Monday, May 12, 1980

"It's one in the morning." Hutch's sleepy voice found beautiful harmony with the soft guitar strains.

They sat side by side in foldable lounge chairs facing the pond. Wind stirred the trees in the small woods close by and made the usually still water lap soothingly against its bank. Spontaneity had seized them with the idea for a late-night picnic at the duck pond. Afterward, their wine glasses and dinnerware stowed in the basket, Starsky had listened to Hutch strumming his guitar under the stars. Mellow from wine and closeness to his favorite person, he had dozed on and off, lulled by the rhythm and content with life in general. Hutch's voice was so much like music that it took a moment for Starsky to realize the spoken words were directed at him rather than the twinkling stars above.
"Did you hear me?" Hutch asked.

Starsky glanced to the side. "Hm? Oh, yeah, one a.m."

Hutch propped the guitar on his knees and yawned. "We have a potentially life-changing meeting just ten hours from this very minute."

"What's your point? I'm enjoying my Sunday night with the world's most beautiful man."

"Shameless schmooze artist," Hutch accused. "My point is it's no longer Sunday night. It's Monday morning. We should probably head home. I doubt the Delaneys want us spending the night at the duck pond."

"I don't see why not. They told us we could use the grounds whenever we want."

"Starsk."

"Come on, what's your hurry, huh? Home's just a few minutes away." Starsky heard a soft startled movement beside him and shifted in his chair for a better look at Hutch's face in the moonlight. "What?"

Hutch was staring at the pond. "Our minds are traveling in the same circles. I've been sitting here thinking. Around this time last year, on a Sunday, we spent the afternoon here at the pond, and I remember having this awful sense of racing the clock to hold off the inevitable, when I didn't even know what the inevitable was...."

Oh. "And? It's okay, you can talk about it. I'm here, I'm fine, there's no inevitable left to fight. Hell, we played tennis on Saturday, and I put you to shame, partner. That oughta tell you how well I'm doing."

"I know." A glint of Hutch's white teeth in the darkness hinted at a smile. "Your physical therapy is doing wonders. That's part of what has me thinking about everything that's happened since you got out of the hospital. So many whirlwind changes, so little time to really reflect on them. It really struck me tonight, for maybe the first time in the nine months we've lived here, what it means that this place isn't a vacation spot for us now. Like you said, home is just a few minutes away, not a two-hour drive."

"That's a good thing, right? You loved fixing up Mr. Smythe's cottage, making it our home, even when I was being a pest and driving you up the wall."

"You weren't a pest."

"Your nose is growing, Pinocchio," Starsky said.

That triggered an unusually loud Hutchinson laugh. "Okay, you were an unholy pain in the ass at times. Agreed." Hutch leaned precariously to the side, half out of his chair, and brushed his thumb tenderly over Starsky's eyebrows. "But you were still in the hard part of recovery. Some healthy bitching was to be expected. Better for you not to bottle it up inside. You were such a trouper in the hospital. I'm glad you could let your hair down with me about how everything really felt. And, yes, it's a good thing we're here. I love our cottage. I'm just amazed at the direction our lives are taking."

"Let me in on what's really circling your head. You're talking upbeat, but I know a Hutchinson fret taking shape when I hear one."
Hutch sat back in his chair, narrowly avoiding an awkward tilt and fall in the flimsy lounge. "Yes, you do, don't you? Damn. You know, once in a while, it'd be kind of nice to have at least the illusion that I can fool you."

Starsky laughed. "You're a complex being, lover, but you stopped fooling me somewhere around '72. And you read me just as well, so don't feel bad."

"Couldn't read you last year."

Starsky leaned over to brush the windblown hair off Hutch's forehead. He tilted still farther to draw a kiss from his partner's temple to jaw, where he let his lips linger against the skin until Hutch turned his cheek in a move that brought their lips together. Barely a second of contact, and Hutch faced forward again.

"Hey." After one last comforting elbow nudge, Starsky sat back in his lounge. "You did read me. You knew something was wrong, and you damn near figured it out. I'll never forget you reading your journal to me in the hospital. Your words are in my heart to stay. I know how close you came to putting the pieces together, even with me trying my damnedest to protect you from it. Memories don't have you in a mood tonight. What is it?"

"If our meeting tomorrow--today, I mean--goes well, we'll officially be partners again. It blows my mind."

"Ah, Hutch, we never stopped being partners."

"No, no, of course not. You know what I meant. Professionally speaking. We'll be partners in a professional capacity again. In a way I never expected...."

"So what about all of that has you feeling less than wonderful?" Starsky asked.

"I'm nervous, I guess." Hutch yawned again. "It's like we're on the verge of another inevitability. A much, much better one than--than last year's, but it's still daunting."

Starsky rose, folded his chair for carrying, and tucked it under his arm, holding out his hand to take the guitar so Hutch could manage the other chair and picnic basket. "Come on, let's head home. You need to forget about meetings and careers and anything stressful for a few hours."

"Starsky."

He wagged his fingers until Hutch nodded at the silent entreaty and held out the guitar. As soon as Hutch had chair and basket in hand, Starsky moved in for a kiss that made promises. With the slow dance of lips, he vowed the future was theirs to command, and that no inevitability, good or bad, had the power to overcome their partnership.

Hutch emerged from the kiss a visibly happier man, but another yawn distorted his smile. "Bed sounds wonderful, but after working all day on the greenhouse addition, I'm not up to sexual calisthenics."

"Not asking for gymnastics and fireworks tonight, Hutch. Just want us both naked, comfy, and you wrapped around me while we fall asleep." Hutch ducked his head, resting his forehead on Starsky's shoulder and muffing his words. Starsky juggled the lounge chair and guitar to free one hand, and covered the blond head with his palm, turning his face to kiss the wispy sideburn visible to him. "Hm, what's that you're mumbling about?"

"Nothing, Starusk. Sleeping naked in your arms sounds good. Let's not put it off a second longer."
"Get those long legs in gear then, Blondie; we'll be there before you know it."

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Tuesday, May 13, 1980

"Gay doesn't sell. At least not in the mainstream, which is where you guys will want to be squarely positioned. You don't have enough synthesizer to qualify as New Wave."

Starsky sat at the piano and scribbled furiously on one of several partially crumpled sheets of paper spread atop the baby grand's gleaming black surface. The snatches of words were supposed to hold deeper meaning, and the illusion of a rhyme wouldn't hurt.

"You two got a great thing going here. Macho ex-cop heroes, longtime partners on the force, escaped death with the scars and a nationally covered super-trial to prove it, now on the verge of a debut album together. Women will go nuts for that, but you can't deny them the right to dream. Mysterious, okay. Sexually ambiguous, that'll fly. Inaccessible, even better. Women really get off on the inaccessible."

Starsky shook the pen viciously to force the last bit of ink down to the tip. It wasn't as if he and Hutch had planned to plaster a photo of themselves in flagrante delicto on the back of the album cover. They hadn't even told Mackie that they were more than friends and creative partners, but five minutes in his office was all it took for the gimlet-eyed, sixty-year-old producer/record-label executive to push back his enormous swivel chair and throw his jewelry-loaded hands to the ceiling with a groan.

"You guys are lovers. Tell me I'm imagining things. No, don't tell me that. I don't wantcha to get in the habit of lying to me. We gotta shake some things up here. Image control, that's the ticket."

And 1980 had suddenly felt like 1950.

"By all means, keep the cottage near San Diego, and if you want to spend most of your time there together, no problem. It's your artistic retreat. It's where you dream up the music that everyone's gonna be clamoring for more of after this first album hits the shelves. But it's gotta be known that you have your own separate places here, too, where the action is, and it wouldn't hurt you to be seen around the hot spots with a couple of tasty busty bits on your arms, you know what I mean? Fuel the speculation."

Giving up on the pen, Starsky flung it across the drawing room. He couldn't help referring to the open, sunny room as the late Geoffrey Smythe had. The elderly Englishman's presence could still be felt in the room's constant warmth and comfort, and remembering his unconditional approval of the partners' love soothed Starsky's frayed nerves.

But the record producer's grating reality check still rankled.

"Your families know, that's okay. You wanna tell your priest, your Rabbi, your whatever, fine. Anyone who can be struck by divine lightning for revealing the truth or sued within pennies of destitution, fine. But you better not whisper around anyone who might be hiding a press pass or a micro-recorder. Understood?"

Starsky dug in his robe pocket for another pen. Why did second verses always have to be the hang-up? The first one had flowed so seamlessly. Maybe there was something wrong with Hutch's melody. It did change after that second guitar rift....

"Of course, what I'm most concerned about is our investment in you. You better believe I'm gonna
make you sign in blood that if this idyllic romance hits Hell Street and you end up hating each other, you're still gonna make music together until we've gotten our money's worth. I wanna see you at the Grammy's next February, and I think you've got that kinda potential, or you wouldn't be sitting here."

Starsky needed the section played through a couple times, but he didn't want to disturb Hutch's sleep. His pensive musical partner had stayed awake half the night brooding in the armchair by their bedroom window, unwilling to talk about what the all-important meeting had meant to him, though lines had appeared on his forehead for the first time in months.

"And don't go getting it in your gorgeous, naïve heads that I'm anti-gay. I fucked five men this past weekend, all of them gorgeous and all between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, but I'm a producer so no one gives a shit. You see the distinction?"

Starsky hadn't liked how Mackie's eye slid appraisingly over Hutch with each use of the word "gorgeous." He trusted Hutch as he trusted the sun to rise each morning, but he didn't want the safe haven Hutch had found for his music to be tainted by unwelcome and awkward advances from a supposed ally. So, with various subtly possessive gestures and body language, he had conveyed an important point to the producer. Namely, that if Mackie ever attempted to lay a finger on Hutch, he'd end up buried in a hole requiring more than five young, gorgeous men to dig him out of it.

"When you're in this office, you can act like you just sucked each other off in the elevator on the way up. No complaints from me. But in the public eye, you're as platonic as Hall and Oates. Speaking of which, you've gotta get a name for yourselves. Can't have another blond and dark duo out there going by last names. You'll be labeled copycats from the get-go. Have me one by Monday or I'll name you myself, and you won't like it."

Bahama Bobby, the music store proprietor who had started this journey into madness and was present at the meeting as their manager, had apologized profusely to the fledgling recording artists on their elevator ride back down to the real world. But he had ended the apology with a ringing endorsement of Mackie Brewster.

"He's a right cheeky bastard, but he's the real deal, my friends. If you're going to make a go of it in this business, you want him surgically attached to you every step of the way."

After all his post-shooting operations, Starsky felt he might be persuaded into one more if it meant surgically detaching Mackie Brewster. Of course, that would also mean axing Hutch's blossoming success before it had a real chance to bear fruit. Starsky also knew that success was the least important aspect of their new career in Hutch's mind. The professional partnership, on the other hand, meant everything to him. Yanking it out from under him was out of the question.

"How long have you been up?"

Starsky looked over his shoulder and smiled at Hutch in his thin pajama bottoms. "A while. Something's wrong with the second verse in 'Weapon.' I can't put my finger on it, but I think it's gotta be something to do with the-- What did you call it?"

"Chord progression?"

"Yeah. After the second guitar rift."

Hutch sat down on the bench with his back to the piano and took Starsky's chin in hand. "My favorite lyricist. Have I told you lately how sexy it is to see you at the piano working on our music?"
"Exactly eleven hours ago. Have I told you how sexy you are in those pajamas? Not that I would mind you ditching 'em right now."

"Is that a proposition?"

Starsky kissed him. He meant it to be light, but he found himself dropping the pen on the floor and seizing Hutch in iron arms, and the kiss suddenly had a desperate quality to it that coaxed a soft groan of desire from his lover. Hutch pulled away, but only to slip to his knees on the floor, gesturing for Starsky to swing his legs around. He complied, resting his back against the edge of the closed piano lid, and Hutch partied Starsky's robe.

"Just as I hoped," Hutch said, kissing up the bare legs and descending on the cock that bobbed and reached for him of its own accord.

Starsky flung his head back and spread his fingers through soft golden hair shimmering in the morning sunlight. "No one...ever...made me feel...uh!...like you do...oh! I don't know how my cock'll ever forgive me for what it was missing all those years."

Hutch loosened his lips and mouthed, "It's a fine, upstanding--" Starsky snickered and Hutch nipped at him, causing a delighted shriek. "It's a fine, upstanding Jewish cock. It's probably too busy feeling guilty for not showing you what you really wanted sooner."

Bursting into laughter, Starsky trembled as the suction returned full force. "God, it feels good to laugh...while you suck me...and you know it, you know it, Hutch--oh, oh!"

Fire seemed to rage against his closed eyelids, and his hands struggled for purchase in the fine hair, wanting to cradle the head in blissful motion over his electrified groin. Hutch was in rare form, and Starsky had never known he could reach heaven so quickly. The ticking of his wristwatch's second hand matched the rise and fall of Hutch's lips, and Starsky began to shout, shaking and jarring the piano keys beneath their protective lid.

Hutch knew exactly when to release, exactly where to plant soothing kisses on his way north to meet Starsky's lips and share the taste of early morning familiarity and sex. After they exchanged all the silent endearments a kiss could hold, Starsky brushed through the sunlit hair he loved so much and left it sensually tousled. "You know, this is a sturdy musical instrument, beautiful, with a nice surface." He telegraphed an image of himself sprawled over the top with his ass in the air.

The image reached its destination, confirmed by pink cheeks and a crimson flush spreading beneath Hutch's ears on his neck. Grabbing Starsky's wrist, he consulted the watch and said, "Someone's going to be late for physical therapy."

"We have plenty of time, fast as you're liable to go off," Starsky argued. "Your monster's trying to bore through that thin polyester/cotton mix. Slick him up, wet me down, and slide him in."

"Starsky, it's not that simple."

"Dammit, I'm tellin' ya, I'm strong now. I've been strong enough for months! What's it gonna take to get you inside me again? A signed permission slip from the Mayo Clinic?"

"Of course not."

Starsky sighed. He had hoped he could rile Hutch, but Hutch's tone remained as a gentle as ever. It was a tone of voice Starsky loved, but not when it sounded like forced detachment. "Please. It's been six months since I was given medical clearance for sex, you realize that? And we've done nothing but blowjobs, rub-offs, and manual stuff. I'm ready to try for a homerun again."
"How about tonight, when we can relax, take our time, and do it right?"

Sensing another indefinite procrastination, Starsky frowned. "Right, sure. And maybe wonders will never cease and you'll finally let me do you."

Hutch visibly flinched and stumbled to his feet.

Cursing himself, Starsky reached for his offended lover, but he was already moving away. "Hutch, I'm sorry. You know I understand, I just--"

"I'm going to put the coffee on; you'd better hurry if you want to get to the Delaneys' by eight. You don't want to mess up Mark's schedule for the whole day."

Starsky watched him leave the room, then bent over to retrieve the discarded ink pen before it could leak on the rug. "Damn me and my big mouth. Gotta be the world's record for deep-sixing a perfectly good morning. As if yesterday wasn't hard enough."

~*~*~

Starsky enjoyed the walk to the Delaneys' summer home, which had ceased to be a private residence in August 1979. Having purchased property in Ireland, the philanthropic Dr. and Mrs. Delaney, with the full endorsement of their surgeon son and his partner, had transformed their San Diego County mansion into an elite convalescent home just as the late Mr. Smythe had long suggested. The home was elite in the sense that it accepted, for reasons of space, only the twelve most severe physical rehabilitation cases in the country at a time. Wealth and prestige were not the keys to admission; medical need determined the roster of patients. The center also offered outpatient physical therapy to the citizens of San Diego County, and David M. Starsky, newly relocated to the nearby caretaker's cottage he and Hutch had inherited, became one of its first outpatient cases that September.

Starsky stopped at the entrance to the curving cobbled driveway and contemplated the most daunting aspect of the mansion's renovation. A fawn-colored brick-and-stucco sign in perfect color harmony with the mansion itself proclaimed its new identity.

The Smythe-Starsky Center for Physical Rehabilitation.

Shaking his head in bemused wonder for the twentieth time since he had first learned of the Delaneys' plans for naming the center, Starsky patted the brick edge of the sign and continued up the driveway.

Each time he approached the mansion, the memories overwhelmed him. A glimpse of the poolside, where he had first touched Hutch sexually... A glance in the direction of the rose garden, where he had prayed to any deity that would listen for a chance to stay with the love of his life... The gazebo and a lantern-lit, champagne-flavored night with the strains of Clair de Lune in the background....

Starsky fixed his eyes on the pool and smiled. He knew he had thrown Hutch for a loop with his willingness to become his lover. The very same night Hutch had confessed his feelings, Starsky had realized his own. It was the answer to all the previously unasked questions in his life. It made perfect sense. Becoming Hutch's lover hadn't been the problem. Deciding what to do in view of the approaching death he had chosen for himself to spare Hutch's life; that was another matter. Sometimes he still shrank inside when he reflected on the pain he had unintentionally caused Hutch during that critical week of change.

Still awash in the past, he entered through the front door. The foyer with its little adjacent sitting...
room hadn't changed, including the floral sofa that had its own set of memories. Starsky headed for
the enormous master suite, now the main physical therapy room. So little had changed that the
house still retained its hint of home. The six guest bedrooms were now semi-private patient
quarters, with a wheelchair-capable elevator installed to provide access to the rooms on the second
floor. The game room and its next-door study had merged into one large radiology/procedure suite.
Mobile patients, or those able to maneuver wheelchairs, could take advantage of the dining room's
opulence for meals. The library, left exactly as Starsky remembered, served as a post-therapy
resting area.

Scheduled for the first outpatient appointment of the day, Starsky found the PT room empty and
went straight to the men's bathroom/shower area to change into the workout clothes he carried in
his old Army duffle. He emerged raring to go.

A tall dark-haired young man waited for him by the dreaded rubber ball Starsky called a dislodged
planet, much to Mark's amusement. Mark looked up from a chart and grinned. "Hi, David! Ready
to kick ass and take no prisoners?"

Proud of his strong, healthy legs, Starsky performed a quick set of freestanding knee squats. "You
know it. I'm already limber from the walk."

"I imagine you are! It's what, a couple miles?"

"By road, yeah, and that's the way I took today. Wanted to really stretch my legs. Normally I take
an overland route that used to be the caretaker's shortcut, and I can cover the distance in ten
minutes without breaking much of a sweat."

Mark whistled. "That's an incredible accomplishment for someone with your history of traumatic
injury. It's amazing how much progress you've made in eight months. I remember at first, Hutch
had to drive you up to the front entrance and help you to this room. Took you several months to
reach full strength of lower extremities. Now you're walking to some of our sessions." He waved
the chart emphatically. "I'm really proud of you. When you made the decision not to pursue
reinstatement, I was concerned your enthusiasm for PT would slip, but you're making steady
gains."

Starsky shrugged. "Police work of the kind I did is a thing of the past for me, and I can handle that,
but I wanna get as strong as possible. I want the energy, stamina, and lung capacity, too. I got my
reasons."

"Whatever they are, I'm grateful for them," Mark said, smiling again. "Okay, let's get started. We
have some work ahead of us to get you back to full upper body strength, and that's why you're still
hanging out with me twice a week."

Starsky flexed his redefined biceps and laughed. "Well, guess what? Played tennis with Hutch over
the weekend, and I damaged his sports ego a bit, which ain't easy considering he can do things with
a racquet that would make Wimbledon sit up and take notice. How's that for upper body strength?
No offense, but it won't be long before your expertise is no longer required."

Mark gave him a thumb's up. "That's my goal, too, David, I'm glad to hear it."

~*~*~

Relaxing in one of the library's comfortable wing chairs, Starsky gulped Gatorade and rejoiced in
his accelerated heart rate. He had outdone himself this session, impressing the physical therapist
beyond expectation. Clinical approval meant everything. He wanted to reach 110% for Hutch--for
himself, too, but mostly for his partner. A familiar sound caught his attention and he glanced at the room's entrance.

"Hiya, Philip."

One of the twelve in-patients, Philip Chappell, wheeled his chair close to Starsky's. The young British-born San Francisco radio deejay was the victim of a near-fatal car accident that had resulted in two months' hospitalization. Dr. Adrian Delaney, Jr., his primary surgeon at San Francisco General Hospital, had served as referral for Philip's transfer to the Smythe-Starsky Center upon discharge. The young surgeon had also subsidized the necessary Life-Med flight to San Diego. Philip had a ways to go before he could walk more than a few steps unassisted, or use his arms beyond gestures and the basics of operating his wheelchair, but he kept a nearly constant positive attitude that matched the fluorescent lettering on his t-shirt.

God's Gift to Men, the shirt boldly asserted.

Right now, Philip had affectionate envy in his smile. "You're a lucky, lucky man."

Starsky recapped his Gatorade bottle. "Hm?"

"To have Mark for a physical therapist."

"But Kara's done a great job with you."

Philip rolled his green eyes expressively. "Sure she has, but I'm not bloody likely to notice Kara, am I?"

Starsky chuckled. "Well, sorry, kid, but I'm not really likely to notice Mark."

Another roll of the eyes accompanied a teasing grin. "Oh, yeah, I forgot. You're one of those straight-turned-monogamous-gay freaks who give us lifelong queers a bad name. And don't call me kid; you're just ten years older than I am."

"Thirty-seven makes me a geezer in the gay community, though, doesn't it?"

Philip shrugged. "Guess so. There is a cult of youth on Q-Street, for sure."

"So, how you doing?"

Philip lifted his arm to brush through his wavy brown hair. The move brought a flicker of pain to his face, and Starsky empathized, remembering a day in the not too distant past when he was in the same boat. But Philip's smile didn't fade. "Besides pining for a straight physical therapist with the body of an Olympic swimmer? I'm okay, I guess. My roommate's a royal pain. I'm simply 'the faggot' to him. That's all he calls me, to my face or to other people. Last night I woke up screaming with leg cramps, and he called the nurses' station and said, 'The faggot's in pain and needs a pill.'"

Starsky grimaced. "Christ, Philip! Doesn't that bother you? You could probably be moved to a different room. Some kind of switch could be worked out."

"Why? It's a waste of time to be bothered. Being here beats the absolute hell out of the hospital, and besides, I love my room. Don't worry; I'll keep your secret, but I fantasize about telling Impotent-Balding-Guy that two of sunny California's butchest cops got it on in our very room back when this was a private residence. I just satisfy myself with calling him Impotent-Balding-Guy. He's less than thrilled, believe me. I may not use my dick the way he thinks every guy should, but at least I can get it up, and I have all my hair!"
Starsky couldn't hold in a bark of laughter. "Oh, to be upfront and in the open the way you are."
And not to have to live a public lie and think about going places with tasty busty bits. Good God,
Davey boy, have you made a switch! What a difference a year and clinical death can make.

Philip was seriously studying him. "You really want that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I think part of me really does. It was one of the compensations that made it easier to give up
police work. I kept telling myself we wouldn't have to care as much who knew, who found out,
what was said about us. Ha! I coulda danced in a rainbow thong through the station locker room
with fewer repercussions than our producer predicts if we go public with our relationship. Mackie
would blow a critical fuse if he knew I talked to you, but you figured us out the first time you met
us, so why beat around the bush?"

Philip smirked. "FYI, three-quarters of the gay community had you figured out as soon as they saw
you together on all those interviews after the Gunther trial. You looked sweetly smitten, and that
scrumptious blond of yours, good Lord! He was giving you looks that made me think fondly of a
cold shower."

Starsky felt a frisson of unease. "So, are we morons for thinking we can pull this off?"

An emphatic headshake answered first. "Not a bit of it. The straight world's delusional and too
eager to keep their illusions. Even if they pick up on something, most will rationalize it's because
you've been through so much together and are glad to be alive and in one piece. The rest will think
you're trying to create 'intrigue' to boost record sales."

Again Starsky felt touches of ice along his spine. "You think we're sellouts, don't you? Living
together, loving each other, but willing to hide it for the sake of success."

"No. If it was just success that mattered, I might think something like that. I know how badly you
want your partner to have a shot at a music career. I know how badly he wants you to be a part of
it. This is a heterosexist world, and you're doing your damnedest to make your way in it as best you
can. I might be militantly gay, but I'm also a realist."

"Realist." Starsky grinned. "A closeted romantic, that's what you are."

Philip made an exaggerated shushing gesture and glanced around askance. "Hush, damn you! I
have an image to protect. So, when is the single hitting nationwide?"

"Soon. We're due at the studio tomorrow for a final mix of the radio edit, which'll be kinda
different than the demo Bahama Bobby distributed. I don't like messing with what works, but
Mackie swears it's necessary."

"He's right. Perfecting what works is the whole point of a radio edit," Philip said knowledgeably.

"Demos are great for localized exposure, but you want something more polished for mass release.
'Into the Rising' is a seriously great song; don't sweat the radio edit."

"Thus speaks the professional deejay or the music fan?"

Philip flashed his quirky, full-face smile. "Both. I'll let you in on a secret. I only allow myself two
favorite songs at a given time. I like plenty of groups, but songs? Just two faves, mate. For quite
some time the chosen ones have been Bowie's 'Rebel, Rebel' and '19th Nervous Breakdown' by the
Stones. Nothing's come close to dethroning either one of them. 'Into the Rising' just might send
David or Mick packing."
Starsky was stunned. Philip's words had the ring of objectivity and no hint of the biased kindness that came of friendship. "You better not say that around Hutch. Those guys are heady company to be keeping, even in your personal favorites list. It'd give him the mother of all stage fright."

"And is that of particular concern right now? A big performance on the horizon?"

"Friday night we're scheduled to perform at a trendy joint in the city. Cobra Bay."


Starsky smiled. "Yeah. He says the secret is that we're onstage together, and he can pretend we're in Bahama Bobby's store doing impromptu jam sessions like last year. All I'm doing are basic guitar rifts and background vocals, but if it does the trick, then great. I don't mind being part of the upfront action, long as I'm with him."

"At the risk of sounding like an interviewer, did you ever think you'd be a songwriter?"

Starsky snorted. "You kidding? Lyricist, to be technical. I couldn't write music if my life depended on it; that's Hutch's department. I came out of the hospital with all these words and feelings trying to get out, and they came out in a form that seemed to just match the tunes Hutch put together. Started out as something we did to get through the rough times when I was still a semi-invalid. We didn't think it'd amount to anything, but Bahama Bobby kept pushing at us until we caved and let him hook us up with the right people."

"If I ever get back to my station, you can count on plenty of airtime," Philip assured him. "And not to brag, but I have the Midas touch. Songs I play frequently tend to end up top-ten material. Not saying there's a connection, but the success rate is fairly staggering."

"That's a great thought, Philip, but to tell the truth, I think we're both hoping for gradual ascent into fame. The thought of being overnight sensations has us spooked."

"That's just your instinct telling you how good you two are, and it's scaring you." Philip glanced at his lime-green wristwatch. "Eeeps. Must jet. I'm due at X-ray in five minutes and the elevator is slower than a winter blowjob. You take care of yourself, Starsky. I'll expect a report on how it goes Friday night."

Starsky watched him wheel vigorously from the room. He grabbed his duffle and shoved the drink bottle under his arm. The sooner he got back to Hutch at the cottage, the faster they would have "Weapon" perfected. It was the key to completing the album.

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He stepped into the morning's steadily increasing warmth to find his best friend outshining the sun. In full view of another outpatient emerging from a blue Chrysler, Starsky didn't risk greeting Hutch with a kiss on his cheek, but he allowed himself a discreet appreciation of Hutch's ass and legs in the tight khaki shorts. From there, he looked up to the soft blue shirt and Hutch's softer bluer eyes. "Didn't expect to see you here."

Hutch slipped an arm around his waist briefly, turning them away from the house. "I know. When you first started walking to PT, and I was worried, Mark lectured me about getting out of protective cop-partner mode and how independence is crucial to your sense of total recovery. But I'm not here as some sort of caregiver/bodyguard. I've just been thinking about you all morning..."
and wanted to see you soon as I could."

Thrilled, Starsky could have skipped down the remainder of the cobbled driveway, but he walked at a leisurely pace, matching Hutch's. "Independence, schmindependence. Independence is great, don't get me wrong, and it beats the hell out of bedpans and nurses, but seeing you here after a session, waiting on me with that we-could-get-into-a-lot-of-trouble smile...man, that's tops. Anyway, I kicked some serious tail in PT today, and Mark's so happy, he wouldn't lecture you if you came in the room and carried me out on your shoulders."

Hutch groaned, flexing his back muscles. "If I carried you anywhere on my shoulders, I'd need PT for my back. Great news about your session! Guess it's all right for me to meet you after therapy now and then?"

"Sure thing. In fact, come on in the PT room. Especially on Thursdays. This curvy, long-limbed flamenco dancer comes in for therapy on her hurt ankle after my session, and I'd love to watch her goggle at your--um--assets." He made a slow growling sound and winked.

Hutch friendly punched his arm. "Stop that."

"What?"

"You know."

Starsky ambled closer to Hutch's side so their arms could brush as they walked with no one picking up on the intent. "There's nothing wrong with having a great body and heart-stopping face. Anyone who knows you for thirty seconds knows that's not all you are by a long shot."

"I don't give a damn what other people think. I've gotten a steady diet of compliments from you for a year now, and from you they're powerful, Starsk. Big magic. It'll go to my head, make me vain."

Fire burned inside him, lit by the underlying love in Hutch's concern. Here they were poised to take flight in the music industry where success would mean scores of adoring fans, but it was his simple, heartfelt praise Hutch called big magic. He wanted to lay his partner down on the soft grass alongside the drive and kiss him from ankles to forehead. Instead, he settled for resting his hand on Hutch's lower back.

"Vain?" he scoffed. "I could go around with 'Ken Hutchinson Is the Sexiest Man Alive' tattooed on my forehead for everyone to see, and you wouldn't end up vain."

"No, then I'd just be embarrassed."

"You really don't want me telling you how good you look?" Starsky knew Hutch couldn't resist him wide-eyed with a slight pout. "It means a lot to me that I'm the only guy on earth you'd ever let call you 'beautiful man.' You're gonna take that away from me? Hm? Some pal you are. I'm hurt, Hutch."

"Go ahead." Hutch sighed in dramatic resignation. "I'll find a way to cope."

Starsky laughed. A sudden thought dimmed his bright mood, and he clutched Hutch's upper arm, encouraging him to stop. "About this morning; what I said to you--"

"Don't," Hutch interrupted. "You're allowed to be an ass on occasion." A teasing smile took the bite out of his words, and Starsky basked in sunshine again.

"I get it. You're trying to make sure I don't end up vain."
Hutch nodded. "Yep. Can't let you get a big head, or you might tattoo all those words on it."

Starsky gave him a little shove. "Go on, hustle it, smart ass. I wanna work on 'Weapon,' and I need you and a piano in the same room for that."

"I was hoping we could apply some more elbow grease to the greenhouse addition."

Starsky heaved his own exaggerated sigh of resignation. "I suppose I can drill a few holes and hammer a few nails in the great cause of you having a place to grow your green leafy things."

"You know, buddy, Freud could dine for a week on that remark."

Hutch didn't sound upset but his voice had an edge, and Starsky winced at his carelessness. He vowed not to make another implied sexual remark for at least--he glanced at his watch--four hours. Surely he could go a few hours without rocking that particular boat. "All right, partner, you can hum the 'Weapon' melody while we apply that elbow grease. That's as good as a piano in my book. You want the greenhouse done by the end of the week, consider it done."

Hutch's voice softened again. "You're one in a million, Starsk."

"Oh, hey," Starsky said, trying hard not to grin but failing, "I get somethin' out of the deal, too. Soon as your greenhouse is done, you can get that plant off my nightstand. I wake up every morning with one of its damn tendrils trying to crawl up my ass."

Laughing, Hutch wove his arm back around Starsky's waist. "I always knew that fern was an intelligent life form."

"Yeah? Well I can think of something else I'd rather have crawling up my--" Starsky shut his mouth and peeked at his watch. Four hours. Sure. Right. He couldn't make it four minutes.

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Later that day, Starsky was waiting at the door when Hutch returned from his evening run. He got a fiery kiss on Hutch's way to their bathroom for a shower. Another time he might have considered surprising his mate under the warm spray, but tonight he had other plans. The small-town restaurant they frequented had recently begun a delivery service, and Starsky eagerly awaited the arrival of their favorite menu items. He set up trays in front of their sofa in the little living room where the TV resided--the drawing room was their musical headquarters undisturbed by technology--and turned off the chandelier light, placing several candles on the coffee table and mantelpiece.

Hutch's emergence from the shower, which Starsky heard thanks to Hutch humming the "Weapon" chorus melody, coincided perfectly with their meal's arrival. Starsky handsomely tipped the teenager on his doorstep, feeling generous as a side effect of anticipating a particularly romantic evening, and hurried to divvy up the eats before Hutch made his way to the living room.

"What's all this?" a surprised voice asked behind him as Starsky expertly poured a glass of wine.

"What's it look like? Dinner is served. And..." Starsky set the glass on Hutch's tray and reached down to the coffee table for a video tape, waving it aloft. "We have dinner entertainment, too."

Hutch took in the candles, the more expensive than usual wine, and a crease marred his smooth forehead. "This is great, Starsk, but did I miss something? Are we celebrating?"

"What's not to celebrate? We got a new career ahead of us, we're inches from completing the
album, and I already told you I kicked ass in PT today."

Hutch closed the distance and kissed him. "I'd say the last bit is reason enough to celebrate. What's this about dinner entertainment?"

Starsky extended the tape for Hutch's inspection. "Philip thought we'd enjoy this. He called his best buddy in San Francisco and had him ship it down. Showed up carefully wrapped in our PO box today. No name, just an address. I've got a feeling Philip didn't tell him who'd be getting the tape. He's fanatical about not letting our 'secret' slip."

Grabbing the tape, Hutch gave it a cursory examination and frowned. "Is this gay porn?"

"Not the hardcore all-sex stuff. Philip says it's soft, what he calls a 'sweet' love story. I'm inclined to believe him."

Hutch smiled. "You really like him, don't you?"

Starsky plopped down on the sofa behind his tray. "Yeah, I do. I wish Nicky had his gumption and self-respect. He's a special kid. Well, okay, he's not a kid. What's the matter? You like him, too."

"Yeah, I do. But a male-to-male skin flick, Starsky? I know you're a knowledge packrat. You get involved with something, and you start feathering your nest with all you can learn about it. You're the guy who put on a blindfold to learn about blindness. That I can understand, but this? You seriously expect me to believe you want to watch two strange guys making it on screen?"

Starsky winked at him. "Who says they gotta be strange?"

"You know what I mean!"

"Hey, what's the use in having nifty technology if you never take advantage of it? I like doing new things with you. You know that. This is something new we can experience in the comfort of our own home with good wine and great food to boot. Where's the downside in all that?"

Hutch sat down beside him and offered the tape. "There isn't one. It shouldn't surprise me that you can still surprise me."

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The movie successfully aroused their basic instinct to couple, just as Starsky had planned and hoped, but not for the reason he would have expected. They critiqued the acting skills, laughed over plot holes, picked out a couple blunders in filming, debated the overall realism--all the things they had done since the early days of their friendship--and the camaraderie excited them more than the steamy love scenes unfolding on screen. The ending credits rolled to blank screen ignored, while the film fans enjoyed a frenzied sofa make-out session of their own.

After a wild dance of pushing, dragging, petting, and kissing brought them to the bedroom, the avid foreplay continued on their bed, and Starsky struggled to find a grip on any piece of Hutch's clothing.

"Don't you worry about that right now!" Hutch growled, fighting off the hands and making quick work of getting Starsky naked from the waist down. "Watch me!" he commanded in that no-nonsense voice that always got attention. "Watch me make you crazy."

"All eyes on you," Starsky assured him.
Hutch wet his thumb and index finger in his mouth, made them into a tight ring, and began running
the circle of fingers from the tip of Starsky's cock to its base, his eyes locked with Starsky's as the
motion quickened and his grip tightened. Starsky lunged his hips and kicked helplessly at the
rumpled bedspread. Hutch's surprisingly talented left hand trailed along thighs and more intimate
spots until the sensation of many hands massaging him pushed Starsky to the brink of madness.

Abruptly, the hands stopped their magic, and Starsky howled his protest.

"Don't want you to come," Hutch said, sounding merciless to Starsky's ears.

"Don't--? What the hell kinda game is this?!"

Hutch smiled, stretching alongside him like a cat in a pool of sun, and hiked his ass in the air.
"Maybe I should clarify. I don't want you coming in my hands. Want you coming somewhere else."

Starsky couldn't believe his eyes or ears. "You want it that way? Really? You're ready to try it
again?"

"No, I'm really just trying out a new yoga position."

Hutchinson sarcasm could get Starsky's motor running faster than anything else. Shedding his shirt
and throwing it in the vicinity of the armchair, he pounced, rolling Hutch into another bout of
wrestling that shoved the covers down to the foot of the bed, knocked one of their pillows to the
floor, and ended with Hutch naked and flushing in beautiful places. Starsky maneuvered him
sideways in bed until his precious blond head hung slightly off the side.

Hutch rolled his head to and fro and gave Starsky an incredulous look. "What the--?"

"I've got a trick in mind. Is your neck comfy? Don't want you dangling too much." Starsky rested
on his knees beside Hutch in the perfect position for going down on him. "Let the blood go to your
head, and you'll come twice as hard."

"Starsk, that's a hot thought, but I know how long you've been waiting for the other. Let's get right
to it."

"Listen here, I'm in charge now, and when I'm in charge I have one thing in mind, and that's to get
you so high you'll think you've got two dicks goin' off instead of one." Hands on hips, Starsky
made it clear he would brook no insubordination.

Hutch licked his lips and nodded. "Yes, sir; absolutely, sir."

"Good." Starsky bent over to take the rose-red erection into his mouth, but a twitch of Hutch's
thighs made him look up into his acquiescent lover's face.

"Kiss me first, your Imperial Majesty?"

Starsky stretched forward to make the most of a kiss at the crazy angle. Hutch's hand slipped
around his neck and squeezed, straying up into his hair, and Starsky gasped into the mouth
threatening to wrest control from him. With a sigh, he rested back on his heels to complete his
aborted mission.

"You get me so hard when you kiss me," Hutch said, wonderingly. "How do you do that?"

"You wanna know the secret of my success?" Starsky traced a fingertip over Hutch's thigh. "I think
you've got a crush on me, Mr. Hutchinson."
Hutch gave a theatrical gasp of astonishment. "You don't say? That's the big secret, then?"

"Without a doubt, schweetheart," Starsky mixed his best Bogey with Groucho eyebrow wiggling. "Now shut up and let me do what I'm down here for!"

"Yes, sir!"

The first taste sent Starsky reeling every time, and he had to hold the velvety firmness perfectly still in his mouth for a moment to savor this amazing right and privilege he had to enjoy Hutch's body. Another twitch of muscular thighs begged him to start the sucking in earnest. He let Hutch's noises dictate the speed and pressure he used, alternating between sucking just the tip and taking the whole shaft. He used his knuckles to punch ever so lightly the erotic patch of skin between erection and tightly drawn-up balls. Hutch bucked and stretched beneath him, mindlessly at his mercy, until a prolonged harsh whimper warned Starsky to expect thick fluid in his mouth. When he'd had his fill, he gently rolled Hutch onto his stomach.

"You...were right...about coming...twice as hard. I'm...totaled."

"Way I wanted you." Starsky drew his tongue down Hutch's back in a straight line, causing shivers. "Now I gotta remember where we put the lube before I'm too out of it to think that clearly."

"Bathroom medicine cabinet," Hutch said shakily.

"Why's it all the way in there?" Starsky grumped.

"It's the kind of thing you keep in a bathroom medicine cabinet."

"No kidding? It's also the kind of thing you keep in a nightstand drawer." He scrambled off the bed, hurried into the bathroom, and knocked half the contents out of the cabinet before he located the prized item.

Back on the bed, he greased his fingers and went to work, but he didn't exclude the most natural form of lubrication. It was a nice coincidence that Hutch was shower-fresh, but Starsky wouldn't have cared otherwise. He wanted Hutch thoroughly stretched and pampered, and he employed his tongue to great effect, turned on by the illicit encouragement slipping from Hutch's mouth in groans and grunts. Eventually certain he could conduct a freight train through the tunnel, he then fussed over placing the bed's remaining pillows beneath his lover.

"Starsk, you'll have blue balls if you don't soon put your cock where it belongs."

He took that as proof positive of Hutch's readiness. Breathing a sigh of gratitude and trying to damp down his onrushing need to come now, any way, anywhere, he fit himself to Hutch's body and mentally crossed his fingers as he nudged forward into a secret place he had yearned for a year to explore.

All in vain. Hutch froze at the first hint of penetration, and his muscles contracted with him, doing criminal things to the ultra-sensitive tip of Starsky's dick. Starsky bit down hard on a yell.

"Damn. Stop, just stop," Hutch's moan was all frustration and no pleasure.

"Hutch, loosen up a little, and it won't hurt as much."

"No, that's not it. It's not...not going to work."

Starsky tried to slow his breathing from pants of controlled exertion to deep draughts of air against
the pain around his cock head, trapped just past the first barrier to entering Hutch's body. But Hutch had said stop, and stop he would, even if it killed him or left him neutered from circulation deprivation in his penis. Now he faced the daunting task of saving Hutch's dignity and his own precious organ from intense discomfort, if not the permanent damage that seemed possible. Unfortunately, the muscle responsible for preventing his entrance also seemed determined not to let him out. Hutch's shoulders drew together in frustration, and the tension radiated downward. Starsky's breathing started to sound like a ridiculous parody of Lamaze.

"Hutch, don't tense up, baby, please don't. Oh, God. Trust me, once you're through this first part--"

"I tell you it's not working. I should have known--"

"Easy, easy, I'm still attached here!" Starsky pleaded as Hutch bucked beneath him, a skittish thoroughbred trying to dismount his rider. He ran his hands along Hutch's shoulder blades, feeling the stickiness of sweat. "Take a deep breath. You have to give in to it, let it wash over you. Then there's this amazing feeling of reaching the top of the mountain. It's sexy, that feeling. You'll see."

"This isn't sexy." Hutch's head drooped, but his voice remained stubborn, defiant. "It feels unnatural."

"Unnatural!" Startled by the uncharacteristic remark, Starsky reared back and cried out in the sudden release of the muscle's too-tight grip on his cock, but he was unwilling to admit defeat, for both their sakes. He pressed his chest to Hutch's back and encircled him, kissing his neck, nuzzling his ear. "It's sex, one of the most natural instincts in the world. More important, it's love. Did you feel unnatural that time you were in me? You made love to me so deep you got inside a place in my heart I didn't even know existed. Let me do that for you? There's nothing about us being together that's unnatural."

Hutch turned his cheek, inviting a kiss. "I didn't mean that kind of unnatural. I just had your tongue up my ass, and I loved it, couldn't you tell? I'm not likely to have a moral objection to your dick taking its place. I want that with you, but my body isn't cooperating."

"You're not giving it a chance. If you'll just let me try one more time, you'll be through the--"

"No, please, let it go, I...I... God, just let it go."

"Hutch, it's not like you to let something get the best of you. Maybe if we--"

"Jesus Christ, Starsky!" Hutch's voice held more pain than anger. He pushed out from under Starsky's covering embrace, toppling him in the process, and was out of the bed and through the bedroom doorway before Starsky could grasp what had happened.

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Wednesday, May 14, 1980

Starsky woke to the soft strains of piano. A bleary-eyed glance at the nightstand clock registered 3:00 a.m. Verging on alertness, he wondered how long his partner's side of the bed had been empty. He left the bed without bothering to track down a single stitch of clothing and headed for the drawing room.

He paused in the arched, open entrance and watched the robed figure at the baby grand. His chest hurt with love but also regret as he remembered their aborted lovemaking.

Starsky brushed a hand over his face, covering a yawn. "I'm sorry," he said, tired of watching in
silence.

Without a glance in his direction, Hutch said, "What's wrong with us?"

Starsky considered going in search of his robe, suddenly wary of his own nudity. He shrugged off the discomfort and went to sit beside Hutch on the piano bench. "We've hit a sexual snag, I think."

Hutch gave a harsh laugh. "Starsky, I won't let you...you..." He shook his head wearily. "I can't even say the words. That's a little more than a sexual snag."

Squeezing the drooping shoulders, Starsky leaned to the side and kissed the tender skin hidden under blond wisps behind Hutch's ear. "Hey, take it easy. I'm the one who should be feeling like a heel, and I do. I came awful close to forcing you tonight, partner."

Scornful blue eyes seared him. "Give me a break. You did nothing of the kind. You thought you were helping. Hell, how many times did I push you like that in your recovery?"

"Sex shouldn't be treated like walking a hospital corridor attached to an IV. I don't care if I thought I was turning water into wine. What I did, how I acted, was inexcusable."

"Starsky, you're just making this worse. I'm the one who got up and left you high and dry in bed. I know it had to hurt like hell when I clamped down, but you didn't try to push the rest of the way. When I said 'stop,' you stopped, no questions asked. That's what counts."

"No, it's not!" Starsky argued, feeling something rip inside. "I shoulda handled it the way I did a year ago, the first time it didn't work with you on the bottom. I don't know why I didn't, but I'm sorry. Last thing I wanna see is you out here losing sleep over how we can or can't have sex. It's not that big a deal."

"Yes, it is, and you know it, but that's not what has me out here this time of ni--morning."

"Try telling your best pal why you're imitating an insomniac, then?"

Hutch pulled the lid down over the piano keys and rapped his knuckles on the hard surface in a disjointed rhythm. "I feel...I feel we're--I'm taking advantage of what happened...capitalizing on the sacrifice you made. When Mackie talked Monday about how our past would boost our success--"

"If you're suggesting we wouldn't have a record deal if I hadn't been shot, you're loony. When Bahama Bobby played 'Into the Rising' for Brewster the first time, we weren't even there, and Bobby didn't tell him our names. Mackie loved the song for its own merit. Yeah, he got a record exec's hard-on when he realized who we were, but that was later, after he'd already told Bobby he wanted to sign whoever was on the tape."

"Yes, but...."

"It's true I don't know if I'd be capable of this if I hadn't...you know. I doubt I'd have the words. I always figured you for the one who had all the words."

Hutch caressed his cheek and stroked a tender hand down his arm. "You've always had something important to say, Starsky, and whenever you've said it, you've made an impact on anyone listening. Don't sell yourself short."

"Okay, fine. Maybe I should say I doubt I could've expressed myself in this medium if I hadn't gone through some big-time life changes. What of it? If what we went through helps us get off the ground, I say it's a dividend we earned. Yeah, somebody upstairs decided to let me live and be here
with you, and I'll always be grateful, but the prophecy did come true in a way, Hutch."

Hutch's eyes were both pained and frightened. "What do you mean?"

Starsky stroked his back soothingly. "The dream told me one of us would have to go down, remember? Well, I did. I got the chance to live, but I'll never be a street cop again, and you made the choice not to stay with it either. After losing everything professionally, don't we deserve a silver lining? A fresh start?"

"Of course. I just regret that I'm the only one who really knows what you did, the true extent of your heroism, but here I am accepting whatever I can get out of it."

Starsky lifted his hands to the ceiling. "Geez, Hutchinson. Put down the whip already, you're hurtin' yourself. First of all, if we told people, most of 'em wouldn't believe us. We'd probably end up in the nuthouse. Second, I'm right here accepting everything with both hands outstretched, too. You haven't exactly had to rope me down and drag me along, y'know."

"After Monday's meeting, I wondered..." Hutch was back to tapping the knuckles of his right hand on the keys' lid. Starsky lifted the hand before it ended up damaged, and brought it to his lips. Hutch looked down at his lap. "I could tell you were miserable, and I think I know why. What he's asking us to do, the public image he's asking us to create, it reminds you of everything that disgusted you about John."

Shocked, Starsky dropped the hand in his grasp. "John? You mean John Blaine? What the hell?"

"The double life, Starsky. The public lie. It threw you that he was gay, but you got over it quickly. What you didn't get over quickly was the lie he lived, however 'justifiable' or forced it might've been. You're disgusted by breaches of integrity. And here we're being asked to do the very same thing."

"Bullshit!" Starsky took a deep breath and moderated his voice. "I hate that what we do in the privacy of our bedroom can impact our success as musicians, just like I hated that we had to fight to get Blaine's case treated with respect. I hated watching Dobey squirm talking about a man who'd been one of his closest friends for years. I hated what John did to Maggie most of all. We're not being forced into marriages of convenience, for God's sake. I don't like the hiding, no, but you're not gonna tell me it's the same thing!"

"We won't be escorting female robots to gala events, Starsk."

Starsky jumped up from the bench in favor of the old familiar rattan chair. He needed the solidity at his back...and a few feet's distance from Hutch. "What we do with them is our business. We know some classy ladies who wouldn't mind a harmless night out on the town without expecting us to dole out in other ways behind closed doors. Women sophisticated enough to handle the spotlight, the smoke and mirrors."

"Yes, I think I know some of the ladies you have in mind. You're ready to subject them to the tabloid scandal sheets? Assuming we get big enough to warrant tabloid attention, which, according to Mackie, we already are because of our fame on the force. How is that different than Maggie?"

Starsky pounded his fists on his knees and looked around the room, wildly searching for inspiration.Intellectually, he knew there was a difference and that Hutch was playing devil's advocate at his best, but he was beginning to feel cheap and underhanded. "It's different because we're not obligating them, Hutch. We wouldn't take anyone out into the public eye who didn't know what to expect. Our contract isn't forcing us to do anything tasteless for the sake of image.
Mackie isn't saying we gotta have steady dates for every public appearance. He doesn't want pictures of us in bed with pretty girls."

"You just wait. I wouldn't put it past him to suggest something along those lines."

Tired of the realities for the moment, Starsky heaved himself out of the chair on a beeline out of the room. "I'm gonna get some sleep. We're due at the studio in less than six hours, and traffic'll be a pain, you can bet on it."

Hutch vacated the piano bench and caught him by the upper arm, trying to turn him off course. "Starsky, wait."

"Look, if you wanna come to bed, I'd love to have you naked and warm in my arms. Woke up missing you. I've got it bad for you, Hutch. Don't like the way my arms feel in bed without you in them."

Face soft and posture yielding, Hutch seemed to flow around him in a liquid embrace that smoothed the real world's hard edges. Starsky clung with difficulty to the fluid comfort, grasping shoulders, arms, cradling the back of Hutch's head as those perfect lips found his neck and whispered against it,

"Starsk...."

"What do you want, Hutch? You wanna give up now before we've started? Just walk away from it all? 'Cause I'm with you either way, but you gotta let me know which way the wind's blowing."

Hutch sighed. "What do you want? Tell me that."

Starsky held him fast and kissed his forehead. "Simple. I wanna live with you, work with you, sleep with you, play with you...anywhere, anyhow."

Hutch pressed their bodies closer together. "Let's hit the sack and make love all the ways we can. Forget the ways we can't. For now, at least."

"Sounds like a brilliant plan to me."

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"Into the rising...straight through the flame (flying)...don't give it time...or give it a name (flying)...set to (letting, letting go)...get to you (starting, starting slow)...into the rising...straight through the flame...."

Hutch gestured for the technician to pause the playback of the chorus. "I don't like the lift on 'flame.' I hear a distinct squeak that makes it sound like my voice is breaking."

Starsky grinned. "Actually, it sounds like you decided to go through puberty again."

Hutch stuck his tongue out at him. "Asshole." He tapped the tech on the shoulder. "One more time in the booth, I think."

Starsky's grin changed to a groan. "Aw, Hutch, come on, I was kidding about the puberty thing. If I have to sing those background words one more time, I'll never use them in normal speech again. I'm hearing 'flying' in my dreams as it is."

"Starsky, you have eight words in the chorus, which means, what? Twenty-four, no, thirty-two
words in the whole song! Compared to my...how many?"

"Who's counting? All I'm sayin' is we've been in that booth ten times now."

"Are you guys still dicking around in here? I want the radio edit history in ten minutes." Mackie entered the "box" with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth and shook his wrist at them. The lights glinted off his Rolex.

The tech dared an angry look at the producer. "Mackie, gimme a break with the cigs, will ya? I told you what the smoke residue does to the equipment."

Mackie's expression was profane. "Listen, you replaceable-in-an-hour peon, if I want to smoke an entire carton of Kools on top of your head in here, I will. I got the goods to replace this entire set-up out of my cookie jar fund. Now, get back to what you're supposed to do best and give these recording virgins their first orgasm, for fuck's sake."

The slam of the glass door rattled all three men. Hutch recovered first. "Is he--?"

"Always like that?" the tech finished, smiling. "No, not really. He's usually pretty good to all the people he calls the 'grunts.' Something's really put a burr up his ass."

Starsky choked laughter triggered by the phrase, and the technician flushed. The glass door opened again, but this time their visitor looked more a victim than a verbal attacker. Even his business suit showed signs of rumpling, the lapel crumpled and the designer tie askew. Starsky recognized the signs: the poor guy had been grabbed by the lapel and shoved up against a wall. He was Mallory, the hospitality rep, and his personality was strictly the product of his profession.

"Trouble?" Starsky asked, slapping Mallory on the shoulder. "Have a run-in with Mackie?"

Mallory straightened his tie. "How did you know? He's spitting venom and fire this morning, but I suppose it must be overlooked under the circumstances."

"Circumstances?" the tech asked. "Fill me in. I've been out since Monday, so I haven't caught the latest gossip."

"Vandalism," Mallory answered. "Mackie's prized sculpture collection is in bits in his office. He had excellent and quite valuable copies of Cellini's Apollo and Hyakinthos and Tribolo's Ganymede Riding the Eagle. The originals are housed in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, but Mackie's were virtually indistinguishable from the real deal. The police have narrowed down the time of the--well, the massacre, to hear Mackie talk--to somewhere between noon and two p.m. on Monday. Unfortunately, they've been less fortunate in snagging a suspect, and Mackie's steamed about police incompetence. Not that the boys in blue have had many breaks. There was a glitch in the security cameras monitoring the corridor outside the office, and Mackie refuses to have his office wired." Mallory glanced at Hutch. "One would do a service by advising all fresh-faced blonds to stay out of Mackie's inner sanctum un-chaperoned."

Hutch turned a fine pink from the neckline up, and Starsky couldn't hide clenched fists at his side. That's it, Hutch, if the mustache isn't enough to make you look older than twenty-five, you're growing a beard if I have to toss every razor in the house and spread Miracle-Gro on your face. He looked up to find Mallory winking at him. Relaxing his hands, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "This fresh-faced blond could break Mackie's back with his bare hand."

Hutch gave him an appreciative smile and Mallory smacked palm to forehead. "I do keep forgetting you two used to be hardened inner city cops. I don't know why that's so hard to
remember considering your wardrobe. Look at them, Jim." He pointed at Hutch. "Worn khakis and beige dime-store windbreaker over a green t-shirt." The hand of sartorial judgment swept over Starsky next. "Jeans and a suede zip-up circa '77. And sneakers. Adidas sneakers. I haven't seen those since--" Mallory seemed to lose speech.

Jim the tech, who wore ratty jeans and a black t-shirt displaying the famous red-white-and-blue thumb from Don McLean's American Pie album, gave Mallory a sharp headshake. "Leave 'em alone, Mal. They're the real goods."

"I know they are. I'd much rather see honest inner city dress-down than expensive faux Americana rock-and-roller chic. Well, I've held you up too long. I'm here to take orders for the hospitality room. What do you want waiting for you after your session?"


"I'd like another of those roast chicken pita sandwiches," Hutch said, flipping through his sheet music. "And some of that raspberry-apple juice."

Mallory made elaborate hand gestures. "You guys are a breath of fresh middle-class American air. So totally unpretentious. I can tell you'd never send me on a search for a rare brand of caviar only produced on an atoll in the North Sea!"

Jim the tech scratched at his brow. "I didn't know there were atolls in the North Sea."

"Precisely!" Mallory huffed, exiting the room.

~*~*~

Halfway down the hallway to the hospitality room, after a recording session that verged on nightmare before the perfected radio edit met Hutch's exacting standards, the perfectionist himself began snickering.

"What?" Starsky demanded.

Hutch bit back the developing laughter and brushed a hand over his mouth. "Nothing. Well...it's the sculpture. That's how Mackie sees himself. A homoerotic god who compels the admiration and desire of beautiful young men." He sobered. "Come to think of it, the cops assigned to the case better keep their eyes open. Whoever did it knew where to hit Mackie where it would hurt most."

"Aw, Hutch, it doesn't have to be that serious." Starsky's cheeks warmed, the physical side effect of guilty knowledge. "I have a confession. When we were leaving his office on Monday, I had a momentary urge to take a whack at one of the statues myself. He wasn't my favorite person right then. Didn't mean I wanted to do him serious harm."

Hutch feigned shock. "David Starsky, you ought to be ashamed! It's a quick slide from one side of the law to the other. What would Dobey say?"

"Didn't act on the urge, did I?" Starsky growled back at him.

Hutch's parted lips curved in a smile. "Listen, thanks for making it clear back there that I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, well," Starsky shook his head ruefully. "I think Mallory's on to us."

"Yes, and he probably has a fantasy of you protecting your lover's virtue from the licentious
Mackie Brewster. He also knows he'll never work in this business again if he says the wrong thing to the wrong people. And you don't have to worry about Mackie.

Starsky couldn't believe his ears. "Oh, come on, Hutch!"

Hutch read his mind, because he took him by the shoulders and gave him an affectionate shake. "I know you're not worried about me being interested in him, you gorgeous dope. I'm saying you don't have to worry about him, either. I'm too mature and independent for his taste. He needs every potential lay to worship him, and he knows damn well I'm not likely to."

"You're telling me to back off the protective vibe?"

"Hell, no." Hutch's smile widened, turned naughty, and made Starsky feel lovingly stroked all over. "We've always watched out for each other. I don't care what vibe you show on the outside, just don't worry about it on the inside, because it's unnecessary. I think it's a power thing for him to flirt with me in front of you, and you're bigger than those kinds of head games."

"Okay, you don't have to grow a beard."

Hutch gaped at him. "What?"

Starsky wanted to take advantage of the empty hallway, regardless of the security camera, and bend Hutch backward with a knockout kiss, but a familiar voice rescued them from a breach of propriety.

"Hey! Just the guys I needed to see."

They turned to greet a uniformed officer. He still had the baby face and collegiate haircut, but his uniform proclaimed him a sergeant. His frank, open smile told Starsky the young policeman hadn't overheard any of the sexually charged conversation.

"Hiya, Scotty. Don't tell me you're working the vandalism case."

Sergeant Scott nodded. "Yes, sir. Brewster pitched a fit to the powers that be, demanding someone from the Ninth Precinct take over the investigation. Said maybe you guys had spread some genius around."

Hutch laughed out loud. "And when someone as important as Brewster starts squawking, little things like jurisdiction no longer apply."

Scott shrugged. "Hey, I don't like to step on anyone's toes, but if they're not getting the job done..." He suddenly looked acutely uncomfortable. "Speaking of which, uh, I--well, in addition to canvassing anyone who's usually here in the building on any given day, we're trying to make contact with all the people who met with Brewster on Monday, and uh, your names showed up on his appointment scheduler, so I really should ask, uh, you know, for the sake of my report, I want to be thorough...."

"You want to know our movements Monday afternoon?" Hutch was obviously trying for a stern frown, but his lips kept twitching and Starsky had to look away from the battle against laughter or he would end up howling himself.

Looking at Scott didn't help. The young sergeant was actually clutching his hands together and shuffling his feet. "Uh, yes, Detective, between noon and two p.m. will do. You know the drill."

"It's just Starsky and Hutch now," Starsky reminded him. "Let's see. Help me out here, Hutch. We
left the meeting with Mackie and headed directly for The Pits. Had lunch there with our friend, Huggy."

Scott scribbled in his pad. "That's Huggy Bear, right?"

"Right," Hutch said. "And if his confirmation doesn't satisfy you, I'd suggest chatting with one Harold C. Dobey, who was our lunch guest for at least an hour of the time we were there. We left The Pits around two-thirty and hit the 5 heading south."

If possible, Scott looked even more distraught. "I should've figured something like that. Gee, I feel like a schmuck for even asking."

Starsky patted him on the back. "Nope, like you said, gotta be thorough. Wouldn't want the captain to think you're overlooking any potential lead."

Hutch scratched the bridge of his nose. "Scotty. I know a thorough cop such as yourself probably won't discuss case details with civilians, but--"

"Oh, you two won't ever really be civilians, sir...uh, Hutch. What's on your mind?"

"Well, had Mackie gotten any strange phone calls, weird mail, anything resembling a threat prior to the vandalism?"

Scott beamed. "That's one of the first questions I asked. The answer's no. No hint of anything in the air. And the people I've interviewed in the building back that up because they hadn't noticed anything bothering Brewster. Looks to be an isolated incident." He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "I have to admit, I've inherited a puzzler. If the perp doesn't blab to the wrong person about playing piñata with Brewster's sculpture, I'm not sure I'll crack this one."

Hutch's lips were twitching again, so Starsky assumed the role of coach and squeezed the cop's shoulder. "Sure you will, Sergeant. Sorry we had to yank two perfectly good suspects off your list."

Scott flushed. "Oh, now, hey. You weren't ever really...you're teasing me, right? I get it. Look, I heard you two are recording an album and everything. You think I could get one signed?"

Hutch smiled. "No problem."

Scott glanced over his shoulder, then lowered his voice again. "Don't tell the captain I hit you up for an autograph. He'd think I was being unprofessional. Well, I should track down my partner and compare notes. Thanks, guys."

They watched him hustle down the hall, waiting for him to turn the corner before they gave in to the mirth they'd held in check. With his arm around Hutch's shoulders and Hutch's arm firmly wrapped around his waist, they continued toward the hospitality room. "You know, if wet-behind-the-ears kids like that are making sergeant, I think we got out in good time, no offense to Scotty."

"Amen," Hutch agreed, hoarse from laughter. "Dobey must feel like Captain Gramps half the time."

~*~*~

Starsky was nearly cut in two by a wheelchair on his way into the PT room. Philip swerved just in time and sat, chest heaving, shoulders limp, and his forearms tensed along the wheelchair arms. Starsky zeroed in on the despairing expression so unfamiliar to the sunny face. "Hey, what's going on?"
Philip didn't look up. "Just had PT, aka Physical Torture. With Mark, no less. Kara couldn't make it today. He didn't--didn't even want to work with me. Tried to talk his way out of it with the charge nurse. I heard him. I'm a bleedin' fool is what I am. The whole session he acted like I was some sort of alien plague visited on him. I didn't even flirt with him, but he was cagey as a homophobe trapped in a gay-pride march. Wanker, that's what he is. What are you doing here?"

"I don't have an appointment; just stopped by to use some of the equipment. Look, I'm sorry, Phillip. Really. You deserve better than that."

"Oh, piss off! Save your sympathy for a bloody song!" Philip shouted and wheeled away.

Shaking his head, Starsky continued into the PT room, where he stopped cold before he reached the first piece of equipment. Mark stood in front of the "resting" bench, alternately dousing his face with water from his squirt bottle and wiping with a PT room towel. He glanced to the side and promptly dropped the bottle and towel, reaching for his sweatshirt and wrapping it hastily around his waist.

"Hi, David."

"Tough session?" Starsky asked, full of innocence.

Mark's face was usually as candid as Philip's was sunny. Today his blue eyes were shifty and his expression guarded. "You could say that. Tough day, actually. Kara called this morning to say she couldn't make it and asked me to take over her caseload."

"Is she okay?"

Mark managed a smile. "Oh, yeah. She's furious, but okay. Two flats, and she put brand new tires on her car just last month. Strangest thing. You here to work on the machines?"

"Thought I might, so I can kick ass again tomorrow."

Mark laughed. "You do that. Have fun." He gathered his duffle, medical charts, and squirt bottle and swept past Starsky out of the room, leaving the towel on the bench.

Flexing his muscles, Starsky smiled to himself. After he massacred a couple of machines, he would have to go in search of Philip.

~*~*~

Philip was waiting for him in the library. Starsky flashed him a grin en route to the corner bar that now offered bottled water, fruit juice, and herbal tea instead of the fine selection of imported whiskey Starsky remembered from vacation. Selecting low-sugar lemonade, he gestured for Philip to join him in the opposite corner, away from the two patients working on a crossword puzzle together. Philip wheeled over and stopped on a dime beside the wing chair Starsky appropriated.

"Sorry about earlier," Philip began.

Starsky waved off the apology. "It's okay. You were upset."

Philip stared down at his bright blue sweatpants. "Yes, I was, and more than I should've been, which has brought me to a rather daunting conclusion. I'm not just hot for his body. After years of taking whatever I want, whenever I can get it, which, shall we agree, is what most men my age consider the only real way to go, I need a guy who's never looked at me as more than a patient in a wheelchair and didn't want to look at me that way either."
"Philip."

"I'm such a horse's ass. I want him. I want only him. Hell, if he asked me, I'd toss every beefcake
mag, or at least donate them to some other needy soul."

"Philip!"

"I want him to quote Marlowe to me, 'Come live with me and be my love.' Jesus, I've sprung a
brain leak. If my friends knew, they'd stage some kind of intervention. Especially Derrick, who
says men should never settle down to monogamy before the age of forty, and only then with a
beautiful boy in his early twenties. And, yes, I know that sounds paradoxical, because if no one
settles down before--"

"Damn it, Philip!"

Philip caught his breath and stared. "What?"

"You won't let me get a word in edgewise!"

"I'm a deejay, Starsky, and I've done talk radio, for St. Pete's sake. What do you expect?"

"Well, shut your infamous yap for a minute because I've got news for you. Namely, that you're
blind. I thought you were a veteran of the gay thing."

Philip nodded, puffing his chest with pride. "Since I was nineteen, why?"

"All that time and you don't recognize when a guy wants you?"

Batting his eyelashes, Philip leaned closer. "Starsky, I never knew! How will Hutch handle it? We
should really think this through. You're ball-throbbing handsome, there's no denying it, and I'll
wager you're a fantasy in bed, but Hutch could put me in a body cast with a look, and--"

Starsky brandished the lemonade bottle at him. "Wise ass!"

Philip laughed. "Couldn't resist. I get a kick out of seeing one of your infrequent blushes. Where's
this guy who's supposedly hot for me?"

"Are those radioactive t-shirts you wear zapping your brainpower? What guy have you been
bending my ear about?"

Philip's laughter died. "You mean Mark? No way. Listen, mate, I am a veteran. That means I can
spot uptight straights and gays-in-denial ten miles away, and I know the difference between them.
There isn't a closet deep enough to hide the tiniest penlight of gayness from me. Mark could run for
office on the Republican ticket. Hell, snip a few sprigs off his already short hair, lace him up in
boots, give him a parachute, and he'd pass for a crack SAS operative. Well, if he were British.
What's your equivalent? A SEAL? Yes, he could pass for a SEAL."

"I can't believe I'm about to play the gossiping matchmaker," Starsky said, chuckling.

Philip batted his lashes again. "I'm telling you, darling, this is a lifestyle that grows on you. You'll
graduate to facials in no time."

Starsky rolled his eyes and took a swig of lemonade. "Over my dead body! Bullets, knives, I can
cope with. Letting someone do something strange with chemicals to the pores on my face, no way,
pal. I don't know how women handle it."
"Me, neither. Fortunately, I have naturally perfect skin. The scars from the auto accident are elsewhere. Several elsewherees, to be exact. It's a nice thought about Mark, Starsky, but your detective's instinct is off this time."

"Instinct ain't got a damn thing to with it." Starsky related how he found Mark in the PT room. "And he wasn't hot and bothered over me!"

Philip looked dazed. "I can't explain what you saw, but I know how he treated me."

"You've never heard of trying to maintain professional distance? He's not in an easy position, you know."

"I'd love to show him an easy position," Philip said huskily. He waved both hands in dismissal of the conversation. "This entire place has gone mad. Did you hear what happened to Impotent-Balding-Guy Tuesday?"

"No, what?"

"It happened after you left, when I was in X-ray, which is good for me, because Nurse Joyce would love to see me booted out of here. Sometime between morning meds and morning rounds, someone went into our room and stuck a bar of soap in Impotent-Balding-Guy's mouth while he was sleeping. Didn't do him any harm, but it sure as hell shook him up. He hasn't called me 'faggot' since. I gather he thinks I managed to spirit myself down from X-ray and do the deed. Starsky? What's wrong?"

Starsky pushed out of the chair and gripped his forehead. "Think...think I'm lightheaded. From the workout, probably."

"You want me to call a nurse?"

"Nah. I'll just head on home. Take it easy, Philip."

~*~*~

Thursday, May 15, 1980

Starsky jumped when the lamp on Hutch's nightstand flashed on, illuminating the bed. A warm, comforting hand came to rest on his shoulder and a sleep-gruff voice whispered, "Babe? It's two a.m., what are you doing awake?"

Starsky's jaw clenched. "Can't sleep."

"That's not all. You were awfully quiet yesterday evening. You didn't want sex last night."

"That wasn't exactly a first," Starsky said.

"And it won't be the last, I'm sure, for either of us. But this was more than just not being in the mood. What's wrong? Is it--?" Hutch's voice failed on a ragged break. "Is it...today? The day."

"The what?" Starsky half-turned to look at his bedmate. Hutch's face had paled and his strong shoulders were nearly quivering. Starsky did a fast calculation of dates in his head and sucked in a sharp breath. "My God. I didn't even think. Oh, man, I'm sorry. No, today would...would affect you more. I was unconscious through the rough stuff."

He hadn't been unconscious through the roughest moment of all. He remembered knowing what he
was walking into when he left the ping-pong match. He remembered praying that his choice to die would keep Hutch safe as had been promised. But Hutch didn't need to hear that now.

"Here, com'ere." He opened his arms and Hutch slid eagerly into their embrace, resting against his chest.

"I promised myself I wouldn't do this, wouldn't rehash everything in my head. Told myself I would treat it just like any other day."

"You went through hell that day, Hutch, and the way you stood up to it, what you accomplished, was superhuman, but it's bound to leave a mark. I'll make you so happy today, you won't think about it."

Hutch smiled. Starsky could feel the curve of lips and lift of mustache against his neck. "You could start by telling me what's wrong. Did something happen at the Delaneys' yesterday afternoon?"

"Not just there," Starsky said with a sigh. "Something weird's going on."

"Well, spit it out. Maybe after we've talked, it won't seem so weird."

"All right. You remember I said I had an urge on Monday to take a whack at one of Mackie's sculptures? And his prized collection ended up smashed the same afternoon? Well, it's happened again."

Hutch pulled out of Starsky's arms to sit rigid against the shelved headboard. "What? More vandalism? Where'd you hear that?"

"No, Hutch. Listen. On Tuesday, Philip told me about his thing for Mark, and that his roommate has been verbally harassing him. My exact thoughts when I left that morning? One, I felt it'd do the bigoted roommate some good if someone washed his mouth out with soap. Two, I thought if Mark's the least bit bisexual, Philip might have a shot if they had a chance to spend time together."

"Right, I'm following you. What's so weird about that?"

"Get a load of this. After I left Tuesday morning, while Philip was in X-ray, someone went into their room and stuck a bar of soap in his roommate's mouth while he was asleep. And yesterday, two of Kara's newly replaced tires go flat on her car, so she has to call in to work and Philip gets to have PT with Mark."

Hutch dragged both hands down his face, worked his jaw, and yawned, shaking his head like a puppy fresh out of an unwanted bath. "What...? Wow. I'm at a loss. What are you suggesting is the connection here? Interesting coincidences, I'll agree, but--"

"Coincidence!" Starsky shouted. "I think something, or wish something, and poof! It happens. You call that coincidence?"

"Starsky, you...you really think someone's going around fulfilling your wishes? These were just thoughts you had. I'm the only one who reads your mind that well, and I have an alibi for all the events in question. If someone has broken into your thought process unprepared, I fear for their sanity."

Starsky yanked the pillow from behind his back and thwacked Hutch with it. "Very funny. Ha ha. This is serious, Blondie."

"Sorry, partner, but this isn't an episode of The Twilight Zone. Mackie's love for his sculpture was
well known and a likely target, and I'm sure someone else in the Rehab Center knew about Philip's verbally abusive roommate and decided to do something about it. You have to admit, cleansing a foul mouth with soap is a cliché. As for Kara, new tires do go flat, you know. Or, maybe she just didn't want to face work and made up an excuse to cover her absence. We've all had days like that."

"Go ahead," Starsky harrumphed, hugging his pillow to his chest. "Go ahead and rationalize it, Mr. Logical. You don't find it strange that I have these thoughts and they become reality so soon afterward?"

Hutch yawned again. "Okay, for the sake of argument, say I do. What do you think is happening?"

Starsky took a silent moment of comfort in their familiar surroundings. His old bed, its shelved headboard filled with their treasures; long-pampered plants atop pieces of furniture culled from their apartments; the new armchair and ottoman in front of their beautiful diamond-paned bay window. The cottage's master suite was a true retreat, a haven where their lives could merge in more ways than one.

"Starsk?"

"Oh...yeah. Hutch, we know what happened to me last year had a supernatural side. We know my survival had a supernatural side. And Gunther keeling over dead from a massive stroke the day after the guilty verdict came in smacked of the supernatural, to me at least."

"Given his age and the circumstances, it wasn't a tremendous shock, Starsky, and certainly didn't require the supernatural. Where are you going with all this?"

"Well, what if I woke up from that coma with some kinda power I didn't ask for?" Starsky glanced to the side. "Hutch?"

Hutch opened and closed his mouth, opened it again and blew out a harsh breath. "Oh, this is worse than I thought. You think you woke up in that hospital some kind of comic book superhero or mutant? Thought-Man or Wishmaster Extremo?"

Starsky left the bed and sank down in the armchair. "This is just great. Terrific. You wanted me to talk, and now you're making fun'a me. Thanks, buddy."

Hutch raised both hands in surrender. "I do want you to talk. I just thought it'd be a garden-variety problem I could make sense of, not the budding idea for a great Marvel comic." His arms dropped to his sides and he sighed. "All right, let's consider it seriously. Why is the power just now surfacing? Why aren't we already millionaires with an estate in Hawaii?"

Starsky shrugged. "Maybe it isn't just surfacing. I haven't been wishing for an estate in Hawaii, because I didn't know I had the power to make it reality, but there've been other incredible things that happened over the last year. Look where we are now."

Hutch's face changed, darkening, and his lecture finger shot up. "You're chalking our music career up to some kind of supernatural wish fulfillment? What about our talent and hard work? No, thank you. I will not let you take that out of our hands."

Starsky shrugged. "Maybe it isn't just surfacing. I haven't been wishing for an estate in Hawaii, because I didn't know I had the power to make it reality, but there've been other incredible things that happened over the last year. Look where we are now."

Hutch's face changed, darkening, and his lecture finger shot up. "You're chalking our music career up to some kind of supernatural wish fulfillment? What about our talent and hard work? No, thank you. I will not let you take that out of our hands."

"Hutch, listen--"

"No, you listen to me. The miracle behind our music is our partnership, our ability to accomplish something together I could never have done alone. And Bahama Bobby's persistence in getting us to pursue it further than we ever imagined. And Huggy's willingness to help us afford a demo tape. It's a dream come true, but its foundation is firmly grounded in reality. It has to be, or I...I won't be
able to handle it."

Starsky returned to the bed and took his shaken partner in his arms. "Hey, shh. This was the wrong
time to bring all this up, I should've known better."

"No. You know I don't want you to shut me out of anything. I'm not going to collapse into a million
pieces. I just want to put the supernatural behind us and live in the real world." Hutch drew back
from the protective hold and closed Starsky's eyelids with his fingertips. "There. Now wish really
hard for something. Let's see if it comes true."

"Hutch, this is ridiculous."

"I'm serious, Starusk. Scientific method. Let's put your theory to the test. Focus."

Muttering, Starsky complied. After a minute, he opened his eyes. "All right. I wished--"

"Nope. This is like blowing the candles out on your birthday cake. You're not allowed to tell. You
don't want to trick my subconscious into contributing to your wish fulfillment. Now, you know
what you need?"

Starsky had an idea what Hutch thought he needed based on the roaming hands attempting to divest
him of bikini briefs, but he played along. "What do I need?"

"To make up for lost opportunities," Hutch purred in his ear.

In a frenzy of hands and kissing, they got naked. Hutch entranced him with skill and tenderness, but
Starsky leapt to alertness when he felt lubed-fingers probing a long-forgotten spot. "Ohmgod,
Hutch, you...oh, YES!"

He sprawled in the center of the rumpled bed and gave his partner ultimate access. He wriggled
shamelessly, flirted with hot looks tossed over his shoulder, and did his best to inflame Hutch
beyond reason. When he felt the special time approaching, he scrabbled for pillows and hoisted his
ass in the air, not just for convenience but for maximum effect, knowing what that part of his
anatomy did to his lover. He felt the prick of tears in the corner of his eyes when the merging
began, nothing to do with pain and everything to do with joy too long denied.

Something was wrong.

The impressive erection responsible for joining them had wilted, and Hutch gave a pained cry. "I
can't. Damn. Damn. I can't."

Starsky valiantly resisted the urge to pound his fists into the mattress. He also squelched a scream
of frustration. Rolling over, he found Hutch kneeling on the bed with his hands covering his face.
He seized his mate's shoulders and held tight. "What's wrong? Hutch, look at me."

Hutch shook his head behind the shield of hands.

Starsky felt helpless in the face of his partner's despair. "I don't understand. You were hot for it. I
didn't even have to ask. When we did this last year, you loved it."

"I know, damn it! Good God, if I knew what was wrong, don't you think I'd be doing something
about it, even if I had to--to--I don't know what!"

The incoherence coupled with distress in the voice pierced Starsky's heart, and his hard-on
softened in sympathy. He drew Hutch up against him and pulled them both down to rest on the
abandoned pillows. Kissing the hands still hiding Hutch's face, he whispered soothing words at random, hoping they would take effect.

"Don't, Starsky. Don't be nice to me. Last thing I need now is for you to be nice to me."

"Tough," Starsky said. "That's what you get for agreeing to marry your best friend and partner, if only in our hearts. Now move those hands so I can kiss you."

Charged with emotion, the resulting deep kiss spawned more, some tender and some frantic with passion seeking a new outlet. Their legs twined and chests rubbed flush, bringing a blush of warmth to both.

"I'm getting hard again," Hutch murmured.

"I can tell. So'm I."

"I can tell."

They laughed.

"What do you suggest?"

"I suggest we rub 'em together until sparks fly," Starsky said.

Their movement grew purposeful and heated with kisses, moans, whimpers, the nibble of teeth on sensitized necks and shoulders, and a final bathing of welcome fluid that felt like a baptism after the struggle. Emotionally exhausted as well, Hutch dropped off to sleep, and Starsky reached for a corner of the sheet to wipe them clean as best he could.

Holding Hutch protectively against whatever demons might invade his nightmares, he whispered, "You were right. I don't know what's going on, but I'm no Wishmaster Extremo. We just proved it."

~*~*~

Starsky stood in a room where memories couldn't be sanitized or erased by medical equipment and fancy hospital-style beds. He was glued to a spot in front of a floor-to-ceiling window, hearing a long-ago voice. "Want to love you by the light of the moon...."

"Reminiscing?"

Starsky jerked and whirled around.

Philip shut the door and wheeled into the room. "I don't mind, but if Nurse Joyce finds you here, you'll get the express ride out. I firmly believe she's Anita Bryant's fraternal twin sister. I thought about seeing if the dining staff would fix me up a pie ala Des Moines, but I better not push my luck. How was PT?"

Starsky smiled. "Great. Fine. Mark's proud and talking of cutting down to one session per week. He even let me out early today. Where's Impotent-Balding-Guy?"

"Jeremy's at pool therapy with Kara." Starsky raised an eyebrow and Philip flushed. "We had a long talk last night. As it happens, his brother Tim is gay. They were real close as kids, but Tim left home at seventeen before his parents could kick him out, or worse, lock him away in a psych facility, which was actually a possibility back then. He and Jeremy lost contact. Jeremy's never gotten over it, and he was taking it out on me. We're past that now. Amazing what a little bar of
soap can do."

Starsky frowned, reminded of his early morning discussion with Hutch. Noting Philip's quizzical stare, he hurriedly replaced the frown with an approving nod. "Glad to hear it."

"Starsky, what's wrong? If Mickey Mantle walked into the room, you'd be too distracted to ask him for an autograph. Assuming you didn't come in here looking for me, I'd say it has something to do with Hutch, am I right?"

"Yeah." Starsky cleared his throat and turned back to the window with its view of the back lawn and gazebo. Again, he heard voices from a year ago....

"Dance with me...."

"Starsky-"

"I'm asking you, Hutch. Please."

"Only if you lead."

"Tonight, buddy, I'm in control."

A voice flavored with Newcastle, England broke the reverie. "Starsky? It's okay to open up, you realize. You won't find a more captive audience than a bloke trapped in a wheelchair. I might even be able to help."

Unable to face Philip's caring green eyes, Starsky kept his gaze riveted on the gazebo. I've never talked about what goes wrong in bed. Just isn't my style. Yeah, and is pride worth continuing to mess up with Hutch just because you're lost in foreign territory and too macho to ask for directions? Hell, no.

Mind made up, he heard himself talking of the night Hutch had taken his "virginity" in that very room, then the night he had tried to return the favor to no avail. He heard himself pouring out a list of recent failures, including the one raw in his memory. He heard himself voicing his fear that they would never be physically one again. He felt a hand rest on his back. Philip had wheeled up beside him. Starsky glanced down at the young man's fluorescent orange t-shirt and its bright green slogan, Gay Means Happy Too.

"How many subtly politicized shirts do you have, anyway?"

Philip grinned. "A closet full. Nurse Joyce's eyes popped at this one. I'd rather not be responsible for her keeling over with a coronary, so I've decided not to wear my 'One Good Cock Deserves Another' shirt here. Unless she really pisses me off."

Starsky burst out laughing.

Philip patted his back. "That's more like it. You were made for laughing. You might not know this, Starsky, but there are lifelong gay men who can't handle being penetrated. Some men just don't have it in them, pardon the phraseology. It doesn't have to mean something's wrong with your overall relationship."

"So their partners just have to deal with it?"

"We-ell..." Philip looked away. "In my experience, blokes like that, if they pair off at all, tend to pair off with partners who always want to bottom. But you and Hutch are a special case."
"Philip, just come right out and say it. You don't see it working out between us long term."

"I won't say that, because I don't believe it. For one thing, you and Hutch have more than just sex going for you. You have history, common goals. He strikes me as really fair-minded. I think that might be making it hard for him to be on top right now, because subconsciously he feels it isn't right as long as he's denying you the same privilege. I think if you solve the latter problem, you'll solve the former, too."

"I don't want to force him into something he's not built to handle, and I have an awful feeling if I keep pushing him, I'll lose everything good between us. It's just... It's something I need."

"Starsky, if you ever want--"

"Did you hear something?"

"I don't know how you feel about sex-help books, but--what'd you say?"

"I asked if you heard...never mind." Starsky hurried to the door, which stood half-open. "Didn't you shut this on your way in?"

Philip stared at the door in visible surprise. "Shut it and flipped the lock. You know, because of Nurse Joyce and her thing about unauthorized visitors in patient rooms. Like this is the ICU at San Francisco General. They supposedly disengaged the locks on the doors, but I figured out how to get that one to work."

Starsky peered into the hallway but saw no one in the vicinity. "When is Jeremy due back from pool therapy?"

Philip consulted his watch. "Not for another half-hour. It really helps him, so Kara gives him an extra twenty minutes. She's an angel. Listen, Starsky, as I was saying, if you ever want to read a good book on the subject..." He wheeled over to a small desk with bookshelf beside his bed, tore a piece of paper from an open notebook, hunted about for a pen, and then scribbled with a flourish. "Call this number and order this title. It's the best I've ever read on dominant personalities adjusting to the receiving end."

Starsky folded and pocketed the piece of paper. "Thanks, Philip. I should probably be on my way. Today's a difficult--"

"I know what today is," Philip interrupted, sounding unusually solemn. "Go home to Hutch and don't sweat the small stuff." Starsky nodded. Philip's voice halted him at the door. "I do hope you know you're the older brother I never had."

Starsky turned with a smile. "I'm honored. If we're brothers, I can call you 'kiddo' with impunity."

Philip winced. "Yeah, guess you can, at that. I'll get used to it. Eventually."

"See ya, kiddo." Laughing, Starsky left the room with a bouncier step.

~*~*~

Starsky's plan to spend time with Hutch on that most difficult of days failed miserably. When he arrived at the cottage, he found no sign of his partner, and only a coolly impersonal note taped to the fridge informed him that Hutch had gone for a run. Hutch returned an hour later but sequestered himself in their bedroom with sheet music and his guitar. After several unsuccessful tries at establishing communication, Starsky reluctantly surrendered, assuming Hutch needed the distance
to deal with memories too raw to share.

He busied himself with projects he had set aside in favor of working on the album, took the opportunity to read the remainder of a novel he had started during recovery, and dabbled with the still elusive second verse in "Weapon." By evening his concern had graduated to worry, with a dose of confusion thrown in for good measure. He went in search of Hutch to suggest a fancy dinner in the city, perhaps at one of San Diego's most romantic restaurants-screw the possible publicity!-and found him in the cozy kitchen. Hutch was systematically chopping vegetables as though he had a personal vendetta against each one and the underlying cutting board as well.

"Hey. If I'm not too late to make a suggestion, I thought dinner out would be cool. Tonight was supposed to be my turn in the kitchen anyway."

Hutch didn't spare a glance from the victimized carrot. "That's funny, I thought lunch out would be cool, but I changed my mind."

"Huh? You never said anything. When I got back from PT, you were out running, and you've been AWOL all afternoon."

Hutch slammed down the knife and flung open the fridge door. He hurled a bottle of beer over his shoulder in Starsky's direction and grabbed one for himself. Like a hardboiled detective in fiction, he popped the top by slapping the rim on the edge of the counter in a vicious downward motion. This was Hutch of the streets, gritty and tough, under fiercely held control, and Starsky felt thrown back in time.

Gulping from the bottle, Hutch wiped his mouth with his shirtsleeve and pierced Starsky with eyes of blue ice. "I've been doing some thinking. We're liberated adults. It's perfectly okay for you to have needs. And if I can't fulfill them, you should feel...feel free to seek fulfillment elsewhere. You won't lose what we have together. God knows I never expected it would be with another man, but if that's what it comes down to, I can...I can handle it. You need to know that."

Starsky dropped his unopened beer. He barely registered the crunch of broken glass or the spread of amber fluid on the kitchen's hardwood flooring. "What--what are you saying? What needs, what other man? Hutch, I consider myself married to you. We don't have rings or documents, but everything else still applies. Doesn't it?"

"I've been married before, Starsky. I know what hell comes from one person not being fulfilled in a contractual relationship. I don't want you to feel trapped in that torture chamber." He plucked a thick dishtowel from the sink's edge and began methodically cleaning the floor at Starsky's feet. Starsky was too paralyzed to assist or move out of the way. "Who says I'm not fulfilled? Where is this coming from?"

"I came by the Delaneys' to meet you after PT. You said Thursdays were good, so I took you up on it. Wanted to suggest lunch in the city. I went in the PT room, but you weren't there. Got a look at the flamenco dancer with the bad ankle, but no sign of you."

"Mark let me out early today."

"Convenient," Hutch said coldly.

"Come again? What the hell's going on here? I'm lost."

"You know what? So am I. I went looking for you, ended up in the hallway outside Philip's room. The door was half open." Hutch rose with the sopping dishtowel and shrugged.
"Hutch, whatever you think you heard--"

"Must admit," Hutch interrupted, wringing the cloth over the sink. "He's got a fascinating approach. Cultivated your friendship, lulled you into a sense of safety talking about his thing for Mark, waited for the right vulnerable moment to swoop in and offer his charms. And he is charming. Very attractive and witty with that Euroboy flair and British accent he's managed to keep after years of living in the States. Good judge of character, too. Spotted your old-fashioned soft side a mile away, so he talks love and romantic movies. He's good; I'll give him credit. I'm sure he's had practice seducing straight men."

"Hutch, what's gotten into you? Philip's not interested in me. You tell me not to worry about Mackie, who undresses you with his eyes every time we're around him, but you're jealous of Philip, who doesn't want me that way at all?"

Hutch laughed bitterly. He spread the dishcloth over his palm and returned to pluck bits of broken glass from the floor. "You have a lot to learn about gay men, Starsky."

"Oh, really? And you don't? How'd you become such an expert?"

Dumping the bottle's shards in the corner trashcan, Hutch wheeled on him, and his face was a hardened mask. "Because I am gay. At least, compared to you, I am. I'm fairly certain I was born bisexual, whereas you--you were just talked into it."

Starsky felt anger flare through the icy shock. "Let me tell you something, Hutchinson, the night you told me how you felt, it was like a switch flipped in my head. Just how straight am I if a few words from the right person can change my whole outlook on sexuality? But that's beside the point. You might've been born bisexual, but you lived straight until a year ago, so you got no right to generalize about gay men or judge Philip's motives."

Hutch spoke through clenched teeth, "I'm not judging--"

"Hell, you're not!" Starsky cut in sharply. "I used to be seen as the one with hang-ups about homosexuals. But you're the one with real issues, and calling yourself gay hasn't changed them. You talked so open-minded about Blaine, like you were so sophisticated, but you're the guy who equated gays with bottom-feeders like Artie Solkin. 'Fagin, fagelah, what's the difference, you're vermin.' Your exact words, amigo. They stuck in my brain. I hadn't heard shit like that since I left the streets of Brooklyn, and to hear it come out of your mouth! Now here you are convinced that Philip's conniving to get into my pants just because he's gay. You can't even accept that he might just wanna be my friend!"

Hutch frowned, but he still showed no hint of releasing his tightly held anger. "That day at Artie's I was furious. I wanted to strangle the bastard. I wanted to get under his skin and make him hurt. Haven't you ever said something irrational, hateful, and downright dumb when you were too mad to see anything but red? You think I didn't feel bad later? Not about Artie. He was vermin. Nothing's too foul for him. But I hated the underlying bigotry in what I'd said. And come off your high horse. Where do you think I picked up the Yiddish? You might not have used the word in that context, but you've used it enough!"

Starsky squared his jaw. "All right. Fine. I can accept that." When Hutch said nothing, he felt the heaviness return to his chest. "I'm waiting."

Hutch actually looked taken aback. "For what?"

"For what?" Starsky's voice turned low and dangerous. "What you mean, for what? For you to
admit you're wrong about Philip, that's what!"

"I'm not wrong, Starsky! I was there! I heard Philip proposition you, and--"

"You heard what?"

"You were talking about what you need in bed, and I heard him say, 'If you ever want--'"

"If you ever want, what? Did you hear the rest? No, you didn't. I know because I heard something and when I got to the door, no one was there. You'd already split. Wanna know how he finished the sentence? 'If you ever want to read a good book on the subject.' The guy is learning how to walk again. It'll be a while before he can offer himself like that to anyone, and you know it. Last thing he said before I left is that I'm the older brother he never had. How does that fit into a seduction scheme?"

Hutch wilted before his very eyes. Slumping in front of the sink, grabbing hold to the counter edge for support, he let his proud head hang in dejection. "I don't know what to say. I'm a moron."

Starsky's anger melted with Hutch's capitulation. He found a smile, and willed Hutch to turn and see it. "Yeah, but I love adorable blond morons named Hutch, so it's okay. I wasn't just talking about what I need in bed. I was talking about needing intercourse with you. And if I can't have it with you, I don't have any desire to go looking for it somewhere else. Not a man or woman on earth can give me what I need with you. There was never one who could. You hear what I'm saying, Hutch? There was never one who could."

Hutch's wide, startled eyes showed he knew exactly above whom he was being placed in the history of Starsky's life. "I can't give you what you need sexually," he whispered harshly. "And I don't know why not, so don't ask."

"Here's a more important question for you. Where is this martyr routine coming from?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hutch evaded.

"Oh, yes, you do. What made it possible for you to stand there and tell me to go fuck some other guy while you bravely handle it, huh? You took your feelings out on some helpless vegetables instead of me. Why weren't you spitting mad, blowing your top, cussing a blue streak? I would've been! Hell, your reassurance yesterday is the only thing keeping Mackie from a fat lip, record contract or no. If he looks you up and down one more time like he's got some natural right, I'm liable to deck him regardless! I know you would never pound a guy in a wheelchair, but it's not like you to concede defeat."

"It's the only way I have left...to...to show you how much I love you!" Hutch shouted. "You don't know what it's like to fail in that department. The love, not just the sex. You've never failed to show how much love you've got for me. You've never been inadequate that way. I have! Several times."

"What?!" Again, Starsky stood helplessly rooted in a spot when he wanted to cross the kitchen and offer physical comfort to his beleaguered partner.

"You don't know what it's like!" Hutch repeated. "Living with someone who's always been the one willing to die. On that roof with Bellamy was bad enough, and all the other times on the streets, but last year...." His voice cracked, and the blood drained from his knuckles as he gripped the counter.

"Hutch, don't, please don't, I can't stand to see you beat yourself up."
Hutch didn't appear to hear him. "Knowing you walked calmly, laughing, into what you had every reason to believe would be your last moments on earth...just to keep me alive! Every day during your recovery, I saw what your choice cost you. God, Starsky, the pressure! If I made the rest of your life perfect, which I can't even do, I couldn't make it up to you. I can't believe I'm saying this. I sound like the world's biggest ingrate!"

"Is that why nothing I do seems to piss you off anymore? Is that your idea of giving me a perfect life? Not calling my ass on the carpet every now and again? Forget it, Hutch. Don't want it like that. I miss seeing you get all fired up. I'm glad we're past the dark stuff we got into that last year before we woke up to what was going on. But our good, honest squabbles and bickering, I miss. That made us real; it was natural. I've tried nudging you into it a couple times recently, and I get a glimpse of the old you, but then you go all apologetic and back off. I'm not some saint you have to worship."

"It'd be easier if you were a saint! I could manage if you were the Pope!" Hutch wheeled and leaned back against the counter. "Lazarus, no problem. Gandhi, fine. But you're the closest thing to Christ I've ever encountered. How's that for pressure?"

Starsky slapped a hand to his forehead and intentionally reeled. "Oh, man! No wonder you went limp last night. If I thought I was trying to lay the Christian Messiah when I got into bed, I'd develop a complex, too. Your inner Lutheran must be having kitten fits! Makes sense you didn't want me talking about the supernatural. Hell, this explains the Philip thing, too. You probably thought he'd touch the hem of my shirt and jump out of that wheelchair instantly healed and ready to get it on."

"Starsky! Take this seriously, for God's--uh..." Hutch reddened, and Starsky had to disguise laughter in clearing his throat.

"I am taking this seriously. No disrespect to Jesus, either. Hutch, I'm no Christ-figure. I'm just the one who got the choice. You think I don't know what would've happened if you'd had the choice instead? You would've been the one taking the bullets that day. I don't know where you've gotten the idea you've failed in the love department, 'cause from where I'm standing, I don't see it."

Hutch's eyes were pleading for absolution. "How many times over the years have I hurt you down deep, where it counts? And what do I have to balance the scales? There was never a time I made a sacrifice on the level of what you did."

Starsky dismissed the idea of sacrifice with a hand wave. "I'm not innocent in the hurt department. The other night you mentioned blindfolding. Got me to thinking back on the Widdicombe case, and it's not a pleasant stroll down memory lane. I pushed you away with both hands throughout most of it. You told me you loved me, Hutch. Said it different than ever before, but I was too hung up on my guilt-thing with Emily to give you the time of day. How'd that make you feel? I know you didn't realize then why you were saying it differently, but still, it had to hurt not to get an acknowledgment. Yet you kept pushing to solve the case, to give me peace of mind more'n anything else."

Hutch now had his arms folded over his chest and his face was averted, but the twitching vein in his neck and tremor in his jaw spoke of pain he wouldn't release. The sight freed Starsky from paralysis, and he walked over to slip his arms around Hutch's waist, letting his body touch his lover's in gentle affirmation.

Lots of people go through a "prove you love me" phase. Only Hutch would do a "prove I love you" thing. I should've seen this coming.
Aloud, Starsky said, "You need a lesson in how much you love me. I could list a bunch of examples from our time as cops when you saved my life, my sanity, hell, my soul even. But your rigid subconscious would probably tell you I'm just trying to make you feel better. I have better proof. You stay right here. I mean it. Stay put."

Starsky pecked him on the forehead and rushed from the room on a mission. He didn't stop until he reached their bedroom and the small locked chest where Hutch kept the paraphernalia pertaining to their special week: the journal, the book on grief Starsky had purchased, Mr. Smythe's letter. He dug in his pocket for his key-chain. Hurriedly opening the chest, he seized Hutch's navy leather-bound journal and sprinted back to the kitchen.

Standing exactly as Starsky had left him Hutch spotted the journal immediately and flinched. "What are you doing with that?"

"Using your own words against you--or to help you, as I see it. You need to reread some of this, but try reading it through my eyes. That day when I couldn't get it up at the poolside, you were willing to leave for my sake. All the feelings and needs you had, you were willing to walk away from, to protect me from something you thought I didn't want. All the times you hounded me about not letting you in, not letting you be there for me. I know I pushed you away and got mad, but deep inside, I was so in love with you for it. Meant everything that you loved me enough to keep pushing at me when you didn't understand what was going on." He shoved the journal against Hutch's chest. "Here, read back through this and see if you don't change your mind about how well you show you love me."

Hutch clasped the journal. "Where're you going?" he asked when Starsky turned to leave.

Starsky grinned back at him. "Living room. I'm giving you space. You come find me when 'til death do us part' means you'd prefer to kick ass than give me up to someone."

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Starsky felt Hutch's presence before his ears picked up the first sound of his arrival. He set down his book and glass of wine and looked up. Hutch's eyes were wet but his face had a full blush of happiness that had been muted for too long. Starsky smiled responsively, and his shirt was grabbed in strong hands as Hutch hauled him to his feet and kissed him with fierce poignancy.

It was a kiss unlike any Starsky had received in months. It reminded him of their first getting-to-know-each-other-as-lovers kisses. He shoved his hands into Hutch's hair and returned the passion, but he held back, too, instinctively aware that Hutch needed to give and give. He was left breathless and unsteady on his feet.

Hutch grabbed the wine glass from the coffee table and drank it dry. Instead of setting it down again, he hurled it into the empty fireplace, giving a victorious shout as it shattered against the chimney's brickwork. "Yeehah! I've always wanted to do that."

Starsky laughed. "Uh, Hutch?"

"I know we haven't had dinner, and there are chopped vegetables spread all over the kitchen counter, but would you mind going to bed right this second?"

"I couldn't get a tastier delicacy than you anywhere," Starsky said, taking him by the hand and pulling him toward the bedroom.

~*~*~
"Starsk?"

Starsky glanced up from the line of sucking kisses he'd bestowed along Hutch's inner thigh. "Yeah?"

"Get up here and put that bursting cock of yours to use."

Starsky chuckled even as his cock throbbed its agreement. "Is foreplay out of fashion?"

"It is when we've been doing little more than foreplay the last six months!"

"I can't help it. Right here, there's this incredibly strong aroma of your hippie soap."

"Hippie soap?!" Hutch's eyes flashed with outrage. "It's not hippie soap. Just because it's homemade and herbal and not filled with excess chemicals--oh, yes, yes, Starsk!"

Starsky lifted his head from kissing a particular spot at the base of Hutch's shaft. "Herbal soap and Hutch-scent combined. Man, this would make fantastic air freshener for the Torino. Problem is, I'd keep a constant hard-on and probably wreck the car."

Hutch sighed. "After Merle worked a miracle for you this last time, you'd better not. Starsk, I'm dying here. You spent a century getting me ready then disappeared!"

"I'm right here," Starsky said, laughing, and planted a kiss on the tip of his impatient lover's rosy erection.

"Which is too far from the actual destination," Hutch complained, but his thighs jerked from the attention paid his cock and a slight purr softened his voice.

"Okay. How you wanna to try it?"

Apprehension marred the handsome, flushed face. "Some way that hasn't been an abject failure before. I don't want to jinx us from the start."

"You don't be thinking 'bout the past or failure or anything like that, or I'll just suck this beauty and forget about trying at all," Starsky admonished and leaned down to draw a continuous slurpy kiss from the silken blond base to the passion-exposed ridge. He thought about spending quality time with Hutch's foreskin but didn't want to be labeled a sadistic cock-tease.

Hutch's token protest changed to an erotic hissing that Starsky felt at his core. Sight, sound, and scent, Hutch was the sexiest creature he had ever known. No words existed to do him justice. Photography couldn't capture the perfect play of curtain-filtered moonlight on his beautiful skin and musculature. Toned and healthy from running, clean living, and months without the burnout stress of police work, Hutch shone like Renaissance sculpture brought to life, and Starsky felt an exquisite ache that nothing could soothe. He didn't want it soothed. He never wanted to lose his wonder at having Hutch for his own.

"Did you fall asleep with your eyes open?" the beloved voice teased.

"I'm thinking maybe I should go down on you first. I didn't get dinner, remember."

Hutch smiled lazily. "I really don't want you to give me head right now. I want you to give me cock. All forty-odd, long-lasting 'Big Red' inches of it."

Starsky gripped Hutch's knees and howled with laughter. "Now you're just being silly."
"Yep. Reading through the journal reminded me that humor in bed helps, so I figured I'd give it a shot. I'm not as creative as you with names for male genitalia, but I'm doing my best."

"Well, you've got me so turned on I might come if I laugh again, so you're doing something right. I think snuggling up behind you nice and easy is the way to go."

"Behind, on top, standing on our heads, underwater, let's just do something now!"

"Damn, Hutch, if you get any hornier--"

"I could've composed an opera while your fingers were up my ass, Starsky, and then you had to pay homage to every part of my anatomy but the one I'm most interested in at the moment. I think you're the one with stage fright tonight. So let me make it simple for you. If I freeze up this time, you do whatever you have to, understand? I can handle it."

"No!" Starsky paused his arrangement of pillows. "I won't do that to you, hear me? If it doesn't work, we'll do something else and try again when I get that book. Maybe someone who knows more about this than we do has a few pointers. No pressure here. Our relationship doesn't rise or fall based on what happens in this bed. Yes, I got needs, but the biggest one is to be with you every night of my life, and I've got that."

Hutch's eyes closed and he rolled over on his side, accepting the necessary pillow between his legs. The tension in his back proved the reassurance inadequate. In the process of curving his body to fit behind Hutch, Starsky felt a surge of energy and inspiration. For all men, there came a time in bed when talk had to surrender to action, because trying to maintain both would lessen the quality of each. With his balls aching, his cock pulsing and throbbing by turn, and his instinct to drive and conquer running high, Starsky had reached that point, but he knew only words could succeed where action had failed.

And for Hutch, he could talk himself hoarse if necessary.

His hands lovingly massaging and spreading tender flesh, he whispered in a blond-covered ear, "Remember making love in the rose garden?" He positioned himself. "Grass was uncomfortable, and it was kinda breezy out, but the way you touched me, Hutch, oh man. Incredible. Nothing in the world like being touched by you."

The tension in Hutch's back began receding. More importantly, Starsky had breached the first physical barrier. He thrust another inch, drew in a deep, strengthening breath, and stroking Hutch's arm from shoulder to wrist, he put his lips next to the well-shaped ear, whispering again, "How you waited for me to get my head together about everything...so patient...tender. Way I see it, love like yours comes around only once every thousand years or so. I'm damn lucky to be this millennium's recipient."

Halfway there, Starsky's cock was crowing. So far, so good. Hutch had tensed and trembled with the usual discomfort that all novices of the act had to endure, but he gave no indication of impending freeze. All the slicking and stretching had to be making it easier, but Starsky was taking no chances.

Summoning his willpower and breath to form and articulate thought, he pressed deeper and murmured, "The way you wrote about me in that journal...no one else has ever known me as well or loved me as much as you do."

Hutch shouted with audible pleasure and relief, and Starsky realized to his astonishment that he was fully sheathed. "Love you..." Hutch rasped. "And what you've said...but you can let yourself go
Starsky had no words left, anyway. His body had wrested all control from him. He eased backward, undulated forward, found a rhythm and swayed with it, his hand on Hutch's hip guiding him into a matching movement. A strange but beautiful silence fell over the bed. Some other time, he could grunt and curse his ecstasy, but for now, all he needed was to be there, and feel, and move, and touch. They rocked, a gentle ebb and flow as emotional as physical, but the pace quickened of necessity, and the final surge rushed through him before Starsky wanted. With his lips pressed to Hutch's sweaty neck, and his arm resting protectively against the smooth chest, he shuddered, dizzy from joy, and thrust his triumphant release. When no orgasmic fervor followed his, he reached for Hutch's cock, chastened that he had ignored it this long, but a sweaty palm closed over his hand and guided it away.

"Don't," Hutch whispered. "Let it calm down until later."

"Wha'?"

"Shh...."

Starsky obeyed the affectionate order and floated into a semi-snooze, but his stomach had other ideas. A peremptory growl made Hutch chuckle. "Shaddup," Starsky said, as much to Hutch as his stomach. "Baskin' in the afterglow."

A louder, longer growl promptly responded, and Hutch laughed. "Starsk, your stomach doesn't know the meaning of the word. It's not too late to get a dinner reservation."

"What about the vegetables all over the counter?"

"Screw the vegetables."

"Lucky vegetables," Starsky said wistfully.

"Don't you worry." Seduction thickened Hutch's voice. "Why do you think I wanted to conserve my juice? When we get back from dinner, I'm taking you for a wild ride, and you'll be lucky if we make it into the house first."

~*~*~

Friday, May 16, 1980

Starsky woke with a delightful soreness he had long desired. He knew his smile had to be enormous because his cheeks and gums hurt worse than his tender ass. He cuddled closer to Hutch and started tracing patterns on his sleeping partner's chest.

Hutch's eyelids fluttered a few times before lifting to reveal those clear, sky-touched eyes Starsky had fallen for, in his own way, at first sight. Hutch blinked, playfully shielding his face. "Damn, that's blinding. Close your mouth or the sun will go on strike in protest. You're probably breaking some cosmic union agreement."

Starsky chuckled and pulled the hand away from the face he could never see enough. "Who needs the sun? You're my bright sexy angel, and I love you."

"I love you, too. Let's share rank morning breath."

"My pleasure." Starsky leaned closer for a deep slobbery morning kiss.
The sunlight fighting its way through the drawn curtains, the earthy kiss, and their healed sexual connection all lifted Starsky's spirits, but the phantom of Hutch's sacrificial offer hovered near. He pulled back and squished his pillow behind him to prop against the headboard. "Hutch?"

Hutch grunted and shifted into an upright position beside him. "What?"

"Us being exclusive means everything to me. Tell me it--" Fingertips closed his lips.

"It means everything to me, too. You have to know what I said yesterday was out of desperation and temporary insanity, but, oddly enough, I think it did the trick."

"Huh?" Starsky mouthed behind the fingers.

Hutch dropped his hand and scratched his chest, yawning. "Like I said, the pressure was horrendous. Every time we tried and I failed, it just got worse. Compounded the problem. The worst thing I could think of was losing you over it. The last thing I wanted was to share you with someone, but when I actually faced the nightmare, offered you the chance, and you didn't take it...well, some of the pressure eased off."

Starsky nodded. "I guess it's like the old saying. Love someone enough, set them free, and if they come back to you, it was meant to be. Only, I didn't even want to go. That had to make you feel better; I get it."

"And your reminding me how loved I've made you feel didn't hurt," Hutch added, smiling. The smile gave birth to laughter. "And demolishing an entire tube of KY and a bottle of massage lotion probably helped. We'll never get these sheets clean."

Starsky grinned and wiggled his ass. "And once you'd succeeded in giving me what I needed, you could take what you needed, too."

Hutch leered appreciatively at the wiggling. "Yes, things had equalized. We have to be equals, Starsk, in all things. We're equals in the music, whether you believe it or not. You contribute more than lyrics and your comforting presence on stage. That's why I refuse to put any of my old songs on the album. This is our music. Our creative love-child."

Yawning himself, Starsky stretched exuberantly and grabbed Hutch in an odd sideways bear hug, rubbing knuckles on his crown noogie-style. "Can't get enough'a you, Blondie. Why don't we scrounge breakfast and head over to the Delaneys'? Fridays, I can sign in for time in the pool, and you can be my honored guest."

Hutch snorted and wriggled under the head-rub. "Nice offer, but I agreed to meet with Bahama Bobby for voice coaching this morning in prep for tonight's performance. You go ahead, enjoy the pool, kick back and relax. I'd ask you to come to Bobby's, but you crack up every time I make the weird noises going through the scales, and frankly that's no help." His bright, loving smile eased the bluntness.

Starsky released him. "You're not avoiding the Delaneys' because you feel awkward? I mean, you know you don't have to worry about Philip, right? And not just because of his current condition."

"I always knew that, Starsky. Yesterday I was a little insane. Even then, common sense told me Philip wasn't offering himself to you, but I was too panicked over everything to listen, and I know how easy it is to want you! Tell you what, we'll find a way to have him over for dinner. Since Philip's like a brother to you, he's my family, too. And I do like him. I didn't mean to sound so cynical and judgmental about him."
"If there was anything to forgive, you'd be forgiven." Thoroughly wetting Hutch's cheek with a kiss, Starsky then leapt out of bed, jazzed over the new day.

~*~*~

Starsky stopped by the PT room first for some time on the machines. A luxurious swim would feel ten times better after a solid workout. Before the shooting, he hadn't cared as much about working out. Hutch was the gym-junkie in their partnership. But during the recovery, as soon as he was released from Memorial's tight leash, Starsky witnessed the rebirth of his competitive nature, which had come into its own at the rehab center, and now he remained inwardly focused on beating his personal best with the goal of earning a completely normal long and energetic life with Hutch.

He started at the treadmill, which faced the comfy blue floor mat where Mark was working with a tiny lady. Starsky had seen her before. She insisted on wearing gym clothes marketed for twentiesomethings, but her personality was so vivid that the tight, colorful Lycra/spandex didn't look as hideous on her frail, bony body as it might have. At least in her late seventies and the recipient of knee surgery, she lay on the mat, rambunctiously smacking bubble gum and blowing bubbles, while Mark helped her bend her legs.

She noticed Starsky's stare and grinned irreverently at him. "Shame they won't let us spark up in here. I could really use a toke right about now."

"Mrs. Fontaine, you're talking to a former cop," Mark informed her.

"So? He doesn't look like he'd begrudge an old lady a little bit of medicinal weed."

"Ma'am, I wouldn't begrudge you anything," Starsky told her.

Mrs. Fontaine gasped, the small sound mischievous. "That grin, those intense eyes! Mark, did he just hit on me?"

"I'll bet he likes beautiful feisty women," Mark said, "so it wouldn't surprise me."

She gave Starsky a high-pitched meow. "Too bad, young man. I doubt you could keep pace with my libido. I'm currently having a thoroughly sordid affair with my pool boy, Guido, and I'm a handful for him."

Before Starsky could counter with an appropriate response, the intercom on the wall above the men's shower room door crackled and squawked in prelude to a disembodied, urgent voice, "Emergency personnel! Code 91245. Emergency code 91245."

Mrs. Fontaine gave a sharp cry, and Starsky realized Mark had let her leg slip in his grasp. The therapist's face had turned a funny ashen color. Apologizing profusely to Mrs. Fontaine, Mark helped her up from the mat and lifted her gently, situating her on the resting bench and assessing her knee. She patted his shoulder and waved him away, and he hurried from the room.

Her shrewd face turned in Starsky's direction. "You should go with him. He might need a friend."

Starsky didn't bother to ask questions. He left the treadmill running and jogged out to catch up with Mark. They both skidded to a halt outside Philip's room just as the door slammed shut behind Dr. Warner, the physician in residence, and two nurses wheeling a cart. Mark pounded his fist against the wall beside the door.

Starsky rested a hand on his shoulder. "It could be his roommate."
"No," Mark said. "It's Philip; 91245 is his patient ID number. I have it memorized...along with his progress reports, medicine schedule...just from one day with his chart. Damn." He pressed his forehead to the wall. "Don't ask me why I'm like this. Don't."

"I won't," Starsky said softly. I already know.

The door opened and a tall prim nurse with shoulder-length dark hair emerged. Mark invaded her space immediately. "Joyce, what's going on? What's happened to Philip?"

"Mark, you know I can't give you that information."

"Joyce, come on, please. I treated him on Wednesday, and I'm concerned about him. Ease up on the rules for once."

"He's Kara's patient, not yours. One of the main reasons we ask our therapists not to share their caseload is that your concern and time should be devoted to the patients formally assigned to you." She started to walk away, having yet to spare Starsky a glance.

Mark grabbed her by the arm. "Tell me how serious it is, goddamn it!"

Joyce drew herself up into a vibrating wire of disapproval. "Mr. Preston! That language is unsuitable here. And you should be with Mrs. Fontaine. Now unhand me, if you please; I'm needed in X-ray."

Mark let her go, and she stalked down the hall without looking back. He ran a hand over his hair and muttered under breath. "Now I've done it," he said louder. "Joyce has never liked me. This'll give her good reason to write me up."

"Here's the game plan," Starsky said, squeezing his shoulder. "Next nurse that comes out, you let me attack her, deal? I don't have a job here to lose."

Mark smiled, but the expression was painful to see on such a pale face. As were his stark terrified blue eyes. "Thanks, David. I'm glad you're here."

The door opened again, but no nurse appeared. A middle-aged, balding man in a wheelchair rolled out and took a deep breath. The sounds of bustling medical activity drifted into the hall before the door slapped shut. "They kicked me out. It's getting bad in there," the man said.

"What's happening, Jeremy?" Mark did a masterful job sounding calmer than he looked.

"I'm not sure. From what I picked up of the lingo flying back and forth, I think it's a drug interaction. A new medicine didn't like one of his others, apparently."

Mark turned and leaned his back against the wall. "Oh, God."

Jeremy fished inside his terry robe and withdrew a small silver flask. "I'm not supposed to have this, and don't ask me where I got it, but I could use a swig, and I think it'd do you good, too, Mark." He tipped the flask to his lips, then handed it to Mark. Brushing the robe's sleeve over his mouth, he coughed. "Quality whiskey so potent you could cleanse surgical instruments in it."

"Might as well. Hell, when Joyce gets through writing me up, I'll get the boot anyway." Mark tipped the flask back for a hefty swallow. He coughed, too.

Jeremy took the flask and offered it to Starsky, who shook his head. Returning the flask to its hiding place, Jeremy shifted restlessly in the chair. "You look familiar. Wait a minute! You're the
big-city cop who got splattered all over his own police garage."

"Jeremy, for the love of God, try for a little less tact next time," Mark said, frowning.

"I call 'em like I see 'em," Jeremy grunted, shrugging off the sarcasm. He snapped his fingers. "I'm with the program now. You're the Starsky Philip's always raving about."

For the first time in the months he'd known him, Starsky received a less than congenial look from Mark.

Jeremy held out his hand for shaking. "Philip thinks of himself as your kid brother, you know. Says you call him 'kid,' too. Annoys the hell out of him, but he'd miss it if you didn't. I'm Jeremy Portsmith."

Starsky shook the offered hand, noting that Mark's glare had relaxed into a rueful smile. "David Starsky. Good to meet you."

"Now, I'm just gonna come right out and ask. Either of you responsible for me waking up with a bar of hospital soap in my mouth few days ago?"

Mark met the older man's eyes squarely. "No, I wasn't, and neither was David, but you had it coming, Jeremy. I heard it whispered around the staff lounge how you were treating Philip."

"I know." Jeremy looked miserable. "I was a jerk-off, for damn sure. What can I say? When you can't even jerk off anymore, you become a jerk-off. No excuse, though. Whoever shoved that foul-tasting soap in my craw did me a favor. I needed a wake-up call."

"I know what you mean about a wake-up call," Mark said, staring at the door. "And you're not the only one with a few Mea Culpas to say for mistreating Philip."

The door opened for the third time, and a matronly nurse in white slacks and crisp blouse beckoned at Jeremy. "You can come back in, Mr. Portsmith."

"Aimee, how is he? What's his condition?" Mark's eyes and body language pleaded more eloquently than words for any scrap of information.

She pinned a stray lock of graying blonde hair under her cap and hesitated. Starsky put a hand on Mark's arm before he could explode again and gave Aimee his most winning but authoritative smile. "I'm David Starsky. Yeah, my name is on that big fancy sign outside. I have both Dr. Delaneys' private beeper numbers in a desk drawer at home. That enough to cut red tape?"

Nurse Aimee turned and shut the door. She gestured for the group to join her farther down the hall. They formed a cluster around her several feet from Philip's room. "He'll be fine, but it was a close shave. His blood pressure bottomed-out and was stubborn about coming back up. He's stable now and we'll be monitoring him closely. Dr. Warner doesn't feel he needs to be transferred, so that's a really good sign. He won't be able to receive visitors the rest of the day, though."

She hurried down the hall, and the lean line of Mark's body had a slight sway to it. Starsky steadied him with a hand against his back. Mark heaved a sigh from way down deep. "I should get back to Mrs. Fontaine. God knows what she thinks of me abandoning her like that."

Starsky smiled. "Somehow, I doubt she minded."

"I'll keep a sharp eye out for Philip," Jeremy promised. "I'll even beg out of my pool time this afternoon." When he fielded two astonished stares, he gave his patented shrug. "What? When a guy
has a good roommate, he needs to take care of him. Otherwise he might end up with some freak." He wheeled back to the room, but he didn't go in. As soon as Mark left, Jeremy crooked a finger.

Starsky obeyed the summons, wondering what Jeremy could possibly have to say to him.

Jeremy pointed down the hall at Mark. "He's good people. Somebody should drop a couple hints Philip's way. I'd do the honors, but I've had two failed marriages so any advice coming from me might be bad luck. But you, being a brother-type...."

Starsky kept a straight face with difficulty. "I'll, uh...I'll take care of it, Jeremy."

~*~*~

"Well, that's that," Starsky said, slamming down the phone. "Meredith and Liz can't make it. Multiple response armed 211 turned nasty. They're okay, but they're snowed under with the bureaucratic cleanup, and Dobey said he wouldn't let go of them even for us. I knew something was wrong when they didn't call a couple hours ago to tell us they were on their way."

Hutch walked up behind him and began massaging his shoulders. "You okay? You've been jittery all day. I know Philip's scare got to you, and I wish I'd been there for you."

Starsky closed his eyes so he could concentrate on the healing sensation of Hutch's hands. "I'm kinda glad you weren't there. Might've brought back some tough memories for you. Just like I'm kind of glad Meredith and Liz can't get down here tonight."

"Why? They've been looking forward to this performance."

"Mackie's here, Hutch, and you can bet he's gonna do his best to make this concert a publicity function, too. You know what that would mean for Meredith and Liz. God, what were we thinking, inviting them to come in the first place? How would Liz's husband and daughter feel seeing her speculated about in the press? And Meredith! I don't give a shit what's said about me, but I'd hate like hell to see Joan talked about behind her back."

"Starsky, they're our friends, and they wanted to be here because they care about us. You were right, they're both sophisticated and above anything that might be said."

"No!" Starsky growled. "You were right. They're not robots, and they don't deserve to be put under a microscope. If they'd shown up, Mackie would've made the most of it, and it's just not fair. If people knew about us, it'd be one thing. Then the ladies would be seen for what they are, our friends and former colleagues. But as it is...."

Hutch turned him around and held him gently. Starsky fidgeted. Hutch kissed his cheek and put his lips to Starsky's ear. "Be still. Mackie said we had complete privacy in here, and he would definitely know for sure before he told us that."

Small but posh, Cobra Bay's "dressing room" for performing acts was furnished with the requisite lit mirror and dressing table, but boasted two designer fainting couches and wet bar as well. Framed black-and-white publicity photos of past acts covered the walls and viewed like a miniature rock-and-roll hall of fame.

Starsky felt eerie staring over Hutch's shoulder at a newly hung photo. A tall blond in jeans, black leather blazer, and black turtleneck sat backward on a baby grand's bench while a curly-haired man stood to the side, his sneaker-clad foot resting on the bench and bent leg forming a flesh guitar-rest for the acoustic guitar he held. Both men had stared at the camera with smiles meant for each other more than the lens.
Starsky winced with a twinge of embarrassment at how the pose emphasized his crotch. He had worn his tightest pair of jeans, too, at the photographer's insistence, along with a half-unbuttoned denim shirt and a leather bomber jacket so close to matching his old beloved and bullet-shredded jacket that Starsky experienced a chill looking at it. The unbuttoned shirt revealed a hint of scar, which Mackie had found chic. Starsky smiled wryly. He was being portrayed as the sex symbol, and Hutch the serious musician. Not that Hutch didn't look sexy as sin. The leather blazer accentuated his graceful figure and blondness, and even seated, his legs stretched long and scruptious in the tailored jeans.

"It's just a picture, Starsk," Hutch said, chuckling. "It doesn't define us."

"How'd you know what I was looking at?"

"You're getting a hard-on, and I hope it's not from the photo of a different Blondie."

"Easy for you to say it doesn't define us. You look like the classically sensual college professor all the young girls--and some young guys--fall for; and me, I look--"

"Stunning, vibrant, alive, virile, engaging. I'm proud of how you look; I'm proud that you're mine. I wish everyone who sees that picture could know you're mine."

Starsky kissed him. "Thanks. I feel the same way about you. I'm just bein' an ass tonight. Something's gotten under my skin, and I don't even know what."

Hutch patted his stomach, and the special little touch felt more soothing than ever. "Nerves. I have butterflies myself. Some groundbreaking music has been played on Cobra Bay's stage. I'm still in shock that we're here, and part of me feels it's premature for our photo to be hanging up there beside those others."

"Well, we're here, and it's zero hour. Thirty minutes to show time, and time to meet Mackie backstage. For what, God only knows."

A knock on the door propelled them apart. Hutch pulled the tail of his suede shirt down over his bulging crotch and went to unlock the door while Starsky adjusted his jeans. Bahama Bobby and Huggy bounced into the room like multicolored disco strobe lights.

"Oh, mahn," Bahama Bobby said, rubbing his hands together. "Does Mackie have a surprise for you."

"Two surprises, to be precise," Huggy added, grinning like a devil and tracing the outline of a perfect female figure in the air. "You two are the inside track to cool, gents. Sty-y-y-lin'! Since the two fine-feathered birds of whom we speak are wasted on you now, Bobby and I've decided we should be allowed to gather whatever crumbs you cast aside. Right, Bobby?"

"Right-o, Huggy-mahn. The best Sweden has to offer. Lingerie models. " Bahama Bobby kissed his fingertips. "Perfection!"

"Did we miss something, Huggy?" Hutch asked. "When did you two apply for identical twin papers?"

Bahama Bobby and Huggy exchanged glances. "We didn't dress alike on purpose," Huggy said with a huff. "Great fashion minds think alike, that's all."

"Speaking of fashion. Your music is supreme in importance, but style does count." Bahama Bobby grasped the collar of Starsky's blue silk shirt and opened the top two buttons. "Don't be afraid to
show chest, Starsky. The scarring is diminished now and would not be visible from the distance of stage anyway. And Lord Hutchinson here, let's muss you a bit." He brushed his hands through Hutch's hair. "There. Much better."

Starsky took Hutch's arm. "Come on, Lord Hutchinson, before they pull out black-and-white KISS paint or Elton John sunglasses. And I don't know about you, but I'm hoping for a malfunction in all camera equipment."

~*~*~

Impeccably dressed in the finest Gucci, Mackie was flanked by two curvaceous women just shy of six feet tall. Starsky and Hutch paused ten feet away and gaped at the "surprises."

"They're like the ABBA girls, only prettier," Hutch said, sounding choked.

Starsky's mouth was dry. "Two years ago, Hutch. Hell, just a year-and-a-half ago...."

"That was then, and this is now," Hutch completed Starsky's thought.

Mackie and his guests met them halfway. "Boys, I'd like you to meet Agda and Brigetta. They're models for one of Europe's top-shelf fashion houses. Friends of a friend of a mine, you understand. We thought it might be mutually beneficial for you and these lovely ladies to do a photo shoot, and what a photo op, what with the blonde and brunette thing." He kissed each girl on the cheek. "Agda, Brigetta, this is David Starsky and Ken Hutchinson, two former policemen who are going to set the whole music world aflame."

Agda and Brigetta were giving them looks that Starsky couldn't help but feel in his hip pocket. Hutch was squirming at his side, similarly affected. A flustered young man rushed up to the interlocked trio and leaned around Brigetta to whisper in Mackie's ear.

"What?! What do you mean the cameras are jammed? Don't be an imbecile. Carlton carries a whole fucking studio around with him. Surely--" More frantic whispering ensued, and Mackie's face contorted. "Oh, okay. I'll make some phone calls and see what can be arranged." The assistant rushed away, and Mackie released his two life-sized accessories. "I'll have a full photography setup here in fifteen minutes. Guaranteed. Girls, you stay and get acquainted."

The irritated producer disappeared from sight through the maze of backstage equipment and milling club personnel. Hutch cast a quick glance at the smiling ladies and said, "Excuse us a moment." He pulled Starsky to the side at a discreet distance and whispered urgently, "I can't. I just can't. Call me crazy, but I can't go through some farce of a photo shoot and then go on that stage and sing our music. Not tonight."

"It's okay. I'm with you on that, and I have an idea. I happened to notice cat hairs on Brigetta's sweater."

"You were checking out her breasts in that skin-tight, paper-thin sweater," Hutch said in the same hushed voice.

Starsky grinned into those knowing blue eyes. "Yeah, I was."

Hutch winked at him. "I was checking out Agda's legs in that scrap of cloth she'd probably call a skirt. What's your big idea with cat hairs?"

"Let's go back over there," Starsky lowered his voice still more to be on the safe side. "You start sneezing up a storm, then head off to the dressing room and stay there until I come get you. I'll
handle the rest."

"Play the allergy card? Just might work. Let's go undercover, Detective Starsky. I'll follow your lead."

Rejoining the girls, Starsky started the conversation. "So, are you ladies here for a fashion shoot?"

"Yes," Agda said. "And to visit friends in the area."

Hutch began to sneeze.

"Gesundheit," Brigetta said solicitously, and the German word sounded strange in her Swedish accent.

Hutch sneezed again, more violently. "I'm sorry, I--" He sneezed again. "Something's bothering my--" Another sneeze. "Allergies. I should..." He doubled over with a sneeze that nearly had Starsky laughing at the girls' polite but wary expressions. With a significant nod at Starsky, Hutch hurried away, dramatically clutching his nose.

Thrilled that Hutch trusted him alone with two Swedish lingerie models, Starsky turned an apologetic smile on the girls. "You'll have to excuse my partner. Do either of you ladies by any chance have a cat?"

"I do," Brigetta said, looking surprised. "My precious Kiki, I bring him on every trip with me. Is this a problem?"

"For my partner, yes. He's allergic. I'm afraid we can't do a photo shoot with you. He'd be too sick to go onstage."

Agda frowned. "So sorry, please apologize to him for us. Mackie did not say--"

"Oh, that's fine. Hutch doesn't like to advertise his condition. Mackie didn't know."

Brigetta nudged Agda and smiled at Starsky. "Perhaps we should leave. Actually, there is a party given by our friends we had wanted to attend, and we do not, I am sorry to say, really like the poop music."

"Pop music," Starsky corrected, returning her smile. "We're not really classified as 'pop,' but, sure, yeah, if there's somewhere you'd rather be, we understand."

"But what can we say to Mackie?" Agda asked. "He is always so nice to us when we are in California, and we do not want to hurt his feelings."

"You leave Mackie to me," Starsky said with confidence.

Brigetta inched closer and trailed a fingertip down Starsky's chest. "Of course, your friend cannot come if he is allergic, and that is a shame, but perhaps you might join us at the party later? I can give you the address."

Starsky's body had no qualms remembering that he used to be a practicing heterosexual. His face flushed, and his chuckle sounded nervous to him. "Thanks, thanks a lot, but we'll probably be here late. You ladies have fun, though, and it was nice to meet you."

Brigetta looked disappointed, and Agda cast a longing glance in the direction Hutch had disappeared, but they took their leave with kind smiles and wishes of good luck for the
performance. Starsky freshly cursed Mackie Brewster to hell and back. They were nice girls and altogether too good for Mackie's manipulations.

The grand manipulator showed up just minutes later. "Where are Hutch and the girls?"

Starsky tried for a nonchalant expression, then remembered his book about controlling people and its advice on difficult business associates. He got up close to Mackie, put on his most searing steady gaze, and said in his deepest voice, "Hutch was allergic to the cat hairs on Brigetta's sweater, so I sent him back to the dressing room, and the girls seemed pretty tired. Washed-out, really. Did they just get here today? Could be jetlag. I suggested they go get some rest since the photo shoot was out anyway."

Mackie shot his hands toward heaven. "I don't know what's going on tonight. Are there twin full moons outside or what? What does Hutch need for the allergy? Epinephrine, Solu-Medrol IV, sinus scraping, Chinese herbs, what? I'll have it here in five minutes along with the best allergist in the city."

Starsky slapped him on the back, feeling a little more kindly toward the man. "Mackie, relax. He's just sneezing. It'll pass; trust me. He'll be onstage raring to go right on time."

When Starsky reached the dressing room, the door flew open on the first knock and he was grabbed and hauled into the room by a sexy madman who slammed the door and shoved him up against it. Starsky couldn't hold in a shout of both shock and arousal as Hutch's lips descended on his neck.

"We're due onstage in fifteen minutes," Starsky gasped.

"Plenty of time," Hutch mouthed around Starsky's Adam's apple, thrusting against him.

Starsky grabbed the seat of Hutch's corduroy pants and encouraged the motion, adding his own thrusts in rhythm. "Harder, feels good, faster, that's it."

Instead, Hutch stilled against him and rested his hands on the door to either side of Starsky's shoulders. "Not really the time or place, is it?"

"Far as I'm concerned, it's always the time and place to be with you, but..." Starsky tried to swallow the lump of excitement in his throat. "We need to go out there focused and ready to bring down the house."

Hutch was studying him intently. "Starsky, about that estate in Hawaii. Wouldn't have to be a mansion. Just a secluded getaway for two with a couple acres close to Diamond Head."

Starsky re-mussed the blond hair in honor of Bahama Bobby. "Yeah, funny timing with the cameras jamming, huh? Hutch, it's not me. I don't know what's going on, but I honestly feel now that it's not me. If it was, I'd give you a lot more'n a getaway in Hawaii."

~*~*~

The bright lights made it impossible to distinguish features in the crowd around the stage, but the louder feminine voices told Starsky that numerous women were pushing closer to the front. He was glad going undercover once as a cruise ship entertainment director had given him practice in playing to an audience. Taking the mic from his stand, he gave Hutch an encouraging nod. Already seated at the piano, Hutch tilted his head slightly, signaling his readiness. Starsky turned to the audience.
"Good evening, San Diego!"

Applause rippled through the crowd.

"I'm David Starsky and this is my partner in crime, Ken Hutchinson."

From the crowd a female voice shouted, "Love you, David Starsky!"

Applause and laughter drowned out any response Starsky could have made. He decided to continue the introduction, knowing he couldn't look at Hutch without his partner's suppressed laughter triggering his own. "You know us as Starsky and Hutch, but our producer wanted us to tell you that you'll be calling us something different soon. We're so new at this, we don't even have a name!"

"I have a name for you!" called a rowdy male voice. "Big Bad Sex Cops!"

Again, hoots, laughter, and applause filled the air. Another female voice shouted, "Talk to us, Hutch! Don't be shy!"

Hutch looked flustered. He leaned toward his mic and said, "H-hi, there!"

Wild clapping ensued with a couple feminine whistles joining in.

When the clapping died down, Starsky said, "Before we get things going, let me introduce the band backing us. Tony Slidell is taking care of bass for us; Joey 'High Hat' Carter's on drums; and Marla Temple will join us for 'Into the Rising' on violin. Hutch is lead vocal, piano, and guitar. I'm responsible for acoustic guitar and back-up vocal."

"Hold that guitar a little higher, Starsky!"

Hutch did burst out laughing that time, and the mic carried the mirth across the crowded room. Starsky hoped the lights didn't show his face to be as red as he knew it had to be.

"Yeah, and get Hutch out from behind that piano, too!"

Hutch's laughter choked, and his face matched Starsky's.

With the classical grand piano turned concert style, the audience got a full view of Hutch in profile; what more did they want? But then, Starsky knew how much of Hutch he liked to see, so he couldn't blame them. Wondering how soon, if ever, they would get used to this sort of thing, he tried a joke, "Now, now, this ain't that kind of club."

"Don't we wish!" shrieked another female fan.

Starsky guessed that somewhere in the room, Mackie was counting imaginary money with both hands. "All right, why don't we get to the music?"

Even louder applause suggested the music was just as important to the audience.

"Talk to us some more, Hutch!"

Starsky watched as Hutch heroically avoided rolling his eyes and leaned into the mic to comply. "Our first song tonight is 'Changeling.' On the count of three. One, two-"

Still nervous after all the coaching and lessons from Hutch to improve his basic skills, Starsky positioned his hands on the guitar.
"Three," Hutch said.

Starsky's eyes met Hutch's as the music began. The eye contact was critical until Hutch got the first stanza out. After the rousing intro, Hutch sang sweetly, "Who are you...where am I...different face, same voice...should I try? Out of hell, into uncertainty, reaching for you, holding onto me...need you more, understand you less...understand you more, find you're best...."

~*~*~

Saturday, May 17, 1980

Starsky knocked on Philip's door. Hutch stood beside him bearing a perfectly cultivated ivy plant with an outrageous, glow-in-the-dark orange ribbon tied around the pot. Starsky looked at the ribbon and snickered again. "Philip'll love that bow. He'll probably tie it around his head and wear it with pride just to get Joyce's goat."

Hutch lifted his eyes to the hall ceiling. "At least this is more sedate than the 'Mine Is Bigger Than Yours' t-shirt you wanted to buy him."

"He would've loved that, too. I'll get it for his birthday."

The door opened, and Nurse Aimee stepped into the hall. "Oh, hello."

"How's Philip doing?"

"He's much better this morning, but still a bit too weak to push his chair very far. He wanted fresh air, so Joyce wheeled him outside. All the way to the duck pond, I think."

Starsky stared at her in alarm. "Joyce took him to the duck pond? Are you sure she's not going to push him in?" Hutch nudged him sharply in the ribs.

Aimee's lips pursed. "Joyce has her prejudices, but she's a fine nurse. She was the one who called the code, and she did all she could for Philip until the emergency team could get here. He might not be here today if not for her." She pointed at the plant and offered a sunny smile. "Philip will just love that bow. Let me put it on his table for you. Go on and join him. He'd enjoy company, I'm sure."

~*~*~

Avoiding the new paved path that had been laid between the house and the pond, they took the cross-country route and tramped happily side by side through the small clump of woods, reveling in shared memories. The reminiscences were appropriate to the tableau that awaited them.

Philip sat in his chair on level ground above the pond bank. He wasn't alone. Mark squatted in front of the chair and held the patient to him with breathtaking tenderness. Philip had draped his arms over Mark's shoulders and the two men were lost in a slow, deep kiss that looked to be their first.

The interlopers turned to leave the budding romance undisturbed, but Starsky stepped hard on a twig that snapped like a rifle shot, and paused with his leg lifted like a pointer dog. Hutch tapped his shoulder. "Way to go, twinkle toes."

"Hey, guys," Philip said behind them.

They did an about-face in unison. Mark had jumped up to stand beside the chair and appeared ready to bolt. Philip reached over and took his hand. "Mark, it's okay. You know you can trust..."
“Sorry,” Starsky said. "When we heard Joyce had wheeled you out here, we didn't know we'd be interrupting a tryst."

Philip threw his head back and laughed. "Can you see Joyce in the role of duenna escorting me to a gay tryst? What a riot. No, I asked her to leave me here for half an hour. I didn't know my Prince Charming would make an appearance. He's not usually here on Saturdays."

Mark absently smoothed his hunter green, Smythe-Starsky Center polo shirt. "I was called in for a special session with a new client, and on my way into the house, I spotted an old gentleman wandering around by the wood. I thought he might be an outpatient client working with Kara today, and I wanted to catch him before he got lost, but when I got here, I found Philip and no sign of the old fellow."

"And I shamelessly distracted him from continuing the search," Philip laughed, tugging on the right leg of Mark's khaki shorts.

"What did he look like?" Hutch asked. "We'll keep an eye out for him."


"No. He's uh..." Starsky sought inspiration from Hutch, who shot him a helpless look. "If it's who I think, he used to live nearby, and uh...he likes to walk the grounds when he comes into town. Harmless. You don't need to worry about him."

Mark wiped his brow. "Thank God. I was afraid I'd managed to let a high-risk patient get lost on the grounds. I have to walk a chalk line for a while. So far I've been lucky. Joyce hasn't written me up yet, and Mrs. Fontaine was really nice yesterday when I got back. She even asked if my young man was okay." He smiled down at Philip. "I don't know how in the world she had the slightest clue."

"You'd be surprised what little old ladies can pick up on," Starsky said.

"I've certainly tried to hide it," Mark said. "Professionally, I've had to. I used to work in San Francisco before I moved here. As I told Philip just a little while ago, I kept encountering two difficulties. My straight male patients, if they thought I was gay, were uncomfortable. As if they assumed a gay man has no control over his hormones and gets hard for every guy he sees, which is ridiculous. My gay patients were worse in a way, though. So often when they figured out I'm gay, uh--" He broke off, blushing furiously.

Philip playfully pinched his side. "Don't be modest. He got propositioned, that's what. I told him that's to be expected for a guy who can pass for Adonis's better-looking brother."

"Philip!" Mark protested, turning his face, but not before Starsky spotted a smile.

"As Jeremy says, 'I call 'em like I see 'em'," Philip insisted. "But Mark, delicious man that he is, has the ethics of a Jesuit, so come-ons from patients made him really uncomfortable."

"Well, I hated that some of the men acted like a gay physical therapist must be in the profession to score dates. It's amazing how you can be misunderstood the worst by people who are supposed to be your community." Mark rested a hand on Philip's wrist where it propped on the wheelchair arm. "I understand Philip's openness and activism, but I'm ready for the day when orientation is a non-issue. When whether a person is gay, straight, or in-between is as unimportant as whether you have"
blue or green eyes."

"That would've made a fab topic for my radio show." Philip grinned up at the physical therapist. "We lived in the same city for years and never met, but here of all places...."

"Did you hear Philip on the radio while you were up there?" Starsky asked Mark.

Mark's eyes became dreamy, and he walked behind the chair, putting his hands on Philip's shoulders. "Oh, yeah. He's something of a celebrity in the Bay Area. Who wouldn't fall for his sweet sexy voice? Never dreamed I'd meet him. When he turned up here and I did meet him, it was like I'd been punched in the gut in the most wonderful way, and I couldn't even talk to him. Got tongue-tied every time I saw him. As much as I wanted to take on his case, I was relieved when he was placed in Kara's group."

"That's why he tried to talk his way out of working with me that day and acted the nervous cold fish during the session. Like a wise man once said; professional distance." Philip's smile offered forgiveness and understanding as he tilted his head back and stared into Mark's eyes.

Mark squeezed Philip's shoulders. "As Joyce said, he's not formally my patient, but since I've treated him in an official capacity, I feel I'm on shaky ground ethically, at least as long as he's here. After yesterday, though, I couldn't afford to keep him in the dark about how I feel."

Philip held out the hem of his purple t-shirt with the bright pink lettering that asserted Straight Is Boring, and sighed. "So guess who'll be in a closet relationship? At least until I'm well enough to be released from here and Mark can handle the rest of my PT on a strictly private basis."

Mark caressed the back of Philip's head, and his eyes pleaded with Starsky and Hutch by turn. "So please, don't--"

Hutch held up a hand to silence the unnecessary request. "Your secret is safe with us until it no longer has to be a secret. And I'm no one's patient, formally or otherwise. There's nothing to keep me from inviting you to dinner at the cottage and coincidentally inviting Philip as well." Hutch's eyes sought Starsky's, silently asking an important question. At Starsky's nod, those beautiful eyes turned back to Mark. "My lover and I can promise you a good meal. Starsky does something with a stuffed pepper you wouldn't believe."

"Lover?" Mark blinked.

Starsky wrapped his arms around Hutch's waist and pulled him backward into a hug, bursting with pride. "Did you really think I could live with this incredible man and not share his bed?"

Mark's jaw dropped. "I thought it was just a roommate thing. You guys are really--?"

Philip stretched, reaching up to gently tweak his chin. "That's classified, Mark."

Shock changed to a grin that subtracted five of Mark's thirty years, and he kissed Philip's cheek. "Understood, cutie." Glancing at his watch, he sighed. "Time for my session. You ready to head back?"

Philip shook his head. "Think I'll stay here a bit. My half-hour isn't up yet. Something about this pond...so peaceful. Does me good."

"We'll see him safely back inside," Starsky said.

Mark included both of them in a grateful nod. "Thanks. For everything." He bent and kissed Philip
with care that had the look of abiding truth. "Crazy about you," he said softly to the wheelchair-bound man.

"Likewise, gorgeous," Philip answered, rubbing his knuckles softly against Mark's cheekbone. He watched Mark walk briskly away, and his jaw tightened with determination. "I am going to walk again. For myself, but also for him."

"Of course, you are," Hutch said.

"Of course, I am," Philip echoed in a strange voice. "Hey, Mark!"

Mark turned around at the beginning of the woods. Philip gripped both chair arms and began to lift himself. Hutch took a step forward in obvious alarm, but Starsky grabbed his arm, staying his momentum. Philip was striving to reach a standing position.

By now Mark had realized his intent, because he shouted, "Philip, no! You're not ready without the balancing rails!" He jogged back toward the pond.

Hutch pulled against the hold on his arm, but Starsky held firm. "Let him, Hutch."

"He could set back his entire recovery!" Hutch argued.

"He won't," Starsky said with conviction.

Hutch tossed anxious glances between Starsky and the young man whose battle against fierce pain and weakened muscles looked formidable. "How do you know?"

"Because I did the same thing, in my own way, for you during my recovery. Sometimes proving you can get well is the best way to say 'I love you'."

Philip had halted Mark's onrush with an adamant raised hand. All three men watched in varying degrees of astonishment as Philip put one foot in front of the other. He staggered, wobbled, and sweat beaded on his pale straining face, but with his eyes fixed on Mark, he covered the small space of ground between them and fell into the therapist's arms, resting against his chest.

"Seven steps," Mark said in a broken voice, kissing Philip's hair. "Seven whole steps without the balancing rails! I'm--I don't know what to say. I'm so proud of you. So proud." He held Philip in gentle support and received an enthusiastic kiss from the joyful victor in return.

"Don't think..." Philip caught his breath afterward. "Don't think I can quite make it back."

"You've earned special transportation," Mark said softly, showing his training by lifting Philip in stages until he held him bride-over-threshold fashion. Though slender--almost frail as the result of prolonged recovery--and a good four inches shorter than Mark, Philip was no feather-light Mrs. Fontaine, and his weight registered in Mark's muscles and expression, but the physical therapist kept a smile that seemed lit from within. He gingerly deposited Philip in the wheelchair and knelt in front of it.

"You get plenty of rest this afternoon to make up for that," Mark ordered, still smiling.

"Just wanted you to carry me," Philip teased, backhand wiping the sweat from his cheeks.

"Right, tough guy. You're my hero, and you know it." Mark stood. "I have to go now, or I'll be late." With another nod for Starsky and Hutch, he turned again and broke into a run toward the woods.
"Well," Hutch said, visibly relaxing. "I've had my dose of inspiration for the month."

Philip grinned at him, then shifted in the chair and wagged a finger at Starsky. "Before you start teasing me, I admit I was as clueless about Mark as he was about you two."

Starsky knew the young man wanted the focus lifted from his special feat. "Who said I was gonna tease you?" Philip elegantly arched one eyebrow, and Starsky laughed. "Maybe I was, a little. Seeing as you were so sure he's an uptight straight guy."

"He's been openly gay as long as I have, but he was forced into a professional closet." Philip stared at the pond. "I swore I'd never get serious about anyone who doesn't lead the open life I've chosen. Odd, when you start to really fall for someone, the first things you forget are the things you swore you would never do."

Starsky looked at Hutch, whose gaze fell from his with an endearing sudden shyness.

Philip was unaware of the nonverbal byplay. "I love San Francisco, and he hates it. He loves San Diego, and I think it's a bore on the whole. I have gay pride running through my veins, and he prefers to keep his orientation to himself. I dress for the discotheque, and he could fit in at a country club."

"Opposites attract with force that defies logic," Hutch said.

"Yes, but can they stay together through all the muck that comes of being opposites? Or is that even harder than learning to walk again?"

"You're looking at two who've done it so far." Starsky slipped his arms around Hutch's waist again and kissed his temple. "Takes teamwork. To paraphrase what a wise man once said: solve one problem, and the solution to another falls into place."

Philip narrowed his eyes, peering at him, but Starsky's meaning dawned quickly, bringing sunshine to his boyish face. "Glad to hear it, Starsky. Really glad to hear it."

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"I love that this room has no windows," Starsky said, looking up from the living room floor where he sat cross-legged in the middle of crumpled and scattered sheets of paper.

"Why's that?" Hutch drawled, staring at sheet music and lifting a beer to his lips.

"Because you feel comfortable sprawling nude on the sofa, dummy."

Hutch half-strangled on the beer, laughing. "Oh. You have a one-track mind, meathead."

"Yep, and you're distracting it. All right. How's this?" Starsky paused, rereading the lyrics to himself. "Never mind. Ugh, ugh, ugh." He crumpled the paper and tossed it over his shoulder. "Ever since I started this, I've wanted to write a song about Jackson's death, and the weapon that racism is, one'a the worst we ever saw on the streets."

"And you will. 'Weapon' is a great song. I'm not sure what it is about the second verse that doesn't work for you, but you'll figure it out. We have the tune down pat. Mackie loves it, the session bass player and drummer loved it; we're good to go as soon as you find the last few words."

"Right." Starsky grit his teeth. "I've only been trying to find them for six days now."
Hutch set the beer bottle on the coffee table and sat up, dropping the sheet music at the other end of the sofa. "Starsk, you're an amazing songwriter. Who knew? But you are. Every time Mackie hears 'Into the Rising,' he gets all misty-eyed, and it's not my piano solo doing it to him! You know..." He brushed through his hair, leaving wisps of blond standing every which way. "Maybe there's another song pushing to get out of you, and 'Weapon' won't fall into place until you've gotten it out."

"Oh, no," Starsky groaned. "No. 'Weapon' is supposed to be the last song on the album. Don't do this to me, Hutch. We're so close."

"'Weapon' might be the first song on our second album. You do believe there'll be a second album?"

"Course, I do. But--"

"But nothing. Put 'Weapon' aside and quit gnawing at it. If it comes, it comes. Open yourself up to other influences. If a new song starts flowing, I'll sit down at the piano and see what I can do. Meanwhile, we have to work on a name. Monday's the deadline, remember, and I wouldn't put it past Mackie to suggest 'Husky and Starch' as his idea of a joke. I could strangle Huggy for telling him about that."

Starsky see-sawed the ink pen over and under his knuckles. "I want to pay tribute to the year everything changed for us. When you get right down to it, there was more good than bad in '79. We became lovers, we got handed a miracle, we discovered our music...."

"Okay. That fits with what I've been thinking about, actually. New beginnings, second chances, and, at the risk of raising the Christ-figure issue again, something about rising again. After all, 'Into the Rising' is a metaphysical song, and it's the title track of the album, but if that's too much...."

"Hutch, relax, you sold me." Starsky grinned. "I do feel like I rose again. Not through my own power, but from all the love around me. Yours, especially. And what Mr. Smythe was willing to do for me."

Hutch looked antsy. "Starsky, you don't really think Mark saw--?"

"I dunno. Sure as hell sounded like him, but I guess another old man could dress that way and walk with a cane. We didn't see anyone matching the description, and we must've covered the whole grounds after we wheeled Philip back in. Not much else we can do."

"Right. Okay. Names. Something to do with '79 and rising... We need one good word, I think, to sum up all I said before, but we don't want to use 'rising' again because that'll take away from the song and album titles. Help me out here, buddy."

A rumbling roar too close for comfort made both men look skyward as Starsky's old bookcase shimmied, a book tumbling off the topmost shelf.

"Navy jet. I hope we're not gonna be in some new flight path." Starsky rose to return the book to the shelf, chanting as he went, "Rising...risen...resurrection...Phoenix."

Something seemed to electrify Hutch. "What did you say?"

Starsky held the book out. "Landed just like this. My mythology book." He joined Hutch on the sofa and handed him the book, which had opened to the pages depicting the stunning mythological bird and its story of new life arisen from ash.
"Phoenix...'79. Phoenix 79!" Excitement raised the pitch in Hutch's voice. "Starsky, that's it! People will rack their brains trying to make the connection, thinking we're named for the city, and wondering why, since we're based in Southern California. It's catchy, but meaningful, and special to us." He grabbed Starsky around the shoulders and kissed his hair.


He snagged a quick taste of Hutch's lips before carrying the helpful book back to its shelf. Slipping the thick hardback into its slot, he caught sight of a framed decades-old picture on the shelf below. It was a picture they had been asked to keep and treasure, but neither pondered it or its significance often. Now, Starsky stared at the grinning young man resting his arms on a British Spitfire's wing, and saw something never before visible to him. He snatched the picture and bounded over to thrust it under Hutch's nose.

"He remind you of someone?"

Hutch picked up on the change in Starsky's voice because his naked shoulders tensed and his posture reflected heightened alert. Studying the photo, his face remained blank. "Should he? I'm not seeing anything familiar."

"Take him out of flight uniform. Imagine him in jeans and a loud t-shirt with some gay-pride slogan."

"Philip?" Hutch looked closer. "Comparable age, certainly. Similar coloring--maybe, it's hard to tell with this yellowed picture. The features aren't really alike, except maybe in the smile."

"Yeah, that grin. So bright it could light up the bottomless pit. One of the first things you notice when you meet Philip."

Hutch cradled his brow with thumb and middle finger. "Starsky, please tell me you're not suggesting Philip is the reincarnation of Mr. Smythe's son, Gregory."

"No," Starsky said impatiently. "Course I'm not suggesting that!"

"Then what are you saying?"

Starsky held the picture in respectful silence for a moment before returning it to the shelf. "I'm saying if I can spot the resemblance, then someone who knew him far better--knew Gregory, I mean--could spot it, too. I'm saying..." He looked up at the mythology book. "I'm saying maybe I shouldn't just be thanking the U.S. Navy for our new name."

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Sunday, May 18, 1980

Starsky stood in complete privacy at the back of the Delaneys' rose garden where a tiny commemorative sun-dial garden honored the resting place of Mr. Smythe, whose ashes were contained in a concrete urn at the base of an elegant headstone. The old caretaker had wanted his earthly remains to be kept near the grounds he loved so much. His wife and son were laid to rest in England, but he did not need to be geographically near them after death to insure an eternity with them in the next world. Those were the thoughts expressed in his will, and Starsky thought them beautiful. Such certainty of love and reunion irrespective of earthly tradition.

Going down on bended knee, Starsky laid a bouquet of white roses at the base of the urn. "I know you can hear me, even if I can't see you."
His voice sounded overly loud in the rustling breeze disturbed only by the chatter of squirrels and birds.

"Now, I don't know much about ghosts, but I always heard they like to come back around the anniversary of their death. I think that's what you did. I'm going out on a limb and guessing it's because you wanted to check up on things back here. Check up on me and Hutch. Because where you are, at perfect rest with your wife and son, you couldn't know what was going on, right? Wouldn't be perfect rest if you could worry about the world down here. So you asked to come back for a quick look-see, didn't you?"

He hadn't expected the elderly man to make a sudden appearance, but he was disappointed when nothing but nature's noisy version of silence answered him. "Problem is, you found out some things weren't going so well. Hutch and I were having a little, uh...trouble in the bedroom, and the bed of roses our music career was supposed to be has some thorns in it. And you found someone else to worry about. Hanging around me, you got to see Philip. I'll bet that was a stunner, huh? Seeing someone who reminded you so much of Gregory. So you decided to try your hand at some earthly housekeeping."

He noticed that the birds had quieted and the trees and bushes around the sundial and headstone were deathly still. "But what does a sweet old man know about teaching badmouths a lesson or giving some comeuppance to a big-shot record producer? So, you took your cue from my own frustrated thoughts. Coming back here to this crazy world from all that eternal perfect love is corrupting, ain't it? Smashing sculpture, stuffing soap in a helpless guy's mouth...that's just not like you, Mr. Smythe. Bet it didn't make you feel too good afterward, either, even if your intentions were honorable."

Starsky stood and patted the top of the headstone affectionately. "And even when you tried to make good stuff happen, you kinda messed up. Sure, Philip got to spend time with Mark when Kara couldn't get to work, but that didn't turn out so well at first. And opening that door for Hutch to hear Philip and me talking... You probably thought he'd hear how much I needed him and things would work out, but he didn't get to hear enough, just enough to jump to the wrong conclusion. Now, that could've been a disaster. Thank God we're old hands at misunderstandings." Starsky chuckled. "But that is like you. I remember how hard you tried to get me to open up to Hutch about what I was facing last year. Calling him and dropping hints about that book, all those things you said when we had dinner with you...."

The birdsong returned, and the breeze played with Starsky's hair. "And you couldn't protect Philip from the drug interaction, just like you couldn't keep Gregory from dying in the Battle of Britain. I have a feeling that gutted you. I was feeling lousy the whole day afterward, even after I knew he'd be all right. A ghost-scientist would probably tell me I was feeling your negative aura. Picking up on your misery. Geez, Hutch would be laughing his ass off by now if he heard all this."

"No, I wouldn't."

Starsky jumped and clutched his chest, turning toward the voice. "Holy-- Hutch, what're you trying to do, sneaking up on me like that?"

Hutch smiled. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you. Just didn't want to disturb the moment."

"I wasn't expecting you to show up. I mean, I figured--"

"You figured after you clammed up yesterday following your enigmatic remarks, I was still in the dark. Starsky, you're not the only one who hasn't forgotten how to be a detective. You could've invited me along."
Starsky dropped his eyes from Hutch's kindly amused expression. "You said you wanted to put the supernatural behind us, and...maybe I thought this was something I needed to take care of myself."

"You want me to leave?" Hutch asked, still looking mildly amused.

Starsky swatted him on the shoulder. "You know I don't."

Hutch turned toward the headstone. "For what it's worth, I made a few phone calls this morning. Talked to Mark and casually broached the subject of Kara's tires. She's blaming it on some sharp stones in her driveway. Called Dobey, too. He says they're leaning toward accidental cause in the sculpture vandalism. Apparently, there was a sonic boom in the area during the time in question, and the investigation has turned up some other broken objects in the building. Insignificant things, in comparison, and it's strange that only a few objects were affected, but sound-energy waves have been known to do weirder things than that, and there's just no evidence of human involvement. Nothing concrete, anyway. Mackie is happier with that than thinking some random nutcase got into the building and decided to smash his treasures."

"Or a ghost," Starsky said.

"Yeah." Hutch grinned. "Needless to say, I didn't suggest that possibility to Dobey. Speaking of Mackie, I talked to him, too. He apologized about the camera fiasco." Hutch laughed. "I let him, because I wanted to get him on that subject anyway. He says Carlton's assistant had left the equipment too long in the van earlier in the day. Got hot as hell out Friday, remember? So, there are perfectly logical explanations for most of the strange recent events."

"And that's what you believe," Starsky finished, trying to keep disappointment out of his voice. To his surprise, Hutch shook his head.

"Doesn't explain everything. Jeremy's soap incident, for one. And what Mark saw. After last year, I'm inclined to give the supernatural the benefit of the doubt. I can accept that Mr. Smythe took advantage of a Navy jet's fly-by to nudge us in the right direction with our name. I can see him leading Mark to Philip. I guess it's like most things in life. We can accept the surface meaning, or believe something deeper and less tangible."

"I'm plunking my money down on the less tangible," Starsky said firmly.

Hutch put his arm around his shoulders. "Me, too." Without pulling away, he thrust a hand in his jeans pocket and pulled out a folded piece of stationery. "I took this out of the chest for a look."

"Mr. Smythe's letter?"

"Got it in one. The last few sentences really struck me." Hutch awkwardly unfolded the letter one-handed against his side and lifted it to read.

"I only ask that you keep the photograph of my son and remember another hero in the fight against hatred and corrupt power. My final request is that you take care of each other, Detective. You and your partner carry the Torch of Goodness between you and only your love can fan the flames."

"I think we've fallen down on the job, Starsk."

"What?"

"Taking care of each other. Oh, I know we take care of each other. But each other, meaning us. Us, as a single entity. We might be slipping in that department."
"Hutch, would you mind speaking my dialect? I'm not following you."

"I've been thinking. Your writer's block over 'Weapon' didn't start until after the meeting with Mackie last Monday. You know what I think? I think you've been subconsciously stalling completion of the album."

"What?!" Starsky was indignant. "Now, wait just a--"

"Subconsciously, Starsk! I didn't accuse you of doing it on purpose. I think deep inside, you're afraid if the album hits the shelves and takes off, we'll be thrust into the limelight beyond anything we've experienced yet, and you're not ready to handle it the way Mackie wants us to."

Starsky eyed him intently. "Hutch, you're building up to something huge. I always know it. Why don't you just skip the freshman psych course, and lay it on the line."

"There's nothing more important than us, Starsky. Not fame, fortune, music, career, anything else. We owe it to ourselves to put us first. It's what Mr. Smythe wanted, and the old man had sense. I know we can't start by making some grand announcement to the whole world, but we could lay down the law to Mackie about a few things and fashion a compromise we can live with."

Starsky couldn't get his mouth to open. For Hutch's sake, for the sake of their new career, which he knew had given Hutch--and him--a new lease on life, he felt obligated to be the practical one and argue against throwing caution to the wind. When he finally could force his lips apart, all he said was, "I want to kiss you right now."

Hutch beamed at him, all soft blue eyes and glistening teeth. "Then kiss me. Knock yourself out. Bring me to the ground with it."

Starsky glanced around. "Hutch, this isn't exactly--"

"Private? I don't care. Haven't you been listening? I doubt we're big enough news to warrant paparazzi yet, but if there's a guy perched behind Mr. Smythe's headstone with a camera, more power to him. I don't care. I just--umph." Hutch's rant fell victim to passionate lips as Starsky yanked him into a tongue-swallowing, strangling, behind-closed-doors kiss. Starsky released a startled cry into the kiss when Hutch's strong arms circled his ass and pulled their lower bodies taut. They were one short step from third base, but Starsky was powerless to slow them down. A bright, cheerful voice and clapping hands did it for him.

"Wild show, lads! I don't know whether I should yell 'Fire!' or get some popcorn and Raisinettes."

Hutch's chest heaved and his face was a sight to behold. Starsky knew his own had to be hilarious.

Philip grinned. "Don't be embarrassed. You caught Mark and me. Now we're even. Will it help if I tell you two men who kiss like that are going to be together a long, long time? I'm an expert at judging kisses. No, really. I once walked in on my flatmate and his new boyfriend kissing in our kitchen, and I knew right off, they wouldn't last a month. Sure enough, they split in two weeks. That kiss of yours had forever all over it."

Hutch was still clearly at a loss for words, but Starsky had regained composure. He walked over to the wheelchair and rifled through Philip's hair. "Okay, kiddo. What'd you deduce from your smooches yesterday?"

It was Philip's turn to blush. "Can't judge my own kisses. Shocking lack of objectivity. But they felt fantastic. I'm bound for my favorite duck pond now."
"Wheeling yourself around again, that's good to see," Hutch said. "You sure you're strong enough to be at the duck pond alone, with no one to push you back if you get tired?"

Philip's smile was decidedly naughty. "Who said I would be alone?"

Starsky whistled. "Talked Mark into a tête-à-tête?"

"Well, he just happened to bring a picnic lunch to the pond, and I'm just happening to pass by and stop for a chat. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it." Philip laughed. "A closet has the appeal of novelty, I'll admit. Don't worry; we won't be doing much to shock the ducks."

Starsky shared a fond glance with Hutch. "Don't worry about shocking the ducks. They've seen action in the past."

Philip slapped his wheelchair arms. "Now I know why I love that pond. Must be all the romantic energy lingering in the air. Well, they won't see much action today. Mark's got an impressive set of inhibitions, I think, and it'll probably be a feat to turn him into an unleashed wild man in a locked bedroom. I'm just happy for the chance to spend some time with him. A couple of kisses, a hug or two, maybe a feel here and there, and I'll be content."

"You're good and caught, kid."

Looking down at his chest, Philip nodded. His t-shirt of the day was a sedate white, but its bold red fancy-script pleaded: Give Me Man Love. "Yes. I know it. Life wouldn't be life without risk, so I'm putting all my eggs in his basket. We'll see what happens. You guys feel free to pick up where you left off." He pointed at Hutch's stationery. "No littering." With a chuckle, he guided his chair down the path toward the pond.

Starsky stooped and grabbed the dropped stationery, handing it to Hutch. "Forever. Well, now we're obligated. Don't wanna prove Philip wrong."

Hutch deftly reached around and goosed him. "We were forever long before Philip put his seal of approval on it. So, what do you say to my suggestion? About laying down the law to Mackie."

"Like the young sage said, life wouldn't be life without risk. It's worth a try."

The risk mattered little in the face of Hutch's visible joy. Starsky was pulled into warm arms and held. "Thank you. I think we should talk to Bahama Bobby about our intentions. He's still to some extent our manager, and he's invested his time and reputation in us. He deserves to know what we're planning. I'll let you finish saying your piece to Mr. Smythe, and wait by the car. I'm parked in the drive."

Starsky drew back from the warmth of Hutch's chest. "Finish saying my piece?"

Hutch frowned at him, but the down-turned lips held more teasing than affront. "Who do you think I am, some guy who doesn't know you? You came here to set him free." He refolded the stationery and slipped it back in his pocket. "Don't let me stop you." After a lingering kiss on Starsky's cheek, he turned and began the trek toward the house.

Starsky put a hand to his cheek, amazed at what such a simple gesture could still do to him. "When the man's right, he's right," he told the headstone. "Go back to your wife and son, Mr. Smythe. You've earned the rest. What you did for me, you gave Hutch 'n' me a chance at life together. We're gonna have some ups and downs, and there'll be crap the world throws at us, but we'll handle it together. We'll put us first, just like you wanted. And as for Philip, well, I'm on the job, Mr. Smythe, and Hutch, too. We'll watch out for him, and if Mark breaks his heart, he'll need a physical
"therapist." Starsky grinned. "But I honestly don't think he will. I think he and Philip've found here what Hutch and I found here last year. Love that lasts. Hear me? We'll all be okay. Thanks for everything, but you leave this crazy world to us."

It somehow felt appropriate to give the headstone and urn a formal military salute. Sensing a weight lifted from his shoulders, Starsky turned, eager to rejoin Hutch. Before he left the rose garden, he gave the urn one last look over his shoulder. Astonishment stiffened his spine.

The rose bouquet he'd placed at the urn's base was gone.

~*~*~

Monday, May 19, 1980

Hutch yawned for the tenth time, and Starsky nudged him. "Hutch, this is gonna be hard enough without that. How professional do you think that looks? You have to look stern, in control, confident."

Yawning again, Hutch glared at him. "Listen, turkey, I'm going to find that stupid 'how to control people' book and chop it up for kindling. Furthermore, you kept me up all last night. When I said you might have a new song trying to get out, I didn't mean it had to get out in one night! I've never stayed up all night working on music."

"It was just your hobby back then. Anyway, it's not my fault you were right. After we talked at Mr. Smythe's garden, I felt something open up inside, and--"

"I know, I know." Hutch yawned again, his eyelids fluttering closed momentarily, and Starsky took his arm to lead him around the corridor before he could walk into the wall.

Reaching the final hallway before the recording suite, Starsky stopped Hutch with a tug on the arm he supported. "Hutch. I need to ask. Are you sure about this? You heard Bahama Bobby yesterday. You know what we're risking."

Bahama Bobby had not minced words.

"You fellows been smoking something recreational? Mackie Brewster is the goods, mahn. He's got the musicality to produce your work, but he's high up in the record company so he wields executive power and can keep the money-vultures off your back when it comes to artistic license. He's done his time in management, too, and when he likes you, he'll take you under his wing and act more like a manager than I do. From the looks of Friday night, he likes you guys just fine! You really want to roll the dice on losing all that? You won't find anyone else to hold your hands the way he will. But he can bite off your balls if you cross him. And he'll see this as crossing him, I guarantee it."

In the end, Bobby had shown his true colors of friendship, though. Seeing their determination, he had smiled and promised to do all he could to pick up the pieces if they ended up music orphans. Starsky and Hutch had left the music store feeling the Bahamian to be Huggy's twin in more than just clothing choice.

Hutch was now giving him an affectionate I-know-best smile that Starsky at times found condescending. At the moment, he found it comforting. "Yes, I'm sure. Starsk, if we hit it big, the fame and exposure will change us in some ways. It's inevitable. But the only way to pull through it together and keep us first is to try and stay ourselves, and true to what we feel and believe, as much as we can."
"You're not doing this for me? I can't let you risk your entire music career on me."

"So speaks the man who willingly turned his body head-on to automatic bullets for me. This doesn't come close to balancing the scales, Starsky, but it's all I've got. And it's not just for you. How happy do you think I'll be if you're miserable? Besides, I'm not happy with the current setup, either. Now, relax. We have to lay down preliminary tape on 'Unsung,' and Mackie'll be preoccupied with that at first. It'll be a while before we drop the bomb on him."

Starsky fidgeted with his dress shirt's collar, and Hutch eyed his attire critically. Starsky adjusted his sport coat. "What?"

"I told you it wasn't a good idea to dress like you were expected in court."

Starsky had to admit he envied Hutch's comfortable jeans and butter-soft pullover, but he would never voice the thought aloud and give his partner reason to gloat. "Yeah, well, this carries more weight than worn jeans and a half-open shirt."

Hutch grinned. "Not on you. The worn jeans and half-open shirt give you so much charisma that hardened record execs step back in admiration. But you look fine. Come on. Let's put our new song down on tape."

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Mackie ushered them into his office with a glistening smile that temporarily disarmed both men. He walked straight to his wet bar. "I know it might seem early in the day, but we have cause to celebrate." His new recording artists relaxed in the spacious leather chairs and watched him open a chilled magnum of champagne. An effortlessly adept host, Mackie poured the beverage in crystal champagne glasses and brought them over to his guests, returning for his own.

"What are we celebrating?" Starsky was proud of his level voice.

"You gentlemen have completed your first album."

Hutch choked on his first sip of champagne. "That means you liked 'Unsung'?"

"Liked it?" Mackie sipped his beverage, actually grinning like a schoolboy. "Loved it! Needs some spit and polish, but that's what a producer's for, right? Partially, anyway. I had thought 'Changeling' might be the second single release, but now, I think we'll push for 'Unsung' instead. Tell me, does it derive from true life? The first verse sounds like it's about an old man who gave his life for someone he barely knew, the second is pretty straightforward...about a pilot who died in the Battle of Britain, am I right? But the third... Help me out on the third."

"Well, the song is all about unsung heroes," Starsky said. "You've nailed the first two verses. The third is about the death of a friend of ours. It was tragic, and almost turned more tragic because of how it impacted his young son. But our friend--Jackson, we called him--had been such a good father that his son was able to find the courage to do the right thing. That makes him a hero in my book, but he was a hero for more reasons than one."

"Good stuff," Mackie nodded approval. "Gritty real-life stuff makes the songs that stand the test of time."

The office door opened, and a perfectly coiffed, elegant woman peeked her head in the room. In her arms, a fluffy Persian cat rested as if on a velvet throne. "Mackie, darling, I needed to ask--"

Mackie shot straight out of his desk chair and waved the champagne glass, splashing half the
contents over the side. "Moira, get that damned flea-ridden beast out of my office! Hutch is allergic, for God's sake!"

Moira gave both Mackie's guests a venomous smile, but turned her full wrath on the producer. "How dare you! Iphigenia doesn't have fleas; I'll have you know. I'll tell Henry you were--"

"You can complain to God if you want, he stands in line with the rest. Just get that cat out of here, and change clothes before you come back!"

Hutch was flushing. "Uh, Mackie...."

Starsky was laughing.

Mackie was on the verge of apoplexy.

Moira was quivering with rage. She backed out of the room and slammed the door so hard the leather chairs quaked. Mackie dropped down in his chair and mopped his forehead with an expensive silk handkerchief. "Whew. Hutch, you okay?"

"I'm fine." Hutch's sideways glare dared Starsky to keep laughing.

"She's the VP's wife, and a pain in every ass she encounters. I told Henry he should have married Gwen. Fine woman, Gwen. Smart, business-savvy, beautiful. Hell, Gwen tempted me, even, and she doesn't have the right equipment. But no, Henry had to have Moira, for who knows what reason. All she cares about is that damn cat. Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Have you got a name yet?"

Starsky had swallowed his laughter. "We thought about Phoenix 79."

Mackie was outrageously mopping the spilled champagne with his hundred-dollar handkerchief. "Phoenix 79. I like it. I do. I damn well like it. Has a hint of The Eagles, a little bit of America, like your music. Not that it's derivative. I wouldn't be producing you if you were derivative. It's a name that'll make people think."

"Well, it's because--" Hutch began.

"No, don't tell me. I want to be able to deny all knowledge myself if asked. Keep the mystery intact. Speaking of your music, I've been meaning to ask you. How did you come up with your style? It's got classic rock overtones, a little bit of fifties Americana on the soft underside, some jazz influence and folk ballad western thrown in, even a classical touch here and there."

"Starsky's tastes run the gamut of Stevie Wonder, Fats Domino, Jim Croce, Zeppelin, and Mozart. And me, well I can be at home listening to Buddy Holly or classical, blues, folk, country-western, jazz. We just threw it all into the pot and ended up with--"

"Phoenix 79. Yeah, I can see that. It's eclectic. Multifaceted, like fine wine. So eclectic that I'm afraid Jeff Lynne from ELO is going to be calling you up and trying to annex you for his band. You get any calls, you send them to me. You're my diamonds in the rough, no one else's."

Starsky eyed Hutch, who looked petrified in his chair. He decided to face the firing squad first. "You might not feel that way when we get to the next item on the agenda."

Mackie frowned. "Well? What is it? Spit it out. More money, a mansion in the hills?"

Starsky straightened in the chair, trying to look impenetrable. "We're not gonna play the image
control game."

"Excuse me?"

Hutch found his voice, and it commanded respect. "You heard him. We're not in this to become the
next big thing in rock or pop music. We want to make music together, and we want it to be heard,
but fame and fortune have never meant that much to us."

Mackie was back to wiping his forehead, with the champagne-stained handkerchief of all things.
"What are you saying exactly?"

Starsky reached over and took Hutch's hand where it rested on the chair's arm. "We won't go
around holding hands in public or anything demonstrative. But we also refuse to purposely give the
press fuel for articles about wild affairs with lingerie models, either. And as for 'dates' to any public
events, if we wanna invite our mothers, half of our former colleagues on the force, or two-thirds of
West Hollywood, that's our business."

Hutch gave Starsky a smile that could have melted the leather chair. "If people figure out where
we're coming from, fine. If they don't like it, tough." Now sounding his confident self, Hutch
turned a tough look on Mackie. "Since this affects your investment, we need to know. Do you still
want to take a chance on us, or do we walk and tell our attorney to start preparing for a breach of
contract suit?"

Mackie pushed back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "First of all, I wouldn't slap
you with a breach of contract suit. After what you guys have been through? I'm a businessman, not
Satan incarnate. I'd find a sly way of letting you off the hook so I wouldn't be setting a dangerous
precedent. But that won't be necessary."

Starsky and Hutch stared at each other, then at Mackie. "What?"

"You heard me. I'm proud. No, honest to God, I'm proud. Principles are in short supply in this
industry. Every now and then a group comes along with enough talent, enough sterling worth, to
make it worth all the crap I have to put up with when they won't play ball. You are that group. I'm
also proud because, let's face it, gay couples don't get credit for establishing relationships based on
anything more than sex. I should know, because I epitomize the promiscuous, emotionally
bankrupt stereotype. That's my shtick, and I'm not apologizing for it, but the gay community knows
just as much about love and loyalty as the het world, and I'm glad that's where you're coming
from."

Starsky wondered if Hutch was going into shock. His face had solidified in disbelief as if the
stunning realization that he still had a music career ahead of him was simply too much for his
system to handle. Eventually, Hutch's beautiful lips moved, "I...I don't understand."

Mackie shrugged. "Thought I'd toss you out on your tails? Let me tell you something. I'm not
altruistic. This setup is better for my investment. You guys have a potent product in each other and
your music. You are going to hit the big-time. I've seen enough acts to know which ones make it.
And when that happens, here's what it'll mean. Thirty percent of all women will fantasize about
you, Hutch. Thirty percent will fantasize about Starsky. Forty percent will fantasize about both of
you, probably at the same time. Some sixty percent of gay men will have posters of you. At least
fifty percent of straight men will wish they were you. What it adds up to is a large number of
people wanting a piece of you, one way or another. That's a strain on any relationship, business or
personal. If you two have the balls to come in here and face me down for the sake of what you
have together, you're gonna make it through all that intact, which means more music will get made,
and I make more money. Understand where I'm coming from now?"
Starsky grinned. "Sure there's not some altruism thrown in for good measure?"

Mackie smiled. "Okay, maybe a little. Hell, I like you guys. Can't help it. But let me tell you something else." The smile faded. "If you ever decide to do a '72 David-Bowie-style, world-shocking, come-out announcement, you'd better damn well give me two weeks' notice, or I'll crucify you both upside down, high noon, at Century Plaza. You understand?"

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Epilogue

Tuesday, May 20, 1980

The bedside alarm clock radio blared, and Starsky reluctantly stirred in Hutch's arms. He flung an arm out to press snooze on the irritating car commercial, but warm lips descending his neck distracted him, and he put his arm to better use, stretching it along Hutch's back.

"Remind me why we set the alarm," Starsky murmured.

"We have to meet with the graphic artist about album design," Hutch answered, yawning.

"Oh, yeah. Y'know, I'm in my most artistic frame of mind after we've had sex."

Hutch pressed closer, advertising his eager morning erection. "Oh, really? Is that why your idea of a mythological bird rising over the San Diego skyline occurred to you after I sucked you dry last night?"

"If you remember, it occurred to me after you rode me into the mattress," Starsky corrected. "So you liked it?"

"You know how much I love your ass, riding it or otherwise," Hutch said, expertly aligning his cock with Starsky's. He received a smack on the rump. "Oh, you meant the idea for the album cover? Yeah, I liked that, too."

The radio was forgotten as the two men rolled in the bed, trying to achieve unity through electric friction. The commercials gave way to a man's suave radio voice.

"Good morning, San Diegans. You're listening to the Rockin' Commute, with Rockin' Roger Robin, on the station that brings you the most up-to-date news and the hottest new music. Speaking of hot new music, here's a song you're going to hear often. It's the debut effort of two former police detectives--

Starsky and Hutch paused mid-roll.

--They're calling themselves Phoenix 79, and the duo of Ken Hutchinson and David Starsky are as adept at making music as they were chasing felons. A power ballad with pep and lots of soul, here's Phoenix 79 with 'Into the Rising,' and this is Rockin' Roger Robin telling all you music fans to crank this beauty!"

They separated, lying on their backs and listening in amazement to the opening strains of their song. They had heard the demo version on local radio, but the radio edit playing now on San
Diego's largest rock station after a formal introduction and endorsement from a well-known deejay brought home the reality as nothing else could.

"Mackie worked fast getting our new name out," Hutch whispered.

Starsky couldn't speak. Hutch's beautiful voice, singing the words Starsky had written, filled the room and brought the prick of tears to Starsky's eyes.

"Your lyrics just blow me away...and you sound so good," Hutch said, showing that he was concentrating on the guitar rift and background vocals.

Starsky felt no one would pay attention to a mere mortal in the background when an angel was singing the lead. He smiled and rolled over to cover Hutch's face in kisses. "I'm crazy in love with you..." He kissed his nose. "...and your beautiful voice..." He kissed his chin "...and our music..." He kissed both blond eyebrows. "...and our thatched-roof cottage...."

"With the leaky kitchen faucet," Hutch said, smiling, too.

"With the leaky kitchen faucet," Starsky agreed. He propped on elbow and played with Hutch's hair fanned across the pillow. "You know, this has been another incredible week. So many good things happened. Okay, so the Mt. St. Helens eruption on Sunday wasn't good, but we didn't have anything to do with that."

Hutch turned and jabbed a finger at him. "Oh, no. I see where you're going with this. Don't look at me. I've already written my special week. You want this one on paper, you're writing it yourself."

"Aw, Hutch. I couldn't do it like you did. I'm not the journal type."

"No. I'm serious, Starsk. My grandmother was firm on her one-week-per-person rule. You want me to mess with the cosmic scheme of things? You're on your own with this one." His stern face relaxed into open affection. "You wouldn't have to do it like a journal. You could always write it like a story, using third person, only from your point of view."

Starsky scratched his chin. "Yeah...maybe."

"Love you, too, by the way." Hutch kissed him with tender passion and rolled out of bed. "We have to shake a leg, or we'll spend the first half of our meeting listening to the Rockin' Commute stuck in traffic."

Starsky watched him plod naked to the bathroom. He was still pondering the idea of penning his own special week when an irritated voice sounded from the bathroom.

"STARSKY! How many times do I have to tell you to squeeze the toothpaste from the bottom of the tube! Thanks to you, I have a streak of toothpaste a mile long in the sink and none on my toothbrush."

Starsky grinned. Hutch would probably bicker over his driving in traffic, too. All was right with the world, and in Mr. Smythe's heaven, and Starsky couldn't wait to get started on the second album.