

Summary: Starsky's gut instincts come to the rescue when Hutch needs him most.

Story Notes: A Story in the [Affirmation Universe](#), A Prequel to [Affirmation](#).

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David Starsky, "M.D."

by **Kaye Austen Michaels**

Tuesday, November 24, 1981

Starsky dropped the last of the graded mock case files on the floor in front of the sofa and listened. Over the hum of the rerun on TV, he heard...nothing. In this case, "nothing" was worthy of investigation. Starsky swung his legs to the floor and rose from the sofa, deciding he could make a slight detour through the kitchen for a hard-earned beer before trekking to the spare bedroom.

Hutch was in the throes of semester final exam preparation, the earliest exam scheduled for the Monday after Thanksgiving break...six days away and the longest almost-week Starsky imagined he would ever endure. On arriving home from the Police Academy earlier in the evening, he had found Hutch already back from the university's medical campus and in full possession of the kitchen table: books and papers stacked or strewn over every inch of space. Starsky fried hamburger patties, slapped them in buns with condiments and toppings, and fed himself *and* Hutch--literally, sticking one bite at a time under Hutch's nose until his mouth opened and accepted the food--while the student mumbled ridiculous terminology, flipped pages, and marked random passages with a felt-tip pen.

After dinner, Hutch carted a full third of the table's academic contents into the living room and commandeered the recliner. Starsky cleaned up in the kitchen and dug through his briefcase for the case files that required grading. If Hutch didn't intend to take at least the night before Thanksgiving break off--Starsky's suggestion that he do so had been received with wide, blue-eyed panic and utter silence--then there was no need for Starsky to make fun or erotic plans best implemented by two participants.

At first, Starsky relished the physical closeness of his partner. He caught peripheral glimpses of a handsome, lanky blond curled in a position emphasizing long, muscular legs, and Hutch's presence made the living room warm and inviting. Lounging on the sofa in the best angle for

discreet Hutch-watching, Starsky succeeded in grading three case files before the one disadvantage of Hutch's proximity broke his concentration.

"Enteroviruses...polioviruses, coxsackieviruses, echoviruses...inhabit gastrointestinal tract...three known polioviruses, twenty-three group A coxsackieviruses--"

Starsky hastily scribbled a line through the "group A" he'd marked over a cadet's incorrect arresting officer write-up. "Hutch!"

"Six group B coxsackievir--Hm, Starsk?"

"Is there a definite benefit in reading that stuff aloud?"

"I--" Hutch glanced away from his textbook. "I wasn't reading out loud."

"Oh, no?" Starsky smothered a developing smirk. "I guess I just learned about the twenty-three group A cox-something viruses from recliner-to-sofa osmosis."

Hutch's ears and cheeks pinked nicely, making Starsky want to kiss his favorite med student, but Hutch was already nose-deep in the book again. Sighing at the missed opportunity, Starsky returned to composing a diplomatic means of informing Cadet Lester that his case file, if real, would give every member of the DA's office cramps from gut-splitting laughter.

"...usually infect humans as a result of ingestion of fecally contaminated material--"

"Oh, that's disgusting!" Starsky slapped the case file shut.

Hutch looked up and over his legs to scan the living room floor. "What? More of those weird, fuzzy bugs?"

"No, babe, no fuzzy bugs." Starsky started to leave the sofa, but Hutch's quizzical expression slowed his ascent.

"Where you going?"

Starsky gave him an indulgent smile. "Blondie, I can take whatever you dish out, but writing about fecally contaminated material on Lester's case file is probably not the best way to tell him he can't write a case for shit."

Obviously swallowing laughter, Hutch gathered his books and waved the armful at Starsky. "No, stay put. You're comfortable. I'll sprawl on the spare bed."

Starsky watched the exodus, shaking his head at the odd bits of paper and index cards trailing in Hutch's wake. *Well, now I won't have to set out breadcrumbs for him to find his way back to the living room.* In the ensuing silence, he finished Lester's file and delighted in the next of the batch. Cadet Armstrong had written a case even Dobey couldn't mutter over. *Now, this young woman has real potential if she can get over her hang-up about frisking people.*

Reaching for another file, he paused mid-stretch. A metallic clanging filtered down the hall from the second bedroom. Starsky cringed. He didn't know where Hutch had picked up the idea of tapping his pen against the headboard rails while studying on his old brass bed, but it was a habit that refused exorcism by any means short of a drastic list of possibilities Starsky didn't want to consider. *Getting closer to it, though.*

In the end, he turned on the television and lowered the volume to a non-distracting hum sufficient for drowning out clanging. By the time the large batch of case files were completely graded and ready for re-distribution, absence of noise had distracted Starsky and made him think more kindly about checking on Hutch.

Hard-earned beer in hand, Starsky started toward the hall doorway, but the kitchen's wall phone jangled and startled him. Muttering at the beer splash on his wrist and shirt cuff, he backed up three steps and seized the phone. "Starsky."

"How fares the medical school spouse?"

Starsky smiled. "Hi, Katherine. I'm doing okay. I know a little more about gastro viruses than I ever wanted, but they say all education's a good thing."

Katherine laughed. "More reason I'm glad Jon's an architect. How's my big brother, or does he seem to be enjoying the gastro viruses?"

"He was courting a bop on the head earlier, but he wisely shifted the base of operations. He has an early final next week, so he's studying 'round the clock. Don't tell him I told you, but I could've fed him a salami-and-sardine sandwich at dinner and he would've had no clue."

"Until it hit him later," Katherine said, laughing harder. "Listen, I won't disturb him. I just called to tell him that Eric is fine. I took him to see Dr. Cooper this morning, and he has a minor ear infection, but that's all."

Starsky set his beer on the counter and massaged his forehead. "He been sick long? Hutch didn't say--"

"No, not long. Actually, I called yesterday and in the course of the conversation, I mentioned that Eric had been more irritable than usual. Hutch pinned me down for details, and he had me worried about mastoid-something--"

"Mastoiditis?" Starsky asked, tracing the can top with his forefinger. "I heard him muttering about that a couple nights ago. Sounded pretty serious."

"Yes, it can be, apparently. But Eric's no candidate for it, thank goodness."

Starsky looked across the room at the kitchen clock. Hutch in medical school meant a clock in every room to ensure punctuality and proper rationing of study time between subjects. "How's everyone else? Getting late where you are. Busy day?"

Katherine sighed heavily. "Busy is one word for it. We're fine, David. Alexis had junior high basketball practice, and she insists on being ten minutes early. Grace is in the elementary school Thanksgiving play tomorrow night, and this evening was dress rehearsal. Add that to a morning spent with a three-year old in the pediatrician's office, and a catered lunch party for Jon's partners and a new associate, and you have the perfect description of chaos. I'm the only one awake in the house right now, and I'm thinking seriously about a Calgon bath and a glass of wine."

"You deserve more than that! Jon better be planning to take you away somewhere soon."

"He's promising me a romantic getaway. Luckily we won't have to worry about babysitters. Mom and Dad--" Katherine fell silent.

Starsky gripped the beer can. "Katherine, it's okay. You can still bring them up in conversation. I'm not fragile."

Another sigh, heavier than the last, preceded another awkward silence. Eventually Katherine said, "I know you're not. Maybe I'm the fragile one. Ken had made such strides re-establishing a strong connection. I remember Mom inviting her Tea and Antiques Society to see the movie Ken worked on during your case, and Dad took his entire firm out to eat at the fanciest restaurant in Duluth the day you two received commendations from the mayor--"

"They just turned their eyes from the gritty realities of what we did on the job."

"Well, yes, of course. Truthfully, David, after a certain point, they just had to leave him in your hands and hope for the best. We all did. I thought Ken's decision to finally become a doctor after all these years would initiate grand rejoicing and festivities the likes of which Duluth has never seen--"

"That might've happened, but Hutch leaving the force and entering med school couldn't trump *me*."

"Ken needs to work on his delivery, that's the problem. He told them about med school and his sexual orientation in the same breath. To be precise, he told them about his relationship with you *first*. Was that supposed to be anything but volatile?"

Starsky loosened his grip on the can before he caused it, or his hand, injury. "You might call it volatile. I call it something else."

"What?"

"One of the reasons I'm in love with him."

This silence ended with a tiny cough. "David, I'm sorry. That must have sounded--"

"Don't be," Starsky interrupted, "I'm used to it by now. We both are. Look, why don't I let you get started on that relaxation, and I'll pass your message along. Glad to hear Eric's all right. Tell Grace to steal the show tomorrow night and Alexis to work on her hook shot."

"David--"

"Good night, Katherine." Starsky hung up the phone with only a twinge of regret. Katherine meant no harm, but her careless comments could hurt regardless of their benign intent. Worse, they could hurt Hutch, so discouraging them only made sense.

The next phone call caught him mid-swallow and one step from the hall entrance. Raising the beer can in a salute to the phone, Starsky backtracked once more and grabbed the receiver.
"Starsky."

"David, it's Edith. I hope I'm not calling too late."

"Course not. You know you're welcome to call anytime. How's it going?"

"Better now. The doctor gave Harold a clean bill of health... well, except for the usual diet, moderate exercise, and lower stress level lecture."

"Wait a minute. Has the captain been sick--I didn't know--"

"That's why I'm calling. He wasn't feeling well last week and I finally talked him into speaking to Hutch about it. Hutch urged him to see his doctor because of some prostate concern, but nothing's wrong, thank the Lord. I know Hutch is probably neck-deep in studying, but if you'd tell him that Harold's fine, I'd appreciate it. I'm sorry to run, but Rosie has a test tomorrow and it's past her bedtime so I need to help her study."

"Sure thing. Hey, listen, glad to hear nothing's wrong. Tell the captain to take it easy and give Rosie a good luck hug for me, 'kay?"

"Of course, David. Have a good night, and tell Hutch not to study too hard."

"Too late," Starsky laughed. "Night, Edith." Hanging up the phone, he decided the beer was a lost cause and went over to dump it in the sink. He whistled as the liquid flowed, but the jangling cut short his melody. He left the can sitting in the sink and crossed the short space to the phone.
"Switchboard. How may I direct your call?"

"I know better than to ask for Doctor Blondie."

"He's not a doctor yet, Huggy, but if he survives this round of finals, I think his chances double. What can I do for you?"

"You can give Soon-to-Be-Doctor Blondie a message for me."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"Tell him not to hassle my waitresses about their health. He came in for lunch between classes yesterday and got Carrie all worried about a mole on her arm. So worried she took today off to see a dermatologist. Before yesterday, I doubt she knew a dermatologist from a derringer."

"Is she okay?"

Huggy sounded distinctly irritated, "Yes, she's fine. Called me a while ago and said she'd be in tomorrow, usual time."

"Well, that's great."

"You're missing the point, genius."

"Wouldya prefer she had something horrible like skin cancer?"

"Oh, forget it. Tell Blondness to wait until he has his degree to hang out his shingle or I'll find a way to double his tab."

"Like it'll ever get paid anyway. Nite-nite, Huggy."

Huggy mumbled a few things that would have shocked anyone but Starsky, and a click was followed by the dial tone. Starsky yawned and slammed the phone back in place. "Do. Not. Ring," he ordered it sternly. Halfway to the hall entrance, he felt optimistic about getting a night's sleep. Four steps into the hall, he broke into a grin and a renewed whistle.

The whistling died when he reached the second bedroom's doorway. He had expected to find Hutch zonked on top of a pile of books. The actual explanation for the silence was more disturbing. In full meditation posture, Hutch sat dead center on top of the bed, surrounded by books like a druid shrine encircled by stones, and staring at one book in particular with the same mesmerized stare a druid worshiper might wear during a ceremony.

"Damn," Starsky said softly, afraid to jar Hutch with normal volume. "If I'd known you were awake, I wouldn't have played answering service."

Hutch lifted his eyes. Starsky wasn't sure exactly where the baby blue gaze landed, but it definitely passed straight through him. "Answering service?"

"Yeah, all those phone calls."

"Phone calls?"

Starsky shook his head and reached the bed in two strides, closing the nearest textbook to the human altar on the bed. "That's it. Enough's enough. Bedtime, gorgeous."

Hutch grew alert, then. "Starsky, are you nuts? I have a good two more hours before--"

"No, you don't. You're done for the night." He closed another book.

Hutch re-opened both of them. "Hard work now will pay off on match-day when I get placed at a good hospital."

"Listen, match-day is a long way off and it won't matter where you get placed if you go crackers beforehand. You're cross-eyed, damn it."

"I am not; that's ridiculous."

"Yeah? How many fingers am I holding up?" Starsky elevated his left middle finger and waited. Hutch squinted at the hand.

"One."

Starsky waited a beat more. Nothing was forthcoming, and he sighed. "The fact that you didn't comment on which finger concerns me even more. Unfold those legs, Hutch, it's beddy-bye for you."

Hutch lifted both hands and rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. "Starsky, I'm sorry, but if you're thinking--"

Taking advantage of Hutch's visual distraction, Starsky shut all of the textbooks. "Come on, you know me better'n that. I wouldn't proposition you when you're this exhausted. I just wanna fall asleep holding something besides your pillow tonight, and I want you to have some higher brain function and eyesight left tomorrow."

Hutch lowered his hands and blinked. Then his tired eyes flashed and roved, and Starsky could sense his slacks and light turtleneck fading away under the stare. Hutch smacked his lips, "Man, you have a body that should never be ignored, but you haven't been getting much lately."

Starsky shrugged. "Which means you've been getting equally little. I figure, long's we're in the same boat, I'll survive...."

Hutch winced. "Misery loves company, you mean?"

"No, dum-dum. If you're getting some, and I'm not, it means you're getting it with someone else!"

Hutch yawned through a smile. "Never happen. You give me everything I need, and then some." Starsky watched him try to stand with precise bearing, but Hutch wobbled like a newborn colt and Starsky decided to take action, tucking a velour-sleeved arm in his and leading the sleepy student from the room.

Hutch refused help with undressing, so Starsky pulled back the covers and busied himself fluffing pillows, but silence again warned him of something amiss. Turning, he found Hutch standing with an armful of their gathered clothing...and half-asleep on his feet. "You've got to take a break, lover, or I'll end up scraping you off the floor." He took the armful of clothes from Hutch and guided him to his side of the bed. "Sit down and fall back. I'll rearrange you in a minute."

Clothes deposited in their bathroom hamper, Starsky returned and paused a few feet from the bed, smiling in spite of his concern. Hutch had taken him at his word. The balls of his feet still touched the floor, but his upper body had lounged backward, blond head pointed toward Starsky's side of the bed.

"Only you, Hutch." Flipping the light and plunging the room into silver, moonlight-tinged darkness, he eased into bed and lifted Hutch by the shoulders, shifting him until they could lie

together. Hutch squirmed around, maneuvering an arm across Starsky's middle and resting his weary head on his favorite spot just beneath Starsky's shoulder.

Starsky coughed.

Instantly, the feathery touch of fine hair lifted from his chest and an alert, focused, and clinical gaze speared him. "Starsk, I've been meaning to talk to you about that cough."

"What about it?"

"You've had it for a while now."

"So? You know I had that cold a couple weeks back. Cough's just being stubborn."

"I don't think so. Last night I heard you wheezing after you rearranged your bookshelf."

"I wasn't wheezing. I don't even know from wheezing. Just catching my breath. What's the deal, Hutch?"

"I think you should get an appointment with your primary care doc. What you're experiencing could be intrinsic asthma."

"Asthma! Listen, Dr. Kildare, I got no asthma, okay? Only frail, sickly kids and old people get asthma."

Hutch sat up in the middle of their bed and glared down at him. "You know, that's just the kind of nonsense that keeps some children--and some adults--from properly treating their asthmatic conditions! The stigma society has placed on young people who have to use inhalers and--"

"Hutch!" Starsky sat up to equalize the height advantage. If he had to endure a lecture, he wouldn't be talked down to by a nude man yawning wide enough to swallow the bed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to slam on kids with asthma. But I've never had asthma a day in my life, and I'm not starting now."

"That's just the point! Intrinsic asthma is different from allergic asthma. You could be perfectly healthy and have bacteria in your lungs that your body reacts to in an asthmatic manner. Once you've had a round of antibiotics to clear the infection, the asthma symptoms disappear. Why don't you schedule an appointment to see--"

"No!" Starsky's yell clearly startled Hutch, and he offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry. It's just...it's a damn good thing I don't have arresting authority right now, because I'd be hard-pressed to avoid busting you for practicing medicine without a license."

"*What?* I am *not* practicing--"

"You know what those phone calls were about? Those *three* phone calls? People calling to inform you they aren't walking around with some dread disease. Eric has an ear infection, not mastoiditis--"

"At his age, his symptoms shouldn't be taken lightly. A three-year-old kid isn't very accurate about pinpointing precise pain location, and--"

"And Dobe doesn't have prostate cancer."

"I *never said* Dobe had prostate cancer! I was concerned about benign enlargement, and furthermore--"

"Huggy is doubling your tab if you cause one of his waitresses to go on a medical goose chase again."

"Goose chase! Do you know the survival rate if malignant melanoma isn't diagnosed early? Furthermore, practicing medicine means delivering a diagnosis and prescribing medicine, which I didn't do. I suggested that a *licensed* physician be consulted, and it sounds like everyone followed my advice to great success."

"Hutch--"

"Am I supposed to just ignore people when they talk to me about their health concerns?"

Starsky scooped forward in the bed and wrapped his arms around his agitated partner. "No, you can't ignore 'em. I just think...aw, hell, I'm too tired to think, and you're worse off'n me. How about a kiss and some sleep, huh?" He released a breath of contentment when Hutch's lips found his neck and lightly nibbled.

They lowered by degrees to the bed and spent the next few minutes in a prolonged kiss that ran hot, turned warm and soothing, strained the limits of lung capacity, and proved to Starsky's satisfaction that he had no asthma, intrinsic or otherwise. Curled together for comfort, he and Hutch let the conversation give way to intimate whispers until they eventually succumbed to sleep.

~*~*~

Wednesday, November 25, 1981

Starsky closed his office door and sank into his swivel chair, drumming his fingers on the desk while he made up his mind. The decision didn't require a long-running mental debate. He towed his phone closer and dialed a number dredged from memory. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to face too many go-betweens.

Relief and good fortune had him tilting back in his chair, no modest achievement in a swivel, when a familiar feminine voice answered on the second ring. "Dr. Simpson."

"Ginny, hi, it's David Starsky."

"Starsky! You're calling me from your hallowed office in the Academy? I'm impressed."

Starsky laughed. "I don't know about hallowed. It's tiny, cluttered, and there's a leak in the ceiling the county doesn't see fit to repair."

"Yes, but it's *your* office, where important decisions are made and planning is done. I hear you're really shaking things up over there."

Starsky was stunned. "*You* hear?"

"Yes, that'll tell you the size of the waves you're making when they reach the ME's office."

"Right, but we talkin' good waves or get-my-tail-fired waves?"

Ginny laughed. "Let me put it this way. The high-ups, with one exception, are thrilled with the rookies who've emerged from your training. Apparently, Ryan is none too happy with Starsky disciples running around, but he'd probably have his butt handed to him if he tried to interfere with your work."

"Disciples!" Starsky sputtered. "Just so y'know, Ginny, I don't have a 'Follow The Starsky Way' cult going down over here."

"I know. Has a nice ring to it, though, doesn't it? What can I help you with?"

"Actually, this is personal."

"Meaning, it involves Hutch."

Starsky held the receiver away from his ear and stared at it. He shook his head and propped the phone back on his shoulder. "Evidence yet again that you're the smartest 'slabologist' over there."

"It's not quantum physics, Starsky. When you say 'personal' in *that* tone of voice, it has to be about Hutch. How's my favorite med student?"

"He's worn down to his molecules from studying, but that's probably not a surprise to you. Otherwise, I think he's fine. But he's changed, and I think it has to do with med school. I thought I'd consult you."

"Changed? How?"

"Well, last year was fine. He studied hard, sure, and wasn't around nearly as much as he used to be, but I could manage that." *And when we were together, oh, boy.* He smiled. "Yeah, last year was fine. It was even fun while he was studying Anatomy, and...and that was probably too much information for you."

Prolonged laughter answered him. After a moment, Ginny made a noise that told Starsky she was drying her eyes. "Whew. That's all right. I can guess how Anatomy might've been a fun class for you to encounter on the sidelines, so to speak. So, last year was fine. What's different about this year?"

"Five years ago, if you told Hutch you were hurting somewhere, feeling under the weather, whatever, he would've told you to up your vitamin intake, go on a fast, do some relaxation exercises, biofeedback, that sort of thing. Now, he's sending everyone we know to the doctor's office at the drop of a hat!"

Ginny sighed. "He's going to be a doctor, Starsky. He has to learn confidence in his profession, doesn't he? Few physicians succeed by trying to solve everything through vitamins and weird dieting. Is he still doing those things himself?"

"Yeah. Last coupla years, he's gone back to his running, his health shakes, working out at Vinny's, all the old health-junkie habits he used to have, and I think they're good for him. They're just not, uh, mass appealing."

"Exactly. He probably decided that what works for him might not always work for other people. I see nothing wrong with that."

"It's not just that, Ginny. He's got people running scared of every disease in the book. Last night he told me I might have intrinsic asthma. He had his sister worried that her kid had mastoiditis. I think Edith was panicked over Dobey having something even worse. The kid just has an ear infection, thankfully, and Dobey's fine, but you see what I mean?"

"Sophomoritis."

The way Ginny spoke, Starsky could just see her nodding her head in the manner of professional verdict delivery. "Wanna run that by me again?"

"Sophomoritis. The second year of med school focuses heavily on the study of disease: etiology, diagnostics, and course of treatment. A lot of second years start diagnosing everything in sight. Anything that moves is liable to have a diagnosis slapped on it. I did it when I was a second year. I can remember it clearly. My family and friends loved me until midway through my third semester. After that, they didn't speak to me until I was a third year and too involved in prepping for clinical rotation to spot diseases everywhere."

"Third year! Ginny, we won't have any friends left if this keeps up until next year. Is there any way to shake him out of it?"

Her initial silence had the warmth of a smile. "He has semester finals coming up soon?"

"Yeah, the first one is the Monday after Thanksgiving break."

"You said he's worn out studying. Don't you get time off from the Academy over Thanksgiving?"

"Yep. I'm finishing up paperwork, then I'm outta here until Monday."

"Good. Take him away somewhere without his textbooks, flashcards, and notes. I'm sure you can figure out how to distract him for a few days."

Starsky felt heat leap to his cheeks. "I'm sure I can think of something."

She chuckled. "Honestly, it would be good for him to have a distraction right now. If he crams too hard, there's the possibility he'll sit down at the exam and go blank. A couple of my fellow students did that, and it can have a devastating psychological impact in the super-stressed world of medical school."

"Okay, sounds like you have a winner plan. I'll convince him he needs a break. Hell, I'll tie him up and tote him to the car if I have to--" Realizing how that sounded, Starsky shut his mouth and smacked himself upside the head with the flat of his palm.

But Ginny was laughing again. "If we keep this conversation running, I'm liable to learn things Hutch probably wouldn't want me to know."

~*~*~

Whistling a popular, catchy tune, Starsky bumped hips with the Torino's door and snapped his fingers as it slapped shut. He caressed the fender on his way past and alternated between a soft shoe and shuffle all the way to the front door. He had to silently admonish another part of his anatomy, happier than his feet, at the thought of having Hutch away from textbooks and flashcards for a long weekend. *Don't count your Hutches before they hatch.*

The house was silent. No sign of Hutch in the living room or kitchen. No Hutch in the makeshift "greenhouse" room. Starsky peeked into their bedroom. The bed remained unmade and tousled, and a trail of clothes leading to the bathroom hinted at a recent Hutch presence, but there was no sexy blond to be found.

Sudden metallic clanking solved the mystery. Starsky put his hands over his ears and headed for the spare bedroom. He nearly fell into the room from shock at the sight that greeted him. "What the--?"

With his head nestled on a pillow at the foot of the bed, Hutch lay on his back holding a textbook aloft over his face, and tapping the brass rails with the ballpoint pen clutched firmly between his toes.

"Okay, there's just something criminally wrong with *that*," Starsky said. He rushed to the bed and grabbed the book from Hutch's hands.

"Hey!"

Starsky dropped the book on the pile of other study materials where the pillow used to lie. "I thought you were gonna sleep in today. Rest your eyes."

"I did," Hutch insisted, blinking rapidly.

"Right. Five'll get you ten, you were outta that bed the minute you heard my car pull out of the drive."

"Not quite, smart ass. I waited a good twenty minutes."

"In case I came back to check on you."

Hutch froze him with the ice stare. "I couldn't fall back asleep. There was no reason to stay in bed."

"Whatever." Starsky rubbed his hands together. "Guess what I got in store for us? You've been studying every waking minute. It's time you had a break. I thought a little romantic cottage by the sea? Just the thing, huh...say, Pismo Beach? You loved camping there last summer. 'Course, this time I thought we could go more luxurious than a tent, but--"

The ballpoint pen fell from Hutch's toes as he pulled himself to an upright position. "Starsk, it's a nice thought, but there's no way I can, not right now, you have no idea how much I have to--"

"No, you don't. I have it on good authority from a medical school veteran that you need a break if you wanna do well on your exam Monday."

Hutch narrowed his eyes in a suspicious squint. "What med school veteran could you talk to about me?"

"What, you think I'm making this up? I called Ginny. She said if you cram too hard, you're asking for a meltdown when you get to the exam."

"No offense to Ginny, but that's ridiculous. Maybe that was true for her, but my study ethic never caused me problems." Hutch leaned over, the movement slightly hitched rather than smooth, and reached for his books.

Starsky struggled against rising irritation. He hated to play his 'I-need-you card,' disliked the ploy especially under the current circumstances, but saw little alternative. He sat down on the bed and pried Hutch's hands from the textbook. "Maybe you don't think you need a break, but I do. Need a break, that is. If you want this relationship to last through med school in a recognizable form, I need some time with you away from disease and diagnosis. Used to be, I knew exactly when you'd last clipped your nails 'cause of how your hands felt on me. Remind me what that was like, Hutch. That familiarity."

Hutch slid his hands up Starsky's sleeves until long fingers squeezed his shoulders and signaled an impending kiss. Starsky closed his eyes and waited, fighting the urge to sigh out loud when Hutch's lips met his. Hutch caressed Starsky's neck on his way to tangling fingers in his hair, and Starsky responded instantly, slipping his arms around Hutch's waist and pulling their bodies taut. Escaping to beautiful places in the kiss, Starsky barely registered the slight hiss of pain, but his 'Protect Hutch Alarm,' activated even in the middle of passion, rang loudly in his head and forced him to release his partner. "What's wrong?"

"Muscle catch." Hutch winced. "I've been lying all over this bed studying in some positions my body probably didn't appreciate."

Something about the explanation rang more alarm bells, but Starsky couldn't isolate the reason. "Well, you can lie around in a hammock all day in the ocean breeze, just as soon as you throw some easy-to-remove clothes in a duffel and--"

The image clearly didn't appeal to Hutch. "No, Starsky. I'll put aside the books, but let's not do the road trip thing right now. I'd rather go away somewhere with you when I can really appreciate the time off. We can barbeque, go get ice cream at your favorite spot, stop by the beach here if you want... Maybe over semester break we can take a *real* vacation together."

Starsky sighed. "Okay, deal. I'll cancel the reservations."

"You made reservations?"

"Yeah, called from the Academy right before I left."

Hutch scratched through the hair curling over Starsky's left ear. "Ah, Starsk, I'm sorry. I'm just not in the mood for--"

"For a road trip. Even a relatively short one like Pismo Beach. That's all right. Nothing lost as long as I get some quality time with you. We'll stay here. On one condition." Starsky leaned over Hutch's legs and began scooping textbooks into his arms.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm locking your books, papers, and flashcards in my trunk, and you won't have access to a key." Arms full, he slipped off the bed backwards. "Rest of the junk's in your satchel, right?"

Hands on his hips, Hutch glared at him from his perch on the bed. "Starsky, this is juvenile. If you can't trust a rational, thirty-six-year-old adult to take a break when he says he'll--"

"You're a med student. Those aren't rational creatures, b'lieve me. I can pinpoint the exact time of your change to an irrational being. At precisely five-fifteen p.m., August 23, 1980, you walked in the door--not this door, my old apartment door, of course--from your first day of classes."

"I was a student before then, Starsk. You're forgetting the night school Chemistry classes I had to take to refresh for the MCAT."

Starsky groaned. "I'm not forgetting them. I've tried to move beyond them. What I remember is I was still in what you called 'crucial recovery' and you wouldn't go out to night class unless I had two people babysitting me. What you didn't know is Edith and Huggy get along like two thieves, and I babysat *them* through wild games of checkers, Uno, you name it, if it had a board or cards, they played it. Except strip poker, the gods be praised."

"It was just twice a week, Starsky. That's why I took the night sessions. That, and because they started in late September. August '79, you were still too high risk for me to consider leaving you alone, even with skilled sitters. Just think, Starsky, how far you've come in a little over two

years. Yeah, I'm in med school, but *you*--you're practically running your section of the Academy."

"You're not distracting me with flattery, babe, or a trip down memory lane. My original point, before you so shrewdly interrupted, was that it's telling when I can remember the exact minute you arrived home from your first day of med school. The Hutch of that morning and the Hutch of that evening were two different guys. I love 'em both, and I always will, but when this one tells me he's taking a break from studying, I'm gonna make sure he does." Starsky shifted his armful of books and papers and left the room in a brisk stride.

"You're psychotic, you know that!" Hutch growled hoarsely, padding along behind him. "What did Ginny do, cast some kind of coroner's spell on you?"

"Where's your satchel?"

"Not telling."

Starsky glared over his shoulder. "Satchel, Hutchinson!"

"Bathroom!" Hutch snapped.

Starsky hung a quick left into their bedroom on a beeline for the bathroom. "That would explain the trail of clothing? So you could find your way back to the satchel?"

Hutch stooped and picked up the discarded jeans and long-sleeved jersey. "No, asshole, I put those on after my bath, but they made me hot, and I changed into these."

Starsky paused for a quick, appreciative glance at Hutch's gym shorts and sleeveless t-shirt. *Hot? Absolutely. In those, you're scorching.* "I'm guessin' the bath explains the satchel in the bathroom?"

"If you must know my every movement today, Instructor Starsky, yes, I reviewed a few things while I--while I soaked." He dumped the clothes in the hamper.

Starsky stared at him. *If you just put those on this morning, why are you dumping them in the dirty clothes hamper?* A more critical thought laid siege to the front of his mind. "Good God. You've gone from two-minute locker room showers at the station to *study baths*? I may lock these books in the trunk until New Years."

"Not if you don't want me taking a K-12 to your precious Tomato."

"I'd like to see you get your hands on a K-12." Starsky bent down beside the tub and managed to work the satchel's carrying strap over his shoulder.

"I have friends in the Fire Department, buddy."

Starsky edged by the blond wall in the bathroom doorway. "Nobody who doesn't know what would happen to 'em if they let you borrow a sharp instrument with malicious intent to the Torino in mind. Is this all of it? All your study stuff?"

"Why don't you haul a forensics team down here from Metro and have them do a search?"

"Tsk, tsk, Hutch. I'm doing this for your own good. You'll reap the benefits, I promise." Halfway to the front door, Starsky heard another small noise of pain. He turned sharply. "What, what's going on?"

Hutch's face cleared instantly. "Stubbed my toe. Look, will you hurry with the nonsense already? I'll be in the greenhouse. At least my plants haven't turned into prison wardens."

Indulging in another headshake, Starsky carted his load to the Torino, fiddled one-handed with the trunk's key lock until it opened, and unceremoniously dumped the entirety of Hutch's medical school paraphernalia into the trunk, shoving everything toward the back. Once he had the trunk locked again, he began devising a hiding place for his key. He would need to get Hutch's set of spare Torino keys as well. That shouldn't be too difficult.

By the time Starsky reached the "greenhouse," Hutch seemed in better spirits. He didn't tense or shrug when Starsky inched up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist. In fact, he let himself rest in Starsky's embrace. "Haven't exactly been a barrel of laughs recently, have I?"

Starsky kissed his shoulder, nosed through soft hair at the nape of his neck and planted kisses there. "Aw, you've been fine, Hutch. I was mostly teasing, and you know it. I imagine some people go much crazier in med school than you have."

"I love you, Starsk. You know what I haven't seen in a while? The way your eyes widen right before you make that little gasp that tells me you're about to come. Sometimes you shout, sometimes you go all quiet and your face tenses up, but you always make that little gasp first. Sounds almost like a little hiccup. I want to hear it."

"Keep talkin' like that," Starsky choked out, "and you'll hear it sooner'n you think."

Hutch made a half-turn and latched his arms behind Starsky's neck. "Take me to bed."

Starsky kissed him. "What about lunch? You had anything to eat all day?"

"Not hungry." Hutch kissed his chin. "For food. Not hungry for food."

Starsky pulled his chin back from the tempting mouth. "Hutch, y'feeling okay?"

"I'll be feeling more than okay if you'll quit with the fidgets and let me suck you off."

"What you're really saying is you want my ass."

Hutch grinned. "That, too."

Drawing his hands in an extended caress toward Hutch's groin, Starsky abruptly changed direction and pushed his fingers beneath the t-shirt, searching for bare skin. Just as he registered the heat beneath his touch, the recipient of his stroking gave a substantially louder cry. Starsky dropped his hand. "Okay, out with it! What's going on?"

Hutch looked embarrassed. "I have a nervous stomach. Funny, a guy my age developing a flaring case of test anxiety, but there you have it."

"Bullshit. This ain't test anxiety. You haven't been able to eat today?"

The flush on Hutch's cheeks deepened. "I...I couldn't keep breakfast down this morning."

Starsky had to keep his hands from reaching for Hutch's neck to deliver a good shake. "Why didn't you call and tell me you were sick? You knew I was just there playing catch-up with paperwork."

"Oh, come on, Starsky. It's just nerves, for God's sake. I'm not a little boy who has to call you whenever I start freaking out about a final exam."

Plagued by suspicion, Starsky left the greenhouse and didn't stop until he reached the dirty clothes hamper in their master bathroom. He dug for Hutch's discarded clothing and brought the jersey to his face. The pungent sweat odor made him flinch before he could even sniff the material. He dropped the shirt and hurried back to Hutch, where he found him leaning on the folding card table used for botanical surgery.

"You've been running a burning fever," Starsky accused, gripping Hutch's arms and helping him straighten. "But you're only moderately hot right now. What'd you take? A whole bottle of Tylenol?"

"Starsky, if you get any weirder, I'm calling the people in white coats, I swear."

Starsky seized his hand and started for the door. "Where's your nearest pair of shoes?"

"What the hell--"

"We're going to the hospital, that's what's the hell. Shoes, Hutch?"

"Living room. Starsky, I'm *not* going to the hospital, and will you please *let me go*?"

"Not this time. You're reminding me of Uncle Al."

"What the--! If I'm reminding you of Al, you're the one who needs medical intervention. I can't believe I'm letting you tow me down the hall like a little kid."

Starsky scanned the living room. "Shoes, shoes. There. Good, your slip-ons. Step into 'em, and let's go."

"I'm not stepping into anything until you start making sense."

"I told you. You're reminding me of Uncle Al when he had appendicitis. Remember, few years back? Aunt Rose called the station and Dobey let me leave 'cause they were doing emergency surgery. Doc said by the time they got Al to the OR, his appendix was about to rupture."

"Yes, I remember, but this is nothing like that, buddy. If anything, it's some little stomach bug. I'll be a hundred percent after a day of rest and fluids--"

"Yeah? That's what Uncle Al thought, too. Fever, nausea, didn't want to eat, stomach pain, cranky as hell. He howled and cussed when Aunt Rose wanted him to go to the doctor. I'm not taking chances with you."

Hutch folded his arms over his chest and smiled. It was a patronizing smile that had physician-to-be written all over it, and Starsky knew he was in for a battle. "I understand your concern, and I love you for it, but there's absolutely, positively no way I'm spending part of my Thanksgiving break in a crowded ER for some resident to tell me what I already know--to rest, pour down fluids..."

Starsky matched the folded arms battle posture. "Absolutely no way?"

"None. Whatsoever."

~*~*~

Dr. Trevor Mannigan sensed a presence beside him and looked away from the disturbing tox-screen results on a thirteen-year-old boy. Bambi smiled at him. "Guess who's in Exam Seven?"

"Who might that be?"

"One of your more startling success stories: former policeman who absorbed a series of automatic bullets and lived to talk about it."

"Detective Starsky? What's David doing here? Is he--?"

Bambi's quick headshake relieved him. "No, he's not the injured party. He brought in his former partner, who is loudly and creatively expressing his dissatisfaction in being here as well as the lack of sense in it."

Mannigan nodded. "Yes, that sounds like Detective Hutchinson. Come to think of it, I can't call him that now. He should be in his third semester of medical school. You've prepped and taken chart?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here. I think you'll want this one. Looks to me like we have an appendix about to cause trouble."

Trevor Mannigan did not bristle at her off-the-cuff diagnosis. He encouraged his nurses to have brains of their own, and he welcomed their input as long as they followed procedure and ethical guidelines. This nurse had her fair share of brains and input worthy of attention. Her unusual name and bouncy mop of strawberry curls didn't fool anyone. Bambi was the senior nurse

currently on staff at Memorial, and residents and junior physicians looked up to her with awe she deserved rather than commanded.

"I'll be right there. Convince him not to walk out or we won't see him again until he suffers a rupture, if then. Sometimes pain eases on perforation, and he might not realize the danger until he's septic."

Bambi's grin had a slightly wicked tinge. "Don't worry about him signing out. I have a feeling Starsky would sit on him first. I gather he threatened to burn the patient's school notes in order to get him here."

Mannigan smiled. "That sounds like David. Man of persuasion and, when needed, definitive action."

~*~*~

Starsky was getting the silent treatment from his partner, who was shivering in the thin hospital gown. "Hutch, I'm sorry about this. If the doctor tells you there's nothing to worry about, you can go home and break one o' my model ships or something if that'll make you feel better."

"Burning it would be more appropriate."

Starsky was happy to hear his lover's voice, but he frowned at the implied accusation. "I didn't actually burn your notes."

"Just the idea! You'd do less harm burning my books. I can replace *them*. Those notes are irreplaceable."

"Which is why I didn't threaten to burn your books. I had to wield maximum leverage to get you here."

"*You* better be glad *I* no longer have arresting authority. I'd haul your ass in for conspiracy to commit arson."

Starsky's outraged reply didn't have a chance to materialize. The door opened and their nurse returned followed by a tall man of distinguished bearing whom Starsky recognized.

Previously lounging casually on the exam bed, Hutch now attempted to sit up, and the expression on his face was as crisp and respectful as a salute. "Dr. Mannigan."

Dr. Mannigan waved him down. "Lie back and relax. I hear you're not feeling too well, Hutch."

Hutch flushed. "It's nothing to waste your valuable time on, Doctor. Just a stomach bug. Starsky tends to be very protective of my health."

Dr. Mannigan included Starsky in a nod of approval then focused on Hutch. "I think we both know you would have insisted your friend come in if he were the one experiencing concerning

symptoms. Why don't you tell me what you've been feeling today? Extra points for accuracy and detailed information."

Starsky hid a grin. This was no baby-faced resident. If Dr. Mannigan couldn't bring Hutch in line, no one could. Indeed, Hutch looked like he'd been called on to answer a question in class. "Generalized abdominal pain, centering this afternoon in my lower right quadrant, low-grade fever that increased, nausea and vomiting, followed by repressed appetite."

"And, if I might test the second-year medical student, what does that sound like to you?"

Hutch wouldn't look at Starsky. "Could be one of a number of conditions, from a virus to gastritis or diverticulitis, but the possibility of appendicitis has to be ruled out."

"Right." Dr. Mannigan stepped between Starsky's chair and the bed, but Starsky could tell he was using his stethoscope to listen to Hutch's chest. "Deep breath. I assume you're doing well in school?"

"Top marks last year, Doc," Starsky answered quickly, catching a smile from Nurse Bambi.

"Glad to hear it. Another deep breath, please. When I write a recommendation letter for someone, I like to be kept apprised of their progress. A phone call to let me know you did well your first year would have been appreciated, Hutch."

Starsky couldn't see Hutch's face, but he knew it probably held enough red to paint the Torino. "I apologize, Dr. Mannigan. I didn't want to be a bother. You treat so many patients, stay so busy."

"Actually, Doc," Starsky interjected, "he talked about calling you, but he thought it'd come across as bragging."

Bambi chuckled, and Dr. Mannigan moved down the bedside, freeing Starsky's view of Hutch, who shot his would-be helpful partner a "why are you doing this to me?" look. Dr. Mannigan was oblivious to the facial byplay, pressing his hands on various points along Hutch's stomach. Hutch's expression changed to agony, and he exhaled a moan that had Starsky tensing from head to toe.

Dr. Mannigan straightened and motioned at Bambi. "Call for Waters. Let's go ahead and get Hutch hooked up with IV fluids, and draw blood for a CBC." She nodded briskly and left the room, and Dr. Mannigan looped his stethoscope over his shoulders. "I'm glad you came in. It's my professional opinion that you require surgery. Confirmatory exploration, at first, but I think an appendectomy is in your immediate future."

Starsky left the chair and pulled up short at Hutch's side. His instinct had been to brush the wayward hair from Hutch's forehead and press his palm to his cheek for a moment of comfort, but gestures like those were telling, perhaps too telling for Hutch's taste. Oh, who cared? Hutch could yell at him later. He followed through with his instinct, but Hutch was too surprised at the doctor's pronouncement to notice, judging from his open-mouthed stare at Dr. Mannigan.

"That's a bit...drastic, isn't it?" Hutch asked.

Dr. Mannigan's piercing eyes held a convincing argument, but he didn't act miffed at the question. "Your respirations are retractive, and your pain is centered over McBurney's point. You have abdominal rigidity and classic symptoms of appendicitis. If you were in my shoes and a patient presented with those clinical findings, what would you do?"

Hutch sighed. "Call for a surgical consult."

"As I've done. Dr. Waters is a fine surgeon. He'll have the final call, and your blood work will tell us more, but you should be prepared to wheel straight from here into the OR."

Starsky squeezed his partner's shoulder. "Is he in danger of it rupturing any second, Doc? Isn't it dangerous when it bursts? I mean, shouldn't you have him hooked up to some kinda machine so you can watch for it?"

Hutch smiled up at him. "It's okay, Starsk."

"That would be nice, David," Dr. Mannigan said, and his gaze was no longer sharp. "Unfortunately, such a machine doesn't exist." The door opened, and their nurse entered, carrying a tray of unpleasant-looking instruments and an IV bag. "Bambi will take excellent care of you," Dr. Mannigan told Hutch, indicating her with a flick of his wrist. "I'll be back to check on you and hear what Dr. Waters has to say."

"Doctor, I--" Hutch bit his lip. "I have a final exam Monday."

Dr. Mannigan didn't smile, but his lips twitched, and Starsky could've sworn he caught a hint of smile in the softer green eyes. "If all goes well, and there's no perforation or resultant abscess requiring drainage, you should be present and accounted for during your exam. Who's your professor?"

"Dr. Vincent."

"I know him. If for any reason you're still unwell and unable to take the final, I'll give Vincent a call. He may seem as inaccessible as deity in the classroom, but he listens to reason from a colleague."

Hutch sighed audibly, the sound instantly identifiable as relief. "Thank you."

"You concentrate on resting. Doctor's orders."

~*~*~

The room was quiet. Starsky had a few minutes with Hutch before Bambi returned to take him to the preoperative staging area. Dr. Waters had confirmed Dr. Mannigan's diagnosis and seemed even more anxious to put Hutch under the knife. Hutch was strangely silent. Starsky stroked his hair, reached down to hold his non-IV hand, and whispered soft words in his ear, but he couldn't evoke a response. Finally, sensing the time of temporary separation drawing close, he cleared his throat and said, somewhat louder, "Hutch, I wish you wouldn't go into surgery mad at me. Tell me what I can do to make things better."

Hutch turned his head quickly at that, and his smile went a long way toward soothing Starsky's anxiety. "Love, I'm not mad at *you*. I'm mad at me. I can spout diagnoses for everyone else, and turn out wrong ninety-nine percent of the time, but I can't even spot a classic case of appendicitis in myself."

Starsky felt clouds gathering beneath his feet. Hutch didn't call him "Love" every day, and the occasions he did were consequently special and to be remembered, but sympathy for Hutch's predicament didn't allow Starsky to linger on the clouds. "You're feeling horrible, aren'tcha? All of that baloney about stubbed toes and muscle catches...you've had a miserable day, or am I wide of the mark?"

"No, you're right. I've been miserable since I woke up this morning, and the pain and misery increased as the day wore on. I should've known something was wrong when I took a higher than advised dose of Tylenol. You know how much trouble you usually have getting me to take one tablet! And that's a number one no-no, too, because the acetaminophen can mask the pain and symptoms."

"See? I don't think it's that you couldn't spot it; I think you tried so hard *not* to spot it."

Hutch's pained frown lifted to a tender smile. "If it hadn't been for you, I might've perforated and ended up septic at home this afternoon. You saved my life, buddy. That's nothing new, is it? I love you so much it hurts...in a good way."

Floating again, light as air inside, Starsky disregarded the possibility of the nurse walking in on them and bent down to kiss Hutch with all his love and concern competing for expression. Not surprisingly, Hutch could distinguish between the two. His soft blue eyes were warm and comforting when they opened on the other side of the kiss. "Starsky, don't worry about me. This is one of the most common surgeries performed. Dr. Waters could probably complete the procedure blindfolded and with one hand tied behind his back."

"Okay. I'll still be close as they'll let me, every step of the way."

Hutch smiled. "Good. That's where I prefer you to be, partner."

~*~*~

"Mr. Starsky?"

Starsky jumped at the soft sound and hastened from his uncomfortable OR waiting room chair. A petite woman in white standing in the doorway represented relief from the endless, agonizing wait. Her smile weakened his knees in gratitude to whatever lucky star shone on Hutch, because he knew the full gamut of hospital smiles, and this one didn't appear unless everything had gone well.

"Mr. Hutchinson is in recovery. If you'll come with me?"

Starsky followed her eagerly. "How's he doing?"

She smiled over her shoulder. "The surgeon will be by momentarily to speak to you."

The evasion didn't alarm Starsky, who also knew every hospital stonewall. She led him to the Recovery area and a curtained cubicle where Hutch rested in a temporary bed, covered toe to chin with a warm post-surgical blanket. "Starsk..." Hutch mumbled.

"He's been saying that one word at regular intervals since we wheeled him in here and the anesthesia began wearing off," the nurse informed Starsky, smiling. "My co-worker finally looked at his chart, and we figured it was a shortened version of your name. Since you were listed as having medical power of attorney, we decided to bring you in here a little earlier than we allow most visitors."

"Thank you." Starsky gave her his brightest smile, and the young nurse blushed, losing her grip on her clipboard chart and blushing rosier as she stepped backward through the opening in the curtain, drawing it closed. Starsky chuckled. *Davey boy, you've still got it. But you're too hung up on one person to care now.*

"Starsk..."

And that's the one person. "Hutch, can you hear me? I'm right here. It's over, partner. You're in recovery, and the nurse is smiling like there's nothing wrong, so I think we made it."

"Starsky." This time the word had conviction behind it, and Starsky knew he'd been heard and, on some level at least, understood.

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Dr. Mannigan closed the door to Exam 4 and found Bambi waiting for him. "Yes?"

"Starsky is at the nurses' station. He wanted to speak to you."

Mannigan glanced at his watch. "Hutch should be out of surgery now. I'd planned to call up to the OR and track down Waters, but I imagine David can update me. Thank you."

David looked relaxed and free of the tension Mannigan had noticed while examining Hutch earlier. His smile when he spotted Mannigan told the doctor all he needed to know. Hutch had come through surgery with flying colors or that smile wouldn't be nearly as gleaming. "I'm assuming the patient is in excellent condition."

David nodded, still smiling. "He's still in recovery, but he's doing fine, and Dr. Waters said everything went well. The nurse there told me he would probably sleep until they took him to his room. I thought I'd take advantage of the downtime to grab some things he'll need while he's here. Figured you might like to know how everything turned out."

"Yes, I'm glad you stopped by. Hutch seemed in poor spirits earlier, but that's to be expected from a patient facing surgery."

The smile faded and David scratched at his jaw. "Actually, I think Hutch felt bad that he didn't diagnose his own condition."

Mannigan was surprised. He hadn't anticipated that concern. "Ah. I see. *Physician, heal thyself*. Tell Hutch he shouldn't worry too much about that shortcoming. He'll fit right in with the medical community and ninety percent of physicians, including myself."

"He really did appreciate your recommendation letter, Dr. Mannigan."

"I had no difficulty writing one. I saw enough during your recovery to know he was an excellent candidate for medical school. I'm glad to hear things are going well for him."

"He *did* want to call you this spring when he'd finished his first year. You have to understand Hutch. He can mock-brag about things he's actually not the greatest at, and he'll tease about being better at stuff than I am, but when he accomplishes something truly magnificent, like his grades in med school, he has a hard time talking about it."

"Modesty isn't the worst trait known to mankind," Mannigan said kindly.

But David looked abruptly ill at ease. "I'm not sure there's not something 'sides modesty behind that, but well, he's Hutch, and he's great the way he is."

"I can tell he has a rock-solid support system, something crucial for all medical students, regardless of age or circumstance. How have you been doing, David? I'm happy to say it's been a long time since you were a patient here."

David responded with the easygoing grin that was as clear a diagnostic of his overall wellbeing as a blood pressure reading. "I'm fine. Teaching at the Academy's been great. Lots of good cadets coming through the system, and it's a blast to watch 'em shape up into great cops. Look, I know you're busy and I don't want to keep you from patients, I just--" Another grin. "Just wanted to thank you for taking good care of Hutch."

Mannigan knew an attempted quick escape when he saw one. "David, is there something else you wanted to talk about?" He received a nervous chuckle.

"It might seem dumb. Before Hutch went into surgery, he reminded me of something. See, over the last while he's been offering medical opinions to our friends. You know, they'd come to him and ask about health concerns. He always sent them to real doctors--*licensed* docs, I mean--but he'd tell 'em what he thought, and--"

"Sophomoritis," Mannigan said, having to bite down hard on laughter.

David snapped his fingers. "Exactly! He was talking 'bout how he'd been wrong, and I got to thinking, oh-for-four is an unusual batting average for Hutch in *anything*."

"I'm guessing he offered you a medical opinion that you'd like to discuss."

"Yeah. He said I might have intrinsic asthma."

"What reasons did he give?" Mannigan asked, snapping instantly into physician mode.

"Well, couple weeks back I had a bad chest cold, and ever since then, I have this cough that irritates me at times. Hutch said he's heard wheezing, too. I do notice I feel kinda tight in my chest after I've done a workout at the Academy gym. 'Course, I didn't use to put much stock in exercise until after the--the shooting, when I depended on it to make a full recovery."

"With your history of pulmonary injury, I don't want to take chances." Mannigan looked around until he spotted a familiar figure in white pants and pale blue nurse's tunic. "Bambi, is Respiratory Exam clear?"

"Yes. You want me to get spirometry set up?"

"Please." Mannigan turned back to David. "Let me ask you something. Was Hutch upset about the times his opinions were incorrect?"

"Not upset. More frustrated with himself, I think."

"And if this exam reveals nothing, you don't plan on telling him about it at all, do you?"

David looked surprised. "How'd you know?"

"I know you're down here for his sake more than your own. Let's just hope this is another time he was mistaken. I don't want you to be the one who builds his confidence in his diagnostic skills."

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Hutch registered dim lighting and a horrible taste in his mouth. Surgery. He blinked quickly and tried to focus on his surroundings.

"Someone's awake," a happy voice said nearby.

Hutch turned immediately toward the sound. The nauseating taste in his mouth didn't prevent a smile. "Well, well. It's David Starsky, M.D."

"Hutch, I'm no such thing. How you feeling, huh?"

Hutch smacked his lips. "Ick. I'm feeling like I just had surgery."

The sound of the hospital chair's metal legs scraping on the floor announced Starsky's approach. Hutch closed his eyes under the tender brush of fingers over his forehead and through his hair. Those welcome fingertips stroked his throat, caressed his chin. The feel of something scraping his chin startled him and he opened his eyes. "What--Starsk, what's this!"

Starsky looked down. "Damn. I forgot about that. Meant to cut it off before I came back."

"What're *you* doing with a hospital bracelet?"

"Oh, y'know, any time they breathe on you in this place, they have to put their paper jewelry on you."

"What have *they* been doing?"

"It's not important, Hutch. Nothing we need to talk about right now. There anything I can get you? You're on IV fluids only right now, but I could bathe your face with some cool water? How's that sound? Are you hurting?"

Hutch tossed his head on the torturously firm pillow. "I don't want anything but the full explanation for your having a bracelet to match mine."

"Would've gotten away without one, but Dr. Mannigan wanted to do a chest x-ray, and they don't let you wander these halls without tagging you somehow."

"Chest x-ray!"

"Uh, Hutch, you're hooked up to a monitor, so you don't needta get excited, okay?"

"Then tell me, in chronological order and full sentences, why you had a chest x-ray!"

"I asked Dr. Mannigan about the intrinsic asthma. He asked me some questions, listened to my chest, and put me through something called spirometry. Then he sent me to have a chest x-ray. You were right, Hutch. Dr. Mannigan thinks there was-- what'd he call it?--bacterial involvement along with that chest cold a while back, and there's still some infection in my lungs causing me to have asthma-like symptoms. I'm apparently real sensitive to the specific kind of bacteria in there."

"Oh, no." Hutch closed his eyes and weakly lifted his arm to cover his face. "Damn."

"Hey, it's no biggie. Like you said, it's not the long-term kind of asthma most people have. I don't have a bunch of what they call allergic 'triggers' to worry about. Dr. Mannigan gave me an antibiotic and said it would probably clear everything up. He also gave me an inhaler and showed me how to use it, but he said my symptoms have been so mild I probably won't even need it. Unless I get a bad chest infection down the road, I shouldn't have to deal with this again."

"Starsk, I'm sorry. So sorry. Oh, man."

Starsky kissed his cheek. "Think of it this way. You weren't oh-for-four after all. Dr. Mannigan said some seasoned physicians miss intrinsic asthma cases."

An insidious thought took shape and worried Hutch as much as Starsky's news. "You didn't think--you didn't think I *wanted* to be right? I didn't *want* to be right about Eric, Dobey, or Huggy's waitress either. A doctor never *wants* to deliver a less than favorable diagnosis. I was hoping I was wrong, especially in your case!"

Starsky kissed his other cheek, and Hutch felt warm kisses drop on his forehead and ear before Starsky lowered back to the chair and relaxed. "I know you don't want me to have a problem. I'm just sayin' you're really learning something in that medical school, and you're gonna be a top-notch doctor one day."

"Thanks, Starsky, but I don't want to practice on you, all right?"

Starsky grinned. "How about some good news? Dr. Waters said everything went super. You'll be here throughout Thanksgiving tomorrow, but if all goes well, they may spring you Friday afternoon. And I won't keep your books locked in the trunk."

Hutch stretched his arm to card through Starsky's hair. "Oh, yes you will. Between your lung infection and my appendectomy, I think we both deserve a weekend away from anything medical. I want to spend some uninterrupted time with you, though I'll probably be too sore to take real advantage of it."

"I'll pamper you real good," Starsky promised. "You're not worried about your final anymore?"

Hutch smiled and lightly play-punched Starsky's cheek. "You're more important to me than any exam. You're more important to me than medical school, period. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, Doctor."

The End

Author's Note: I wrote this story in May 2003 as a gift for [Paula Wilshe](#), whose encouragement and support of the Affirmation stories made exploring this S/H universe even more fun and meaningful for me. Paula's heart always beat the strongest for sharing and giving of herself. She had wanted me to share this gift story with fandom. Before I was able to post the story, we lost Paula to her battle with cancer. With the healing of time, I found the strength to revisit this story as a happy memory, and when I was ready to fulfill Paula's wish to see this story published, I knew its debut had to be in a VPP zine. Paula's encouragement of writers is still an integral part of Venice Place Press, living on in Keri's vision. This is the place for David Starsky, "M.D." to come home. Thank you, [Keri](#), for the final edit, which reminded me so very much of Paula's gentle, humorous style and sharp eye, your own unique wit and wisdom dovetailing nicely. You're a treasure, my friend. Special thanks also to [Ellis Murdock](#) for informative medical editing and tremendous support.

Paula, this one's for you. –Kaye Austen Michaels