Pre-emption

by DPPatricks

Summary

It’s 1981, almost two years after Gunther’s assassination attempt. Starsky and Hutch are beaten, kidnapped, and told they must make a life or death decision.

Notes

This was the first heavily slash story I ever tried to write and I’ve been working on it for two years. My inspiration came from Paula Wilshe, Flamingo Slim, Charlotte Frost, Keri Mera, Dawnwind, HardboiledBaby, Wightfaerie, and many, many other talented writers. I can’t thank Dawnwind enough for her patience, expertise, advice, and suggestions as several-times editor. If this story is any good at all, I owe it to her. If it’s not, the fault is mine.

Denise was kind enough to offer additional suggestions, thus this complete re-write (1/1/17), which now includes the Epilog, mistakenly left off the original posting. Apologies. As of 9/15/17, the entire story has been re-re-written and edited for, hopefully, easier reading.

Thanks to everyone who has read it in it’s earlier versions and, should you choose to give it another try, I hope it will deliver a better experience.

Author’s Notes follow the Epilog, at the end of Chapter 14.
Detective Ken Hutchinson watched his partner, David Starsky, ease his way through the wall-to-wall crowd at The Pits, beneath the WELCOME BACK, STARSKY! banner. He was effortlessly dodging waitresses, dancers, pool players, and others with the grace of Barishnikov on a good night. The sheer joy Hutch experienced at that moment put the kind of smile on his face he hadn’t felt like showing in a very long time.

It had been almost two years since Gunther’s assassination attempt. In the beginning, the unadulterated fear on Hutch’s part had been very nearly crippling. For Starsky, Hutch thought there probably weren’t any words for the agony. His memory replayed the myriad scenes.

“Don’t give up, Starsk. Please?” he whispered, sitting by his partner’s bed. He held the unresponsive hand for what seemed like days, watching for the slightest movement under the shadowed eyelids.

“I hear ya, Blintz. I’m tryin’.”

Hutch heard the words in his head as clearly as if Starsky had spoken them aloud. “I know you are, babe. I know.” He put his head down on their clasped hands and wept.

During the weeks that followed, the feelings turned to numb relief in Hutch’s heart and dogged determination in Starsky’s body. All the medical crises, additional surgeries and infections were survived and the doctors finally decided he would live.

“Tol’ you, Blondie,” Starsky slurred through the medications. “Can’ get rid o’ me that easy.”

Those weeks of draining, debilitating emotions were followed by months of care and support by Hutch and slow, painful recuperation by Starsky.

During that time, Hutch went after Gunther with a vengeance. Helped by everyone in the department, paper trails were followed, facts sifted, pieces of the intricate puzzle put together so tightly no high-paid lawyers would be able to disassemble it. The bastard was in jail and would be staying there, his accounts frozen, bail denied. The trial might not take place for years, what with all the motions his new also-in-prison lawyer was filing, but at least Gunther’s criminal organization no longer existed.

Hutch smuggled a chocolate cupcake into Starsky’s hospital room as soon as he got back from arresting Gunther and they celebrated quietly.

“Sorry to leave you with all the work, partner, while I just laid here and did nothin’.”

“Sure you are, Starsky.” Hutch slipped another piece of the confection into his partner’s mouth. “You’re such a slacker. Everybody knows that’s why you got shot, to get out of the paperwork.”

Starsky turned his sulk to a crooked smile and lifted a still-weak hand to corral a few chocolate sprinkles at the corner of his mouth.

Even though the doctors held out little hope that Starsky would ever be fully recovered, as soon as he was out of the hospital he threw himself into physical therapy with a determination that had them all shaking their heads. Hutch smiled inwardly, knowing the pundits simply didn’t understand his partner.
The PT was rigorous and grueling and Hutch went through each of the exercises right beside Starsky. “Only two more, buddy. Come on, you can do it.”

“You’re finished already?”

“I didn’t get shot, remember?”

“You’re a slave driver, pal. You know that?”

“Old Hutchinson family tradition, Starsky.” Hutch held his partner’s ankles down to the mat to make the next two crunches a little bit easier. “Surprised you didn’t know that.”

“I suspected.”

Initially, Starsky had to be dragged to yoga classes but eventually he admitted he enjoyed them. They strengthened his entire body and with the calming techniques he learned stress became easier to handle. “If you ever tell a soul about this, Hutchinson, I swear I’ll --”

“Not… a… word.”

After the yoga classes achieved a nearly-happily-anticipated status, one of his doctors suggested swimming. So they went to the public pool near Starsky’s apartment and logged miles of laps. It was always after dark when fewer people were around to stare at his scars.

“I think they’re sort of beautiful,” Hutch said while carefully rubbing cream into the fading lines. “You’re alive.”

Until the crisscrosses began to lighten somewhat though, and his chest hair grew back, Starsky was very self-conscious.

When his partner was well enough and fit enough, Hutch started talking about getting out of town for a few days, maybe doing some hiking, fishing, see new country. At first Starsky wasn’t too keen but, after they got brochures from a travel agent and started looking through them, he was willing to think about it.

“This looks nice.” Starsky held out a photograph of a lake at sunset with tall pines and low hills in the background. “Lots of water. Not quite as many trees and mountains.”

Hutch looked over his shoulder. “That’s a little north of Duluth, Starsk. I’d love to take you there.”

“Yeah?” Starsky’s genuine interest was nearly palpable.

“Yeah! It’s part of the area that gives Minnesota its nickname, Land of Ten Thousand Lakes. The number’s no exaggeration.”

“Says here, though…” Starsky read from the brochure, “we’d need to take insect repellant.”

“That’s no exaggeration either.”

“Mosquitoes?” Starsky’s tone turned decidedly plaintive. “You know I don’t like mosquitoes.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get a permit. You can shoot them on sight. There’s no season, and no bag limit.”

Starsky stared at him, open-mouthed, the concept of mosquitoes big enough to shoot visibly running around in his mind. Seconds later he noticed the glint in Hutch’s eyes and started laughing.
As soon as he was back on solid food he was eating healthy, at everyone’s insistence, and even began to enjoy some of the things he was allowed. He hardly ever admitted it though. He also took any opportunity to complain when Hutch wouldn’t allow him a much-craved spicy beef burrito or double pepperoni and hot sausage pizza. With onions!

“Veggie lasagna tonight, Starsky.” Hutch took the wonderful-smelling dish from the oven. “You know you love it. It’s Italian! It’s got lots of cheese. And it’s good for you!”

Starsky groused but ate every morsel.

Through it all, even though Starsky professed enthusiasm and belief that he’d ‘be back,’ Hutch saw the uncertainty in his partner’s eyes. He felt the lingering pain as if it were his own, and understood the mental conflict behind the cheery façade. Hutch knew Starsky was afraid that, ultimately, he would fail.

“If it turns out that I can’t make it back, Hutch, you have to --.”

“Don’t say that, Starsky! You’ll make it, if you want to badly enough. Now come on, two more.”

“Slave driver.”

Starsky didn’t fail though. He proved all the Doubting Thomases wrong. Those who had stated unequivocally that a man nearing forty, so grievously wounded, couldn’t regain his physical strength, agility and stamina, much less his nerve, resolve, and guts, were forced to change their minds.

Starsky told anyone who’d listen that he’d never have made it without Hutch being there every step of the way.

Hutch said they were partners; that’s what partners did.

Those who listened nodded sagely, probably thinking, ‘Right. Why didn’t I have a partner like that?’

Hutch shook himself out of his reverie. Starsky was back. All the ache, sleeplessness, fear, and depression that Hutch had experienced during the past twenty two months were gone. The time had been well spent. Starsky was back and Hutch realized he was happier than he’d ever been in his life.

“Was that a pirouette I saw your spry partner execute a minute ago?” Huggy Bear whispered the snide question passing close by Hutch’s right side. He realized the bartender must have been reading his mind. The slender black man slid into the booth opposite him while Hutch continued to watch for Starsky’s return from the men’s room.

“Sure looked like a pirouette, t’ me.” A sly smile curved Huggy’s lips.

“Better not let him hear you say that, Hug.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. But, listen…” Huggy put his elbows on the table and pushed his head forward intently. “Is it true?”

Hutch didn’t try to disguise the pride and happiness he was feeling. He looked across the table at the inquisitive bartender and cocked an eyebrow. “About what, specifically, are you requesting information, Mr. Bear?”

“Is it true that Starsky was on foot, Mathison was in a car, and Starsky still caught him?”

“You should have seen him, Hug. It was like old times.” Hutch’s smile widened at the memory.
“Traffic may have had something to do with it but Starsky sprinted between cars, ran right over the
tops of a few others, got to Mathison before he’d gone two blocks, had his door open, the guy out on
the ground and cuffed…” Hutch took a breath, “before I got the Torino away from the curb.”

Huggy sat up straight again. “Our boy’s back, huh?”

“You bet!” Hutch allowed himself a moment of celebration before sobering. “We wouldn’t have
gotten Mathison without you and Freddy though. As long as your cousin stays clean from here
on…” He picked up his beer, making sure Huggy understood the severity of what he was saying.
“No more fencing stolen goods, ever, he’s clear. All charges dropped.”

Huggy nodded several times. “Fred’ll be happy to hear that. And you got the guy that did Squeeky.”

“With the likely murder weapon in the glove box, too.” Hutch took a swallow of beer. “The knife
had blood on it which will probably turn out to be Squeeky’s. That piece of physical evidence, along
with Fred’s testimony, might not get Mathison the needle but it’ll put him away for a long while.”

Huggy was quiet for a few breaths. “‘A long while’ is good.” His face cleared and he looked around
the room full of people. “Folks were starting to wonder though. You two’ve been on the streets again
for months but you both kept refusing to let me throw him a welcome back party.”

“Don’t take it personally, Hug.” Hutch remembered their friend’s disappointment every time his
partner had put off the event. “I think Starsky didn’t want to jinx anything. He wanted to wait until
he knew he’d be able to handle the grind. The all-night stake-outs, having to chase down a perp, or
face someone with a gun or a knife who wanted to kill him.” He took a breath. “You know what I’m
talking about.”

Understanding and acceptance were in Huggy’s eyes. “I guess no party was better than one we
threw too early.” He glanced around again. “But look at all these people, Hutch. The Pits has never
been this crowded. You guys were missed! We’re all glad you’re back and the streets are safe
again.”

Hutch physically shuddered. “You now better than to say something like that, Huggy. The streets are
never safe. But we’re back out there and he’s doing great. I know today helped his confidence a lot.”

Hutch glanced impatiently toward the men’s room hallway again.

“Relax, Hutch! With this crowd there’s bound to be a line for my little two-holer.”

Hutch slowly became aware of Huggy’s intense scrutiny. “What?”

“How’re you doing m’ brother?” Huggy asked. “I had the feelin’ that if Starsky wasn’t able to make
it back, or decided he didn’t want to come back, you’d’ve been just as happy. Maybe even happier.
Seemed like you were getting pretty burned out there before Gunther.”

Hutch smothered an instinctive sarcastic response. This was Huggy, the man who’d been with them
through every moment of every ordeal for years. “I’m fine, Huggy. But thanks for asking. And
you’re right, I would have been happy to have him say ‘let’s do something else.’ But he didn’t. He
worked his ass off to get to where he is and there’s no way in hell I’m not going to be with him. As
long as he wants to keep doing this nonsense I’ll have his back.”

Huggy smiled and nodded.

Catching sight of Starsky moving smoothly through the elbow-to-elbow crowd toward their booth,
Hutch put his beer down and watched his best friend. ‘God, I must really be in love,’ he thought,
‘when the mere sight of him makes my heart pound.’
Out of the corner of his eye Hutch saw Huggy follow his gaze with an approving grin. He seemed to be as proud of Starsky as Hutch was. Well, almost as proud. Hutch looked back at the Bear as Huggy mouthed, ‘another pirouette,’ and almost laughed out loud.

Starsky slipped between two dancers at the edge of the crowd, receiving a kiss on the cheek and a slap on the back, and slid into the booth next to Hutch. “What are you two grinning about?”

Hutch picked up his beer, hiding a conspiratorial look at Huggy. “We were thinking we should all catch a movie next week. Maybe ‘Turning Point’ over at the Reprise?”

“That’s the one with Shirley MacLaine, right?” His partner showed a definite interest instead of the irritation Hutch expected. “She’s terrific!”

Hutch and Huggy shared another smile before Huggy hunched forward. “Actually, guys, I need to talk to you. There’s something going on but none of my contacts knows exactly what.”

Because of the unmistakable tension in their friend’s voice Hutch set his beer down again.

“You remember after Gunther’s empire crashed,” Huggy continued, “leaving all those holes in the criminal hierarchy, we thought –”

“‘Hierarchy’?” Hutch interrupted.

Starsky swallowed quickly and cocked an eyebrow at the Bear. “You been reading… Reader’s Digest again, Hug?” The anticipatory tone in his voice was one Hutch didn’t think he’d ever heard before.

Huggy raised his head on his long neck. “My vocabulary is expanding exponentially, Starsky.” The tone of voice was disdainful.

Starsky stared at the skinny black guy across the table with apparent expectation. “‘Exponentially’?”

“Can we discuss Huggy’s impressive command of the language some other time, please?” Hutch looked seriously at the barkeep. “What about the hierarchy, Hug?”

Huggy folded his offended expression and put it away. “Okay, I’m mollified, for the moment.”

Starsky’s reaction seemed to be puzzlement, which had Hutch confused.

Huggy didn’t give Hutch time to wonder about it though, he lowered his voice and went on. “Remember everybody thought crime lords from all over the country would swoop in and pick up the pieces of Gunther’s operations?”

Hutch nodded for both of them since Starsky’s mind was elsewhere at the moment.

“I know you know about all the fly-by-nighters that slithered in trying to fill their own little corners of the void,” Huggy told them. “Hell! You two are responsible for stopping most of them in their tracks. But nobody important dropped by. At least not somebody ready and willing to take over the whole shebang. Just didn’t happen, right?”

“Not yet, anyway.” Hutch did not want to tempt the fates too strongly. “What have you heard?”

“Well the word is something’s coming. Make that someone.” Huggy looked around as if searching for eavesdroppers. “No hard information, only whispers. It’s all very hush-hush, under everybody’s radar and super quiet.” His voice dropped even lower. “But the feeling is it’s somebody big, maybe
from back east. Or up north. Possibly the mid-west. Whoever he is and wherever he’s from, he’s going to make Gunther look like a pussy cat.”

Hutch turned to Starsky and could tell from the intensity in those dark blue eyes that his partner was focused again. Huggy wouldn’t be saying all this if he didn’t think it was important. Hutch looked back at Huggy. “You got a name for us?”

“Nope. Leastways not one I believe. ‘d’Ambrosia.’ But that’s not a real name, is it? Ambrosia’s a word, I know that. It means --”

“We know what it means,” Hutch said.

Starsky’s “delectable” was lost because Huggy hurried on. “Food of the gods and immortals.”

“These days,” Hutch added, smirking a little, “since gods and immortals are in short supply, it usually means a concoction, made with fruit, that’s sweet, and served as a salad or dessert.”

“It can also refer to a liqueur.” Huggy had the final word on the subject.

“‘Li cure’?” Starsky mimicked Huggy’s pronunciation.

Hutch couldn’t help but wonder what was going on. Why was Starsky acting so strangely? Whatever it was it could wait because he wanted to hear more about this criminal someone that was coming. Putting a hand on Starsky’s arm to forestall another quip he encouraged the Bear, “Can we get back to the ‘something wicked this way comes’ please?”


Hutch simply looked at the bar owner, waiting for more information.

Huggy folded his hands on the table. “Nothing else I can tell you right now. I’ll keep my ears open and you’ll know as soon as I do. But there is one other kernel of information I need to impart.” He looked around the room carefully before he turned back. “Remember Mike Tate?”

“Yeah. Rapist.” Hutch found the name in his mental Rolodex and got the words out before his partner. “Six or seven years ago.”

“Three victims,” Starsky added. “Pretty badly beaten up in addition to the rape. We caught him en flagrante delicto…” He raised his eyebrows toward Huggy. When their friend only nodded he continued, his tone deflated, “with a fourth. He got seven years for each, consecutive.”

“Well, he’s out,” Huggy said.

“He’s out?” Starsky fairly shouted the question.

The raised voice and enraged tone caused nearby partyers to turn and stare.

Starsky looked around, his face reddening, hunched his shoulders and muttered, “Sorry.” He looked back at Huggy and shrugged.

“Think nothing of it, Starsky.” Huggy passed off the interruption good-naturedly. “And to answer your query, I’m told Tate got out six months ago. Something about good behavior and overcrowding.”

“Why didn’t we get the memo?” Starsky whined.
"We probably did, Starsk." Hutch put a hand lightly on his partner’s arm. “I’d guess it’s in one of those boxes under our desks.”

“Oh, yeah.” Starsky’s response was subdued. “Wonder what else we’ve missed?”

“That’s not all.” Huggy’s voice was still hushed.

Hutch waited for the next disclosure, feeling pressure from Starsky’s arm.

“He’s making inquiries about you both. Keeping a real low profile, not asking too many questions but talking to a lot of people about how you’re doing, Starkey, how you’re getting on now that you’re back on the street, wondering if you’ll be sticking it out or quitting any time soon. Stuff like that.”

Hutch took a swallow of beer; he did not like the sound of this. Tate, out of prison, was one thing but Tate, actively interested in them, was something else again. He waited, the pressure against his arm telling him Starsky was as focused as he was.

“He’s been asking about you, too, Hutch,” Huggy said. “How come you didn’t take a new partner? Instead, you spent all that time helping your buddy get on his feet and back in shape.” Hutch could feel the concern behind the words when Huggy continued. “He’s being real casual, just shooting the shit, not making anybody suspicious. But I’m curious about why he’s so curious.”

“We put him away, Hug,” Starsky stated. “He wants revenge.”

“Maybe not, Starsk.” To Hutch that sounded too easy. “If all he wanted was payback why hasn’t he made a move against us?”

“Hutch is right, Starkey. Especially these last few months since you’ve been on your regular beat. You’ve been out there doing your thing where he could have taken a crack at you anytime. It’s not like you’ve been incognito.”

Starsky raised his eyebrows again.

“Hey!” Huggy’s irritation surfaced loudly. “Quit that!”

The people nearby turned and stared again.

Hutch was startled at Huggy’s uncharacteristic response and it was obvious that Starsky was, too.

Huggy got up, plainly miffed, and went to the nearby customers. “It’s just Starkey. You know how he gets when he’s had a few beers.”

“Give him a break, buddy.” Hutch gently kicked his partner’s foot under the table. “Mellow out on the sarcasm okay?”

“It was a game we used to play, Hutch.” Starkey hunched over his beer. “I can’t believe he’s forgotten.”

Hutch hated to see his partner’s ebullient mood of a few minutes before lost. He nudged the adjacent elbow. “What kind of game, Stark?”

“Aunt Rosie subscribed to Reader’s Digest.” Starkey stared into his glass as if it could show him the past. “Every month I’d copy down all the words from the two columns that were supposed to increase your vocabulary.”
“I remember those. Mother subscribed, too.”

“She did?” Starsky’s surprise was obvious.

“Who’d’a thought, right? She kept them in her sitting room where no one ever saw them but, yeah.” Hutch nudged his partner again. “Sorry to interrupt, you were saying?”

“Each month,” Starsky picked up his thread, “I’d make a list of the new words and their definitions. Then Huggy and I would memorize them.” He glanced shyly at Hutch. “We made a game out of putting them into long sentences. The longer the better. Sometimes it was when we were bored and couldn’t think of anything else to do. Other times, it was around people who never expected to hear intelligent words out of junior delinquents. We laughed a lot afterward at the looks on their faces.” Starsky chuckled. “We called ourselves The Inextricables, and chalked ‘NX’ everywhere. Drove the gangs crazy!”

“That’s wonderful, Starsk!” Hutch realized this was a whole new facet of his best friend, and he was intrigued.

“It’s amazing, how a bunch of long, unknown words, said to a hood whose gang is about to pulverize you, can change the situation.”

Hutch stared at Starsky, picturing the scenario.

Starsky’s face flushed a little as if in embarrassment. “I mean it, Hutch. Huggy and I talked our way out of some pretty tight places with words we learned from the Digest.”

“A few you might have talked yourselves into in the first place?”


Hutch nodded, interested to learn how a hardened vice cop a few years their senior was going to figure in Starsky’s tale of two young wordsmiths.

“He used to head up a gang from Southside. One day he and a bunch of his guys cornered Hug and me in an alley. They did not like us at all.”

Hutch found himself holding his breath.

“I didn’t even have to use our code. Huggy knew we needed to throw some serious words around. I started it off with, ‘The plethora of undesirables that is disproportionately slanted against the virtuous could potentially prove to be detrimental.’”

“Inspired!” Hutch was convinced that there was still a great deal to learn about his fascinating partner. “Do you remember what Huggy said?”

“Like it was yesterday. Looking at me, not at the gang, he said…” Taking a breath, Starsky provided the words, tone and inflections: “‘Disarticulation appears imminent, my friend, unless unforeseen intervention materializes that proves beneficial to those of us in jeopardy of termination.’” He smiled. “Those guys backed right off.”

“I would have, too.”

“While I was a rookie, still in uniform,” Starsky went on, “Jackson took me aside one day. He told me that that afternoon, when Huggy and I threw all those words at him, made him decide to change
his life. He left the gang and eventually became a cop.” There was wonder in Starsky’s eyes. “Can you imagine that?”

“Yeah, Starsk,” Hutch said, with warmth. “I can.”

“Well, it about blew me away, I can tell you that!”

“What was your code word?”

“‘Reading.’ It didn’t come up very often in our everyday conversations so when we used it, we’d each know it was time to dust off those sophisticated syllables we’d been learning.”

“You asked him a few minutes ago…” Hutch replayed the earlier exchange in his mind, “if he’d been reading Reader’s Digest again.”

“Yeah. But he didn’t toss it back to me like I expected. He kept using big words but they weren’t strung together in sentences like we always did. It wasn’t the same.”

“Maybe he’d have caught on if I hadn’t kept interrupting both of you. I think I’m the one that messed things up.”

“Maybe.” Starsky took a swallow of beer. “But it’s been too long, I guess.” He glanced at Hutch. “I didn’t mean to piss him off.”

“I’m sure he’s not angry, Starsk.” Hutch patted his partner’s arm. “And it has been a few years.” Hutch noticed Huggy headed back toward their booth with a tray and three fresh bottles of beer. He took his hand off Starsky’s arm.

Huggy slid into the booth and distributed the bottles, embarrassment on his face and in his posture. “Sorry, Starsky. I missed it completely. I must have been so wrapped up in what I wanted to tell you both about d’Ambrosia and Tate I wasn’t paying attention to anything else.”

“My fault, Hug.” Starsky sat up straighter. “I could have warned you. But you came out with ‘hierarchy’ and ‘exponentially’ and I was suddenly fourteen years old again. Figured you’d done it deliberately.”

“Guess I’m gettin’ older.”

“No, my friend, you’re getting better.”

“Is that a statement of verisimilitude delivered with perceptive depth by my boon companion of innumerable years?” Huggy looked like he was fourteen again, himself.

“Incontrovertibly attested to by me, a sworn purveyor of camaraderie, not to mention truth, justice and the American Way.” Starsky punctuated the last words with a dazzling smile.

“Thanks, Starsky.” Huggy definitely appeared grateful. “I guess I needed that.”

Starsky lifted his beer in a salute before taking a swallow. “Seriously, Hug, I’m jealous. Have you been reading the Digest again?”

“Actually I have. Had to do something to keep from going crazy these last almost-two years. And my cousin, Jerome, has every issue of the Digest ever published.” He took his own swallow of beer and a softer expression came over his face. “Minnie’s been great, don’t get me wrong, but sometimes I needed to feel closer to you than a hospital visit allowed. Reading and learning words again did
that. I was almost able to go back to those years when you and I were so tight.”

Hutch met his partner’s startled gaze before turning back to the Bear. “*Our Minnie*?”

“Watch your proprietary mouth, Hutchinson,” Huggy retorted with a twitch of his expressive lips. “She’s been my Minnie for over a year.”

Hutch knew his surprise was showing. With another quick glance at Starsky, it was clear that his was, too.

“Yep.” Huggy grinned. “We ran into each other at the hospital so many times I started picking her up and taking her home.” He looked significantly at Starsky. “If you hadn’t gotten shot so bad, and been laid up so long, she and I might never have had the chance to spend that much time together.”

Starsky paled and Huggy went on quickly. “I’m not saying it was a good thing, Starsky. I’m only saying I got a remarkable lady out of it.”

“We’re really happy for you, Hug,” Hutch assured their friend, meaning every word. “You both sure can keep a secret though.”

“We never had a clue,” Starsky admitted.

“Good.”

“Listen, if you think of it,” Starsky said, “would you ask your cousin if he’d lend me part of his collection? I’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

Hutch smiled inside, inordinately pleased at the way his partner had handled that potentially hurtful situation. ‘No wonder I’m in love with him,’ he thought, ‘that was brilliant.’

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Starsky and Hutch walked out of The Pits later, heading for the Torino half a block away. Remembering the amazing sentences Starsky and Huggy had rattled off during their final beer, Hutch put a hand on Starsky’s forearm. “Starsk, can I ask you something?”

Starsky stopped immediately, looking at him curiously. “Anything.”

“Why don’t you ever let people know you have that kind of vocabulary?”

Starsky’s face took on a look of vulnerability. It was gone in an instant though, and the usual cocky competence was back in place. “We’re street cops, Hutch. You can get away with it because it’s obvious you’ve got a college education. You look like you were born spouting twenty-cent words.”

He held out his hands and looked Hutch up and down. “Just standing there you’re sophisticated. Refined. Charismatic. Erudite.”

Hutch was glad the street wasn’t better lighted because he knew he was blushing.

“Me?” His partner turned back toward the Torino. “I look like I’ve never seen the inside of a book.”

He stopped at the back of the car. “In the Army, I figured out real quick that if I used words like Huggy and I played with people thought I was putting on airs. So I learned to hide it.”

He glanced around at their location. “And nothing’s changed, Hutch. The local people we have to deal with wouldn’t talk to me. The lawyers, the police brass, the stuffed shirts we have to interview would think I was trying to raise myself undeservedly to their level.” He patted Hutch’s stomach. “Believe me, partner, it’s better this way.”
Hutch knew he’d have to think about that for a while; his best friend never ceased to amaze him. As he started toward the passenger door, movement across the street caught his eye and he stopped.

Starsky stepped off the curb but the movement had apparently been noticed by him, too.

At the mouth of an alley across from where they stood a man was loitering in the light cast by the corner street lamp. Almost immediately he darted into the alley and vanished in the darkness.

“Was that Tate?” Starsky asked.

“Sure looked like him.” Hutch walked back to Starsky.

“The rapist who served five years of a twenty-eight year sentence.”

“The very same.” Hutch’s attempt at a light-hearted reply fell a little flat.

“Well, speak o’ the devil.”

“Think we should go ask him why he’s been stalking us?”

“Good idea, Ollie.”

Hutch and Starsky walked toward the alley where Tate had disappeared, Hutch to the right side, Starsky to the left. Unholstering his weapon, Hutch held it against his leg, seeing Starsky do the same. Down the alley Tate was checking doors, presumably to find an open one, before moving on. With a nod to Starsky, Hutch entered the dark passageway cautiously.

“Hey, Tate!” Starsky hollered when their quarry reached the far end. “We hear you’ve been askin’ about us.”

Tate dashed around the corner and out of sight.

Hutch crossed to his partner. Something was definitely not right, he could feel it in his bones. It was the same feeling he’d had when Huggy had told them Tate was inquiring about them. Wordlessly, Hutch began to move back the way they had come, Starsky perfectly in step.

Suddenly, supposedly locked doors on both sides of the alley opened and half a dozen rough-looking men poured out. At the same time five more came around the corner from where Tate had gone.

Hutch and Starsky immediately turned back to back in classic defensive stances while they were surrounded. Hutch cursed himself silently. He and Starsky were professionals, they shouldn’t have fallen into this trap.

These were not average street punk opportunists either. Even in the poor light of the dark alley it was plain to see that they were all of a size: large, bordering on huge. Most wore flannel shirts, dirty jeans, work boots, ball caps with machinery or sports logos, and scowls. It was pretty obvious that they were on a mission.

Scanning each face, Hutch memorized details so that he’d be sure to recognize them again when he searched the mug books. One man’s face had a particularly memorable burn scar on the right side of his head, puckering the flesh from behind what was left of the ear to his chin.

Another sported a shaved head and a frown so exaggerated Hutch labeled him Smiley, and wondered if his face could assume any other expression.

None of them looked as if they could carry on an intelligent conversation. Hutch, his back still to
Starsky’s, knew that he couldn’t simply begin shooting though. Talking his way out of situations was his forte, after all. “We’re cops. You don’t want to get into this kind of trouble, fellas.”

Tate came back around the corner. “Sure we do, Hutchinson.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll have a lot of fun with me. You don’t want to get into this kind of trouble,” Tate said. “I told ‘em you were still in the clink. When’d they let you out?”

“Months ago, Starsky.” Tate almost sounded annoyed. “Surprised you didn’t get the memo.”

“Somebody said you were askin’ about us, Tate.” The scorn in Starsky’s voice was unmistakable. “But I told ‘em you were still in the clink. When’d they let you out?”

“Hell, no! I told them you were still here.” Tate almost sounded annoyed. “I thought you’d get the memo.”

“Okay, okay. I get it. You’re really upset about this.” Starsky shrugged nonchalantly. “You’re way down on our list of priorities.”

Hutch smiled, his partner could show bravado under even the most dire of circumstances. Nudging Starsky with an elbow, he kept his tone light, “Got any long-word sentences for this situation, Starsk?”

“Irreconcilable dissimilarities conceivably resulting in pugilistic confrontation and conflict?”

Hutch didn’t even try to keep the pride out of his voice. “Good one.”

Tate clenched his fists. “Take ‘em.”

Burn Scar, on Hutch’s right, lashed out with a heavy chain, entangling his arm and weapon. Hutch grabbed the chain with his left hand, surprising the disfigured man entirely. Pulling the thug forward, using his right hand still holding the Magnum, Hutch landed a blow to the side of Burn Scar’s head. The big man fell, but the chain jerked Hutch’s gun from his hand.

Spinne, Hutch blocked a kidney punch and landed two quick jabs to a glass jaw in a pock marked face under a John Deere cap. That attacker went down, too.

Another goon landed a hard hit to his spine, making him arch back as Smiley and a plaid-shirted man planted heavy blows in his midsection. Hutch swung and blocked, delivering as many hits as he received, until something hard and heavy smashed into the back of his head.

Starsky heard, and very nearly felt, each blow his partner delivered and received but was unable to help because his own opponents came at him full tilt. A very pale-skinned, white-haired, light-eyed man Starsky mentally labeled, Deadhead, whipped his own chain around Starsky’s left wrist and gun hand. Instead of resisting the pull, Starsky took two quick steps toward the man, ramming his head into the flannel-clad stomach. The move didn’t have the expected results though, because it felt like the guy was wearing a bullet proof vest. What the hell?

Before he could reassess the situation, a pair of huge, hairy arms wrapped around him from behind and lifted him completely off his feet. Starsky had rarely felt so utterly helpless. Deadhead stepped back in front of him, no emotion whatsoever in the ghost-like eyes.

Starsky knew it was going to hurt and the first blow that impacted his middle left him in no doubt. The next ones pounded him mercilessly. When the huge arms released him he tried to find his balance but Deadhead struck him again. Falling, Starsky was kicked from behind and passed out.
Chapter 2

Hutch regained consciousness but kept his eyes closed, attempting to learn all he could through his other senses. He could feel the different fabrics of the clothes he’d been wearing when he and Starsky had been attacked, and he still had his socks and shoes on. But he was cold because he was lying on what felt like a concrete floor in a building probably without heat.

His head hurt abominably and various parts of his body ached pretty badly, including his back. No bones felt broken though. Starsky was probably no better off. He could hear his partner breathing next to him; he’d recognize that breathing anywhere. Extremely subtle pressure against his arm told him that his partner was awake, as well. Slowly, to keep from alerting any watchers if possible, Hutch turned his head and opened his eyes. Starsky squinted back at him.

“You might as well stop pretending,” a cultured voice said before any silent communication could take place. “I know you’re both awake.”

Hutch sat up slowly while beside him Starsky did the same. He didn’t have to put his hand up to the back of his head, he knew the lump there was probably similar to the one his partner was fingering on his own head. The self-disgust Hutch felt was mirrored in Starsky’s face but he couldn’t help silently asking, You okay? He mentally heard, More or less, in return.

Hutch looked over at the man standing a few feet away. He was about five feet eight or nine, his twenty-pounds-too-heavy frame camouflaged by a well-tailored gray suit. If he was carrying a gun Hutch couldn’t spot the telltale bulge. The longish dark hair was going gray at the temples and the dark brown eyes would probably look very scary when he was angry. A razor-thin mouth gave the impression that smiling was never an option.

Hutch turned to his partner, searching for recognition, but the indigo eyes showed none. Never saw him before.

“Get up,” the man ordered.

Hutch stood up, reaching a hand to help Starsky and holding on until dizziness passed. He assessed his condition and thought he probably had a mild concussion. Not too bad considering. He fervently hoped Starsky wasn’t hurt any worse. He didn’t appear to be.

Hutch looked around the room searching for some clue as to where they were, possible escape routes and options. The space was large with a very high, unfinished ceiling. Windowless rectangles just under the steel rafters let in weak, possibly early morning light. A concrete floor, exposed-steel-stud walls, and only one door completed his inspection. No wonder the place was so cold. The only ‘furniture’ was a filthy mattress against the wall opposite the door.

“We’ve been in worse places, right, Starsk?” Hutch kept his tone light.

“Oh, yeah, lots. I’ll make a list.”

“Start with that asylum where --”

“It’s my list, Hutchinson!” Starsky sounded irritated. “I’ll start where I want. And I’m puttin’ the old zoo first. You wanna start with Matwick’s place, make your own list.”

Hutch hid his smile and continued to look around. Tate was standing next to the door, Hutch’s Python stuck in the front of his belt. “I hope you shoot your balls off, pal.”
Only Starsky heard him and the sentiment produced a crooked smile.

“Detective Hutchinson. Detective Starsky! You don’t know me yet so I’ll introduce myself. My name is Anthony d’Ambrosia.”

Hutch caught the short, sharp look Starsky threw him but their captor didn’t seem to notice. Or else he didn’t care.

“My friends used to call me Tony D, but I don’t have them any more. You may call me Mr. d’Ambrosia.”

Hutch made no comment and neither did his partner.

“I noticed you looking around, Detective Hutchinson, undoubtedly deciding upon a plan of action, a means of escape. Let me assure both of you that such a thing would be impossible.”

d’Ambrosia unbuttoned his jacket and opened it fully. “I myself never carry a weapon.” He buttoned the coat again. “My tailor forbids it. My associates however,” he gestured toward Tate at the door, “are heavily armed. Not only Mr. Tate, but all the other men waiting outside. Should you be lucky enough to get past Mike, the others would kill you.”

Hutch returned the man’s stare. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Starsky standing hip-shot, inspecting his scuffed knuckles with casual interest as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

d’Ambrosia snapped his fingers, the loud crack echoing around the bare walls.

Tate scurried forward. “Yes, sir?”

“Chairs, Mike.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tate ran out the door. Burn Scar slipped into the opening and stood staring at Hutch and Starsky, a gun dangling from each hand. The left side of his face was red and swollen and Hutch took some satisfaction in that. No chance of escape at the moment though, he realized.

Tate shoved past the disfigured man carrying three folding chairs. He opened one and placed it behind d’Ambrosia, who sat down. He unfolded the other two and placed them behind Hutch and Starsky, not coming close to either of them.

Hutch sat, remaining silent, followed by Starsky.

d’Ambrosia studied Hutch and his partner, perplexity written across his face. Finally, he sat more comfortably in the uncomfortable chair, crossed one knee over the other, folded his hands on them and addressed his captives in an almost professorial tone of voice, as if explaining the day’s curriculum to a roomful of students. “I always research a potential city’s police force before expanding my business into their territory. Bay City will be the location of my next venture. Therefore I determined the identity of its two best detectives.”

Hutch had to admit it was the strangest opening gambit he’d ever heard.

“One of my colleagues who has had dealings with you in the past advised me to choose cops other than yourselves. He believes you have lost your resolve due to the bungling efforts of my predecessor.”
“James Marshall Gunther?” Hutch didn’t attempt to keep the smugness out of his tone.

d’Ambrosia continued as if uninterrupted. “I, on the other hand, am convinced you are still the best the city has in its employ. Witness the pursuit and capture of Maynard Mathison yesterday afternoon.” He turned a decidedly fake smile on Starsky. “Congratulations, Detective Starsky. My sources tell me you were quite spectacular.”

“Got that right.” Starsky cocked his head, taking his due credit.

Hutch didn’t try to hide his smile this time. It was readily apparent to him that d’Ambrosia wasn’t used to silence and then sarcasm from detainees. He sincerely hoped his partner was reading his mind because he knew that was the way they needed to play it, for now.

d’Ambrosia shook his head and continued. “As I was saying, I believe you two remain the best, therefore…” He gestured around the empty room. “This is my pre-emption. I am going to draw the fangs I’m sure you posses before you even think about applying your skills to me or my enterprises.”

Hutch remained silent and was pleased when Starsky did the same.


“You got a list?” Starsky looked at Hutch, his expression almost boyishly pleased. “We got a list, don’t we, Hutch?”

“Sure, Starsk, we’ve got a list.” Hutch was glad his partner had found another sarcasm card in his deck.

“Didja bring your copy? We can compare notes with Mr. d’Ambrosia, here.”

Hutch raised a shoulder and grimaced in a ‘sorry, I forgot’ gesture.

Starsky looked back at d’Ambrosia and slumped in apparent defeat. “Guess not.”

d’Ambrosia casually removed a gold case from his inside breast pocket and took out a cigarette. Tate darted forward, lighter in hand, brought it to flame and lit the cigarette before stepping away again.

“Here’s the deal gentlemen —” d’Ambrosia began.

“You research ain’t too good, d’Ambrosia,” Starsky interrupted, his voice cold and flat. “Hutch and me don’t make deals.”

Hutch thought the man might be attempting to smile but, if so, it was a complete failure.

“Poor choice of words on my part, Detective.” d’Ambrosia’s jaw was rigid. “Allow me to rephrase. This is what will happen. If you do not do what I tell you to do, you will die. Here. Today. In the most agonizing, terrifying way you can imagine.”

Hutch remained silent, refusing to grant d’Ambrosia anything but a stare and Starsky was likewise mute.

The crime lord smoked the rest of his cigarette before crushing it under his shoe. He removed another and Tate stepped forward to light it. “I’m moving into Bay City, gentlemen,” d’Ambrosia stated. “You will ignore my presence, once it comes to your attention. That’s all. Simple studied ignorance.”

“You know better than that,” Hutch retorted. “We have no control over what cases we’re given. Our
captain assigns them, we follow orders.”

“Of course you do.” d’Ambrosia plastered an ugly smile across his face. “The only thing I require is that, should you be given any case involving me or my businesses, you recuse yourselves. Use whatever excuse or reason you need to in order to become un-involved. I’ll take my chances with your colleagues. I will not tolerate your participation.”

“And we should ignore you and your businesses… why?” Starsky’s voice was rife with more sarcasm.

“Because if you do not, Detective Starsky, Detective Hutchinson…” d’Ambrosia nodded to each, “I shall destroy your careers and your very lives. You see, I will have video tape proof that you have performed fellatio and sodomy upon each other.”

Hutch’s heart almost stopped. ‘What?’ He felt Starsky’s equally appalled reaction but, thankfully, his partner said nothing.

“If I were to release such a tape, you would lose your jobs as well as your sterling reputations. You would be crucified in the press, not to mention excoriated within your fraternity of fellow cops.” d’Ambrosia exposed hyper-white teeth in a grisly approximation of a supposedly-genuine smile. “And who do you think would hire two cock-sucking, butt-fucking ex-police officers after that?”

“No such proof exists.” Hutch kept his voice level. “You know that.”

“Not yet. But you will perform those acts within the next two hours. And I will record them.”

“Ain’t gonna happen,” Starsky muttered.

“Oh, but it will, Detective Starsky. Because you see, if you don’t do as I require, I have a dozen men who will be more than happy to fuck you both… To death.” d’Ambrosia bared his teeth again. “They have drawn straws and the first two ‘winners’ will fuck each of you, while the other watches. It doesn’t matter how many of my men are required to hold you both down while this is happening, they all want a chance to participate in the ‘fun’.”

The man’s words cut through Hutch like nothing he’d ever heard before but he did his best to keep any emotion off his face. He didn’t dare look at Starsky either, afraid it might trigger a physical reaction that would get both of them killed immediately. There had to be a way out of this. There simply had to be.

“As soon as the first two run out of energy two more will take their place.” d’Ambrosia uncrossed and re-crossed his knees, making sure the creases in his slacks didn’t get wrinkled. “This will go on until you are both dead, each having watched the other being, for all practical purposes, torn apart. From the inside.”

The crime boss gestured broadly around the room. “We are in the middle of a half-completed, abandoned industrial park so your screams will not even be heard. And please believe me, you will scream. You will each be forced to watch for as long as you remain conscious. My men will probably not care when you stop resisting, they’ll continue until you no longer breathe.”

Despite his training and rigid self-control, Hutch paled, images suddenly lodged in his mind. Why hadn’t he told Starsky long ago how he felt? Now, he might never get the chance. Unless... Wait. There might be a way… “What happens if we do what you demand?” Hutch forced himself to sound calm, still not daring to glance at his partner.

Starsky inhaled sharply but said nothing.
“I will let you go, of course. I give you my word.”

Hutch grunted in disbelief and Starsky choked off a laugh.

d’Ambrosia placed his right hand on his chest. “I am a man of honor. You will return to your duties and your lives. I swear it on my sainted mother’s grave.” The stare Hutch saw was ruthless now. “And you will belong to me. You will be my Bay City pocket cops.”

“No,” Hutch said. In his peripheral vision Starsky smiled tightly.

“‘No,’ Detective Hutchinson?”

“No, we will not be your pocket cops.” Hutch looked at Starsky quickly. *Stay with me, buddy. Trust me.*

Hutch turned back to d’Ambrosia. “We will do only what you said at first, ignore you and your business activities. ‘Studied disinterest,’ isn’t that what you said?” Hutch had to take a breath and swallow before he could continue. “We won’t take part in any investigation involving you. And we’ll excuse ourselves if we’re assigned to one. But that’s all. We will not provide you with any information. We will not do ‘favors’ for you. We will not be your tame cops.” He stared at d’Ambrosia, willing the man to believe him.

After what appeared to be due consideration, d’Ambrosia nodded. “Agreed.”

Starsky grabbed his arm. “Wait a minute, Hutch --”

Feigning impatience, Hutch shook off his partner’s hand and continued to stare at d’Ambrosia. “State your demands.”

Watching their tormentor while he waited for Tate to light another cigarette, Hutch was convinced this was the most twisted, dangerous man he and Starsky had ever encountered. ‘Something wicked this way comes’ indeed.

“You will suck each other off.” d’Ambrosia’s voice was as devoid of feeling as Hutch had ever heard. “And you will fuck each other. There will be no half-measures. Each of you will suck your partner to the root, and you will fuck similarly, to the root.”

Hutch was actually having difficulty breathing; he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I care not which of you goes first but there will be a thirty minute time limit for each event. Two hours is all my video tape is able to record. Even if one of you completes his task in less than the allotted minutes the next segment will commence immediately. There will be no rest periods, no time outs.”

Normally calm and cool in the most demanding circumstances, Hutch found himself breaking out in a sweat. He ran a hand through his hair before clenching it tightly, hoping d’Ambrosia hadn’t seen the tremor. He looked at his best friend and silently promised, *We’ll get through this, Starsk.*

“I require visible proof of orgasm each time, for the camera. I will not have you pretend to climax. I will not have you supposedly swallow the ejaculate.” He paused while Tate lit yet another cigarette.

“You will both be completely naked.” He exhaled languidly. “I won’t have clothing obscuring the view. And there will be no talking. Rumor has it you two communicate without saying a word, which I don’t believe, but which I sincerely hope you can demonstrate. No talking!”
He appeared to muse. “What else? Ah, yes...” He held a finger up, as if having an epiphany. “I, and all my associates, will be in the room watching, and my video tape machine will record everything. For posterity.” He ground the cigarette out under his heel and stood.

Tate folded up his chair and held it.

“You will have half an hour to talk, then you will give me your decision. There are no cameras or microphones in this room yet so feel free to say anything you like. I do not wish to hear your discussion.” He turned to leave but spun back. “Oh, by the way, my men hope your answer is ‘no’.”

As d’Ambrosia and Tate approached Burn Scar, he stepped aside, keeping his weapons loosely threatening. Tate followed d’Ambrosia through the door and Scar backed out closing it behind them.

Knowing his partner was about to explode, Hutch reached but was too late to keep Starsky from lurching to his feet.

“Can you believe that guy?” Pacing around the room, Starsky’s words came fast, as if tangled in his racing thoughts. “He sounded so calm, cool and collected. Like he actually thinks we’ll do those things! Is he crazy? That’s got to be it, don’t you think? He’s certifiable! There’s no other explanation. This is absolutely nuts!”

Hutch couldn’t remember hearing his partner string so many words together at one time before. He stood, trying to think of something calming to say.

“What?” Starsky stopped and stared at him. “Hutch! I know you can’t be thinking about doing what he says! You were only asking questions to keep him talking, right? You aren’t really considering…”

Hutch opened his mouth, persuasive words in his throat, but before he could speak Starsky strode back to him and grabbed his shoulders.

“Look at me, buddy. When this bastard comes back you’ve got to tell him he’s full of shit! They’re going to kill us but that’s okay. Because we just can’t do what he wants!” He gulped air. “I can’t. I won’t. But God…” He dropped his hands from Hutch’s shoulders and turned away. “I don’t want you to die like that, Hutch.”

Hutch felt as panicky as Starsky sounded but he was doing his best to think of a way out of this mess. He put his arms around his shattered partner from behind, holding him tightly. “What else can we do? No one knows where we are. We have tomorrow off. No, wait.”

He turned Starsky around to face him, his hands gripping his best friend’s upper arms. Twisting his wrist slightly, he glanced at his watch, “Today, actually. Dobey won’t even be looking for us until Monday.” He rubbed his hands up and down Starsky’s arms, trying to settle him a little. “If we’re going to get out of this alive we have to rescue ourselves. And the only way I can see of doing that is… by doing what d’Ambrosia says.”

Starsky broke away and began pacing again. “No. No! No, no, no! I can’t do that to you.” He stopped and pivoted around, his wide-eyed look cutting straight to Hutch’s heart. “You’re a virgin, Hutch! Am I right? I mean… we’ve never talked about it but I always got the impression…”

Hutch discovered he couldn’t move, could barely breathe under Starsky’s soul-deep scrutiny.

His partner took a step closer and lowered his voice. “You’ve never been… penetrated… by a man, have you? Never sucked cock…. Not even when you were a kid.”
Hutch managed to shake his head and tried to keep his tone light. “Starsky, I was a kid in Duluth, Minnesota. You know that.”

Starsky didn’t respond to the attempted humor. Instead, his shoulders slumped and he began pacing again. “Thought so.” His voice was even more strained. “You have no idea what it’d be like then. I couldn’t fuck you here, like this, with a thirty minute time limit. I’d tear you apart. With the kind of tension we’re both feeling, and no lube I’m willing to bet… I could hurt you real bad.”

“Starsky, we can --”

His partner cut him off with a wave of his hand, circling the floor like a caged animal. “Even if we tried to do what he said, we’d fail.” His words tumbled over each other. “Knowing I was going to hurt you the way I’d have to I probably couldn’t even get hard.” He looked at Hutch as he strode past. “Which means we wouldn’t be able to complete the tasks anyway.” Without breaking stride, Starsky shot him his best sarcastic look. “I doubt seriously that he’d give us points for trying.”

“Starsky, listen to me --”

“Don’t ask me to do this, Hutch. Please. You can’t know… You probably think you do, but you don’t. If you’ve never…” He stopped in his tracks. “I got an idea. You tackle Tate, I’ll go after the one at the door. They’re so stupid and fast-trigger-fingered, they’ll shoot us. Maybe they’ll be good shots and we’ll be dead. No, wait! I’ve got it... Murder suicide. I’ll kill you, then I’ll kill myself.”

Hutch was stunned by what his partner had just said. He had never seen Starsky in a near meltdown before and knew he was running out of options.

“If we’re dead…” Starsky began to pace again more slowly, “We can’t do what d’Ambrosia says. Then his goons won’t be able to hurt us. Uh… you don’t think they’d mess with our bodies, do you, Hutch? I mean, I guess it wouldn’t matter, we wouldn’t know about it, but it still makes me a little sick to think --”

When Starsky’s pacing brought him close, Hutch pulled his partner to his chest, wrapping his arms around the tense body. Without a word, Hutch kissed him, hard, on the mouth. He held Starsky firmly and deepened the kiss, his lips quivering but demanding.

Breaking the kiss and the embrace after hours, or maybe it was only seconds, Hutch stepped back, his hands on Starsky’s shoulders. He looked longingly into his friend’s eyes. “I love you, Starsk.”

Starsky stared back at him, wide-eyed.

Hutch raised a hand to the side of his best friend’s face. “But I’m also in love with you. Have been for quite a while. I just haven’t had the guts to say anything. Or do anything. I was afraid you’d ask Dobey for a transfer. Or a new partner.” He waited, not knowing which of the numerous possible responses his volatile friend would choose.

Starsky took a deep, shuddering breath and placed a hand over the one against his face. “I’m in love with you, too, Hutch.”

Hutch was struck dumb. It was the one reaction he hadn’t anticipated.

“Didn’t know it until just now, but I am. I thought I was the only one fantasizing about us being together. Didn’t realize it meant I’d fallen in love with you.” With a sigh of desperation, Starsky turned away and began pacing again. “What good is that going to do us though? Huh?”

Hutch could hardly believe what Starsky had said but his heart was beating wildly. He took a
steadying breath. “It’s our ace.” He tried to sound as positive as he could.

Starsky stopped and turned to stare at him.

“Think about it. d’Ambrosia doesn’t have a clue how we feel about each other so we can use that. We can get through this. Me ‘n’ thee, partner. Like always. Only this time it’ll be more important than ever.” Starsky didn’t begin pacing again which Hutch took as a good sign. “We can do this, Starz.” He kept his voice calmly persuasive. “We have to. Not only for ourselves but for all the others d’Ambrosia’s suborned. You heard him, he’s got pocket cops in every city where he has business interests. Detectives, like us, who have violated each other in order to avoid an unimaginable death.”

Starsky came back slowly, a silent plea for hope in those incredibly blue eyes. “How?”

“By making love with each other while d’Ambrosia believes we’re just suckin’ an’ fuckin’ in order to avoid his promised ‘or else’.” Suddenly, under his partner’s continued intense stare, Hutch couldn’t face him and turned away. “God, Starz, I’ve dreamed about us being together. I’ve wanted you so badly, I didn’t think I could stand it much longer.”

He began pacing, unconsciously following the path Starsky had taken only moments before. “I’d give anything if this hadn’t happened and we could have discovered our love in our own way.” He stopped and turned back, desperate to make Starsky understand. “But it’s happened now and if we want to live, and bring this sonavabitch down, we have to do this. And we can, Starz. We can do it.”

Starsky didn’t respond and Hutch hoped that was a tacit acceptance. He approached and put his arms around the stiff body again, his large hands rubbing up and down the tense back. “I… I think you should go first. I… I don’t… You were right. I don’t know anything about giving head. You… you’ll have to teach me, show me what to do and how to do it. If I go first and ca… can’t perform, we’re dead.”

Surprisingly, Starsky broke the embrace and stepped back. “No, Hutch. You have to go first. You’ve been sucked off by enough ladies, you know what you like.”

Hutch had the instant memory of his hands tangled in Gillian’s luxurious hair while she pleasured him. Oh, yeah, he knew what he liked!

“You know what’ll feel good to me. It’ll come naturally, believe me. And for the other… You’ve done women, it’ll feel like that… Sorta.”

Hutch remembered having experimented with Abby but that hadn’t gone very well. Maybe if he and Gillian had had more time….

Starsky smiled wanly as if reading Hutch’s thoughts. He opened his mouth to say more but shook his head. “Here’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question, buddy. Will he really let us go?”

Hutch considered the situation and nodded. “Yes. He wants us alive and under his thumb. If we’re dead he has to start all over again.”

“Okay. ‘Cause I’d hate for us to go through this only to have his goons kill us afterward.”

Now that the decision had been made Hutch found he was extremely nervous and uncertain. He knew his face was flushed so he turned away, hoping his partner wouldn’t realize how unsettled he was. What the hell was wrong with him? Was it the perversity of being forced to do something he’d been dreaming about? And do it in front of a bunch of creeps, all of whom were hoping they’d fail?
He turned back to Starsky who was standing, waiting. The expression on Starsky’s face was one of such understanding and calm compassion, it made Hutch ashamed of his own mental turmoil. “What do I do, Starsk?”

Starsky moved to the pair of chairs and turned them to face each other, sat in one and motioned Hutch to join him.

Walking as if in a nightmare, Hutch sat in the other chair.

“Do what feels right. My problem is going to be not coming too soon. I’m afraid that I’ll go off like a Roman candle the minute you touch me because I’ve been dreaming about this for such a long time. And we can’t let them know that.”

Hutch realized that was true. We have to convince d’Ambrosia that he’s coerced us into this. Which he has, of course, this would never be happening otherwise. But it was happening. He dragged his chaotic thoughts back to what Starsky was saying.

“I’m going to fight you, verbally,” Starsky said. “It’ll be an act, of course, but they’ll believe it. When I do come though, try to catch as much of my juice on your hands as you can and spread it on your cock. I’m betting he won’t give us any lubricant and that’s going to be bad. It’s been a long damn time for me but it’s been never for you. So the fuck part is going to be hell.”

Hutch physically shuddered. He’d read some gay literature lately and anal penetration had sounded pretty intense. At the time though, he was only reading. Starsky was going to tell him what it would feel like. It didn’t help his tension at all.

“You’re going to hurt and so am I.” Starsky held his gaze. “But if you can get your cock as wet as possible it’ll help.”

Hutch stared into the intensity of his partner’s ocean-deep eyes and found he couldn’t look away.

“If you have pre-cum, use that. Also wet your fingers with saliva and rub them around my ass. As soon as you’re ready don’t hesitate. Get both of us as wet as possible then do it. Fast and deep.”

The mental images Starsky’s words formed shook Hutch to his core; were they really considering doing this? He’d dreamed about making love with his partner. But it was always done tenderly, with care and consideration. Not this way, not this perverted, ugly -- Hutch was jolted out of his desperate thoughts when his partner scooted forward, put his hands on Hutch’s knees, and kissed him. Startled, it took a moment to process the jump from horrible images to the sweet contact of Starsky’s lips.

“Hutch, we can do this. You’ve convinced me, okay?” Starsky sat back, keeping his hands on Hutch’s knees. “We’ll have the rest of our lives to make love to each other the way we want to. The way I guess we’ve both been dreaming about.”

The absurdity of the situation suddenly hit Hutch. He and Starsky had been fantasizing, separately, for a long time, each afraid to make the first move. “I guess we have.”

“Now I need to ask a huge favor of you.”

Hutch didn’t like the sound of that.

“I want you to turn that beautiful brain of yours off for the next couple of hours. Don’t think too much, okay?”

“You always say that, Starsky!” Hutch was instantly angry. “But when have I ever really thought too
Starsky leaned back, a startled look on his face, and Hutch was immediately contrite. Where had the anger come from? He knew the answer of course, as soon as he asked himself the question. It came from the situation they were in. The one they’d have to do everything they could, together, to get out of. He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Starsk.” All his love went into the apology. “I guess I’m wired.”

“My, too.” Starsk’s eyes returned the love, unconditionally.

“What were you saying?” Hutch’s ire was snuffed out.

“We’re going to have to let our bodies take over. They want each other. You can feel it, I know you can. I could when you kissed me, and when I kissed you a minute ago. You’re already half hard and so am I.”

Hutch knew the truth of that statement by the tightness in the crotch of his jeans. He could see the same condition in Starsky’s lap, too. His partner glanced down at himself and actually blushed. Hutch almost laughed.

Turning serious again, Starsky looked up at him. “We have to let our bodies do the work. Think you can do that? Do you love me enough to hurt me if it means we’ll both live through it? ‘Cause I’m going to be asking myself the same question when it comes time for me to do you. It’s going to be worse than you can imagine right now. But you’ll get through it, I promise. Me ‘n’ thee, Hutch.”

Hutch tried his best to smile but knew it must look very strained. “Me ‘n’ thee, Starsk.”

Starsky got up and paced around the chairs. “Okay, he’s not going to let us talk so I’m going to throw things out now as I think of them.” Starsky paused, clearly getting his thoughts in order. “When you come, inside me, don’t come too hard. Because I’m going to have to suck you off in the next segment --”

“Wait a minute, Starsk!” Hutch almost choked on the words. “I haven’t come twice in thirty minutes since I was in high school. Maybe not even then! I don’t know if I can!”

Starsky came back and sat down. “Yes, you can. Trust me, I know some tricks. Just try to hold something back the first time. I’ll do the rest.”

Starsky got up again and Hutch was glad his partner couldn’t see how shaken he really was.

“Also, if you think of it --”

Starsky stopped in mid-thought when the door opened and d’Ambrosia and Tate entered, stopping a few feet inside the room. Burn Scar and his guns filled the entry.

“Your decision, gentlemen?” d’Ambrosia’s harsh voice gave them no more time.

Hutch got up, Starsky rejoined him and they stood side by side.

“We’re probably stupid to trust you, d’Ambrosia,” Hutch said, his voice controlled, “but you said you’re an honorable man and we’re betting our lives on that. We’ll do what you require.”

d’Ambrosia did his thin-lipped imitation of a smile again, making Hutch question his sanity in attempting to play this monster’s game. Their captor snapped his fingers at Tate who left immediately. Walking to the pair of chairs, d’Ambrosia sat in one. “Mike will be setting up the video
equipment and testing it. You may use the time to disrobe and prepare yourselves. As soon as Mike says he’s ready the first timed sequence will begin.” He crossed his knees, took out a cigarette and lit it himself.
Chapter 3

Starsky and Hutch walked very slowly, as if through hardening molasses, toward the mattress.

Tate came into the room followed by the first of the men who had attacked them in the alley. Looking more closely, Starsky knew he’d never seen any of them before last night. But he’d remember each and every one of them now. They were cut from the same bolt of cloth: large, rough and lumberjack-thrift-shop-dressed. With ball caps. ‘Where does he get these guys? Ex-cons R Us?’

Tate and two of the men pushed a couple of warehouse dollies. They carried a folding table plus lots of equipment. Starsky recognized a heavy-duty tripod, a camera case, an industrial video tape machine, a small television, cables, wires, and extension cords. More men brought in a couple of Hollywood type arc lights, cables and a gas generator, and began setting up.

Behind these, d’Ambrosia’s other goons filed in, staring at Starsky and his partner, anticipation and hatred on their faces. Weapons were prominently displayed in waistbands and holsters.

The men leaned against the walls, reminding Starsky of a PBS show he’d seen where a pack of wolves had waited on the periphery of a life and death struggle between two bull elks, until they could claim the spoils. ‘Keep waiting fellas, you ain’t gettin’ us.’

Dragging his mental cataloging away from the watchers who continued to file in, Starsky took a step toward their tormentor. “Any chance of getting some Vaseline, d’Ambrosia? My partner’s never done this before and he could get hurt pretty bad. You don’t want a crippled cop on your hands.”

“Come now, Detective…” d’Ambrosia curled his lip in a textbook sneer. “You can do better than that. A fucking won’t cripple him, as you so dramatically imply. If you’re careful. It will simply help you both remember our agreement. Besides…” His expression turned ugly. “I’m sure you’ll do your best not to injure him too badly. Request denied.”

Starsky took another step forward. “Is my car here?”

“Yes, of course.” d’Ambrosia was clearly surprised by the off-the-wall question. “I couldn’t leave it outside The Pits.”

“There are a couple of blankets and towels in the trunk. Could we at least have those? Please? Hutchinson’s probably going to be in shock, possibly bleeding when this is over and I’d like to have those things available.” He took another step closer. “Ya wanna know why?” He waited a few seconds, his eyes boring into their captor’s, his arms folded across his chest.

When no answer was forthcoming, Starsky took one more step forward. “Because, if my partner dies… peritonitis and sepsis can be fatal, you know… and if he dies, you’re going to wish you’d never been born.” One last step brought him almost toe to toe with d’Ambrosia. “I realize that’s a cliché,” he said, putting as much threat in his tightly controlled tone as possible, “but in this case it’ll be true.” He bent down, almost breathing in the crime lord’s face. “I’ll turn into your worst nightmare. And you do not want that.” Again, Starsky waited.

d’Ambrosia remained silent for many long seconds before snapping his fingers over his shoulder. “Cairo!”

A man pushed himself off the wall nearest the door and approached his boss, not looking at Starsky or his partner.
Starsky stood up straight, stepped back and cast a quick, appalled look at Hutch. Nicky Cairo. Terrific.

The dark haired former mafia hit man stopped next to d’Ambrosia’s chair, his eyes on his boss.

Starsky’s impression was that Cairo was trying to look deferential but to him, it was more like cunning and sullen anger. “Hey, Nick, long time no see.” He pasted a sorrowful frown on his face and stuck out his hand. “Sorry to hear about your brother.”

“Stuff it!” Cairo slapped the hand away.

“That’s no way to talk to Starsky, Nick.” Hutch spoke from next to Starsky’s shoulder. Starsky had been so concentrated on d’Ambrosia and Cairo he hadn’t heard the soft-footed approach. “He was offering our condolences.” Hutch almost sounded sincere.

“I said, stuff it!” Cairo repeated, surly, his eyes downcast.

Starsky detected a layer of something he couldn’t define in the former mobster’s tone. Cairo was working an angle but damned if he knew what it was.

“I didn’t know you three were on speaking terms,” d’Ambrosia remarked.

Starsky thought he might have heard a hint of uncertainty in the crime lord’s voice. ‘Hmmmmm. Exploitable later, maybe?’

“Oh, we’re not,” said Hutch. “Haven’t seen each other in years. We’re just old…” he cocked his head at Cairo, “acquaintances.”

“Nicky,” d’Ambrosia broke in before Cairo could offer another retort. “See if the items Detective Starsky asked for are in the trunk of his car. If they are, bring them here.”

“Yes, Mr. d’Ambrosia.” The former mobster turned on his heel and left.

Tate and his helpers had unpacked the equipment, hooked up all the cables and wires, and Starsky noticed that they were already in the process of assembly and testing. ‘The set’ was fully lighted. They’d obviously had a lot of practice.

d’Ambrosia reached into his pocket again, taking out the gold case and extracting yet another cigarette.

Casually, Starsky reached over and plucked the items from the manicured hands. He put the cancer stick back in the case and firmly replaced it in d’Ambrosia’s pocket. “Those things’ll kill ya.” He tried to sound genuinely concerned but didn’t really care if he hadn’t been successful. He turned away from their fuming captor and, with Hutch at his shoulder, walked slowly toward the mattress. “Cairo’s not on the same page as his boss,” he whispered.

Hutch glanced toward the door. “Did you notice the guy he was standing next to? Small, wiry, sneaky-looking. Ever seen him before?”

Starsky surreptitiously looked in that direction and shook his head.

“Well, whatever it is,” Hutch muttered, “they’re in it together.”

“We’ll worry about it later, Hutch. Okay? Have to live through the next two hours first.” He began taking off his clothes. “I don’t want to be standing when you do me. I don’t trust my legs. I’m going
to lie down on my back. If you get on my right side…” He glanced at the camera, perpendicular to
the mattress, about ten feet away, “they’ll have their view and you won’t have to see the ‘peanut
gallery’.” He tried a smile but got no response.

“Look at all those scars, will ya?” someone at the wall stage-whispered.

Starsky cringed but felt a light, brief touch on his arm. “You’re beautiful, babe.” The words were for
his ears alone.

Standing naked in front of his equally nude partner, Starsky realized the activities they were about to
engage in, in front of a dozen men who quite obviously hoped they failed, had withered his partial
erection. Hutch’s, too. Maybe it was a good thing for now. At least they didn’t have to endure the
embarrassment of wisecracks.

He looked sadly at the new bruises covering his best friend’s body, bruises he knew his own
probably matched. They were becoming colorful but not serious enough to hamper the upcoming
events. Out of the camera’s view, Starsky put his hand on Hutch’s upper arm. “I love you, and I’m
going to love you the way you deserve for the rest of our lives.”

Under his hand, Hutch was so tense he was practically vibrating. Starsky knew that tension was
going to be their worst enemy. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do about it.

Cairo came back in carrying two blankets and a couple of towels. At his boss’ nod, he put the items
on the floor next to the mattress, on the far side of the camera. Out of the corner of his eye, Starsky
saw Nicky rejoin the wall of watchers and lean down, whispering to the wiry little man.

d’Ambrosia picked up his chair, moved it near the mattress, camera left, and sat down. Making sure
Starsky was watching, he removed the gold case from his pocket, took out a cigarette and lit it.
Inhaling deeply, he blew the smoke directly toward Starsky.

“Gonna kill ya,” Starsky stated, fanning the smoke away.

Tate quit fiddling with the equipment. “Ready, Mr. d’Ambrosia.”

“You’re on the clock, gentlemen.” d’Ambrosia crossed his legs. “So, as they say in the movies,
Action!”

Starsky stared into his partner’s cornflower blue eyes, guessing that every muscle in Hutch’s body
was as tightly wound as one of his guitar strings. Knowing that postponing the inevitable wouldn’t
help though, he flopped onto his back on the dirty mattress. Grabbing his cock and displaying its
flaccidity, he leered up at his best friend. “Come ‘n’ get it, Blondie.”

The sudden coarseness clearly surprised Hutch, who looked like a headlight-caught deer.

Starsky turned his head toward the men at the wall. “One o’ you guys wanna come over here and
show this cherry what to do? He’s wastin’ my time!” Instinctively knowing that the men wouldn’t
move without their boss’ orders, Starsky wasn’t surprised when none did.

“This is between you and your partner, Detective Starsky.” d’Ambrosia’s voice brooked no further
delay. “I suggest you get him to perform.”

Playing ‘disgusted’ to the hilt, Starsky grabbed Hutch’s left wrist and yanked him down next to him.
Hutch landed on his knees at Starsky’s right hip, his tightly clenched fists hitting Starsky on the thigh
and stomach. Starsky grunted involuntarily.
“Oh, God, I’m sor --”

“Jeezus, Hutchinson!” Starsky cut him off. “Watch where you’re fallin’, will ya? You almost got my pecker in your mouth.” He grinned at the spectators. “Course that’s what you’re all waitin’ for, ain’t it fellas?”

Out of sight of the camera, Starsky’s right hand unclenched Hutch’s left fist and entwined the fingers. “Stop thinking, Hutch,” he murmured. “We can do this.”

Starsky watched Hutch mentally shake himself and get back in the game. His fingers were squeezed lightly in response to the words before Hutch grabbed his limp penis abruptly. Starsky inhaled sharply because his partner’s touch did exactly what he suspected it would, sent chills down his spine, through every nerve in his body and straight to his cock. It stiffened and hardened in Hutch’s hand.

He caught Hutch’s eyes and conveyed as much love and support as possible their way. Do it, babe, just like you’ve been dreaming about.

Starsky knew that Hutch was ready when he bent down to take the shaft in his mouth. If Starsky had thought he was in love with his partner before, he had no idea what name he’d give to his feelings now. Brilliant, gorgeous, skillful, gentle, compassionate, loyal, dedicated, multi-talented, sometimes-ferocious Hutch was doing something he’d never done before. And he was doing it so that they would have the chance to explore this new facet of their relationship in the future. The love Starsky thought he felt turned to devotion and he knew he’d do anything and everything for Hutch, forever.

If Hutch had had stage fright, it was gone. Starsky’s cock was loved with more passion than any woman had ever demonstrated. Hutch’s tongue laved the shaft from top to bottom, his lips teased the crown and tickled the slit. Fire raced from Starsky’s groin along every nerve in his body and erupted in his brain. He clutched his fists in the cloth of the mattress instead of in Hutch’s hair, which is where he desperately wanted them to be. Those watching couldn’t be allowed to know of his intense pleasure.

At each downward thrust, Hutch managed to take Starsky deeper into his throat and Starsky had to fight to keep from groaning aloud. If his partner was aware of the audience now it didn’t show in his performance.

Starsky couldn’t get over his amazement at Hutch’s natural skill and talent, although he knew it shouldn’t surprise him. Hutch was always so goddamn good at everything! Starsky almost had to laugh. But what Hutch was doing to him was blowing his mind. He couldn’t concentrate on anything except the sensations coursing through his body, the slick feel of Hutch’s soft flexible tongue, the gentle but firm pressure of the hands on his shaft as they led his partner’s mouth in their increasingly rapid up and down movement. His manhood throbbed almost painfully with the blood engorged there.

Could he allow himself to come yet? Was it too soon? Too bad if it was because he couldn’t hold it any longer. Hutch had him way down his throat, swallowing around the head. How was he doing that? He’d never sucked cock before, he shouldn’t be able to take that much of him! The gag reflex normally… the hell with ‘normally,’ this was anything but. Oh, God, he was going to come, he couldn’t control it any more. Hutchhhhhhh.

Starsky’s shaft expanded in Hutch’s mouth and pulsed with final release. The orgasm, which began at the tips of his toes, ends of his fingers, depths of his balls and top of his head, raced through his body to his penis and shot his semen into Hutch’s throat. It was the most searing climax he had ever experienced.
He could hardly breathe for a moment but saw his partner twitch the corner of his mouth while he slyly swallowed a little of Starsky’s essence.

“Off!” d’Ambrosia screamed.

Hutch took Starsky’s shaft out of his mouth and showed the camera the ejaculate flowing down over his hand.

Starsky was having difficulty thinking and breathing at the same time, but Hutch did exactly what he’d been about to request when d’Ambrosia had come back in the room. His partner squeezed his shaft below the crown, stopping further pulsations. *You musta read my mind, babe, that’ll sure help.*

Hutch scraped the cum that had already escaped onto his hands, using it to coat his own prodigious erection.

Starsky hid his grin when his partner looked down in apparent shock. When did that happen, Hutch was unmistakably wondering.

*You remembered to save the cum. Good boy. I love you so much.*

“That’s only the first event, Detectives.” d’Ambrosia’s voice was harsh. “You’re on the clock again, Hutchinson.”

Starsky locked eyes with Hutch while they shifted positions so that Hutch was now between his legs. Raising his knees to his chest and rocking his hips up, he spread his limbs, wantonly displaying his ass.

The look on Hutch’s face was a combination of desire, amazement and terror. He stared into Starsky’s eyes again, as if to verify that this was really happening. Starsky put all his love and trust into his gaze and that seemed to be all his partner needed.

Hutch looked down again, picked up his own rigid member, and bent forward. Pausing a moment, he put the first two fingers of his right hand into his mouth before rubbing them around the ring of Starsky’s anus. At the touch, Hutch’s own cock stiffened more and exuded a few drops of pre-cum which Hutch captured and spread down his shaft. Starsky watched as Hutch pointed himself toward Starsky’s butt before looking up. Starsky held his gaze and nodded ever so slightly. Taking a deep breath, Hutch thrust.

Starsky couldn’t keep a gasp of pain from escaping.

Hutch gave a single, strangled cry and froze.

Starsky had known it would be bad. He hadn’t realized it would be this bad though. Hutch had done exactly what Starsky had asked, and impaled him. But the pain had immobilized them both. If he couldn’t get his partner past this moment, they would die.

Starsky closed his eyes and concentrated his entire being on taking the next breath and relaxing the muscles in his lower body that were holding Hutch captive. After what seemed like forever, to Starsky’s relief, Hutch managed to take a breath and begin to move a little inside him.

The look that came over Hutch’s face melted Starsky’s heart. He knew his partner had just realized he was inside the man he loved. But Starsky also knew they couldn’t stay like this. If Hutch didn’t get his cock moving it would deflate and they’d be back where they started.

Starsky lurched up and forward. Locking his ankles behind Hutch’s back at the same time his left
hand grabbed Hutch’s ass, he held his partner deep inside himself. With his right hand he grabbed the back of Hutch’s neck, pulling their faces together. Starsky captured Hutch’s mouth in a ravaging kiss.

Hutch was obviously completely surprised and Starsky plunged his tongue between the half-open lips. When he pulled Hutch’s hips tighter against his buttocks, he felt Hutch’s cock swell inside him. *That’s good, babe. Let our bodies do the work.*

Continuing to pull Hutch deeper, Starsky savaged his partner’s mouth with lips, teeth and tongue.

“What the hell’s happenin’?” asked one of the watchers.

“He’s tongue fuckin’ ‘im!” someone answered. “Look at that! He’s pushin’ his tongue down his throat at the same time he’s pullin’ that dick into himself. He’s gonna make Hutchinson come after he’d frozen. It was gonna be over and we were gonna get t’ play. But Starsky’s ruined it. I’ll bet Hutchinson’s hard in there again. Shit!”

Still concentrating on Hutch, Starsky darted his eyes toward d’Ambrosia and saw him glare over his shoulder. The admonishment, although silent, was no less demanding. The men stopped talking.

Starsky was pleased to know he’d shown the hardened scumbags something new. ‘Take notes, boys.’

Starsky drew his partner’s body more tightly to him, burying his tongue deeper into Hutch’s mouth and stroking into his throat to the same rhythm his hips were using to thrust upward.

Hutch seemed finally to have turned his brain off and was truly immersing himself in the ‘assault.’ As Starsky increased his hip action and tongue gymnastics, Hutch’s body responded. The testicles tightened against Starsky’s ass and the cock grew larger as Hutch thrust more firmly. Hutch’s fingers dug into Starsky’s back and his tongue finally engaged the invader in his mouth.

Starsky indulged himself in one moment of sheer bliss. ‘Hutch is really and truly inside me. And he’s gonna come now. Inside me.’ Then he mentally slammed that door and concentrated on the mission: bringing Hutch to orgasm. While his tongue grappled with his lover’s, he tried to think of anything else he could do to increase his partner’s passion.

Using the toes of one foot, he stroked a few inches of Hutch’s spine while he lovingly pinched a bit of butt cheek with the fingers of his left hand. He moved his right hand up into Hutch’s hair and caressed the back of his head, tugging lightly on the silken strands. In clear response to these extra stimulations, Starsky felt the rod inside him swell even more just before Hutch drove his hips forward one final time.

Even though most of Hutch’s brain must have been functioning on auto-pilot, he stopped thrusting and pulled out as carefully as possible, displaying his cum to the camera.

Starsky smiled inside, silently happy that his partner was saving energy for later.

Starsky unlocked his ankles, let go of Hutch’s ass and head, and fell back on the mattress. He was so proud of his best friend he could almost forget the pain in his nether regions. They’d done it, half the ordeal was over. He allowed his aching body to go slack but kept his eyes focused on Hutch.

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Hutch had never felt so exhausted, exhilarated, conflicted, guilt-ridden and satisfied in his entire life. Overwhelming all those emotions though, was the love he felt for his partner. His very best friend.
His lover. No one had ever made him feel as important, strong, and cherished as he did at that moment. How improbable for it to happen this way, and in this place. But there it was. He immediately locked everything away in a corner of his mind, to be retrieved, sorted, viewed, savored and appreciated later.

d’Ambrosia’s hated voice broke into Hutch’s seconds-only contemplation as he knelt between Starsky’s legs, now spread in unmistakable pain on either side of his knees.

“If your turn, Starsky! Tick tock!”

Hutch reached out his right hand and took Starsky’s extended right hand, pulling him up. Their eyes communicated while they changed positions with no tangled arms or legs, no wasted motion.

“So far, so good, partner. We got ‘em on the run.

We can do this, buddy. I love you.

I love you back. Trust me now, Hutch. You gotta trust me.

I do, Starsk. You know I do.

Hutch laid on the mattress, tired but wired, scared that this whole thing would come crashing down on them soon. Still, he was filled to overflowing with the knowledge that, whatever happened, he’d been able to make love to his partner. He almost felt he could die happy now. Almost. Well, not really. ‘No. NO. This is not going to be the end. They’d get through the next two ‘events’ and have the rest of their lives to love each other. Help me, Starsk. I don’t know what to do.

The look in Starsky’s eyes as he knelt between Hutch’s splayed legs was so determined that Hutch had no choice but to believe everything would be all right. He even managed a smile and Starsky returned it, the special smile his partner always reserved for him. Unbelievably, with the camera unable to see it, Starsky winked when his left hand enfolded Hutch’s weary cock. Another bombshell followed, his partner’s forbidden voice.

“Don’t go to sleep on me, Hutchinson.” To everyone else in the room, the tone probably sounded mean and derisive. Hutch, alone, heard the underlying encouragement and support, with a little teasing thrown in.

“No talking, Detective Starsky!” d’Ambrosia shouted. “Remember what I said, you are not to speak to each other.”

“Shut up, d’Ambrosia!” Hutch realized he and Starsky had growled the same words at the same time. He grinned up at his partner before looking over at the conductor of this bizarreness. “We’re doing what you ordered and…” he gestured to the camera, “you’re getting what you wanted.”

“So we’re doin’ the rest of this our way, d’Ambrosia.” Starsky’s teeth were clenched, his tone determined. Starsky ministered to Hutch’s abused organ at the same time he glared at their captor. “You ever try to come twice within a few minutes?”

Starsky stroked Hutch’s cock with a skill Hutch had never suspected. His hands felt so gentle it took a few moments to become aware of the rekindling fire in his groin, the nerve endings in his entire body igniting.

“You like to watch, doncha?” Starsky didn’t look away from d’Ambrosia as his fingers worked their miracle. “That’s how you get your rocks off. Well, watch then! But don’t tell me I can’t talk to Hutchinson. We’re way ahead of your schedule so I’m slowin’ things down. Helpin’ my partner…”
He leered into the lens, “get it up again.”

“Like Starsky just told you, d’Ambrosia…” Hutch felt his confidence returning, aided by Starsky’s able hands. “We’re doing this our way from now on. You can sit there and enjoy it or you can kill us.” He looked into his partner’s approving gaze, speaking directly to those midnight blues. “But I don’t think you’ll do that. Not now.” He tore his eyes away from his partner and matched Starsky’s glare when he looked back at d’Ambrosia. “Not after you’ve already got half your ‘proof’.”

“Kill us now, d’Ambrosia…” Starsky continued his manipulations, winking at Hutch again, “and you’ll have to start over.” He glared again at their captor. “You don’t wanna hafta do that. So just sit there like a good boy. Smoke your cigarettes. And spectate.”

Hutch thought d’Ambrosia was probably unaccustomed to being disobeyed, much less so blatantly. However, he lit another cigarette and said nothing.

Starsky licked the palms of both hands and soothed the abraded column, loving it back to life and filling it with lust again. Hutch couldn’t believe his body was reacting this way; he was almost dead not two minutes ago. And yet here he was, watching his cock being resurrected and rejuvenated.

He laid back and relaxed as much as possible, putting a steely expression on his face for the audience’s benefit but reveling in the feelings being created by his lover’s caresses. His blood pounded, his mouth was dry, his palms were wet and every nerve in his body tingled. No woman, not even Gillian, had ever made him feel like this.

The corner of Starsky’s mouth that Hutch could see but the camera couldn’t, twitched. The warmth of another wink washed over him. Hutch lost track of time as his partner’s stroking, soothing and petting re-awakened his organ. Finally, Starsky bent and his mouth enveloped Hutch’s cock, flooding it with his gathered saliva. Hutch inhaled deeply when the cool, soothing fluid covered his glans. He managed to smother the moan he felt trying to escape. It wouldn’t do at all for everyone to know he was actually enjoying part of this charade. But he was! Oh, Starsky! That is sooooo good.

Again, Starsky seemed to have heard the thought because he smiled around the growing flesh in his mouth and tightened both hands at the base of it. The blood was flowing back into Hutch’s wilted shaft and it was responding to Starsky’s artful fingers and mouth. He could almost hear his partner’s soft, seductive, Relax, Blue Eyes. You’re gonna come whether you think you’re ready again or not.

As much as his over-stimulated body wanted to react to Starsky’s calm encouragement though, Hutch began to be afraid he wasn’t going to be able to achieve orgasm again. He was too tired. Too worn down by all the mind-destroying horror. He probably couldn’t do it!

Starsky inserted the first two fingers of his left hand into his mouth, along the length of Hutch’s shaft. Those fingers gently added to the tongue’s strokings and caressings. Then they left and it was only Starsky’s mouth still pleasuring his erection. His partner took him deep down his throat, making Hutch moan silently with ecstasy, while the tongue worked the prominent back vein. But where had those fingers gone?

After what was only a second in actuality, but had seemed like an eternity, Hutch felt the fingers against his anus. The gathered saliva made the touch slick and smooth. Starsky rimmed the opening, teasing and tormenting. Hutch had never, ever felt anything like it. Even in his fantasies he hadn’t imagined this.

Suddenly those fingers left his ass. They were inserted back into Starsky’s mouth before being returned to his rectum, where he felt one inserted almost delicately. Hutch’s body tensed at the invasion.
Starsky didn’t stop his deliberate motion up and deep down on Hutch’s shaft but he closed his mouth and throat tighter, his right hand gripping the base more firmly, exerting pressure from crown to root. At the same moment Hutch felt the second finger being inserted.

Without warning his nervous system flared. Starsky had touched something inside him that made his whole world implode and Hutch opened his mouth in a soundless cry. What did you do, partner? Whatever it was, please do it again!

It took only a moment for Hutch’s common sense to kick in and he knew it was his prostate Starsky had touched. Never though had he imagined his entire body would feel as if it had received all the energy of a lightning strike if that gland were touched the way Starsky was stroking it. Not that he’d ever been hit by lightning, but… well, maybe he just had.

Starsky smiled slyly around his mouthful and tightened his right hand. While the middle digit of his left hand stroked Hutch’s prostate inside, the edge of Starsky’s right thumb pressed down against the gland from outside.

Hutch was overwhelmed by never-before-known sensations and, building swiftly, inexorably, more explosively than ever before, Hutch climaxed. His head, shoulders and back arched up off the mattress, his legs went rigid and his hands grabbed the filthy batting in death grips.

“Goddamn!” the stage-whisperer said. “Almost makes me want that bastard to do me!”

“Off, Starsky! Let the camera see!” d’Ambrosia shouted. Hutch was beginning to think if he never heard that voice again it would be too soon.

Starsky’s mouth and fingers were instantly gone and Hutch felt utterly bereft. His withering erection continued to pump essence out over his stomach. That fluid was quickly gathered by Starsky’s hands and transferred to his own cock. This was necessary Hutch realized because they had one more performance.

Hutch’s left leg was gently lifted, the knee bent and moved toward his right. He knew instinctively what Starsky needed and rolled over onto his stomach.

“Sez you, Starsky.” Hutch forced as much anger into his voice as he could manage. “I’m tired of this bullshit. Hurry up so we can get the fuck outta here!” He wrenched himself up on his elbows and glared over his shoulder at d’Ambrosia. “That was an intentional pun, Tony, in case you didn’t recognize it.”

“No rush, Hutchinson. We’ve got time.” Starsky sounded almost casual.

“Sic ‘im, partner,” Starsky whispered.

Hutch thoroughly enjoyed d’Ambrosia’s seething fury before settling back on his stomach on the mattress.

Starsky helped him shift to the middle before lifting Hutch’s hips so that he could bring his knees up under his chest, opening his rear and presenting a better angle of entry. ‘Oh, shit! Angle of entry. This is really going to happen.’ For the first time in a long while Hutch was afraid. But the hands on his buttocks were gentle. His partner’s hands. His lover’s hands. He forced himself to relax as much as possible. I trust you, Starsk. I love you.

Interminable time seemed to pass during which Hutch imagined that Starsky was getting his cock ready for penetration. ‘What if he can’t get it up? What if we’ve gone through all this for nothing?’ Forcing those thoughts aside he glared over his shoulder, making his voice sound angry. “What are
you *doing* back there, Starsky? We should be half way to Venice by now.”

Unexpectedly, Starsky slapped his right buttock sharply. “Shut up, Hutchinson! I’m settin’ the scene in my head. A director’s gotta know what he wants on film before the camera rolls, ya know?”

“No! And neither do you, pal. I was only a bit player in that stupid movie and if I remember right you never even talked to the director!” Hutch intensified his ‘glare’ and maintained his furious charade.

“Well…” Starsky gestured toward the camera, “we’re in film school now, buddy, so I’m gettin’ in character.”

Hutch felt a feather-light touch against his anus and the hand remaining on his right buttock was soothing the sting from the slap. He took the deepest breath he could, in the position he was in, and spread his knees more. “In that case…” He settled on the mattress. “Ready when you are, C.B.” He didn’t care whether anyone else in the room recognized the legendary Hollywood line, he knew Starsky did. His butt cheek was softly caressed.

When Starsky penetrated him the pain was worse than he had imagined it could possibly be. A cry was wrenched from him and he was instantly ashamed of his reaction. Why couldn’t he have kept silent and not let everyone know how much it hurt? But it wasn’t like anything he had ever experienced before. Not like being shot or stabbed. Not even like the fire he had felt in his lungs when he was dying of the plague. Nothing had flamed through his entire body like this. Starsky had tried to prepare him but no words could have conveyed the agony radiating from his ass and intestines.

‘Thank God it isn’t Cairo back there.’ This was Starsky inside him. Not a fantasy or dream but reality. It hurt like the end of the world but it was Starsky. He needed to forget the pain, relax and let Starsky finish it. Once his partner came it would all be over.

Even after he managed, with a few deep breaths, to relax enough to take the majority of the pressure off Starsky’s shaft, he realized that the cock inside him was no longer completely hard. And tears were falling on his back.

Starsky was bent over his body. The whispers were soft sounds only he could hear. “I can’t hurt you like this, Hutch. I’m so sorry.”

Acting purely on instinct, Hutch shifted enough to get his right hand and arm underneath himself, reaching toward his groin. His back complained bitterly but he ignored it. Starsky didn’t seem to understand what was happening but he lifted up. Hutch shoved his right hand between his own legs and found Starsky’s testicles, squeezing them.

From his contorted position, Hutch saw the look of shock on his partner’s face, felt those hands grab his buttocks in grips that would probably leave bruises. Deep inside him, Starsky’s cock stiffened and swelled again, thrusting deeper, so Hutch continued manipulating the tightening balls.

To Hutch, the pain became almost unbearable. It felt as if the walls of his canal were being sandpapered. He knew that would heal though. He was pretty damn sure Starsky’s penis was getting the same treatment and they’d need to be very gentle with each other for quite a while after this.

‘After this. Yes, goddammit, there will be an ‘after this’!’

Hutch began to realize that, even with the additional stimulation, Starsky achieving orgasm wasn’t a sure thing. Twisting his body a little more, he reached farther underneath himself for a better grip on Starsky’s sac. His precarious balance almost lost, he momentarily thought being impaled on his
partner’s rod was the only thing keeping him from falling over.

Starsky compensated for the imbalance and thrust harder and more deeply.

Hutch shifted again and a lance of pain shot through his back. He gasped, and unconsciousness threatened. With Starsky fully involved in his imminent completion, Hutch fought off the blackness and brought himself back to acute awareness. In a flash, he understood that he wanted, no needed to feel every instant of his partner’s experience through his own body. Living a fantasy he’d never even had, Hutch felt Starsky’s orgasm as if it were his own.

With a groan, Starsky broke the tape on the final event.

Hutch could barely breathe and sincerely hoped Starsky didn’t try to withdraw too soon or too quickly. He was pretty sure that would hurt as badly as anything yet. He could tell that Starsky was trying to wait for his erection to subside and therefore wasn’t ready for d’Ambrosia’s move.

From the corner of one pain-squinted eye, Hutch saw the man jump up from his chair, grab Starsky under the arms and drag him away from the mattress. “The camera has to see!”

Managing to stifle any sound this time, Hutch felt as if his insides had been ripped out.

“NO!” Starsky roared, the sound echoing around the bare walls.

Hutch fell over on his side.

Starsky angrily shook off d’Ambrosia’s hands and launched himself back to the mattress. Grabbing a towel, he pressed it up between Hutch’s thighs, against his bleeding rectum. Lifting one of the blankets, he spread it over Hutch’s shoulders and back.

Hutch held the towel and blanket in place while his partner turned to the camera, displaying the ejaculate. Hatred was plain on his face.

“Get out, d’Ambrosia.” Hutch knew his voice sounded weak but it was the best he could manage. “You got what you wanted. Now leave us alone.”

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Starsky never took his eyes off d’Ambrosia when the man looked at Tate questioningly.

Tate nodded and stopped the tape machine. He and his assistants began breaking down and loading up all the equipment, turning off the lights and disassembling them. They shut the generator down and hauled it out of the room. Everything was done with a minimum of fuss and in a surprisingly short amount of time. The only remaining light came through the openings under the roofline.

d’Ambrosia straightened his jacket, dropped his cigarette and ground it out. “I’ll have a copy of the tape sent to you. And there will be more copies in my safe deposit box addressed to the Chief of Police, the Mayor and all news media. In case either of you decides to renege on our deal.” When Starsky opened his mouth to protest, he added, “Oh, wrong word. Our arrangement.”

“Go to Hell, d’Ambrosia,” Starsky hissed. “Go directly to Hell. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars.” He tucked the blanket more securely around Hutch’s shoulders, trying to hurry warmth into his partner’s body.

d’Ambrosia did his thin-lipped smile. “Your weapons and car keys will be outside this door, Detectives. I trust we’ll never see each other again.” He turned and walked out of the room with the
last of his men.

“You should have let us kill ‘em, Mr. d’Ambrosia,” Starsky heard Cairo say. “They’re gonna be trouble.”

“Nonsense, Nicky, they’re mine now.”
Starsky waited until he and Hutch were alone and the last sounds of their captors had faded before pulling the second blanket around his own shoulders, realizing he had symptoms of shock himself. He was very cold and his hands were shaking.

Gathering Hutch in his arms he whispered into the tangled blond hair over the pain-creased forehead, “We gotta get you to a hospital, buddy.” His voice was raspy with emotions he couldn’t even identify. “You’re bleeding.”

“You’re not?” Hutch sounded disbelieving.

“Don’t think so.” Pulling the blanket more tightly around his partner’s shoulders, Starsky shook his head.

“Good. But no hospital, Star. I’m not hurt that badly.”

“You could be ruptured inside, Hutch. From the way you were twisted around, I could’ve... You don’t know --”

“I’m pretty sure. Pre-med, remember? The courses were all reading but I think I’d feel it if anything was torn. The pain’s already bearable.” He sat up straighter, making it obvious that what he said was true. “Besides… I really don’t want some intern’s fingers and instruments up my ass right now.”

Starsky did his best Groucho impersonation complete with eyebrow uplift and cigar-twirling hand wiggle. “My fingers and instrument enough for you, were they?”

Hutch chuckled softly, warmly. “Don’t you ever run out of one-liners, buddy?”

“That’ll be the day.”

“Not exactly the end to your welcome back party we anticipated, was it?”

“Not quite.”

“Can we go home now, you think?”

“If he didn’t lie to us,” Starsky gestured toward the open doorway, “our chariot awaits.” Still holding the blanket around his shoulders, he got to his feet, reached down and helped Hutch stand. He gathered their clothes, climbed into his and assisted Hutch, when needed, to do the same. The towel stayed between his partner’s legs, snugged up and held in place by his jeans.

“Can you walk?” Starsky was unable to completely mask the worry.

“Course I can, Star.” Hutch’s response sounded almost harsh. “I’m not dying.”

“I know you’re not.” Starsky did his best not to hover. “I’m only tryin’ --”

“I’m sorry, partner.” Hutch’s apologetic tone salved the hurt. “But I’m okay. Or I will be.”

Starting toward the door, Starsky put his arm around Hutch’s waist and although he sensed that it wasn’t needed, it was accepted. “Think you can sit? Or you want to lie down and put your head in my lap?”
“I’ll give sitting up a try. If that doesn’t work your lap sounds like a fine idea.” Hutch jabbed Starsky lightly in the ribs. “You’re a real mother hen, you know that?” The words were mean-spirited but the loving tone of voice removed any sting.

“I learned it from you.”

“Yeah, you probably did,” Hutch admitted. “I’ll be fine, Starsk. We both will. You’re hurt, too, you know. We’ll take care of each other.”

“Always.”

In the cavernous room outside their ‘stage,’ they found the weapons and car keys as promised. Starsky picked up both holstered guns plus his keys before putting his arm back around Hutch. They crossed the warehouse floor and exited through the huge opening where doors might someday preclude opportunistic kidnappers.

Outside it was mid-morning and Starsky wondered why that was surprising. Possibly because the horrors they had been forced to endure should belong to the night. The Torino sat in glorious sunshine and the sight lifted his spirits. Holding the passenger door open, Starsky watched, trying not to help, as Hutch gingerly slid onto the seat. Eventually he got the smile he needed.

“Tolerable,” Hutch decided.

Closing the door, Starsky hurried around to the driver’s side. Sitting down, he hissed when his weight settled on his abused rear end and he shot a grimace toward his partner. “As you say… tolerable.” He started the car and turned on the heat. “I’m cold. You?” Hutch only nodded but Starsky could feel the shivers through the seatback. Leaning over, he put the weapons on the floor at Hutch’s feet.

“Any idea where we are?” Hutch glanced around.

“Somewhere in the San Fernando Valley, I think. I see what looks like a freeway over there.” Starsky pointed. “Venice should be that way,” he added, gesturing over his shoulder.

It took a little time to find an exit out of the standing and downed chain link fencing surrounding the uncompleted, abandoned industrial park, then across the couple of miles to the freeway. “That’s what I thought,” Starsky said. “The four-oh-five. We’re almost home, Hutch. Well… almost almost.”

Starsky took the south onramp and blended into the late morning traffic. “Be there in an hour, tops. Unless there’s a wreck in the Sepulveda Pass.” He smiled ruefully. “The fates wouldn’t do that to us, too, would they?” He looked over at Hutch who was pale, holding the blanket tightly around himself. “Hey, you okay?”

“I just want to get home, Starsk.”

“Come ‘ere.” Hutch looked at him, uncertainty in his eyes. “I’m serious. Stretch out and put your head in my lap. You’ll be more comfortable.”

Without further urging, Hutch slid onto his left side and laid his head, wincing when his bruised cheek met fabric, on Starsky’s thigh.

“Go to sleep, if you can.” Starsky rested his right hand in the silky hair. “We’ll be there before you know it.”

Within minutes, Hutch’s breathing indicated that he had done as Starsky suggested. Rubbing his
right hand along Hutch’s arm while he drove, he made good time up and over the pass. No wrecks, thankfully.

Starsky slid his hand down to cover Hutch’s fist holding the blanket, slowly becoming aware of Hutch’s agitation. His partner shifted and moaned, shuddered and tried to throw off the covering. Starsky didn’t let go. Instead, he pulled the Torino to the shoulder of the freeway, flicked on the emergency lights, and put his left hand gently on Hutch’s head, running his fingers tenderly through the baby-fine strands. “Shhh, easy. It’s okay now. It’s over. Easy.”

Hutch awoke and looked around. Taking a deep breath, he entwined the fingers of Starsky right hand with his own. “I definitely do not want to sleep alone tonight, Starsk.”

Starsky kissed the blond hair. “Never alone again, Hutch.”

“I like the sound of that.” Hutch levered himself up on his left elbow and looked out the windshield. “Where are we?”

“Almost down to the Santa Monica Freeway. Not long now. How’re you feeling?”

Hutch was silent for a couple of breaths. “Not too bad.” He put his head back down and rubbed his cheek lightly against the denim-clad thigh. “But I can hardly wait to get home.”

With a wicked grin, Starsky pulled back out into traffic. “Your wish…”

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Starsky parked the Torino in front of Venice Place, hopped out and was hit with such a jolt of pain he staggered. Catching himself on the door, he stood up hoping Hutch hadn’t noticed his lapse, closed the car door and hurried around to the sidewalk. He waited in case his partner needed help getting out. Possibly because they were on a public street in broad daylight, Hutch got out by himself. Starsky picked up the holstered guns and gently kicked the door shut. Putting an arm around Hutch’s shoulders, as he figured he’d done at least a thousand times, they headed upstairs.

Inside the apartment, Hutch leaned against the wall while Starsky closed and locked the door, laying the weapons on the hall table. “Where to first, Hutch? Bed or bath?”

“Bath. We both need to soak in medicated salts.”

Starsky was happy to see Hutch walking pretty well as they both made it to the bathroom without falling over anything. No mean feat the way he felt.

“There’s a bag from True Health Pharmacy under the basin.” Hutch pointed to the cabinet. “According to Jessica everything we’ll need is in it.”

Starsky raised an eyebrow at that but didn’t voice his query. He found the specified bag and opened it on the counter, taking things out one at a time. There were tubes of medicated herbal ointment, a jar of medicated herbal bath salts, a container of pills, a very narrow bottle brush - of all things - a brand new chamois, still in its wrapper, a pair of scissors, a package of tiny rubber bands, an ear wash bulb and a box of organic stool softener tablets.

“I don’t think I even want to know what some of this stuff is for.” Starsky cocked an eyebrow at his partner. “Do I?”

“You’ll be intimate with all of it soon.” Hutch’s face almost held a smirk.
Starsky appreciated the attempt at levity and did his best to smother his concern.

“Don’t worry, Stark,” Hutch added, with a discernable trace of humor, “compared to what we’ve just been through, this’ll be a piece o’ cake.”

“Wouldn’t anything?” Starsky quipped, more than willing to feed Hutch’s attempt at lightening the mood.

Hutch actually smiled. “Probably.”

“What’s first?”

Hutch nodded toward the tub. “The hottest water we can stand. And add about two cups of the salts.”

Starsky started the tub filling, got the container of salts and measured several handfuls of the granules into the steaming water. ‘That looks like about two cups,’ he thought. Remembering what Ma always said though, he tossed in another handful, smiling at Hutch. *And a pinch for luck.*

Hutch’s eyes held fond understanding as did his nod.

After re-capping the salts container, Starsky picked up the pills and looked at Hutch.

“Two, each, with juice,” Hutch explained. “There’s orange in the fridge.”

“You okay for a minute?” Starsky didn’t like Hutch’s paleness and the way he was still leaning against the wall.

“I’m fine. Go.”

Starsky hurried to the kitchen, as fast as his aching body would carry him. He got the juice from the fridge and glasses from the cupboard, poured them full and put the o.j., back before retracing his steps to the bathroom.

Hutch was sitting on the john taking his shoes and socks off. “Never knew the simple act of sitting down could be so problematic.”

“There’s your ‘learned something new for today,’ then, partner.”

“I hate to quote Nicky Cairo but, stuff it!”

“Gladly! Just as soon as we’re both feelin’ better!”

Hutch laughed and it was the most glorious sound Starsky thought he’d ever heard. Handing one glass to Hutch, he shook out four pills. Hutch took two and swallowed them with his juice. Starsky did the same.

He checked the water level and temperature in the tub and began to shed his clothes, dumping them in the corner.

Hutch got up and took his clothes off, discarding each piece as if he never wanted to see it again. He turned around and leaned his hands against the wall, his body bent forward, so that Starsky could gently remove the towel from between his legs. It came away without sticking and Starsky’s relieved sigh was loud enough for Hutch to hear. “The bleeding’s stopped, right?”

“Seems to have.”
Hutch didn’t try to hide the same relief Starsky felt. “The tub’s big enough for both of us, Starsky. You need to soak, too.”

“Ya don’t gotta ask me twice!” Turning off the water while Hutch eased himself down into the healing solution, Starsky folded a towel and put it behind Hutch’s head on the edge of the tub. “Slide down, babe, get those bruises in the water.”

“You need room, buddy. It’s not that big a tub.”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll manage.” Starsky put all the supplies back in the bag, placed it next to the tub at his end and climbed in. Working his legs down beside Hutch’s hips, his feet under Hutch’s back, he rubbed his toes gently against possibly-injured ribs, eliciting a moan of pleasure. “No sleeping yet, Hutch. This is a medical procedure.” He squeezed Hutch’s knees. “What’s next? The ointment?”

“No, that’s for after we’re dry.” Hutch sat up a little straighter and appeared to concentrate. “This part’s not going to be much fun.”

Starsky sent a lop-sided grin toward the other end of the tub. “As opposed to everything else that’s happened today?”

Hutch’s return smile was definitely rueful.

“Still a piece o’ cake, though, right?” Starsky tried to get the levity back.

“Stale, maybe.”

Starsky tightened his hands on Hutch’s knees. “I like stale cake!”

“I remember.” Hutch’s color was getting better and the sky-blue eyes were looking directly at Starsky again, focused.

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“That wasn’t so bad.” Starsky dropped the ear bulb on the floor. “Now we let the salts do their thing in there for a while, right?”

“I think the instructions say thirty minutes.” Hutch’s eyes were closed.

“More hot water.” Starsky twisted around, let water out and turned the hot tap on. When he got the temp and level to where he wanted them, he turned back and settled again. “Okay… Tell me about Jessica.”

Hutch opened his eyes and, from the look on his face, Starsky could tell his partner wasn’t sure what kind of reaction he might get. But Starsky wasn’t interested in causing Hutch any more pain or embarrassment, he was simply curious. He gave his friend all his quiet attention.

“She and her partner, Alicia, own the True Health Organic Grocery and Pharmacy. You’ve been there with me. I think you’ve met them both.”

“Yeah, I have. Jessica’s tall, lean but strong, has curly gray hair, steely eyes, wire rim glasses, wears sensible clothes and shoes. Alicia’s a few inches shorter, slender, short brown hair, brown eyes, wears hats and tailored suits.” He stroked Hutch’s calves and ankles.

“Excellent brief descriptions, Starsky. You should think about joining the police force.”

Starsky smiled at the old line and waited.
“We got talking a few months ago,” Hutch continued. “I’d been fantasizing about you and me for a while and had some questions. I knew Jessica and Alicia were gay… No, I guess they’re lesbians, but you know what I mean. They’re in a relationship and have been for twenty years.”

Starsky read the uncertainty in his partner’s eyes. He waited, putting all his love and support into his gaze.

Hutch looked away, clearly embarrassed. “I asked about, you know, ‘first time’ things…. What happens, what to expect, what kind of problems can occur. Stuff like that.”

“Yeah. Regular grocery store conversation.”

Hutch looked back and smiled. “She and Alicia were both concerned that we get things right, that we didn’t hurt each other.”

“Wait a minute.” Starsky sat up straighter. “They knew you were talking about me?”

Hutch stroked his leg. “Settle down, Starsk. Of course they knew. They’d met you, remember? Alicia said all she had to do was look at us once and she knew we were in love.”

Hutch glanced away again, color rising in his neck and face. ‘My God, he’s blushing,’ Starsky thought. ‘After everything that’s happened this morning, my partner is embarrassed about a couple of ladies knowing we’re in love with each other. No wonder I’m crazy about him!’

“We didn’t have a clue,” Hutch continued, “but she and Jessica knew right away.”

Starsky considered that for a minute. “We’re going to have to be careful, Hutch. If it’s written all over us, we could be in trouble.”

“I know. But we’ll just have to deal with whatever happens. Especially if we want to bring d’Ambrosia down.”

“Oh, we’ll bring him down,” Starsky vowed, with fervor.

Hutch smiled at that. “Okay. Well, anyway, Jessica helped me put this bag of supplies together for whenever I got up enough courage to admit my feelings. She was pretty sure you’d be amenable but I wasn’t.”

“You thought I’d ask Dobey for a new partner. That’s what you said, right?”

“It was one possibility.” Hutch’s expression clouded.

“And were there others? Possibilities, I mean?” Hutch looked surprised and Starsky showered him with a face-splitting smile. “Did it ever occur to you that I might feel the same way?”

“No. Honestly, it didn’t.” Hutch’s gorgeous face showed so many emotions Starsky couldn’t begin to sort them out. “You’ve always seemed to have a problem with gays and the whole lifestyle. You said yourself this morning that you only realized, after I kissed you, that you were in love with me.”

“I’m not sure exactly when I knew.” Starsky tried to sort through the recent revelations. “Everything was so mixed up there for a while today. At first, my mind was all bent out of shape about the idea of being forced to fuck you in front of all those perverts, or dying that way ourselves.” He stopped, trying to arrange his scrambled thinking. “In all the fantasies I’d had about us, force or coercion was never involved. We made love with each other. And it was sweet, and gentle, and… perfect.”
He turned around, letting water out of the tub and adding more hot. Hutch waited patiently and Starsky had never been more grateful. He tried again to get his thoughts in order.

“Suddenly, that bastard was demanding we do those things under penalty of a really, really ugly death. And as badly as I’d been wanting to I knew I could never do that to you because I didn’t think you’d want it.” He rubbed his hands along Hutch’s calves. “My fantasies were mine, Hutch. I couldn’t get my head around us being forced to do something I’d dreamed of, but hadn’t had the courage to talk to you about.” He looked at his smirking tub-mate. “This isn’t making a lot of sense, is it?”

“Not a whole lot. But go on.”

“Well, like I said, my mind was a mess. I didn’t want you to find out I’d been thinking those things, hoped I’d been hiding them. I thought you might ask Dobey for a new partner.” Hutch laughed. “I guess I was talking a blue streak.” He looked appraisingly into his lover’s smiling eyes. “You probably thought I’d lost it. Didn’t you?”

Hutch appeared momentarily embarrassed. “‘Meltdown’ was the word that came to mind.”

“You were close, believe me.” He took another breath. “Then you kissed me. And things suddenly made sense. I knew I really had fallen in love with you somewhere along the way.”

Hutch rubbed both hands along Starsky’s legs. “And you say I think too much.”

“Yeah.”

Realizing the water had cooled off again, Starsky sat up, reached behind and pulled the drain plug. “We’ve got to get out before we catch pneumonia!” Starsky got up carefully, pulled the shower curtain around and then inside the tub. Reaching down, he helped Hutch stand up. “You feeling any better?”

“I sure am. It’s pretty amazing, really. You?”

“Yeah.” Starsky realized it was true. “Much.” He reached down and gently touched his flaccid cock, looked up at Hutch, amazed. “Gee, my dick doesn’t feel like it’s been sandpapered anymore.”

Hutch felt his own slack shaft and nodded. “We’ll have to tell Jessica those salts really work!”

Starsky turned on the taps, adjusting the temperature, and pulled the lever for the shower. Living another of his fantasies, he gently washed and rinsed Hutch’s entire body.

Afterward, he stood, as placidly as possible, while Hutch did the same to him. Starsky couldn’t imagine what he’d ever done to deserve this man who stood in front of him but he vowed to do his best for the rest of his life to be worthy.

Drying each other lovingly, Starsky hung his towel on the rack. Turning, he put his hands on either side of his new lover’s waist, tilted his face up and kissed him, making sure only his hands and lips were in contact. He did not want to start anything, he just wanted Hutch to know he was loved. The kiss was returned but before it could get heavy Starsky stepped back. “Bed now?”

Hutch stepped forward and kissed him again, lightly. “Yeah, Starsk. But on top of the covers.”

“Okie dokie.”

On the way out of the bathroom, Starsky snagged Hutch’s terrycloth robe plus his own spare one
from the back of the door and grabbed the bag of supplies off the floor.

Realizing he was feeling much better, Hutch led the way to the bedroom. “We’ll have to take Jessica and Alicia out to a very special dinner as a Thank You for all their help.”

“You bet! First chance we get.”

Hutch spread the huge towel he’d grabbed from the linen closet on the bed before donning the robe Starsky handed him. He sat down on the edge of the bed very gingerly and was pleasantly surprised to find that there was little pain. He was able to move into the middle and stretch out with only a slight grimace.

“You really are feeling better!” Starsky slipped his robe on.

“Yeah, partner. I really are.”

That got a smile as Starsky sat on the edge of the bed next to Hutch’s hip. “What’s next?”

“Next is the ointment. But we have to make the swab first.” Hutch reached out and put a hand behind Starsky’s neck, kneading gently. “Before that though, I’d just like to hold you for a minute. Is that okay with you?”

“No,” Starsky replied, mock-sternly, a glint in his eyes. “How ’bout ten? Or twenty? Or a billion?”

“Billion’s good.” Hutch pulled his partner to him, wrapping him in his arms. “We’re alive, Starsk,” he said, wonderingly, into the curly hair. “Do you believe that? I’m not sure I do yet.”

“Oh, I do.”

Starsky cuddled into Hutch’s arms, nestling his head into the hollow at his throat. Hutch never thought that he and Starsky would fit together so perfectly. ‘Of all the times we’ve held each other it was never like this and I didn’t realize.’ Hutch tightened his arms around his lover and threw a leg over his thighs, trying to draw the wiry body more closely to him. He knew his breath was ragged but he couldn’t seem to do anything about it.

“What’s wrong?”

Getting himself under control again, Hutch lessened his strangle hold. “Nothing, really.” He drew a deep breath and felt Starsky gently stroke his back. “I was just thinking we almost lost this chance. We’ve been so afraid, we didn’t --”

Starsky pressed fingers lightly against his lips. “Shhh… It’s over, Hutch. We’re together. We’re in love. And we’ll always be both of those things.”

Hutch leaned back enough to look into the indigo eyes he adored. “Promise?”

“Indubitably.”

Hutch laughed and allowed his hungry mouth to capture the soft lips being offered. He kissed them and the kiss was returned. Crushing his partner to him, he pressed harder against the willing mouth, urging the lips apart and plundering the warm cavity with his questing tongue. He never wanted the discovery of Starsky’s lips and teeth and tongue to end.
Starsky felt his left arm going to sleep but was loathe to move in case he woke Hutch. Instead, he allowed his eyes to feast on the face so close to his. He had felt his lover’s distress earlier, when Hutch had realized that they’d come very close to dying without ever telling each other their true feelings. But to Starsky, that was past, and he would need to help Hutch put it behind him, too. This was their future. Together. And together they’d go after d’Ambrosia, bring him down, and never look back.

Satisfied with that scenario, Starsky glanced around at the mess they’d made of the room. The bedspread and sheets were tangled, robes were on the floor, and the supplies from the bag were all over the place.

They’d constructed a swab using the bottle brush, chamois and tiny rubber bands, slathered it with the medicated ointment and treated each other’s intestinal tracts. They had dredged up every raunchy joke and bit of very dark humor they could think of, remember, or invent, laughed girlish-sounding giggles and barroom guffaws while smothering each other in endless kisses, passionate and soothing. The swab was now on a towel at the foot of the bed, the re-capped tube of ointment next to it, both ready for tomorrow morning’s application.

Starsky had fallen asleep with Hutch’s fingers ‘cloud dancing’ up and down his back and along his right arm. Feather touches he could barely feel but that had sent his soul flying. Remembering, he almost felt those sensations again, and smiled.

“What’s so funny?” Hutch murmured in his ear.

Starsky turned his head and looked into the now-open sky blue eyes. “Nothing, just thinking.”

“About what?”

“‘bout how much I love you.”

Hutch visibly melted. “I love you, too, Stark. Somehow, in all the years we’ve known each other, all the times we’ve taken care of each other, I never realized how gentle your hands are.”

“When they’re touching you, Hutch, they only want to be gentle. Take away all your hurt.”

Hutch closed his eyes in obvious contentment and Starsky thought he might go back to sleep. Before long though, his lover opened his eyes again and, from the intensity of the look in them, Starsky knew an important question was about to be asked.

“How did you know it would be that bad?”

Starsky would have thought he was ready to answer anything Hutch wanted to ask but now he wasn’t so sure. He must have taken too long trying to decide what to say because Hutch jostled him gently.

“It’s been done to you.... Hasn’t it?”

Knowing he couldn’t begin this part of their relationship with anything less than complete honesty, Starsky nodded. “In ‘Nam. The platoon I was assigned to had a sergeant who thought it was his right to initiate all the newbies. And he had enough guys who agreed with him, that…”

Hutch’s arms tightened around him and Starsky knew what the next words would be.

“He raped you.”
“He sure did.”

“Did you report it?”

“Aw, Hutch. You have no idea how much of that kind of stuff went on. If I’d reported it he would have denied it and his guys would have backed him up. So I didn’t bother.”

Starsky thought Hutch was probably unaware he was doing it, but his fingers began ‘cloud dancing’ up and down his back. “I’m so sorry, Starsk.”

“’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

“You tried to prepare me for it.”

“I tried. But there really are no words, are there?”

“No. I guess not.”

Hutch’s silent consolation and unquestioning support did more to heal those old emotional scars than all the counseling Starsky’d endured after he got back from the war. He also knew his partner wasn’t going to let the discussion end there.

“What happened to the sergeant?”

“He got killed.” Starsky’s voice was as cold as his memory.

“How?”

“I didn’t kill him.”

“No, of course not, Starsk. I never meant to --”

“I wanted to,” Starsky quickly interrupted, “believe me. Thought about it for days. But I didn’t. A ‘Cong sniper took care of it for me. And for all the other newbies he’d ‘initiated.’ I don’t think a single member of the squad was very sorry when he bought it. Maybe the two guys he’d taken as fuck buddies but I doubt it. I know I wasn’t.”

Starsky realized he didn’t want to talk about the war any more right then. He disentangled himself from Hutch’s limbs and sat up. “I’m hungry.”

Hutch laughed and sat up with him. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Shit, Hutch! We haven’t eaten since last night, and what is it now?” He glanced at the bedside clock. “Geez, it’s nearly six o’clock. I’m starved!”

Hutch climbed out of bed and picked up his robe.

Starsky swung his legs over the edge of the bed and caught his lover as he passed. Pulling the blond between his knees, he wrapped his arms around the slim waist, filling his hands with terry-cloth-covered buns. “Later, Hutch, okay? I’ll tell you about it later.”

Hutch’s hands gathered fistfuls of Starsky’s hair and lips brushed the top of his head. “Any time, Starsk. We’ve got the rest of our lives.” Hutch stepped back, took his hand, pulled him to his feet and started toward the kitchen.

Starsky grabbed his robe from the floor and slipped into the comfort. His spirits fell though when
Hutch got out eggs and a frying pan. “Aw, Hutch, I was hopin’ we could order a pizza.”

Hutch threw a scowl at him which he had no choice but to catch. “Only easily digestible food for a couple of days, partner. Can’t put any strain on the plumbing.”

“Spoil sport.”

“Here…” Hutch held out the whisk, “take your sulk out on the eggs, while I cut up some mushrooms and toast the bread.”

*******

Starsky didn’t usually remember his dreams. Even while he was dreaming though, he knew he’d remember this one.

He was pacing, waiting for Hutch to come out of the bathroom. What was he doing in there all this time? Throwing himself face down on the bed, he hiked his robe up over his ass and spread his legs because he wanted to give Hutch a good view when he came back. A view of what was waiting for him as soon as they were both healed.

Having exposed himself like a two dollar whore, Starsky found himself flushing bright red. Geez, he hadn’t blushed since grade school, that day Marsha Dawson caught him and Sally… No, he wouldn’t think about that. Hutch would be back any second and he wanted to be calm and composed.

Hutch. His Hutch, his love, now his lover. Hutch of the gorgeous body, the lean flanks and sculpted legs, perfectly formed hairless chest and strong, supportive, comforting arms. Hutch of the soft blond hair that was so silky he wanted to run his fingers through it all the time. Hutch of the beautiful, expressive face, incandescent smile and sky-blue eyes, eyes in which he could so easily lose himself.

Hutch of the long-fingered hands that made such beautiful music with his guitar, or calmed a child’s tears, or handled his Python with deadly precision, or stroked his partner’s back when he collapsed in poisoned pain.

Hutch of the perfect genitals. Oh, God, yes, those perfect genitals. How he yearned to have his mouth around that huge, rigid shaft again, his hands massaging the firm, toned globes of his ass, and those marvelous balls, his fingers finding and stroking his lover’s core…

Starsky woke up to the velvety feel of a soft kiss on his left buttock. He hadn’t heard Hutch come back into the room.

His lover laughed, a seductive sound right next to his ear. “Thought you’d fall asleep on me, did you? Dreaming about us, were you?”

“No!” Starsky denied, slightly flustered. Relenting immediately, he laughed into the pillow. “I was dreaming about you. In all your blond glory. I love your body, Hutch.” He rolled over and allowed his eyes to devour their prey in the low ambient light from the street. “Did you ever wonder why I’ve been waiting for you outside the gym lately? It’s because I started getting hard whenever I saw you naked.” He looked sheepishly up at his beloved, mostly hidden in the shadows, the golden hair glowing as if with its own light. “Guess that could’ve been a clue, right? Should’ve known I was falling for you?”

“Probably.” Hutch laughed and climbed into bed. “That could’ve been a subtle indication.”

Starsky drew him in and held him, feeling the chuckle vibrate through his body. “Must’ve been
asleep that day in clue class.”

“Wouldn’t be at all surprised.”

Starsky trailed light kisses all over Hutch’s face, along the strong jaw and down the smooth aftershave-scented throat. ‘He shaved! For me!’ Nibbling his way toward an ear, Starsky realized something was different. He looked up and did the proverbial double-take. “It’s gone!” Hutch tried to duck his head but Starsky put both hands to the sides of his face and held it firmly, his thumbs caressing the hairless upper lip. “Why?”

Hutch wove his hands inside Starsky’s, his own thumbs lightly tracing the lines of Starsky’s pout. “I noticed your mouth was red and a little swollen.”

“Really?” He started to roll over and get up, headed for the bathroom mirror.

Hutch caught his arm and pulled him back into a firm embrace. “Narcissist. You never liked it anyway, admit it.”

Still staring at the newly naked lip, Starsky shrugged. “I didn’t at first. But I got used to it a long time ago.” Suddenly, the lip caressing got to him and, putting all the seduction he could muster into his gaze and voice, he murmured, “Whaddaya wanna do now, Blondie?”

“I, uh... I think…” Hutch stammered, “we’re both pretty tired. Why don’t we get some sleep?”

“Don’t wanna go to sleep now,” Starsky crooned. “Wanna look at you. Look at your eyes, your beautiful moustache-less face, touch your hair --”

“Guess we’ve both got it bad because that’s all I want to do, too. I love your eyes, Starsk. They’re the most amazing blue I’ve ever seen. Where’d you get eyes that color?”

“I’m an elf.”

“What? Where did that come from?”

“I have no idea.” Starsky was genuinely surprised himself.

“Well, it wouldn’t surprise me. I love your childlike qualities, your enthusiasm, your compassion, your way with kids and the elderly, your --”

“Aw, Hutch,” Starsky cut in, feeling the heat rise in his face, “you’re gonna turn my head if you don’t quit that.”

“And your tricks.” Hutch kissed the tip of Starsky’s nose. “Did you learn about prostates in the army, too? It was my prostate you found when you sucked me off, right?”

“Yeah, it was.” Starsky laughed, but there was sadness in it. “Did it blow your mind?”

“You know it did. And now I understand exactly what that phrase means. I felt like the top of my head had come off.”

“It was ‘Nam.” Realizing that there would never be a better time, Starsky gathered his thoughts. “After my… initiation, a guy named Jim Carver picked me up and half-carried me to his hooch. He gave me some towels and a tin of salve. Told me to get the bleeding stopped then put the salve as far up my ass as I could.” He tried a lop-sided smile. “He didn’t have a neat swab like we do.” Hutch silently stroked his back. “He went to stand at the door while I did what he said.”
Starsky took a deep breath. “When I’d gotten myself together, I discovered I could still walk and went over to stand next to Jim. Outside three guys were strolling around like circling sharks. You’d think there was blood in the water or something.”

“There was, Starsk. Your blood.”

“I guess. Anyway, Jim draped an arm over my shoulders and stared at them. After about a minute they walked away.”

“So, you became lovers.” It was a soft statement, not a question.

“No, Hutch. It wasn’t like that! We became friends. Turned out he was from The Bronx so we’d’ve been buds anyway. But he was a really good guy. Loved his folks, couldn’t wait to get home and go back to his manager’s job at the local Ace Hardware. Had a girl waiting for him and everything. We liked each other so we looked out for each other.”

Starsky buried his face in his partner’s shoulder for a few breaths before he looked back into the compassionate sky-blue eyes. “You can’t imagine what it was like over there, Hutch. And thank God you can’t! But I think it was the most fucked up conflict we’ve ever been in. I got there just before the real nasty stuff started happening and nobody on our side, and I mean nobody, from the lowest grunt to the highest brass, seemed to know anything about how to win a war. It was cluster-fuck time.”

Rattled from the memories, Starsky untangled himself from Hutch’s arms and sat up on the edge of the bed, his back to his partner. “Patrols would go out supposedly to engage the enemy and call in air strikes,” he went on, his voice tightly controlled, “but the enemy wasn’t where intel said they’d be. Other patrols went out to sweep territory supposedly free of the VC and got ambushed. So more units had to be sent out to help them.” Looking down at his clenched fists, he made the effort to relax his fingers. “Sometimes guys fell through the ceilings of tunnels where whole companies of VC were camped.”

He half-turned so that he could look at Hutch again, silently pleading with him not to speak. If Hutch said anything now he wasn’t sure he’d be able to continue. “The country was honeycombed with tunnels, Hutch. It must be how they got from one place to another without being spotted from the air. It was a nightmare!”

He took a breath. He’d never told anyone any of this but Hutch deserved to hear everything. He stretched out his right hand and Hutch took it.

“Snipers had nests in trees and picked off anybody that crossed their sights. Stake pits were everywhere and if you fell in one it was almost guaranteed you’d lose a limb, at the very least. They coated the sharp tips with dung so that infection would set in right away before you could be evac’ed out.”

Hutch’s fingers tightened, conveying total support and empathy.

“Everybody was scared. All the time. And believe me, Hutch, constant terror gets to you after a while. Two ways the guys tried to cope with it were drugs and sex. Jim and I had been out on patrols where half the guys were floating from weed and the other half were wired with hard stuff. We decided we didn’t want to go down that road. So once in a while, when the stress got to be too much, we’d get each other off with a blow-job.”

He looked beseechingly into his partner’s eyes. “Believe me, Hutch, that’s all it was. We just tried to keep ourselves sane.”
“I know, Stark. It’s okay.” He opened his arms and Starsky slid into them. “He taught you everything you know and I’m grateful.”

“What?” Starsky couldn’t hide his surprise.

“If you hadn’t known what to do this morning, we’d be dead.”

Starsky had to think about that before he nodded.

Hutch began stroking his back again. “Where is he now?”

“Arlington National Cemetery. He got killed a week before he was due to go home.”

“Aw, Stark…”

“A stupid routine patrol into an area the VC had abandoned, according to intel.” Starsky’s anger at the memory coated his words. “Jim was point man so the sniper got him first. Then the Lieutenant. That shot’s the one that let me spot him. He didn’t get anybody else. The LT wasn’t hurt bad but Jim was dead. The bullet went through his helmet and exploded his head. He never knew what hit him. Which is the only good thing about it, I guess.”

Starsky rolled onto his back. “After I got home, I went to see his parents. Drove them down to Arlington to see his grave. They’d been so distraught they hadn’t been able to make it for the burial. Told them what a good friend he’d been, that he’d saved my life more times than I could count, that he’d done his country proud. I hope it did them some good.”

“I’m sure it did. But he helped you and that’s all I care about. As selfish as it sounds, he was one of the reasons you lived through all that. You’re what’s important to me. Plus…” He grinned at Starsky. “You remembered about prostates.”

Starsky couldn’t come up with a grin but at least his sadness had been lifted. “Thought it might take your mind off that part of the ordeal.” He rolled back into the waiting embrace.

“It sure did!” Hutch kissed his forehead lightly. “I was thinking too much, exactly what you asked me not to do, and was afraid I wasn’t going to be able to come that second time.”

“But your thinking saved our lives in the last event, Hutch. If you hadn’t twisted yourself up like a pretzel, grabbed my nuts when you did, and stuck your finger in my ass, I’d never have been –”

“I did what?”

“You stuck your finger up my ass. Just after you snagged my jewels.” He searched his partner’s unsure face. “Don’t you remember?”

“No. I don’t.” Hutch seemed to be reliving those moments. “I recall scrunching up and getting my hand under both of us so that I could reach your sac…. I started to lose my balance, you shifted, I moved… my back screamed and I faded for a second. I know I wanted to feel your orgasm so that’s what I concentrated on, until d’Ambrosia dragged you out of me. I had my finger…?”

“Yep, and it put me right over the edge. I came like I’ve never come in my life before.” He smiled and inched in for another kiss. “Thank you. And please put that in your arsenal for the future. Okay?”

“You’re welcome.” Hutch smiled radiantly. “And I sure will.”
Starsky snuggled against the warm, smooth chest.

Hutch leaned back and looked into Starsky’s sleepy gaze. “Where exactly did your inspiration come from when you kissed me… what I think one of the peanut gallery called ‘tongue fuckin’’?”

“Ah, you heard that. I wasn’t sure.” Starsky stroked Hutch’s cheek. “I couldn’t think of anything else to do. I knew we were in trouble and I wanted to stop you from thinking about anything except what your cock was doing.” He caressed Hutch’s cheek. “Inside me.”

“Well it worked. And I’ll want you to do it again as soon as we’re both capable of that much activity.”

“You’re on, pal. That’ll go right at the top of the list.”
Hutch looked over Starsky’s head and discovered it was nearly morning. They had slept and snuggled, petted and kissed, dozed and held each other all night. They hadn’t talked any more about the ordeal but it had been there constantly, the proverbial elephant. Starsky’s arms tightened around him and he knew his partner was awake.

“I’m wonderin’…” Starsky murmured.

Hutch brushed Starsky’s shoulder with a kiss. “Yeah?”

“What are we going to tell Dobey?… And when?”

Hutch had been wondering the same thing. “I think we should wait until we get the tape…. If we get the tape.”

“Oh, we’ll get it.” Starsky rolled onto his back, his right hand entwining the fingers of Hutch’s left hand that had come to rest on his chest. “And you’re right. It’s the only way we’ll be able to prove we were forced.” He sat up abruptly. “Oh, shit! I hope he doesn’t somehow leave out the audio track. Or have it dubbed over.”

“He won’t.” Hutch pulled Starsky back down. Absent-mindedly he combed his fingers through the thick chest hair that had almost covered all the scars until he found a nipple. “He wants us to hear his voice, commanding us, lording it over us, making us obey him. He’ll leave the sound.”

“You’re right, I know you’re right.” Starsky covered Hutch’s hand, stopping the movement.

“But we can only tell Dobey,” Hutch decided. “We don’t want anybody else on d’Ambrosia’s radar, they could be in danger. Also, we’re going to have to be really careful about how we go after the sonavabitch.”

Starsky nodded. “Until we can tell Dobey, we won’t have any official reason to dig into d’Ambrosia’s activities.”

“And you know Dobey’ll be expecting us to carry our usual load of cases. We’ll have to do the digging on our own time.”

“We can do that.”

“If d’Ambrosia finds out we’re doing anything at all he could release the tape.”

“What would happen if he did?” Starsky sounded pissed. “Would it really be so bad? I mean, how could he explain why he even had the thing? Wouldn’t he be incriminating himself? Coercion of a police officer’s a crime, isn’t it? And if it isn’t, it sure as hell should be!”

“I doubt seriously if anybody would bother to ask how he got it. They’d be so busy ruining our careers he’d probably laugh himself silly.”

“But then he’d be back to square one, wouldn’t he? Having to find other cops to subvert?”

“He would if he thinks that far in advance.”

“This is making me crazy.” Starsky pulled himself up and leaned against the head of the bed.
Hutch moved closer and buried his face in the chest pelt, his arms snaking around the slim body. “On second thought we should tell Huggy, too.” He felt Starsky stiffen and continued quickly. “I realize I said only Dobey but I think we have to make an exception with Huggy.”

From the tension in Starsky’s body, he didn’t like the idea of bringing their friend into this. “If Huggy discovers he’s been kept out of the loop, he’ll never forgive us. You know that.” Hutch tightened his arms around the rigid frame. “Huggy deserves to be included in whatever we’re going to do.” He looked up at his unconvinced partner. “Besides, he’s probably got cousins who can be trusted and might be able to help.”

“Okay,” Starsky finally agreed. After a few moments, he asked a quiet question. “You think this’ll finish us as cops, Hutch?”

“Probably. When what we did becomes public, and it will almost have to if there’s a trial, we’ll lose our badges for sure. Coercion doesn’t have any meaning for some people.”

Starsky’s arms tightened around him. “We’ll worry about that when it happens then, partner. Not before. Okay?”

“Okay.”

*******

Starsky called his mother Sunday morning, apologizing profusely for not having called earlier in the weekend. “No, Ma, everything’s fine, I’m fine, Hutch’s fine. We just had an incredible party Friday night, and yesterday… well, yesterday, Ma… you wouldn’t have wanted me to call…. Yeah, yesterday was kinda rough.” He grimaced at Hutch, hating the obfuscation, listened for another minute and held the phone out.

Hutch smiled and took it. “Hi, Mom.” Listening for a while, he rocked his head, did an eye-roll, nodded, listened some more, nodded some more, all while Starsky tried to keep from laughing out loud. “No, really, Mom,” he managed to wedge into the verbal onslaught, “he’s doing great. We just had a tough day yesterday… right, after the party…. Yeah, I know, your Starsky men sure can drink when the occasion warrants.” He raised his eyebrows and Starsky had to turn away. “You’d have been proud of him Friday though, Mom,” he went on hurriedly. “He ran down a murder suspect… the guy was in his car, David was on foot….”

Starsky turned back around and Hutch grinned at him. “That’s right,” Hutch told his mother. “Caught him with the probable murder weapon right there in the glove compartment, too…. We’re pretty sure he had killed a small-time fence… you know, a seller of stolen goods…. Well, he must have figured no one would care about somebody like that…. Yes, ma’am, he figured wrong.”

Starsky felt heat rising to his face and turned away to make a fresh pot of coffee.

“It was probably in yesterday’s papers,” Hutch continued. “Maybe even today’s. I’ll make sure David sends you everything…. We’ll go out and get them right now…. Yes, ma’am, uh, Mom, I will…. You, too. Here’s David.”

Starsky took the receiver, shaking his head. “Me again, Ma…. Yeah, I heard… sure, be happy to.” He rolled his eyes at his partner. “I will, Ma, promise…. Love you, too…. Call ya Friday. G’bye.” He hung up the phone and looked at Hutch. “That went well.”

Starsky turned off the coffee pot and they left immediately, glad to have an excuse to get out of the apartment. It was a beautiful spring day and the slow walk to the market was enjoyable. During the
stroll, Starsky realized that their injuries, all of them, were healing remarkably well.

In every area newspaper, both the fat Sunday ones, and the leftovers from Saturday, numerous articles detailed the pursuit and capture of murder suspect, Maynard Mathison. One Saturday paper included an exclusive photo of Starsky running over the roof of a car in bumper-to-bumper congestion. ‘Detective Sergeant David Starsky dashing through traffic, approaching the fleeing man’s escape vehicle,’ the caption read. The photograph was credited to a Japanese tourist.

Starsky shuddered, knowing his mother would have words to say about the risks he took. “She’ll love that one.”

“I’ll bet the photographer made enough off that picture to pay for his plane ticket home.”


“He deserves it. That was a once in a lifetime shot!” Hutch paid for the papers plus their few purchases and they headed home.

On impulse, Starsky threw his arm around Hutch’s shoulders. This was Venice, where tolerance was king. And where, if anyone cared to count, he’d probably had his arm around Hutch’s shoulders hundreds of times. Well, maybe dozens. More than a few anyway.

Hutch transferred the papers to his other side and wrapped his free arm around Starsky’s waist. They both smiled all the way back.

*******

Starsky knew from his reflection in the mirror Monday morning that he didn’t have any facial bruises that would cause comment. Most of the blows he’d taken had been to his body and clothing covered those now-colorful places.

Hutch, on the other hand, had one brightly hued bruise on his left cheek that would be noticeable.

“Which one of the bastards did that?”

“No idea. They probably weren’t very gentle with us during transport either, though. Could have happened any time before we woke up.”

“We should have bought some makeup yesterday, when we were at the market.” Starsky turned Hutch’s face one way and another, studying the garish colors.

Hutch broke away and went to the hall closet. Starsky leaned against the door jamb while his partner rummaged all the way to the back of every shelf leaving towels, rolls of toilet paper, a spare shower curtain, as well as other odds and ends, scattered on the floor. Emerging triumphant at last, something clutched in his right hand, Hutch came back into the bathroom. “Found it!”

Starsky took the jar and read the label. “Aw, Hutch, you’ll be my Cover Girl.” Hutch reached for the jar but Starsky held it away. “Gonna let me apply it? I’m a licensed beautician.”

“Hair only, Starsky.”

Hutch made a grab, over reaching when Starsky pulled his hand back. The resulting melee of tickling and wrestling lasted until the structural integrity of the john and basin cabinet were in serious jeopardy. Not to mention the potential for additional bruises to their bodies and extremities.
“Uncle!” Starsky hardly recognized his own voice he was laughing so hard.

Hutch rolled off him, their arms, legs and towels entangled to the point that it took a minute to figure out what went where.

Starsky, still chuckling, left Hutch in the bathroom to shave. In the kitchen, he got boxes of Grape Nuts and Capt’n Crunch out of the cabinet, juice and milk from the fridge, then cut up one of the peaches they’d bought the day before. Putting everything on the table, along with bowls and utensils, he started the coffee.

When he went back into the bathroom he found Hutch staring at himself in the mirror. “You’re beautiful, babe,” Starsky whispered, kissing a shoulder.

Hutch smiled at Starsky’s reflection before turning and kissing the real lips. “Okay,” he sighed, drawing back. “Work your magic, Mr. Tyrone.”

******

Starsky figured he’d done a decent makeup job. They’d been at work the whole morning and comments, both joking and complimentary, about the moustache’s absence were all they’d heard. Starsky breathed a sigh of relief. The loss of the caterpillar had been a great distraction. He found himself staring at that naked lip often during the day and had to bring himself up short. ‘Somehow, we’ve got to separate work from home. Good luck doing that, Starsky,’ he told himself.

That evening, after an all day marathon of making sure every ‘t’ was crossed and each ‘i’ dotted in their Mathison reports, he and Hutch waited until the last of the detectives had left. Before the night shift came in they dug out every mug book in the precinct and found an empty interview room.

“You labeled him ‘Deadhead’?” Hutch turned another page.

“Ummmm.” Starsky was paying more attention to the faces he was studying than his explanation. “No color in his skin, eyes, or hair. Like he was…” He looked at Hutch, “deceased.”


“Not yet.” Starsky searched more pages. “You haven’t found ‘Burn Scar’ either though, right? Or ‘Smiley’?”

“Nope. And this is the last book we’ve got. We’ve both been through all of them. Which makes me…” Hutch closed his volume and caught Starsky’s eyes.

“That maybe they were out of town talent.”

“We know Cairo and Tate because they’re from around here. But what if…”

“d’Ambrosia brought these clowns with him from wherever else he’s got operations,” Starsky finished.

“That’s why they’re not in our books.”

“Makes sense.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me yet, Starsk.” Hutch laced his fingers on top of his book. “d’Ambrosia investigates a city’s police department, chooses its top cops, does his intimidation thing, sets up shop and gets his operation in gear and… what? Just leaves? Takes his goons with him? I’ve never heard
of such a thing.”

Starsky mimicked his partner’s pose. “What if he has a… what’s the word I want… conglomeration!” Hutch nodded with a smirk. Starsky smiled. “So he’s got a conglomeration, a cadre of bad guys who go with him to the new city but he gets ex-cons and other out-of-work hoods in each location to stay behind and keep his enterprises functioning when he’s not there.”

“I imagine,” Hutch nodded in agreement, “that he picks one creep he thinks he can trust, say, a Nicky Cairo type, to leave behind in every city. They run things while he goes and sets up somewhere else.”

“Slick.”

“Chaney though. What happens when one of his trusted lieutenants turns out to be untrustworthy?”

“Oh, I like that scenario.” Starsky’s smile turned wicked.

Defeated for the time being in identifying their attackers, Starsky and Hutch put all the mug books away.

******

After a few days of being assigned no new cases Starsky was getting sick and tired of re-typing reports and filing old ones. He began to get anxious because they needed to keep things going as ‘normally’ as possible. That meant he and Hutch had to work. “Hey, Babcock,” Starsky called across the room. “You and Simmons need help with anything?”

Babcock looked at his partner. “Uh… yeah. If you and Hutch have some time.”

Hutch was on his feet. “Whatcha got?”

“You guys are serious?” Simmons clearly disbelieved the offer.

“Sure,” Starsky said.

“We could use some ideas,” Babcock began, while Starsky and Hutch drew chairs up to the other detectives’ desks.

“Drive-by shooting at a dance club.” Simmons indicated a stack of folders. “As you can imagine there were dozens of witnesses.”

“Nobody saw anything, of course,” Babcock told them, sarcastically.

“Of course,” Hutch repeated, with a knowing nod.

“We’ve only had a chance to interview half the wits ourselves, so far,” Simmons went on. “Most of these,” indicating the folders, “are statements taken the night of the incident. We have to re-interview all of them.”

Starsky grabbed a stack. “We’ll take half.”

With Dobey’s consent, the files were divided and the two teams of detectives got to work. Witnesses were interviewed, re-interviewed and brought in for questioning with their parents and/or attorneys in tow.

Slowly, carefully, details were sifted out that pointed to the sixteen year old ex-boyfriend of a fifteen
year old girl, one of the fatalities. It began to look as if seven people had died that night, twelve more were hospitalized, simply because the young man saw his ex-girlfriend kissing another boy.

Starsky and Hutch did their share of the paperwork, too. Babcock and Simmons were so grateful they insisted on taking Starsky and Hutch down to the cafeteria where Babcock made an announcement to everyone within hearing. “Simmons and I are treating Curly and Blondie to every cup of coffee, donut and bagel they want for the rest of the month!”

‘Curly’ and ‘Blondie’ took them up on their offer immediately.

By the following Monday morning, when Dobey hadn’t put any new case files on their desks, or called them into his office, Starsky was beginning to feel as if someone had carbonated his blood. He could barely sit still. “Having this d’Ambrosia thing hanging over us is driving me crazy, Hutch. I need to keep busy.”

“You’re right. Let’s go see if Dobey’s holding out on us.”

Before they could move, Dobey’s office door opened and the squad’s newest detectives, Bert Tyler and Jeff Allenby, walked out. Tyler was ex-military, his hair cut so short it was difficult to determine the color. His usually intense brown eyes were bloodshot and his face was flushed. His normal 5’10” lean, wiry frame was slumped in dejection. His tall, muscular black partner didn’t appear to be in any better condition. Starsky thought they couldn’t have looked much worse if they’d been run over.

“Whatever it is, Tyler,” Starsky said, as the two new detectives passed his desk, “Hutch and I’ve probably done worse.”

“I doubt it,” Allenby snarled, since Tyler chose not to reply.

Hutch came around the end of the desks and stood next to Starsky. “Sounds ominous.”

Dobey appeared in his open door and beckoned to Starsky and Hutch before going back inside.

Starsky led the way and Hutch closed the door behind them.

The captain went behind his desk and sat down heavily. “We got two new cases this morning,” he indicated folders. “I was going to give the murder to you, two, but Tyler and Allenby got here early. They asked for it.”

When Dobey didn’t continue right away, Starsky prodded gently. “And…?”

Dobey looked up, sadness more than anger in his expression. “They both lost it at the scene.”

“Lost it?” Hutch asked. “As in…”

“Tossed their cookies,” Dobey told them.

“Both of them?” Starsky was surprised.

Dobey nodded.

“It happens, Cap,” Starsky added, quickly. “It’s kind of like laughter or yawning.”

“It can definitely be contagious,” Hutch agreed.

“I don’t care!” Dobey flared. “Get over there now! The coroner’s waiting.”
Starsky reached for the file. “What about Tyler and Allenby, Cap?”

“I told them to take the rest of the day off. I’m trying to think of a way to keep this out of their jackets.”

Hutch reached for the second file. “We’ll take that one, too, then.”

“They’ll be okay, sir,” Starsky said. “T and A, I mean.”

“They’d better be,” Dobey growled.

“We’ll call you from the scene,” Hutch told Dobey.

Starsky led the way out of the office. In the squad room he picked up his jacket and headed for the door, Hutch right behind him. Passing Tyler’s desk, Hutch stopped and put a hand on his shoulder. “First one’s always rough, Bert.”

“Did you lose it at your first?” Tyler’s tone was almost belligerent.

“I did!” Starsky jumped in before Hutch could respond. “Lost my breakfast, then my lunch. Couldn’t eat dinner.” He patted his stomach. “Lived with Pepto for a couple of days.”

“Give yourselves a break,” Hutch went on. “Talk about it, think about it. Then come back stronger.”


Walking down the stairs, Hutch put his arm around Starsky’s shoulders and drew him close, since no one else was around. “You didn’t.” Starsky shrugged under the comfort of the arm. “It was a kind prevarication.”

Starsky couldn’t think of anything to say on the way to the address and Hutch was equally silent.

At the offices of the late Irving Webber, his secretary, Miss Evelyn Turner, was in the outer room crying hysterically. A female uniform was there but keeping her distance.

Starsky and Hutch walked through into the office behind, where the scene was one of such violence Starsky had difficulty controlling his own stomach. “Oh God, Hutch,” he whispered, “no wonder they lost it.”

Irving Webber was slumped in the high-backed chair behind his desk, what was left of his head leaning on his right shoulder. The entire left side of his skull was caved in with slivers of glass visible in the wound. The left eye was hanging out of its socket. Blood and brain matter heavily coated the top of the chair and the wall behind. A broken snow globe, the probable murder weapon, lay on the floor next to the desk covered with dried blood and other material. Close by was a broken picture frame enclosing a photograph of two men. The glass was shattered.

Ray Proctor, an always-in-a-rush officious little man, balding and portly, glared at them, apparently expecting an apology. When none was forthcoming, he yelled, “It’s about time! I gotta get this…” he gestured to the body, “outta here!”

“This used to be a person, Ray,” Hutch pointed out, his voice taut.

Starsky put a claming hand on Hutch’s arm and turned him away from the fuming coroner. “Rough one for a first.”

“Rough one anytime,” Hutch agreed. “No clean stab wounds or bullet holes to deal with. Blood’s
one thing but a dangling eyeball and copious brain matter?”

“Not to mention the smell from loosened bowels.”

“Gee, Starsk, I’m glad you didn’t mention that.”

“Sorry.”

Starsky and Hutch checked out everything they could, careful not to disturb anything or get in the techs’ way while they dusted for prints and did their collecting.

Hutch approached Proctor. “Got a TOD for us?”

“Between five and eight p.m. last evening. I’ll fine it down once he’s on the slab.”

“Your guys got everything they need?” Starsky asked.

“They will have.” Proctor was clearly still pissed.

“Thanks for waiting, Ray.” Hutch patted the shorter man on the shoulder.

“You’ll have my report by tomorrow,” Proctor growled, nasty to the last.

Starsky and Hutch went out to the reception area where Miss Turner seemed to have quieted down a little, although she was still crying.

Hutch reached for the phone on her desk. “May I, Miss Turner?”

“Of course,” she managed to say between sniffles.

Hutch dialed Dobey’s office. “It’s Hutch, Captain.” He held the receiver so that Starsky could hear and lowered his voice. “Starsky and I bear witness to the fact that it’s no wonder Tyler and Allenby had a problem. It was brutal, sir. The victim’s eye is hanging out of what’s left of his head and the room looks and smells like a charnel house.”

“Maybe I can work with that.” Dobey seemed relieved. “Are you two okay? You need anything?”

“We’re fine, Cap’n. We’re going to talk to Miss Turner, see if she can tell us anything she didn’t tell the uniforms.”

“Thanks, Hutchinson.”

Hutch hung up the phone and put it back on the secretary’s desk.

The coroner came out of Webber’s office, followed by the techs and two assistants wheeling the gurney carrying the blanket-covered body.

Starsky snagged the secretary’s attention. “Would you please write your name and address, Miss Turner?” He handed her his notebook and she didn’t seem to notice the departure as she jotted down the information.

Hutch nodded to the female uniform. “No need for you to stick around, Officer Warwick. Thanks for staying though.”

She nodded and left with the coroner’s group.
Miss Turner was sixty-something, rail thin, hawk-nosed, hollow-cheeked and sad-eyed. “I loved him, you know.” She sniffled into her crumpled handkerchief. “I’ve worked for Mr. Webber since my mother died fourteen years ago. I took care of her during her final suffering. She didn’t want to die in a hospital.”

“I know the feeling,” Starsky muttered.

Hutch put a hand on his shoulder, understanding in his eyes.

“Mr. Webber offered me this job right after the funeral. He was so kind to me in my bereavement.”

“We’re very sorry for your loss, Miss Turner,” Hutch told her.

“Thank you.” She sniffed some more before blowing her nose.

“You’re the one who found him. Is that correct?” Starsky asked.

“Yes. I got here at my usual time, six fifteen. I like to have the opening numbers from the New York exchanges on Mr. Webber’s desk when he gets here at seven. He’s always so prompt. And he appreciates my efforts so much.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hutch soothed.

“But it turns out he never left!” she wailed, sobbing again. “He was still there, sitting in his chair, his head all caved in, and his eye…”

Hutch looked around quickly, snatched a box of tissues from the credenza behind her desk and handed it to her.

She pulled several and blotted her tears. “You’re very kind, Detective. So like Mr. Webber.”

Starsky closed his eyes for a moment, opening them to find his partner’s slightly flustered gaze on him. He nodded encouragingly. *Go on, buddy, you’re doin’ great!*

“Do you know if Mr. Webber had any enemies?” Hutch asked.

“Oh, yes. I can tell you exactly who killed him.”

“Who would that be, please?” Starsky tried to keep the surprise off his face.

“His brother, Saul! I heard them arguing last night.”

“When was this?” Hutch was making notes.

“Just before I left at five fifteen.”

“What were they arguing about?” Starsky glanced at the shattered photo on the floor in the office.

“I didn’t hear the exact words. It was something about their neighborhood homeowners’ association, I think. Their voices were raised and I heard glass break.” She blew her nose and wiped her eyes again. “I knocked on the door and the voices stopped. When I poked my head in they were on opposite sides of the desk. A framed photograph of the two of them was on the floor, smashed. Mr. Webber told me everything was all right, they’d had a small accident. He said I should go on home and he’d see me in the morning.”

She broke down again, pulled more tissues from the box and wept energetically before she managed
to pull herself back together. “I’m so sorry. He was such a good man. Always so kind and
thoughtful. He never forgot my birthday.”

“Do you know where we can find Saul?” Hutch asked.

“Yes, of course. He’s probably at home. They lived together, you know.”

“Miss Turner…” Starsky waited until her teary-eyed attention came back to him. “Why didn’t you
tell all this to the uniformed officers who responded?”

“Or to the first two detectives?” Hutch added.

“Why should I?” She was clearly outraged. “The officers were bullies. They had no sensitivity. And
as for the other detectives…” her voice took on a truly offended tone. “They ran out of here with
their hands over their mouths and didn’t even make it to the men’s room down the hall.” Her tears
began again. “I had to clean that up! The janitor isn’t due until Monday.” She got herself back under
control again. “You two seem different. You aren’t trying to intimidate me. You didn’t get sick. And
you sound as if you understand. You’re both so like him.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Hutch appeared to be verging on embarrassment but Starsky didn’t think she noticed.
“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She wrote down Saul Webber’s address.

“Are you going to be okay, Miss Turner?” Hutch put the piece of paper in the case folder.

“Oh, yes.” She had apparently drained the waterworks. “My sister, Esther, lives with me. We take
care of each other.”

Hutch tore a sheet out of his notebook, wrote his work phone number on it and handed it to the
bereft woman. “Call us if you think of anything else.”

She took the paper. “I will, Detective Hutchinson. And thank you both so much.” She sniffed again.
“I just know you’ll make Saul pay for what he did to his wonderful brother.”

Starsky thanked her again and held the door for Hutch. Outside, he looked at Hutch over the roof of
the Torino. “Did I miss something in there?”

“A whole lot of unrequited love?”

“Oh, no.” Starsky donned a horrified expression. “Not the dreaded U.L.”

“Thought that was Underwriters Laboratory.” Hutch opened his door and got in the car.

“You’re such a romantic.” Starsky shook his head and got in on his side. He didn’t start the car right
away though. “Nobody can be all that good.” He looked at Hutch. “Can they?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

“Think we should mention in our report that the responding uniforms were bullies?”

Hutch shook his head. “Let’s not.”

Starsky nodded and started the car.

The residence belonging to Saul and Irving Webber was not what Starsky expected. The house was
poorly maintained, the flower borders flowerless and overgrown with weeds, the trees and shrubbery untrimmed. Newspapers littered a dead-grass lawn that might never have seen a sprinkler. Exiting the car, they approached the porch and climbed the steps. Starsky knocked on a door that desperately needed painting and a new screen. Getting no response, he knocked harder. Hutch looked in the nearest window. Starsky silently discussed going around to the back of the house with Hutch but a voice hailed them instead.

“Hey! You lookin’ for the Webbers?”

A man was standing on the far side of a badly-in-need-of-trimming-on-this-side hedge. Starsky and Hutch descended the stairs and walked over to him.

Thomas Riley ranted for the next ten minutes on the subjects of the inconsideration, ineptitude and hostility of the brothers Webber. “The neighborhood association’s been trying to get them to move out for years! They don’t do any work on the place themselves, as you can see, and won’t hire anyone. They’re both deadbeats, if you ask me.”

“Do you happen to know where we might find Saul Webber, Mr. Riley?” Hutch took out his notebook.

“Why?” Riley looked suddenly suspicious.

“His brother, Irving, is dead,” Starsky told him. “We need to speak with Saul.”

“Finally killed him, did he?”

“Why do you say that, Mr. Riley?” Hutch asked.

“He threatened to enough times.” Riley gestured around. “Ask anybody. We’ve all heard the arguments. They never had a decent word to say to each other. Screaming all the time!”

“Do you know where Saul is?” Starsky repeated Hutch’s question.

“Well…” Riley considered, “If he’s not here, and he’s not at Irving’s office, he’s bound to be at their mother’s.”

“Would you happen to have the address?” Starsky’s patience was running thin.

“I’ll get it.” Riley turned toward his front door.

Starsky looked at Hutch. “Miss Turner thinks Irving Webber was the kindest, sweetest man on earth. She’s ready to propose him for sainthood. Riley, here, thinks he and his brother are scum.” He shrugged. “Where’s Rod Serling when we need him?”

“Dead.”

“I know.” Starsky couldn’t keep the sadness out of his voice. “I loved that show.”

“Didn’t everybody?”

“Robert Redford was in one of the episodes.”

“Sundance?”

Starsky nodded. “I meant to say something that night, as soon as we came out of the movie. But you and John were talking about the fine art of robbing trains and banks and I guess I forgot.”
“John Colby.” There was no inflection in his partner’s voice.

Starsky was sorry he’d mentioned the name. “Redford played a wounded cop,” he went on quickly, “who was taken care of by an old lady. She was terrified of dying and had been trying to avoid Death for years!”

“How do you remember these things?” Hutch sounded amused.

“That episode affected me,” Starsky confessed. “I think it’s the first time I realized what a comfort kind words and understanding can be.” His partner was looking at him curiously so he explained. “Redford charmed her and by the end she wasn’t afraid any more. Turned out that was a good thing, too, because he was Death.”

“I remember it now.” Hutch smiled. “One of the best they ever did.”

“While I was watching it, I remember thinking I hoped my dad was that kind of cop.”

“I’m sure he was, Starsk. You are.”

“No, I’m not, Hutch.” Starsky tossed off the compliment. “That’s you. The way you treated Miss Turner made me think of Redford. You’re the kind of cop his character was.”

“I’m not sure I want to be known as Death.” The look on Hutch’s face was inscrutable.

Starsky punched him lightly on the arm. “You know what I mean, turkey. You’re just really good with people.”

“Thanks, partner.”

Riley came out with a piece of paper. “Sorry it took so long. Had it stuffed way in the back of a drawer.”

He handed the paper to Hutch. Hutch read it and gave it to Starsky who read it and handed it back. It, too, went into the folder.

“Thanks very much, Mr. Riley.” Hutch kept his tone professional.

“Tell him I sent you! I want him to know who fingered him!”

“Now, that’s a neighborhood association I really want to join,” Starsky muttered on the way to the car. Hutch stifled a laugh.

When they got to the address written on Riley’s piece of paper, Starsky turned off the engine and looked at his partner. “Front or back?”

“Back.”

Before Starsky could say anything, Hutch climbed out of the car and ducked around a clump of shrubbery, headed down the side of the Webber property. Starsky sat for a few minutes, to give Hutch time to get into position, got out and started up the walk. When he knocked on the screen door he heard a commotion inside, running footsteps, and a door slamming open. He unzipped his jacket and put his hand on the butt of his weapon before he pounded on the door. “Police, Mrs. Webber, open up!”

“It’s okay, Starsk!” Hutch shouted from behind the house. “I’ve got him. We’re coming around.”
The front door was opened and a tiny, worn woman looked out at Starsky through the screen. “Don’t hurt him. Please.” She was weeping. “He didn’t mean to do it.”

Hutch came around the house with a small, mousy-looking man in tow, his hands cuffed behind him.

“I know he didn’t mean to do it,” the woman in the doorway whimpered.

Starsky looked at his partner and received a head shake and sad look in return. Hutch put the handcuffed Saul Webber in the back seat of the Torino, making sure he didn’t hit his head. Starsky wrote his name and phone number on a piece of paper and gave it to the mother. “Don’t worry, Mrs. Webber, we’ll take care of him. My partner and I will come back later to talk with you.”

“All right.” The woman continued to leak tears.

Starsky walked to the car and got in. He looked at his partner who said nothing, then at Saul Webber in the back seat who was silently crying. With a shake of his head Starsky started the engine and headed to the precinct.

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“Five hours, Starsk.” Hutch pulled the finished report out of his typewriter. “I think that may be the fastest we’ve ever completed a case.”

“I just hope the D.A. can figure out what to do with it. Murder one, murder two, manslaughter, accidental death… justifiable homicide?” He was almost amused by the possibilities. “Listening to Miss Turner and Saul Webber talk about the same person really was like being in an episode of ‘The Twilight Zone’.”

Hutch began humming the memorable theme.

Starsky spent a few minutes picturing his gorgeous partner in a tight uniform like Redford had worn. ‘Maybe I can talk him into modeling his dress blues for me. Then I can take my time getting him out of them.’

Starsky opened the second folder they’d been given that morning, forcing his mind back into work mode. Two students at the university had very nearly overdosed. They’d been taken out of school by their parents with threats of lawsuits since the campus was clearly a hotbed of drug activity. Attorneys would be in touch. The dean and board of directors had realized their campus police were overmatched and had requested the help of the BCPD.

For the following two days Starsky and Hutch interviewed dozens of students, teachers, teacher’s aides, janitors, grounds keepers, and anybody else they could find who might know something about drugs being sold on campus.

“You have got to be kidding me, dude,” one jeans-clad student snarled, before stalking away.

“Oh, please,” whined a skinny, limp-haired co-ed.

“Get a life!” a TA growled.

“Screw yourself, Chief,” a member of the football team suggested.

“Go perform an anatomical impossibility on yourselves.” This came from a member of the basketball team.
Starsky heaved a sigh. “At least he used the word ‘anatomical’ correctly in a sentence.”

“But it was the same sentiment. No points for originality.”

They continued talking to people.

“I… know… nothingk,” an overweight Germanic student protested, before he huffed and walked away.

Starsky sighed more deeply. “God help us. ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ has joined the lexicon.”

A teacher offered an irony-laced, “Good luck!”

“Half the kids on campus are usin’,” a maintenance man explained. “They’ll never give up their source.” He puffed his cigarette. “The other half would find themselves in a world o’ hurt if they said anything.”

Starsky and Hutch bought cups of coffee in the cafeteria and sat outside on the busy quad. People of every age and description walked by, some staring, others pointedly avoiding eye contact.

“I’m getting real depressed here, Hutch,” Starsky admitted.

“You and me both, buddy.”

A few minutes later a young woman approached timidly. “Are you the cops investigating the drugs?” She cast a nervous glance over each shoulder.

“Yes ma’am.” Hutch stood up.

Starsky got up and held out his hand. “Detective Starsky, ma’am.”

She took it briefly, fingers-only. “This,” Starsky indicated Hutch, “is my partner, Detective Hutchinson.”

“Your name, miss?” Hutch extended his hand.

“Marjorie.” She shook Hutch’s fingers.

“Marjorie what?”

“Uh… just Marjorie.”

“Alright… Marjorie,” Starsky complied. “What can you tell us?”

“Nothing.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her huge purse, thrust it into Starsky’s hand and hurried away.

Hutch looked over his shoulder when Starsky opened the folded paper. ‘Peter Jeffers’ was printed in large letters. ‘Room 423, Laughton Dorm.’

“Well, at least it’s not another obscene suggestion,” Hutch noted.

“I was beginning to think that’s all they’re learning here.”

Walking up the stairway to the fourth floor of Laughton Dorm, they began to hear screaming and crying above them. Hurrying up the final flights, Starsky pulled the door open and Hutch darted
through. Students were clustered in front of Room 423. Some were crying on each other’s shoulders, some were standing, dry-eyed, apparently stunned. Someone inside the room was hysterical.

Starsky pushed his way through the crowd and entered the room. Hutch attempted to get everyone to move back.

Inside Room 423, a young woman was nearly lying on top of a figure on the bed. She was sobbing and shrieking unintelligibly, her hands fisted in the hair of the dead man beneath her.

That he was dead Starsky had no doubt. There’s a certain hue the skin takes on when death has visited hours before. He knew no EMTs in the country could be of any benefit here. Zipping up his jacket again he walked to the side of the bed.

Hutch came in the door and waited just inside, keeping everyone else out in the hallway.

Starsky put a hand on the woman’s shoulder and she jerked up so violently she would have fallen if Starsky hadn’t caught her. He maneuvered her to the only chair in the room, sitting her down.

Hutch closed the door and walked over to the bed. The body, probably the former Peter Jeffers, was fully clothed and looked peaceful. The almost certain cause of death was whatever had been in the empty syringe protruding from a vein in the left elbow.

Starsky kept a hand on the shoulder of the crying girl while he looked around. On the desk was a legal size pad of paper. Leaning over he read the message quickly. “Hutch.”

His partner came over and read the page. “I’ll call it in.”

Hutch left and Starsky surveyed the remains of at least one ruined life.

Interviews the rest of the afternoon verified the information Jeffers had left in his note. He had dabbled in pot, cocaine and even a little heroin in high school. Upon entering college he had discovered he could pay for anything he wanted by dealing those same substances. When Starsky and Hutch had started asking questions Jeffers realized he might be in for a very hard fall and had decided to take the easy way out.

Starsky knew his partner had no sympathy whatsoever for Peter Jeffers and that was as it should be. Nobody had tied the guys hands, beaten him, and forcibly injected him! He had gotten into the drug trade all by himself and it killed him. Case, as they say, closed!

That night Starsky suggested they stay at his place and a subdued Hutch had no objection. Even the idea of ordering a pizza didn’t trigger Hutch’s usual snide remarks.

“Don’t worry, Starsk.”

Starsky had been trying to figure out how to cajole his partner out of his funk but the quiet statement took the wind out of his sails.

“I’m fine. Really.” Hutch put the pizza box on the coffee table while Starsky got plates and napkins out of the kitchen. “I know the kid did it to himself. He and I have nothing in common.”

“Then what are you so down about?” Starsky knew his partner well enough to see the weight on his shoulders, the sadness in his eyes.

“We solved two cases in three days. And helped Babcock and Simmons with that drive-by last week. All of them involved death and stupidity.”
Starsky could certainly see his partner’s point.

“It’s all we ever seem to deal with, Starsk. Death and stupidity.”

“Hutch…” Starsky waited until he had his partner’s attention. “I never realized it before but, when I was in ‘Nam, it was all death and stupidity there, too.” Reaching out, he took the clenched fist and gently unfolded the fingers, twining them with his own. “Come to bed, Hutch. Let me hold you. We both need to believe that there are others things in life.”

Wordlessly, Hutch carried the pizza box to the kitchen and put it in the refrigerator. He walked with Starsky to the bedroom. “I want to go after d’Ambrosia, Starsky.” Hutch got into bed. “All this waiting around, not knowing when, or even if, we’ll ever get the video tape, is getting to me.”

“I know, babe.” Starsky suppressed his own frustration, knowing Hutch needed his support more right then. He crawled under the covers and drew Hutch against him, spooned. “But we have to keep doing our job until we have Dobey behind us.”

“Sure,” Hutch agreed, sadly. “Our job of finding two-bit drug pushers, sad little fratricidal maniacs and teenage premeditated murderers.”

“Same ol’ same ol’, partner,” Starsky murmured into Hutch’s ear.

Hutch chuckled, pulled Starsky’s hands onto his chest and clasped them tightly. “Don’t let go tonight, okay, Starsk?”

“Never lettin’ go, Hutch. I promise.” He kissed Hutch’s shoulder.

Starsky slept lightly for a while, ready if Hutch had the nightmare. It was always the same one, of course: The Event, as they’d started calling their abduction and subsequent activities. It was the dream Starsky had himself too many times. They had held and soothed each other out of the throes of anger and fear many nights but thankfully this didn’t turn out to be one of them. He slept deeply at last, Hutch cradled in his arms.
A string of burglaries in surrounding precincts extending back over four months had been the subject of regular discussion between Starsky and Hutch before their abduction. Other detectives in the Ninth’s Robbery-Homicide Division had felt the anticipation as well. When would the guy get around to pulling a job in their precinct?

It wasn’t that much of a surprise, therefore, when Dobey called Hutch and Starsky into his office one morning and handed Hutch two files, a thin one on top, a much thicker one underneath. “It’s ours now.”

Hutch sat in his usual guest chair. Starsky scooted the other close enough to read the file across Hutch’s arm.

“Last night,” Dobey began, “the ante went up a little, as you’ll see.”

Hutch handed the thick file to his partner and opened the thin folder. He read the new report quickly and looked up at Dobey, stunned. “He killed the birds?”

Starsky stopped skimming through the reports of all previous robberies and glanced at Hutch’s file. “Birds?”

“A prize-winning pair of African Gray parrots.” Dobey’s voice was somber. “The owners are heart broken. Hatched the birds themselves.”

“They had to be valuable, right, Cap?” Starsky asked.

“Extremely. Insured for fifty thousand dollars.”

Starsky whistled and Hutch shook his head. “Why kill them?”

“According to the housekeeper, Mrs. McGuire,” Dobey answered, “they had vocabularies of over two hundred words and when frightened they could be heard for blocks.”

“So he killed them to keep from waking the neighbors,” Starsky guessed.

“The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Daily, were out for the evening,” Dobey went on. “Mrs. McGuire heard the birds yelling at about eleven and called the police. By the time a patrol car got there thirteen minutes later the thief was gone and the birds were dead.”

“I knew a parrot once,” Starsky remembered. “Those beaks can rip your hand off! How’d he kill them?”

“Threw their cage against the wall.” Dobey was keeping his voice firmly under control. “It must have stunned them enough that he was able to wring their necks.”

“Shit,” Starsky and Hutch cursed at the same time.

Hutch went back to reading the file. “Starsky, you’d have loved these birds.” He pointed to the bottom of the page, holding it so that his partner could read the words. “Look what Mrs. McGuire says they were screaming.”

Starsky scanned quickly and looked at Hutch. “‘Insalubrious miscreant’?”
“Among other uncomplimentary character judgments,” Dobey added. “Mrs. McGuire told the responding officers that the birds seemed to know the meaning, too. They used particular epithets to people they didn’t like.”

Hutch took the file back and finished reading. He looked at Dobey again. “He left with nothing?”

“Go! Talk to the owners, see if they’ve noticed anything missing since last night. Then find this guy. Stealing stuff is one thing. Destroying God’s innocent creatures is something I won’t tolerate.”

Hutch closed his file and got up. Starsky was already at the office door, his folder under his arm. “We’ll get him, Captain,” Hutch promised.

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“Remember Blackie Russell?” Starsky put the thick folder down on his desk. He pulled out his chair, spun it around and sat, his arms folded on the back.

“Yeah.” Hutch pulled out his own chair and sat down. “We liked him for Squeeky.”

“Initially.”

“He’s done time back East for burglary. We thought Squeeky might have tried to short change him on some stolen property and Blackie took exception.”

Starsky nodded. “Had an iron clad alibi for that night. But Russell did turn us on to Mathison.”

“Which probably gave more of an open field to Blackie.”

“Let’s go talk to…” Starsky picked up the thin file from Hutch’s desk and read the name, “Mr. and Mrs. Daily and the housekeeper. Maybe somebody noticed Russell in the neighborhood.”

Hutch got up and went to a file cabinet to get an empty folder while Starsky went through his desk drawer, pulled out his paperwork on Russell and extracted the mug shot. Hutch put the photo in the folder along with five others from a mug book and followed his partner out of the squad room.

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At the Daily residence, neither of the birds’ distraught owners was able to contribute anything constructive. Nothing was missing from the house, neither of them had any enemies that they knew of and no one had issued any threats. Both were sure they’d never seen any of the men in the photos. Hutch tried every persuasive, compassionate tool in his arsenal but wasn’t able to coax a single helpful bit of information from either ‘parent.’

Miriam McGuire, the housekeeper, was much more helpful. A matronly woman of indeterminate age and enduring charm, she insisted on pouring them each a cup of coffee. They sat at the kitchen table while she told them, in detail, exactly what she had heard and done the evening before, verifying everything in the file.

Hutch took the pictures out of his folder and handed them to her. “Do you recognize any of these men, Mrs. McGuire?”

She put on her reading glasses and looked closely at all the images before decisively selecting the one of Russell. “That’s the man I saw last week! He was sitting in a pickup truck in front of the Pierson house next door when I came back from grocery shopping.”
“Can you describe the truck, ma’am?” Hutch took out his notebook and a pencil. “What color was it? Did it have a camper shell? Anything you can tell us will help.”

“It was kind of old, sort of beat up looking. I wondered, at the time what it was doing in this neighborhood.”

“That’s good, Mrs. McGuire,” Starsky encouraged. “Anything else?”

“It was an awful shade of green. A color my daughter calls monkey-vomit.” She grimaced. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Of course you should, ma’am.” Hutch added the comment to his notes. “It’s very descriptive.”

“Was there a company name or logo on the truck, ma’am?” Starsky asked.

“Let me think.” She got up, went to the refrigerator and brought back a platter piled with sandwiches, cut in half, and another with slices of what looked like home made lemon pound cake. “Would you like something to eat, Detectives?”

“Oh, no, ma’am.” Hutch cast a cautionary eye toward his always-hungry partner. “Thank you, we’re fine.”

“I know you are.” She got plates out of a cabinet and put one in front of each of them, taking a half sandwich herself. “I just know people are going to start coming by to give their condolences and I had to do something to keep busy.” She gazed imploringly at Hutch, then Starsky. “Please? It would make me feel a little bit better.”

Hutch knew when to cave and took half a sandwich. His partner took two. When he threw him a reproving look Starsky put on his puppy dog face.

“’m hungry.”

Mrs. McGuire laughed heartily. “You sound exactly like my nephew. Eat up, Detective Starsky, there’s more than enough.”

“This is great, Mrs. McGuire.” Somehow, Starsky managed not to sound as if he was talking with his mouth full. “Thanks!”

“My pleasure, Detective.” She ate her own sandwich and thought for a couple of minutes.

Starsky polished off both his halves and reached for a slice of cake.

Hutch ate his sandwich in silence, enjoying Starsky’s enjoyment. ‘Why do I always make fun of him and try to make him feel self-conscious at times like this?’ he wondered. ‘It’s part of why I love him so much; his appreciation of simple things and gratitude to kind people. I need to lighten up because I definitely want him around for the rest of my life!’

“East Side Telephone. I remember now,” the housekeeper said. “But when I think about it, the lettering didn’t look professional. And he wasn’t wearing any kind of uniform just a red plaid shirt.” She looked at each detective with an almost embarrassed expression. “I should have realized he was casing… Is that the right word?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hutch assured her.

“Casing the neighborhood,” Mrs. McGuire finished.
“Did you notice if there was a phone number?” Starsky asked, around his mouthful of cake. “This is terrific, by the way!”

Mrs. McGuire beamed and Hutch felt distinct pride; his partner had a way of charming witnesses.

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “No. There was nothing but the name, no address or phone number.” She looked at each of them. “That should have been another clue, shouldn’t it?”

“That’s okay, Mrs. McGuire.” Hutch put away the photos and his notebook and finished his sandwich. “You’ve been a great help.”

“Have I really, Detective?” She sounded genuinely surprised.

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” Starsky agreed. “We know who we’re looking for now.”

“Well, I hope you get him. He had no call to kill Itsy and Bitsy. They were only making their character judgment known.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Hutch got up. “Thanks for the coffee and sandwiches.”

“And the cake!” Starsky added.

“You’re more than welcome, boys.”

Outside, on the way to the Torino, Starsky kept his voice low. “‘Itsy and Bitsy’?”

“Well, Starsk,” Hutch said, equally quietly, “not everyone has your inimitable and expansively eloquent vocabulary.”

Starsky caressed his ribs on the way around to the driver’s side of the car. “Good one, Hutch!”

Starsky started the car and put it in gear. “Taylor Hotel, right?”

Hutch nodded. “Traffic’s going to be brutal this time of day.”

“Don’t I know it.”

When Starsky pulled the Torino to the curb in front of the address the entire building was gone. Only a pile of rubble occupied the otherwise vacant lot. “Geeez. Three weeks ago this place was a four-story fleabag hotel.”

“That’s progress for you, partner.”

Starsky and Hutch got out of the car to canvass the neighborhood. An hour’s worth of knocking on still-standing doors and talking to pedestrians netted them no one willing or able to tell them where Blackie Russell had gone.

Getting back in the car, Hutch picked up the mic. “Zebra Three to Control.”

“Go ahead, Zebra Three.”

“Please put out an APB on Blackie Russell. Check with Captain Dobey, Russell’s stats are in the file on top of Starsky’s desk. The charges are burglary and…” he glanced at his partner, “murder.”

“Ten four, Zebra Three.”
“‘Murder?’” Starsky fired up the engine and pulled away from the curb.

“It’s the least Itsy and Bitsy deserve.”

******

Three days later there had been no activity from their APB and Hutch was feeling antsy for reasons he couldn’t even articulate. He busied himself with re-typing and refining a few reports.

Starsky took care of filing recent case folders. Pouring himself and Hutch cups of coffee, he headed back to his desk. “We’ll find him, Hutch.” Starsky set one of the cups down at Hutch’s elbow and trailed a hand across the convenient shoulders when he moved around and sat at his own desk.

Hutch was glad he and Starsky had firmly established their penchant for physical contact over the years because he couldn’t keep his hands off his partner these days. Happily, like just then, Starsky seemed to find an equal number of tactile opportunities but no one paid any undue attention. Starsky looked at him slyly, probably knowing exactly what Hutch was thinking and he had to fight down a rising tide of heat.

“I know we’ll find him,” Hutch repeated, bringing his mind back to the subject at hand. He drank some of the muddy brew and managed to keep from gagging. “We’ll just turn over a few rocks…”

“Knock down a few doors…”

“Get a few snitches workin’…” Hutch returned Starsky’s crooked grin. The exchange, although bringing back unpleasant, painful memories, felt good.

“It’s been three weeks,” Starsky noted, seemingly apropos of nothing. The words were almost inaudible but Hutch didn’t have to think about what the statement meant.

“I know that!” Hutch’s response was unintentionally harsh.

“I know ya know,” Starsky soothed. “It’s probably why we’re both on edge today. But, hey!” He brightened. “Want a bagel?” He jumped to his feet turning toward the doors. “Babcock and Simmons are still treating!”

“Plain, please.”

“Back in a jiff!”

Hutch distracted himself for about ten minutes with mundane chores before Elliot, the departmental mail clerk, pushed his cart through the squad room doors.

“Where’s your partner, Hutchinson?” Elliot was distributing letters, manila envelopes and packages to various desks.

“Cafeteria, where else?” Hutch didn’t look up.

“I got a package here and it’s got both your names on it.” He held up a small brown-paper-wrapped parcel.

Reluctantly, Hutch reached for it. Elliot pulled it back, smirking. “If I find out you withheld his share o’ whatever’s in this, you’ll regret it.” Elliot held the box up to his ear and shook it. “Whatever it is, you’ll have to get your money back though. Sounds like it’s broken.” He started to hand the package to Hutch, then drew it back again, a look of humorous cunning on his face. “No, I know what it is.
It’s a video tape. My sister works at a film lab. This is the sound those spools make.” He cast another ‘suspicious’ look at Hutch. “Hmmm, plain brown wrapper, cassette-size box. You guys aren’t by any chance havin’ porn flicks sent through the postal service, are ya?”

“No.” Hutch didn’t smile. “And if I hear so much as a hint of a whisper of a rumor that we are I’ll know who to come looking for, Elliot.”

The color drained from the mail clerk’s face as he handed over the package. “Joke, Hutch! Geez, can’t ya tell when a guy’s funnin’ ya?”

“Not lately.”

Elliot beat a hasty retreat with his cart.

Starsky, on his way in as the clerk hurried out past him, must have seen the expression on the young man’s face. Moving to his desk, he reached across and set a plate-with-plain-bagel in front of Hutch. He perched on the back of his chair and began devouring the first of two cake donuts, no sugar, no glaze, no sprinkles, as he showed his partner with a self-righteous look on his face. “What’d you say to the poor kid, Hutch? He looked like he --”

Hutch held up the package. Starsky sighed, put his plate on the desk, sat down and took the parcel when Hutch handed it to him. Taking a quick breath, he read the cancellation. “Post marked yesterday, Bay City.” He looked at Hutch. “Came through the regular mail. No return address.” He held it up to his ear.

“It’s not ticking, Starsk.” Hutch’s tone was heavy with sarcasm.

“I know.” His partner was clearly embarrassed. “I was just trying to see if it rattled, like a video cassette does.”

“It did when Elliot shook it. That’s how he knew what it was.”

“What did he say?”

“Wanted to know if we were ordering porn through the mail.”

“Oh shit,” Starsky swore. “That’s all our reputations need.”

“I think I disabused him of the idea of spreading that rumor.”

“Good!” Starsky stared at the object before looking up at Hutch. “You think this is it?”

“It’s the right size. And he’s had enough time. He could easily have had the dupes made by now.”

“Guess there’s no sense putting it off.”

Without a word, Hutch got up and went to Dobey’s office door. Starsky got up and followed him. Hutch knocked.

“What is it?” Dobey hollered from inside.

Hutch opened the door and stuck his head around. “Have you got a few minutes, Captain?”

Dobey seemed surprised at the seriousness of Hutch’s expression and tone of voice. “I guess so. Come on in. What’s on your minds?”
Hutch held the door for Starsky and closed it behind them. He crossed and sat in his usual chair in front of the desk while Starsky took the other. Hutch held the package in his lap, staring at it, before he looked up at Dobey and cleared his throat. “We need to tell you about something that happened a few weeks ago, and you need to watch this video tape.”

“I’m listening.” Dobey laced his fingers on top of the report he was reading.

“Not here, Cap’n,” Hutch said. “We can’t take the chance that we’ll be overheard or that someone will come in. You have to help us think of a place with a three-quarter inch video tape machine and a TV set. Someplace each of us can get to without being followed. And without arousing suspicion. Someplace that –”

“Wait a minute!” Dobey interrupted, irritation on his face and in his voice. “Are you implying that someone in this department is dirty? That we’re all being watched?”

“Not exactly, Cap.” Starsky scooted forward in his chair. “We don’t know if d’Ambrosia has someone in the precinct yet or not. But we can’t take the chance.”

“Who the hell --” Dobey roared, but stopped when Hutch raised his hand.

“Don’t say the name, please, Captain.” He lowered his hand and went on with as much control as he could muster. “We’re not surprised you haven’t heard the name. He hasn’t made his presence known here. Yet.”

“Go on.” Dobey’s voice was cool now, waiting.

“That’s just it, Cap.” Starsky sat forward a little more. “We need to talk to you somewhere else. But we can’t figure out where.”

“Somewhere with a video tape machine you say?”

“Yes.” Hutch held up the package. “An industrial model, the kind that takes three-quarter inch tapes.”

“There’s one here in the conference room.” Dobey smiled at his easy solution.

“We know.” Starsky nodded. “But we can’t use that one.”

“There’s no time of day or night,” Hutch went on, forestalling Dobey’s next question, “that we could all be in the conference room, using the machine, and not have someone wonder why. Trust us, Captain. You’ll understand, once you’ve seen the tape.”

Dobey’s eyes lit up. “Doesn’t Huggy have a cousin who works for a television station? They have tape machines, don’t they?”

Starsky appeared embarrassed. “You’re right, Cap’n, I forgot about him. Dexter, or something. That’s a good idea. We were going to ask Huggy to meet us…” He shrugged. “Wherever we decided to meet.”

Hutch got up, giving Dobey their thanks with a look. “We’ll call him. If he can contact his cousin and his cousin is willing to help we’ll let you know where and when. Apologize to Edith in advance for us, please, because it’s probably going to have to be when everybody’s asleep.”

Dobey glared. “And you’re not going to tell me what this is about until then. Are you?”
“We can’t, Captain.” Starsky spread his hands in an unhappy gesture. “Believe me, you’ll understand.”

“Okay.” Dobey picked up the report he was reading when interrupted. “Make sure you set things up as soon as possible. I hate waiting for the other shoe to drop. Now get outta here!”

Hutch walked out of the office and moved to his desk, Starsky right behind him, closing the door softly. Catching his partner’s slight nod, he pulled his jacket off the back of his chair, wrapping the box inside, and headed down his aisle of desks toward the door.

Starsky paralleled him. “Let’s go see if Huggy’s had any luck tracking down that snitch he told us about.”

Hutch was the only one in the room who might have heard the underlying strain in Starsky’s voice. “Yeah. I’d love to nail Russell before he pulls another job.” Hutch held the door for his partner and followed him out.

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The Pits wasn’t open for lunch yet but Huggy was there completing his pre-opening routine: chairs off tables, cash in the register, beer in the cooler, full liquor bottles on the shelves, ash trays empty, peanut bowls full. All the things he did before his staff showed up.

When the door opened he almost snarled at whoever was intruding but his face split in a genuine smile when he saw it was his two best friends. “An’ what brings you gentlemen to my fine establishment this early on a Friday mornin’?”

Rather than meet his banter with their normal upbeat responses the detectives headed for their back booth, grim looks on their faces. Huggy folded his cheerful attitude and followed.

They slid into the booth, both on one side, as usual. Huggy slid in on the other. ‘Exactly where we all were three weeks ago tonight,’ he realized. “You want something to eat?” Huggy asked. “Or is this not a social call?” The strained, serious look on each of their faces and the rigid tension in their bodies all but answered his question.

“Not a social call, Hug,” Starsky said.

“So, wha’s happenin’?”

“We need to show you a video tape.” Hutch held up the package. “But it has to be in a place where no one will know you’ve seen it. No one can even know we’ve been there together. Dobey, too.”

Huggy was confused but didn’t ask any questions.

“All will be explained, Huggy,” Starsky added, smiling. Huggy knew his friend well enough to realize it was more of a grimace. “We promise. Dobey reminded us about your cousin… Dexter? The one who works at a TV station?”

“Derwin,” Huggy corrected.

“Right, Derwin,” Hutch repeated. “He still work at the station?”

“Last time I talked to him he did.”

Starsky put his elbows on the table and sat forward. “We need you to ask him if you, me, Hutch and
Dobey can meet him there as soon as possible. It will probably have to be at night when no one is around to know we've been there. We need a three-quarter inch video tape machine.”

“Once we’re sure we know how to operate it,” Hutch continued, “he has to leave. The fewer people who know what’s on the tape the better. For now. Eventually everyone’s going to know. But for now it can only be you and Dobey.”

“What’s this all about, fellas?” Huggy couldn’t keep concern out of his voice.

“Believe me, Hug,” Starsky said, “once you see the tape you’ll understand why we can’t say anything right now.” He reached across the table and put a hand on Huggy’s arm. “Will you please contact Derwin and ask him if it’s possible?”

Huggy looked at the two people he cared about more than he’d be willing to admit. “Sure. Okay. I’ll ask.”

Hutch put his hand on Huggy’s other arm. “Thanks, Hug. We really appreciate it.”

“Where’ll you be?”

The partner’s checked with each other silently before Starsky answered. “Around. We’ll catch up with you tonight when we come back for dinner. Right now we need to find anyone who can tell us where Blackie Russell went after the hotel he was staying at was torn down. Our APB has turned up nothing.”

“Any ideas, Hug?” Hutch asked.

“Try Tracey. Over at The Gilded Cage. She used to know Blackie real well. Had the bruises to prove it, too. She might be able to tell you.”

“Thanks, Hug! You saved us a whole lot of trouble!” Starsky’s smile appeared a little less strained.

Huggy shrugged. “That’s what I’m here for, fellas. Go talk to Tracey and I’ll see you tonight. Hopefully with some good news from Derwin.”

“You’re the man, Hug.” said Hutch.

“An’ don’t you forget it!” The Bear turned serious again. “You two stay outta trouble now, ya hear?”

Starsky matched his seriousness. “Too late for that.”

When they walked out Huggy stood, shaken a little by Starsky’s words. He went to the bar and picked up the phone.

******

At The Gilded Cage the assistant manager wasn’t being very cooperative. Starsky leaned hard against one shoulder and Hutch leaned equally hard against the other.

“Tracey,” Starsky said. “We don’t know her last name. But we’re told she works here.”

“Never heard of her,” the nervous manager muttered.

Starsky figured the guy’d probably been told never to cooperate with cops. Too bad. “My partner showed you his badge, remember?” He got a brief nod. “If I have to dig mine out, too, I’m gonna be
real pissed.”

Hutch replicated Starsky’s menace. “We need to know where Tracey is. And we need to know now.”

“She’s not…” the manager sputtered, his resolve crumbling, “she ain’t… she called… said she can’t come to work tonight.”

“Okay.” Starsky stepped back half a pace. “She called.”

“From where?” Hutch asked immediately.

“Her apartment, you idiot!”

Starsky stepped in again and lightly patted the side of the manager’s flushed face. “That was not nice, Bill. We want the address.”

“I’ll get it.” Defeated, the manager turned toward the back.

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The assistant manager had given them all the information they’d asked for. The girl’s full name was Tracey Montaine, she was using an I.D. that claimed she was twenty-one but was probably only sixteen or seventeen. She lived at 3331 Fulton.

When Tracey answered the door Hutch knew immediately why she wouldn’t be able to work that night. She’d been beaten. She was pretty enough to be a model or an actress. Instead Hutch knew the teenager he was looking at was a junkie who would probably never see twenty. Barefoot, wearing a ratty housecoat, she appeared to be worn out.

She backed away from the door, leaving it open, and went to the ratty couch in the tiny living room. When she sank down at one end defeat was prominent in every move. “Can’t ya see I’m busy here? Whadda want?”

Starsky turned toward the back of the apartment.

Hutch moved over and sat next to her. “Did Blackie do this, Tracey?” He gently touched an ugly bruise on her cheek. “Why?” She didn’t answer right away but Hutch waited.

Starsky came into the room and sat on the arm of the couch. With only a look between them Hutch knew the rest of the small apartment was empty.

Tracey put her face down into the hands on her knees and began to cry in deep, wracking sobs. “He’s… never been… like that… before… I mean, he’s hit me lotsa times… but never like… last night.” She sat back up and brushed her hand across her eyes. “I thought he was gonna kill me.” She got up and went into the miniscule kitchen, got a glass and filled it at the tap. She drank it dry before coming back and sitting down again. Her voice was very low and Hutch had to strain to hear the words. “I think he killed somebody last night.”

Hutch glanced at Starsky but said nothing.

“He told me he had an easy job t’ do,” she continued, her words running together without a breath, “and he’d be back before I got home from the Cage but he didn’t get here ’til nearly three and when he came in he was so crazy mad and spattered with blood I could hardly understand what he was sayin’… something about they came back early he didn’t have no choice he didn’t want to but he
didn’t have no choice.” She looked up at Hutch, desperate. “I think he killed both of ‘em.”

The look on Starsky’s face told Hutch he hadn’t heard about any double homicide either. Hutch turned back to Tracey and put a hand on her arm. He removed it quickly though, not wanting her to get the wrong impression. “Where was the job, Tracey?”

“Beverly Hills, I think.”

Hutch looked at his partner again. That makes sense. We haven’t heard yet because it’s not our jurisdiction.

Starsky got up and left.

“Why did he beat you, Tracey?”

“He was crazy.” She shrugged. “I don’t even think he knew it was me. He kept talkin’ about ‘them’ while he was hittin’ me.” She looked at him, the knowledge in her eyes. “I’m pretty sure he beat those people to death.”

“Do you need to go to the hospital? Is anything broken? Did he rape you?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He knows how to beat a woman so’s she can still work.” She rubbed a badly bruised arm. “Usually. I guess he lost his head last night…. I’ll be fine. Soon as I can cover the bruises with makeup I’ll be back at the Cage. I’ll be okay. Thanks.”

Hutch got up and drew another glass of water, brought it back to her before sitting down again. “Will you press charges, Tracey?” She looked at him, fear overlaying the distress. “We’ll need you to give a statement about what he said while he was beating you. It will tie his assault on you to the murders in Beverly Hills.” He put his most persuasive tone into his next words. “We need your help to nail him. He could have killed you. And you think he did kill two other people.”

She was silent for a long time before sitting up, her voice stronger than it had yet been. “Okay.”

He squeezed her arm gently. “Thank you. Why don’t you go get dressed and Starsky and I’ll drive you downtown. You can give your statement and we’ll find you a safe place to stay until we can arrest Blackie.”

“Oh, that’ll be easy.” Her smile was malicious. “When he left this morning he said he was gonna take the stuff he got last night to Wally, his regular fence. And then they were gonna celebrate. It musta been quite a haul. Blackie was talkin’ about gettin’ out of town with the money he’d make off the diamonds alone. He seemed to have forgotten all about his having killed anybody. And he never even looked at the mess he’d made of me.” She sat up straighter. “Damn right I’ll press charges!”

“Does Wally have a last name?” Hutch had his notebook out.

“If he does, I don’t know it. Just Wally. But he has an ‘antiques’ shop over on 23rd, somewhere around Main, I think.”

Starsky came back in and gave an affirmative nod to Hutch.

Tracey got up and made her unsteady way to the bedroom.

Starsky sat back on the arm of the couch. “Doctor and his wife.”

******
That evening at The Pitts Starsky and Hutch were in their back booth drinking coffee while Huggy tended to details at the bar.

When Diane brought a tray with the detectives’ dinner out of the kitchen, Huggy took it. “Thanks, Diane.” He took the coffee pot and a cup and saucer off the counter behind the bar, added them to the tray, and made his way to his friends’ booth. They lifted their plates while he slid in, refilled their cups, then filled his own.

Hutch snatched a fry off Starsky’s plate. Starsky, as expected, slapped at the hand, a playful expression belying irritation.

Huggy could tell the day had gone better than any of them might have predicted. “Were you serious? Blackie was still at the fence’s place? And the stuff was right out in plain sight?”

“Plain sight, Hug.” Starsky shared a grin with Hutch. “If they’d been sober they might have thought to put it in the safe but they were both so drunk they could barely stand up when we put the cuffs on them.” Another shake of his head. “Never saw such a sorry sight in your life as those two, Hug.”

“Beverly Hills sent over two detectives,” Hutch continued between gulps of coffee. “They sat in on the interview with Blackie, after he sobered up, and he didn’t try to deny the murders. Even with his lawyer there he kept talking and talking.” All lightness and cheer left his eyes. “Confessed to killing Itsy and Bitsy, too.”

Starsky nudged Hutch’s elbow. “Maybe he thought he’d get a better cell with a better quality of cell mates if he was an admitted murderer.” He snickered. “Humans and birds.”

“What are you talking about, Starsky?” Huggy was lost. “What birds?”

“Never mind, Hug,” Hutch waved off the question. “We’ll tell you that part later. What about Derwin?”

“Good news!” Huggy was feeling happy about the way things were falling into place. “Derwin has moved up in the world. He’s now an associate producer of the station’s ‘Let’s Talk News.’ One of his jobs is finding interesting people to interview on the show. When he called me back a little while ago he said he’s thought of a way we can all get into the building and watch the tape. He’d already heard about the murders and the way you guys had Blackie in custody. He wants to get both of you, and Dobey, on the show! Tomorrow night!”

“It’s a great idea, Hug,” Hutch said. “We shouldn’t be interviewed ourselves though. We can be there in the background but the host should talk with Dobey.”

“Right.” Starsky readily picked up the thought. “Then we can all stay afterward…” He looked at Huggy. “It’s a live, late night show?”

Huggy nodded. “Eleven thirty.”

“Afterward,” Hutch chimed in, “we stick around. After everyone else has left and the studio is shut down, we all end up in the tape room.”

“Where Derwin shows you how to operate the equipment,” Huggy continued, as if reading from a script, “before he goes to keep a lookout in case somebody shows up unexpectedly. And the four of us watch the video.”

“Only one problem I can see.” Starsky suddenly looked uncertain. “Getting Dobey to agree to being interviewed.”
“Oh, he’ll love it.” Hutch laughed. “You remember how much in his element he was that time he talked about Elmo Jackson’s murder. He’s a natural in front of a camera, Stark.” His face suddenly lost all humor. “Besides, it’ll be a perfect opportunity to do what we need to do without arousing suspicion. He’ll agree to the interview if for no other reason than that.”

“You’re right.” Starks’y face lit up. “Besides, as he said this morning, he hates waiting for the other shoe. Think I should call him tonight? Or wait ‘til tomorrow?”

“I’d call him tonight” Hutch advised. “That’ll give Edith time to choose his wardrobe.”

Starkey got up and headed for the phone.

Huggy and Hutch drank their coffee. “Huggy…” Hutch turned serious. “How do we rate a friend as good as you? You’re always there for us.”

Huggy’s instant response might have been sarcasm, but he decided an honest question merited an honest answer. “I guess it’s because m’ man, Starkey, an’ I were into so much shit when we were young and only made it through by lookin’ after each other.”

“The Inextricables?”

“He told you about that, huh?” Huggy paused. “Those were some of the hairiest, best times I’ve ever had, Hutch. You’re partner’s something else.”

“No argument.”

“So I figure if you’re with him I gotta look after you, too. Then you’ll both look after me.”

Hutch seemed to try to follow that rationale and it must have made sense. “I just wish you’d let us do something for you once in a while. Lately it always seems to be you taking care of us.”

“You hear me complainin’ m’ brother?”

“No, Hug. Thanks.”

Starkey came back, all smiles. “He’s a happy camper.”

“I’ll go call Derwin.” Huggy got up. “His producer can set things up officially with Dobey in the morning.”

******

Starkey slid into the booth next to Hutch, watching Huggy walk away. All his good cheer had evaporated. “You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” He put his hand on Hutch’s thigh and felt the heat.

“What if you’d been hung like John Holmes? I never would have gotten you down my throat.” He gripped the fingers tightly. “Because d’Ambrosia specified ‘to the root.’ Remember?”

Starkey laughed out loud and moved his hand to cover Hutch’s growing erection. “I’m extra special glad I’m not him, babe.”
“I’m going to take you again, Stark.” Hutch sounded unsure and self-conscious. “One of these days, I’ll be ready to take you again.”

“I know that. No rush. We’ll both know when it’s time.”

“I hope so.”

“Let’s go home, huh? I’d better call Ma and catch her up on all the big doings. She’ll be thrilled we’re going to be on television!”

Hutch shot him a version of his own patented lop-sided smile.

“We got a big day tomorrow, pal, getting all the paperwork on Blackie finished up before our debut. Background only, I know. But you can never tell who’ll be watching.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Bad guys watch TV don’t they? We have to look our best.” He gave Hutch a huge, phony smile and slid out of the booth, leaving a twenty on the table. Hutch followed. Starsky waved goodnight to Huggy as they left.

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Slowly, Starsky became aware that Hutch’s restlessness was becoming agitation, his body jerked and his arms moved as if trying to fight someone off. His soft moans became angry cries.

“No!” Hutch shouted. “We did what you wanted. Don’t hurt him! Please! You promised! Don’t hurt him any more!”

Starsky gathered Hutch in his arms and cradled him against his chest, stilling the arm movements and body jerks with firm but soothing strokes of his hands up and down Hutch’s back. “Shhhhhhhh, it’s just a dream. It’s all over, Hutch. Come on, partner, wake up for me now.”

“I’m awake, Stark.” Hutch finally opened his eyes.

“Bad one, huh?” Hutch didn’t answer right away and, knowing his partner always had a tougher time talking about the nightmare than he did, Starsky waited.

“You could say that.” Hutch took a shuddering breath and cuddled closer. “They grabbed you and held you down. And Cairo was raping you…. After we’d done everything d’Ambrosia said they were going to kill us anyway…. They started on you. I couldn’t stop them, Stark. I couldn’t do anything to help you.”

Starsky tightened his embrace and slowed the strokes along his partner’s back. “We’re gong to get the bastard, plus all his cronies. It’s going to take longer than we thought but I promise, Hutch, we’re going to get them.”

Hutch snaked his arms around Starsky’s waist and settled against his chest. Starsky was content to remain like that, drawing comfort and strength from his best friend and giving the same back. Just when Starsky began to think that Hutch was ready to sleep again he felt a stirring against his thigh and sighed happily. Maybe their conversation at The Pits had opened a door. He buried his face in Hutch’s silky hair and murmured, “Better be careful down there, Blue Eyes.”

Hutch looked up at him, all innocence. “Or what?”

Starsky chastely kissed the offered lips. He didn’t want to start something unless Hutch was really ready. “Or I’m likely to ask your permission to put that thing in my mouth an’ suck you so slow and deep you’ll go back to sleep for a while before you feel like comin’.”
“That’s funny, Starsk, because I was thinking of doing the same thing. I want to taste you, and lick you, and suck you, swallow you if I can.”

Starsky chuckled as he pushed Hutch onto his back and the covers off their bodies. “You’ll have to wait your turn then, pal. I asked first.”

Hutch grabbed fistfuls of his hair. Starsky didn’t resist when his face was pulled to his partner’s for a long, deep, no-tongue, yet passionate kiss.

“Sixty-nine?” Hutch whispered?

Starsky laughed, sexily, and planted soft kisses on Hutch’s chest. “Nuh-uh, I’m no good at it. I like to concentrate on what I’m doing and when I tried that with a lady I always got so distracted I could never do her justice. I’d much rather pay strict and undivided attention to your pleasure, at least for tonight.” He looked up, making sure Hutch could see the blatant longing in his eyes. Hutch melted.

Reaching over to the night table, Starsky turned on the light. “Want you to watch me, Hutch. Watch me love your cock so good you’ll come ‘til breakfast. We went through hell to get here, babe, but everything’s going to be sweet from now on.”

Starsky could tell from Hutch’s increasingly rapid, shallow breathing, his flushed skin and glitter-bright eyes, his lover was ready to be loved. He slid down the golden body, licking and kissing his meticulous way from throat to chest to stomach to groin, ignoring no spot but lingering on none either.”

“Ohhh, Starsk.”

“God, you’re easy. I haven’t even started yet.”

“Well, get to it! I’m dyin’ of old age here.”

“Go back to sleep then, Gramps,” Starsky snickered. “I’ll wake you when I’m ready.”

Starsky was so patient and deliberate that Hutch’s phallus was swollen and pulsing by the time he reached it. With a glance up at Hutch’s face, which had turned an interesting shade of lust, he took the organ gently in both hands, stroking it lightly, barely touching the skin. Starsky could tell it was a sensation Hutch had never felt before and the expression on his face was one Starsky would cherish.

Not letting go of his ‘captive,’ Starsky moved carefully between Hutch’s legs, his knees insinuating themselves under Hutch’s thighs, raising his legs a little and allowing Starsky to move closer to the object of his attention. Locking eyes with his beloved, he slowly, sensuously licked the palm of his left hand and placed it around Hutch’s rigid shaft. Next he licked the palm of his right hand, placing it below his left. Hutch moaned. Starsky smiled, grateful to have been able to give pleasure so quickly.

Lowering his head, he breathed onto the crown, which made Hutch thrash. Without looking up he murmured, “Hey, Hutch…”

“Hmmmnnnnmm?”

“You know the difference between pink and purple?”

With what Starsky was doing it was unlikely Hutch could have put together an intelligible response. Starsky waited until his partner opened his eyes and was looking at him before tightening both hands on the length of his lover’s column. “The grip.”
Hutch’s eyes flew wide, a look of utter surprise and desire flashing across his features, turning the lust to passion.

Starsky bent over Hutch’s engorged cock and took it all the way down his throat in one slow, smooth swallow, until his lower lip touched testicles.

Hutch reached for Starsky’s head and entangled the curls with his long fingers. His moans increased in volume and rose in pitch: “Ahhhhhhhh… Oh, God, ohhhhh… Starsssskkkkyy!”

Starsky had dreamed of loving Hutch’s cock like this but never in those wildest of fantasies had it felt so powerful, alive, and vital. It was like nothing he’d ever done before in his life! And he found himself wishing it could continue forever. But he realized that he’d have to pull off a little if he wanted to keep breathing because Hutch was so far down his throat air couldn’t get past. And as much as he wanted to hold his lover that deep inside himself he wanted to go on living, too. At least until he’d made Hutch come. Then possibly he could die happy. No. Nope. No way. Not a chance! This was only the first of many times he intended to lavish Hutch with loving. It was simply the beginning.

Using all his long-abandoned skills, Starsky made sweet love to Hutch. Realizing he’d drawn his partner to the ragged edge several times, and knowing his jaw would ache fiercely tomorrow, Starsky drew off a little more. With his tongue he traced the prominent vein, licking and teasing the crown’s slit as he manipulated the organ rapidly in and out of his mouth. His left hand moved to Hutch’s balls, softly but firmly rolling and massaging.

Hutch slammed his hands onto the bed and he gripped the sheets in white-knuckled tension.

Exquisitely slowly, Starsky brought Hutch to an orgasm he sincerely hoped would never be forgotten. Living his own dream as well Starsky swallowed. The fluid was hot and viscous and bitter but it was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. Sucking and swallowing he drained Hutch of every drop of semen he could produce. At least, for that night.

He sat back on his heels and enfolded Hutch’s wilting rod. The look on Hutch’s face was one of blissful contentment and Starsky pasted it on a page all by itself in his Memory Book. He crawled out from between Hutch’s legs, gently straightening them to a more comfortable position, reached for the covers and pulled them over their bodies. Elbowing his way up the bed, he snuggled next to his partner again. “You okay?”

Hutch laughed and rolled onto his right side. His glazed eyes refocused and, from the languid, utter peace in them, Starsky knew he had accomplished his objective: to make Hutch’s demons vanish in a blaze of sublime pleasure.

“You realize, of course,” Hutch managed to say, “that every time you ask me that in the future I’ll think of this moment.” He lifted a hand and stroked Starsky’s cheek. “I’m more okay than I’ve ever been, Starsk.”

Starsky turned his head, kissed the palm and put his own hand over it to hold it in place. “Think you can sleep now?”

“If I don’t hear the alarm go off, you’ll have only yourself to blame. And if you don’t hear it either, we’ll be late for work.”

Starsky turned off the bedside light. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.” Kissing his partner lightly he whispered, “Sleep well, Hutch.”
Hutch’s murmur sounded as if it came from far away. “You, too, babe.”
Chapter 7

Saturday passed in a haze of paperwork, more interviews with Blackie and his attorney, meetings with the D.A. and Dobey, as well as the Beverly Hills detectives. Hutch could hardly believe he and Starsky had managed to cram so much into one day. And it wasn’t even dark yet.

He hadn’t had a second to himself to think about the gift Starsky had given him the night before: the beginning of their lives together as lovers, not just as apartment-cohabitants and bedmates. After The Event he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to enjoy a sexual act again, much less achieve orgasm.

He’d never mentioned his anxiety and misgivings to Starsky of course, Starsky would simply have passed them off as a lingering effect of their trauma. He shouldn’t have underestimated his partner though, Starsky knew him so well he’d understood Hutch’s fear even better than Hutch had himself. And Starsky’d had the cure, a spectacular, lengthy loving. He’d never beenpleasured that energetically, irreverently, thoroughly and satisfyingly before in his life.

Hutch had melted under Starsky’s tenderness. The application of combined passion and skill had rendered Hutch’s dread and uncertainties null and void. He was whole again, because of Starsky. And he intended, at their very first opportunity, to begin balancing the scales.

Every time he caught Starsky’s eye that day, he knew his mind was being read. We’ve only just begun, his partner told him silently, and even though he couldn’t block Karen Carpenter’s voice from his head, it was Starsky’s gaze he held, returning the promise.

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From Hutch’s point of view, ‘Let’s Talk News’ that night was a total success. Dobey was at his best, answering probing questions put to him by the show’s host, Maury Courtland. The captain explained issues succinctly while Hutch and Starsky, wearing their go-to-court sport coats, shirts, slacks and ties, stood behind their boss. Hutch had tried to keep his face neutral but was afraid he’d only succeeded in looking slightly embarrassed.

After the sign-off, Courtland excused himself and left.

“Sorry about that, guys,” Derwin apologized, when the host had gone. “Maurey can’t carry on a conversation without his teleprompter.”

The Assistant Director stuck her head around the backdrop. “You all staying for a while?”

“We have some things to talk about, Janice,” Huggy’s cousin answered. “If that’s all right.”

“Sure, Derwin, that’s fine. After tonight’s show, you can probably do anything you want around here! Except burn the place down!” Derwin blushed and she laughed. “Lock up when you leave.”

“You got it,” Derwin said.

Hutch noticed the small talk everyone engaged in for the next few minutes consisted mostly of silences.

“I feel really bad about the birds,” Derwin offered.

“We all do, son,” Dobey replied, kindly. “Thank you.”
When no one had interrupted them for fifteen minutes, Derwin got up. “Be back in a few.” He walked around the backdrop.

Hutch thought Huggy looked as nervous as the proverbial long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. And Dobey didn’t look any better. That was no big surprise, he and Starsky hadn’t given them much information. Yet. He could hear Derwin moving through the building turning off lights and locking doors, making sure no one was lurking. Exactly as they had planned earlier.

When Derwin came back they all got to their feet and followed him to a room at the rear of the building where the video equipment was housed. Hutch took the tape out of the briefcase Dobey had loaned him. He handed it to Derwin who turned on the Video Tape Recorder and television set, tuning it to Channel 3.

“You guys know how to operate this machine, right?” Derwin sounded nervous. “I mean, if something happens, it’s my neck on the line.”

“We have one exactly like it at the Precinct,” Hutch assured him. “We’ll handle it gently. I promise.”

“Sorry.” Derwin almost blushed. “No offense. Guess I’m a little up tight.”

“Understandable, cousin.” Huggy plainly understood.

Derwin put the tape into the machine. “Levers are all labeled and self-explanatory.”

Hutch checked the words on each lever to make sure they were the same as on the machine in their conference room before he nodded.

“Only thing to remember,” Derwin warned, “is the Pause. Never leave it on for more than thirty seconds. You’ll burn right through your tape.”

Hutch patted the nervous young man’s shoulder. “We’ll remember.”

“I’ll be right down the hall, Huggy, if you need anything.” Derwin closed the door behind him when he left the room.

Hutch drew a chair up close to the machine so that he could manipulate the functions while the others took chairs in front of the TV set. He looked at Starsky, trying to infuse him with all the love and support he could.

Starsky turned to Dobey and Huggy. “A little over three weeks ago, well, nights, actually, Hutch and I were kidnapped by a bunch of guys employed by one Anthony d’Ambrosia.” He waited but, except for Huggy’s widened eyes, neither he nor Dobey reacted. “They beat us, knocked us out, and took us to an abandoned industrial park in the San Fernando Valley.”

“When we woke up the next morning,” Hutch continued, “d’Ambrosia told us he was expanding his business enterprises into Bay City but that he wouldn’t tolerate Starsky’s and my interference in those businesses. Therefore, in order to insure that we would be disinclined to take part in any investigation of him or his interests, he would hold a video tape over our heads of us performing… certain acts.”

Dobey couldn’t help but ask the obvious question. “What ‘certain acts’ would those be?”

Hutch glanced at Starsky and got the silent reinforcement he needed; there was no turning back. He looked directly at Dobey. “Fellatio and sodomy.”
Dobey and Huggy were clearly stunned. It was Dobey who found his voice first. “But… you’ve never… Had you?”

“No, Cap’n,” Hutch assured him. “And we told d’Ambrosia that. Which is when he informed us that we would either perform those acts on each other within the following two hours, in front of him and his ‘associates’ as well as his video equipment, or we would both be fucked… to death.”

“He said he had a dozen men waiting for just that opportunity,” Starsky went on quickly. “They had already drawn straws to see who would be the first two ‘winners’.”

“d’Ambrosia promised,” Hutch continued, “that we’d each be forced to watch as the other was fucked as often, and by as many of his men as possible, until we were dead. We knew he had the guys, including Mike Tate…”

Huggy shot a sharp look at Hutch who nodded.

“Because that’s how many had beaten and kidnapped us,” Starsky finished.

Dobey still said nothing.

“We either did what he demanded,” Hutch picked up the story again, “or we died. We decided we didn’t want to die, Captain…”

“So we did what he wanted.” Starsky gestured to the machine in front of them. “He said he’d send us a copy of the tape and we assume this is it. Hutch and I haven’t seen it so we don’t know if it’s been edited or the sound track deleted or what. We’d like both of you to watch it at the same time we do.”

“May I say…”? Huggy asked in a very soft voice, “that I hope it turns out to be a copy of ‘Babes in Boyland’? I never got to see that one.”

Hutch couldn’t help but laugh. The others did, as well.

“We can always hope, my friend,” Starsky said.

“Interrupt any time,” Hutch got back to business. “Ask any questions you want, then we’ll talk.” He looked at his captain and good friend, doing his best to hide his inner turmoil. “We need help and didn’t know who else to turn to.”

“Of course you need help.” Dobey donned his fatherly commander’s mantel. “I have no idea what we can do, yet, but we’ll think of something.” He nodded at Hutch. “Start the tape, son.”

Hutch pressed the ‘Play’ lever and black took the place of snow on the television. This lasted for about ten seconds, after which the warehouse ‘set’ filled the screen. The bruised, naked figures of Starsky and Hutch were standing next to a ratty mattress.

“Ready, Mr. d’Ambrosia,” came from off-screen.

“You’re on the clock, gentlemen,” said another voice. “So, as they say in the movies, Action!”

Hutch looked quickly at Starsky. *He didn’t take out the audio.*

The next hundred and twenty minutes were some of the longest and most difficult Hutch could ever remember. It seemed worse somehow, watching what had happened, than it had felt when he and Starsky were living it. Forcing those thoughts into a dark corner of his mind, he focused on the
screen. His peripheral vision couldn’t help noticing though, the horrified reactions of Dobey and Huggy to what they saw.

Several times Dobey asked for a sequence to be replayed so that he could make sure he understood d’Ambrosia’s orders. Huggy never spoke.

At the moment when Starsky penetrated Hutch and he cried out, Dobey blanched and looked as if he was about to faint. Hutch hit the Pause lever.

Dobey quickly got his composure back, as much as possible, and motioned for Hutch to continue the tape.

Hutch hit Play again and they all watched the fourth event. When d’Ambrosia lunged into the frame and dragged Starsky away from Hutch, leaving him bleeding, Dobey pushed to his feet and ran out the door.

Hutch again hit Pause and glanced at his watch. After thirty seconds he hit Stop, mindful of Derwin’s caution.

Several minutes later, Dobey, pale and wiping his forehead with a paper towel, came back, looking apologetic. “Sorry. I’ve never seen anything like that and knowing it happened to two of my best friends…” He sat back down.

“It’s almost over, Captain,” Hutch said in sympathy. “I don’t know how long Tate kept the machine running but that was the end of the fourth ‘event’.”

Dobey’s fervent “Thank God!” seemed to reflect everyone’s feelings.

Hutch hit Play again and a minute later the screen went black. He stopped the machine. The silence dragged on for a while but no one seemed ready or willing to break it.

“Are you both all right?” Dobey finally asked, visibly concerned. “Was there a hospital nearby? You didn’t even take a day off work.”

“We didn’t go to a hospital, Cap,” Starsky replied, “and we had a whole weekend.”

“Starsky and I took care of each other. Like always.” Hutch’s look hardened and his eyes turned cold. “That’s when we started thinking about how we were going to get d’Ambrosia.”

“You see, Cap’n…” Starsky sat forward, “Hutch and I aren’t the first cops he’s done this to.”

Dobey’s face showed surprise which quickly turned to hate.

“Settle down, Cap.” Huggy put a gentling hand on Dobey’s arm. “I don’t think our boys have finished yet.”

“Right you are, Hug.” Hutch sat forward. “But here’s where we need help. We have to find the other
cops d’Ambrosia’s got under his thumb.”

“And that’s going to take some digging,” Starsky added. “It has to be done very carefully, too, so that d’Ambrosia doesn’t get wind of it.”

“Minnie.” Huggy quietly inserted the name into the silence. All three cops looked at him, startled, probably for different reasons.

“Minnie Kaplan?” Dobey was patently lost. “Our Minnie? What’s she got to do with this, Huggy?”

“Oh, that’s right.” Huggy appeared slightly nonplussed. “I told Starsky and Hutch but haven’t had a chance to tell you.”

Hutch never thought he’d see the Bear flustered but he was at that moment.

“She an’ I got to know each other pretty well when Starsky was in the hospital, Cap. We’ve been keepin’ company now for over a year.” Huggy looked seriously at Hutch, Starsky, then Dobey.

“Minnie knows everything there is to know about searching files. She has contacts in every cop shop in the country, too, I think. If the best detectives in a city suddenly stopped being the best, we need to contact them without anybody knowin’ about it. Find out if they were done the same as you two.”

“It could be dangerous, Hug,” Hutch pointed out. “If d’Ambrosia discovers she’s helping us, she could –”

“She’s a cop, too, Hutch,” Huggy was suddenly fierce. “And don’t you forget it! ‘Sides, she loves you guys. Almost as much as the Cap’n, here, and I do.” He dropped his eyes, shyly. “I’ll ask her tonight. Told her I’d be late but she said come by when we were finished.” He looked uncomfortably at Starsky then Hutch. “Is it okay if I tell her about this?”

“You’ll have to, Hug,” Starsky said.

“It won’t be easy,” Hutch added. “And I’m sorry about that, but –”

“Cut the crap, Hutch!” Huggy began venting his pent up feelings. “She’s a cop! She’ll hate it!” He took a deep breath. “She’ll hate it,” he repeated. “But she’ll understand what we need to do.”

Hutch couldn’t think of anything to say after that. Apparently nobody else could, either.

“After we find these pairs of cops, what do we do?” Dobey asked. “You think they all have these tapes?”

“We’d bet on it, Cap.” Starsky glanced at Hutch. “And d’Ambrosia has the originals. He said he’d have copies of our tape in his safe deposit box addressed to the Police Chief, the Mayor, and all the news media. In case we ever reneged.”

Dobey nodded. “Guess he thinks he’s got the whole thing figured out.” He sat up straighter, a look of pride now on his face. “But he misjudged you two. You’re willing to risk your careers in order to bring him down.”

“We didn’t have a choice, Cap’n.” Hutch shrugged.

“Of course, you had a choice!” Dobey flared. “You could have kept your mouths shut! And nobody would have known. Just like all the other pairs of detectives he’s done this to. I’ll bet they’ve never said a word to anybody!” He seemed mentally to shake himself and regain his usual aplomb. “But that’s why you’re the best cops it’s ever been my honor to work with.”
“Thanks, Cap’n,” said Starsky. “We really appreciate that.”

Hutch hit the Rewind lever.

“Our first objective, the way I see it,” Dobey continued, “is to find these other cops! And for that I think Huggy’s right. Minnie is our best bet.”

Hutch didn’t like it but he had no other suggestions. He looked quickly at his partner and got an affirmative nod.

Dobey turned to Huggy. “Give her our best, my friend, and let her know we’ll be counting on her.” He put a hand on Huggy’s arm, his smile possibly forced. “No pressure though.”

The laughter was brittle but it succeeded in breaking the tension. Hutch ejected the rewound tape and turned everything off, put the cassette back in its box and into the briefcase. Hutch held the briefcase out to Dobey. “Would you keep this in the safe in your office, Capt’n? I can’t think of a better place.”

“Of course.” Dobey took the case.

Chairs were returned to where they had been. Starsky opened the door, turned off the light, and followed the others out.

At the end of the hall, Derwin was seated, reading a book. “Everything go okay, Huggy?”

Huggy put an arm around his cousin’s shoulders. “As well as they could, cousin, as well as they could. Now lead the way out of here, lock the place up and get on home.”

Hutch put his hand out and shook Derwin’s. “My partner and I are in your debt, Derwin. If there’s ever anything you need, let us know. Okay?”


“That goes for me, too,” Dobey said. “The department owes you and we won’t forget it.”

That really seemed to be too much for Derwin to absorb. He turned and led the way to the closest exit, shutting off lights.

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In the Torino, Hutch waited until they were out of the studio parking lot. “You were talking to Huggy at the time but did you hear Dobey tell me he’s going to have his office checked for bugs tomorrow? And once a week from now on?”

“I heard. How’s he going to justify that?”

“I have no idea but I’m sure he’ll think of something. That’ll be one place we know will be safe to talk.”

Starsky was quiet for a few minutes, driving cautiously and Hutch noticed him checking for tails. When he spoke, the voice was so soft, Hutch had to strain to hear them. “I’ve never seen Dobey get sick like that. Have you?”

“No, I never have. I wish he hadn’t had to see the tape, but…”

“If there’s anything Dobey hates it’s bad cops. And now guys who think of ways to make good cops
go bad. Wait, that’s not really what’s happening, is it? Ways to make cops not be best cops any more.” He shrugged. “Oh, hell, you know what I mean.”

Hutch put a hand on Starsky’s shoulder, and began to knead the tense muscles. “Where are we going anyway?”

“I figure we could use a beer or two. With Huggy on his way to Minnie’s, and The Pits closed by now, I was going to stop at the first all-night convenience store we come to on the way to your place.”

“Good idea, Ollie,” Hutch quipped, making Starsky smile. “But please don’t pick one that’s being robbed, okay?”

“No robbers at the 7-11, got it!”

******

Hutch woke up to a still-warm but empty space beside him. He’d gotten so used to Starsky’s furnace heat keeping him toasty all night long he guessed it was the loss of that presence that had awakened him. Sitting up, he realized he was chillier than the simple fact that Starsky wasn’t in close proximity should have caused. Also, the residue of the dream he’d been in had him shaking. He knew it had involved The Event but couldn’t quite remember the details. Didn’t want to!

He grabbed his robe off the foot of the bed, cinched it tightly around himself and went looking for his partner. He didn’t bother to turn lights on and the dim illumination from the street made it take a while to check all the places Starsky could be. His jacket and holstered weapon were still on the back of the couch and his car keys were on the end table so he hadn’t left. Not finding him in the living room, bathroom or kitchen, Hutch opened the door to the greenhouse last.

Even then it took a few seconds to discern the huddled figure on the floor in the corner. Starsky was naked, his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms hugging them. He was trembling so hard the plant stand he was leaning against was shuddering. Leaves on the philodendron on top were shaking.

Hutch dashed inside to the bedroom and snatched Starsky’s robe off the floor before he hurried back to his partner. “Aw, Starsk.” He spread the soft terry cloth over Starsky’s shoulders, knelt next to the vibrating body and wrapped his arms around the whole package. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Apparently…” Starsky’s teeth were audibly chattering, “I did.” He pulled the edges of the robe tighter and leaned against Hutch. “Sorry.”

Hutch settled on the floor. Pulling Starsky more fully into his arms, he tucked the robe in and did his best to surround his partner with warmth. “What’s wrong, babe?” He threaded his fingers into the soft curls at the back of Starsky’s head, nestling the rough cheek more firmly against his shoulder. Starsky’s tremors calmed slowly.

“Watching it was worse.”

Hutch sighed and drew Starsky even more tightly to him. He should have known his outwardly tough other half would react the same way he had to the video. And stupidly he now realized, instead of admitting it to each other, they had both obviously tried to pretend the viewing had been no big deal.

Hutch was also suddenly aware of the fact that Starsky had been the strong one all along. He had sloughed off the physical and emotional ordeal with his usual swagger and self confidence. He had provided all the comfort and support Hutch had needed; had coaxed, cajoled and loved him through
every nightmare and incident of insecurity. Only to have the buried trauma surface tonight. “That’s exactly how I felt.”

“You did?” Starsky looked up at him, his eyes wide, his cheeks tear-streaked. “You didn’t say anything.”

“Didn’t think you needed the added burden.” Hutch took a deep breath, banished the insincerity from his voice, and kissed Starsky’s forehead. “No, that’s not true. I didn’t think I could handle it. Not with Dobey and Huggy around.”

“When we got back here, though?” Starsky persisted. “Why didn’t we talk about it, Hutch?”

Hutch had to think about that for a while. He must have taken too long because Starsky shrugged out of his arms.

“Never mind, it’s not important.” Starsky slipped into his robe and stood up. He tied the belt and held his hand down. “Let’s go back to bed, okay?”

Hutch allowed Starsky to pull him to his feet and into his arms.

“Thanks for waking up, partner,” Starsky murmured. “Thanks for bringing my robe, too.” He lifted his head and planted a firm kiss on Hutch’s chin. “Thanks for being there for me.”

Hutch wrapped his arms around his best friend. “Any time.”

An arm around each other, Hutch led the way back to the alcove and within seconds they were cuddled under the covers. Hutch drew Starsky to him, spooned. “You’re right, Starsk, we should have talked about it. So let’s promise each other something,” he whispered into the chocolate curls.

“Anything.” Starsky gathered Hutch’s hands to his chest.

“Whenever one of us needs a little more support and comfort than usual, we won’t try to hide it from the other.”

“I won’t fall apart again,” Starsky said. “I hope.”

“We’re a team, Starsk. If one of us has to fall apart that’s okay. The other’ll pick up the pieces.” He kissed the nape of Starsky’s neck, causing him to shiver again. “We just can’t do it at the same time.” He kissed a shoulder. “Whaddya say?”

Starsky snuggled back against Hutch’s front. “Deal.”

*******

Starsky felt like the next several weeks must have appeared ‘normal’ to anyone keeping track of their activities. He and Hutch had the satisfaction of seeing Blackie Russell sentenced to twenty five years to life for the murders of Dr. and Mrs. Amante, plus the string of burglaries and destruction of two valuable birds. His full confession had meant no trial and the judge had considered for only a week before delivering the sentence. Starsky and his partner were as satisfied as they ever were at the conclusion of a case.

Arriving at The Pits one evening after their shift, Starsky found a stack of Reader’s Digest on the table in their usual booth. He slid in and opened the first one before Huggy made it over with their beers.
“I see you found my cousin’s magazines, Starsky.” Huggy slid into the booth across from them. “He was only willing to lend me a year’s worth for now, but I figured you can take your time readin’ through ‘em.”

“I will, Huggy.” Starsky was already immersed. “Tell Jerome I’ll take good care of them.” He put his arm around Hutch’s shoulders and pulled him close. “Let’s see how many of these words you already know, College Boy.”

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One morning, before Starsky and Hutch could settle at their desks, Minnie breezed in and headed directly for Dobey’s office, carrying a small notebook. She nodded briefly at them before knocking on the door and going in. Starsky tried to look interested in his cup of coffee while Hutch shuffled through paperwork on his desk.

“Starsky! Hutchinson! Get in here!” Dobey shouted a few minutes later.

Putting on his best ‘confused’ look, Starsky followed his partner into the office and closed the door behind them.

Minnie looked up from her place next to Dobey behind the desk, her notebook open in front of him. Starsky and Hutch sat in the two guest chairs. Dobey got up and ushered Minnie around. “I want you to do the explaining, Minnie.” Dobey pointed to the chair Starsky was sitting in. “Here, sit down.”

Starsky leaped to his feet and stepped aside while she grinned at him and sat. Moving over to Hutch’s chair, Starsky sat on the arm and Dobey went back behind his desk.

“Nobody knows cop shops like records clerks.” There was definite pride in her voice. “Every case comes across our desks in one form or another. We know our men and women, too, uniform, detective, and brass. They’re like family. We don’t blab about it, except to each other, but we know who’s gettin’ the work done and who’s just punchin’ his time card.”

Starsky was fascinated. He’d never thought about what Minnie was saying but he knew she must be right. Hutch nudged him and Starsky figured this was news to him, too.

“I know the clerks in a whole lot of departments since we have to fax information back and forth all the time and talk on the phone.” She glanced at Dobey who nodded encouragement. “I’ve been talkin’ to some o’ these clerks on my own time, Cap’n, when I didn’t have an official reason to call…” Dobey nodded again. “and a couple of ‘em are tellin’ me they know exactly what I’m talkin’ about. They’ve got pairs of detectives who were gung ho and successful for years then suddenly deadbeats. They won’t give me names and I wouldn’t ask. You’ll have to do your own investigating for that. But I think I can give you a place to start.”

Starsky could feel the intensity radiating off his partner.

“Chicago and Philadelphia.” She lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “So far.”

Hutch nudged his hip again. “Starsky, remember that conference we went to last year before you were certified for street duty again?”

“The one on information sharing. Yeah… we met guys from both of those departments.” Starsky got up and dashed out the door, returning almost immediately. Flipping through his notebook, he sat back on the arm of Hutch’s chair so that his partner could see the pages, too. “Here we go… Melvin Porter was there from Philly.”
“Gus Abrams from Chicago,” Hutch read from farther down the page.

“We know these guys, Cap.” Starsky looked up at Dobey. “I think they’ll talk to us. We can at least find out if we’re on the right track. Just give us the okay for a few phone calls.”

“You got it.” Dobey sounded almost as enthused. “But…” he added, “do not cast aspersions on any officers until we know they’ve been influenced by d’Ambrosia.”

“Wouldn’t think of it, Cap’n. Thanks!” Starsky got up. He kissed Minnie’s cheek. “We love you, Min.”

“That’s no big deal, Starsky. You love everybody!”

Hutch got up and followed Starsky toward the door. “We couldn’t do this without you, Minnie, and…” turning to Dobey, “thank you, Captain.”

Outside in the squad room, Starsky waited for Hutch to come out of Dobey’s office. Keeping his voice down he shuffled papers on his desk as his partner moved to his own. “You got along better with Porter than I did so you take Philly. I’ll take Abrams.”

“Let’s call from Huggy’s. We’ll reimburse him for the long distance.” Hutch reached for his jacket. Starsky grabbed his own jacket and headed for the door.

*******

At The Pits, Hutch held the phone to his ear, cocked so that Starsky, who was leaning against his shoulder, could hear, too.

Huggy hovered but kept busy doing bar stuff.

“Correct, Mel, we’re only asking right now. Trying to put some lines of thought together…. Yeah, a team, good record, then suddenly quit closing cases…. right, no reason…. We understand, Mel…. No! Absolutely not, this is all unofficial, we are not looking to make trouble for anybody…. We’ve come across something here and are trying to figure out if other departments have experienced similarities…. Take all the time you need…. We’ll really appreciate any help you can give us…. You, too…. Starsky and I’ll see you at the next conference, we hope.”

He hung up and Huggy brought the coffee pot, filling both their empty cups. “Philly, too, maybe?”

Hutch nodded. “Just like Chicago.”

“Sounded to me as if Porter isn’t too keen on looking into his files though,” Starsky said. “Like maybe he knows what’s going on but doesn’t want to get involved.”

“He gave me that impression, too,” Hutch agreed. “But I think he realized the importance of what I was telling him and he’ll do some digging. I’m just afraid he may drag his heels.”

Starsky sat on his own stool and drank some coffee. “Abrams was exactly the opposite, didn’t you think?” Hutch nodded. “I’ll bet he’s already down in his archives.”

“And in the meantime…” Hutch put both hands around his cup. “We initiate Plan B.”

Huggy waited but when no further explanation was forthcoming, had to ask. “May I inquire as to the nature of Plan B?”
“Libraries.” Starsky’s reply bordered on smug.


“They’re better than newspaper morgues,” Hutch pointed out. “We’d have to call every newspaper in each city but libraries have back issues of all publications. If we can get a librarian to go through them, probably on microfiche, looking for the pattern we think is there, it’ll give us the information we need.”

“Public domain information,” Huggy added, knowingly.

“Exactly.” Starsky sounded pleased at Huggy’s quick grasp of the situation.

“Articles will give us names, Hug,” Hutch continued. “Plus, it’s something we could have found out ourselves.”

“Nobody can claim we have privileged information,” Starsky added.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think Minnie knows any librarians in Philly or Chicago,” Huggy said.

“She’s already done everything we could have hoped for, Hug,” Starsky told him. “She gave us the places to start!”

“So, what can I do while you two are hittin’ the books?” Huggy asked.

“Any word about where d’Ambrosia’s set up his headquarters?” Hutch glanced at Starsky. “If we knew where that was we’d start finding reasons to pay him a few visits.”

“Rattle his cage a little.” Starsky smirked with anticipation.

“Or a lot,” Hutch grinned, wickedly.

“I’m workin’ on it, fellas,” Huggy said. “My sources tell me it’s somewhere around the docks but that’s a huge area.”

“That it is, Hug.” Hutch finished his coffee and got up. Starsky did the same and they headed for the door. “Thanks again for the use of the phone. Let us know what the charges are when you get the bill. We’ll make sure you get reimbursed.”

“I ain’t worried,” Huggy stated, worriedly.

“That’s one of us, Hug.” Starsky waved as the door closed on his words.

*******

That afternoon Starsky was sorting through one of several boxes on his desk, trying to make sense of all the memos and paperwork that had accumulated during his absence and that had remained buried since his return. Hutch was at the file cabinet.

Dobey came through the squad room doors, a grim look on his face and a thin folder in his hand. He passed Hutch but caught Starsky’s eye. “In my office, Starsky. And bring your partner.” His voice wasn’t harsh and didn’t sound angry which made Starsky more wary than usual. He got up and followed Dobey through the door, Hutch close behind.

Inside, Starsky sat in the nearest guest chair and Hutch took the other while Dobey lowered his bulk into his swivel chair. Instinctively, Starsky knew it was not the time for jokes and waited silently.
Dobey laid his hands on top of the folder he’d brought in. “A young woman named Sharon Glassman was beaten and raped last night.”

Starsky shot a look at Hutch but his partner didn’t return it.

“Her attacker,” Dobey continued, stating facts in a neutral tone of voice, “tore her pantyhose. He used one half to tie her hands behind her back and the other half to gag her, wrapping the stocking twice around her head.”

At that, Hutch did look at him. Tate.

Dobey nodded, almost as if he’d heard the thought. “From her description, and a couple of other things he did that we never told the press about, it sounds like your friend, Mike Tate.”

“How’s she doing, Cap?” Starsky asked. “Can we talk to her?”

“She’s doing okay and they’re going to release her this afternoon. I want you two down there right now. She’s at Memorial. Take some pictures with you. If she can pick Tate out of a six pack we’ll nail his ass. Hopefully for good this time.”

“You got it, Cap’n.” Starsky got up, took the file from Dobey and opened the door for Hutch.

Hutch went straight to the mug books and pulled five shots. Starsky opened his desk’s file drawer and got Tate’s picture out of the folder they’d started on him the Monday after The Event. Starsky grabbed an envelope and shoved the images Hutch had selected into it along with Tate’s. He picked up his jacket. “Aren’t you glad we brought my car today, Hutch?” he joked, attempting to lighten his partner’s mood. “We’ll be there in no time.”

“Just drive, Starsky.”

******

In the Torino on the way to Memorial Hospital Starsky could tell Hutch was tense and he was pretty sure he knew why. Instead of needling or cajoling though, he paid close attention to his driving while making sure they weren’t being tailed.

“I hate him.” Hutch’s voice was low and intense.

Starsky felt The Look when it was directed his way and returned it.

“I really hate him, Star.”

Hutch held the gaze as long as traffic allowed, nodded, and faced forward again.

“I don’t usually feel strongly one way or the other about our perps, you know that.”

Starsky swallowed any reference to Artie Solkin, JoJo and Ben Forest. Among others. He nodded again instead.

“But I detest this guy. He’s slime, and he pollutes the world simply by existing.” Hutch looked out the window, his left hand fisted on his knee.

Starsky reached over and covered the fist with his right hand.

After a moment, Hutch turned his hand over and opened it so that Starsky could entwine their
“Because we’re supposedly under d’Ambrosia’s thumb now,” Hutch continued, more calmly but still taut, “Tate thinks he’s free to go back to his hobby and we won’t do a damn thing about it.”

“Impunity,” Starsky muttered.

Hutch chuckled and tightened his fingers. “Exactly.”

Starsky grinned. “Think he’ll be discommoded when he discovers his misapprehension?”

“I certainly hope so.”

*******

At the nurse’s station outside Sharon Glassman’s room, Starsky called Huggy to tell him of Tate’s latest bad act while Hutch was talking with her doctor. “Thanks, Huggy. Call Dobey if you find out where he is. The Cap’n’ll get in touch with us…. You got it.”

He hung up the phone and thanked the nurse, moved over to Hutch and Dr. Hartly. The physician was a slight, balding man with such a kindly face Starsky knew he’d have a great bedside manner.

“She’s doing well,” the doctor was saying, “all things considered. We’ll be releasing her this afternoon after she talks with Dr. Michelson.”

“That’s good news, doctor, thank you.” Hutch shook the man’s hand.

Starsky pumped the firm hand as well. Hutch knocked on the door as the doctor walked away.

“Come in.” The reply sounded weak but determined.

Hutch opened the door and Starsky followed him inside the room.

Sharon Glassman was a slender, dark haired woman, twenty-four, according to the folder they had, unmarried, a counselor at the local high school. The head of the bed had been raised and she was sitting up, alert but not smiling. There were red, chafed marks around her wrists from where she had fought the pantyhose bindings. Her face displayed a collection of uncovered stitches, bruises, and bandages. Her left eye was swollen nearly shut. The look she directed toward the door, however, was anything but defeated.

Starsky hated hospital rooms. He moved casually to the window and looked out while Hutch walked to the bedside.

“Ms. Glassman, I’m Detective Hutchinson.”

Reflected in the window, Starsky watched Hutch extend his hand. She took it.

“The one over there at the window… we hate hospital rooms, Ms. Glassman, please don’t take it personally… is my partner, Detective Starsky.”

Starsky turned and approached the bed, his hand out. She took it. “We’re very sorry about what happened to you last night.”

“Not half as sorry as I am.” Her reply was forthright.

Starsky nodded, what could he say? He reached a hand toward Hutch and was given the envelope.
“Would you mind looking at some pictures?”

“Show me!”

Starsky took the photos out and handed them to her. She studied each one carefully then went back to the fifth. Dropping the others, she brought that one closer to her undamaged eye. “Him.”

“You’re sure?” Hutch took all the photos back, Tate’s now on top.

“Definitely. And I’ll testify, too. You don’t have to worry that I’ll wimp out on that. Let’s get this bastard.” Her damaged face displayed firm resolve.

Starsky smiled at her. “We will, Ms. Glassman, count on it.”

“Do you have a place to stay? Someone to take care of you?” Hutch asked.

“My mother drove up this morning from Yorba Linda. She’s with my roommate right now making sure the apartment has everything we’ll need. They’re both coming to get me when I’m released.” She looked at Starsky, then at Hutch, concern now showing in her battered face. “Is this guy going to come after me again?”

“We’ll find him before he has a chance, Ms. Glassman,” Starsky assured her.

“Would you able to come down to the station in the morning?” Hutch asked. “You could give us your statement, and pick him out of a line-up.”

“You think you can arrest him that quickly?”

Starsky nodded once, sharply. “We’re working on it right now, ma’am.”

“I’ll be there! I don’t want him to do this to anybody else. Ever again.”

Hutch patted her hand. “He won’t.”

The door was pushed open and Dr. Shirley Michelson came partially into the room. “May I come in?”

“No, thank you,” Sharon said, flat-voiced. “I don’t need to see you, Doctor. I’m fine.”

Hutch went to the door and spoke quietly. “Give us a minute?”

The doctor nodded and left, closing the door.

“Sharon…” Starsky began when Hutch came back to the bed. “May we call you Sharon?” After a brief pause she nodded. Starsky began again, “Sharon, you’re a strong woman, you’ll get past all this. But you’ve been through some major trauma, emotionally and physically. It’ll take time. Believe me. I know what I’m talking about.”

Sharon looked from him to Hutch, the question in her eyes.

“He knows.” Hutch held her gaze.

“You’ll need all the help you can get,” Starsky continued. “Dr. Michelson’s good, she really is.” He reached out and took her hand again. “Let her help you. Okay?”

She allowed him to hold her hand for a moment, then took it back and laid it in her lap. “Okay.”
“Thanks, Sharon,” Hutch said, an underlying tone of tense excitement in his voice.

Starsky could tell his partner was anxious to start the hunt. “We’ll see you in the morning.” He barely got the words out before Hutch grabbed an elbow and hurried him toward the door.

Outside in the corridor Hutch motioned Dr. Michelson to go on in. “She’s ready for you now.”

Starsky took a few paces down the hallway and came back. When Sharon’s door closed behind Dr. Michelson, Starsky turned to Hutch. Only inches separated them and Starsky was turned on by the tension and excitement that vibrated between them. Their eyes were locked. “Tate was shacked up with a waitress last time…”

“Brenda… no, Glenda…”

“Albertson,” Starsky supplied.

“Right!”

“But she split as soon as we arrested Tate. Moved back to…”

“Seattle,” Hutch finished.

“Wouldn’t come down to testify against him.”

“Never wanted to hear his name again,” Hutch remembered.

“So we find his new…”

“Detective Starsky?” A nurse called from behind the counter.

Starsky turned and moved toward her when she held out the phone. “A Captain Dobey for you.”

“Thanks.” Starsky took it, looking at Hutch, who had followed him. Their silent exchange was brief but electric. Starsky put the receiver to his ear so that Hutch could hear, too. “Starsky here, Cap’n.”

“Did the victim identify Tate?”

“Her name’s Sharon Glassman, Cap. And yes, sir, positive I.D.”

“Great! I’ll get Simmons started on the warrant. And here’s more good news. Huggy’s found him! He says he also knows where d’Ambrosia’s headquarters is. Stop by The Pits on your way back here for the warrant, he’ll fill you in.”

Hutch tilted the phone a little and spoke into the mouthpiece. “Captain, you don’t know how much we appreciate that.”

“Oh, I think I do, Hutchinson. Let’s clean this piece o’ scum off the streets today! We’ll worry about the rest later.” Dobey sounded almost confident.

“Will do, Cap,” Starsky said. “Thanks!”

He handed the phone back to the nurse with a nod of appreciation and turned to Hutch. “Huggy’s first, the precinct next…”

“d’Ambrosia after that,” Hutch continued, “Tate last.”
“You read my mind, partner.” Starsky slid his hand across Hutch’s stomach on his way past.

“That’s ‘cause you’re so easy.”
In the warehouse district, Starsky parked the Torino beside a seemingly derelict behemoth and got out. Hutch exited the passenger side and looked around at the run down area which now sported a bright red car. ‘So much for undercover,’ he thought, not for the first time. Glancing up he noticed bright shiny phone and electrical wires running from across the street into the building. “Wonder if he’s siphoning? Or actually paying the bills?”

“Gee, you think we could get him for utility theft, too?”

“We can hope.” Hutch put his hand on Starsky’s back and they headed for the side door.

Before they got there, Burn Scar and Smiley, John Deere and Deadhead sprinted from a ramshackle structure against the warehouse wall. They swung the familiar chains, were drawing guns, and Deadhead even had a knife. This time, however, Hutch knew the outcome would be different.

He pulled his Python when Burn Scar swung the chain at him, catching it with his left hand. As before, he pulled the stupid thug forward. He landed a blow to the same side of the same face, almost exactly like he’d done in the alley. This time when Burn Scar went down Hutch held onto his gun.

He turned immediately to Smiley and ducked the club swung at his head. He caught the arm in an under-the-elbow-and-up move that had Smiley on tiptoe attempting to keep his arm from being broken backward. Hutch stuck the muzzle of the Python under Smiley’s chin and turned them both to watch Starsky.

His partner already had Deadhead on the ground. Starsky’s knee was in the pale man’s back and his right hand was holding the goon’s right wrist in a painful looking hold at the small of the back. The knife was tucked into the belt of Starsky’s jeans.

Starsky held his Beretta pointed at the leaping animal on the cap that had been pulled so low over its owner’s face a bullet would explode the entire head. John Deere must have realized his untenable position because he was frozen, his gun nearby on the ground.

“Need any help, Starsk?”

“Nope. I’m fine, partner. You?”

“I’m doing well, thank you.” Hutch released Smiley and motioned toward Burn Scar who was still out cold. “Pick him up.”

Starsky stood up, hauling his captive to his feet by the wrist which he kept twisted behind the thug’s back. With the barrel of the Beretta, he lifted the bill of John Deere’s cap so that the guy could see what was happening.

Pushing and dragging the fight’s two mobile losers, while they half-carried their associates, Hutch led the way to the warehouse door. “Open it,” he told Smiley.

Hutch made Smiley and Burn Scar wait while Starsky collected all the dropped weapons before he stuffed his pair of thugs roughly inside. Hutch pushed his captives in after them and followed Starsky through the door.

The vast interior of the warehouse was lighted by the ever popular Hollywood arc lights. Hutch knew those things used a lot of electricity and their presence underscored his idea about siphoning.
The front half of the space had been partitioned off with pieces of what might have been old movie sets. The back half had crates, boxes, and barrels stacked on pallets reaching nearly to the ceiling. An area just inside the huge roll-up doors held a gleaming black Lincoln stretch limo. ‘The man likes to ride in style,’ Hutch thought.

Desks, chairs, couches, tables, and all manner of other furnishings were scattered around in front of the partitions. It had the appearance of a neighborhood yard sale waiting to happen.

d’Ambrosia got up from behind one of the desks and stalked forward when the second set of his goons was summarily dumped on the floor. He grimaced when their weapons were tossed into a corner. He was exhaling streams of smoke from his nostrils and Hutch wondered if it was from the cigarette between his fingers or from the fury that showed in his face. He truly looked like a raging bull.

“How did you find this place?” d’Ambrosia sounded as if he was choking on the words. He threw the cigarette on the floor and stomped on it.

“Oh, come on, d’Ambrosia…” Hutch didn’t try to disguise his scorn.

“We’re cops,” Starsky finished. “It’s what we do.”

“But don’t worry.” Hutch holstered his weapon, “We’re not really here.” He walked toward a couch, holding up his empty hand in a placating gesture.

“This isn’t an official visit.” Starsky holstered his own weapon and followed Hutch to the couch.

“Your name won’t appear anywhere in our daily log. Nor will this address.” Hutch sat down, keeping a pleasant expression on his face.

d’Ambrosia stopped about ten feet in front of them. His anger was under obvious rigid control.

“You’re on thin ice, gentlemen.”

“Gee, Hutch…” Starsky took a position behind the couch. “This is the thanks we get for tryin’ to do somethin’ nice for the man.”

“I guess the old adage is true, Starsk. No good deed goes unpunished.”

“Too bad, too, ‘cause all we want to do is inform you, Mr. d’Ambrosia, that we are about to arrest Mike Tate.”

“And it has absolutely nothing to do with you.” Hutch crossed his knees.

“Your name will never be mentioned.” Starsky hardened his glare. “We’re keepin’ our bargain.”

Hutch stared at d’Ambrosia, unblinking. “Tate was on our beat and there’s no way he gets away with assault and rape.”

“Write him off, d’Ambrosia,” Starsky urged. “He’s chump change anyway.”

“No need to thank us.” Hutch uncrossed his legs and rose gracefully to his feet. “This is merely a courtesy call.” Heading toward the door, Starsky at his shoulder, he stopped and turned to look directly at the speechless d’Ambrosia. “Oh, and if you decide to release that video tape of us?”

“Knock yourself out.” Starsky’s sneer was textbook. “‘Cause Hutch an’ me have decided that we’re about fed up with the job anyway. So go ahead, shoot your best shot.”
Hutch raised a cautionary finger toward their former tormentor. “But be aware…” his voice was even colder than before, “we will take you down with us. That’s a promise.”

d’Ambrosia actually smiled. He took his gold case out of a pocket and lit a cigarette. “Don’t worry, gentlemen. I knew of Mike’s proclivities and suspected they might cause trouble. You may have done me a favor.”

“Think nothing of it.” Starsky opened the door for Hutch. He shot another hard look at d’Ambrosia. “Like I said before though, Tony,” he glanced down at the cigarette, “those things can kill ya.”

Hutch sent Starsky a silent ‘atta boy,’ before he walked out.

“First ‘excoriated,’ and now ‘proclivities’?” Starsky whispered on their way to the car. “Does everybody subscribe to Reader’s Digest?”

Hutch laughed out loud and put an arm around his partner’s shoulder.

*******

Starsky pulled the Torino up behind a black Crown Victoria that was sitting at the curb across the street from a small diner. Simmons got out of the car ahead, walked back, and squatted down at Starsky’s open window.

“Where’s Babcock?” Hutch leaned toward Starsky, his left arm behind Starsky’s shoulders, his right hand on the dashboard. “Inside?”

Simmons nodded. “Watching soaps and eating pie. Says it’s the best stake out he’s ever been on.”

“And Tate?” Starsky wasn’t interested in Babcock’s happiness at the moment.

“In the very back booth next to the exit. He’s been smoochin’ his girl friend before she starts her shift.” He looked at both detectives. “You want me to come in with you? Or stay outside and call the cavalry?”

“Stay out here,” Hutch said. “The cavalry won’t be needed.”

“Anything you say. I like staying outside.” Simmons stood up, walked back to his car and got in.

“Gimme thirty.” Starsky jumped out of the car and headed across the street, ducking into the alley next to the diner.

Hutch sat, mentally counting. When he reached thirty he got out and crossed to the eatery. Walking in he immediately spotted Babcock at the counter. The detective was putting the final bite of pie in his mouth, his eyes glued to the TV over the coffee maker. To the soft sound of canned violins, two people, fully clothed, were attempting to portray passion. And failing.

In the back corner booth, Mike Tate had pinned his current amour against the seat, fondling her breasts and chewing on her neck. Hutch watched for half a minute or so and decided they looked more believable than the soap.

Something made Tate look around. For a second he was immobile, sheer disbelief on his flushed face. Then he bolted out of the booth and threw himself through the exit door.

*******

Starsky leaned against the alley wall opposite the back door of the diner, his right knee bent, foot
braced against the bricks. He was getting antsy; what was taking Hutch so long to spook this guy?

The door burst open and Tate ran out, fear all over his ferret face. He stopped abruptly and stared at Starsky until Hutch came out the door behind him. Glancing quickly at the blond, he turned and ran down the alley away from the street.

Starsky launched himself off the bent right leg and caught Tate before he’d gone ten steps. He tackled him and brought him down hard, sliding in the grease and filth. Starsky wasn’t even breathing heavily which caused him no end of delight. Getting up, he kept a knee on Tate’s back.

“Jeez, Starsky, you weren’t that fast before,” Tate wheezed.

Starsky pulled the felon’s wrists behind him. “Gettin’ shot can do wonders for ya, Tate.” He bent low over his captive, drew his Beretta and touched Tate’s shoulder blade with the muzzle. “Wanna try it?”

“d’Ambrosia’s not gonna be happy about this.” Tate threw a nasty leer over his shoulder at Hutch who was walking up, handcuffs dangling from his clenched fist. “Neither will you two be when your faces,” the leer turned evil, “and other body parts, are all over the news.”

Starsky holstered his gun, reached up and took the cuffs, snapping them on Tate’s wrists tightly. Hutch’s hand lingered on his shoulder, squeezing gently. Starsky brushed his fingers across the knuckles. “We’ve already talked to your former boss.” He got up and yanked Tate to his feet by the cuffed hands, causing the rapist to yelp. He looked into Tate’s now fearful eyes. “He’s decided he never heard of you.”

Starsky hustled Tate toward the street, Hutch walking casually alongside. They passed Babcock, standing in the doorway, clearly pleased to see that Starsky and Hutch required no assistance. Babcock went back inside.

“You see, Tate…” Hutch sounded as if he was lecturing a class, “what you don’t seem to realize is that scum like you are the proverbial dime a dozen. Your exalted position in Tony D’s organization has probably already been filled.”

“You made a big mistake,” Starsky continued. “You thought our agreement with d’Ambrosia meant you could take up your little sideline again and Hutch and me wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.”

“But that’s not the way it works,” Hutch told the now uncertain rapist. “d’Ambrosia’s washed his hands of you and, if you have one smart bone in your worthless body, you’ll never mention his name again. To anybody. Ever. He probably has ways of eliminating people who take his name in vain. Even in prison.”

“No good behavior or overcrowding this time,” Starsky vowed. “You’re goin’ down, and your used-to-be boss ain’t gonna raise a finger.”

Exiting the alley and heading toward the Torino, Hutch gave the high sign to Simmons. Babcock was getting into the passenger’s side of the Crown Vic. Simmons gestured a thumbs-up in return and drove away.

“Hey, Hutch…” Starsky opened the driver’s side door and pulled the seat forward, prepared to stuff Tate inside.

“Yes, Stark?” Hutch moved around to the other side of the car.
“Do you happen to have your copy of Miranda with you?”

“I do.”

“Would you mind reading Mr. Tate his rights while we drive him downtown?”

Hutch took out his badge wallet and extracted the card. “It would be my pleasure, partner.”

Starsky shoved a now compliant Mike Tate into the back, pushed his seat into position and got in. Hutch climbed in on his side.

The car pulled away from the curb with Hutch’s voice reciting the familiar quotation: “You have the right to remain silent….”

*******

“Did you see his face?” Hutch murmured into Starsky’s hair that night.

“No, I was outside in the alley, remember?”

Starsky’s face was nuzzled into his neck and Hutch could feel the voice through his body as well as his ears. The vibration sent his blood racing. Again. “Well, he looked like every description you’ve ever read, or seen, of a frightened animal that knew it was about to die.”

“You mean like a mongoose when a cobra’s staring at it?”

“Exactly.” He drew back a little so that he could look down at his lover’s face. “Where’d you see that, Star?”

“I don’t know. PBS, Discovery Channel, Learning Channel. One of those you’re always trying to get me to watch.” He yawned and snuggled back against Hutch.

“It’s the perfect description. Tate might have thought I was the Grim Reaper himself from the look on his face when he first saw me.”

“No wonder he froze when he came out.” Starsky laughed. “He kinda looked at me like I might be the Devil. Poor guy, the Grim Reaper behind him and Satan in front.” He chuckled again. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer piece o’ shit.”

Hutch stroked his partner’s arms, not really trying to light another fire; they’d already gotten each other off quite satisfactorily, thank you very much. But he’d been thinking about something Starsky had said at The Event and it was bothering him. He threaded his fingers into Starsky’s hair and pulled the head back enough to see the deep blues. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything, babe. I hope you know that by now.”

“That night…” no need to specify, Hutch could tell from the sudden tension in the body he held that Starsky knew which night. “You said something, and I’ve been kind of wondering about it.”

“And you’re only now getting around to asking me?” Starsky leaned back, curiosity in his eyes. “What did I say?”

“You said, ‘Murder suicide. I’ll kill you, then I’ll kill myself.’”

Starsky was silent for a long time. “I was hoping you hadn’t remembered.”
“Did you mean it?”

“Yeah.” Starsky paused and Hutch didn’t push. Starsky rolled onto his back, keeping Hutch’s left hand in both of his. “I was scared, Hutch. More scared than I’d ever been in my life… More than ‘Nam, more than when I got poisoned. More than after I got shot, even. ‘Cause it wasn’t just me I was scared for.”

Hutch splayed the fingers of his hand across Starsky’s chest, pressing gently, conveying as much empathy as he could, and waited.

“I’d wanted you so badly for so long, and then suddenly we were going to die. In a worse way than I could ever have imagined.” He rolled back to look at Hutch. “You see, I didn’t believe for a single minute that you’d agree to what d’Ambrosia was demanding. I knew we were going to die. But the thought of you… being ripped apart like he said made me so crazy… it screwed up my head and I couldn’t think.”

Hutch stroked the anguished face, his thumb wiping away the tears that started.

“I should have known you had a plan, Hutch. You always have a plan.”

“I didn’t that morning. All I had was a vague hope.”

“But the point is, I didn’t listen. I was so wrapped up in my own horror I wouldn’t let you get a word in edgewise.”

Hutch drew Starsky tightly against himself and waited, holding the curly head to his chest and stroking the tense back.

“I knew I couldn’t let you die like that. First I thought we could attack the bad guys and make them shoot us. But then I thought I should kill you myself before any of them touched you.” He was silent for a few heartbeats. “I could have, too.”

Hutch had to strain to hear the muffled words.

“I could’ve killed you so quick… you’d have been dead before you knew it.”

Hutch felt his heart tear and immediately stitch itself back up stronger than ever. This man in his arms loved him so desperately he’d do anything to keep him from pain. Even kill him. “You had the perfect opportunity, you know.” Hutch swallowed around the boulder in his throat. “When I was --”

“Not really.” The interruption was firm but gentle. “The position you were in, I couldn’t have done it quick.” Starsky took a deep, shuddering breath. “Besides, and you’ll just have to take my word for this… I can’t kill someone when I’m crying.”

“Oh… Well… I think I’m really glad of that.”

“Me, too,” was almost inaudible.

Starsky was barely breathing, undoubtedly waiting for a ‘verdict.’ Hutch jostled his partner lightly, making him open his eyes and look at him.

“And how were you going to kill yourself afterward?”

“Uh…” Starsky blinked. “I have no idea.”

“Thought so.” Hutch drew Starsky back against him. “You’d have saved me from all that pain then
had to go through your own by yourself.” He shook his head in wonder and devotion. “Moron.”
Starsky’s soft chuckle sounded grateful, relieved, and happy.

*******

On the way in to work the next morning, Starsky had a brainstorm. He turned excitedly to Hutch.
“Remember Jerry Neidlander in the Third?”

“Of course.”

“He’d do us a favor, wouldn’t he?”

“Probably. He seemed grateful for that tip we gave him last year. What do you have in mind?”

“d’Ambrosia’s warehouse is in the Third, right?” Hutch nodded. “What if we ask Jerry and his
buddies to keep their eyes peeled for Tony’s cronies?” He laughed. “Hey! That’s a great name for
those clowns, isn’t it?”

“It’s a winner, Starsk.”

“Thanks. We ask Neidlander’s crew to pick up any of Mr. D’s associates they can find, on real or
trumped up charges. We’ll give him super descriptions.”

“The Third’s not our precinct,” Hutch mused. “d’Ambrosia couldn’t think we had anything to do
with it. Go on…” a corner of Hutch’s mouth turned up slightly. “I’m liking it already.”

“If it’s a real charge, we let it stick. But…” he spared a glance from traffic to look at Hutch. “if it’s
trumped up, we ‘convince’ Jerry that it wouldn’t be worth his time, and all the paperwork, to press
the case. We spring ‘em.”

“And take them back to d’Ambrosia.” Hutch put a loving hand on the back of Starsky’s neck,
twining the long curls.

Starsky grinned. “Like a lost kitten or something.”

“You’d put a defenseless kitten that had escaped from that degenerate back into his clutches?” Hutch
tugged softly on Starsky’s hair, a happy smile belying his harsh words.

“Naw, ‘course not.” Starsky matched the smile. “What about an escaped rat though?”

Hutch nodded happily. “We’d definitely have to return one of those.”

“Let’s go talk to Jerry.”

*******

The very next day, Neidlander called Starsky. “Got somebody named Sam Schwartz here, Starsky.
Goes by the nickname of ‘Ghost.' Think that might be your ‘Deadhead’?”

Starsky nudged Hutch’s foot under the desks and rubbed the toe of his shoe up his partner’s calf. The
blond immediately punched the lighted button on his phone and picked up the receiver.

“Sounds like it could be, Jer,” Starsky told Neidlander. “What’d he do?”

“He and his buddy,” some papers rustled on the other end of the line, “beat up a couple of guys in a
bar. They paid the owner for the damage and the two losers didn’t want to press charges but we brought your two in anyway, just like you asked.” More papers were shuffled. “His buddy’s name is Thomas Grover, aka John Deere, ‘cause o’ the hat he wears.”

“That’s a definite ‘yes,’ Jerry. We’ll be right over.”

He and Hutch hung up, saluting each other with their coffee cups.

*******

When Starsky parked the Torino at the warehouse Burn Scar and Smiley were waiting in front of the side door. “Mr. d’Ambrosia don’t wanna see you guys.” Burn Scar hefted a pipe and smacked it into the palm of his left hand.

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll change his mind when he sees what we’ve brought him.” Hutch opened the back door of the car and dragged Deadhead and John Deere out, their hands cuffed behind them.

“Sam and Thomas, here,” Starsky slapped each one on the shoulder, “got themselves into a speck of trouble. We got ‘em out.” He walked ahead of the trio, nodding at the unsuccessful guards, pulled the door open and ushered Hutch and his captives inside. He gestured for Scar and Smiley to precede him.

Hutch was unlocking Deadhead’s cuffs when Starsky joined him. Digging his own keys out, Starsky undid John Deere’s. Both men rubbed their wrists and slunk off to the side.

d’Ambrosia stormed from the back of the warehouse trailing smoke. “I thought I told you --”

Hutch held up his hand, palm out. “You’ll have a coronary, Mr. d’Ambrosia, if you keep smoking all those cigarettes. And you need to find a way to alleviate all that anxiety.”

“Hate to see a man of your distinction have an early heart attack.” Starsky didn’t even try for believable sincerity.

“We heard your men had been picked up by a buddy of ours.” Hutch’s voice sounded quite reasonable.

“That’s right,” Starsky chimed in. “Turns out ol’ Jerry owed us a few favors so we talked him out of keepin’ your guys locked up.”

“Thought you might need them back.” Hutch almost managed a degree of concern. “Especially since you lost Tate.”

“Didn’t want your… enterprises t’ suffer ‘cause you’re short a crony or two. Hutch and I couldn’t stand to have that on our consciences.” Starsky sent the furious crime lord a lame, insipid smile.

“You might want to feed them though, Tony.” Hutch gestured toward the surly Sam and Thomas. “I don’t think the food at the Third’s all that great.”

“And I hear the cell bunks are rock-hard,” Starsky said. “They might need a nap.”

Hutch seemed to be having a very difficult time keeping a straight face. He turned toward the door before turning back. “Oh yeah, their weapons are being held.”

“Checked for possible use in previous crimes,” Starsky finished.

“You’ll get them back,” Hutch said.
“Eventually,” Starsky muttered.

“Take care now.” Hutch waved and headed for the door.

“Have a nice day.” Starsky followed Hutch outside.

“God, Starsky,” Hutch said through his chuckles as they walked toward the Torino, “I’m almost beginning to enjoy this.”

“Don’t get too complacent, babe,” Starsky cautioned, the reality of what they’d done taking over. “We’re playing with a rattler and we’re not wearing heavy gloves.”

“I know.” Hutch turned serious again. “But if we can keep shaking him up he might just have that coronary.”

“And our troubles’d be over.”

“Except for the video tapes.”

“Spoil sport.”

*******

The days passed and Starsky realized that his and Hutch’s initial ardor had cooled to the extent that their touches and ‘unintentional’ contact at work were no more blatant or numerous than they’d been before d’Ambrosia. It was only he and Hutch who felt the additional tingle, charge, or adrenaline rush. And that increased sensitivity always flowered at night when they were alone in their own private world of love and sensuality. It was sheer bliss. And the world was, thankfully, blind.

Porter hadn’t gotten back to them from Philadelphia. Abrams had been off work with a bad case of that season’s strain of flu that had felled nearly half the Chicago force.

“Gee, that’s too bad,” Starsky told the overworked officer in Abrams’ office. “Tell him we hope he gets well soon.”

Plan B wasn’t going all that much better. They’d spent hours on the phone, ever since telling Huggy about the idea, trying to find librarians who not only understood what they were asking but were willing to take on the task.

“Old crone number four,” Starsky muttered, hanging up. “I guess I don’t speak library, Hutch. You better talk to them from now on.”

Hutch finally found a lady in a suburban Philadelphia branch that was willing to do the research. She thought the subject of a Master’s thesis on ‘Police Officer Burnout, Symptoms and Manifestations,’ was fascinating. She also understood how to sift what they needed from her archives. She said she’d get on it right away but couldn’t promise how long it might take. Hutch told her they’d greatly appreciate any help she could give them and provided Minnie’s name and fax number.

Tate was identified positively by Sharon Glassman, and pled guilty. His public defender did not object. There would be no trial and Tate was awaiting sentencing.

Some days were diamonds…

*******

“Starsky!” He spoke into the phone around a mouthful of the day’s first rice cake. “Hi, Jessica…”
yeah, he’s here….” Hutch cocked an ear, half listening from across the desks. “He’s on another line and it could be awhile. Can I help?… Yeah, actually Hutch mentioned stopping by after work, said he wants to get some fresh asparagus…. Really?… This morning? That’s terrific!” Hutch perked up while continuing his own phone conversation. “Do you need to talk to him before that?!… Okay, we’ll see you around… six?” He let the inflection in his voice ask Hutch the question and got an affirmative nod. “Yep, ‘round six…. You, too.”

Starsky hung up and put his right elbow on his desk, his chin in that hand, munching on the rice cake. He openly listened to Hutch’s end of his phone call.

“Yes, ma’am, I’m helping my partner gather information for his thesis…. That’s only the working title but it’ll be about cop burnout…. We’re hoping you can search your newspaper archives, going back about… oh, say five years…. Yes, ma’am, we’re focusing on teams of detectives since that’s what Starsky and I are…. Anything that indicates a pair who were really great at their jobs, then faded…. No, ma’am, there’s no time limit and we’ll be happy to pay whatever it costs for copies and faxes…. Take as long as you need. Monday’ll be soon enough…. Yes, ma’am, that was intended as a joke…. Yes, ma’am… all right, Ethel. I’m Ken. I gave you the phone and fax numbers for our Records Department, didn’t I?… Right, her name’s Minnie Kaplan. She’s part of this project, too…. Thank you so much, Ethel. G’bye.”

Starsky gave the rest of his rice cake to Hutch, making a ‘gimme’ gesture with the fingers of his other hand while he dug out another tasteless treat.

Hutch took a bite. “She said it would be a mountain of a job but she’s willing to tackle it. Said it was the most interesting sounding research she’s been asked to do in years! Wished you luck with your thesis.” Hutch shrugged with a sheepish grin. “Am I getting too good at lying to people?”

“Worthy cause, partner. I’m just happy you know how to talk to them. She say anything else?

“Only that she feels like she’s got a bit of a stake in the subject matter since her son recently got his detective’s shield.” Hutch finished the rest of the cake. “Now what did Jessica want?”

“They got a delivery of fresh asparagus this morning. She’s saving us some!”

“She called about asparagus?”

“No. She wants to talk to us. I told her we had planned on stopping by this evening and she said that’d be fine.”

“How did she sound?”

“Okay, I guess. Not nervous or anything.” Starsky took the last rice cake out of the bag, broke it in half and handed Hutch his share.

“She wouldn’t.” Hutch accepted the offering. “She and Alicia are both reserve deputies with the Sheriff’s Department. Search and Rescue, mainly, but they’ve had a lot of training.”

“Good to know.”

“Yes, it is.”

******

Hutch pulled the LTD into the parking lot of the small well maintained neighborhood shopping center. Anchored by the True Health Grocery store in the middle, there was a trendy used clothing
boutique and a wine shoppe on one side, a cleaner’s, coffee shop and book store on the other.

Climbing out of the passenger side of the brown car, Starsky looked around at the BMWs, Mercedes and other upscale vehicles in the lot. “I’m ashamed to be seen in this thing, Hutch.”

Hutch got out the driver’s side and looked over the roof at his partner. “I’ve quit bitching about the Torino, Starsk, so I’d really appreciate it if you’d lay off my car, okay?”

“If nothing else, can we clean out the back seat? Please?”

“Sure. We’ll do it this weekend.”

Starsky almost skipped around the front to join Hutch who was already heading for the grocery. “You mean it? We’ll clean out the car this weekend? How about a nice bath, too? Huh?”

“Don’t push it.”

Starsky opened the door for him and followed him inside.

A few customers were moving through the aisles filling their carts and baskets with necessities and luxuries. Hutch led the way to the back where Jessica presided over the Pharmacy.

She was almost as tall as Hutch, with curly steel-gray hair. Her face was cheerful with gray eyes behind wire rim glasses. She wore no visible makeup and a sensible mid-calf length dress. A smile appeared when she noticed Hutch and Starsky approaching.

Coming out from behind the counter, she led the way into a small back office where Alicia was doing bookkeeping. Alicia stood to welcome them. She was slender, shorter than Jessica, had straight, shoulder length brown hair under a hat. Hutch was reminded of Starsky’s description and realized that hats were her signature.

Alicia sat back down in the desk’s swivel chair, appearing slightly nervous. Jessica stood at her left shoulder behind the desk. At her bidding, Hutch and Starsky seated themselves in the two guest chairs in front.

“Betty has your asparagus put aside,” Jessica told them with a smile. “Best of the season so far. Don’t forget it on your way out.”

“No chance of that,” Hutch said.

Jessica glanced at Alicia who nodded. She looked up and directly into Hutch’s eyes. “We had a visitor yesterday. Businessman type, well cut gray suit, in his fifties, mean eyes. He said his name was A.J. d’Ambrosia.”

Starsky drilled Hutch with a look and he returned it.

Jessica didn’t miss the exchange. “You know him?”

“We’ve met.” Hutch’s voice was taut.

“Not a nice fella?” Alicia was clearly anxious.

“Understatement.” Starsky’s teeth were gritted and his lips had barely moved.

Hutch sat forward. “Was he alone?” He didn’t even try to keep the concern and tension out of his voice.
“No. He had a couple of… associates with him. They were dressed okay but Alicia and I got the feeling they were thugs.”

“What did he want?” Hutch asked.

“Said he needed to sell us insurance.” There was mock sincerity in Jessica’s voice.

“We told him we were happy with State Farm,” Alicia said.

Hutch chucked at Alicia’s temerity and Starsky gave her a thumbs-up. She grinned around her uncertainty. Jessica put her hand on Alicia’s shoulder and squeezed lightly. The way Alicia’s face lit up, the gesture was as good as applause.

Jessica looked back at Hutch and Starsky. “He didn’t seem to be amused.”

“Did he threaten you?” Starsky was visibly keeping his emotions tightly controlled.

“Not really,” Alicia answered, with more resolve. “But his cronies wandered around, eying everything. Mr. d’Ambrosia said we needed insurance against unforeseen incidents like broken windows, Dumpster fires in the alley, collapsed shelves, deliveries that never arrived.”

“We told him we were already covered for all those things,” said Jessica.

“Did he set a price for his… insurance?” Hutch asked.

“Three hundred a week,” Alicia said.

Starsky let out a short, sharp laugh. “Chicken feed.”

“Not when you multiply it by the six businesses in this shopping center,” Jessica pointed out, “and then by all the other businesses in the neighborhood.”

“He’s approached everyone?” Hutch surged to his feet.

Jessica nodded. “All the ones we’ve been able to talk to.”

“Any of them pay, yet?” Starsky stood up, putting a hand lightly on Hutch’s back.

Alicia shook her head and stood. “Not yet. We think they’re waiting to see what we’ll do.”

“How much time did he give you?” Hutch asked.

“Two days,” said Jessica.

Hutch looked at his partner and Starsky nodded firmly. He turned back to the women. “We’ll take care of it.”

Starsky put a cheery expression on his face and looked at the two courageous store owners. “Let’s do lunch, as the Hollywood in-crowd says! We’ll have our people call your people. Ciao!”

Starsky headed for the door. Hutch smiled at the women and followed. He could hear Jessica and Alicia laughing, less tensely, when he and Starsky left the office. He put his arm around his partner’s shoulders. “That was inspired, Starsk.”

Starsky visibly lapped up the praise. “Thanks.”
On the way out, Hutch picked up and paid for the very fresh asparagus.

Outside, walking toward the LTD, Starsky exploded. “A protection racket!” He stopped, turned and caught Hutch’s arm, rage reddening his face. “Do you believe that? All the stuff Gunther was into and it ain’t enough for good ol’ Tony D. He has to shake down innocent people like this!”

Hutch didn’t even attempt to calm his partner, he simply nudged him toward the car. “We’ll talk to the man.”

*******

Later that night at The Pits, customers abounded. Huggy had turned over duties to Diane and the rest of the staff and was ensconced with his friends in their usual back booth. All were drinking beer.

“Watch yourselves this time,” Huggy advised. “He’s got lookouts now on almost every corner for blocks around that warehouse.”

“How do you know that, Hug?” Starsky sounded as if he didn’t quite believe it.

“I have my sources,” Huggy replied, suddenly afraid he might have said too much.

“It’s dangerous!” Hutch glanced around and lowered his voice. “If d’Ambrosia suspects he’s being watched your sources could be in trouble.”

“It’s okay, fellas,” Huggy assured them. “My guys are inconspicuous.” Starsky’s eyes narrowed and Huggy knew Starsky had figured it out.

“Kids!” Starsky’s voice was almost accusing. “You’re using kids!”

d’Ambrosia won’t care how young they are!” Hutch chimed in. “If he suspects anything --”

“They’re street rats,” Huggy interrupted, somewhat callously. “They got no homes, no future. And they want to help.”

A look blazed between his friends and Huggy held his breath, not having a clue what they were ‘talking’ about this time.

Hutch turned to him. “Maybe we can do something about that.”

“How?” Huggy’s innate suspicion surfaced.

Starsky sat forward. “Remember that couple Blackie Russell killed? The Amantes? Turns out they were really rich. She was an heiress or something and he was a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon.”

“They had no children,” Hutch continued. “No other family left, had already set up a foundation. Their lawyers called us last week asking if we know of any causes the foundation can get involved in.”

Huggy shivered under the intensity of Starsky’s gaze.

“I can’t think of anything more worthy than your ‘street rats’ can you, Hug?”

“What if we got the foundation to rehab one of the old buildings down by the docks?” Hutch suggested. “That’s where they hang out, right?”

“Most of ‘em, yeah,” Huggy admitted.
“Basketball courts,” Starsky continued, “a gym, someplace the kids could go to get off the streets. With counseling available.”

“We’ve got to get them back in school though, Starsk, get them to graduate.” Hutch put a hand on Starsky’s arm.

Starsky covered it with one of his own. “I’m with you, partner. And after they graduate the foundation’ll send them to college.”

Huggy was staring at his friends, part of his mind on possibilities for the kids, part on the hands still resting on Starsky’s arm. He knew he’d better not even mention the contact but he chortled inwardly, ‘that is so cool!’ Instead he put his mind on the other revelation. “You could do all that?”

“We can try, Huggy,” said Hutch, with conviction.

“They want to help us, we want to help them,” Starsky added, with equal sincerity.

Huggy Bear thought there might be a God, after all.

******

The following morning, Hutch cruised the LTD through the warehouse district spotting all the lookouts Huggy had told them about. Not one single head turned when the dirty brown car rolled by. Ordinarily he would have made some remark about not being able to do this in the tomato but he and Starsky had made peace on that subject.

Starsky got out a block from the first guy they intended to take out, ran down an alley and out of sight. Hutch drove slowly to the corner where the goon was sitting in a beach chair. With the LTD approaching, the guy got up warily, his hands holding a long pry bar. The butt of an automatic pistol protruded from the front of his waistband.

All Hutch remembered about the man was that he’d been one of the dozen attackers in the alley, although he couldn’t recall that the guy had actually gotten in on the action. He was skinny, wearing a dirty work shirt over a holey t-shirt, the ever present ball cap, and steel-toed boots.

Hutch slowed the car to a crawl. Skinny crept forward, peering into the rolled up driver’s window intently.

Starsky came around the corner behind Skinny, ran silently up and placed the muzzle of his gun in the man’s left ear. “Do. Not. Move.”

Skinny didn’t.

Hutch got out. “In case you don’t remember, we’re the cops.” He gave his handcuffs to his partner and got the pry bar and pistol in exchange. Starsky cuffed the guy and searched him while Hutch dragged a large duffle bag off the floor of the back seat and put the heavy metal, as well as a knife and the gun, inside. He put the duffle back on the rear floor. Starsky shoved Skinny around the car and into the back seat on his side.

“Hey,” Skinny, hollered. “What’s all this crap back here? And that smell?”

Getting behind the wheel, Hutch glanced over his shoulder. “Maybe it’s you.” There was ice in his voice and eyes. “I hear corpses stink.”

Skinny was very quiet after that.
Hutch really had to admire his partner’s stealth and grace as they easily collared three more of the lookouts. Each new one was cuffed to the ones already crammed in the back seat of the LTD. The duffle, which was getting heavy and cumbersome, had to be transferred to the trunk.

Hutch pulled the car up to the front of the warehouse. He and Starsky got out. Starsky opened the back door on his side and dragged the four hang dog henchmen out while Hutch retrieved the duffle. He was in the lead with the rag tag group behind him, his Python out and ready, when two more men, both of whom had been part of the alley fight, ran out of the ramshackle shed. Each was holding a weapon.

Hutch pointed his at the first man’s head. “Mine’s bigger.”

Four wide eyes stared down the barrel of the .357 and apparently decided that Hutch was correct. When Hutch put the duffle on the ground in front of them and opened it, they dropped all their weapons, chains, knives and guns, inside. Knowing it was going to weigh a lot now, Hutch motioned for the first goon to pick it up. He tried, but had to ask his buddy for help with a pleading look. They each took a handle and with Hutch using the barrel of his gun to gesture, they turned toward the door.

Hutch pushed his two captives inside and stood back. Starsky dragged his four up and shoved them in, too. Starsky grinned at Hutch and went through the door first.

Inside d’Ambrosia was getting to his feet and stubbing out a cigarette in an overflowing ashtray. His face was schooled into a calm expression but Hutch could see the steel control needed to maintain it.

“This is getting to be a habit,” d’Ambrosia snarled.

“You noticed.” Hutch walked over and sat on the couch.

Starsky, all nonchalance, followed Hutch and stood behind him as he’d done the first time. “We’re not here d’Ambrosia. No mention in our logs, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Your Yul Brynner’s getting better, Starsk.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

Hutch turned to d’Ambrosia, crossing his knees gracefully. “Another courtesy call. We’re still keeping our agreement.”

“Then why am I being harassed?” d’Ambrosia flared.

“Gee, Hutch,” Starsky whined, “are we harassing this nice businessman?”

“No, Starsk, I don’t think we are.” Hutch patted the hand that Starsky had laid on his shoulder.

“You better explain to Mr. d’Ambrosia why we’re here then, ’cause he looks kinda peeved t’ me.”

“You’re absolutely right, partner!” Hutch looked innocently at d’Ambrosia and laced his fingers on his knee. “We, that is Starsky and I…” he glanced over his shoulder and smiled at his partner, who returned it cheerily. He looked back at the poor excuse for a human being standing in front of him, all lightness gone. “We think you need to stick to Gunther’s former enterprises, drugs, prostitution, money laundering, industrial espionage --”

“Was he into that?” Starsky interrupted, sounding shocked.
“Oh, right,” Hutch responded as if in apology. “You didn’t know because you were still in the hospital.”

Starsky walked around the couch and sat on the arm next to Hutch’s shoulder. “Gonna hafta smarten up your associates in that case, Mr. D. No way these turkeys infiltrate a company where employees have to think.”

Hutch’s expression turned to stone. “Forget about branching out.”

“You heard him.” Starsky raised his right foot across his knee and examined the bottom of the shoe carefully. “The protection racket’s penny ante stuff anyway.” He kicked his foot out and down hard, staring at d’Ambrosia. “Way below your level of expertise.”

“We don’t have any friends in the drug trade,” Hutch told the crime lord.

“Or prostitution,” Starsky said.

“Money laundering or industrial espionage,” Hutch continued, getting to his feet.

“But we do have friends…” Starsky stood up, ice in his stare, “in local neighborhoods. Neighborhoods with small businesses.”

Walking to the four lookouts Hutch began unlocking their handcuffs while he spoke casually over his shoulder in d’Ambrosia’s general direction. “If you want to branch out, what’s wrong with… piracy? I’ll bet there are boatloads of goods moving up and down the coast. Easy pickings.”

Starsky followed him, taking his cuffs back when Hutch handed them to him. “How ‘bout buyin’ a few politicians? You could make millions from government contracts you don’t deserve!”

Hutch retrieved his own cuffs, putting them in his back pocket. “There’s always opportunity in Hollywood. Discover some dirty secrets about big shot producers and you could write your own ticket.”

“How about the construction industry, Hutch?”

“That’s always a good one,” Hutch agreed. “Or Vegas. Casinos make loads of money. Shake down some owners.” Turning to d’Ambrosia, he continued, “The point is, you should --”

“Gun running!” Starsky interrupted with a snap of his fingers.

“That’s a great idea, Starlk!” Hutch clapped his partner on the shoulder. “Countries and gangs in Central and South America want guns, Tony. That field’s probably wide open.” Figuring he and Starsky had made their point he turned and walked toward the door.

Starsky didn’t move. “Like we told you before, d’Ambrosia…” All trace of humor was gone from his face and voice, “if you wanna release our video tape... Go for it.” He spun on his heel.

Hutch caught the icy glint in his partner’s eyes when Starsky passed him on his way to the door. He threw a half-hearted salute toward d’Ambrosia and followed Starsky out.

Walking to the LTD, Hutch put his arm around Starsky’s shoulders. “Gun running was hilarious, Starlk. I almost laughed out loud.”

“He didn’t.” Starsky was grim but clearly pleased.
Chapter 9

When Starsky and Hutch got back to the Precinct Dobey immediately called them into his office. Minnie was standing behind the desk again, poring over two piles of faxes with the captain. Hutch moved to his usual chair and sat.

Starsky remained standing, too nervous to sit. “Are those the articles from Philly?”

Dobey nodded at Minnie. “And Chicago.” Her bright eyes showed her happiness. “My machine’s been spewing these all night.”

“Go ahead, Minnie,” Dobey encouraged, sitting back.

She gathered up the sheets, moved around to the front of the desk and sat in the vacant chair. Starsky perched on the arm of Hutch’s.

Lifting about half the pages, Minnie’s look turned serious. “These are from different Philadelphia papers and all paint a glowing picture of two detectives, Douglas Warren and Morton Stillman. They were tops in their police academy class and had the best arrest and conviction record of any officers in their department.” She paused and looked at first Dobey, then Starsky and Hutch. “Until three years ago, after which there isn’t a single mention of either name in any Philadelphia newspaper.”

Starsky felt as if he’d touched a live electrical wire.

“I talked to my friend, Carl, the records clerk there, this morning,” Minnie continued. “After I read these. When I gave him the names he knew we’d pulled up public information.” She shrugged. “There was no reason why he couldn’t tell me the rest. He said Warren and Stillman split up about the time they dropped off the achievement chart. Warren transferred to Internal Affairs. Stillman resigned and moved to Denver.”

She waited for a response but when none came she put the sheaf of paper in her lap. “Your Philly librarian couldn’t find them after that, Hutch. Warren hasn’t done anything newsworthy since.”

When neither Dobey nor his partner said anything, Starsky broke the silence. “And Chicago?”

She lifted the second set of papers. “In Chicago, we have Detectives George Mason and Abel Sterling. Partners for thirteen years, top of their class, best solve rate ever. A major arrest at least half a dozen times a year.” She raised an eyebrow toward Dobey. “Sound like two people we know, Captain?”

Dobey didn’t seem to want distraction though. “Go on, please, Minnie. What else?”

She looked down at her information. “A year ago their names disappeared from the papers; not one mention in the last twelve months.”

She put these faxes on top of the others in her lap. “I talked to my friend there, too, this morning, after reading these. He told me that both Mason and Sterling requested and received new partners. No reason given. And neither of the new teams has closed a major case.”

Starsky knew they were on the right track; he looked at Dobey. “Hutch and I’ll talk to Porter and Abrams again. This time we’ll ask if they’ve heard of d’Ambrosia and, if so, when.”

Hutch nodded. “If the dates d’Ambrosia surfaced in those cities coincides with the breakups of the
two detective teams we’ve got more than a theory, Captain.”

“But no proof!” Dobey pointed out.

“We call these guys, Cap,” Starsky proposed, not willing to allow this lead to slip through their fingers. He pointed at the stacks of papers Minnie was holding. “Tell them what happened to us!”

“Wait, Starsk.” Hutch put a hand on his arm for only a moment. “What would you think if somebody you’d never heard of called you and started talking about…” He didn’t have to finish the sentence.

“You’re right.” Starsky slumped. “I’d probably lie and hang up. Or maybe I’d just hang up.” He looked at Hutch, Dobey, and Minnie. “What do we do?”

“I can keep talking to my contacts,” Minnie offered, “see if I can find another city or two that fits the pattern.”

Starsky got up, took her hand and pulled her to her feet, kissing her cheek noisily. “If you and Huggy weren’t an item…”

She shook his hand off good-naturedly. “Starsky, how can you hit on me with your Captain sittin’ right there?” She laughed, handed the stack of papers to him and left, closing the door behind her.

Hutch looked at Dobey. “I think Starsky and I have to go and talk to these guys. Face to face, where they can read us and we can read them. They have to understand we know where they’ve been and how it’s messed up their lives. We have to convince them that they’re not alone.”

Dobey nodded. “I agree. But the department’s not going to spring for two air fares to Philadelphia, Chicago, and…”

“Denver,” Hutch supplied.

“Forget Denver for now.” Starsky was suddenly tense. He sat in the chair Minnie had vacated. “You said we don’t have any proof, right, Cap?”

Dobey nodded again.

Starsky felt Hutch reaching for his thoughts. “Tate was secure enough to go back to his hobby.” Starsky looked at and spoke to his partner. “Is it possible that other ‘associates’ of d’Ambrosia’s might have felt the same freedom?”

“More than possible, I’d say, Starsk.”

Dobey appeared lost.

“If d’Ambrosia’s goons are convinced key detectives are bought and paid for,” Starsky explained to Dobey, “maybe they’ve been inclined to take up their outside interests again.”

“What if we ask Porter and Abrams to fax us briefs on their open, unsolved serial crimes?” Hutch suggested to Dobey.

“And Hutch and I can find similar crimes here?” Starsky finished.

“We’d have a reason to go there, Captain.” Hutch’s voice was nearly vibrating with tension, “Confer, share our information, cooperate.”

“And while we’re there,” Starsky went on quickly, “we’d talk to Warren in Philadelphia, and Mason
and Sterling in Chicago. Face to face.”

“Let them know we’ve been through their nightmare,” Hutch added.

Dobey was clearly interested but skeptical as well. “What kind of serial crimes are you talking about, Starsky?”

“I don’t know, Cap, anything d’Ambrosia’s goons might be involved in on their own. Could be murder, rape, book making,” he shot a quick grin at Hutch, “gun running.”

Dobey obviously didn’t understand the reason for the grin or the reference and his mind must have taken a detour. “If you think crimes in our city could be linked to similar ones in Chicago and Philadelphia, shouldn’t we contact NCIC?”

Starsky was stunned by the idea. From the dazed look on Hutch’s face, his partner was, too. “Do you… uh, wait a sec… do you really want to call in the Feds, Cap?”

Hutch sat forward, his fists white-knuckled on his knees. “The National Criminal Information Center probably has all the data on any serials Porter and Abrams might send us. But the FBI hasn’t put the pieces together and solved them. Not if they’re still open.”

“Or maybe they don’t even have the information yet, Cap’n,” Starsky said. “Submission to the Center is voluntary and lots of departments don’t bother.” He looked quickly at Hutch, and back at Dobey. “I know we don’t most of the time. It’s too much paperwork. Especially if the crimes aren’t considered major.”

“If we call them in,” Hutch went on, “we’ll only be alerting them to these officers’ situation.” He nodded toward the pages Starsky held.

“If they even suspected sexual coercion,” Starsky said, “they’d fall all over themselves. Eventually Warren, Stillman, Mason and Sterling would go down.”

Dobey clearly hadn’t thought of that. “Not to mention you two.”

“Give us a chance, Cap’n,” Starsky pressed. “Please.”

“Okay. Get the files from Philadelphia and Chicago and search for similar cases here. But…” there was fire in his eyes, “they had better be righteous connections, not something you two invent.”

“Oh, they will be, Cap’n.” Hutch got to his feet. “Minnie’s not the only one who can do research. If we have any cases that link to what Porter and Abrams send us Starsky and I’ll find them!”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Do it! And don’t come back until you’ve found something! Now go on, get out!” This last was shouted so loudly that everyone in the squad room would have heard. Which was probably what Dobey had in mind. He sent them a small smile to counter the harsh words.

Starsky opened the door for Hutch and followed him out.

******

That night Starsky had his worst nightmare about The Event. When Hutch was finally able to wake him, he found himself immobile, his partner’s long, strong arms and legs wrapped completely around him from behind. He took several deep breaths and managed to relax a little. “Was I that violent?”
Hutch loosened his strangle hold and stroked his cheek lightly. “Felt like what I’d imagine wrestling an octopus might involve.” Hutch’s words were teasing but the tone was overlaid with concern.

“I’m okay now.”

“Sure you are, Starsk. I know that. All the same, I’m going to hold onto you for a while if you don’t mind.”

“As long as you can go back to sleep like that, Blondie. Your right arm and leg are probably gonna go numb but I kinda like bein’ in your cocoon.”

“You do, huh?”

“Sure do, but…” Starsky wiggled and shrugged himself around so that he was facing Hutch and snaked his arms around the slim waist. “Why am I having these nightmares now, Hutch? I thought we were both over the bad part.”

“Delayed reaction?” Hutch kissed his forehead. “Hell, I don’t know, babe. You’ve had your emotions under such a tight rein since it happened… Maybe all these visits we’re making to d’Ambrosia, plus the fact that we could be getting close to being able to go after him, officially, is putting cracks in your armor.”

“Don’t let me fall apart, Hutch,” Starsky begged, leaning his head against Hutch’s chest. “I don’t want to let you down.”

Hutch pushed him onto his back, reached behind himself and turned on the night table lamp. He leaned up on his right elbow and glared down at Starsky’s surprised face. “David Michael Starsky, you could never let me down. Do you hear me?” When Starsky didn’t respond immediately, Hutch shook his shoulders. “Answer me!”

“Yeah, Hutch, I hear you.” Starsky shuddered. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize, either.” Hutch stroked Starsky’s cheek. “I’m sorry if I sounded angry. It just tears me apart when I see you doubting yourself.”

Starsky was pulled into those strong arms again and his partner laid back, addressing the ceiling. “If we were seeing a shrink, buddy, I think we’d be told to expect flashbacks and nightmares for a while yet. It hasn’t been all that long and, until we can put the sonavabitch away, we have to keep diving back into his cesspool.” He stroked Starsky’s back. “I honestly believe we’re both doing okay.”

“You’re the one who took Psychology, Hutch,” Starsky said, doing his best to affect his usual self-confidence. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“One semester, buddy.” Hutch chuckled. “That was all I could stand of that sanctimonious self-published-book-promoting professor.”

“Poor baby.”

Hutch pushed him onto his back again, his left hand finding and clutching Starsky’s semi-hard cock while nibbling on an ear lobe. “I’ll ‘poor baby’ you, pal.”

Starsky moaned, “Not fair.”

“All’s fair, my love.” Hutch worked his way down Starsky’s throat with his sensuous mouth. “Because this is definitely not war.” Hutch began stroking the stiffening phallus with his almost-
expert-now fingers while his kisses moved lower.

“Aw Hutch…” Starsky groaned. “I like this even better than being in your cocoon.”

*******

Hutch felt as if the following few days were interminable. He called Porter and Starsky talked with a fully recovered Abrams, explaining what they were asking for now. Porter did not sound enthusiastic. Abrams said he’d do his best but he was so swamped after being sick he couldn’t promise when he’d be able to send them anything.

Porter and Abrams both also said they knew d’Ambrosia’s name but had no official requests to investigate him. They each said they’d try to remember when he had first come to their attention.

Hutch thought he and Starsky probably shouldn’t hold their breath.

Some days were stones…

The only enjoyable experience during those tedious days was the weekend cleaning-out of the LTD. Hutch brought a trash barrel from behind Venice Place and he and Starsky practically filled it up with the detritus from the back seat. Some of the items even Hutch was surprised to find.

Starsky made very few sarcastic comments and was solicitous of Hutch’s feelings about the sanctity of the junk in the back seat of his treasured car.

After the trash was removed Starsky brought out a can of ArmorAll and the seats, door panels, arm rests, dash and any other leather or leatherette surfaces were cleaned and polished. Hutch was actually impressed with the way the interior looked and smelled when they were done.

Starsky was so keen and happy during the whole process Hutch found he wasn’t able to deny his partner the pleasure of washing and waxing the entire car, too. Working together everything was accomplished in under three hours, beginning to end.

When it was finished Hutch stood next to Starsky admiring their work, a smile on his face, an almost idiotic grin on his best friend’s.

“Every week, Hutch.” Starsky looked up at him through those outrageous eyelashes. “I’ll wash it for you every week if you’ll let me.”

Hutch put his arm around Starsky’s shoulders, picked up the bucket full of polish, sponges, towels, etc., and hurried him upstairs.

Once behind closed doors Hutch dropped the bucket and divested Starsky of his obscenely short cut-offs, Jockeys and t-shirt. After Starsky got Hutch out of his own shorts, shirt and briefs, they fell on the couch face to face.

Hutch, for some reason he didn’t have time to fathom, attempted to dominate his partner but Starsky was determinedly against that scenario. Hutch fought valiantly while his lover laughed and smothered his intentions under passionate kisses. Lips crushed willing lips, tongues wrestled in a match neither wanted to win because that would mean the end of the competition.

Hutch marveled yet again at how much he loved the feel of Starsky’s pelt of chest hair rasping against his own smooth skin. It was a soft sandpapery feel he never grew tired of experiencing.

He also found himself marveling anew at how well his body fit with Starsky’s. Legs entwined
seamlessly, arms wound ‘round each other’s torsos, heads fit into the hollows of each other’s shoulders. ‘Perfect fit’ took on a whole new meaning.

Hutch could feel his partner’s increased heartbeat keeping time with his own. His hands found and grasped Starsky’s firm round buttocks at the exact moment his beloved’s palms and fingers took possession of his own ass.

Hutch’s raging erection slid against Starsky’s, setting off fireworks in his nervous system. His vision went blurry and his breathing came in gasps. Starsky’s turgid shaft rubbed increasingly aggressively against his cock. Their pubic hair became entangled, pulling almost painfully when Starsky reached between them and held their rods together. He pumped in rhythm with Starsky, their bodies seemingly attempting to meld. The orgasm he at last allowed himself to experience came only seconds before Starsky’s.

Falling asleep in Starsky’s arms Hutch decided that washing and waxing the LTD wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

*******

Hutch came up with the next idea for hassling d’Ambrosia, the realization of what the new utility wires at the warehouse probably meant having gelled in his subconscious.

He inquired at the phone company while Starsky checked with the Department of Water and Power. Each discovered, as suspected, that there was no listing for an account under d’Ambrosia’s name. Of course he could be using a company name they didn’t know but the most telling thing was there was no listing for service to the warehouse address.

Hutch drove the LTD right up to the main doors, bypassing all the new lookouts who followed the car like a school of fish. The surly new guard simply opened the side door.

Starsky went in first, a definite spring in his step.

Hutch nodded at the nearest scowling face and put a calming hand on Starsky’s back. “Easy, partner.”

d’Ambrosia ambled almost casually toward them but Hutch could see the tight rein he had on his emotions. Hutch took great delight in causing the son of a bitch all the inner turmoil he possibly could.

Starsky put his hand inside his jacket and brought out a sheaf of forms. “You need to fill these out and send ‘em in, Tony.”

“Our friend in the Third alerted us to an investigation that’s about to be initiated by the phone company and DWP, Mr. d’Ambrosia.” Hutch didn’t really care if anyone believed his supposed concern.

“ Seems like somebody in this general area’s been siphoning utilities.” Starsky looked around. “Couldn’t be you, could it?”

“An oversight when you moved in, right?” Hutch shrugged. “But you need to correct the situation before you get caught.”

“If they nail ya…” Starsky shook his head and tsk’d, “you’re not only gonna be charged for all the services you’ve used but penalties and interest out the wazoo.”
“They’d terminate you… uh, your utilities,” Hutch continued, “until every cent was paid, too.” He spread his hands as if he was sorry. “The re-activation fees alone would be exorbitant.”

“Don’t know what it’s like where you come from,” Starsky said, “but around here Ma Bell and DWP can be worse than the cops.”

“You don’t want to be on their bad side,” Hutch informed the man who looked as if he was ready to explode.

Starsky fanned the sheaf of forms, glancing around the warehouse interior. “Been meanin’ t’ ask you, d’Ambrosia, where’s Nicky? Haven’t seen him around the last few times we’ve come t’ visit.”

“Cairo’s my chief lieutenant,” d’Ambrosia growled through clenched teeth. “He keeps things running smoothly in my other operations. He’s out of town a lot.” He glared at Hutch, then Starsky. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Oh no, of course not.” Hutch shrugged with exaggerated unconcern. “We were just inquiring about our old… acquaintance.”

“We’ll leave these here.” Starsky put the forms down on the nearest flat surface. “Fill ‘em out right away and send ‘em in. That’ll make you all legal and proper.”

“As we said before, no need to thank us, Mr. d’Ambrosia. Starsky and I are only doing our civic duty, trying to keep you and your enterprises out of trouble.” Hutch slung his arm around Starsky’s shoulders and walked him to the door.

Outside, Hutch contained his laughter until he and Starsky were in the car and headed back to Metro. He pulled over and parked in a deserted lot next to a derelict building. As soon as the engine was shut off and they made sure no one was watching, he pulled Starsky into his arms. His kisses and laughter were matched enthusiastically.

*******

Minnie checked in almost daily and it seemed that Baltimore and Detroit were other possibilities for vanished teams of great cops. She said she’d keep them updated.

“What happened in Baltimore and Detroit?” Hutch wondered out loud that night on their way home.

“Doesn’t bear thinking about, Hutch.”

“I know. I mean about d’Ambrosia though. Did he simply give up on moving his enterprises into those cities?”

“Or did he find other pairs of cops?”

“We need to see if librarians there would be willing to help us.”

*******

Hutch and Starsky poured through all Bay City’s open serial crimes in preparation for whatever they’d get from Philadelphia and Chicago, in between all their other cases. They had to testify at Saul Webber’s sanity hearing, track down more witnesses in the dance club shooting, and give depositions to the university students’ lawyers.

They had dinner with Jessica and Alicia at a vegetarian restaurant near their store. Hutch and the
women found entrees to their tastes and Starsky discovered that spaghetti with tofu meatballs was nothing short of terrific!

“Can you get me the recipe?” Hutch whispered to Jessica.

She nodded conspiratorially. “Pretty sure I can.”

“d’Ambrosia hasn’t been back to the neighborhood,” Alicia told them over dessert.

Hutch and Starsky considered that a good sign.

*******

Eating lunch at their desks about two weeks after making their most recent requests to Porter and Abrams, Starsky looked up to see Minnie coming into the squad room with another sheaf of faxes in her hand. Starsky nudged Hutch’s foot under their desks.

“Sure hope you two are reimbursing the department for all that fax paper, Starsky,” Babcock hollered from their side of the room.

“Not only are we doing that, Babcock,” Starsky called back, “but we might even let you and Simmons in on the bust. Once we’re ready.”

“As long as you don’t bug us in the meantime,” Hutch threatened.

“Far be it from us, Hutch.” Babcock put his hands up in mock-surrender.

Minnie put the pile of faxes on Starsky’s desk and left.

Hutch got up, went to the file cabinets and got out a sheaf of empty folders. Starsky opened a drawer in his desk and removed the files he and Hutch had made up of Bay City’s serials.

Starsky got up, picking up the faxes and files. “Let’s find an empty room.”

“Reading my mind again, partner.” Hutch didn’t even attempt to hide his anticipation.

Interview #2 was vacant. Starsky closed and locked the door behind them. Hutch brought the chair from the far side of the table around to the near side and sat down next to Starsky who handed half the faxes to him and began to read the ones he’d kept. They shuffled pages back and forth making short stacks. No words were needed.

Two hours after beginning, Starsky felt Hutch’s undercurrent of excitement and it set his blood tingling. “We got ’em, Hutch.”

“Yeah, partner, I believe we do.”

“Show me yours, I’ll show you mine.” Starsky made sure the innuendo was blatant. To his amazement and delight, Hutch actually blushed. He relented immediately and put a hand on his partner’s thigh out of sight of anyone who might be looking through the two-way mirror. “Hold that thought for tonight.”

“You first then.” Hutch fought to appear unruffled.

Starsky shuffled seven faxes to the top but didn’t ask Hutch to read them yet. “Remember two murders here a few months ago, down around the docks? Each guy’s wrists and ankles were bound with packing tape. It was the same brand both times. A twenty-five caliber bullet had been fired from
Hutch nodded. “Not our precinct so we weren’t involved.”

“We didn’t pull the files because crimes aren’t usually considered serials until there are three similar cases.”

“We only had the two.”

Starsky pushed three faxes toward him. “These are from Philadelphia.”

Hutch scanned them quickly. “Almost exactly the same.”

“We’ll ask Neidlander to send us copies of his two so we can verify.” He slid over four more faxes.

Hutch skimmed through them, his body language exhibiting increasing anger. He looked up. “Four in Chicago.”

“Remember who the guys here were?”

“Former mob hit men and enforcers I think,” Hutch mused. “Pretty sure I read that they were from different ‘families’ though, had never worked together. No connection between them. They were simply old, retired killers.”

Starsky nodded. “And these?” He gestured toward the faxes.

Hutch skimmed the pages again. “All former mobsters.”

“Maybe somebody’s settling old scores?”

“I’ll take ‘Enemies of Patsy Cairo’ for a hundred, please, Art.”

Starsky laughed out loud. “Big brother died in prison and I’ll bet Nicky’s been taking out everybody he thinks did ol’ Patsy wrong.” He put a hand on the faxes and folders. “I count nine. So far.” He allowed Hutch to ponder things before nudging his arm. “What have you got?”

Hutch focused on his own pages. “A string of armed robberies in Chicago and Philadelphia that sound like the same perp.” He pushed a bunch of papers toward Starsky. “He accosts his victims as they’re walking away from a bus stop.”

Starsky read quickly through the briefs.

Hutch gave him the details. “He sticks a gun in their backs, hustles them into an alley or a vacant lot, even a recessed doorway, tells them if they make a sound he’ll kill them. Always the exact same words.”

Starsky finished reading and nodded for Hutch to continue.

“He takes everything of value and pistol whips them, leaves them where they fall. No witnesses and the victims can give only a general description since he never lets them see his face. White male, average height, average voice, no accent, no hair color, no eye color, no description of clothing. But it’s always a bus stop, always a gun in the back, and always a pistol whipping.”

Starsky checked the faxes. “Chicago forensics say it’s likely the same gun, wounds to each victim’s head were nearly identical.” He flipped more pages. “Same thing in Philly.” He looked up at his partner. “Possibly the same gun. Almost for sure the same guy.” Hutch silently slid a folder toward
him which he opened, scanning through the three pages in it. “He’s here.”

“Reads that way to me,” Hutch agreed, a light in his eyes.

“You know, Hutch?” Starsky began to collect his papers and notes. “I think we really do need to talk to the cops in Philly and Chicago. We could end up helping them clear all these cases.”

“You’re right, partner. We need to show all this to Dobey and hope he can set it up with the brass.” Hutch gathered his own folders.

“Isn’t this the kind of thing NCIC is supposed to catch?”

“You’d think so. But they haven’t been collecting information all that long.” Hutch was good at rationalizing. “Besides, like you said, departments are often too busy to send them the data.”

“Great,” Starsky grumbled. “So we do their jobs for them.”

“We’re cops…” Hutch mimicked Starsky almost perfectly. “It’s what we do.”

Starsky laughed, got up, dropping a quick kiss on the top of Hutch’s head. He unlocked the door, opened it, and held it while his somewhat flustered partner got his act and papers together and preceded him out the door.

*******

Shortly after, in Dobey’s office, Starsky sat on the arm of Hutch’s chair again. His partner sat on the front edge, his forearms on his knees, his hands clasped tightly. Dobey was reading through the briefs and their notes.

Starsky wanted a cup of water so badly he could almost taste it but he didn’t want to do anything to distract Dobey.

At last Dobey looked up from the papers. “What about Denver?”

“What about it?” Starsky shook his head. “That’s were Stillman ran off to. I say we forget about him unless the other three fizzle out.”

“If we can get Warren, Mason and Sterling to admit what happened to them,” Hutch said, “we probably won’t need Stillman.”

“And don’t forget, Minnie’s still looking,” Starsky pointed out.

Dobey folded his hands on top of the faxes, folders and notes. “I’ll run this by the brass. Even though the two murders down on the docks, and the assaults, aren’t in our precinct, you’re the ones who made the connections. They have to agree to send you both. And I won’t allow them to even think about calling in the Feds. You boys put this together, NCIC didn’t! You deserve to be the ones to follow it through.”

Starsky nearly cheered.

“Don’t count your chickens yet but I’ll do everything I can.” Dobey got up and extended his hand across the desk.

Starsky jumped to his feet and took the big paw, releasing it when Hutch reached for it next.

“You’ve both done exemplary police work here. I’m proud to have you in my division. Hopefully
someday everybody will know about it.”

Starsky got the words caught in his throat and was grateful Hutch didn’t.

“Thanks very much, Captain, we really appreciate that.”

“G’wan,” Dobey mumbled, “get outta here. I’ll let you know what the bosses say after I meet with them in the morning.”

Starsky held the door for Hutch and followed him through into the squad room.

“We did good, partner,” Hutch said, quietly, moving to his desk.

“I’ll bet d’Ambrosia wouldn’t think so.” Starsky went to the coffee machine and poured two cups. Giving one to Hutch, he sat at his own desk and put his feet up on the edge.

“Shall we celebrate tonight?” Hutch asked.

Starsky shook his head, suppressing superstition. “Too soon.”

“We should do something special though, don’t you think? We’ve been going at this for weeks straight.”

“What’d you have in mind, Blintz?” Starsky sipped the vile brew.

“Oh, I don’t know. What haven’t we had in a while?”

“I haven’t had you in a while.”

Hutch glanced around quickly to make sure no one had heard. “Quit that! You want to make me blush all over myself?” He threw a paperclip.

Starsky caught it. “That’s an erotic mental image. I can picture it already, my gorgeous blond hunk, naked, and all pink and blushy, flushy, sweaty, and oh soooo hot.”

“I said, quit that!” Hutch actually sounded flustered.

Starsky relented. “Okay, Chinese.”

Hutch ran his hands through his hair and took a deep breath. “Thank you. Wok San’s it is.”
Chapter 10

At Starsky’s place that evening Hutch put the leftovers from their Chinese take-out dinner into containers and in the fridge while Starsky washed the few dishes and utensils.

Starsky went into the living room, turned on the TV, leaving the channel set on 18. Old western movies were something he and Hutch usually agreed was the least offensive. He left the sound off though, figuring they were pretty worn down by the day and needed to relax for a while.

Starsky sat at the far end of the couch and, as he expected, Hutch came in from the kitchen, stretched out and laid his head in Starsky’s lap. He ran the fingers of his right hand lightly through his partner’s silky hair, his left hand resting on Hutch’s chest.

Hutch began massaging Starsky’s forearm but the fingers were tense and the wrist didn’t have its usual flexibility. Starsky knew Hutch was all wound up about the connections they’d made that day, the cases they hoped to help Philadelphia and Chicago solve, the trip they needed to make to those cities, locating and trying to interview the respective ‘pocket cops,’ plus the endless ramifications Hutch instinctively worried about. He was ready when Hutch broke the silence.

“What if Dobey can’t --”

Starsky put his left hand gently over his partner’s lips and smothered the rest of the question. After a breath he replaced the hand with his mouth. The kiss was soft and patient. Eventually Hutch’s mouth relaxed under his and the lips parted. The tongue darted out to tease Starsky’s lips, which opened invitingly. The kiss deepened and tongues danced as Starsky’s fingers tightened in Hutch’s hair and Hutch lifted his left hand into dark brown curls.

Needing to breathe Starsky sat up a little. “No more thinking tonight, Hutch. We’ll do everything we can tomorrow. But for tonight let’s try to forget all about d’Ambrosia.” He finger-walked his left hand down the buttons of Hutch’s shirt, over the belt buckle, down the outside of the zipper and pounced on the bulge inside the jeans. Hutch inhaled sharply and Starsky smiled. “Okay?”

In answer, Hutch pulled his head back down demanding another kiss, deeper and more insistent this time. Starsky matched his partner’s passion and the sparring tongues engaged in battle. Lips tried to crush and cushion at the same time, hands began to wander over bodies and breathing became difficult with so many clothes on.

Hutch fell back, rolled to his feet and pulled Starsky up, leading the way to the bedroom. Mindful of wasted electricity, Starsky shook loose of Hutch’s hand, darted back and turned the TV and lights off. He dashed to the bedroom in time to tackle Hutch as he began unbuttoning his shirt.

Landing on top of his face-down partner on the bed, Starsky spread himself over as much of his lover as possible, kissing any exposed skin - neck, ears, cheeks, hands, wrists - before starting over. “Pink and blushy, flushy and hot,” he chanted over and over, relishing every goose bump and shiver his attentions produced.

Hutch didn’t resist, he simply chuckled into the bedspread until Starsky ran out of energy. When the frenzy slackened he rose up and tossed Starsky off onto his back and laid on top of him.

Starsky never tired of looking in Hutch’s eyes, seeing the love and devotion he felt returned in full measure. But tonight there seemed to be something else in those bright blues. When Hutch lifted up, his knees on either side of his hips, Starsky grinned. “Gonna get me back for making you all
flustered this afternoon, babe?”

The look in Hutch’s eyes changed from thoughts of humorous foreplay to deep, needy passion and Starsky shuddered. He knew what Hutch wanted, what he would say. He didn’t blink, he didn’t look away, he waited.

Hutch began to unbutton Starsky’s shirt, his breathing shallow and rapid. “Fuck me, Starsk.” His partner’s voice was low and strained, packed with what Starsky knew were conflicting emotions. “Please. I want you to fuck me.”

“You’ve been thinking about it since this afternoon, haven’t you?”

Hutch looked away.

Starsky caught Hutch’s hands when he finished with the buttons. “Haven’t you?”

“I guess so,” Hutch admitted. “So what?” The beautiful face had an almost belligerent expression. “I want it, I want you! Inside me! Now, tonight!”

“No, Hutch.” Starsky put all his love in his eyes but shook his head.

Hutch, clearly surprised at the refusal, rocked back on his heels.

Starsky sat up, locking his gaze with Hutch’s while he began unbuttoning his partner’s shirt. “I’m going to make love to you tonight. But I’m not going to fuck you.” Hutch looked away, unmistakably hurt. Starsky put a hand to the side of his face and turned it back. “I know you want me, babe. I can see it in your eyes. But there’s fear there, too.”

Hutch flinched and started an obvious denial. Starsky put two fingers over his lips. “I hurt you, Hutch.” He dropped the hand to his partner’s shoulder and began to rub slowly up and down Hutch’s arm. “I didn’t want to. But I did. And part of your mind is afraid it’ll happen again. So you’ll tense up. And it’ll hurt.”

He finished undoing the final button. “That’s why we’re not going to do that until you’re ready.” Starsky slowly pushed the shirt off Hutch’s shoulders, pulling a sleeve off one wrist, then the other. “I can’t ever hurt you again, Hutch.”

He took Hutch’s shoulders and gently turned him, laying him on his back in the middle of the bed, and knelt beside him. Slowly he unbuttoned Hutch’s belt, unsnapped the jeans, and lowered the zipper. Hutch raised his hips a little and Starsky pulled the jeans and shorts down over the lean hips.

Starsky got off the bed at the foot, took Hutch’s shoes and socks off, before removing the jeans and shorts. While he was there he shed his own clothes, his eyes never leaving Hutch’s. “Remember that mongoose I told you about? The one staring at the cobra?” Hutch managed a slight nod. “That’s kinda the look on your face right now. But I promise, this is going to be about love. And you’re never going to think of that mongoose again.”

Hutch nodded, more firmly this time. His face relaxed a little and the corners of his eyes crinkled, anticipation replacing concern and uncertainly.

Holding Hutch’s ankles, Starsky gently spread his legs and raised his knees so that he could crawl onto the bed, between those knees, still looking in Hutch’s eyes. “I can’t make you forget the hell we went through but I’m going to help you put it behind us for good, and ever, and always.” He stroked the insides of Hutch’s thighs feeling his partner shiver. “Do you believe me, Hutch? Do you trust me?”
Hutch’s eyes never left Starsky’s. “I want to believe you, Starsh. And you know I trust you.”

“Good, that’s all I need.” Then with a small smile, he added, “For now. Stay tuned though. I may request your participation later.”

He hopped off the bed, hurried to the nightstand and got a jar of Vaseline. Unscrewing the lid, he left it there and carried the open jar back to the foot of the bed. Instead of kneeling between Hutch’s knees again though, he laid on his stomach, his mouth close enough to blow warm breath on the shaft and testicles.

Hutch gasped.

“Close your eyes, babe.” Starsky’s voice was low, sensual and intense. “Don’t think. Feel. This is me, Hutch, loving you the way I promised.”

He placed Hutch’s legs over his shoulders. With his left hand he raised Hutch’s genitals, exposing the puckered anus, recently so abused but now fully healed. While his fingers tenderly massaged his partner’s balls, Starsky lightly kissed the portal while he dipped the fingers of his left hand in the petroleum jelly. With his right he reached around and clasped Hutch’s hardening phallus.

Hutch began panting as if running. His fists gathered the sheet into wads.

Starsky massaged Hutch’s sac with his slickened left hand as he stroked the erect shaft with his right. When he felt Hutch’s testicles begin to throb, and his cock swell, Starsky slowly inserted his lubricated middle finger into the tight opening.

Starsky knew that he’d done almost all these things to Hutch during their ordeal, and many times since. He’d sucked his cock, rolled his balls, even lightly ringed his hole. But Starsky also realized that, with Hutch thinking, and re-thinking, and over-thinking about possibly being fucked tonight, fear and hatred left over from The Event would be clouding his ability to experience anything else. Starsky wanted, no he needed to help Hutch put what he was feeling into a loving context.

“No pain, right, Hutch?”

Hutch raised his head. “None,” he admitted, his eyes wide and wondering. “It feels… fantastic. Don’t stop. Please.”

“Oh, I’m no where near stopping yet. Only wanted to make sure you were doing okay.” Starsky was intensely happy. Bending back to his task without breaking rhythm, Starsky pulled his knees up under himself so that he could take Hutch’s manhood in his mouth. Stroking up and down on the engorged shaft, he inserted a second finger and pushed deeper, finding the node he was after. He rubbed it gently.

Hutch thrashed. “Right there! Oh, God, that’s it!”

Starsky was ready for just such gyrations and managed to hang on to both his conquests. While his finger stroked the prostate, his right hand gripped the base of Hutch’s cock, and his mouth rode up and down in a rhythm he knew would take Hutch to brand new heights.

He had no idea how long he kept Hutch flying but the golden body was bathed in sweat and the white-knuckled fists had put wrinkles in the sheets that would probably be permanent by the time Starsky decided his partner was ready for the moment of supernova.

Starsky pressed firmly against Hutch’s prostate, closed his throat around the shaft and began swallowing.
Within seconds Hutch’s system reached overload. He grabbed Starsky’s head, entangling his fingers in the soft curls. He groaned/ moaned/ cried his ecstasy and came into Starsky’s willing mouth.

Starsky gently extracted his fingers and used both hands to pump all the fluid out of the balls, up the shaft and down his throat. This was definitely heaven.

Hutch, literally drained, fell back on the bed, as if de-boned.

Starsky pulled the spread over Hutch’s lower body and crawled across a splayed leg, to sprawl as close to his lover as he could get.

“Swear t’ God, Starsk,” Hutch muttered. “If you ask if I’m okay, I’m going to kiss you to death…. That is, as soon as I can get up enough strength to kiss you at all.”

Starsky chuckled. “I’m going to love you like that whenever you’ll let me, Hutch. Until you can look me in the eye, tell me you want me, and all I see is the want.”

Hutch turned to him. “I love you so much.”

“Love you that much back, babe.”

“Sleep now, you think? No dreams tonight? For either of us?”

“No dreams, Hutch. Sleep.”

They both got up so that they could slip under the covers. Hutch rolled onto his left side and slid back against Starsky’s front. Starsky pulled his lover as close to himself as he could, kissed the back of the neck, nuzzling the silken hair, and followed him into dreamless slumber.

*******

“You know something, Starsk?” Hutch asked the next morning, while they were cruising their beat, waiting for word from Dobey about his meeting with the brass. He looked again in his rear view mirror. “I thought you were crazy, checking for tails all the time, but…”

Starsky looked in his side view mirror before turning and staring out the back window. Hutch continued to drive in his normal, cautious manor. After a few turns, Starsky faced front again. “Dark blue Impala. Three cars back. Two men.”

“You got it.”

“Gee, Detective Hutchinson, what should we do about a couple of guys innocently following the same route we are?”

“Ask them their intentions?”

“You mean see if they want to join us for dinner? Go to a movie? Double date?” Starsky was in full-on sarcasm mode.

“Unless you can think of something you’d rather do.”

“Would they be stupid enough to follow us into that dead end alley off Snyder?”

“Let’s find out.” Hutch sped up and was encouraged when the Impala cut around intervening traffic and stayed with them through a mile of lefts and rights into a less well-traveled part of the city. There were no cars now in Hutch’s rear view mirrors except the Chevy.
Starsky grabbed his door handle in preparation when Hutch threw the LTD into a narrow space between buildings. He jumped out before Hutch brought the car to a stop.

The Impala careened into the passage but screeched to a halt, the brown car blocking its path.

Starsky tapped the barrel of his Beretta on the passenger side window. Burn Scar rolled it down, the perpetual frown firmly in place.

Hutch approached on the driver’s side, the Python held down against his leg.

Skinny rolled down the driver’s window and smiled hollowly at Hutch.

Hutch’s grim expression was carved in stone.

*******

The Impala preceded the LTD to the warehouse, Hutch keeping the brown car’s front bumper nearly up the Chevy’s hanging tail pipe. Starsky’s grin was almost Joker-ish and Hutch’s smile was anticipatory.

Inside the vast building, Hutch noticed the limo’s absence. d’Ambrosia was there though, so the Lincoln was out with Nicky again.

The crime boss stubbed out a cigarette, seething. He stood and approached, anger visibly reddening his face.

Hutch pushed Skinny ahead of him. “You should check out your associates’ rides, d’Ambrosia. Skinny’s wheels aren’t up to snuff. Missing tail light…”

Starsky shoved Smiley. “Bald tires. Tail pipe just about draggin’ the pavement.”

“Inoperative turn signals,” Hutch continued.

“We had t’ get the vehicle off the streets,” Starsky finished. “It’s a menace t’ public safety.”

“Darn good thing they were following us,” Hutch said, “and Starsky and I spotted the deficiencies ourselves. If a traffic cop had seen the disgrace your man drives he’d be facing some serious fines. This city does not like dangerous vehicles on it’s streets, Mr. d’Ambrosia. There are laws.”

“Don’t take offense at my partner’s pontification, Tony.” Starsky swatted Hutch lightly on the butt. “You see, he spent a few years in Traffic citing cars not nearly as dangerous.”

“Are you both finished?” d’Ambrosia hissed.

“Not even close,” Starsky muttered, so low only Hutch heard him.

“We just thought you should know, Mr. D,” Hutch went on quickly. “You better have your mechanic look into it. Before somebody gets ticketed. Or hurt.”

“Where’s the pretty black Town Car, Tony?” Starsky asked. “That’s a sweet ride. Pass anybody’s muster.”

“Cairo has it!”

“Ah…” Starsky’s response was noncommittal.
“Why?” d’Ambrosia demanded, lighting another cigarette, back in control. “You don’t know of anything he’s done wrong in your city. You can’t harass him.”

“We aren’t lookin’ t’ harass Nicky, are we, Hutch?”

Hutch shook his head. “Of course not, Starz.”

“Course not,” Starsky repeated. “We’ve just been thinkin’ about him a lot lately, ever since that night…”

“You remember the one he means, right, Tony?” Hutch’s voice and face were schooled in innocence.

d’Ambrosia smoked. His face got redder but he said nothing.

“Well, after that night…” Starsky wandered over to the couch and sat. “Hutch ‘n’ me, we’ve been wonderin’ just what Nicky does for you? You mentioned that he checks on your other operations.”

“That’s pretty vague though.” Hutch followed and sat next to him.

“Makes us curious,” Starsky went on. “That’s all. Nothin’ t’ get riled up about. We were just wonderin’.”

“Is he your limo driver?” Hutch asked. “You said he’s out of town a lot.”

“Down in Mexico, maybe?” Starsky suggested. “Buyin’ your cigarettes? Cheaper down there, I hear.”

“That’s no business of yours.” d’Ambrosia drew himself up to his full, medium height. “He comes and goes at my direction, gentlemen. Now get out!”

Hutch got to his feet. “Give him our regards the next time you see him.”

“Tell him we were askin’ after him.” Starsky got up, linked his arm through Hutch’s, and they sauntered to the door. Hutch opened it, allowing Starsky to precede him, and followed.

“Cairo’s off somewhere, Starz.”

“And I think we got Tony wondering about it.”

When they got back to the car the radio was squawking. “Zebra Three, Zebra Three. Come in, please.”

Starsky grabbed the mic and keyed it. “Zebra Three. Whatcha got, Mildred?”

“Captain Dobey says to get your butts back here. You need to make travel plans.”

Hutch allowed a smile to creep across his face when he slid onto the passenger’s seat.

Starsky reached for Hutch’s hand. “Dobey sold it!”

“Sounds like it, partner.” Hutch glanced around, making sure none of d’Ambrosia’s goons was watching, before he lifted Starsky’s hand and kissed the knuckles. “‘Chicago, Chicago, that toddlin’ town…’,” he sang.

Starsky laughed, reluctantly pulled his hand back and started the car. “What the hell is ‘toddlin’
anyway?” He tried to sound petulant but came across as simply happy.

“Maybe we’ll find out when we get there.”

******

Two days later Starsky and Hutch were in Dobey’s office, standing on either side of his desk chair while Dobey flipped through their itinerary. There was a knock on the door and before Dobey could respond Minnie stuck her head in, looking contrite and excited at the same time. Dobey motioned her inside.

Hutch appropriated his usual chair. Starsky moved around and sat on the arm.

Minnie sat on the very edge of the second chair, a notebook and thick stack of faxes clutched in her hands.

When she didn’t speak, Dobey prodded, “What have you found, Minnie?”

Hutch noticed definite concern in her expression and sat forward. “Tell us, Min. Whatever it is, it’s okay. Tell us.”

“It’s not anything bad really, but I might have overstepped my bounds.” She cleared her throat nervously. “You see, Huggy has a cousin, Emily, in the San Francisco main library and I talked to her a week or so ago. I hope you don’t mind.”

Hutch smiled. “Of course we don’t mind, Minnie.”

“Oh, good.” She was plainly relieved. “I didn’t want y’all to think I was goin’ behind your backs.”

“We’d never think that, Min,” Starsky said. “You’re the one that’s keeping us on track,”

“Thanks, Starsky.”

When she didn’t continue right away Dobey got up. He went to the water cooler, drew a cup and handed it to her before he sat back down.

Hutch caught his captain’s eye and nodded his thanks before he turned back to Minnie. “Start at the beginning, Minnie.”

“Okay.” She drank the water and took a deep breath. “My friend, Derrick, in the SFPD records office has been calling me almost every day since last week, when he found out what we’re looking for.”

Dobey, however, was clearly furious. “How the hell does he know what we’re looking for?”


She appeared even more flustered but took another steadying breath. “Word’s gotten around, that’s how, Captain. Like I said weeks ago, we records clerks talk all the time. But only to each other. None of us has ever said a word to anyone else in our departments. We all know how important this is going to turn out to be. And we all want to help.”

Dobey appeared to subside.
“Anyway,” Minnie continued, “last week Derrick told me he didn’t even have to look at files or newspaper articles, he knew exactly who Starsky and Hutch need to talk to. They’re really good friends of his and he’s been worried about them. Says he knows something bad happened but they’ve refused to talk about it, to anybody.”

“Did Derrick say when this happened?” Hutch asked.

“Late last year, after Thanksgiving. But let me tell you all of it. The guys’ names are Ben Atchison and Dean Crosley.” She looked down and checked her notebook. “They’ve been partners for twelve years, highest solve and conviction rates in the history of the SFPD. Until last year.”

She paused again but everybody waited this time. “These two are different though. They stayed together and are closing cases again. Apparently they haven’t allowed what d’Ambrosia put them through to beat them. They’re still good cops!”

She held up the stack of faxes triumphantly. “And here are the newspaper articles to prove it. Emily sent them to me this morning! They corroborate everything Derrick told me. Atchison and Crosley were good, then missing from the papers for a few months, now good again.”

Dobey asked everybody’s next question. “And d’Ambrosia was there?”

Minnie nodded. “According to Derrick, rumors started floating around about an A.J. d’Ambrosia moving to town around the time Atchison and Crosley crashed.”

“We can drive to San Francisco, Cap.” Starsky jumped up. “A long weekend, that’s all we’d need.”

“Settle down, Starkey,” Dobey ordered. “You’ve already got tickets for Chicago and Philadelphia. Go there. Do what you can to help those guys solve their murders and armed assaults. Talk to Mason and the other two. San Francisco will still be there when you get back.” Putting up a hand to forestall objection, he continued, “And… if you get your three detectives to sign on with our little project you’ll have more ammunition when you do go up there.” He leaned back and shared a smile with Minnie. “Also, while you’re back east, Minnie and I will look for murders and armed assaults in the Bay area that match your two strings.”

“The Captain’s right, Stark,” Hutch said. “It’s the old scuba diver’s motto: ‘Plan your dive, then dive your plan’.”

“What do you know about scuba diving?” Starsky asked, probably knowing he was being deliberately distracted.

“Sea Scout, remember?”

“How could I forget,” Starsky muttered.

Hutch turned back to Dobey. “We’ve got all the information and reports for the Chicago and Philly cops. And we’ll find a way to talk to our three guys.”

“When you get back,” Dobey picked up the thread, “you’ll have a much better idea of everything. If you strike out we’ll concentrate on San Francisco. But,” he added, significantly, “if you get what you need in Philadelphia and Chicago, that’ll give us an even better hand to take up to the SFPD guys.”

Starsky retreated, good naturedly. “Yeah, yeah, okay. Chicago first, then Philly.” He got up, went over to Minnie, leaned down to kiss her cheek. “You’re the greatest, Min. Hope Huggy knows how lucky he is!”
“Oh, he knows, Starsky. He knows!” She tore the relevant sheet of paper out of her notebook, handed it to him, along with the faxes, and practically bounced out of the office.

Dobey picked up the ticket packets and handed them to Hutch. His expression was hopeful but realistic. “I want to say, ‘good luck’ but I’m not sure that applies. Anyway, you know what I mean. Now get outta here. Call me if there’s anything you need from this end.”

“Thanks, Cap’n.” Starsky threw a picture-perfect salute.

Hutch pushed his partner out the door.

******

The following afternoon Starsky and Hutch were seated in a large conference room in the downtown headquarters of the Chicago Police Department. Around the table, littered with coffee cups and the remains of sandwiches, as well as numerous files, folders and reports, were six detectives, including Gus Abrams, and two Division Captains.

The senior Captain, Darrell Brewer, was 6’ tall, lean and lanky, silver haired, with black eyebrows over intense hazel eyes. Hutch suspected Brewer had seen just about everything that could come down the law enforcement pike.

Brewer stood at the head of the table and looked at Hutch and Starsky. “The information you brought is impressive, Detective Hutchinson, the cases definitely appear to be connected. But can you help us with suspects? I hate to admit it but we’ve come up blank.” He sat down, folding his hands on top of his copies of the files. “You say you don’t know all of d’Ambrosia’s gang members.”

“No, sir, we don’t,” Hutch replied. “The only two we have positively identified are Mike Tate, serial rapist, and Nicky Cairo, mob hit man.” He glanced around the table and didn’t even try to keep the satisfaction out of his voice. “Tate is currently in jail in Bay City, awaiting sentencing for assault and rape, so don’t bother looking.”

“You two got him?” Brewer asked.

“Yes, sir, Captain.” Starsky glanced at Hutch. “His impunity expired.”

Hutch caught the tiny smile and sent it back before he continued. “If you have a file on Cairo, and your people can find his known associates, you might be able to get somebody to talk. Once d’Ambrosia’s employees realize their boss isn’t untouchable, they might be amenable to some sort of a deal. If they haven’t done anything themselves, that is.”

“I’d look at Cairo for the murders,” Starsky suggested. “He always seemed ready to put a bullet in somebody’s head and didn’t even need a reason.” He put a hand on the second set of folders “As for the armed assaults, Hutch and I don’t have a clue. But we think it’s too much of a coincidence that all these things happen when d’Ambrosia and his thugs are around.”

Brewer nodded. “I tend to agree, Detective Starsky. I’m no believer in coincidence, myself.” He looked around at the others in the room. “Any questions? Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky will be in our fair city today and tomorrow only. Get your questions answered before they leave.”

No hands were raised but Abrams caught Hutch’s eye and Hutch nodded.

Brewer got up signaling the end of the meeting. “We’ll have all our information gathered by nine in the morning if you can come back then, detectives?” He reached to shake Hutch’s hand.
“You bet, Captain. Thank you.” Hutch shook the offered hand.

Starsky shook next. “We appreciate your being willing to listen to us, sir.”

“Always willing to listen to someone who can help us solve crimes, Detective. Really good work on your parts, by the way, making the connection to all these incidents in all these cities.”

“Only doing our jobs, Captain,” Starsky said.

“Would that more of my officers were as diligent.” Brewer left, followed by the others, with the exception of Abrams.

Abrams held the door open and trailed Hutch and Starsky into the hall where he led the way. “You can leave your visitors’ passes at the front desk and pick them up in the morning.”

When they reached the elevators, Abrams didn’t push the call button, just looked hard at both Hutch and Starsky. “Is this what all those phone calls were about? Wanting to know if any of our detectives had fallen off the charts? If this d’Ambrosia guy was operating here?”

“It’s connected, Gus,” Hutch said, “but we really can’t talk about it yet.”

“Except,” Starsky continued, “to tell you we think Nicky Cairo and one of d’Ambrosia’s other goons have been committing crimes in your city. We’re here to help you make those cases. We’re not trying to get you to start an investigation of d’Ambrosia himself.”

“Not yet,” Hutch finished.

Starsky pressed the Down button.

Hutch could tell Abrams wasn’t convinced of anything but seemed willing to bide his time. He put out his hand and after a moment Abrams shook it. Starsky did likewise.

“We’ll see you at nine in the morning,” said Abrams.

The elevator arrived and Starsky and Hutch entered. Abrams turned away.

******

That evening, at a watering hole near the station Detective George Mason worked out of, Starsky and Hutch walked into a crowded room full of noise. Lots of uniformed cops and plain clothes, as well as a few people who were undoubtedly civilians, mingled, sitting at tables or the bar.

In a back booth a man sat by himself, a half-full beer and two empty glasses in front of him. They knew from information Minnie’s friend in CPD Records have given them that the detective was forty-five years old, twice divorced, with no children. He was 5’9”, 165 pounds, brown and brown. The man in the booth appeared to be older and looked just plain used up.

“Was it a little scary,” Starsky asked, quietly, “how easily we found out where this guy drinks? Or am I being paranoid?”

“Both?”

Starsky followed his partner, surreptitiously checking out everyone in the place. Hutch led the way toward their quarry. Mason didn’t look up. They slid in on the opposite side, their backs to the majority of the room.
Even though the place was crowded, a waitress came over right away.

Mason, not looking up, precluded her spiel, “They’re not stayin’ Willa.”

She looked crestfallen but Hutch smiled brightly. “Sure we are, Willa. Two beers, please, whatever’s on tap.”

“Be right back!” She turned and hurried away.

“Who are you?” Mason looked up, obviously not happy at their intrusion into his solitary world. “What do you want? I’m busy!”

“We can see that,” Hutch retorted. “How many beers does it take before you get un-busy?”

“Easy, Hutch,” Starsky soothed. “Give the guy a break.”

Hutch nodded and took a deep breath. “If you’re Detective George Mason, we three have something in common.”

Mason didn’t say a word.

“Can you imagine, Hutch?” Starsky plastered a big fake smile on his face and nudged Hutch’s elbow exaggeratedly. “Having the same name as the third President of these United States? Wow!” He turned back to Mason. “I’ll bet you get asked about that all the time, huh, George?”

Mason stared at Starsky. “George Mason was never President, you idiot. He was responsible for the Bill of Rights.”

“Glad to know you have some intelligence, Mason,” Starsky shot back, “because you need to listen to what my partner has to say.”

At that moment Willa came back with the beers. Hutch pulled a twenty out of his wallet and handed it to her. “Let me know when that runs out, okay?”

She put the bill in her pocket. “I’ll run a tab, honey.”

Hutch looked into Mason’s skittish eyes until the other detective turned away. “We’re not here to hassle you, George. We’re here to help.”

“Go t’ hell,” Mason snarled.

“We’ve been there!” Starsky snapped, hard and cold. He was suddenly tired of the gentle approach.

Mason looked at him, unmistakably confused.

“Courtesy of Anthony d’Ambrosia,” Hutch said.

Mason physically flinched and hunched his shoulders. After a long silence the detective asked, “What do you two know about d’Ambrosia?”

Starsky looked at Hutch then back at Mason. “Me and Hutch were beaten and kidnapped,” he began, quietly, “and under threat of a very gruesome-sounding death, involving a dozen of d’Ambrosia’s closest friends, we performed… certain acts.”

Mason paled. The beer he had clutched nearly spilled when he tried to take a drink. “Who are you guys?”
“I’m Ken Hutchinson. This is my partner, Dave Starsky. We’re detectives with Bay City PD, in California.”

Starsky pulled out his badge wallet and slid it across the table. Mason opened it and studied the I.D. before he slid it back. Starsky put the wallet away. Mason looked from Starsky to Hutch and back again. “d’Ambrosia was moving into Bay City?” Starsky nodded. “When were you…?”

Hutch answered the unfinished question. “A little over three months ago. We’ve been trying to figure out how to bring the bastard down ever since. Our investigation has brought us here.”

“Why?”

Starsky looked around the room before turning back to Mason. “Is there somewhere we can talk? Where we won’t be overheard?”

The stony expression returned to Mason’s face. “I don’t know you two. Why should I go anywhere with you?”

“Would it help,” Hutch asked, “if we told you we have a video tape, too?”

“Show us yours…” Starsky quipped.

Hutch punched him on the arm and Starsky realized the words were in really bad taste. “Sorry. Sometimes I don’t think before I open my big mouth.”

“We’ve only shown ours to two people,” Hutch continued. “Our captain and our best friend.”

“You’ve shown it to somebody?” Mason didn’t try to hide his shock.

“We had to, George,” Starsky told him. “We’re going after d’Ambrosia and Captain Dobey had to know we weren’t making up the kidnapping. Or the… other stuff.”

“I can’t believe you let anybody see what he made you do.” Mason’s hands were visibly shaking again. Starsky and Hutch waited. “I’ve never looked at ours.” Mason’s voice was lifeless now, defeated. “Abel has it.”

“That’s Abel Sterling, your partner?” Starsky checked silently with Hutch and received a nod.

“Yeah. But he’s former partner now. We split up right after… afterward. We couldn’t even look at each other any longer.” He picked up the glass again and took a swallow. “Best partner I ever had. And we couldn’t be in the same car together.” Mason kept looking at Starsky, Hutch, Starsky again.

“How’d you guys get past it?”

“Everybody’s different, George,” Hutch said. “But if we bring d’Ambrosia down maybe you and Abel can work it out.” He looked at Starsky. “Good partners are worth keeping.”

“Tell me about it,” Mason agreed, with resignation. “The one I got now sucks. Oh, God! Talk about poor-taste jokes.”

They each laughed, a little hollowly, but laughter all the same.

“Is there someplace we can go, George?” Hutch repeated the question.

Mason finished his beer. “Might as well go to my place. Ain’t nobody there.”

They got up and Willa came toward them, a frown on her pretty face. Hutch held up his hand to
forestall her giving him back most of his money. “Keep the change, Willa. And thanks!”

She beamed at him, turning back to her regular customers.

*******

Later, in Mason’s small apartment, Hutch and Starsky had shed their jackets and were seated on the sofa. Mason was in a large wing back chair. Three bottles of beer were on the table but Hutch had barely taken a swallow and he hadn’t noticed Starsky touch his either.

Mason picked up his beer and sat back in the huge chair, clearly stunned. “You really think Cairo and one of the other guys in d’Ambrosia’s outfit are doing these murders and assaults in every city he moves into?”

Hutch picked up his beer. “Looks that way to us, George. What about you?”

Mason rolled the bottle in his hands. “Wish Abel was here. He always said he was the brains of our partnership.”

Hutch smiled at Starsky, who clinked his bottle against Hutch’s. “Why don’t you call him? It’s not too late, is it?”

Mason looked at his watch. “Naw. He’s a night owl. I’m sure he’d still be awake. But… what do I tell him?”

“Don’t tell him anything yet,” Starsky said. “Just see if he’ll come over. Say two California detectives have information he needs.”

Mason reached for the phone on the end table, “That might work.”

Figuring to give the man some privacy, Hutch got up and walked toward the kitchen with Starsky right behind him. On the way, Starsky nudged his arm, gestured toward the back of the apartment and angled off into the hallway, undoubtedly headed for the bathroom. Hutch continued to the kitchen. When Starsky joined him, Mason hadn’t completed his call, so Hutch made the trip to the facility. Mason was standing next to Starsky when Hutch returned.

“He’ll be here in half an hour.” Mason sounded almost upbeat. “Says he’s got a lady with him but that he’ll drop her off before he heads over.” He led the way back to the living room where they all sat again. “Can you tell me about the other cops you think this has happened to?”

“You know we can’t, George,” Starsky said.

“Would you want us talking about you to any of them?” Hutch asked, kindly.

“No, of course not,” Mason admitted. “I’d just like to know I’m not alone.”

“Oh, believe me, George…” Starsky picked up his beer. “You are not alone.”

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Sometime later, Detective Abel Sterling had joined them. He was taller than Mason as well as three years older. He carried a little more weight than he needed, had graying hair and faded blue eyes. He, too, appeared worn.

Hutch watched him closely, sensing that everything the seasoned cop had just heard was weighing heavily on his shoulders. He glanced at Starsky who shrugged. He and his partner waited.
“God, George…” Sterling turned to his friend, hurt, apology and anger in equal measure in his voice. “He’s done this to at least three other teams! It wasn’t only us.”

When Mason didn’t reply, Hutch continued the thought. “No, it wasn’t, Abel. But Starsky and I are going to do everything we can to make sure he doesn’t do it to anyone else.”

Starsky cocked his beer bottle in agreement.

“What do you need from us?” Sterling asked.

“For now,” Hutch replied, “put your heads together and remember every detail about your abduction, d’Ambrosia’s demands, and the aftermath. Write it all down. Every word. Watch the tape if you need to refresh your memories.”

The CPD detectives looked at each other, unsure again. “Neither one of us has a machine,” Mason said.

“We’ve discovered that you can rent one at any electronics store,” Starsky told them. “Doesn’t cost much for one day.”

“If you decide to become part of our operation,” Hutch continued, “it’s going to come out. You’ll need to be prepared.”

“On the other hand,” Starsky shrugged, “if you don’t want to be involved, we can forget we ever talked to you. We never heard your names.”

Sterling and Mason looked at each other, then at Starsky and Hutch. “Can we think about it?” Sterling asked. “How long will you be here?”

Starsky checked his watch. “We leave tomorrow morning, since it’s already today. We’ll be downtown working with Captain Brewer and his task force all day. We head for Philadelphia tomorrow.”

“d’Ambrosia did this to a team there?” Mason’s voice was firmer and more controlled than at any time that evening.

Hutch only nodded.

Mason and Sterling exchanged a long look and their own nods. “We’re in, guys.” Sterling’s voice was firmer, too. “We’ll talk about it ourselves, probably all day today, but we want to help take this bastard down. Where can we reach you?”

“We’re at the Marriott, downtown,” Hutch said. “It’s fairly close to your headquarters.”

Sterling smiled. “I can drop you off on my way home.”

“That’d be great, Abel. Thanks!” Starsky got up.

Hutch stood, too, taking his jacket when Starsky handed it to him. He held his hand out to Mason and had it shaken firmly. Starsky was next.

“You knew George Mason was never President, didn’t you?” the shorter CPD detective asked Starsky.

Starsky had the decency to look embarrassed. “Yeah.”
“It was a good ploy,” Mason remarked, with admiration. “Got me thinking.”

“That’s one of the things my partner’s really good at, George.” Hutch put his arm around Starsky’s shoulders. “Getting people thinking.”

Mason turned to Sterling, who was putting his jacket on. “I’m sorry, Abel.” He put a hand on his partner’s arm. “I haven’t managed my part in this well at all. I should have been willing to talk about it but I couldn’t.”

“It’s okay, George. I couldn’t either.” He looked at Starsky and Hutch, then back at Mason. “I think we can be grateful these guys found us. Now we know we’re not alone and can go from here.” He stepped forward and put his arms around his partner. “I’ve missed you, George. And I’m going to go to my Captain in the morning… well, as soon as I get to the office, and request you as my partner again.” He stepped back and looked seriously at Mason. “That is, if it’s okay with you?”

Mason laughed and slapped Sterling on the shoulder. “‘Course it’s okay, turkey. We’re a team, aren’t we? I’ll make the same request so we shouldn’t have any problems.” He turned to Starsky and Hutch. “How can we ever thank you guys?”

“Don’t thank us.” Hutch didn’t try to hide his seriousness. “At least not yet. This is probably going to get an awful lot uglier before it gets better. But Starsky and I know for a fact that, if your partnership is strong enough, you’ll get through it. I know that sounds hokey but, believe me, it’s true.”

“Don’t depress ‘em, buddy.” Starsky nudged him. “Not after we got ‘em on our side.” He grinned at both Sterling and Mason and they smiled back.

“Oh, one more thing.” Hutch added. “Don’t mention this to anyone. We weren’t here. We never met you. Starsky and I are in Chicago to help your department put together cases against two serial criminals. No mention will be made of your situation. If that ever comes out it will be as a separate charge against d’Ambrosia himself.”

Sterling and Mason were standing together. “We understand,” they said at the same time. Sterling turned to Mason. “I’ll call you, George. Get some sleep.”

“You, too, Abel. See you later.”

Mason began to pick up beer bottles. Sterling opened the door and followed Hutch and Starsky out.

******

Sterling dropped Starsky and Hutch at the Marriott. Hutch checked them in while Starsky crashed for a few minutes in a lounge chair in the lobby. Hutch shook his head in admiration at the way his partner could go to sleep any time, anywhere, since Gunther. After only ten minutes of wasted time about a ‘missing reservation,’ Hutch took their room key, picked up the single duffle bag and gently nudged Starsky’s foot. His partner woke up immediately, bright eyed and bushy tailed.

Upstairs in their room Starsky went straight to the phone. Hutch dumped the bag on the floor and headed toward the bathroom and a quick shower. When he came out, hair dripping, towel around his waist, Starsky was sitting on the couch, his hands behind his head, his feet on the coffee table.

“Edith wasn’t too happy about my calling this late but it’s earlier there than it is here!” He looked at his watch. “Hell, it’s barely midnight there!”

Hutch sat down and put his arm around Starsky’s shoulders. “Meaning it’s two a.m. here. Time for us to turn in, too, Starsk. I know you hate flying as much as I do and I’m tired!” He got up, pulled
Starsky to his feet and shoved him toward the bathroom. “Go grab a shower while I call Huggy and bring him up to date.”

“Say ‘Hi’ for me!” Starsky shuffled off, closing the bathroom door behind him.

Hutch sat down and called the Bear, who absorbed all Hutch told him like the sponge he, thankfully, was. By the time he was off the phone Starsky came out, dripping and towel-clad.

“Huggy was glad to hear from us, and happy to hear about Mason and Sterling.” He got up and went to the bed, turning down the spread. “We did good today, partner.”

Starsky came up behind him and put his arms around his waist. Hutch turned within the embrace and kissed the offered mouth. “Did you see the way they looked at each other?”

“Sure did. They’ll be okay. I hope.”

Hutch crawled under the covers, held them up for his partner, who readily joined him. Hutch wrapped his arms around the warm still-wet body and the Perfect Fit second set of arms and legs wound around him.

Starsky buried his face in Hutch’s neck. “Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he murmured, his voice soft and not the least bit seductive. “I’d really like to go to sleep tonight. I’m tired, too.”

“My thoughts exactly, Stark.” He kissed the top of the curly-haired head. “G’night, love.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmm.”
Chapter 11

Starsky decided he wouldn’t give anybody two cents for the supposed City of Brotherly Love. Hell, the place was a nightmare from the moment their plane landed. They were late arriving and had to wait half an hour for a gate. Their cab broke down on the way to Philadelphia Police Department headquarters and, in the middle of afternoon rush hour, he and Hutch couldn’t flag down another.

While their driver was trying to get his dispatcher to send a replacement, Starsky spotted a purse snatching in progress. He nudged Hutch. “Purse, old lady.” He took off after the perp.

When Starsky dragged the sullen teen back to the scene a few minutes later he noticed that his partner, in addition to being relieved to see him in one piece, had succeeded in calming and enchanting the victim, a fragile-looking elderly woman. ‘Eat your heart out Redford,’ he thought, with pride.

The two local uniformed cops that were summoned promised to keep their names out of the report since Starsky and Hutch insisted they really didn’t have time to get involved in paperwork. Officer Genetti and his partner were more than welcome to the credit for the collar.

A substitute cab was sent and Starsky and Hutch made their way, fully two hours late, downtown to their meeting with another task force.

Mel Porter was part of the gathering but didn’t contribute a word. He sat silently through Hutch’s presentation. Starsky didn’t care much for the PPD detective’s concept of sharing and cooperation.

Captain Stuart Connelly, whom Starsky mentally nicknamed ‘Slick,’ was tall, well groomed, well dressed and well spoken. He was vocally appreciative of the California detectives initiative in connecting crimes in their state to two of Philadelphia’s serial cases. Also potentially to two of Anthony d’Ambrosia’s henchmen. “d’Ambrosia has been on our radar for several years,” Connelly informed them, stiffly, “but we’ve had nothing concrete to investigate. Now that we do, be assured that we’ll be bringing all our resources to bear.”

“Right,” Starsky muttered when they left the meeting. “Don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

“I sure was underwhelmed,” Hutch said, keeping his voice down.

“You’re questioning the captain’s veracity when he says they’ll pursue the investigations with all possible diligence?”

“Yep, I guess I am.” He smiled when Starsky laughed.

After the task force meeting Starsky and Hutch tracked down Douglas Warren and he was even more wary than either Mason or Sterling. Talking with him, Starsky found himself wondering how the guy had ever been part of a really good detective team. ‘Maybe it was all Stillman,’ he mused, uncharitably. But possibly truthfully.

Hutch finally convinced Warren of their claims but the Philly cop was opposed to getting involved in any action against d’Ambrosia. He admitted he wasn’t ready to face what the exposure of his ordeal might mean.

“Did you notice?” Starsky asked Hutch that night at their hotel. “He never mentioned his partner.”

“Not once. In my considered opinion, Warren’s a real horse’s ass.”
A second meeting with the recalcitrant detective the next day netted no better results. “I’ll think about it though,” Warren promised, “and let you know if I change my mind.”

The second gathering of the task force produced no positive information or results, either.

“Oh well,” Starsky said on their way to the airport, “at least we didn’t get snowed in.”

“Or rained on,” Hutch contributed. “It could have been worse.”

“No blackouts.”

“We didn’t get hi-jacked.”

“Don’t say that!” Starsky cut in, quickly. “We aren’t home yet.”

“Good point.”

*******

Because of the three-hour time difference, Starsky and Hutch arrived back in Bay City with an entire evening ahead of them. However, their mental clocks were haywire after four days of shifting time zones.

Starsky reluctantly agreed to a swim session but he was so lethargic Hutch found he didn’t really enjoy himself. The hour of yoga he talked his partner into afterward didn’t seem to help Starsky out of his depression either. Even a sausage pizza was simply eaten, not savored.

Lying in bed near midnight, Hutch rolled onto his right side next to his rigid lover.

Starsky was on his back, his hands crossed on his stomach, staring at the ceiling. “They didn’t listen to us, Hutch.”

“I know. But Chicago did.” He put his left hand onto Starsky’s chest, lightly combing the pelt, finding a nipple.

“I just hate that we did all that work.” Starsky put his right hand over Hutch’s, stopping the movement. “We showed them the connections, practically make their fuckin’ cases for ‘em and they acted like we weren’t there.” He balled the hand on top of Hutch’s into a fist. “Warren’s a jerk, Connelly’s an arrogant ‘yes’ man, and d’Ambrosia’s going to get away with everything.”

“Only in Philadelphia, Stark. Chicago listened.” He lightly pinched the nub. “Hell, we got one out of two. We batted five hundred, pal!”

Slowly he became aware that Starsky was tense under his fingers. When he began to rub the protrusion, Starsky, more insistently this time, stopped the hand. “Why are you so up tight tonight, babe?”

“I’m not.”

“You are,” Hutch insisted. He spread his large hand lightly across the furred chest. “Is it because of Philly?”

“No... Yes! I guess.”

“So what if they don’t follow through? We’ve got more than enough on our own plates. We don’t need to worry about a bunch of parochial cops back east.” Hutch began to rub again on the hard little
“Please,” Starsky whispered, his voice strained. “Don’t.”

Startled, Hutch leaned up on his elbow and looked down at the vulnerable expression on his lover’s face. “What is it, StarSk?”

“Nothin’,” Starsky lied again.

Hutch carefully pinched the nipple and saw Starsky wince. “Does that hurt?” When his partner didn’t answer, Hutch persisted. “Does it?”

“A little.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Tiny pieces of a miniature puzzle fell into place. “That’s why you always manage to side track me when I start to play with them, isn’t it?” Starsky barely nodded. “And it’s why you never spend any time on mine.”

“I don’t know how,” Starsky admitted. “I don’t know what would feel good and what wouldn’t.”

“Aw, babe. Is it since Gunther?”

“No. It’s always been like that. They’re not connected.”

“What do you mean, ‘they’re not connected’?”

“That’s the way I think about it.” Starsky sighed. “I’m supposed to feel something when someone sucks them or pinches them during foreplay or sex, right? It’s supposed to turn me on, get me hard.” Hutch nodded, in response to the plaintive look in Starsky’s eyes. “Well, it doesn’t. Never has. At best, it’s irritating. At worst, it’s painful.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault, Hutch. It’s me. It’s my problem.”

“Not true. And I’ll tell you why. You’re mine, David Starsky, and I’m a very possessive guy.”

Starsky looked at him, the vulnerability more plain on the beautiful face than ever. Hutch gently stroked his cheek. “I want all of you, StarSk. Not only your mouth, your cock and your ass. All of you. I want to be able to touch, and love, and pleasure every part of you. Including your rose buds.”

“You can have ‘em, Hutch.” Starsky’s response was child-like. “Do whatever you want. I’ll try not to stop you again.”

Hutch gathered the trembling body in his arms and kissed the forehead. “I know you won’t. But that’s not what I mean. I want you to love everything I do with you, StarSk. Everything. I don’t want you to endure my playing with your nipples if it doesn’t make you feel good.”

Starsky shivered. “It won’t.”

“Has no woman ever been able to make you enjoy it?”

Starsky shook his head. “Terry tried. And she wanted me to make love to hers all the time. But I couldn’t. Nothing ever felt good to me so I didn’t know how to make it good for someone else.”

Hutch had to think about all that for a minute. He held his lover closely and stroked his back, arms,
any part he could reach.

“I’m sorry, Hutch.”

“What are you sorry about?”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to hold back.” Starsky took a deep breath. “If you want to play with ‘em go ahead. I’ll learn to grin an’ bear it.” He smiled but Hutch could tell it was forced.

“Oh, no you won’t. You’ll learn to love it.” He rolled Starsky onto his back and looked deeply into the unsettled dark blues. “Remember your mongoose?”

“Shoulda known I was gonna regret that.” Starsky’s rueful smile clawed at Hutch’s heart.

“Well, get ready, pal, ‘cause I’m going to try and change your mind about having your nipples touched.”

“Aw, Hutch, you don’t have to --”

“Yes.” Hutch interrupted. “I do.” He pushed all the covers off and knelt next to Starsky’s left hip. He stared at his lover’s body as if he’d never seen it before, memorizing every detail. As his eyes traveled up Starsky’s torso and came to rest on the anxious eyes looking back at him, Hutch almost lost his nerve, wondering why this was suddenly so important to him. In the next breath, he knew: this was Starsky, the man who would do anything in the world for him. He could do nothing less than attempt to break down whatever barrier was keeping his lover from enjoying this simple act.

“Starsk… if I hurt you, tell me and I’ll stop. And I’ll never do it again. We have all the other ways we pleasure each other, babe, I don’t have to have this. But I think I can make you enjoy it.” He barked a laugh. “Hell! I’m so egotistical I think I can make you love it. But you’ll have to be the judge of that.” He locked eyes with his nervous partner. “Okay?”

Starsky nodded. “Okay.”

“Relax.” Hutch put the most soothing quality he possessed in his voice. “Empty your mind. You know the techniques.”

Starsky closed his eyes. The furrows on his forehead faded, the tension in his lips relaxed into a near-smile, his breathing slowed, the muscles in his arms loosened.

Hutch allowed Starsky to find his peaceful center. He didn’t waste the time, either. He used it to study his best friend’s body more closely than he ever had before. It was such an incredibly beautiful piece of sculpture. Even the crisscrossed scars were decorations on a work of art.

“I’m going to begin now. If you want me to stop, just say the word.” A flash of tension crossed the peaceful face but was quickly banished. “Okay?”

“Kay.”

Hutch extended his left hand, fingers spread, over Starsky’s chest above the hair, attempting to convey warmth and comfort by proximity only. Moving over Starsky’s left breast, he lowered his hand enough to contact the top of the pelt. He sent all his love into his fingers and across the narrow space to Starsky’s warm flesh.

Starsky’s breathing deepened and the brown bud began to fill and harden.
Hutch lowered his hand into the hair around the left nipple, not quite contacting the skin and held still, concentrating. The bud slowly grew until it kissed his palm.

Starsky’s eyes flew open and he stared into Hutch’s smiling gaze. Starsky looked down at his chest where his nipple touched the soft skin.

“Close your eyes again,” Hutch commanded, gently. Starsky did as he was told. Hutch lowered his hand until it pressed lightly on the nub. Gently, round and round in tiny circles, he rocked the bud.

Starsky began to pant shallowly and his face flushed with what Hutch sincerely hoped was pleasure. A sound, similar to a moan but much more intense and drawn out, came from deep within his body.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hutch noticed Starsky’s cock bob to life. ‘Not connected, huh? We’ll see.’ He moved his left hand over to Starsky’s right breast and the seduction began again. His right hand took up residence over the left nipple, continuing the slow rolling motion.

Peripherally, Hutch noticed Starsky move his right hand toward his growing erection. “Nuh uh,” he murmured. “I’m the only one touching tonight.”

Hutch applied his lips softly to the fully engorged left nipple. It was hot! He could feel it throbbing. Hutch opened his mouth and enclosed the nub.

Starsky made a new sound that could have been agony or ecstasy. Since Hutch hadn’t heard ‘stop’ or ‘no,’ he chose to believe it was the latter. He swept his tongue lightly around the areola. It erupted in gooseflesh. Taking the pap carefully between his teeth, he didn’t bite or nip, he simply held it while his tongue licked gently around the top. He took the right nipple between the thumb and first finger of his left hand, softly massaging it.

This time the sound Starsky made was definitely pleasure, and it continued to hum as background. Hutch began tonguing the nipple, sucking lightly between licks.

Probably unconsciously, Starsky lifted his chest a little forcing the nub more firmly into Hutch’s mouth. Hutch accepted the invitation and sucked in earnest. He manipulated the right nipple at the same time, pulling and rolling it between his fingers until it, too, was as hard and rosy as its twin.

Lifting up, Hutch looked down at Starsky’s now-rigid shaft, engorged and needy. With one hand on each of Starsky’s pert nubs, Hutch bent and kissed his lover’s mouth, startling the lips open. Hutch invaded the warm, wet, welcoming space with his questing tongue and felt both nubs twitch in his palms. He continued the passionate kiss while, between their bodies, his hands and fingers made gentle, sweet, enthralling love to each bud. He could feel Starsky’s entire body pulsating under him.

Hutch pulled back at last and found his partner’s blazing eyes fastened on his. “Are you ready, babe?”

“Almost.”

“Come for me, then, Starsk. Don’t touch…” he cautioned, when Starsky’s hand moved. “Come from only my fingers and mouth on your nipples. Come for me,” he whispered, seductively.

Starsky arched his back, the swollen nubs pressing into Hutch’s chest, demanding attention. Obligingly, Hutch bent to the right one, taking it gently into his mouth. His right hand attended the mate. Hutch sucked and laved the bud, kissing, teething and teasing. The fingers of his right hand gently rolled, pulled and twisted the left one.

Starsky’s whole body tensed, his back arched even more and he buried his hands in Hutch’s silken
hair. The cry must have begun in Starsky’s toes because it took a long time to come up through the body and escape the mouth in a deep exhalation of sheer pleasure.

Starsky’s cock slapped against Hutch’s side when the fluid exploded, fountaining over both of them. Hutch wrapped his arms around the slender body before Starsky fell back on the bed. He drew the covers over them; he’d change the sheets in the morning. Throwing his left leg over Starsky’s hips, Hutch pulled him closer. “You feeling okay, babe?”

“No.”

“No?”

Starsky looked up at him shyly. “I feel so much better than okay it’s way off the scale.”

Hutch had to smile at the allusion.

“No one’s ever done anything like that for me before. I thought I was broken, and had to live with it.” Starsky’s expression looked like happiness, relief, and pleasure all rolled into one. “But you made me come just by touching my nipples. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Maybe nobody ever loved you enough before.”

“Egotistical all right.” Starsky laughed and snuggled.

Hutch couldn’t remember ever feeling quite so satisfied. He’d never even gotten hard but he felt as if Starsky had loved him as completely and fulfillingly as he had loved his partner. Starsky had gifted him with his unconditional faith and trust. And Hutch hadn’t let him down.

*******

Early the following morning, Starsky and Hutch briefed Dobey on their trip. Hutch sat in his familiar guest chair and Dobey sat behind his desk, his fingers laced across his ample middle.

Starsky paced the small room. “Sterling and Mason are good guys, Cap. But I’m not sure either one is up to what the press and the public might do to them if d’Ambrosia releases their tape.” He stopped and looked at Dobey. “Can’t say I’d blame them all that much if they decide not to join us.”

Dobey nodded. “Neither would I, Starsky. But what about Warren?”

“He either rode his partner’s coat tails all those years,” Hutch said, “or he’s changed completely. He wanted nothing to do with us.”

“That’s too bad.” Dobey sighed. “I hate to see a good cop wasted.”

“So do we, Cap, but Hutch and I think Warren’s out of it.”

Hutch decided to change the subject. “What about San Francisco, Captain?”

“I didn’t think you’d forgotten about that.” Dobey shuffled some papers. “Minnie found three assaults and two murders that match the other cities. Cairo, if it is Cairo, and his buddy, have been busy up there.”

Starsky stopped in front of the desk. “We gotta go, Cap’n!”

Dobey returned the stare. “Would tomorrow be soon enough?”
Starsky stepped back. “Uh… you bet, perfect!”

“Everything you’ll need is on your desks.” Dobey couldn’t keep the satisfaction out of his voice. “Contact Captain DelPlain, at Metro, downtown. He’ll be expecting you sometime tomorrow afternoon. And the information for the two detectives is in the folder on your desk, Hutch.”

Hutch got up as Starsky opened the door for him. They both turned back to Dobey. “Thanks, Cap’n!”’s were sincere and simultaneous.

“Call me!” followed them out.

*******

The next afternoon Hutch leaned close to Starsky’s ear. “Do all police departments get their architectural plans from the same firm? This conference room’s a near duplicate of those in Chicago and Philadelphia.”

“And the one at our own precinct,” Starsky whispered back. “The recessed lights here are brighter though, less harsh. Bet that’ll make for better seeing and less eye strain.”

Captain Arthur DelPlain approached them. He was of medium height, lean, and gray haired with keen brown eyes. His hand shake was firm and dry. “I’m impressed. The job you two have done, putting all this together,” he indicated the folders in place on the table, “should make our job easier.”

A dozen plain clothes officers walked in and DelPlain made introductions. Starsky’s tension ratcheted up when Detectives Ben Atchison and Dean Crosley’s names were mentioned, the last two to enter the room.

Atchison, a tall, slender black man of indeterminate age but almost regal bearing, extended his hand to Starsky, then Hutch.

Crosley was a few inches shorter but no less lean, blond and gray eyed, probably mid-thirties, with a hand shake as hard as his partner’s. Starsky got the definite feeling that both detectives were more interested in him and Hutch, and the task force, than any of the other officers.

When Hutch glanced at him, Starsky plainly heard his partner’s thoughts: Why are these two guys here? They should be staying as far away from d’Ambrosia as possible. Shouldn’t they?

Atchison and Crosley took seats across the table from Starsky and Hutch while everybody else, except DelPlain, found chairs and began flipping through the folders in front of them.

DelPlain, at the end of the table, cleared his throat and his officers settled. “You all volunteered for this task force. We’ll be focusing on two sets of crimes. One is a pair of murders and the other, four armed assaults and robberies. If Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson are correct,” he nodded at the BCPD cops, “these crimes have been committed by two members of a gang run by Anthony J. d’Ambrosia.”

He waited while the information was absorbed. Gesturing at Starsky and Hutch again, he continued. “Yesterday, while talking with these detectives’ Captain, I learned that Philadelphia and Chicago have been investigating extremely similar crimes in their cities, all committed while d’Ambrosia was setting up his enterprises there.”

Around the table looks were exchanged but no hands were raised.

“This morning,” DelPlain went on, “I talked with Captain Brewer in Chicago and he believes, as I
do, that we’re dealing with only two perps.”

Crosley raised his hand and was recognized. “What about Philadelphia, Captain?”

“Unfortunately,” Brewer said, “Captain Connelly was unavailable. I’ll get with him later today if possible. Now I’ll ask Detective Hutchinson to fill you in on the rest.” He nodded at Hutch and sat down.

Starsky surreptitiously studied each of the officers around the table. There was nothing his partner did better than impress a room full of strangers.

“A few months ago, Starsky and I had cause to start digging into Anthony d’Ambrosia’s activities. What we discovered was that, when he and his gang of ‘associates’ come to town, two particular crimes, gangland style assassinations, and armed assaults at bus stops, seem to be committed.” He gestured at the folders in front of each man. “In San Francisco, you have two murders that fit a series in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Bay City that we believe were committed by Nicky Cairo, a former mob hit man. My partner and I don’t know d’Ambrosia’s other henchmen well enough to guess which one may be responsible for the armed assaults but, from the M.O., it’s probably one guy.”

Atchison raised a hand and DelPlain nodded at him. “What caused you to start digging into d’Ambrosia?”

Hutch started to answer but DelPlain cut him off and looked sternly at Atchison. “That’s not for discussion today, Ben. We’re focusing on making a case against Cairo, or whoever is actually doing the murders. Plus whoever is committing the assaults.”

Starsky noticed Atchison and Crosley look at each other intently. ‘Hutch and I don’t have a corner on that market,’ he realized. From the nudge of Hutch’s foot against his own, he knew his partner had seen the silent communication and come to the same conclusion.

“As I see it,” DelPlain brought them all back to the agenda, “we need to bring in as many of d’Ambrosia’s men as we can before he gets wind of the investigations. Starsky and Hutchinson tell me he’s setting up his new operation in their fair city so we may have a little time. Especially if Chicago and Philly can get their task forces moving, too, and d’Ambrosia finds he has a lot of separate fires to contain.

“This task force has the Chief’s full support,” he continued, “so bring in as much help as you need. Interview everybody who’s ever worked for d’Ambrosia, in any capacity, and get somebody to talk. He has to have a chink in his armor. Find it!” He got to his feet and the others followed suit. “Starsky and Hutchinson will be in the building the rest of the day. If you have questions, ask. Dismissed.”

Taking their folders, the officers shuffled out, leaving only the Captain, Atchison, Crosley, Starsky and Hutch. DelPlain must have sensed tension between the four detectives but he didn’t say anything. He extended his hand to Starsky, then Hutch. “Thank you for putting all this together, Detectives. We’ll do our best.”

When Atchison and Crosley didn’t say anything and didn’t join him in heading for the door, the Captain shrugged and walked out of the room. With a look between them, Atchison and Crosley sat down again, so Starsky and Hutch did, too.

After appraising each other, Crosley broke the silence. “My partner and I know about you two. The hotshots from So Cal who make all the high profile arrests, take down all the crime lords.”

Atchison put a hand on his partner’s arm. “Take it easy, we agreed we weren’t going to get into
“What are you two doing on this task force?” Hutch shot back, his voice taut. “d’Ambrosia told you to leave him and his people alone or face the consequences, didn’t he?”

Atchison and Crosley were unmistakably stunned and Starsky couldn’t hide a smirk. ‘That got ‘em off their high horses.’

Atchison found his voice first. “What… what’re you talking about?”

“Not here, Atchison!” Starsky snapped, still bristling from the combative attitudes of the SFPD cops. “This has nothing to do with finding out who’s been killing and mugging people in at least four cities. We need to talk, yes, but not here!”

Hutch looked intently at Atchison. “Why don’t we all have dinner tonight? You pick the place, we’ll find it. Just make it somewhere no one will recognize any of us.”

Atchison and Crosley put their heads close together, whispering, before Atchison looked back at Hutch. “There’s a bar near Fisherman’s Warf called ‘The Half Pint.’ Once you get to the Warf anybody can direct you. We’ll see you there at eight.” He and Crosley got up and left.

Starsky and Hutch remained seated. “Hope this task force has its act together,” Starsky muttered.

They gathered their files, got up and left the room.

* * *

At eight o’clock Starsky and Hutch were seated at a table in the very back of the small, clean, probably family-owned bar. They’d been there a while as evidenced by the nearly-empty beer glasses in front of them.

“Think they were jerkin’ our chains?” Starsky was miffed.

Hutch shook his head and lifted a shoulder in answer. Suddenly, he inhaled sharply. The knuckles of the hand holding his glass went white, his eyes fastened on the front door.

Starsky spun around and what he saw made his heart skip a beat. The woman standing near the hostess podium looked so much like Hutch’s dead lover, Gillian, it was uncanny. She had the same glorious wavy shoulder-length light brown hair with burnished gold highlights, the same beautiful face and radiant smile, the same perfectly shaped body, clothed in a form-fitting jersey dress.

“I’ll find out.” Starsky put a reassuring hand on Hutch’s arm and got up. He moved toward the entrance, casting glances at the look-alike and her companion who had taken seats at the bar and were exchanging familiar-sounding greetings with the bartender. They were obviously regulars. Starsky spoke to the girl at the cash register for a few minutes before he made his way back to Hutch.

Hutch was still staring at the apparition but his knuckles weren’t quite as white and he had taken another swallow or two of beer.

Starsky picked up his own glass. “Her name’s Cynthia Brownlow. She’s lived here all her life and she’s a para-legal at some big law firm in town. Married to the guy she came in with for about twelve years, two children.” Hutch’s tension appeared to be lifting but Starsky was worried. “Want to move to another table?”

“I’m okay, Starsk.”
“I know that. But you don’t need to sit there and look at her all night either. Here…” Starsky got up and almost forced Hutch into the chair he’d been sitting in, with his back to the bar. “At least now you can concentrate on Atchison and Crosley… if they show up.”

Hutch did seem to be more comfortable looking in a different direction and Starsky relaxed a little. They finished their beers.

A few minutes later Starsky nudged Hutch’s arm when he saw the SFPD partners enter and spot them. Looking as if they’d been having a heated conversation ever since leaving the conference room, they made their way to Starsky and Hutch’s table and sat down. None of the four said anything until after a waiter had approached and taken their order.

More silence and appraisals until their beers had been delivered and the waiter had moved out of earshot.

Hutch cleared his throat. “The task force is good.” He glanced at Starsky who nodded. “We’re betting they’ll have found at least one canary by tomorrow and d’Ambrosia’s organization up here will begin to have problems.”

Starsky put his beer down after taking an appreciative swallow. “But that’s not why we’re all here, of course.” He looked at Hutch before shifting his gaze to the other pair. “Is it?”

“What do you want?” Crosley, the apparent short-tempered one, asked.

Atchison caught his partner’s eye and Crosley calmed somewhat. The black detective looked at Hutch. “You wanted to talk in private. We’re here. Talk.”

Hutch took a swallow of beer and put the glass down. “We know what you’ve been through… because he did it to us, too.”

Crosley looked as if he wanted to explode but Atchison put a hand on his arm, still looking at Hutch. When Hutch didn’t continue Atchison turned to Starsky. “Explain.”

“Not too complicated, fellas. We’re going to make some educated guesses so listen close, okay?” He looked at Hutch and received the encouraging nod he expected. “We think you were kidnapped, just like we were. You were given two choices, as we were. You obviously decided you didn’t like the dying one so you did the other. We did, too. And we were video taped. Your turn.”

For the second time that day, Atchison and Crosley were speechless. This time it was Crosley who found his voice first. “When?”

“About three months ago,” Hutch replied.

“And you managed to put yourselves back together already?” Crosley looked at Atchison. “It took us weeks before we could even talk about it. Then almost a month before we got our professional feet under us again.”

“Starsky and I have had a lot of practice putting each other back together.”

Crosley flushed. “Yeah, we’ve read about some of those cases.” He shrugged. “Sorry for that crack earlier about you two being hot shots.” He looked intently at each of them. “But you can’t tell me you ever went through anything like that before!”

Starsky decided these two were going to be worth some effort. “No, Crosley, never anything like that!”
Crosley put his hand out. “Dean.”

Starsky shook it. “Dave. My partner’s Ken.”

Atchison joined the shaking. “I’m Ben.”

After hands were shaken all around they each picked up their beers and, seemingly by mutual thought, clinked them together in the middle of the table. “Are we a club now or something?” Atchison’s voice was laced with sarcasm.

“Not exactly.” Starsky wished it were funny. “But it’s closer than you might want to believe.”

Hutch appraised these potentially new friends. “We’ve found two other teams of detectives who were put through the same ordeal, in Chicago and Philadelphia. We have people back home still looking.”

Atchison’s “Good God,” and Crosley’s “Oh, my God,” overlapped. They glanced at each other, then back at Starsky and Hutch. Atchison seemed puzzled. “How did you find us?”

Starsky couldn’t help but crow a little. “We happen to have a records clerk who can find anything! d’Ambrosia told Hutch and me that he only suborns the best so Minnie started looking for good cops who suddenly, and inexplicably…” He stole a quick glance at Hutch who smiled approval with his eyes, before he looked back at the San Francisco cops and continued, “either split up, quit the job, or simply weren’t very good any more. She came up with Chicago and Philadelphia.”

“Starsky and I contacted libraries in each city,” Hutch took up the story, “and asked them to sift through their newspaper archives to find articles about teams of detectives who were great, then not so great.”

“After we had that information,” Starsky went on, “it was easy to put it together with when, and if, d’Ambrosia was in their towns.”

Atchison was thoughtful. “Have you already talked to the others?”

Hutch picked up the menu. “How’s the food here?”

Starsky looked around, realizing the place was getting crowded and their conversation, no matter how softly they talked, could be overheard.

Atchison’s expression said he knew why the subject had been changed. “Okay. But why don’t we all go back to my place and order a couple of pizzas?”

Starsky beamed. “Sounds like a good idea, Ben.”

Atchison put a twenty on the table and the four got up and left. Hutch only glanced once toward the woman sitting at the bar.

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On the coffee table at Ben’s place later two pizza boxes were open and showed only one piece left in each. Starsky and Hutch were seated on the couch, Atchison and Crosley in arm chairs across from them. Starsky was congratulating himself on having lucked into a really good pepperoni pie.

“So,” Atchison summarized, “one Philly detective quit the job and left town, the second is, at best, a ‘maybe’.”
“The Chicago guys are partners again,” Crosley added, “and want to pursue the case against d’Ambrosia.”

Hutch nodded and finished his slice of pizza. “We talked to our captain before we left the hotel earlier and he told us the two from Chicago called today. They’re definitely on board. The ‘maybe’ from Philadelphia hasn’t checked in yet.”

Starsky swallowed his mouthful of pepperoni. “Minnie has found two possible pairs who either made the other choice or weren’t able to ‘perform.’ In Detroit and Baltimore their best teams of detectives vanished. Detroit was two years ago, Baltimore was five. We haven’t been able to confirm whether d’Ambrosia was in those cities at those times.”

“And if he was,” Hutch continued, “we don’t know yet if he managed to unduly influence other cops there.”

“So he’s done it,” Atchison mused, “or tried it, at least six times. And thinks he has four teams in his pocket.” He and Crosley shared a look. “How can we help?”

Starsky wadded up his napkins and closed them in the empty box. “As we told the guys in Chicago, write everything down. Try to remember every word he said, before the tape started running and afterward. If you decide you want to be part of our case against him let us know.”

“We’ve got an awful lot of planning to do,” Hutch continued, “and people to talk to before we can do anything. We don’t even know yet what specific charges we’ll file against him. But at least we know when and where he’s taken his film crew.”

Crosley took the last slice of pizza and closed the second box. “Were you two together before this happened? Or not ‘til after?”

Starsky didn’t think Crosley could have meant what he thought he’d heard. How could he? ‘Together’ didn’t necessarily mean ‘together,’ did it? He and Hutch hadn’t touched each other all day. Well, hardly at all. He tried to keep any kind of ‘tell’ off his face when he glanced at Hutch.

Atchison laughed, good-naturedly, taking any sting out of Crosley’s question. He reached for his partner’s hand and lifted it to his mouth, kissing the knuckles. “Don’t worry, guys, you’re secret’s safe with us.”

Crosley twined his fingers with Atchison’s. “Ben and I’ve been together for almost twelve years but we’re so deep in the closet nobody in our department has a clue.”

Starsky was relieved. He was a little uncomfortable that someone else knew their secret but his curiosity got the best of him. “How did you know?”

Atchison chuckled. “We can usually spot each other. Not always but… You two are pretty tight and do an awful lot of eye talking.”

Starsky did exactly that with Hutch before he looked at Atchison. “We’ve always done that, ever since we met at the academy. But we didn’t realize we were in love with each other until d’Ambrosia.”

“We’d each been wondering and fantasizing,” Hutch said, “but hadn’t gotten around to doing anything about it. That morning, after we figured out how we really felt, we used it. It got us through.”

Atchison and Crosley nodded in sync. “That’s exactly what we did,” said Crosley, “pretended it was
the worst ordeal of our lives. And in very many ways it was. As I said earlier, it took us a couple of weeks before we could talk about it. But at least we didn’t tear each other up.”

“Unfortunately,” Starsky couldn’t help cringing, “we did. But we’re both okay now. And we’re not going to let d’Ambrosia do it to anybody else if we can help it.”

Crosley kissed his partner’s hand. “Count us in. We’ll start writing in the morning. Whatever else we can do to help, let us know.”

Starsky and Hutch got up at the same time but something was apparently still bothering Hutch. “Why did you join the task force? Weren’t you worried that d’Ambrosia would make good on his threat?”

Atchison was gathering up the empty beer bottles and pizza boxes by that time so Crosley answered. “We want to bring this bastard down and have been trying to figure out how to do it. When we heard the task force was going to revolve around d’Ambrosia we decided to chance it. And now, with all the investigations that’ll be keeping him occupied in Chicago and Philadelphia as well as here, he probably won’t have time to think about us.” He shrugged. “And if he does, we’ll deal with that when it comes.”

Atchison came back from the kitchen, sans empties, and put his arm around Crosley’s shoulders. “We’ve had our snitches keeping tabs on d’Ambrosia’s headquarters for a few weeks. Ever since we asked them to look, and they found it.”

“This afternoon after you guys left,” Crosley continued, “we told DelPlain that we’d been watching d’Ambrosia surreptitiously. We didn’t tell him why though.”

“We knew he wanted to ask,” Atchison went on, “but he managed not to. He’s been our captain for a long time now and we’ve got history. Usually he lets us handle things pretty much the way we want to.” He paused for a moment and looked at Crosley before continuing. “I think, after your presentation, he suspects that there’s more going on but is willing to wait for us to tell him about it.”

“He did say,” Crosley added, “that if our C.I.s spot any unusual activity at Tony D’s warehouse, we’re to tell him immediately.”

“For now…” Atchison shrugged, “we wait.”

Hutch and Starsky nodded their agreement and approval. Hands were shaken all around.
Chapter 12

That night in their room at the hotel Hutch undressed Starsky slowly and seductively. He kissed the furry chest sliding his partner’s shirt off the muscled shoulders.

“You think they really knew about us?” Starsky asked, huskily. “Or were they guessing?”

Removing Starsky’s belt, Hutch chuckled. “They probably knew.” He unzipped the jeans and slipped his hand inside, gently covering Starsky’s jewels. “Think we should have recognized them as a couple?”

“Probably,” Starsky murmured, his mind plainly not on word games.

Hutch pushed the too tight jeans down. Going to his knees, he took off Starsky’s shoes and socks, steadying his partner as he stepped out of the pants. While he was there he reached up and released Starsky’s bulging phallus from the briefs and took it in his mouth.

Working the shorts down off his partner’s legs, he waited while he stepped out of them. Starsky’s fingers threaded into his hair. Looking up with his eyes only, Hutch watched Starsky tilt his head back while Hutch took more cock down his throat. His left hand massaged Starsky’s balls.

“God, how’d you get so good at that?”

Hutch hmmmmmmmm’d in answer and Starsky shivered. After several splendid minutes Hutch got up and allowed Starsky to finish disrobing him. They fell onto the bed wrapped in each other’s arms.

Starsky began to snuggle but Hutch rolled his lover onto his back. “Where’s the lube?”

“Right front corner of the duffle bag.”

Hutch got up, searched, but found a tube of K-Y Jelly instead of the jar of Vaseline he was expecting. He brought it to the bed. “What’s this?”

“Something new.” Starsky’s skin was turning an alluring shade of pink. “Jessica says it’s better than Vaseline.”

“I’m sure it is.” Hutch crawled onto the bed. “As a surgical lubricant it’s been around since the turn of the century, I think. Didn’t realize it had become a sex enhancement.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see.”

Hutch knelt next to Starsky’s hip but was suddenly uncertain. “May I try something, Starsk?”

“Something of an intimate nature, perhaps?”

Hutch found he was unaccountably nervous and looked away.

Starsky turned his head back until Hutch couldn’t avoid staring into the blazing cobalt blues. “Sure you can, Hutch. Anything. Always.” Starsky wiggled his eyebrows a couple of times. “After your incredible nipple seduction I’m putty in your hands.” He laid back, relaxed. “You don’t have to ask. If it’s something I don’t like I’ll tell you.” He sat up and kissed Hutch before throwing his arms and legs wide and flopping back down. He was completely open to whatever Hutch wanted to do.

“You’ll let me know if you don’t like it?”
“Promise.”

“Close your eyes.” Reveling in the love and devotion he saw in Starsky’s gaze, Hutch waited for his lover to burrow his head into the pillow and do as directed. He uncapped the tube, squeezed the gel into his palm and put the container aside. He spread the light clear substance over his fingers and palms until they were coated evenly and the lube had warmed. He knew instantly that the jelly would be better than Vaseline.

In obvious anticipation of the attention soon to be paid to it, Starsky’s penis filled and lifted, nodded and waited. Hutch could tell the mystery was killing Starsky but his partner’s lips curved in happy patience.

Hutch put his right hand around Starsky’s glans, sliding slowly downward. When the crown appeared within the circle of his first finger and thumb, he placed his left hand on top, against his right, continuing the slide. When his right hand reached the base of Starsky’s cock, Hutch moved it quickly up so that he could capture the crown as soon as it appeared. Nearing the base with his left hand, he duplicated his right’s movement.

Starsky grabbed fistfuls of sheet, moaning with delight but keeping his eyes closed.

Hutch never altered his slow, firm motion down Starsky’s rod, moving each hand to the top when the slit appeared. His fingers were always in contact with the shaft and always descending, slowly, smoothly, continuously.

For the fourth or fifth time, he’d lost count, Hutch brought his right hand to the top of the column but Starsky’s moans took on a ragged edge and he began to thrash.

“Oh, God, Hutch… Stop… Please.”

Hutch ceased his movements and held Starsky’s shaft in both hands. “Talk to me, Starsk.”

Slowly Starsky relaxed and opened his eyes. After a few deep breaths he tried a smile which wasn’t completely successful. “What was that?”

Hutch didn’t let go of the tumescence but he didn’t move his hands yet either. “What did it feel like? Can you tell me?”

“Like sliding down a long, long tunnel.” Starsky appeared to be searching for words. “Like being in a warm, tight place that kept taking me deeper and deeper inside.”

He paused and Hutch waited, concerned and beginning to feel guilty.

“It was like nothing I’d ever felt before. And it was wonderful.” His eyes clouded. “But then I started to feel like I might never get out. If I kept going I’d be drawn so far down I’d be lost.”

Hutch tried to camouflage his regret at having caused his partner distress when all he’d wanted to do was please. “I’m so sorry, Starsk.”

Starsky sat up and put his hands on either side of Hutch’s face. “No, Hutch, I didn’t mean it like that.” His tone was anxious, his eyes pleading. “You don’t have to apologize. It was fabulous! Like Alice down the rabbit hole. Hell! I don’t know.” He paused and took a breath. “But it got to be too much. Believe me, Hutch, I want you to do it again sometime, only…?” Hutch was rent by the beseeching look in his partner’s eyes. “Next time, don’t take me so deep?”

Hutch smiled. “Okay.”
Starsky fell back on his elbows. “Show me what you did. My mind went numb.”

Reassured, Hutch demonstrated, very slowly, and watched Starsky being transported back into that long tunnel. Except this time everything was okay.

His lover laid back on the pillow and laughed. “Where did you learn that?”

Hutch could barely get the answer out of his constricted throat. “Gillian.”

Whatever retort Starsky had ready died still-born.

Hutch laid Starsky’s cock gently on his stomach, went to the bathroom and came back after a minute with a warm, wet washcloth and towel. He carefully cleaned the gel off Starsky’s cock and stomach and dried both tenderly. Throwing the cloths on the floor, he stretched out next to his partner and pulled the covers over them. Starsky snuggled and Hutch gathered him in.

Hutch must have been silent for too long because Starsky reached up and stroked his cheek, running a thumb across the smooth upper lip. “I know it threw you tonight, seeing her. But I’m awful glad it brought that memory back…. You want to tell me about it?”

Hutch wasn’t sure he did but maybe... He put a hand on Starsky’s arm which was now draped across his chest. “One night… I must have been deeper inside her than I’d ever been because she cried out and locked her ankles behind my back. She begged me to press in harder, just press in and stay. And she came, Starsk. She came and couldn’t seem to stop coming.”

He looked into the midnight blue eyes he knew so well and saw there the same incomprehension he’d felt that night. “I guess women, or at least some women, have a spot inside like we have our prostate. When it’s touched, and especially when it’s pressed against, it acts like an orgasm button.”

Hutch paused again, unhappy with his explanation. “That sounds crude but I can’t think of any other way to describe it. I’d heard about continuous orgasms but didn’t really believe it. That night, I saw it happen. She was completely out of control, crying and laughing and screaming, holding me inside her as if she wanted to die that way. It went on and on.”

He stopped, remembering. “And I got scared, Starsk. I was afraid she’d have a stroke or something. I mean, I’d read about people dying during sex and suddenly it seemed like an all too real possibility. So I unwrapped her legs from behind my back and pulled out.”

Starsky caressed his cheek, waiting patiently.

“I laid down next to her and held her. When she was able to talk she told me that nobody had ever touched her there. That she hadn’t even known there was a ‘there’ there!” He was lost in memories. “She was quiet in my arms for a while. Then, with a gentle smile on her face, she threw back the covers I’d pulled over us, got the Vaseline off the night table and knelt between my legs. And sent me down that long tunnel.”

He looked into the loving eyes of his partner. “I don’t think Vaseline was as good as K-Y but it’s all we had at the time,” he said, trying for some humor. When Starsky didn’t say anything, he went on, softly. “And my reaction was exactly the same as yours. It was wonderful at first but it got to be too much. When I begged her to stop she looked like a deer in headlights. She had wanted to please me and instead... Before I could explain, she went down on me. I was already so close, and it was so unexpected, I came in her mouth.”

He sat up and turned away, feelings he couldn’t identify washing over him. “And she swallowed.” He knew his voice sounded almost desperate but he couldn’t help it; that’s exactly the way he’d felt.
“It’s the only time that ever happened. She hadn’t seemed to want it so I never allowed it. But that night she deliberately made me come in her mouth. And she swallowed.”

He turned to look into Starsky’s compassionate, even understanding gaze. “And the look on her face was beautiful. As if she had accomplished something. There was nothing I could say so I simply kissed her. I thought we’d talk about it in the morning but we didn’t. And a few days later she was dead.”

Hutch allowed Starsky to draw him back down and was gathered in strong, comforting arms.

“How’s the only time that ever happened. She hadn’t seemed to want it so I never allowed it. But that night she deliberately made me come in her mouth. And she swallowed.”

“Hutch, you dummy...” Hutch looked at his lover, surprised. “I’ve seen that look on your face when you swallowed my seed, and I know you’ve seen it on mine. We love each other, Hutch. Swallowing your semen makes you part of me. I need that sometimes. You do, too, I guess. And it must have been what Gillian needed.”

Hutch would have to think about that, but it made sense and he was grateful for Starsky’s intuition. “What makes you so wise all of a sudden?”

“I’m an elf, remember?”

“Are elves wise?”

“Beats the hell outta me.” Starsky threw the covers back and got out of bed, headed for the bathroom.

Hutch wondered what he’d said wrong.

********

Starsky didn’t know why he had been so unsettled by Hutch’s recitation of the intimacy he’d shared with Gillian. He knew he wasn’t jealous of her, and he knew Hutch had never truly gotten over her loss. Still, the ‘long, long tunnel’ hand job had affected him in ways he didn’t understand.

And dammit, he was so hard he couldn’t even pee. He thought about jerking off right there only that seemed somehow unfair to Hutch. After a few minutes he crept back to bed figuring Hutch would be asleep and his hard on would dissipate by itself, sooner or later. Surprisingly though Hutch was still awake and came smoothly into his arms when he laid down.

“You must be ready to explode, babe. Want me to suck you off?”

Starsky didn’t say anything because he realized what it was he wanted, almost craved. He also realized he was afraid. Hutch waited patiently. “We’ve been doing each other with fingers for weeks now, Hutch.” He held his breath. “Do you want me?” Knowing that Hutch was immediately aware of what Starsky was asking, he was thrilled to see the answer before he heard the words.

“Yes. You know I do, Starsk. What do you see in my eyes?”

Starsky looked carefully for any negative shadows and saw none. “Only want.”

“Can I watch you?”

Starsky pushed the covers back and took the K-Y from the night table before he crawled between Hutch’s legs. “You have to. I need to see your eyes, remember?” Bending over the edge of the bed he retrieved the wash cloth and towel from the floor and put them close.
Hutch raised his knees and spread them languorously.

Starsky reached for his pillow and slid it under Hutch’s hips, lifted for him obligingly. Starsky picked Hutch’s ankles up and placed them on his shoulders, stroking the long, sculpted thighs. Hutch’s entire body shivered.

Taking a liberal amount of the gel in his left hand, Starsky put the tube on top of the towels. He worked the lube thoroughly onto the palms and fingers of both hands. Holding Hutch’s gaze, he gathered the cock into his mouth as Hutch drew in a deep breath.

Starsky’s slick right hand firmly stroked the lower portion of the shaft while his mouth sucked the top half. His tongue moved slowly up and down the back vein, into the slit and around the edge of the glans on the upstroke. At the same time, Starsky carefully inserted the fingers of his left hand into Hutch’s rectum.

With two fingers in, Starsky scissored them, opening and stretching the muscles, getting them used to being penetrated again. Starsky’s mouth and right hand continued to attend to Hutch’s engorged phallus as he slipped a third and fourth finger inside, gently massaging the muscles into acceptance.

When Starsky lifted from Hutch’s cock the look in his partner’s eyes was one of such desire and love Starsky’s last fears vanished. He removed his fingers from their sheath, took K-Y and squeezed it liberally on the length of his shaft, working it around, coating it thoroughly.

He looked up and saw Hutch watching his every move, his lips parted, breathing shallowly.

Starsky grinned suddenly and, putting the business end of the K-Y tube against Hutch’s anus, he squirted some of the gel inside.

“Shit, Starsky, that’s cold!”

“Won’t be for long, partner.” Holding Hutch’s blazing eyes, Starsky gently inserted his swollen cock into his lover’s body.

And Hutch actually sighed. “Oh, yeah, Starsk. Yes, please.”

Slowly, carefully, Starsky pushed himself inside the hot, tight tunnel and felt the muscles almost draw him in. Instinctively, he knew that this was the way it was supposed to feel, welcoming and comforting. He was home. Inside Hutch. And suddenly tears came and he didn’t try to stop them. “Hutch? I just thought of something.” He stopped moving, his cock fully sheathed. “Me ‘n’ thee, babe. I’m inside you. It’s me in thee. God! I can’t believe it.”

“We’ll talk about it later, Starsk, okay?” Hutch appeared to be in a conflict of emotions and his usual patience had clearly run out. “Right now, would you please fuck me? We’ve waited so long for this I don’t want to talk about it. I need you to do it!”

Galvanized by Hutch’s words and tone Starsky began to stroke faster and deeper. He took hold of his partner’s still-engorged phallus again and stroked to match his thrusts.

Hutch’s hands grabbed fistfuls of the bedding. His moans became cries as Starsky plunged harder and deeper and his hands manipulated Hutch’s cock into a prodigious orgasm. One which Starsky matched only seconds later. Starsky buried his essence deep inside his lover while Hutch ejected his cum all over Starsky’s hands and his own stomach.

After what seemed like hours but probably wasn’t, Hutch’s legs slipped off Starsky’s shoulders and stayed where they fell, splayed on the bed. Starsky collapsed over Hutch’s lower body, his cock
deflating and slipping out.

Starsky couldn’t move for what seemed like a very long time. Finally he shifted a hand and found the wash cloth and towel. Sitting up, he gently cleaned the gel off Hutch’s nether regions, the cum off Hutch’s belly, and the lubricant off his own cock. Tossing both cloths back to the floor, he capped the K-Y and put it back on the night table. Only then did he allow himself to stretch out and put his arms around the supine figure. “No pain, right, Hutch? Like I promised. No pain ever again.”

Hutch nuzzled Starsky’s neck. “I hope you didn’t use up all the lube, partner. ‘Cause I want to try that ‘me in thee’ as soon as I can breathe again.”

“I bought three tubes.”

Hutch laughed and Starsky drew him close, pulled the covers up and followed his partner into deep, dreamless sleep.

******

Toward morning, with fog horns moaning on the bay and pre-sunrise light just beginning to define the interior of their room, Hutch woke Starsky with kisses and a gentle hand stroking his flank.

Lazily, Starsky rolled onto his back, opened his eyes and looked into Hutch’s eager gaze. Hands found each other’s morning hardness and gripped, bringing each other to ‘woody’ status almost instantly.

Not wasting a moment, Hutch turned Starsky onto his stomach and climbed between his legs, spreading them and lifting his partner’s hips. He reached for the lube and coated himself quickly but thoroughly. Leaning forward over Starsky’s back, he kissed his shoulders, neck, ears, and any other part he could reach. His right hand guided his rigid phallus unerringly to Starsky’s portal.

Starsky spread his knees wider apart. “Do it, babe. I want you inside me.”

Hutch moved his hips forward and his cock entered his lover as if it had been waiting for this all its life. Both Hutch and Starsky made almost identical sounds simultaneously of such soul searing pleasure they laughed.

Starsky clenched his nether muscles and Hutch inhaled sharply at the feeling of tightened bands around his cock. That only added to his lust though and he pushed through the restriction, as Starsky must have intended. The muscles relaxed, tensed again, relaxed and tensed. It was a sensation Hutch had never felt before and his already-engorged flesh responded with added growth, causing Starsky to thrash.

Hutch gathered Starsky’s body, lifting it against his chest as he sat back on his heels, pulling his partner onto his lap, his cock thus forced deeper still. Hutch lowered his right hand and took hold of Starsky’s tumescent shaft, stroking it firmly.

His partner managed to lift off Hutch’s rod a little, then settle back, lift and settle, creating his own stroking.

With Starsky lifting himself nearly off before lowering himself more deeply onto Hutch’s erection each time, Hutch stroked Starsky’s column in perfect synchronicity. After bringing his lover to the edge several times but backing off teasingly, savoring the sensations of heat rush, whole-body-tingling, numbing of extremities robbed of blood because every drop was in his cock, Hutch took Starsky to a shattering orgasm, following it immediately with his own.
Hutch didn’t think he could move. He bent his head and kissed his partner’s neck, shoulders and back with tender, soft kisses.

Starsky lifted himself off Hutch, turned around and kissed him lightly. Then not so lightly. Then harder and more insistently.

After only a brief hesitation Hutch returned the passion. Wrapping his arms around Starsky’s body, he lifted up onto his knees, pulling his partner with him so that he could crush the lean form closer. ‘Physics dictates that no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time,’ he thought. ‘But damn it, they can try!’

Strength and stamina lasted only so long though and Hutch eventually felt himself falling. Not wanting to injure Starsky, he turned their bodies so that they slumped, face to face on their sides in the middle of the rumpled bed.

Starsky shifted a little. “I sure made a mess of the sheets. Wonder if the hotel will bill us an extra cleaning charge.”

Hutch laughed and tightened his arms. “I’ll pay it, gladly.”

Starsky chuckled, too. “Me in thee. Pretty intense, huh, partner?”

Hutch stroked his lover’s face. “King Of The Understatements, that’s you, pal.”

Starsky snuggled closer. “Good thing we’ll only be observing interviews today. I don’t think I could summon up either a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ cop.”

Hutch kissed the chocolate curls. “Oh I’ll bet after a shower and a great big breakfast you could come up with… something.” He reached between their bodies and found Starsky’s flaccid cock, which instantly began to harden. Hutch smiled, contentedly.

Starsky smiled, roguishly.
Chapter 13

At six a.m. Starsky was languidly washing the love off himself and his partner in the shower when he heard the phone ring. Grabbing a towel, he handed the soap to Hutch. “Don’t leave ‘til I get back.” He dashed out to the end table and grabbed the phone. “Starsky!”

Atchison’s voice came loudly through the line. “We thought you guys might want to join us and most of the SFPD in a little raid on d’Ambrosia’s warehouse this morning.”

Starsky was immediately on edge and taut. “Where are you?” Hutch came out of the bathroom drying his hair. Starsky handed the phone to him, dropped his towel and started dressing.

“Downstairs,” Crosley cut in, overriding Atchison. “We can only wait five minutes.”

“We’ll be down in three!” Hutch shouted, pulling on his clothes.

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Starsky stayed as close behind Atchison and Crosley’s Crown Vic as he could in the early morning traffic. He didn’t know the city and neither did Hutch. He shouldn’t have worried though, Atchison was driving carefully and not doing anything to lose their BCPD ‘tail.’

“Didn’t he say anything, Starsk?”

“Nothing except most of the department’s going to raid d’Ambrosia’s warehouse.”

“Ah. Should be fun.”

Several Crown Vics, a dozen black and whites, and a couple of SWAT vans, their lights revolving but sirens silent, converged on the warehouse district, parking in a lot next to an abandoned, heavily graffitied structure. Uniformed and plain clothes cops of every description gathered around Captain DelPlain. Behind him an office trailer that looked as if it had been commandeered from a construction site sat like a dusty spider at the center of a web of wires and cables.

“I want everyone in vests, no exception!” DelPlain scanned the tense faces surrounding him. “For those of you not already familiar with the situation, Detectives Atchison and Crosley’s confidential informants have been watching this place for weeks. Late last night they called and said it looked like rats deserting the proverbial sinking ship. Trucks were leaving every few minutes.” He made a quick gesture over his shoulder. “We set up this command post at two a.m. to monitor everything.”

A few at a time, officers went to their vehicles, got vests and weapons out of trunks, coming back to the briefing as quickly as possible.

“I started routine traffic stops on all the trucks,” DelPlain continued, “ostensibly for broken headlights, missing tail lights, hanging exhaust pipes, failure to yield, not coming to a complete stop, anything we could legitimately pull them over for.”

He paused and his expression hardened. “When the trucks were searched with probable cause, since none of them had a seal on their doors as they should have, we found each one loaded with contraband. The building we’re going to raid on the next block must have been a collecting point for d’Ambrosia’s stolen goods.” DelPlain cracked a thin smile. “We’re going to clear a lot of hijackings and robberies from this morning’s work, people.”
Starsky looked around at the attentive officers and saw only concentration and anticipation. A good group of cops always added to his confidence.

“Based on what those trucks contained,” DelPlain went on, “we’ve got a warrant to go into that warehouse and close it down! But,” he stated, grimly, “I don’t want any heroics. We do this by the book and we don’t take any chances. Do I make myself clear?”

Every listener nodded.

Behind DelPlain a uniformed officer stuck his head out the trailer’s door. “We’ve got company, Captain!”

DelPlain spun and leaped up the steps, Crosley and Atchison right behind him. The black detective motioned for Starsky and Hutch to join them.

Inside the long, narrow space surveillance equipment had been assembled. Exposed wires and cables ran everywhere making it hazardous to walk or move around. The officer, slipping his headphones back on and sitting down, pointed to the monitor just above his work station.

The grainy black and white image showed the yard of a warehouse where a dark Lincoln stretch limousine was pulling through the main gates.

“That looks like d’Ambrosia’s car,” Hutch whispered to Starsky.

“What’s he doing here?” Starsky murmured back.

DelPlain leaned over the officer’s shoulder. “Can we get in tighter?”

The officer spoke into the mouthpiece of his headphones. “Push in on the limo, Steve.”

The lens of the video camera that was evidently mounted on the roof of a building overlooking d’Ambrosia’s warehouse, zoomed in on the scene. d’Ambrosia climbed out of the back seat of the car as soon as it came to a stop, his body language plainly saying he was not happy.

DelPlain turned to Hutch and Starsky. “Is that d’Ambrosia?” They each nodded once.

On the monitor, a warehouseman rushed out of the huge open doors to meet his boss, attempting to appear casual but failing completely. A short, wiry man exited the driver’s door and stood by the limo.

“Hutch…” Starsky grabbed his arm. “That’s the guy Cairo was talking to… that morning.”

“It sure is,” Hutch agreed.

DelPlain put a hand on the officer’s shoulder. “Can we listen?”

“We got the best parabolic the DOD would let us have, Captain. Lemme just crank up the volume.” A key was tapped a few times and a very angry voice could be heard.

“… going on here, Nelson?” d’Ambrosia poked a fist in the chest of the local hireling and the man fell back a step.

“I have no --”

“Don’t lie to me!” the crime boss shouted. “This yard should be full of trucks unloading the haul from yesterday’s ‘jack.” d’Ambrosia stared around at the empty space. “Cairo told me it was huge.
Where is it?”

Even in black and white Starsky could see that d’Ambrosia was livid, his face darkening with every breath. He touched a fresh cigarette to the one in his mouth and inhaled deeply before tossing the butt aside.

“Easy, Tony,” Starsky muttered, “you’re gonna have a stroke.”

Hutch put a hand lightly on his back.

“Inside,” d’Ambrosia ordered, stalking toward the warehouse. The hapless associate and the wiry guy followed him.

DelPlain turned and almost mimicked d’Ambrosia’s tone. “Outside!” The Captain hurried out to the waiting task force. Starsky, Hutch, Crosley and Atchison right behind. “The Main Man has arrived,” DelPlain said, loudly, and with what was obviously a great deal of satisfaction. “We’ll get the whole enchilada in one fell swoop.”

A big rig was being backed into the yard, it’s rear door rolled up.

“Dean, Ben, take over the briefing. But make it quick!” DelPlain turned to his aide who was holding out his flak vest.

Crosley spread a hand-made map on the hood of the closest car. Everyone crowded around.

Someone tapped Starsky on the shoulder. He turned to find a uniformed officer with a bullet proof vest in hand. “We’ve got spares. And you heard the captain.”

Starsky took the offering and put it on. Another uniform gave one to Hutch. Starsky drew and checked his Beretta while Hutch checked the Python. Holstering them again, Starsky and Hutch turned back to the briefing.

“We think most of the trucks are out of the yard by now, all of them rounded up by patrol cars,” Atchison was saying. “But we don’t know how many men are still in the warehouse.”

Crosley pointed to building outlines. “SWAT teams are on all the roofs surrounding the target.” He indicated a point on the schematic. “A team is cutting through the fence at the rear of the property at this moment, waiting for the word to go in. The rest of us are going to be inside this captured truck.” He gestured to the waiting eighteen-wheeler.

“As soon as the guys at the rear entrance are through,” Atchison continued, “we’ll back the truck into the yard, right up to the front doors, as if we’ve forgotten something.”

Starsky thought it sounded like a good plan and, looking at Hutch, he saw approval there, too. Folding his arms, he waited to hear where he and his partner would fit in.

DelPlain took over again. “Once we’re inside the warehouse, secure d’Ambrosia. That’s our first objective now. After that we want files and paperwork. The floor plan indicates an office in the back corner so that’s priority. Protect yourselves and each other but take these guys down. d’Ambrosia’s operation in our city stops today.” He pointed to the tractor trailer. “Saddle up!”

Dozens of vested cops climbed in the truck carrying lots of firepower. Crosley beckoned to Starsky and Hutch. “Care to join us?” he asked with a glint in his eye. Atchison, no glint, stood at his shoulder.
Starsky knew his face mirrored the anticipation he saw on Hutch’s. “We thought you’d never ask.”

*******

From inside the truck it was a little difficult to tell what was happening but Hutch felt like he and Starsky were in good hands. The operation had run like clockwork so far, except for the unexpected arrival of d’Ambrosia. Hutch wondered what had triggered the local bad guys’ flight last night. Had d’Ambrosia found out about the task forces he and Starsky had initiated? Was that why he had driven up here?

He glanced at his partner who appeared to be almost asleep but knew it was a ruse. Starsky was as wide awake and alert as Hutch had ever seen him. Every jolt of the truck was felt, every whisper of the officers heard. Starsky was so tense with expectation that Hutch’s heart filled with pride. And arousal. ‘Not now!’ he admonished himself. ‘We’ve got work to do. But after this is over, buddy, I am seriously going to jump your bones!’

The vehicle made a turn causing Hutch and everyone else to grab hold of each other or side rails to keep from falling. After a moment Hutch felt the truck come to a stop and begin backing up. He drew his weapon. The big rig halted with a hiss of brakes.

The door slid up rapidly and the warehouseman was standing there, anger boiling over. “Why the hell did you come back?”

Atchison, Crosley, Hutch and Starsky were the first to jump down.

The man was already backing toward the hanger-like doors.

Atchison grabbed Hutch’s arm. “You’re with me, Ken!” He headed into the structure on the left side.

Hutch cast a quick glance at his partner who had been appropriated by Crosley and was moving to the right. Hutch nodded at Starsky and followed the tall black detective.

The vast space inside the building was nearly empty, only scattered piles of boxes, some broken pallets, and a few dented barrels remained. A handful of men were running in different directions, drawing guns and firing at the SFPD officers.

d’Ambrosia appeared in the doorway of the rear corner office. Open-mouthed, he stared at the confusion before stepping back inside and slamming the door.

Atchison gestured. “Priorities, Ken, d’Ambrosia and files.”

Hutch and the black SFPD detective ran, dodging carelessly fired bullets, to the office. It had no windows and only the one entry. Slamming his back against the wall on the right side, Hutch caught his breath. Atchison flattened himself against the wall on the other side. At a nod from Atchison, Hutch reached around the jamb and turned the knob. It wasn’t locked. Hutch pushed and the door swung inward.

Atchison used the barrel of his weapon to open the door fully and, with a sharp nod to Hutch, rolled into the room to the right. With Atchison’s long legs barely clear of the opening Hutch rolled in to the left.

D’Ambrosia was standing behind the room’s only large piece of furniture, a ratty old wooden desk. His face was red and his hands shook as he clasped one to his chest and flung the other out in a warding gesture. “Leave me alone! Why won’t you leave me alone?”
At that moment hell rained down outside the office.

******

Starsky and Crosley dashed into the warehouse from the right side of the double doorway. Men were running in all directions, shouting orders at each other and firing weapons. Starsky kept one eye on Hutch and Atchison heading toward the back. He grabbed Crosley’s arm just as a bullet ricocheted off the steel support column near his head. “We gotta cover Hutch and Ben.”

Crosley nodded.

Before they could move, the small wiry limo driver ran directly toward them, apparently headed for the entrance. Starsky stepped from behind the girder, put out his arm and clotheslined the fleeing felon. The trick landed the guy flat on his back.

Starsky had him flipped over onto his stomach and both wrists behind him before the breathless weasel could squawk. Crosley was there with cuffs and Starsky slapped them on tight.

“We gotta get outta here!” The captive thrashed around. “The place is gonna burn!”

Starsky looked up at Crosley whose eyes widened. Starsky hauled the babbler to his feet and shook him. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s wired!” the man yelled. “Nicky said it was gonna go off at eight o’clock, and that’s…” He glanced quickly at his watch. “Now!”

Seemingly in response to the word, flames fell from the network of overhead pipes throughout the structure, setting hair, clothing, and all combustible material ablaze. Cops and bad guys ran, dropping whatever they had in their hands and attempting to smother flames on themselves and each other.

From the pungent smell Starsky knew what their enemy was. “Napalm,” he shouted, dragging Crosley and his prisoner out the huge front doors. For a second he was back in Vietnam with men screaming and guns firing. And the unmistakable smell of napalm.

Crosley turned toward inside. “Ben… Ben!”

Starsky shook himself back to the present, Hutch was in that inferno! He pushed the handcuffed goon toward a uniform near the truck. “It’s napalm,” he yelled to the cop. “Tell the firefighters not to use water!” He caught Crosley’s arm. “Come on! We’ve got to get to the outside of the office.”

Starsky dashed around the corner of the building and along the side toward the rear corner. Hutch and Atchison had been heading in that direction.

“I’ll get more help!” Crosley screamed.

There was a small window, covered by heavy bars, in the corrugated steel wall. Below it, a tiny elderly, rusted air conditioning unit stuck out and Starsky could hear pounding from inside. “Hutch?”

“Starsky, we’re in here.” As soon as the words were out Starsky could hear Hutch coughing harshly.

Grabbing the A/C unit, Starsky pulled with the strength of one possessed and the corroded screws began to give. Digging his fingers more deeply behind the edge, and putting one foot against the wall for better leverage, he pulled even harder. With a metallic shriek, the old piece of junk came completely out of the wall. He regained his balance, threw the thing to the ground and kicked it aside, ignoring his torn fingers.
Smoke billowed from the opening, dense and very black, engulfing Starsky. He fell back, coughing. When the first cloud of smoke dissipated a little, Starsky realized the hole he’d created wasn’t large enough for a grown man to get through. Without a thought, Starsky grabbed the now exposed top ridge of the outside wall’s rippled sheet metal and ripped it off.

Inside, Starsky heard paneling being torn off the wall. The exposed ratty insulation disappeared next, into the smoke behind Hutch and Atchison, who were crouched, trying to stay below the dangerous cloud.

Crosley arrived, breathless, and recognized the new problem immediately: the space now opened in the wall was divided vertically by steel studs and horizontally by the sill which had held the A/C unit. Dense smoke continued to pour out.

“Get him out of here, Ben!” Hutch croaked from inside.

“No, you take him and go!” Atchison coughed on the last word.

“Where’s d’Ambrosia?” Starsky shouted into the office, pressing a hand to his chest in an attempt to ease the pain in his smoke-filled lungs.

“He’s here, Starz,” Hutch answered. “But he’s in bad shape.”

“Shove his arm out,” Starsky hollered. “Crosley and I’ll take him. And if you’re not out here one second later, I’m comin’ in!”

Crosley was at Starsky’s shoulder and shouted in to Atchison. “All three of you, Ben! Get your asses out of there!”

A hand and arm covered in gray fabric and black soot emerged from the cloud at ground level. From inside and outside, the unconscious man was maneuvered through the narrow opening in the wall. Crosley dragged him away so that Starsky could reach back into the smoke. “Hutch! Grab my hand.” Choking and coughing, he felt the clasp of Hutch’s long fingers and eased his partner under the sill and between the vertical steel studs.

As soon as Hutch was clear Crosley helped Atchison make his escape through the same small aperture.

Starsky pulled Hutch into his arms and helped him stagger away from the totally enflamed structure. Crosley and Atchison stumbled beside them.

When Starsky and Crosley had their respective partners seated against the chain link fence, they walked slowly back toward d’Ambrosia. Before they got there though, teams of EMTs ran up and motioned them away. Two picked up the crime lord and carried him to where Hutch and Atchison were already being tended by other teams of paramedics. Oxygen masks were placed over faces and blood pressure cuffs were applied.

Firefighters arrived and shoved the nozzles of their CO2 canisters into the gaps Starsky had created in the wall.

Starsky sat next to Hutch and put his hand lightly on a soot stained sleeve. He decided he’d say the words that were overflowing his heart later. Or maybe not. They’d never really needed words.

*******

Hutch did his best to decline hospitalization but Captain DelPlain overrode him. “Mandatory, guys.
You were injured in my territory so you get the same attention as any of my officers. And that means being checked out and treated at a hospital. No arguments!” His words had been strict but his face had shown genuine concern.

At the med center, Hutch and Starsky were granted the same treatment room, since Hutch only needed to be on oxygen after he was examined. Starsky’s hands required some serious attention and Hutch wasn’t about to be anywhere he couldn’t give his partner all his support.

Starsky, never a good patient unless he was unconscious, made light of his injuries. “It’s nothin’! Just gimme some Band-aids!” He sighed, groused, grumbled and whined behind his own oxygen mask while the doctor assembled his instruments and supplies.

Hutch could tell his partner’s assertions were less than true. Starsky had refused any treatment at all until it had been determined that Hutch’s lungs hadn’t taken any lasting harm from the smoke he had inhaled. By that time, Hutch knew Starsky would welcome some pain medication. He remembered only too well what it felt like to have a damaged hand scrubbed, stitched and splinted. Starsky was enduring the agony of two!

After the doctor and his assistant had sterilized, sutured and bandaged to their satisfaction, the head ER nurse bustled around for a few more minutes. “You both need two hours on oxygen before Dr. Drummon will be ready to see you again.” She fluffed Hutch’s pillow. “If your vitals are good at that time, he’ll release you. Captain DelPlain told me he’ll have a squad car waiting to take you both, plus Detectives Atchison and Crosley, back to headquarters.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Yardley,” Hutch said.

“You’re welcome, Detective. You need to rest now. No talking.” She raised her eyebrows as if she knew that order wouldn’t be followed and left the room.

“This pain killer’s got me all fuzzy, Hutch,” Starsky mumbled, using his wrists to lower his mask. “How much of what I think happened was a dream?”

Hutch lowered his own mask, the better to speak softly and not bring Mrs. Yardley back. “None of it, Starsk.”

“You think d’Ambrosia’s dead?”

“I have no idea. But he didn’t look good when Atchison and I got into the office. And that was before the smoke.”

“Maybe Ben and Dean know.”

“Maybe.”

“Are they okay?” Starsky asked.

“I think so. Crosley was on oxygen for a while but when he was told he could leave he refused. He demanded to be allowed to stay with Ben.”

“Think they’ve been hanging around us too long?” Starsky’s mouth slid into a mushy lop-sided grin.

“It’s from Chapter One of The True Partnership Handbook, Starsk. Maybe they’ve been reading it.”

“We got a copy?”
“Probably. I’ll check my bookcase.”

“Wancha t’ read it to me sometime.” Starsky closed his eyes. “A bedtime story.”

“That’s the meds talking, babe. You’re flying.”

“Could be. What else didja hear?”

“I heard DelPlain talking to the doctor. Ben had pneumonia last year so smoke inhalation can be hazardous.”

“I don’t s’pose you remembered t’ mention that you’d had the plague.” Starsky cocked an eyebrow that said he knew Hutch hadn’t.

“Musta slipped my mind.”

“Slipped your mind.” Starsky repeated with a sly smile. “Right.”

“Need any help putting your mask back on, Starsk? Your lungs need that stuff as much as mine do.”

“Naw, I can do it.” To prove it, Starsky managed to shove his mask back into place then wiggle his elastic face around to get it set correctly.

Hutch almost laughed at the antics. “Go to sleep. I’m sure Mrs. Yardley will wake us when it’s time to leave.”

Starsky was already out.

*******

Later that afternoon, Starsky and Hutch walked into the viewing room next to Interview #2, at SFPD headquarters. Each wore clothes brought to them at the hospital by the officer who had volunteered to pick them up. The sweat pants and t-shirts with SFPD initials, the jackets, and less than-new shoes had probably been donated by members of the department. They didn’t fit too badly but not being their own clothes they felt… weird.

DelPlain was making a fresh pot of coffee at the Mr. Coffee machine. Starsky and Hutch sat down in chairs against the wall and the captain brought them each a large mug. “Cream or sugar, detectives?”

“I think we both need it strong and black right now,” Starsky answered. “Thanks, Captain.” He had to hold the mug between the palms of his bandaged hands.

Hutch moved his chair a little closer so that they could be in contact from shoulder to ankle and that simple pressure did wonders for Starsky’s peace of mind. The meds were beginning to wear off and he needed Hutch close.

DelPlain picked up his own cup. “Some first and second degree burns.” The cheer in his voice sounded only slightly forced. Starsky believed the captain was covering the anxiety he felt at nearly losing many of his team. “Nothing our guys won’t get over.” He looked gratefully at Starsky.

“Thanks to your warning, the firefighters knew not to use water.”

Starsky gripped his coffee cup a little tighter and the added discomfort was almost welcome. He knew what would have happened if they had, water on a petroleum-based fire spreads it. He lifted a shoulder in thanks and felt additional welcome pressure from Hutch’s entire left side.

“The goons we arrested,” the captain went on, “are another story. They’re falling all over each other,
pointing fingers and laying blame. The structure is a total loss of course. Thankfully the trucks had taken almost all the stolen goods away and we’ve got those. Any papers and other evidence are gone though.”

DelPlain refilled Starsky’s cup, Hutch’s, and finally his own. “Ben and Dean shouldn’t be too much longer. I think they’re changing in the locker room. They always keep spare clothes here.”

“What about d’Ambrosia, Captain?” Hutch addressed the gorilla in the room.

“I’d like to wait for my men before we talk about that, if you don’t mind Detectives.” The captain’s request was more of an order.

Starsky drank his coffee in silence.

The viewing room door swung open and Atchison and Crosley, wearing different street clothes, not sweats, came in. They were accompanied by another detective from the task force, Ron Albert. DelPlain got up and talked for a moment with Albert before the two left the viewing room.

Starsky and Hutch joined Atchison and Crosley at the window.

“Any word about d’Ambrosia,” Starsky asked the SFPD detectives.

“Not that we’ve heard,” Crosley replied. “I think we’re about to find out though.” He gestured into the next room.

Through the two-way mirror, in Room #2, a thin, wiry, dirty-haired, hard-eyed man was sitting in a chair on the far side of the table. He was handcuffed to the rail that ran lengthwise across the middle, staring at the two-way mirror.

Starsky’s hackles rose. He looked sharply at Crosley. “That’s the guy we caught --”

“Running out of the warehouse!” Crosley completed the sentence.

Starsky stared in surprise at the SFPD detective. Crosley looked back at him, clearly equally startled. This finishing-each-other’s-sentences thing could be catching, Starsky realized. He smiled ruefully and Crosley returned it. Glancing at Hutch, Starsky noticed his partner and Atchison watching them with almost patronizing grins.


“Imprinted on my brain,” Starsky replied, softly.

Hutch motioned toward the glass. “d’Ambrosia’s chauffeur. The same guy that was whispering with Cairo at our pre-emption.”

“He was at ours, too.” Atchison shared a confirming look with his partner. “Didn’t seem like a willing participant though, if I remember correctly,”

Crosley nodded. “Looked like he wanted to be anywhere else.”

DelPlain and Detective Albert entered the interview room, taking seats across from the suspect. DelPlain sat casually while Albert put his elbows on the table and leaned toward the wiry man. “Ely Withers… It’s been a while. Welcome back. You know why you’re here, right?”

“Yeah, Detective Albert, I know,” Withers snorted. “You read me my rights, told me what the charges are prob’ly gonna be. An’ I’m not askin’ for a lawyer.” He shrugged in an attitude of
nonchalance. “You’re tapin’ all this, too. I understand that an’ it’s okay with me.” Withers stared directly at the mirror. “Are Starsky and Hutchinson in there? I can almost feel ‘em. I’ll just bet they’re the ones that’ve gotten all the task forces goin’.”

The detective was still in Withers’ face. “What task forces?”

“Don’t play dumb, fellas, it don’t suitcha. But it seems like d’Ambrosia’s organizations talk to each other more than cop shops. We’ve known our Chicago and Philly outfits have become targets of investigations for a week or so now. An’, like I said, I’m willin’ t’ bet Starsky an’ Hutchinson are behind it.”

DelPlain’s face betrayed nothing.

Inside the viewing room, Starsky tensed, and felt Hutch lean lightly against his shoulder.

“Cairo was right when he told d’Ambrosia to pick somebody else.” Withers laced the fingers of his cuffed hands. “But d’Ambrosia thought he knew everything.”

DelPlain glanced over his shoulder at the mirror, almost as if he could see through it. The captain was unmistakably confused.

“Nicky hated cops,” Withers continued, forcing DelPlain to turn back. “He was afraid of Starsky and Hutchinson though. They’d busted him an’ his brother, and Joey Fortune. Patsy and Joey died in prison. When Nicky got out, instead of goin’ after revenge, like I thought he might, he jus’ wanted to avoid ‘em. Said they were too tough to break and couldn’t be bought, intimidated or threatened. That scared him. He told d’Ambrosia it’d be a mistake to target ‘em.”

Withers sat back. “‘Course Nicky used another reason for not goin’ after Starsky and Hutchinson. He said they’d lost their edge, that they’d never be the cops they once were.” Withers stared at DelPlain. “Once the boss had made up his mind though, there was no changin’ it. So Tate took ‘em. An’ they played the game.”

In the viewing room, Starsky was rigid with tension.

Withers obviously knew DelPlain would love some answers. Instead, he continued, conversationally, “They did good, too. Better then anybody else we ever grabbed.” He looked back at the mirror. “After it was over, Nicky told d’Ambrosia he should kill ‘em. But d’Ambrosia believed they were his.” Withers’ voice turned hard. “That was when Nicky started makin’ his plans.”

DelPlain seemed about to break into Withers’ reminiscences when the wiry man sat up straighter. “Anyway, Cap, I’m gonna tell ya everythin’ I know ‘bout d’Ambrosia and his operations. An’ it ain’t gonna cost ya nothin’! I’m goin’ down an’ I know it but as an accessory only. I never did none of the killin’. I was a driver, that’s all. An’ if I give ya enough good information, maybe the D.A. ‘ll cut me a break. I’d really like to get outta prison in time to see my grandchild grow up.”

Starsky and his companions relaxed again, a little.

Withers smiled, ingratiatingly at DelPlain. “Could I maybe get a cuppa coffee, Cap?”

DelPlain nodded to the detective who got up.

“Two creams, no sugar. Please?” Withers added.

Detective Albert left the room. DelPlain stared at Withers, his face completely blank. After a few minutes the detective came back in, put a huge mug in front of Withers, and sat back down.
Withers sipped appreciatively, put the mug down and nailed DelPlain with a cagy look. “Ya see, Cap, Mr. d’Ambrosia thinks he’s so smart, thinks he’s thought of every angle. Got his ‘pocket cops’ in every city where he does business, guaranteed not to interfere in anything he does.” He sipped more coffee and neither cop responded. “But he don’t know some of his boys’ve been makin’ their own plans, behind his back. ‘Cause they knew it was all gonna blow up in d’Ambrosia’s face one o’ these days.” He gulped more coffee and physically shuddered. “He’s the scariest dude I’ve ever seen.”

Withers stared into the mirror. “He’s twisted, man.” He visibly shivered. “You would not believe the things I’ve seen him do t’ cops. And make cops do to each other.”

In the viewing room, Starsky was again so tense, he could feel the air almost crackling. Without a word he turned toward the door at the same time Crosley did. He’d only taken a step when Hutch caught his arm. Turning back, he saw that Atchison had similarly stopped Crosley.

Hutch gestured into the interview room.

Withers sat back, casual again. “But I’m not gonna tell ya ‘bout that ‘cause it ain’t got nothin’ t’ to with what you need from me. You need me to tell ya ‘bout Nicky Cairo payin’ back all those guys he thinks done him an’ Patsy wrong years ago, at the same time he’s been runnin’ all d’Ambrosia’s recent operations.” He drank coffee, smacking his lips in appreciation. “An’ ya need me to tell ya about Paulie Garner. He’s been doin’ the same things he spent six years in Rikers for, muggin’ an’ robbin’ people. He’s in Bay City right now.”

He drank more coffee and looked at DelPlain again. “An’ I’ll tell you where the cops in Balti’mer and Detroit need to look t’ find whatever’s left of their missin’ detectives. Mr. D’ll never tell ya none o’ this but I will.” Withers had a wicked gleam in his eyes. “He messed up with Starsky and Hutchinson. An’ Cairo’s no fool. He knows when t’ quit while he’s ahead. I figure Nicky’s already outta the country with as much of d’Ambrosia’s swag as he can get his hands on. While you got the big man hi’self right here in your pretty little jail.”

Starsky tried to get his mind around what he was hearing. ‘He’s really enjoying this,’ Starsky thought. ‘It’s probably the most attention he’s gotten in years. Poor bastard.’

Withers held up the empty cup, looking at DelPlain. “This is pretty good cop slop. Could I have some more? Please? Two creams, no sugar?”

DelPlain nodded and the detective got up, took the mug and left. DelPlain stood, turned and stared at the mirror, confusion on his face. When the detective came back with the coffee, putting it down in front of Withers, he and DelPlain re-seated themselves, still saying nothing.

“Nicky’s been plannin’ this morning’s operation for weeks. When Mr. D said he wanted to drive up here last night I was worried sick. Figured maybe he’d gotten wind of Cairo’s double cross. But that wasn’t it. He was just wantin’ t’ gloat over all the stolen merchandise Nicky said we’d taken yesterday. Wanted t’ get shed o’ some o’ the stress he’s been under since Starsky and Hutchinson got on his case.” He continued to drink coffee and look self-satisfied. “Bet you guys almost shit yourselves when the warehouse burned, didn’t ya?”

“It was a bit of a shock,” DelPlain admitted. They were the first words the captain had uttered during the interview.

“I’ll jus’ bet it was,” Withers gloated. “Cairo’s idea. All of it. d’Ambrosia never suspected a thing.” He glanced around as if his former boss might be lurking. “Where is he anyway? Another interview room?”
“Anthony d’Ambrosia is dead.” DelPlain made the statement in a flat voice.

Ely Withers sloshed his coffee.

In the viewing room, Starsky reached for Hutch’s hand and gripped it hard.

“Starsky and Hutchinson got ‘im, did they?” Withers put his mug down and wiped his wet hands on his pants.

“No, Ely,” said DelPlain. “What they did was bring your former boss’ illegal enterprises to the attention of various law enforcement agencies and get a few task forces started. Mr. d’Ambrosia’s abused heart, overburdened, the M.E. tells me, by stress and too many cigarettes, gave out while his warehouse was burning.”

Withers sipped his depleted coffee and did some unmistakable mental back peddling. “Okay, so Mr. D’s history. Prob’ly jus’ as well. But if you can find Paulie before he gets t’ Mexico, you can clear all those muggings. I’ll bet Cairo’s already gone though.”

DelPlain got up, motioning the detective to stay, and left the room.

In the hallway, Starsky was first out of the viewing room, closely followed by Hutch and the two SFPD detectives.

DelPlain looked seriously at Starsky and Hutch. “Would one of you please go to my office and call your captain?”

Hutch started quickly down the hall. “You want to know if the warehouse in Bay City burned this morning, right?” He rounded the corner before DelPlain could reply.

“Is your partner always on the ball like that, Detective Starsky?” DelPlain sounded almost amused.

“Yes, sir,” Starsky answered, knowing his pride was showing.

“Must keep you on your toes.”

“Oh, I’ll bet they’re a matched pair, Captain,” Atchison said.

DelPlain gestured to the Interview Room he’d just left. “What’s your take on everything Withers said, Detective Starsky?”

Starsky temporized. “I really don’t know what to think, Cap’n.”

DelPlain led the way back into the viewing room, with Starsky and the other two following. Starsky and DelPlain picked up their coffee cups, Atchison and Crosley got clean ones. The captain poured the remainder of the pot into the four cups. Starsky, Atchison and Crosley sat down near the window. DelPlain got out the makings and started another pot of coffee. The silence stretched while the captain went through the preparations.

“Speculate then,” DelPlain told Starsky when he sat down. “I won’t hold you to anything.”

Starsky drank his coffee and collected his thoughts. “Hutch and I know, from several encounters with the man, that d’Ambrosia treats his hirelings as if they’re not worth his consideration, except to follow his orders. So I guess it’s possible that Cairo would make plans of his own. Especially if it’s true that he advised d’Ambrosia against targeting me and Hutch in the first place but was ignored. Cairo didn’t like being ignored.”
He thought about what else he could safely say without getting himself and Hutch and, by extension, Crosley and Atchison, in more trouble. “If Nicky was aware of the task forces beginning to investigate their operations in all their cities at the same time…” He paused and his mind went back to Nicky Cairo, his brother, Patsy, and Joey Fortune; the whole mess he and Hutch had gotten themselves into with those three. He was grateful DelPlain wasn’t trying to hurry him.

“Knowing Nicky,” Starsky continued, “I think he’d make sure he was fully aware of everything concerning d’Ambrosia. So, yes, he’d probably plan something exactly like what happened this morning.”

DelPlain nodded. “You think it’s possible that Cairo’s flown the coop.”

“What Withers said makes sense, Captain,” Starsky agreed. “I wouldn’t bet against any of it.”

DelPlain turned to Crosley and Atchison. “Get with the rest of the task force. See if you can find this Paulie Garner. Coordinate with Bay City and see if they can pick him up!”

The two SFPD detectives left the room.

DelPlain got up, took Starsky’s empty cup and his own, and filled them from the fresh pot of coffee. Bringing them back, he handed Starsky’s to him and sat down again. “I’m not stupid, Detective Starsky.”

“No, sir, I know you’re not.” Starsky had a lot of respect for the captain and knew he was walking in a mine field.

DelPlain kept his voice low. “Withers was talking about something that happened with you and your partner and d’Ambrosia. Did I get the gist of it right? Against Cairo’s advice, he had you kidnapped? And what? Tortured?”

Starsky didn’t want to lie to DelPlain but he also didn’t want to answer the question. He was attempting to think of something to say when there was a brief knock on the door before Hutch opened it and came in. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

Starsky knew the tension in the room was palpable. He was grateful when Hutch launched right into what he’d learned.

“d’Ambrosia’s warehouse in Bay City burned early this morning. Captain Dobey said it sounds exactly like what happened here. Napalm. The place is a total loss.” He glanced at Starsky who knew that Hutch wasn’t telling everything Dobey had said.

DelPlain appraised each of them. “Withers told the truth.”

“Looks like it.” Hutch reached for Starsky’s coffee cup and drank.

Atchison and Crosley burst into the room. DelPlain held up a hand and they stopped to catch their breath. “It’s coming in over the wire now, Captain,” said Atchison. “Looks like every one of d’Ambrosia’s warehouses, offices, and homes, every piece of property he owns in every city, has burned. Exactly like the warehouse here. Sounds as if it was all coordinated and happened at the same time.”

“Which means…” Crosley went on hurriedly, “we’ll probably never find a shred of evidence linking him, or any of his gang to… shit! To anything! It’s all gone up in smoke!”

DelPlain waited for his detectives to settle into chairs and looked at each of the four faces around
him. “I don’t really know what’s been going on here, gentlemen, but I have to wonder if this isn’t the best possible outcome?”

Starsky kept his expression blank. Hutch and both SFPD detectives did as well.

DelPlain continued, unruffled. “d’Ambrosia’s dead. That means he can’t be tried. In any of the cities. Sure, we’ve lost evidence of his illegal activities but those activities will cease. The members of his gangs, the ones that haven’t been rounded up, will be scattered to the back of beyond. Unless we can catch this Paulie Garner, whoever he is, first.” He pointed at Atchison and Crosley. “Which is the SFPD’s priority now. What’re you waiting for, an engraved invitation? Get going!”

Atchison and Crosley jumped up with “Yes, sir!”s and hurried out.

DelPlain, Starsky and Hutch got up as well. DelPlain indicated that they should stay but he turned and left the room.

The look in Hutch’s eyes was one of confusion, hope, relief, disbelief and patience; all the emotions that exactly matched Starsky’s. They moved back to the window.

A moment later, DelPlain re-entered the interview room, where Withers and the detective were waiting.

DelPlain sat down across from Withers again. “Now, Ely…” DelPlain bestowed a friendly smile on the prisoner. “Can you write?”

“‘Course I can!” Withers snapped.

“‘Fine.’ DelPlain nodded to the detective who got up and left. “I want you to write down everything you told us. Plus everything else you can think of about d’Ambrosia’s operations here, and in every other city you know about. Names, dates, details. You mentioned detectives in Detroit and Baltimore, tell us about that, too.”

Detective Albert came back in with a yellow legal size pad of paper and a handful of ballpoint pens, put them down in front of Withers. DelPlain got up again after the detective sat down.

“There’s no time limit, Ely,” DelPlain added, “but neatness counts so please try to write legibly.” He shifted his attention to the detective. “Get him more coffee whenever he wants it, Ron. And make sure you go in the men’s room with him when he asks for a potty break.”

The detective nodded. “You got it, Cap.”

Withers began to write and DelPlain motioned to Starsky and Hutch, behind the two-way mirror, to meet him in the corridor.

Out in the hall between the two rooms, DelPlain held out his hand. Hutch took it. When Starsky reached with his damaged one, DelPlain pulled back and shook his head. Starsky held the captain’s gaze for a moment.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to finish our discussion, Detective, but perhaps it’s better this way.” He addressed both of them. “It’s been a pleasure having you in our city, gentlemen. Please convey my respects to Captain Dobey and thank him for lending us your considerable services. Good job! Drive safe on your way home.” He headed for his office.

*******
In the task force conference room, Starsky and Hutch found the two SFPD detectives conferring with three members of the group. Hutch motioned to the hallway, held the door for Starsky and followed him back out.

In the corridor, Atchison and Crosley came out of the room. Hutch reached to shake Atchison’s hand, Crosley’s next. Starsky wasn’t expected to participate in this display of camaraderie.

“We’ve been handed our walking papers, Ben,” Hutch told them, “so we’re going to hit the road. If you guys find yourselves in Bay City, or there’s ever anything we can do for you, all you have to do is call.”

Atchison and Crosley exchanged a look before both smiled at Starsky and Hutch. “Same goes for us, fellas,” Atchison said. “We owe you. Big time.”

Crosley was obviously still bothered. “You really think it’s over?”

Starsky and Hutch exchanged a look of their own, deliberately copying the one the SFPD detectives had shared.

“d’Ambrosia’s dead,” Starsky said, “and all his properties are destroyed. Yes, it’s probably over. The task forces will be disbanded and the only trials will be the ones involving his associates. For whatever they’ve done.”

“They’ll have their hands full,” Hutch continued, “answering charges relating to all d’Ambrosia’s illegal enterprises. No reason for any of them to bring up their extra curricular activities.”

“What about everything Withers is writing?” Crosley asked, anxiously.

“He’s not going to go into details about any of us,” Hutch assured them.

Starsky believed his partner and hoped the others did, too. “He already told Captain DelPlain that. He’s going to concentrate on what the D.A. will want to hear. Nothing more.”

“I guess so.” Crosley didn’t sound convinced. “It just seems like such a… what? A let down? Anti climax? You know what I mean. We’ve been so tense for so long, it’s hard to think we can finally relax.”

Hutch turned his smile on their two new friends. “Well, try, ‘cause that’s what we’re going to do.”

He and Starsky headed for the stairwell. Starsky half-turned and threw a “See ya” over his shoulder. Hutch opened the door to the stairs for him and followed him through.
Chapter 14

Later that afternoon in a diner on the I-5 south of San Francisco, Starsky was in the phone booth, Hutch hovering at the door. Starsky had the phone to his right ear so that Hutch could hear, too.

“The fires are out,” Dobey reported. “But the properties are a total loss. Fire chief here says it looks as if every piece of paper was scattered before the napalm was ignited. There really is nothing left. Thanks to Huggy and his informants though, we managed to get enough patrol units together to round up all the trucks after they’d left the warehouse.”

“Huggy called you?” Starsky could hardly believe what he’d heard.

“He sure did,” Dobey chortled. “I tried to get hold of you guys after we bagged everybody but you were already out with the raid. You both owe Huggy a lot for this.”

“Don’t we know it, Cap’n,” Hutch agreed.

“We caught every associate of d’Ambrosia’s that was still there, before the fire started.” Starsky could hear Dobey smiling. “His operation is definitely finished in Bay City.”

“That’s great news, Cap.” Starsky breathed a contented sigh.

“You bet it is, Starsky! How soon will we see your smiling faces?”

Starsky checked his watch. “We’re about four hours out, Cap. Okay if we get some sleep and come in bright an’ early?”

“Sleep as late as you want, Starsky. You both deserve it.” Dobey chuckled, happily. “This was really great work, guys. The chief’s been on the phone with his counterparts up there, as well as in Philly and Chicago. The CPD and SFPD are happy as clams.”

Starsky mouthed ‘why would clams be happy?’ and Hutch almost laughed out loud.

“What happened in Philly, Cap’n?” Hutch asked.

“I’m still finding out about that. I’ll fill you in when I see you. And if I’m not mistaken you’re both in line for another commendation. Well deserved, too, I might add. Now get yourselves back here and get some sleep. I’ll see you whenever you show up tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Cap,” Starsky said. “G’night.”

“Good night, Starsky. Take care.”

Hutch caught the handset before the disconnect. “Oh, we will, Capt’n. That’s exactly what we’re going to do from now on.”

Dobey laughed. “See that you do!”

Hutch replaced the receiver and followed Starsky back to their booth where a great-looking club sandwich and a huge burger and fries were just being delivered by the waitress. She cast an uncertain glance at Starsky’s hands before tearing the check off her pad and leaving it on the table. Smiling at them, she walked back toward the counter.

Starsky slid onto the bench seat and Hutch sat down next to him. Starsky reached for his burger but
Hutch stopped him. Picking up a knife and fork, Hutch quickly cut the monster into bite-sized pieces. He speared one and popped it into Starsky’s astonished mouth.

Reflexively, Starsky chewed and swallowed, simmering mock-anger in his eyes. “I have never eaten a cut-up hamburger in my life, Hutchinson. Didn’t plan on startin’ today.”

Hutch forked up another bite and, glaring almost believably, Starsky ate it. “You can’t get beef juice on those bandages, Starsky. And there’s no way you could eat that thing, whole, without. Think about what the inside of your beloved Torino would look like after you put your greasy paws all over it.”

“Thin ice, partner.” Trying to maintain irritation, Starsky bent forward and scooped a couple of fries off the plate with his mouth.

Hutch laughed. “That’ll work, Starsk. Gives me time to eat my sandwich.”

Starsky chuckled and actually managed to grab another burger bite without using his hands. He got pretty good at gobbling the fries, too.

Hutch noticed the waitress and counter man turn away shaking their heads. He smiled indulgently at his inventive partner and enjoyed his excellent club sandwich, stealing a fry or two from Starsky’s plate.

“Starsk…”

“Hmnmhm” was the best response Starsky could manage around his mouthful.

“What about the tapes in all his safe deposit boxes?”

Starsky almost choked. “Geez, Hutch, will you please quit finding black linings in our silver clouds?”

Hutch picked up the last quarter of his sandwich. “I can’t quite figure out how you mangled that metaphor but I take your point. We did manage to come through what looked like a pretty impossible situation, didn’t we?”

“Yes we did, partner. Again.”

Hutch turned thoughtful. “Again. Wonder how many more times --”

“Will you quit that?” Starsky snapped. “I don’t want to think about it and I don’t want to talk about it. At least not right now.” He sucked up another bite, chewed and swallowed. “Right now I just want to enjoy this great dismembered burger and a few of the last of my fries.” He cast a squinty-eyed look at Hutch who, with a grin, was appropriating another fry. “We’ll talk about it when we get home. Okay, partner?”

“Okay.” Hutch quickly snatched one more fry. “Oh, and by the way…”

“What?” Starsky was now thoroughly suspicious.

“I promised myself something this morning, right before the raid.” Hutch realized he had unconsciously softened his voice.

Starsky must have instinctively known Hutch wasn’t joking any longer because he matched the quiet tone. “What’s that?”
I swore, as soon as it was all over, I’d seriously jump your bones, first chance I got.”

Starsky melted, just before his expression took on wicked determination. “I know you’ve always secretly wanted to drive my car fast, Hutch.” He grinned. “If we use the mars light, we could be home in next to no time.”

******

That night, in Hutch’s apartment, all the candles on all the flat surfaces of the bedroom had burned down to stubs and were sputtering, casting dancing shadows over everything, including the entangled bodies on the bed. Hutch worked up enough strength to rub his hand lightly up and down his partner’s back, tracing and caressing each of the scars. “Starsk…”

Starsky moaned but didn’t move. “Hutch, I can’t kiss you or suck you any more tonight. I’m so tired and so relaxed and so utterly happy, I couldn’t get it up again even if you… Well, you know what I mean.” He snuggled closer while Hutch continued stroking his back.

“I know.” Hutch smiled into the dark curls. “But that’s not what I was going to say.” Knowing that Starsky wouldn’t be able to stand the suspense for long, Hutch waited.

Starsky leaned his head back and looked at him. “Okay. What?”

Hutch kissed him lightly. “Let’s quit.” When Starsky began to stiffen he pulled him closer. “Oh, not tomorrow. Or even next week. But soon.” He pulled Starsky’s head to his shoulder and buried his face in Starsky’s hair, stroking his partner’s back more firmly. “We’ve been dodging bullets for years now, Starsk.”

“Not too well sometimes, either,” Starsky muttered, with a chuckle.

Hutch dug tickling fingers into his partner’s ribs.

Starsky yelped and wriggled. “Thought we were having a serious discussion here, Blintz,” he snickered, trying to reciprocate.

Starsky’s hands put him at a severe disadvantage and as soon as Hutch realized the activity was causing pain, he settled and soothed, drawing Starsky back against him. “I am serious, babe. I can’t help but feel, after what d’Ambrosia put us through, and this morning, that we’re on borrowed time. We need to step away before one of us has to go through the rest of his life without the other.” He kissed his partner’s forehead. “And as selfish as this sounds, I don’t want that one to be me. Because I honestly don’t think I could make it without you.”

Starsky pulled away only far enough to look into Hutch’s eyes again. “That makes two of us. ’Cause I know I couldn’t make it without you.” He put his head back into the hollow of Hutch’s shoulder. “I guess it is time, Hutch…. Let’s quit.”

Hutch took a deep breath and tried to swallow his tears but wasn’t really successful.

Starsky reached up and gently wiped them away with his wrist. “Not tomorrow, maybe, but soon. I promise”

Hutch kissed the bandaged fingers and gauze-encased palms. “That’s all I ask. Thank you.”

Starsky drew back farther and started laughing. “Oh, no you don’t. I know you, Hutchinson. First the tears, then the ‘thank you’s,’ the hugging, the kissing, the caressing, the fondling and, before ya know it, we’re at it again.”
Starsky reached a mummied hand down between them and grabbed Hutch’s cock in as tight a hold as his wrapped appendage could manage.

Startled, Hutch broke the embrace and rolled onto his back.

Starsky lifted up on his left elbow and looked down at his hand cupped around Hutch’s swelling erection. As surprised and pleased as Hutch was by this unexpected turn of events, his partner was positively effervescent. “Gee, Ma, I think he loves me!”

Hutch laughed/gasped when Starsky began licking and nibbling all the way down his chest and stomach. Starsky took the rod into his mouth, sucking mercilessly. One stiff-fingered bandaged hand stroked the shaft below his lips and the other mauled Hutch’s testicles, the wrappings seeming to have no adverse affect on the inspired manipulations. The maelstrom of sensations produced the fastest orgasm Hutch had ever experienced.

Starsky swallowed and stroked but there wasn’t much ejaculate this time. He licked his lips. “You’ve got the record, Hutch. That was twice in twenty minutes. You’re the champ, babe!”

Hutch reached for his grinning partner. “Come here, you.”

Starsky threw himself into the waiting arms, snuggling close. “God, Hutch, I love you so much!”

“Love you right back, Starsk.”

“Let’s quit tomorrow!”

Hutch wrapped his lover more fiercely in his protective arms. “No, not tomorrow. It’s too soon after d’Ambrosia. We’ll let the dust settle and see how we feel in a couple of weeks. Then we can figure things out without all the emotional turmoil of the last few months.”

“Okay… a couple of weeks…” The rest was lost in the base of Hutch’s throat.

Hutch kissed the top of his partner’s head and closed his eyes.

******

A week later Starsky and Hutch were at their desks finishing up the paperwork on their part of the d’Ambrosia case. Starsky’s hands sported only Bandaids. The stitches were out and he could move all his fingers again without pain or stiffness.

Dobey opened his door and beckoned them. “Starsky, Hutchinson, if you’ve got a few minutes?” He went back into the office.

Starsky got up, raised his eyebrows in silent question, and followed Dobey. Hutch, right on Starsky’s heels, closed the door behind them.

Dobey was back behind his desk when Starsky and Hutch sat down.

“I just got off the phone with Captain Brewer in Chicago.” Dobey’s face shown with what had to be pride. “He couldn’t be happier. He credits you two entirely for alerting his department to d’Ambrosia. After you left, his detectives’ snitches found Tony D’s warehouse and kept tabs on everyone going in and out. They stopped every truck after it left the yard the night before the fire, recovered all the stolen merchandise and apprehended each of d’Ambrosia’s known associates.”

Dobey folded his hands on top of the stack of folders on his desk. “Except for the fire, which
destroyed all the physical evidence, the operation was a complete success. Brewer’s putting you both up for a commendation.”

Starsky grimaced at Hutch and received a equally appalled look in reply. “What about Philadelphia, Cap?” Starsky quickly changed the subject.

“Captain Connelly has some explaining to do to his superiors.” Dobey couldn’t hide a bit of a smirk. “He and his department either didn’t give credence to your information, or their C.I.s aren’t as good. When the warehouse there burned Connelly and his people were caught flat footed. Every one of d’Ambrosia’s gang got away. The stolen goods that were undoubtedly in the building are gone and the property is ash.”

“That’s a shame.” Hutch’s comment was noncommittal.

“Detroit and Baltimore?” Starsky asked.

“No warehouse fires reported, Starsky. Either d’Ambrosia never went after a second pair of cops or he abandoned plans for those cities entirely.” He sobered. “I heard this morning, though, when I checked with them, that they’ve each found the remains of their pairs of detectives. Exactly where Withers said they’d be.”

“Any chance d’Ambrosia’s goons will be charged with those murders?” Hutch asked.

“That will probably depend on how much Withers was able to tell them. And whether or not those particular associates of d’Ambrosia are in custody here, in San Francisco, or Chicago. If they’re not, I’m sure Detroit and Baltimore won’t leave any stone unturned in tracking them down. Whatever happens though, those cases are out of our hands.”

“Any other napalm fires, Capt’n?” Starsky was almost afraid to ask.

“I’ve had no reports of major warehouse fires that night anywhere. Started by napalm or anything else. It looks like d’Ambrosia only had the four operations.”

“Well, then…” Starsky didn’t try to stop the grin creeping in at the corners of his mouth. “Three out of four ain’t bad.”

“No, it’s not! Go call Mason and Sterling. I think they’d like to hear from you both.”

“Thanks, Captain,” Hutch said as he and Starsky left the office.

Back at their desks, Starsky made the call. Hutch picked up his phone and punched the same line. “Hi, George, it’s Dave, out here in sunny southern California!… You there, Able? Good, Ken’s on the other line, too.” He and Hutch listened for a minute, nodding and smiling at each other. “You heard right, George, d’Ambrosia’s dead and his organizations are finished…. Correct, no more task forces.”

“The trials will all be routine, Able,” Hutch told the CPD detective. “d’Ambrosia’s associates are being charged separately for their various parts in his operations. And they’re going to have plenty on their plates without worrying about any of us.”

“We did, George,” Starsky said. “Caught Pauli Garner on his way to Mexico…. That’s how we feel, too.” He gave Hutch a thumbs up. “We will…. You, too. Bye, guys.” Starsky hung up.

“G’bye George, Able. Take care of yourselves.” Hutch disconnected, a satisfied look on his face. “So that’s it then. Mason and Sterling are in the clear. Atchison and Crosley are cool with
everything, and Warren won’t return our calls.”

Starsky bent back over his paperwork. “Guy’s a dickhead. If you ask me Stillman’s better off in Denver without him.”

“You’re probably right.” Hutch went back to his paperwork as well.

******

Two more weeks passed. Starsky and Hutch tracked down the perps in a string of convenience store holdups. They also assisted Tyler and Allenby in sifting through the confusing evidence in a double murder. They made yet another court appearance in the Webber sanity proceedings.

At home every night, Starsky gloried in the love-making he and Hutch indulged themselves in. It was, by turns, inventive, energetic, gentle, explosive, exhausting and rejuvenating. He never tired of finding new ways to shower Hutch with soft, tender, or wild, athletic pleasuring.

And Hutch not only absorbed every new experience but came up with numerous additions and variations of his own. It was obvious to Starsky that Hutch had never felt the total freedom that their passion gave him. Love, for either of them, had never had the depth of emotion, the multitude of meanings, and the breadth of expressions it now had.

“I love you,” Starsky whispered with what he thought just might be his final breath, after one particularly strenuous session.

“I know,” Hutch intoned, in a perfect imitation of Harrison Ford’s Han Solo.

Starsky hit his lover with a pillow. A full-on seams-bursting pillow fight ensued until their combined energies failed. As usual, they slept in each other’s arms.

******

Whenever they had any ‘free’ time, they helped Babcock and Simmons with the continuing circus the dance club shooting case had become. The rack of lawyers for the accused, Juan Jose Ortega Cruz, had let it be known their client was going to plead temporary insanity.

The four detectives began intensively interviewing and re-interviewing all witnesses and friends of Cruz and the victims. They were determined to make sure the D.A. could prove, beyond the proverbial shadow, that the defendant had carefully planned the attack.

Sworn depositions were taken from more than half a dozen people, detailing Cruz’ purchase of the murder weapon, scouting out and setting up his ambush site, prior to the night of the dance, and bragging to his buddies afterward about ‘wastin’ the bitch.’

Starsky and Hutch, as well as Babcock and Simmons hoped it would be enough to have the sixteen year old tried as an adult, convicted, and put away for one count of pre-meditated murder and six counts of manslaughter. Insanity was a plea Starsky and Hutch were willing to live with in Saul Webber’s case. Not the arrogant, willful teenage murderer’s.

******

In the middle of an otherwise uneventful morning, Elliot pushed his mail cart into the squad room, delivering envelopes and packages to the individual desks. Stopping at Starsky’s, he cast a wary eye at Hutch. “Who do you guys know in South America?”
Starsky glanced at Hutch. His partner shook his head.

“Well, you know somebody.” Elliot put a familiar-shaped brown-paper-wrapped parcel, covered with colorful stamps, on Starsky’s desk and beat a hasty retreat.

Starsky knew his own expression was one of suspicion, wariness and anticipation. Each emotion was mirrored on Hutch’s face. He picked up the package and left the room with Hutch right behind him. Finding an unoccupied interview room, Starsky locked the door behind them. He and Hutch sat at the table.

“Costa Rica.” Starsky looked closely at the many multi-colored stamps and the numerous cancellations. “Elliot needs a geography lesson. Costa Rica’s in Central America, right? Not South.”

“Last I heard.”

“No return address though.”

“Cairo, you think?”

“Who else would be sending us a video tape now?”

“Are you sure it is one?” Hutch sounded as if he hoped it wasn’t.

“It’s the right size.” Starsky held it up to his ear and shook it, producing an ominous rattle. “Unless whatever’s inside’s broken, it sounds like one.”

“The spools of a tape cassette don’t sound exactly like anything else I’ve ever heard,” Hutch noted.

“That’s true.”

“Go on, Starsk. No time like the present.”

Starsky took out his pocket knife, opened it and slit the package. Inside were a three-quarter inch video tape case and a single-spaced typed letter. Starsky moved his chair closer to Hutch’s so that his partner could read it at the same time, and unfolded the letter.

Starsky & Hutchinson,

I told d’Ambrosia you’d be trouble but he didn’t listen. So I’ve done what I had to do. His entire organization is finished and you’ll never hear from any of us again. Don’t even think about trying to look for me. I paid back all my brother’s enemies so I’m done. They needed killing and now they’re dead.

This tape is my ‘good bye’ gift. It’s the original of your pre-emption.

Now here’s the bit of information I think you’ll be happy to hear. About two months ago, I convinced d’Ambrosia to give me his power of attorney so that I could visit his bank in each city. We’d been talking about all the mergers lately. I told him I’d heard that, when one bank takes over another, the take-over bank sends in people to open all the safe deposit boxes. They use the pretext of making sure none of them have explosives or weapons.

d’Ambrosia believed me and got paranoid about the idea of somebody finding his tapes. I told him I’d gather them up and bring them to the warehouse in Bay City. They’d be safe there. He must have trusted me because that’s where they were when the building burned to the ground.

All the tapes, except this one, are gone. You, and the other cops no longer have them hanging over
your heads.

Don’t bother to thank me.

The letter wasn’t signed but a signature wasn’t needed. Starsky stared for a long time at the letter and tape, feeling empty. When Hutch’s hand covered his own, the long fingers entwining with his, he felt fulfilled.

Hutch got up, picking up both items. “Dobey needs to read this.”

*********

Hutch knocked on Dobey’s door. After “Come in!” was bellowed from inside, he opened it for Starsky, followed him in and closed it behind.

Dobey was sitting at his desk. Seeing the looks on his detectives faces, he closed the report in front of him. Hutch put the package on top before he and Starsky sat down.

Dobey looked at it as if the thing might grow fangs and bite. Without touching, he studied the stamps and cancellations. “Who do you know in Costa Rica?”

“Nobody, Cap’n.” Starsky was studiously keeping his face blank.

“Please read the letter, sir.” Hutch schooled his face to ‘inscrutable,’ too.

Carefully, Dobey took the page out of the brown paper wrapping, unfolded it and began to read.

Starsky got up and went to the water cooler, drew a cup and drank it, drew another and took it back to Hutch. Hutch smiled his thanks and drank. Starsky sat on the arm of his chair. Hutch crumpled the cup and made a no-net toss into the wastebasket.

Dobey refolded the letter and looked up, shock and amazement plain on his face. “This is from Nicky Cairo, right?”

Hutch and Starsky nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Who else could it be, Cap?” Starsky’s question was reasonable.

“What is he doing in Costa Rica?”

“We have no idea,” Hutch replied, truthfully. “Maybe the U.S. doesn’t have an extradition treaty with them.”

“Maybe,” Dobey mused. “I’ll have to check. But you’re right. There isn’t anybody else who knew all this.” He looked down at the tape case and back up. “What do we do with it?”

Hutch looked up at Starsky and his partner’s raised eyebrows asked the question. Without hesitation he nodded. Starsky held out his right hand and Hutch took it with his left, lacing the fingers.

Dobey’s jaw dropped. His face immediately darkened with anger.

Hutch turned to Dobey, reading the captain’s shock. “Do whatever you want to with it, sir. Starsky and I are done.”
Dobey couldn’t seem to find any words.

“We wanted to wait a while, Cap.” Starsky used the same gentle tone Hutch had. “But since Cairo’s letter seems to indicate the case is really over, we figure it’s time.”

“But… but…” Dobey sputtered, lurching to his feet and leaning heavily on his desk. “What are you saying? You’re cops! You can’t be holding hands in my office! I won’t allow it!”

“Please sit down, Captain,” Hutch urged, quietly. “We’d truly hate to be the cause of another coronary this month.”

“Yeah, Cap,” Starsky added. “Edith would never forgive us.”

Dobey dropped into his chair. He clasped his hands tightly on top of his desk. “Talk to me!”

Hutch continued to hold Starsky’s hand. “The morning d’Ambrosia made his demands, we realized we were in love with each other, and had been for a long time.”

“But… at the TV station… you told me you’d never… you weren’t… you --”

“We hadn’t,” Hutch interrupted.

“We didn’t lie to you, Cap. Before that day, we’d never even kissed.”

Dobey sat back in his chair, unmistakably confused. “Then, why?”

“Once we admitted we’d been hiding how we really felt about each other,” Hutch said, “we knew we could use our love.”

“It allowed us to live through that morning, Cap’n,” Starsky added. “Maybe nothing else would have.”

“Since then,” Hutch continued, “we came to the conclusion that we may not get many more chances to come through something like that, alive.”

“And both of us want to keep on living, sir,” Starsky said, completing the thought. “We want that very much.”

“But, you’re cops!” Dobey repeated. “You can’t be gay and be cops at the same time! That’s never gonna happen in this city.”

“We know,” Hutch replied. “That’s why we’ll be resigning.”

Starsky stood up, pulling Hutch up with him. “You’ve been the best Captain we could ever have worked with. We want you to know that. And you’ve been our good friend.”

“We’ll never be able to thank you enough…” Hutch had to stop and clear his throat. “Or pay you back for all the things you’ve done for us. The times you went to bat for us and backed us to the hilt.”

Dobey got up again, straightening to his full height. “I know things have been tough lately, guys. I know some of what you’ve been through.” He looked at each of them. “But have you really thought about this?”

Are you still sure? Hutch heard Starsky silently ask. He squeezed his partner’s hand lightly in reply. “We’ve done nothing but think about it for weeks, Captain. We’ve talked about getting P.I. licenses,
carry permits…”

“Getting a small office, taking out an ad in the Yellow Pages…”

“Helping people,” Hutch finished. “Like we’ve always tried to do here.”

“Only, not with badges any longer.” Starsky cocked his head in what Hutch knew was a conciliatory gesture.

Dobey was clearly fighting it but, at last, he smiled a little. “What am I going to do without you two?”

“Sleep a little better?” Starsky offered, sheepishly.

Dobey barked a laugh. “That’s no lie.”

“Spend less time in hospital waiting rooms?” Hutch suggested.

“Amen to that!” Dobey said, heart-felt.

“Tyler and Allenby are learning fast, Capt’n,” Hutch pointed out.

“They’re a good team,” Starsky agreed.

“They won’t be you guys,” said Dobey.

“Think how much quieter it’ll be around here, Cap.” Starsky’s eyes twinkled.

“Quiet’s overrated,” Dobey mumbled.

“Not really,” Hutch denied with a chuckle. “You’ll get used to it in no time.”

“How long do you think it’ll take you to finish up your open cases and complete your paperwork?”

Their captain was deflating right before Hutch’s eyes. For the first time since he’d known him, Hutch felt sorry for Harold Dobey. “We don’t have any open cases at the moment. We were going to ask for one this morning. Then the tape came.”

“Maybe two weeks to have every report finished and on your desk?” Starsky guessed. He grinned crookedly, “And the rewrites you’ll want done?”

“Also,” Hutch said, “we’ll do whatever we can to help Babcock and Simmons with the Cruz case.”

“And wrap up our testimony on Saul Webber,” Starsky added.

“Two weeks it is, then.” Dobey heaved a sigh.

“We’ll always be available to testify,” Hutch went on, “when the cases we’ve been involved in come to trial.”

“What about your commendations?” Dobey was clearly playing his final card. “The Mayor, along with the Chief, is going to present them at a --”

“No commendation, Cap’n,” Starsky interrupted gently. “We were only doing our jobs.”

“Yes, you were.” Dobey’s voice was filled with pride. He came around his desk and held out his hand.
Hutch let go of Starsky’s and stepped forward to shake Dobey’s.

Starsky was next, holding on for a long time.

“I meant what I said at the TV station.” Dobey swallowed a couple of times. “You’re the best cops it’s ever been my honor to work with.” He looked deeply in Hutch’s eyes, then Starsky’s. “I can’t say I’m happy with the way things have turned out but I wish you both the best.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hutch said.

“We’ll never be able to thank you enough, Cap.”

“You’re repeating yourself, Starsky,” Dobey grumbled, sounding a little like his old self. “G’wan, get outta here. Get started on that paperwork!”

Hutch opened the door for his partner and followed him out. Before they’d gone two feet, Starsky turned around and, keeping a hand on Hutch’s stomach, leaned past him back into the office.

“We’ll stay in touch, Cap! That’s a promise.”

“Well… just … see that you do!”

EPILOG

That night at The Pits, Huggy was pleased that his establishment was busy and noisy with lots of people enjoying themselves.

In their usual back booth though, his best friends were subdued and somber. The ending of the incredible saga Starsky and Hutch had endured for the past four months had taken its toll and they both looked tired and worn out. But incredibly happy, he also noticed. He wondered how they could do that, be beat down and upbeat at the same time. ‘That’s Starsky and Hutch for ya,’ he thought, with a great deal of love.

“So, that’s it?” Huggy set fresh beers on the table and slid into the booth on the opposite side. “You’re just gonna ride off into the sunset?”

Starsky smiled crookedly. “No, Hug. We’d drown.”

Hutch looked at his smiling partner before turning back to Huggy. “And that’s what this is all about. We want to live.” He took Starsky’s hand.

Huggy felt his own face break into a matching smile. “It took ya long enough!” He reached across the table and covered the clasped hands with both of his. “Congratulations, m’ brothers! I am truly happy for you. Does Dobey know?”

Starsky and Hutch reluctantly let go of each other’s hands and Huggy understood. They were in a public place and hadn’t officially come out of the closet.

“He’s the only other one that does, Hug,” Starsky told him.

“Unless everybody in the squad room heard him,” Hutch said. “Keep it under your hat for now, okay?”

“You have t’ ask? ‘Course I will.” Huggy was unable to maintain any degree of ‘offended.’ “So, what are you gonna do with yourselves, other than screw each other’s brains out for a month or so?”
Starsky and Hutch actually blushed. “Not so loud, Hug,” Starsky pleaded. “I thought you were going to be discrete!”

Huggy laughed. “If you think anybody in this whole place cares what goes on in this corner of yours you’re deluding yourselves. You’re my friends and nobody’s listening, I guarantee.” He held up his fingers in the Scout’s Honor salute. “But the question stands. What are you gonna do?”

“Our resignations won’t take effect for two weeks,” Starsky explained.

“We have to finish up all the paperwork on recent cases,” Hutch went on, “make sure the new guys, Tyler and Allenby, are familiar with anything that might come up.”

“Try and tie up any loose ends with our court appearances,” Starsky added.

“And help Simmons and Babcock with the Cruz mess,” Hutch noted.

“In other words, same ol’ same ol’,” Huggy said, with a smirk.

“More or less,” Hutch agreed.

“And, after that?” Huggy persisted.

Starsky shared an uncertain look with his partner. “Not sure.”

“Any suggestions?” Hutch asked.

“Actually, I do.” Huggy looked around to verify that no one was listening. “I have a cousin who works for a security firm and he thinks his boss is playin’ both sides. Truman says the man gets huge retainers and monthly checks to guarantee his clients’ employees, and prospective employees, have spotless records and backgrounds.”

He put his elbows on the table and lowered his voice. “But Truman’s pretty sure at least a few of ‘em are ex-cons and his boss knows it. He’s also pretty sure these guys are ripping off his boss’ clients. He’s afraid to do any actual investigating himself ‘cause, if he gets caught, getting fired might be the least of his worries.”

“You tell Truman to back off, Hug,” Starsky advised, quickly. “We can give the information to a team we know --”

“Truman won’t talk to anybody but you guys,” Huggy interrupted. “Since he heard what you and the Amante Foundation did, getting that old building refurbished for the kids, he thinks you both walk on water.”

Starsky and Hutch definitely looked embarrassed.

“The two weeks we’ve got left won’t be enough time to make any headway with his situation.” Hutch easily managed to redirect the conversation. “It’ll have to wait until after we’re retired.”

“If we’re the only ones Truman will talk to, he needs to keep his head down for a while,” Starsky said. “Hutch and I had already planned on getting P.I. licenses. With our years on the force it shouldn’t take long.”

“Once we get carry permits,” Hutch went on, “we’ll be armed again.”

“Until then though,” Starsky cautioned, “we’ll be lame duck cops and can’t really help him. He has to stay very quiet until we can start looking into it.”
“I’ll let him know,” Huggy promised.

“If he can give us the names of a few of his boss’ clients, once we’ve got our licenses…” Hutch glanced at Starsky and received a nod. “We should be able to get at least one of them to hire us, if for nothing else than to check into their losses.”

Huggy had seen his friends do their silent back ‘n’ forthing before, and it never ceased to amaze him. He was fascinated, yet again, as they inaudibly exchanged words, thoughts and probably promises.

“What do you think, partner?” Looking at Starsky, Hutch had a twinkle in his eyes that Huggy had never seen before. “Want to go private?”

When Starsky smiled, the air almost crackled with anticipation. “What do you think?”

Huggy almost blushed. “Cut it out, you two! Save it for the bedroom.” Then he, too, turned serious. “So, can I tell Truman that Starsky and Hutch’ll be on the case?”

The partners exchanged another long, deep look, and each set of blues had the fierce fire they’d showed at the beginning of their careers.

“Yeah, Huggy,” Hutch said, his gaze still locked with Starsky’s.

“Tell him we’ll take it from here,” Starsky finished.

***********

Satan in a suit
arrogant, menacing, cold
Evil backwards? Live

END

AUTHOR’S NOTES, for anyone who’s interested:

Baryshnikov, Shirley MacLaine, and “Turning Point” - 1977

I was told that ‘slacker,’ used as I have in this story, is an anachronistic word for the early 1980s. According to the Oxford English Dictionary though, it first appeared in print, in this story’s context, in 1898, so I kept it.

Reader’s Digest - first published in 1922.

“Something Wicked This Way Comes” - published in 1962

Ray Bradbury - 1920-2012
Believe it or not, I wrote the first of the two references in my story to this Bradbury classic at least ten days before I heard on television that a new film version had been made. I figure nobody will believe me, but it’s true.

“You’re not getting older, you’re getting better” - Loving Care hair products catch phrase, 1971

The $64,000 Question - TV quiz show, 1955-58
Cecil B. DeMille - Hollywood director and producer - 1881-1959
The story behind Hutch’s quote is apocryphal and undoubtedly recounted somewhere on the ‘net.

Industrial video tape technology - mid-1970s. I rented one every week.

Cover Girl - 1963, Jennifer O’Neill was the first spokeswoman

Rod Serling - 1924-1975, writer and host of ‘The Twilight Zone’ - 1959- 1964
Robert Redford - 1936- American actor
He was the co-star of the 3rd season Twilight Zone episode, “Nothing in the Dark.”

Indirect references to “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid” - 1969

Indirect reference to ‘The King and I,’ 1956, and reference to it’s star, Yul Brynner, 1920-1985

“Hogan’s Heroes” - TV series, 1965-1971


“All Days are Diamonds” - John Denver, 1981

ArmorAll - 1972

“Jeopardy” - Debuted in March, 1964. Art Fleming was the host in 1981, Alex Trebec taking over in 1984.

“We’ve Only Just Begun,” 1970; written by Roger Nichols and Paul Williams.


NCIC - National Criminal Information Center - launched in January, 1967
According to my ‘old timey’ friends in law enforcement, submission of statistics was voluntary in the beginning and many departments, as stated in this story, didn’t bother, either because it was simply too much paperwork or because they didn’t feel their crimes were ‘major’ enough.

“Chicago, Chicago (That Toddlin’ Town),” written by Fred Fisher, 1922

K-Y Jelly - Johnson & Johnson, 1980; Hutch’s reference to its earlier use is factual.

Mr. Coffee - Introduced for home use in 1972

Indirect reference to “Star Wars - The Empire Strikes Back” - 1980 and one of its stars

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