Now ain't the time to go on a guilt trip," Huggy told him sternly. "I know you felt bad. You quit because of Lionel. And you went back because it was the right thing to do. I wouldn't have said it at the time, but I'm glad you went back."

"See what happened because we went back!" Hutch roared. "If we hadn't... If we'd found another job, or if the mayor hadn't... God, if I'd just... Damn, I don't know. I just don't know. Why? Why did we go back?"

"Because you had to." There was no doubt in Huggy's voice. "Because it's what you do. What you're meant to do."

"*Meant* to do? Fate, you mean? Gimme a break."

"Fate. Destiny. Meant to happen. Call it what you like."

"Right. So then all this," Hutch waved his hand helplessly to include the ICU, the room, Starsky, "was meant to happen? You can't be serious. Life doesn't work that way."

"That ain't what you said in the elevator yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

Hutch had a sudden flash of recollection. The elevator. What he'd said. What he'd known. The certainty of his knowledge. The moment seemed a hundred years ago, in a forgotten past.

"Yeah," Huggy said. "Yesterday. When you told me in no uncertain terms that Starsky would die. And he did. How did you know that if some things weren't meant to happen?"

Hutch was shaking. "It didn't. He didn't..." He faltered.

"He died. Just like you said."

"But I... That's not..."

"Yeah, I know. You didn't look beyond that moment 'cause you didn't believe there'd *be* a beyond. Maybe if you'd looked..."

"And if I'd looked? What would I have seen? Something even worse? Maybe something..." Hutch felt his voice crack and shut his mouth quickly. He couldn't afford to go to pieces. Not now. Not yet. And Huggy didn't deserve the flak.

He closed his eyes in weariness. Jerked back to full awareness when a hand touched his forearm.

"Have you had that seen to at all?"

"What?"

"Your hand. You still have that same old bandage on it. Has anyone cleaned it properly yet?"

Hutch almost laughed with derision. "My *hand*? Starsky's lying there with his chest ripped to shreds and you're worried about *my hand*?"

"Yeah. You've no idea where that knife's been. Could've been rusty. I wouldn't want Starsky to wake up and discover you're down with an infection. Or somethin'. C'mon."

Huggy hauled him to his feet. "Let's go find a nurse. Can't believe you spent all day in this place and no one's bothered to check this out. And when we're done, you're gonna lie down on those there chairs and get some sleep. I'll wake you if anything happens."

ooOOoo

He was floating again. The water was warm and peaceful. The turbulence lay far behind him.

But the shore was still so far away.

Take your time. Don't rush. You aren't ready yet.

He lay back and relaxed, letting a landward current carry him slowly closer to the land.

In the distance, the warm, familiar light shone bright and steady through the mist. He'd be all right as long as the light was there to guide him.

Thursday

Sometime around 2 or 3 in the morning, in another fit of sleeplessness, Hutch hit on a temporary coping strategy.

Faced with the horrors of the present and the uncertainties of the future, Hutch escaped into the past instead. It was the only way to stop the memories of the shooting.

Hutch's mind roamed back through time. He remembered...

...Thanksgiving. Two weeks after their lives had taken the most amazing turn.

They were at Starsky's. Hutch had gone all out to prepare the most lavish, most sumptuous Thanksgiving spread, with a turkey big enough to feed the entire zebra unit. There was so much to be thankful for.

Maybe it was the stuffing, or the size of the bird, or maybe the fact that they were eating it in bed that made them end up not just with turkey inside them, but with turkey grease all over them.

"Off to the tub," Starsky commanded, when he'd licked the last piece of stuffing off Hutch's stomach.

They scrubbed each other clean, and when they were done, they lay back and soaked up the heat of the water—Hutch reclining against Starsky's broad chest, Starsky's arms and legs securely wrapped around him. Happiness filled every part of Hutch. Close. So close. Hutch hadn't thought it was possible to be this close to another human being.

Starsky seemed to be reading his mind.

"Hey, Hutch," he said.

"Hmmm?"

"You close enough to me now?"

"Hm? What d'you mean?"

"You said that the other night. You said that you wanted to be closer to me. You said you wanted to crawl inside my skin and never come out."

Hutch remembered the moment well. Part of him wanted to cringe when he recalled the embarrassing scene he'd created when he'd bared his soul to Starsky and fallen completely apart in the process.

Starsky nibbled lovingly at the top of his ear and added softly, "Cause there's a way you can do that, y' know."

Hutch stopped breathing. He turned to face his partner. "You mean...?"

Starsky nodded, watching Hutch closely. "Don't you want that?"

Hutch hauled in a lungful of air. "Yes," he admitted quietly, eyes on his hands. "I want that. But..."

"But what?"

He looked up to find a glimmer of uncertainty in Starsky's deep blue eyes. "I thought... I thought it'd be the other way round. I want you inside me so bad."

Starsky laughed with relief and the small uncertainty melted away. "Hey, get in line! Today's my show. You can have a go tomorrow, if you like."

He reached out under the water, put both hands on Hutch's hips and pulled him close again. Hutch looked at him with a complex mixture of fear, hesitation, excitement and concern in his heart.

"Are you sure?"

"Mm-hmm!" Starsky leaned into him. "I wanna give you everything I can. I wanna show you that I'm yours, body and soul."

Hutch swallowed hard. "I... don't wanna hurt you."

"OK, so it's gonna hurt a little the first time. It doesn't matter. I still want it. I want *you!*"

"What... in here?"

"Yeah, why not in here? It's perfect. Nice and relaxing."

"Too damn relaxing," muttered Hutch. A cover-up job.

"Not so that you'd notice," teased Starsky, not taken in. He brushed suggestively against Hutch's already swelling member, and Hutch's cock rose to the occasion. "See? There's life!"

A slow change came over Hutch. The fear and hesitation fell away in layers, revealing a vast reservoir of love and a sudden surge of desire. "Okay," he said slowly. "Okay." His stomach gave an unexpected lurch.

We're gonna do this. It's really gonna happen.

He looked at Starsky and saw excitement in his eyes, tinged with a dose of apprehension. But Hutch had the situation under control. "Wait," he said, climbed out of the tub and retrieved a small tube from the bathroom cabinet.

"Antiseptic cream?" giggled Starsky when Hutch slid back into the water. "Just what exactly're you plannin' to do?"

"That's all there is. Unless you prefer turkey grease," said Hutch deadpan.

"Hm, maybe not."

They looked at each other. "You scared?" Hutch whispered.

Starsky hesitated. "A little. You?"

Hutch laughed. "Terrified!" He slung an arm round Starsky and hugged him. "C'mon. Let's get this show on the road."

ooOOoo

The muted lights of the ICU blurred into each other when the memories of that day came to life before Hutch's inner eye.

At first, the situation had all the makings of a farce descending into complete disaster—tenseness, awkwardness, the narrow confines of the tub. The distinct

impression that there were too many legs between them and no room to put them.

"Dammit, couldn't we have done this in bed instead?"

A suppressed giggle from Starsky.

"Stop that," Hutch admonished him. "Can't you be serious about anything? I'm trying my best to do this right."

Outright laughter. Stopped only when Hutch silenced the sound with a kiss and dipped them both under water. "You're not being much help," he complained when they'd re-surfaced.

They untangled their limbs, kissed some more, their cocks bobbed back up with renewed interest—and the situation slowly shifted into a different gear.

Starsky—glistening and slick with water, the curly fur on his chest matted with soap bubbles, sprawling invitingly with his legs up on the bathtub rim.

Hutch—kneeling before him, touching, exploring, caressing in a new way, using slow, deliberate movements that were in complete contrast to the wild, uncontrolled frenzy of their feverish encounter earlier that night.

Very slowly, very cautiously, Hutch entered the tight opening. *So tight. So hot.* So different from anything he'd known before. Sparks of light flared up before Hutch's eyes, and he gasped for breath, trembling with the strain of maintaining control.

Starsky emitted a low moan and dug his hands into Hutch's wet hair, hard. The thick shaft of his cock stood proud and strong in Hutch's hand. Hutch wanted to weep with joy, laugh with the exquisite agony of their closeness.

Starsky, Starsky, Starsky...

Starsky suddenly jerked beneath him and cried out, but Hutch couldn't have said if it was a cry of pain or pleasure or a mixture of both.

"You OK?" he panted.

"Yes, yes, yes! I'm OK. I'm great. Don't worry 'bout me! Keep goin'!"

And then Hutch was inside, all the way in, moving slowly, deliberately. Heat exploded inside him.

Starsky. I'm inside you. You're all around me!

Hutch cried out, joy and pleasure and love and all his animal instincts mingling into one sensation, and heard Starsky's answering cry like an echo in his ears. Felt Starsky press against him, drawing him in, a hot ball of fire all around him.

Hutch let go. Pushed inside, deeper, faster, all his self-control was slipping away, and Starsky was urging him on with hips and legs and hands and wild guttural cries.

"You're mine, you're mine!"

I'm yours, I'm yours, I'm yours.

He thought he cried out again, but he wasn't sure. Maybe it was Starsky's voice he heard, instead. Starsky's voice shouting his name. Starsky was all around him. He was a part of Starsky. They were one.

He collapsed on top of his lover, helpless, drained, almost drowning them both. Starsky went limp beneath him, soft as melting butter and completely out of it.

I did that. I put you in that state. My tough, strong macho partner.

God, how I love you.

I'll never stop loving you...

Hutch surfaced from the joys of the past to the bleak waiting room of an uninviting present to find his cheeks wet with tears and his heart still warm from the memory of that night months ago. He ran the back of his hand over his face.

Starsky, Starsky...

ooOOoo

Morning came, and Starsky's condition was unchanged. The nurses started their routine, doctors made their rounds, Dobby arrived, Huggy departed, and Hutch closed his eyes and lost himself in the past again.

...December. One week before Christmas.

"Dammit, Starsky, will you look at that! Someone in admin's screwed up our schedule again. They've put us down for ten, *twelve* days in a row. Right over Christmas and New Year."

Hutch stabbed the innocent piece of paper with an accusing finger. "Idiots! I'm going down there right now to tell them that our request to get Christmas Day off went in weeks ago."

Annoyed, Hutch made to head for the stairs. A hand on his arm stopped him.

"Um, Hutch?" Starsky said in that well-known tone of voice that signaled either trouble or the prelude to a Starskyesque confession. Hutch stopped in mid-stride and turned around slowly. The look on his partner's face was all he needed to confirm the budding suspicion.

"OK, what've you done?"

"Um, well... I know you wanted Christmas Day off, but... we always work holidays so that the family guys get to spent the day with their kids and..."

"Yeah, but this year..."

"...and anyway, this was the only way to get us a whole week off in January. I swapped a couple of weekends with Simmons and Babcock, too, and that means we got nine whole days off in a row!"

Starsky looked so pleased with himself that Hutch's annoyance dissolved away. He sighed. "And what would we do with nine whole days off in January?" Wondering if he really wanted to know.

"It was gonna be your Christmas present, but... OK, you want me to tell you?"

"Yeah, 'course I want you to tell me why you've cancelled our first real Christmas together."

The broad grin on Starsky's face contained not a trace of a guilty conscience. He reached into his inner pocket and produced an envelope.

"This came through this morning." He held it out, the light of anticipation dancing in his eyes.

There were tickets, vouchers and receipts in the envelope—flights, hotel, ski hire and lift passes. Hutch's jaw dropped as he rifled through the documents.

"Aspen?" he said, incredulous. "Colorado?"

"That's the one."

Hutch looked up. "But Starsk, this must've cost a fortune!"

"Got a special deal through Huggy's travel agency connections. January's low season, didja know that?"

"You mean you've blown your entire savings on a week of..."

"Not my *entire* savings." Starsky shrugged and produced his widest grin. "Hey, you only live once. Or so I've been told." He leaned into Hutch. "C'mon. Lighten up. 'T's only money."

"But you can't just..."

Two hands gripped him firmly by the shoulder and a pair of intense blue eyes bored into him.

"Hutch, don't you understand? I want us to live life while we can. Now, and not at some point in the future. Look at poor Doherty. Worked like a maniac. Saved up for years. Had all those grand retirement plans—traveling to Europe and visiting grandkids in Hawaii. He even wanted to take up amateur dramatics again, for Chrissake! And then he keels over with a stroke three months into his retirement and hasn't been on his feet since."

Starsky slipped his arm round Hutch's shoulder—always a safe gesture, even in the precinct. "Y' know, I just don't wanna wait that long before doing things with our lives."

Hutch thought that no matter how many decades he spent in Starsky's company, the man would never cease to amaze him. He wanted badly to crush him against the nearest wall and kiss him breathless.

Instead, he said, "But you don't know anything about skiing."

"You can teach me. It'll be fun. Whatsamatter, Hutch, aren't you pleased? Only the other day you were tellin' me you wanted to get back on the slopes some day."

"But what about Christmas? I thought we'd have a proper Christmas this year."

"Oh, what's happened to Mr. Euphoric Sentimentalism?"

"He's died a sad and premature death at the hands of a certain curly-haired Jewish cop who's insisting on celebrating religious festivals that aren't even his own."

Starsky's lips twitched in the most alluring fashion. "Look, we can still have Christmas. We're not on duty 24 hours a day. We'll have Christmas before we go to work, OK?"

A look passed between them, the precinct melted into the background, and for a precious moment, they were completely alone with each other. Hutch felt himself smile.

"Yeah, OK."

ooOOoo

In his mind, Hutch was back in Colorado.

...Starsky in the snow...

...Starsky with snow flakes in his hair, ice crystals on his lashes...

...Starsky stuck in a snow drift, skis in a tangle. Calling out for help in a pitiful voice. Pulling a laughing Hutch into the powdery snow beside him and snatching a quick kiss...

Hutch swallowed hard at the memory.

Starsky had taken to skiing with an enthusiasm that amazed and delighted Hutch. After a day and a half on the nursery slopes, his adventurous partner had insisted on leaving the "baby lift" behind and hitting the high slopes. He'd even mastered the intricacies of the lift system after only falling off twice.

Starsky tackled skiing the way he tackled everything in life: head-on, giving everything he had, facing every challenge with defiance and determination. He had some spectacular falls that made Hutch's heart jump into his throat, but always picked himself up with a shrug and a grin, ready to take on the next slope. The style was uniquely Starsky. What he lacked in technique, he made up in speed and enthusiasm and an utter fearlessness. By the end of the week, he was hurtling down slopes that daunted much more experienced skiers.

After a long exhausting day on the slopes, a meal, a couple of drinks in the bar and maybe a swim in the pool, they would return to their room, and Starsky would make love to him with the energy and the imagination of a man inspired.

And the next morning, he'd be up again, stiff maybe, sore in places he complained he hadn't known he possessed, but ready and eager to throw himself off another precipice.

Starsky had always lived life so much to the full, with so much zest and passion.

Hutch opened his eyes and gazed at the unresponsive figure of his friend, partner and lover through the glass.

And now?

What now, Starsk?

No more fun and laughter? No more wild and playful romps in bed? Certainly no more skiing.

Hutch's heart constricted, the fear in his chest like a physical sensation.

God, I'd no idea it was possible to feel so much pain.

ooOOoo

"Hutch..."

(...)

Hutch?"

(...)

"Hutch!"

"Captain."

"Hutch, go home!"

"I'm OK."

"Go home. Just for a while. Get some sleep."

"I'm fine, Captain. I'm all right."

"You've been here all night. Listen, he's stable. They say he has a good chance of making it. You don't have to watch him every second of the day."

Hutch stirred and turned haunted eyes on his captain.

"You don't know that. Look what happened the last time I walked away and left him alone."

Dobey sighed. And wished for the thousandth time that there was something he could do. If not for Starsky, then at least for this scared, pain-filled man held together by nothing but hope. In a rare display of emotion, he placed his hand on the younger man's shoulder and gave it a brief supportive squeeze.

Hutch's self-control seemed to wilt under the gesture. Dobby had never seen so much open vulnerability, so much naked pain in those blue eyes before.

"I love him, you know." It was no more than a whisper.

Dobey's heart went out to him. "I know. I know how much Starsky means to you. I know how you feel..."

Hutch sighed and looked away, back at Starsky behind the glass. "I'm not sure you do."

"Look, I know how I would feel if that was Edith lying there," Dobby said carefully. "If that was the person I loved more than anyone else in this world. It's no different, is it?"

Hutch's head came up and Dobby saw shock, astonishment, and sudden understanding rippling in quick succession over the weary face. When Hutch spoke, his voice was shaking.

"How long've you known?"

"A few months now."

Hutch gave a tight little laugh and shook his head in stunned amazement. "How did you... ? We were so careful. I thought..."

"Dammit, Hutchinson, what do you take me for? A rookie?" Dobey bellowed, remembered where he was and—casting a nervous glance around—continued in a lower, but no less intense voice.

"I'm not blind. Or stupid. I may be deskbound, but I'll have you know that I was considered one of the finest detectives on the force in my day! Don't you think I was wondering what was wrong between you two? When you were sitting in my office and everything between you was falling apart? Starsky putting in for a new partner. And you, looking like the world was ending. For the life of me, I couldn't see a way out of the mess."

Dobey glared at his detective. "Then you disappear. And if that wasn't dramatic enough, I get a distraught Starsky on the phone two days later, desperate to find you. And then Starsky disappears. And a week later, you both show up in my office, together, closer than ever, looking happier than I've ever seen either of you before..."

Dobey paused and shrugged. "What else was I s'posed to make of it?"

"And..." Hutch stopped breathing, "you're OK with it?"

Dobey heaved a deep sigh. "Don't get me wrong. It took me a while to put my finger on it. And it took me even longer to come to terms with the idea. It was not an easy thing for me to accept. I won't deny that the very thought of you two..."

He shook his head in amazement. "But seeing you together again... seeing how happy you were... I don't know. I just had to accept it. The alternative was just unacceptable. Actually, it was Edith who convinced me that it was OK. She said it was love. Nothing I could do about that."

"Edith?" said Hutch weakly. "Edith knows? God, is the entire department in the know, too?"

Dobey allowed himself a small smile. "I don't think so. The rumors have always been there. There are probably a few who wonder why you've stopped chasing every skirt, but I don't think anyone has jumped to the right conclusion."

"But *you* have."

"Hutch, you gotta remember that I've known you two for a long time. I've seen you in situations few people can even imagine."

Dobey raised a finger and pointed it at Hutch. "But make no mistake about it. The only reason I never hauled your asses in over this is that it never interfered with your work and that I never saw you bring your private lives into the squad room. If you *had*, if you had acted just *one* iota less than professional, believe me, I would've had your badges faster than you could have said 'Internal Affairs'. Best team or not!"

He glared at Hutch, and Hutch looked back at him with a new softness in his eyes.

"Thanks, Captain," he said softly. "You don't know how much that means to us."

'Us,' Dobe thought. *As if Starsky was still...*

He shook himself. Anger at his own lack of faith made his voice gruffer than usual.

"The next time they kick you out of there, go and get some food and some sleep. That's an order, you hear! You're gonna be no good to anyone in this state."

ooOOoo

Ten minutes later, they allowed Hutch back into Starsky's room.

"Hey, babe. How're you doin', huh?" Hutch pulled the familiar chair as close to the bed as he could.

"You won't believe what happened just now. Dobe..." Hutch shook his head in lingering astonishment. "Dobe *knows*. About us. Amazing man, our captain. There's not much you can hide from him. He says that as long as we do our jobs properly, he doesn't have a problem with it."

Hutch remembered how they'd made the decision early on in their new exciting relationship to keep their professional and their personal lives strictly separate.

"We're professionals," he'd said to a reluctant Starsky. "We're not gonna be much good as cops if all we think about is kissing in the men's room and groping each other in the broom cupboard."

"Oh, that's what you're thinking about when we're at work?" Starsky's grin could have given the Cheshire cat a run for his money. "Might've known. I ain't never gonna look at the broom cupboard in the same way again."

"You've no idea what I really wanna do with you when we're at work. In Dobe's office when he's out. On his desk. Want me to show you?"

The conversation stalled while Hutch demonstrated the type of thing he thought they shouldn't be doing while on duty.

"Hmm. Hmmm. See what you mean. No, definitely can't do *that* on Dobe's desk."

"How about this?"

"Aaah. Aaaah. Oh, babe... No, I think we should reserve *that* for Simonetti's office."

Hutch smiled at the memory.

"OK, so kissin' in the men's room is out," Starsky clarified when he had his breath back. "Or in the broom cupboard. Or Dobey's office. How 'bout in the car? Huh? Can I hold your hand when we're drivin' in the car?"

"Yeah, well, I guess that'd be OK."

"What about stake-outs? Say it's pitch dark, and you and I are sittin' in complete darkness outside some flake's house who's probably doin' it with his own squeeze at that very moment. Can I kiss you then?"

"No, you can't. What if we miss something important? It'd be far too dangerous. Anyone could sneak up on us. That's exactly the reason they're splitting up partners who get involved with each other. How can we do our job properly if we're thinking with our dicks all the time?"

"All men think with their dicks, Hutch. Didn't you listen to Linda?"

"Linda also says all men are chauvinist pigs who only have one thing on their minds. That doesn't mean we have to live up to her expectations."

"Guess you're right," said Starsky darkly. "But it's gonna be damn difficult keepin' my hands off you all day."

It *was* difficult. Not keeping their hands off each other—they'd never kept their hands off each other, and now wasn't the time to start. The hard part was getting it right. Learning where to draw the line.

But we did it, Hutch thought.

We learned to control our dicks during working hours—and then made up for it after getting back home—your place or mine, whichever happened to be more convenient.

And we learned something else much more important.

We learned that we didn't lose what we had before. That we could be lovers and still be partners, and best friends.

ooOOoo

The day wore on and there were no changes. Nurses came and changed the drips and dressings. Doctors examined and shook their heads doubtfully. Minutes ticked by and became hours. Hours stretched to half days.

A constant stream of visitors flowed through the ICU.

Minnie was a regular, and so was Mildred. They came several times a day, sat with Hutch outside the window, not speaking much, simply providing the comfort of their presence.

Dobey, who had moved back to headquarters earlier that day, came in as often as he could, hovering helplessly.

Throughout the day, groups of officers dropped in to provide food, support and encouragement—Joan and Linda, Babcock and Simmons, Robertson and O'Bryan.

A tall, slim uniformed woman with a shock of jet-black hair was introduced to Hutch as Chrissie DiMare, and from somewhere in a recess of his mind, a memory surfaced of slender hands covered in blood, a high-pitched voice yelling for first aid supplies.

Menendez and Stanton delivered regular updates on the state of the investigation, reporting, Hutch thought, a little touched, as if he were Captain Dobey.

There were others, many different faces, that Hutch only took in at the margin of his awareness—Sweet Alice, Larry, the Chief of Police, Edith of course, Molly and Kiko, Rose and Al.

But the most upsetting visitor was Rachel Starsky.

When she walked into the ICU, flanked and supported by her sister and brother-in-law, Hutch took one look, came out of his chair and enfolded the small grey-haired woman in his arms as naturally as if it hadn't been more than two years since they'd last met. She clung to him tightly.

"Ken! Oh, Ken, how is he?"

The evidence of two days' fear and anguish was etched in her face, and her strong, usually so animated features looked lined and haggard with worry. She looked, Hutch thought, every one of her 59 years.

Her distress brought out a new strength in Hutch. Here was a mother fearing for her son. A woman who'd already lost her husband to almost identical circumstances. Hutch couldn't even begin to understand how she had coped for so many years. He straightened up, smoothed the despair from his features and buried his own fears beneath a thick veneer of optimism.

"He's stable. The surgery went well. He's still in a coma, but the doctors say that there's a very good chance he'll make it."

That wasn't quite true, but Hutch needed to believe in that small falsehood as much as Rachel Starsky needed to hear it.

But Starsky's mother was no fool. Never had been. One look in her face told Hutch that she might choose to buy the small white lie, but she would never buy the expression of quiet confidence he tried to maintain on his face as anything other than a façade.

Hutch relinquished his right to the place beside Starsky's bed with only the faintest touch of envy. He watched her through the glass as she sat in the familiar chair, clutching her son's hand.

And felt suddenly very, very tired.

ooOOoo

Later that day, they talked. Down in the hospital cafeteria after Rose and Al had departed.

"They'll pick me up again later," she explained. "They met me at the airport and drove me straight over here. I'm gonna stay with them for the next few days."

She said, "I wished I could've gotten an earlier flight. I phoned every airline, but there just weren't any seats available yesterday or the day before. I thought I was going crazy."

And then, "I couldn't reach Nicky. He's in Mexico. Traveling, he said. I've no idea where he is and how to get hold of him."

And after a while, "Your captain told me what happened. He said there was nothing you could've done."

And later, "I'm so glad Dave has you for his friend. I'm sure you did everything possible."

And later still, "You look like you haven't eaten in days, Ken. And how much sleep have you had in the last two days?"

And finally, "It's all right. You can go home and take a break now. I'm here now. I know you're doin' the best you can, but I'm his mother. It's my place to be with him."

Hutch knew that she didn't mean to do it, that she was entirely unaware that every word she spoke sliced through his heart like a scalpel.

...nothing you could've done... sure you did everything possible... know you're doin' the best you can...

She doesn't know how I let him down.

Her place to be with him?

Hutch's insides churned and he wanted to shout at her that it was his place, and his alone. Not to be shared with anyone. But, of course, he couldn't. She had no idea, after all, that Starsky was so much more to him than just a friend and partner.

They'd debated the point for all but five minutes, just a few weeks ago.

"One day, I'll tell her," Starsky had said. "But maybe not just yet. I don't know what she'll do, but it won't be pleasant. I couldn't take that right now."

Hutch had agreed. Their new relationship was still so fresh and pure and bright with the joys of discovery. He didn't want anything to sully that. Didn't want the real world to taint their happiness with the inevitable hostility and ugliness they would encounter.

Eventually, he knew that the burden of living a lie would begin to outweigh the need for secrecy, and then they'd be ready to face the world with the truth, and take the consequences, if necessary. Not everyone would be as understanding as Dobey.

Starsky's mother would certainly find the news difficult, maybe even impossible to handle.

And maybe now there might never be a point in telling her what Starsky really meant to him.

Hutch shivered and shoved the thought away.

"Thanks for the coffee, Ken," Rachel broke into his thoughts, "but I think I'd better get back upstairs now. I don't want to leave him alone for too long."

Hutch watched her leave, then hauled himself to his feet and headed down to the car. He'd go home and take a shower, and then he'd come back. He wouldn't get much sleep at home anyway.

ooOOoo

Closer. The shore was much closer now. He was almost there.

The light of the beacon continued to guide him, a warm glow in the darkness, and he homed in on it, impatient to get home.

Not yet. It's too soon. You need more time.

He knew the voice was right. If he started rushing, a countercurrent might take hold of him and sweep him back out to sea.

He let himself drift, warm water lapping around him, and watched the light come closer.

Friday

Early on Friday morning, the doctors unhooked the respirator and removed the heart monitor.

"There's nothing wrong with his heart," Freeman explained patiently. "His heart stopped as a result of blood loss and trauma, not due to any cardiac causes. He's stable now. It's not his heart we're worried about."

Hutch wondered what was left unsaid.

"Doctor..."

"And he has one healthy lung. It's time he started using it again."

When the respirator was gone and only the nasal cannulas remained, Starsky's face looked bare and vulnerable, the dark three-day stubble a stark contrast to the pallor of his skin.

Starsky would hate that, Hutch thought. Starsky with his cleanliness fetish. Who would rather shave twice a day than be seen with an afternoon shadow.

"Can someone give him a shave?" he asked one of the nurses, a new one, a different one each time, it seemed. Hutch didn't even know his name.

"I'll do a shaving round later in the afternoon," he replied.

"If you'll give me a razor, I'll do it," Hutch offered. "Don't worry, I'll be careful."

The man glanced up briefly from his task. "Sure. Ask at the nurses' station. They'll set you up."

A few minutes later, Hutch was installed beside Starsky's bed, armed with an old-fashioned brush, shaving cream and razor. Carefully, he lathered the rugged features and, mindful of the tubes, ran the razor cautiously over the stubbly chin. Slowly, the three-day growth yielded.

Hutch took his time over the task. Anything to prolong his stay by Starsky's side. Soon enough, Rachel would reclaim the place, and he couldn't deny her that comfort.

It felt good to be able to perform that small service for Starsky. It made him feel a little closer to Starsky. Physically, anyway. In all other respects they were already as close as two people could possibly be. Closer even. So close, in fact, that the pleasure of it was sometimes almost painful.

He's everything to me. He's in me, deep as bone. In every cell of my body. How can two people be as close as we are and still be two separate entities?

He gazed longingly at the still face, and then couldn't help himself and kissed the newly smooth cheek. A silent sob caught in his throat, but he swallowed it with an effort.

When did we grow to be so close? When did you climb into my heart and make yourself at home there?

The lake, of course. It had all started at the lake.

Well, no, actually it had started much earlier. They'd already been close at the academy.

Hutch's memory trip took him right back to the beginning when he had first laid eyes on a ridiculously young David Starsky who seemed to have nothing at all in common with an equally young Kenneth Hutchinson.

Took me long enough to see past the scruffy exterior and tough guy attitude and discover a kindred spirit.

Took you almost as long to warm to the WASP from the Midwest with his idealistic ideas and stuck-up manners.

But once we'd gotten past the basics, we really hit it off, didn't we? When we finished training, we already knew exactly what we wanted—get partnered as soon as it could be arranged. I still think the only reason you took the detectives exam so soon was because I pushed you to do it. You always had an uneasy relationship with examinations. The laugh was on me, of course, when you passed with flying colors and I almost came to grief over that damn procedures question.

Hutch smiled a little when he recalled the long evenings of studying and practicing together.

And after we'd both passed, and pulled a few strings, we finally got me transferred to 9th, but it was another few months before Adamson partnered us on a trial basis. He never thought we'd amount to much. Too undisciplined, he said. No respect for authority. He wanted to pair us up with older, more experienced detectives. To settle us down, he said, and teach us the ropes.

But then we started producing results, and after we managed to infiltrate and bring down Mad Manny's gang of heavies, there was never a mention of splitting us up again.

And shortly after that, Dobe had taken over the department, and he'd known a winning formula when he saw one.

You were so close to me even then. My best friend. My partner through everything life and work could throw at us. But it wasn't enough. I had to go and fall in love with you and almost ruin everything. Because I was greedy and wanted more and more. I wanted all of you. If you hadn't realized just in time that you felt the same way... God, Starsk, it would've destroyed us.

But you did, and you found me, and made everything right between us, and we started something wonderful together. How I loved you then. I didn't think it was possible to love someone so much. And to be loved so much in return.

Something strange happened at the lake. We connected in more ways than the physical one. We formed a bond that was so strong I thought it could never be broken. But now...

Now he couldn't even sense Starsky anymore, almost as if in the moment of death, their unique connection had been irretrievably disrupted.

The fear was a living thing inside him, a beast with talons and teeth clawing at his heart. It hurt. It hurt so much.

What if we never get it back? What if...

What if...

ooOOoo

It was Friday afternoon. Time was running out. Starsky's chances were melting away with every passing minute. The doctors had made that clear enough.

...best chances for recovery if he wakes up soon... more than three days in a coma and... wouldn't hold out much hope... he's lucky to have made it this far... don't expect a full recovery even if he lives...

More than three days had passed since their world had been ripped to shreds. Three endless, endless days.

In the hospital, doctors and nurses were fighting to keep the shattered body alive. At Metro, officers across departments were pulling together, dedicated to the pursuit of the men responsible for bringing down "one of their own". In the St. John's Church, the Dobeys were praying for Starsky's survival. In The Pits, the barmaids had taken over management to allow Huggy to stay at the hospital through the night. From all over LA, friends, colleagues, people of all runs of life called and visited and sent cards and best wishes.

In the ICU, Hutch sat, eyes fixed on his partner, every part of him focused, willing Starsky to take the final step back into the world of the living.

Everyone, it seemed, was doing everything in their power. Only the main participant, the lead actor in the drama, lay unaware. Cold. Still. Oblivious to everything around him.

Over three days since the shooting. From here on, Starsky's chances would diminish exponentially. No one had actually said so, but Hutch knew it anyway. Knew that hope was beginning to fade rapidly.

Hutch closed his eyes and swallowed the tears in his throat. Let his fingers trail over the beloved face, the dark curls that now looked as lifeless as the man himself.

Come back to me, babe. Please. Please come back.

You've already cheated death. Now you gotta make it back all the way.

He found that he was praying—something he hadn't done since he was a child with a childlike belief in a just and kindly god.

Please, God. Please. Don't take him... don't take him away.

I don't care if there's damage. I swear I'll love him, I'll look after him for the rest of my life. I'll love him so hard. Just—please—don't take him away from me.

But there was another voice inside him that said differently.

Looking after Starsky for the rest of his life?

How could he want, desire, hope for anything like that for Starsky? His fiercely independent partner forever chained to a wheelchair? Forever reliant on someone else for all his needs? Forever someone else's burden, unable to do anything for himself? Maybe unable to speak, or express himself, or communicate in any way?

He wouldn't want to live like that.

Cold terror ripped through Hutch.

I'm just being selfish.

An icy hand reached deep inside him and crushed his heart in a vice-like grip.

I have to let him go.

The fragile shoots of hope in his heart withered, leaving only a cold, bleak space and a wild, crippling pain in his chest.

Maybe that's what he's waiting for. He's waiting for me to let him go.

ooOOoo

He'd almost made it. It was still dark, but he knew that he was close. The rhythm of the waves changed as they carried him into shallow water. The shore was so near, he could hear voices on the beach.

One of them was a familiar, much-loved voice. It was full of so much sadness, edged with fear and pain. It reached out to him, pulling him closer.

He had to step back on shore, he couldn't wait any longer.

He was coming home.

ooOOoo

His five minutes were up. Had been up half an hour ago. Hutch didn't move. Each time was a struggle to tear himself away, each time more difficult than the one before.

"Please, Mr. Hutchinson," the nurse said, not looking up from her novel. "It's time."

Time. Yeah, it's time. Time to wake up, Starsk. Time to come back.

Or time to let you go.

But I promised to hold onto you. I promised. How can I let you go?

"I don't know what to do, Starsk," he said to the still figure in the bed. "... don't know what to do... I mean, what if...?"

The cold, bleak space inside him grew a little colder. "What if...?"

He rose to leave. Hesitated. Turned back to the bed one more time. Looked at the pale face.

Froze.

Felt every part of him seize up.

Movement. There was a movement on the still face. Just like on that morning. The smallest movement.

The long lashes trembled. Imperceptibly almost. A dark glint of blue escaped from hooded eyes.

An age went by.

Then Starsky's eyes opened slowly, lazily, beautifully.

Every part of Hutch clenched tight. And he suddenly knew, in a lightning flash of understanding, like exploding stars in his mind, that he'd been wrong again. So wrong.

He couldn't let Starsky go. Simply couldn't. Wouldn't. Never would. No matter what.

And Starsky would never have wanted it, either. Starsky would never willingly leave him. He'd promised, too.

"Starsky? Starsky..."

The long lashes swept down and up.

The breath exploded from Hutch's lungs. "You're awake!" Couldn't really trust his eyes. Moved forward, not taking his eyes off the miracle, grabbed the nurse by the arm and pulled her from her chair. "He's awake..." Then again louder, "He's awake!"

Starsky's eyes lazily roamed the room. Trying to focus.

Focus with... recognition?

Hutch's nightmare shattered into a billion fragments, letting in a stream of sunshine. He wanted to crush Starsky in his arms, couldn't, hauled the nurse close instead—"He's awake!"—a poor substitute, but he needed confirmation, and the closeness of a solid human body in those brief seconds of delirious joy and overwhelming relief.

He released her and forgot her instantly. Never even heard her rushing from the room. Was beside the bed, bent low over the beautiful sight, Starsky's limp hand caught up in his own.

"Starsk. God, Starsk..."

Time stopped. The moment of truth.

Would Starsky know him?

The dark blue of Starsky's eyes looked washed out and dreamy, and for one endless, breathless moment, all Hutch could see was a hazy sheen clouding Starsky's vision.

Slowly, the look in the midnight blue eyes steadied, and there was life, and knowledge, and recognition in the liquid depths.

Hutch choked back a sob, blinked at the annoying cloud of tears.

"Starsk?"

Their eyes met and locked, drawing each other in, reconnecting. The pale lips moved a fraction.

"-tch...?"

It was a soft, almost inaudible sound, no more, but Hutch would have recognized the name anywhere, anyhow, under any circumstances. Joy of an agonizing intensity expanded in his chest.

"I'm here," he whispered, holding Starsky with his eyes. "I'm here. I'm right here. Right here." He couldn't think of anything else to say.

The dark eyes clung to him, confusion in their depth.

"Wh... happ...?"

Hutch took a careful breath. He reached out and cupped the beloved face with one hand, stroked the pale cheek with his thumb.

"You were shot," he said softly. "Outside the station..."

A glimmer of memory flickered over the pale face and the hand in his own tightened by the merest fraction.

"Y'kay?"

Hutch almost lost it. Had to tear his eyes from Starsky's to try and hold onto a modicum of control. Took another deep breath. Looked back up and recaptured his partner's gaze.

"Yeah, I'm okay." He gripped Starsky's hand, interlaced their fingers. "And you gotta be okay, too. You gotta rest now and use all your strength to get better and..."

A sob strangled the words in his throat, but Starsky seemed to have understood what was left unsaid.

"-kay," he whispered. The effort had exhausted him and the lids slowly slid shut.

And Hutch dropped his head on Starsky's arm and gave in to his tears.

Part III : Saturday

The morning after the awakening, Starsky took the first faltering step on the long, hard journey to recovery.

The doctors and specialists exuded cautious optimism.

...appears coherent... movement in all limbs... no sign of reduced brain function... time will tell... must give the healing process a chance... always a risk of infection... pneumonia...

"He's awake, but only just," the nurse told the small crowd of jubilant visitors in the waiting room when the doctors had finished. "One of you can go in for a few minutes, no more. And don't tire him out!"

Rachel had just left the ICU to make a phone call. All eyes turned to Hutch and a path fell open for him as he jumped to his feet and rushed from the room.

Starsky looked drained, exhausted, and doped to the eye-balls, but his eyes latched onto him as soon as Hutch stepped into his field of vision.

"Starsk..."

They connected with hands and eyes as the cocoon closed tightly around them, shielding them from the world outside.

"You don't... look so good," Starsky mumbled, left hand moving feebly on the covers until Hutch took it into his large, warm hand and held it tight.

"You're not gonna win any beauty contests, either, right now," Hutch countered. The smile on his face, he knew, was genuine. Somehow, he simply couldn't stop smiling. To be able to talk to Starsky, to feel the slight pressure of Starsky's fingers in his hand, to sense their connection strong and vibrant between them—it was simply overwhelming.

At this stage, nothing else mattered.

"How... long?"

"Four days since... it happened. You've been in a coma for over three days."

Starsky digested that. His eyes sought Hutch's. "Rough time?"

"Getting better," Hutch assured him. "Getting better all the time."

They gazed at each other. There was so much Hutch wanted to say, so many emotions crowding his heart and wanting to spill over in words, so many thoughts he wanted to share with his partner. One look in Starsky's eyes told him that there was no need. Starsky already knew.

There was much to be said for wordless communication.

Starsky's eyes drooped again, then opened with an effort.

"How bad, Hutch?"

Hutch hesitated. Looked up and saw Rachel at the window, disappointment at having missed her opportunity written large into every line on her face. He waved at her, glad of the distraction.

"Starsk, look, you're ma's here. She got in a coupla days ago."

A flicker went over Starsky's wasted face. "That bad, huh?" he forced out, his voice just a shade above a whisper. He struggled for words, then for air, finally settled for a hollow wheeze.

"Tell her..." he fought for breath, "tell..."

Hutch's heart clenched tight when he saw the struggle. "It's OK. I'll tell her. It's OK. I know. I'll tell her."

Weariness and relief rippled over Starsky's face and his eyes drooped again.

"How d'ya... do't?" he whispered, already half asleep.

"How did I do what, babe?"

"Get m'back..." Another wheeze accompanied the words. "Wouldn't've. Made it. W'thout ya..."

The fingers tightened a fraction and relaxed as Starsky subsided back into sleep. Confused, Hutch placed the hand back on the cover and tugged the sheet in place around his sleeping friend. Finally, mystified, he got up and left the room.

ooOOoo

Rachel got her chance in the evening, several hours later. Suppressing a surge of envy, Hutch watched as she claimed the chair and Starsky's hand.

She seemed to do a lot of talking. And crying.

Hutch watched his partner's struggle to respond, the exhaustion in the pale, drawn face evident even from the distance. He bit his lip and looked away. Her ten minutes would soon be over.

But Rachel came out much sooner than Hutch had expected.

"He's asking for you, Ken," she said, and the expression on her face—puzzlement and disappointment mixed with the smallest flicker of hurt—made him pause in his head-long rush for the door. Then she shook her head and gave him a tight, weary little smile.

"It's all right, Ken. Go in. Go to him." She waved him forward. "He wants you."

Hutch hesitated, nodded once and closed the door behind him—and the world dropped away as he re-entered his partner's orbit.

My partner, my lover. My world...

"Hey."

The relief in Starsky's eyes was unmistakable.

"-ey."

Nothing more was needed as they re-connected. For a long moment, they simply looked at each other, drawing strength from each other, giving and receiving the comfort they both so desperately needed. The beast of fear and pain that had lived in Hutch's heart for what seemed like forever cowed before the powerful flow and retreated a little further.

Far too soon, the door opened again, but it was only to admit a nurse with a cup of ice chips in her hands.

"Hallo, Dave. My name's Janice. Doctor Patel says you can have some ice water if you like."

Starsky's lashes dipped in response.

"Yeah, he would," Hutch said and took the cup from her, ignoring her curious gaze.

"Um, are you comfortable? Is there anything else I can get you?"

Starsky's eyes closed and opened in acknowledgment. The parched lips moved in an effort to form words.

"-light... s'bright..."

"I'm sorry, Dave, I didn't catch that."

"The light's hurting his eyes," Hutch said. "Could you turn it down a little?"

"I can switch off the overhead light. Maybe that'll help."

"Thanks, uh, Janice. Yeah, that's better."

She gave him another strange look and left the room.

Hutch moved his chair an impossible inch closer to the bed and spent a few enjoyable minutes spooning ice chips into Starsky's mouth.

"Don't worry about your ma," he said when the cup was empty. "She's upset right now, but there're lots of folk here looking after her. She's made friends with Edith, would you believe it? And there's Al and Rosie. And some friends of theirs from the synagogue. Everyone wants to do things for her. She'll be fine."

Starsky gave a slight nod. Then lifted his eyes back to Hutch's.

"Go home," he whispered, every word a struggle. "Sleep. Check your. Plants. 'M not goin'. Anywhere."

Speech pared down to its bared bones, not one unnecessary syllable. Starsky, who could talk birds down from the trees and chatter holes into Hutch's brain. Hutch swallowed hard.

I swear I'll never again tell you shut up. Even when you drive me wild with inane chatter. God, I just can't wait to hear you rambling on about something utterly trivial. And I swear I'll listen...

"Shhh, shh. No more talking now, OK? We've all the time in the world to talk when you're better."

The skin around Starsky's eyes crinkled in the approximation of a smile. He brought up a feeble hand and let it rest against Hutch's cheek for a moment. A boulder dislodged inside Hutch's throat and before his better judgment could apply the brakes, he'd taken the hand and covered the inside with hot, burning kisses.

The smile deepened to the real thing, for just a second, before the heavy drugs pulled the injured man away to a place where Hutch couldn't follow. Hutch sat for another minute, bent low over the sleeping figure, and unsuccessfully tried to impose some order on the wild riot of emotions in his heart.

He saw Rachel the moment he turned to go. She looked pale, shaken. Her gaze was burning holes into him through the glass.

Hutch re-entered the real world with a jolt. How much had she seen?

"He's asleep again," he told her when he reached her side, avoiding her searching gaze. "Probably will be for a while. Can I give you a lift back to Rose and Al's? The car's right outside." He laughed a little. "I'm under strict instructions from Star... from Dave to water my plants and get some sleep."

Her expression became distant and unreadable. "No, but thanks, Ken. I'll stay a while longer. Al can come and pick me up later."

Hutch felt her eyes like laser beams on his back all the way down to the swing doors.

When he walked through the front doors of Memorial, he was greeted by a downpour. Fat drops of rain pelted the ground like tiny bullets. The road was already awash with water. Hutch considered making a dash for the car, then shrugged. Stepped into the torrent, threw his head back, opened his arms wide and let the water cascade over him. Within seconds, he was drenched. It felt wonderful.

Tuesday

By Tuesday, Starsky managed to stay awake for half hours at a time and began to communicate with doctors, nurses and visitors without the aid of Hutch's interpretation skills.

And wouldn't be put off any longer.

"How bad, Hutch? I gotta know. I'd rather hear it... from you than... from a doctor."

Hutch sighed. "Yeah, OK." He shifted in his uncomfortable straight-backed chair. If the design was a conscious effort on the part of hospital managers to discourage visitors from outstaying their welcome, the approach wouldn't work

for Hutch. Hutch would be spending a lot more time on that chair in the near future.

"D'you remember... anything?"

"You. Holdin' me. Tellin' me you loved me."

Hutch's guts contracted. "I meant..."

"I know." The dark eyes closed for a moment, then opened with determination. "The car. I remember the car. Gun fire. Knew I'd been hit. Once, I thought. Or twice?"

"Three times," Hutch whispered. "You were hit three times. In the back. The bullets..."

He broke off when he saw Starsky's huge, horrified eyes. "Three? In the *back*? But... Hutch, that's impossible. How..."

"I dunno. I just... I dunno. They used the wrong ammo, for one thing. The bullets should've exploded on impact, but they didn't. And... and they missed your heart by about a mile. And they didn't stray in your body, pretty much went clean through, and..."

"And?"

Hutch took a shaky breath. "In a nutshell? One went through your shoulder and caused some tissue damage. That's why you can't move your arm right now."

It missed your spine by a fraction and almost paralyzed you from the neck down.

"-kay."

"The second pierced your lung..."

It shredded part of your lung and ripped a huge hole in your chest and almost made you drown in your own blood.

"...and the third took a piece off your liver and damaged a coupla ribs."

It blew your ribs to pieces and scattered them through your insides. That's what took so goddamn long during surgery. They had to find and pick out all the fragments.

Starsky looked shaken. "Close call, huh?" he whispered raggedly. Hutch didn't even want to know what he'd look like when he told him the unvarnished truth.

"You came through," he said simply. "You made it. I don't know how. Maybe you're simply the luckiest goddamn bastard that walks this earth. Or maybe someone up there loves you."

Their eyes met. "Or maybe someone down here," Starsky said softly. His hand crept over the sheet and connected with Hutch's. Hutch clung to it and fought to get a grip on himself. Then he took a deep breath and forced himself to meet the unspoken question in Starsky's eyes with as steady a gaze as he could.

"They don't know yet," he said, wishing he could, just this once, tell Starsky a comforting lie. "It's too early to say. Anything's possible." That much, at least, was true.

The thing was—Starsky was a cop. He knew all about guns, and gun shot wounds, and he knew exactly what the chances of recovery were. There was no point in telling him comforting lies.

Something inside Hutch shifted and cracked open an unsuspected reservoir of defiance and resolve. He straightened up and faced Starsky with determination.

"You know doctors. They never give you any good news, do they? But whatever they're saying, they don't know you. They've been wrong about you from the start. But I know you. I know you're gonna make it. *We're* gonna make it. Those doctors are gonna get the biggest surprise ever."

It wasn't his most eloquent speech ever, but his partner's grateful look told him he'd been understood.

Starsky's short window of lucidity was beginning to close as the drugs kicked in and lulled his mind into drowsiness. But the cop part of Starsky was still struggling to stay alert.

"Did you. Get them?"

"We have a lead, but not enough evidence. This could be real big. Menendez and Stanton are on it."

"Who?"

"James Gunther."

"Gunth...?"

"Yeah."

They shared the look they'd shared a hundred times before. Speculation, possibilities, theories.

"What're y'doin'. In here then?" Starsky mumbled, fading rapidly. "Get out there and. Nail the bastard."

"Tell you what," Hutch said. "Let's make a deal. I go nail the bastard, and you go surprise the doctors. How's that?"

An exhausted smile curled one corner of Starsky's mouth. "-kay. You're on."

Wednesday

Starsky's urging was all Hutch needed to throw himself back into the investigation with a vengeance.

Menendez and Stanton handed over the reins of the case and the results of their efforts without a whisper of protest. The groundwork they'd laid—interviews, research, investigations into the background of Gunther's enterprises—was substantial. All Hutch needed to do was pull the pieces together.

Everything they had pointed firmly in the same direction. Always at the same man.

Gunther.

And other names. Sherman, Gutierrez, Brown, Bates, Soldier, McClellan, Clayburne. They all tied together, spinning a vast, intricate net that stretched across state and national borders.

Stanton jumped around the squad room in the manner of an excited puppy on its first walk. "This thing's massive. This is the biggest thing since... since... *Watergate!* And it's our case. *Our* case!"

Menendez rolled his eyes. "Don't let it go to your head, kid. When the excitement's over, we'll be back patrolling the streets and running after small-time crooks."

"You mean *I*'ll be running after small-time crooks while *you* call it in from the comforts of the car."

"Sure, that's what you do when you're the brains of an outfit, *chiquito*."

"Ah, and I thought it was just your arthritis playing up, *old man*."

Hutch listened to the good-natured exchange with an ache in his heart.

Starsky, Starsky. I wish you were here...

Not being able to discuss the case with Starsky was a persistent throb in the pit of his stomach. This was Starsky's case as much as his own.

"Better put a surveillance team on him," he said. "A good one! We don't want him to slip away while we're not looking. He has connections everywhere, and in the highest places. It's just a matter of time before he finds out that we're on to him. If he doesn't already know."

"I'll call Ringer at the SFPD. He'll set one up."

They were so close. All they needed was evidence that would stand up in court. This was one fish no one wanted to see slip through their fingers in the murky waters of legal wheeling and dealing.

"We want him put away for life," Hutch emphasized. "With as many of his henchmen as we can lay our hands on."

"And take his network apart so no one else can take over his turf," Menendez added.

"And for Chrissake, let's keep the feds out of this. This is our case, and they're not gonna take this one away from us."

Friday

The computer printouts were the final clincher.

"It's all there, black on white," Stanton babbled excitedly and waved the sheets around. "Look at that—Gunther's name all over the place. And federal judge McClellan. And here, the link to DA Clayburne. It's all there, all the evidence we need. It's an airtight case. He can't wheedle out of this one!"

Hutch took the sheets from him and spread them out on Dobey's desk. Names jumped out at him. Places, times, connections. Everything fell into place.

"My God. He's our Mr. Big!"

"What?" said Stanton startled.

"He's our Mr. Big," Hutch repeated, elated. "Starsky and I always knew there was someone behind Clayburne pulling the strings. We called him Mr. Big. Clayburne was our only link, and he was shot before he could talk."

Dobey nodded. "That ties in with what we have on the drugs busts early this year."

"And those hits on you and Starsky a few months ago," Menendez said thoughtfully, "you think they're related?"

"Absolutely. Don't you? He's wanted us dead for a long time."

A long time. Long before we quit our jobs over Lionel. We were on his hit list, badges or not. Going back never made a difference.

Relief swelled around him like a tidal surge and washed away that particular burden of guilt. Excitement rushed in and filled the space, building to a wild euphoria inside him.

We got him, Starsk. We nailed him. Gimme another minute and I'll come round and show you what we've got.

"Where's he now?" Dobey asked.

"Still at his place in Frisco."

"OK," Dobey said with decision. "We've enough evidence for a warrant. *And* a conviction. Someone has to fly down and bring him in. One of us. We can't let the SFPD steal him from us."

Menendez and Stanton exchanged a look. They nodded at each other. Stanton picked up the phone.

"Julie, get a seat on the next flight to San Francisco. Name of Ken Hutchinson. Get back to me with the times as soon as you can."

Menendez was already at the door. "I'll let Ringer know you're coming. He'll sort out the particulars."

"Hutch," Dobey said as he took the phone from Stanton. "I'll have an officer pick up the warrant and take it straight to the airport for you. That'll save some time. You better get going."

"I can't," Hutch protested, still aflutter with the excitement of their success. "I can't leave Starsky."

"It won't take you long," said Menendez. "You fly in, arrest the sonofabitch, hand him over to the cops and fly home. You'll be back this evening. We can get him transferred to LA next week sometime."

"You and Stanton should go. You did so much of the work."

"No, Hutch," Menendez shook his head and smiled. "This one's yours. There's no one here who'll begrudge you that moment of triumph. Go, bring the bastard in. For Starsky."

Hutch looked at the three men united in purpose. Then nodded once.

"OK," he said. "I'll do it." He took a deep breath. "For Starsky."

ooOOoo

Dobey took it upon himself to drive Hutch to the hospital.

"I gotta go see him before I leave," Hutch insisted, still riding high on the wave of euphoria. "I gotta tell him. He's my partner. I gotta keep him in the loop."

He knew, even as he stood inside Starsky's room, reeling off names and companies and connections from the printout, holding the nurse at bay at the same time, that he was close to losing control.

"Starsky, listen. Listen to this. You're not gonna believe it..."

"I must forbid..."

"...Gunther Industries, Gunther Petroleum, Texas Shorthorn..."

"You don't leave now, I'm gonna call hospital security."

"...New World Textiles, Gunther Overseas Oil, Western Electronics..."

"Please get out of here right now..."

"...and listen to this... Jenny Brown... Bates..."

Dobey punctured the wild hysteria with a single look at Starsky. Sanity returned instantly at the sight of the closed eyes, the exhausted face, skin the same color as the sheets, and they all tiptoed out of the room.

"Your flight to San Francisco leaves in 30 minutes," Dobey warned.

Hutch looked back at Starsky—unresponsive in the bed, drugged out of his mind—and hesitated. How could he go and arrest the man who'd almost killed his partner without telling Starsky? He had to share this with Starsky. They did these things together, not apart.

God, Starsk, I wish you were awake. I can't do this alone. He's the biggest fish we've ever caught. And the most powerful. I need you by my side. I can't do this alone.

In his mind, like an answer, he heard Starsky's voice—gently reproachful, faintly amused, full of promise, and so full of love.

"Hey, I'm with you. I'm always with you. Don't you know that by now? I'll be right there beside you. I'll be with you the whole time. Don't ever forget that."

Startled, he looked at Starsky, asleep and oblivious to the commotion outside his room. But with him nonetheless. How did he always do that?

Hutch suddenly smiled. *OK. OK then.*

He pushed the balled mass of computer printouts at Dobey, looked him intently in the eyes. "Look after him for me. Tell him I'll be back tonight."

He pushed through the crowd, felt reassuring hands reaching out to clap him on the back and speed him on his way—Dobey, Huggy, Mildred, the nurse even. Caught a glimpse of Rachel at the periphery of the crowd, looking at him. Rushed down to the entrance, threw himself into the waiting black-and-white.

He made the flight with only minutes to spare.

ooOOoo

The hours in San Francisco, the hours away from LA and Starsky, would be imprinted forever on Hutch's mind like one of the dream sequences he retained of the morning of the shooting—distorted, fractured images interspersed with moments of sharp, blinding clarity.

Plain-clothed police officers were waiting for him at the airport. An unmarked police car received him and whisked him away.

On the long ride to the suburbs, Detective Lieutenant John Ringer filled him in on the details—security, surveillance, backup.

In turn, Hutch provided some of the background of the case—edited highlights of the past few months, and the police efforts that had led to the imminent downfall of one of the most powerful men in the United States. He sidestepped all queries relating to his injured partner.

The excitement, the euphoria had evaporated long ago. Now where it counted most, Hutch was all cop—focused, coldly determined, completely in charge.

Gunther's mansion loomed before them, stately, imposing.

"I'm going in," Hutch said to Ringer. "Alone. Give me ten minutes with him, and if we're not out by then, send in a couple of officers."

He strode away, into the building, not waiting for an acknowledgment.

The butler seemed to be expecting him. He led Hutch to the second floor. A large, sumptuous room received him, richly furnished, but dark, and cold. Not even the fire in the fireplace could take the chill from the old walls, even on that warm May day.

Finally, he was face to face with Gunther, the man who had almost killed his partner. A man who'd always gotten what he wanted. A man who had made only one mistake in the whole of his criminal career—he had underestimated a couple of ordinary cops.

A cold, tightly contained anger surged through Hutch. If he'd been alone with Gunther, in that cold, dark room, he might have given in to the desire to do some permanent damage to the man. But he wasn't alone.

Throughout everything, Starsky was right by his side. Just like he'd promised. Holding Hutch in the here and now, making sure he didn't slip back into the darkness of his soul.

Starsky steadied his hands, directed his gaze, concentrated his mind.

It was Starsky who pointed out the dead man leaning into his coffee cup. Starsky who swaggered up to the desk, Starsky who stared down at Gunther sitting behind it.

It was Starsky who deflected the gun that came up out of nowhere, and made the shot go wild.

Gunther had miscalculated one last time when he thought he could face Sergeant Kenneth Hutchinson on his own.

The handcuffs closed over his wrists with finality.

Hutch's cool, steady voice filled the room.

"You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak an attorney..."

ooOOoo

Getting back to LA took the longest time of all. The formalities at the San Francisco police headquarters, the string of questions from the excited local cops, the long drive to the airport, the endless flight home.

Menendez was there to pick him up, his face alight with the glow of success. He took the car on the direct route to Memorial before Hutch could even ask.

After the chaotic events of the day, the ICU at that late hour was a calm and restful oasis. The crowd of visitors had long since gone. Outside the observation window, Dr. Mahendra Patel stood in conversation with a colleague. He nodded at Hutch.

"Yes, you can go in. He is still awake. He was determined to stay awake until you got back."

Two pairs of eyes turned to him when he walked in. Rachel's were cool and reserved, Starsky's bright and glowing, and they tracked Hutch across the room until he settled in the chair opposite Rachel.

"Hey, babe," Hutch said softly. "You doing all right?"

He placed his hand on Starsky's right arm just above the IV line that supplied the patient's life-giving medication. "Sorry it took so long to get back. I meant to be here an hour ago, but there was a crowd of journalists at the airport and the fastest way out of there was to agree to give them a statement."

Starsky gazed at him with bright eyes. "Yeah. Dobey told us. Everything. 'M so prouda ya. They say you're a hero."

Hutch's heart did a little skip. Unthinkingly, he reached out and stroked a wayward curl from Starsky's forehead.

"No," he said, caressing the warm skin with his thumb as the cocoon came around them again and enclosed them in a small private space of their own. He hardly noticed when Rachel got up from her chair and left the room. "We both

are. We did it together. You were there with me the whole time. Don't you remember?"

They gazed at each other. Hutch said softly, "He's never gonna hurt us again. Or anyone else. We'll make sure that he'll be put away for a long time."

Starsky smiled up at him, drowsy.

Something inside Hutch stilled, and he sat back and took a good look at his friend. What he saw made his heart pound and the fear rush back in. Starsky looked flushed with an unnatural, not a healthy glow, and the brightness of his eyes owed more to a feverish glaze than the excitement over Gunther's arrest. Starsky's cheek felt unnaturally warm under his touch.

Hutch exhaled with an effort and put a cold, restraining fist around his fear.

"Starsk..."

Starsky reached for him, found Hutch's hand, gave it a barely noticeable squeeze.

"I'll be all right," he mumbled, the ghost of a reassuring smile on his face. "Don't worry. I'll be fine. Don't worry..."

Hutch watched, horrified, as Starsky slipped away into an uneasy state of restlessness. When he lifted his eyes, he found Rachel gone and Dr. Patel standing beside the bed. He jumped to his feet and faced the doctor.

"What's wrong? What's wrong with him now?" Fear made his voice go hoarse.

"A slight infection of the lower chest wound," Patel explained. "Not an uncommon complication, especially in a case as serious as this. We have put him on antibiotics, but much depends on how strong his natural immune system is."

"But he'll be all right, won't he?"

The dark, almost black eyes met Hutch's with an appraising look. "It is difficult to say. The infection is classed as minor. Under different circumstances, I would not hesitate to say that there is nothing to fear. But given the severity of his injuries, a precise prognosis is impossible. He is very weak. He may not have enough strength left to fight through yet another crisis."

"Oh God."

"But no one is giving up yet. There are several factors in his favor. He is still young..."

"He's thirty-two," Hutch whispered.

"...and he was strong and healthy when he was shot..."

"Hasn't been sick in years..."

"...and he certainly seems to have a strong will to live."

"He's always been a fighter..."

"And not least," Patel continued, "he has the support and the love of his relatives and friends. He has everything to live for. That could be the deciding factor. If you ask me, I would say that he will have a few rough days, but with the proper care and attention, he stands a good chance of coming through."

The calm, steady voice and reassuring words had the intended effect, and the fear in Hutch's chest withdrew a little.

"Thanks, doctor," he managed to force out.

"He is a remarkable man, your partner."

Hutch looked at Patel more carefully, seeing him for the first time as an individual, and not just as one of the many ICU doctors. He liked what he saw—a man whose word could be trusted.

"Yeah, he is. Always has been."

"I am having to ask you to leave now. We will give him something to make sure he will sleep through the night. You can come back tomorrow and sit with him, if you like."

ooOOoo

Hutch left the room with his mind in uproar and his heart twisted into a hard, tight knot.

Dear God, is this nightmare never gonna end?

"Ken!"

He stopped and turned to see Rachel advancing on him.

"Rach-"

Her voice cut him off. Sharp with anger. Lashing out. "What are you doin' to my boy? Huh? Tell me, what're you doin' to him?"

"What?" Hutch said bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talkin' about. All that touchin' and kissin'. I saw you. You're all over him. And he lets you." Her eyes flashed fire. "I can't believe you're doin' that to him. Takin' advantage of him like that when he's down and defenseless."

"What? You don't..."

"I know you!" Anger poured from her like chilled air from a freezer. "I know your type. You pretend to be his friend, but you're after something completely different."

"Rachel..."

"I didn't see it before, but it's so obvious now. You've had your eyes on him for years. Don't think I haven't noticed. Always touchin' him, mooning after him. Any excuse to touch him. I don't know how he put up with it for so long."

"Rachel, listen..."

"Don't touch me. Stay away from me. And stay away from my son! I don't wanna see you in his room again. I despise you! You and your filthy mind. You... you're sick!"

Hutch's self-restraint snapped. "It's not like that! You don't know what you're saying. I love him!" He resisted the urge to grab and shake her.

"That's not love. That's... that's depravity!" Disgust distorted her homely face into a mask of ugliness. "Don't you come near him again with your dirty little fantasies."

Hutch breathed in deeply, struggling for control. "You don't understand," he whispered. "He loves me, too."

"No, he doesn't!" she lashed out. "How can you say that? Dave's not like that. He's never been like that in his life."

She aimed a wild look at him. "He's always been after the girls, even when he was still livin' in New York. He almost got married once. To that girl, Kerry, Terry? The one who got killed. He's always wanted kids. You'll see—one of these days, he's gonna find himself a nice girl and get married. I don't mind if she's not Jewish."

A nurse walked by and gave them a curious look. Hutch stared at her hard, and she looked away and hurried on.

"Rachel, listen to me. Starsky and I, we love each other. We're in love with each other. There's nothing you can do about it."

Her voice rose in denial. "My son's not a pervert!"

Hutch flinched. "No," he said softly. "He isn't." He fixed the older woman with his eyes. "And neither am I. But that doesn't change the fact that Starsky and I... that we're together. That we mean everything to each other."

"I don't believe you. Dave isn't one of them. He's a real man. Don't you think a mother knows? You'll see. Tomorrow. I'll talk to him. I'll make him see reason."

I'll tell him the truth about you, about this... this... *perversity*. When he's awake tomorrow..."

Hutch saw red. He gripped her tightly by the arms and hauled her close, ignoring her protests.

"Don't! Don't you dare throw that at him now. Isn't he in enough pain already? How much more d'you think he can take?" He shook the smaller woman. "Dammit, he needs us now. He needs *you*. He needs you to love him and accept him the way he is. He needs you to be there for him. It's the only way he's gonna make it!"

The fight suddenly went out of her, and she sagged. Started sobbing with her face in her hands, big heaving sobs that shook her body more violently than Hutch had a moment ago.

Hutch stood hesitant for a moment. Grimaced with indecision, wiped a hand over his own face. Finally, he pulled her close again, not in anger this time, but in helplessness and fear and confusion. Rachel leaned against him for just a second, then pulled out of his grasp, pushed him away and ran from the unit.

Hutch stared at the swinging doors for a long moment. Then he sank into the nearest chair and dropped his head in his hands.

Sunday night

Through the weekend, the fever climbed while the antibiotics struggled to keep the infection at bay. Doctors checked and tested. Nurses fussed with antiseptics, dressings and medication.

Rachel and Hutch had reached an uneasy truce and took it in turns to sit with Starsky and keep his face cool with wet cloths. But late on Sunday night, as Starsky's condition deteriorated, the doctors were clearing the room of visitors.

"Mr. Hutchinson," Dr. Freeman said firmly. "You're going to have to leave now."

A flash of panic flared up in Starsky's eyes and the fingers of his left hand dug weakly into the folds of Hutch's jacket.

"Don't..." he whispered, "go..."

Starsky's face was glazed with sweat, lips the color of ash, dark circles like bruises around a pair of eyes that had retreated deep into their sockets. A fine tremor shook his body held firm in the grip of the fever.

"Shh, it's OK, it's OK," Hutch whispered, leaned in closer until their foreheads were almost touching and renewed his hold on the shaking hand. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here. I'm not leaving."

"Mr. Hutchinson! We've been very patient with you in the last few days, but now we *must* ask you to leave. It's in the best interest of the patient."

"You don't understand," Hutch forced out through clenched teeth. "He needs me. I need to be here with him. *That's* in the best interest of the patient."

Couldn't they see that? Couldn't they understand that?

"He needs peace and quiet."

"He needs *me* right now!"

"Mr. Hutchinson! Do I have to call security or will you leave peacefully?"

Starsky's eyes were pleading with him, more eloquent than words. *Don't leave.*

"I won't," Hutch assured him, tightening his grip on the trembling fingers.

Someone placed a hand on Hutch's shoulder, and he whipped around, gun half drawn, ready to do whatever was necessary to keep him by his partner's side.

A small tug on his sleeve stopped him.

Hutch blinked, caught himself, and reluctantly returned the Magnum to its holster. Starsky was right. Threatening the medical team with a hand gun was not the way forward.

There were voices behind him, debating in a low key. Hutch ignored them. He slipped his right hand back into the sweat-damp curls and leaned his forehead against Starsky's, touching where he could. He wished he could pull the feverish man into his arms and hold him tight. But Starsky's shattered body wouldn't allow that.

Hutch couldn't remember when exactly they'd discovered the healing, soothing properties of touch. They'd relied on them for so long.

Hutch knew without a doubt that he wouldn't have made it through the dark hellish nights of his withdrawal if it hadn't been for Starsky's touch. When he lay dying under his car in a remote canyon, it was Starsky's caress that had told him that he'd been found, that he was safe. After the plague, it was Starsky's soothing hand on his forehead that had kept the demons away.

The power of touch was something they'd learned to take for granted—as essential in a crisis as pain meds.

And in the last few months, touch had taken on an even greater importance. Touch was everything. Without it, they hardly made it through each day.

"I think we should make an exception in this case," a new voice joined the discussion behind him. A polite, soft-spoken voice. Patel. "From a purely medical point of view, I believe it would benefit Mr. Starsky if his partner stayed

with him right now, especially since that is what the patient so obviously wants."

At last, someone who understood.

Hutch aimed a grateful look at the doctor. And resolved to thank him properly as soon as all this was over.

"Hutch... Hutch..." Starsky blinked up at him with glazed eyes. A fever tremor shook the weakened body. "God, Hutch, this sucks."

Hutch tightened his grip, covered the shaking fingers with his own steady hand. Dropped a kiss on the burning forehead.

"Yeah, I know," he whispered. "But you're gonna be all right. You had your chance to go out in a blaze of glory. You're not gonna give in to a lousy buncha microbes now, are you?"

Somehow, he knew he'd gotten it right this time. "You'll be fine. Trust me. I know you will. I *know*. Ask Huggy. He thinks I've developed second sight or something. Hang in there for a little while longer. Just keep fighting, you hear me? I'll be right here with you. We're gonna get through this together."

Starsky shuddered and relaxed a little. His eyes slid shut as he fell away into a restless state between sleep and wakefulness. Hutch closed his own eyes in weariness.

No more. Please, God, no more. He can't take much more. Hasn't he suffered enough?

He wasn't sure how much more of a battering his own heart and soul could stand.

ooOOoo

"No. Don't. Let me... I can't..."

Hutch's eyes snapped open to find the room dark and warm and quiet, the only source of illumination the muted glow that seeped through the curtain from the corridor. Everyone had left. There wasn't even a nurse in the room. It was two hours past midnight.

"Starsky?"

The curly head was moving restlessly on the pillow, eyes closed. Starsky was mumbling incoherent words, left hand batting feebly at an invisible target.

"No. Please... I have to..."

"Starsk?"

"Too strong, can't... Hu-utch..."

"I'm here, Starsk, I'm here." Hutch caught the flailing hand, and the fingers gripped him with a surprising strength.

"Have to go back... can't leave him... I promised..."

"C'mon, Starsky, snap out of it."

"He'll fall... into the darkness..."

"Starsky, it's OK, it's the fever. You're hallucinating. The doctors said this might happen."

"So dark... I'll lose him... take his light way... please..."

"You're delirious. It's not real. Listen to me, it's not real. It's just a dream, that's all."

"Hutch... don't let them take me... away..."

"You're here with me in the real world. I won't let anyone take you away from me."

Hutch wasn't sure if it was his words or just his voice that filtered through to the dark space where Starsky was hovering between dream and reality, but gradually, the agitation in Starsky's voice faded and his distress eased.

Minutes crawled by. Hours. Days and months, maybe. Time lost all meaning in the endlessness of the dark night hours, the warm confines of the room, the slow ticking seconds of the clock, the short labored gasps of breath from the injured man in the bed. Past and future ceased to exist in the surreal nightmare of Hutch's sleep-deprived wakefulness, and he thought that he must have lived his entire life in that small room sitting beside his partner's bed and willing him through the endless night.

Leaden weights of weariness pulled at Hutch.

God, let this night be over. Please, let it be morning soon.

Starsky's pale lips moved again, curved in a small smile that was heart-wrenching to see. Hutch leaned in close.

"Shhh, it's all right. Go back to sleep."

The dark lashes trembled as Starsky struggled to open his eyes.

"The tree... Hutch, did'ya see the tree?"

"No, babe," Hutch whispered. "I didn't see it. Tell me about it. What was it like?"

"Was beautiful... like a tree... our tree... 'cause you were there, too... you're always there..."

Hutch swallowed thickly, wiped a tear from his cheek. "That's right. I'm here. I'll always be here. As long as you need me. As long as you want me."

"Always. Always. Hutch...?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Just... try and relax now. You'll be fine. You've almost made it. Just hold on a little longer."

Dizziness engulfed Hutch as he felt his grasp on reality begin to slip away from him like the fleeting glimpse of a dream from the night before.

Maybe the new day would never arrive. Maybe they'd be locked into that neverending night forever, with no hope of escape or reprieve. Maybe they'd never see morning again...

Behind him, the door of the room opened. Voices from the corridor drifted inside. Footsteps approached.

Hutch lifted heavy eyes from the bed. The cool, grey light of dawn hovered outside the window. Beside him, Starsky was asleep, looking peaceful and weaker than a newborn pup. The hand in his own felt warm, but no longer burning to the touch.

From across the bed, Dr. Patel smiled his enigmatic smile and nodded once.

"Somehow," he said lightly, "I had a feeling you would still be here."

Hutch's voice sounded hoarse and rasping in his ears as if he hadn't used it for years. "Where else would I be?"

Patel gazed at Hutch pensively. "Indeed, where else?"

Wednesday

Two days later, the medics officially declared a still weak, but defiant Starsky out of danger.

...remarkably rapid recovery... might well have turned into something more serious... looking good... healing well now... stable... pleased with his progress...

Another crippling weight fell off Hutch's shoulders. The roller-coaster ride of the past two weeks, he thought, had probably aged him by at least two decades. It would be good to get a decent night's sleep. Maybe next week sometime.

A silhouette darkened the observation window.

Rachel. Beckoning to him. *God, not again.*

Stiffly, he rose and met her outside the room.

"Ken, I've had a phone call from Nicky last night. He called Rose and Al when he couldn't reach me in New York."

"Is he coming?"

"He's in trouble. They've picked him up at the Mexican border with contraband in the car." She shook her head in confusion. "There's gotta be a mistake. He wouldn't do a thing like that. I mean he's never been involved in anything illegal before."

Hutch struggled to maintain a neutral expression on his face. *So she's never found out about his shady activities on the side.*

"I gotta go to him," she said. "He needs me."

Hutch almost choked. "*Nick* needs you? *Starsky* needs you! He needs you more than that little..."

"No, no, Nicky... Nicky's just a kid. He needs my help."

"He's 28, for crying out loud. Old enough to take responsibility for his own mistakes."

"I'm still his mother!"

Pent-up anger and frustration bubbled up inside Hutch, steaming just below the surface of his self-control. He wanted to sweep the self-control aside and smash his fist into the nearest object. Preferably Nick's face.

Little Nicky. The favorite. The mollycoddled. Nick who could do no wrong. Nick who would, in time, produce a daughter-in-law and a stable full of grandkids. Nick who was not a pervert.

"Why are you doing this? Nick's not the real reason you're leaving, is it? You're punishing Starsky for the choices he's made."

"No. No, that's not true. I mean... this isn't easy for me. You have to understand that. I need time to think. About all this. About Dave. About... *you.*"

She shook her head. "I saw you the other night. How you... were there for each other. How he looked at you. I don't know. Edith told me... oh, never mind. I

need some time to think. The doctors say he's out of danger. He doesn't need me now. I think he hasn't needed me for a long time. He's never really needed anybody, even when he was a kid. So independent, you know? But I think in a strange way he needs *you*."

I know he does.

"Say good-bye to him from me. Tell him, I'll phone. I... just need time to think."

Hutch stared after her as she walked away. He sighed. Then went back inside to reclaim the chair and his place by Starsky's side. Kissed the sleeping man on the forehead. Intertwined their fingers and felt the steady pulse beating under his finger tips.

So, it's just you and me again, babe. Just you and me.

He unfolded his newspaper and settled down for another long wait.

July

Summer had arrived in force and LA was sweltering under a relentless sun, stifled under a cloche of unrelenting heat. Streets and sidewalks were emptier than usual as the city's inhabitants found reasons not to leave their air-conditioned houses and offices.

In Memorial, Starsky was getting better by stages.

As if fate had decided that the infection would be the last obstacle she'd throw in their path for a while, Starsky's recovery was suddenly beginning to pick up pace.

In early June, Starsky graduated from the ICU to a recovery ward. Shortly after, they elevated his bed for the first time. By the end of the month, he was sitting up unaided.

Only a few days earlier, they'd changed some of the medication and reduced the doses of the heavy duty drugs that masked the pain, but kept the quirky mind in an almost perpetual state of fog.

The difference was startling. Starsky was more alert, began to take an interest in his surroundings, kept up his end of the conversation. He was even beginning to enjoy his food again.

The memory of the infection faded, the specter of impending pneumonia receded as Starsky slowly got stronger.

Hutch was there through everything. He cheered the smallest triumph, celebrated every milestone, soothed the worst nightmares, eased the greatest

setbacks. He was there first thing in the morning, during his lunch break, back again in the evening after work and until Starsky fell asleep at night, or until the nurses threw him out. Spent the weekends practically camping out in Starsky's room.

He did it all joyfully, gratefully. The smallest step, the tiniest improvement was a gift, an added bonus.

Because despite the progress, there was no denying that Starsky was still very ill. Thin to the point of gauntness, ghostly pale, and desperately weak. He still slept a lot, was still in great pain, still needed help with some of the most basic functions.

No one knew to what degree he would ever regain the full use of his right arm, or his stamina, or a life without constant fear of a setback.

"Go out!" Starsky urged him occasionally. "It's a beautiful day out there. Go to the beach. Relax. Take a day off. I swear you're startin' to look worse than me."

And without fail, Hutch shrugged and said something like, "Nah, you know how easily I get burned. I've decided to give the beach a miss this year." Or maybe, "Are you kidding? This is the coolest building in the city. Why d'you think I spend so much time in here?" Or, "I promised Dobey to get these reports done by Monday. I'd better do that first."

And once, when Starsky pushed too hard, he said quietly, "There's no place in the world I'd rather be. You know that."

Starsky gave up after that. Secretly, Hutch knew, Starsky was counting the minutes until his partner's reappearance. He could tell by the way the blue eyes lit up when he walked through the door, the way Starsky leaned into his embrace, the way he returned Hutch's kiss. Hutch lived for that moment.

ooOOoo

Independence Day fell on a Wednesday. Hutch, working regular hours for the first time in his career, had the day off.

"Don't even think about making me go back on the streets," Hutch had said to Dobey sometime in June, forestalling the inevitable suggestion. "I can't do that to him. How can he get better if he's constantly having to worry about me? Anyway, I can't afford to get hurt now. But what I can do is work on the Gunther case. Get the paperwork ready for the trial. That could keep me busy for weeks."

That turned out to be an understatement. There was so much to do. The Gunther case was growing by the day as more evidence and more incriminating details of his more shady activities emerged. The media had already dubbed it the case of the century.

Consequently, Hutch had brought his paper work to the hospital with him and was quietly working his way through the case files while Starsky dozed, looking up now and then to gaze at his sleeping partner with the mixture of joy, fear, pain and anger that had taken up permanent residence in his heart.

Only sometimes, he caught a glimpse of something else festering beneath the terrible fusion of joy and fear and pain and anger like an infection that wouldn't respond to treatment.

You idiot. Starsky is getting better every day and you're having hang-ups about the day he died.

He couldn't help it. The memories of that day had begun to ambush him at the most unpredictable moments of the day. The smallest thing could set them off. A printed word on a piece of paper, a snatch of conversation, a few bars of a familiar tune on the radio.

Help me. Hold me. Promise you won't let me go.

Hutch sighed and shook himself, realizing that once again his thoughts had drifted far from the details of the case file he'd been studying. He glanced at Starsky—the quick once-over he gave him every few minutes, to make sure he was there, alive, breathing—and gave a small start.

Starsky was wide awake and gazing at him.

Hutch felt a smile of delight creep over his features. "Hey," he said, and put the file aside. But this time, Starsky didn't respond in kind.

"Are you ever gonna tell me what's wrong, Hutch?" he asked quietly.

Hutch, caught off-guard, opened his mouth for the inevitable denial. "Hey, nothing's wrong. Why do you think something's wrong?"

Starsky's eyes looked large and luminous in his thin, pale face. "Cause I'm no longer on morphine, and I can read. It's written in large letters on your forehead. Something's botherin' you."

Hutch smiled weakly. "What? Apart from all this, you mean?"

"Yeah. Apart from all this."

"You don't think this is enough?"

Starsky shifted and struggled to sit up, and Hutch rushed to his side to help him raise the bed. When Starsky was sitting comfortably, he placed a restraining hand on Hutch's arm.

"Hutch, look, I was shot in the back, not in the head. I know something's eating you. Don't you think we should talk about it?"

"I don't know what you mean. There's nothing to talk about." Hutch shook off the hand, jumped up and strode to the window, realizing too late that nothing would confirm Starsky's suspicions more quickly than that textbook evasive behavior. Behind him, he heard Starsky sigh.

"Hutch, don't."

"Don't what?" Hutch said to the window.

"Don't do this. Don't try to shield me." Then, softly, "Don't take this one thing away from me that I can still do."

Hutch turned around. "Starsk?"

Sadness flickered over the pale face. "Well, look at me. Right now, I can't do a thing for myself. Hell, I can't even go to the bathroom on my own. And you... you're always there for me, doin' everything. How d'you think that makes me feel, huh?"

"Starsk..."

"There's only one thing I *can* still do, and that's being there for you when you need me." The look on Starsky's face mutated to a complex expression of love, concern, need and exasperation. "It's 'bout the only thing I *can* do right now. So lemme do it, huh?"

Hutch hesitated, and Starsky pressed his advantage.

"We promised," he reminded Hutch.

"What?"

"We promised each other, no more secrets. Something's eatin' you up, and you know you gotta tell me eventually. That's the only way we cope with shit."

"You have enough shit of your own to cope with right now."

"Yeah, and you're here at every stage helpin' me cope with it. All I wanna do is return the favor." A small, sly smile flitted across his pale face. "If you don't tell me, I'll just be lyin' here, wondering and worrying. That could lead to a major setback, y' know."

Hutch snorted. "Nothing like a little emotional blackmail to get your own way, huh?"

"Yeah, well, I don't exactly have a lot of options to play around with right now."

Hutch's resolve wilted. Surreptitiously, he checked his partner over for signs of pain and fatigue. Starsky, dressed in his blue pajamas, a halo of overlong curls surrounding the much too thin face, looked washed-out, but alive and alert. Not every day was an improvement on the one before, but today was definitely a

good day. A very good day. Soon, too soon, the drugs would be wearing off, and the pain would strike and hold until the time came for the next dose. But not yet. Maybe not for a while yet.

A feeling of infinite tenderness washed around Hutch's heart.

God, Starsk, look at you. Alive, here with me. Getting better all the time. You're a miracle.

The troubled look in Starsky's searching eyes softened and he reached out for Hutch. Hutch crossed the room in three long strides, sat on the edge of the bed and—gently, so gently—pulled the thin body of his lover into his arms. Starsky leaned into him and hooked both arms around his waist. The wiry curls tickled Hutch's cheek and he inhaled a lungful of the clean, warm scent.

Starsky sighed and rested his forehead on Hutch's shoulder.

"Look, you're not beating yourself up 'cause I was shot, are you?" he said softly. "There's nothin' you could've done. They had me straight."

"Yeah. I know. I... I've realized that."

"And you had to get down. It was the only way. The Torino wouldn't've protected you. If they'd used different ammo, the bullets could've gone straight through the car."

"I know, I know..."

"Hutch, I couldn't've made it if you'd been shot as well. There ain't a day that I'm not grateful they didn't get you, too."

Hutch almost choked. *God, Starsky, stop it. You're killing me.*

He squeezed his eyes shut, buried his face in Starsky's curls. "I know..."

The iron struts he'd erected to fortify his resistance were collapsing, one by one, no match for a Starsky inquisition.

"It's not because of Ma, is it?" Starsky said against his shoulder. "She'd've found out sooner or later, or I would've told her, and believe me, her reaction wouldn't've been any different then."

"No," Hutch said miserably, "I guess not..."

Starsky drew back and gazed at Hutch, confused. "Then what, Hutch? What's wrong?"

Hutch pulled away. Took a deep, shaky breath, lowered his eyes, raised them, looked at Starsky, looked away. Took another deep breath.

"I gave up," he said, his eyes on his hands. "That day. I gave up on you."

Saying it out loud somehow made saying the rest a little easier. "I let you down. I knew you were gonna d-die. Somehow, I *knew* it. I *believed* it. I... had no hope at all. I-I knew you'd die!"

"Yeah, well, you were right about that."

The puzzlement in Starsky's voice fueled a sudden surge of anger and Hutch was on his feet. "OK, I was right! What kind of satisfaction d'you think that gives me? The point is, I gave up on you. I let you down! D'you understand?"

He strode away from the bed to the opposite corner of the room. Turned around, faced Starsky again. "I promised I'd never let you go. That I'd hold onto you. But then I gave up on you within minutes. I never even gave you a chance."

"Whoa, whoa," said Starsky, taken aback. "Hold on a sec. Hold on. What the hell're you talkin' about?"

"I let you die!" Hutch roared and stabbed a finger at him. "I didn't lift a finger when you were bleeding out on the tarmac. If it wasn't for Chrissie and Dobby, you'd've b-bled to death right there..."

"Hutch..."

"And when you were in the hospital, fighting for your life, I wasn't even with you. No, I was out on the streets running after some perp. Couldn't get out there fast enough. Carried on as if nothing had happened, doing stuff I could've done any time. Didn't even wait until you were d-dead. And all because I *knew* you were gonna die."

"Hutch..."

Hutch balled his hands into fists. Strode to the window, slammed a fist against the wall, strode back across the room. Strode back to the window. Leaned both hands heavily on the sill, head down, breathing hard.

"When you were poisoned, I told Dobby that we wouldn't give up. And if we only had two minutes left, we wouldn't give up. But this time, you... I..." The words almost choked him. "I was so certain you'd die. I didn't do anything to help you live. I didn't even try."

He gulped in some air. Stood with his back to the bed, head against the glass. "In how many different ways can I let you down?"

"But Hutch, I don't understand." Distress joined the confusion in Starsky's voice. "How can you say you weren't there? You *were* there... All the time. I don't know how you did it, but you were with me the whole time."

The heat in Hutch's heart dissipated, leaving a small cold space. *God, I've no right to lay this on you right now.*

"No," he whispered. "You don't understand. I should've *done* something. Don't you see? What if you... if you'd died just because I didn't do everything in my power to save you?"

"But you did. Don't you remember? You were holding me. You wouldn't let me go. Without you I'd never have made it."

Hutch shook his head. The words made no sense. Starsky's voice reached out to him.

"C'mere."

Hutch went to him at once.

Starsky drew him close with his left arm and anchored him against his side. Hutch clung to him, face buried in the dark, warm space created by Starsky's arms, fighting desperately to keep his ragged gasps of breath from turning into outright sobs. Starsky stroked the blond head soothingly as if petting a terrified, frightened little animal.

"I don't remember much about gettin' shot," he said softly when Hutch had calmed down a little. "Just the bit about the car, and the gun. I saw the gun, y' know. Remember thinkin' that gun could blow the whole car apart. But after that... things were a bit hazy. Until you got there."

Starsky's voice drifted around him like snowflakes dancing in a gentle breeze. "You kept me alive there. I don't know what Dobey and Chrissie did, but I know that without you... if you hadn't been there... there's nothin' they could've done. You were holding onto me. I wanted to go to sleep so bad. I was so tired. But you wouldn't let me. You kept sayin' '*Look at me, don't close your eyes, look at me.*' D'you remember? You were all light and golden. You looked at me like you were right inside me. Like you were a part of me. I just couldn't let go."

Hutch had gone completely still. He'd almost stopped breathing. He was listening to Starsky as if he'd just discovered the sense of hearing and a whole new world of sound, listening not just with his ears but with his whole body, his mind, his soul.

"I'm not really sure what happened next," the husky voice floated over him and a hand crept to the nape of Hutch's neck, the touch firm and comforting. "Something was pulling me away. There was... an ocean, I think. I'm not sure. I think I was drowning. The pull was so strong. I tried to get away, but I couldn't make it."

Hutch shuddered and clutched at the warm body beside him.

"It's all a bit hazy now," the voice continued, "but there was a strange place, and I saw... some weird stuff. Y' know, dying's not at all how I'd imagined it. No tunnel or bright light or anything like that. In fact, it was pretty dark, and..."

I couldn't see the way back. I tried so hard to get away, but I just couldn't do it. And I didn't know which way to go."

"But you came back," Hutch whispered into the dark, warm space. "Somehow, you came back to me. How did you do that?"

There was a moment's silence, and then a small unexpected sound. A ripple of quiet laughter.

Hutch's head came up with a snap.

Starsky was laughing.

The sound was nothing like his usual hearty, deep-bellied laugh, more like a mixture between a cough and the squeak of a rusty hinge—short-lived, before it broke apart into a painful wheeze, and the pale face twisted into a mask of agony. Hutch had his arm around him immediately, supporting him until the spasm faded. Starsky sagged weakly against him.

"Hutch, you moron!" he whispered. "You really don't know? *You* got me back. When it came to the crunch, you were right there pullin' me back, like a... a lifeline or somethin'. Without you, I'd never have made it."

Hutch didn't know what to say. Didn't know what to think. He'd never heard anything like it before. Things like that weren't possible. He looked uncertainly at the man in his arms.

Starsky raised a feeble smile. "Hey, don't worry," he said, struggling for breath. "I'm not completely off the rocker yet. I know that without the medics and the surgery and the defib and all that, no way would I be here right now. But you... You're something else. Without you, none of this medical stuff would've done any good."

He took in another labored breath. The pain meds were wearing off. Exhaustion flickered over the rugged features. But Starsky wasn't ready to give in to the pain yet. He gazed at Hutch with eyes that were bright and clear and full of life.

"We've something weird between us, you 'n me," he said softly. "A strange connection. You're so much a part of me. You couldn't give up on me if you tried."

And suddenly, Hutch remembered. The connection. He'd felt it stretch between them, in the moment of Starsky's death. The connection had still been there. When his conscious mind had already surrendered all hope, another part of him had still hung on, refusing to let go. Was that what Starsky meant?

Could it really be as simple as that?

And then he remembered something else. Six months ago, on the shores of a small lake in the mountains—commitments made and received, love given and confirmed, bonds formed and strengthened. And a moment of supreme clarity

and understanding, of light and darkness, and the fleeting knowledge of something deep and strong and powerful connecting two souls together.

We're linked. Part of each other. And most of the time, we're not even aware of it.

If we were, maybe it would drive us insane.

How can anyone go through life with that kind of knowledge?

Hutch looked at Starsky, saw the same fleeting knowledge reflected in the deep, blue eyes. Sensed the link pulsating between them like a living creature born of need and want and trust and love.

Love. So much love. All for him. He hadn't lost it. And maybe he wouldn't now. One day, yes, one day. But not now. Maybe not for a long time.

A new kind of joy welled up inside Hutch and some of the weight on his chest crumbled and fell away. He clutched the warm, reassuring body of his partner as firmly as he dared and buried his face in Starsky's neck.

"God, if I'd lost you... if I'd lost you again, I don't know what I would've done." His voice wavered dangerously, and Starsky's arms snaked around him and held him fast. "When you were... when I thought you were dying, I-I went a little crazy. I don't know what happened. If you hadn't come back..."

"I know," Starsky said into his hair. "Been a rough time, but it's gonna get better now. Gonna get a lot better. I promise."

ooOOoo

Starsky was floating again.

He was on a drug-induced high and felt fantastic.

Not just because of the pills he'd just taken, and the all-too-brief absence of pain, but because he had Hutch back. The real thing, not the almost-real, pain-filled, guilt-ridden substitute.

Down by the beach, the Independence Day fireworks display started up with bangs and explosions that could be heard all the way to Memorial.

"Wish we could go and see that," Starsky sighed, sitting up in bed, wishing he could at least crane his neck to catch a glimpse of the distant action. But that was only one of the many maneuvers the healing tissue in his body wouldn't allow yet.

When he looked back at Hutch, he saw the gleam of an idea taking root there.

"Maybe we can," his partner said, thoughtfully eyeing the room. He jumped up, crossed to the window and looked out.

"T's no good. I've already had my stint in the wheelchair today."

"You don't need a wheelchair," said Hutch, energized, and started shifting the table and chairs against the wall. Starsky almost laughed.

"What're ya doin'?"

"Preparing the best seats in the house," Hutch replied without looking up, absorbed in his task as he moved the night table out of the way.

Ah, my Hutch. The determined one.

"You better watch out for Godzilla, um, Gabriella, the nurse. She'll kick your ass when she finds out you've messed up her room."

"Hm, she can try."

Hutch surveyed the space he'd created, then turned to Starsky and tossed a smile of brilliant, undiluted joy in his direction. Starsky's heart skipped a beat.

God, you're beautiful when you do that!

Hopefully, he'd get to see that kind of smile a lot more often now.

Hutch snuck around the bed, oblivious to the effect his buoyant mood had on his partner, took hold of the railing and released the brakes. "Let's roll before the show's over. Hold on. Ready? Here we go." He gave the bed a well-aimed push.

Starsky reclined luxuriously and let Hutch maneuver him into place.

The view from the 7th floor window turned out to be a lot better than expected. The vast city of LA spread out around them in every direction—alive, vibrant, aglow with lights. But beyond the office blocks, freeways and suburbs, the dark sea stretched to the horizon, mingling with a starless night sky, a perfect canvas for the multi-colored display in the sky.

Lights of green and red and purple erupted along the sea shore, sending sparks of colored fire high into the sky and casting an unearthly sheen over the city before descending and being swallowed up by the sea.

"Wow," Starsky said. "I'd no idea we'd get to see it so clearly."

"Well, it's not the real thing, but it's as good as we can get."

Hutch turned off the light and brought his chair forward, but Starsky would have none of that arrangement today.

"Aren't you sick of that chair yet? C'mere and share this bed, will ya?"

"Better not. I've already dipped you more than enough for one day. You know what Patel said about that."

"I don't care," Starsky said stubbornly. "I want you here, not miles away on that chair."

"Hey, I got an idea. Move forward just a little."

Hutch kicked off his shoes and—steadyding his lover with one arm—carefully slipped in behind him, taking care not to jar the injured man. He arranged one long leg on either side of his friend and gently tugged at Starsky until he leaned back against him.

Starsky sighed with contentment when Hutch's arms came around him and held him fast. He relaxed against Hutch's strong, muscular chest, breathing in the moment of perfection, the sense of safety within the protective circle of Hutch's arms, the renewed joy of their closeness.

Hutch's arms rocked him gently. Happiness invaded Starsky, a force stronger than the pain and the fears and the uncertainties that lay ahead.

Hutch. My big blond lion.

I came so close to losing you.

The lights of the fireworks display distorted to a multi-colored blur. He blinked a few times, annoyed at his own weakness. A single tear escaped and slowly traveled down his cheek. He wanted to wipe it away, but Hutch's arms were holding him fast, secure.

Hutch leaned into him from behind, nuzzled his neck, then his cheek. Discovered the tear by leaning into it.

"Hey," Hutch whispered, instantly alarmed. "What's wrong? Are you in pain? Am I hurting you? What's the matter? Tell me."

Starsky would have laughed a little if he'd dared. The memory of his earlier attempt stopped him. He squeezed Hutch's arm with his stronger, his good hand, instead. Turned his head a fraction to catch Hutch's eye.

"Nothin's wrong," he said softly. "That's just it. Everything's fine. I'm just... happy, y' know?"

The arms around him tightened ever so gently, cautiously. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

A particularly spectacular display of yellow and green illuminated the horizon, and they both went "Aaah!" with admiration.

Hutch kissed him just below the ear. The mustache tickled and Starsky squirmed a little. The joy of life washed through him.

"Next year," he said, "we're gonna go see that in real. Whadda ya say?"

"Next year..."

"Yep. 'Cause there's gonna be a next year now."

The night sky erupted into brilliant light, casting a faint glow over the bed, the room. Starsky leaned back against Hutch.

And Hutch kissed him again.

— End —

Feedback is always appreciated: keri_mera@yahoo.com