

## **In His Father's Image**

by **Dawnwind**

Looking through the anteroom window, Starsky didn't have to guess the identity of the man standing in the hospital hallway. He'd seen photos way back when, could have picked the man out of a crowd despite never having met him.

Same blond hair, although streaked with silver and very thin at the crown. Same long legs, broad shoulders, and strong patrician nose.

Gunner Magnus Hutchinson, Hutch's dad.

Starsky removed his isolation garb more slowly than usual, considering the implications of Hutchinson's arrival. Did Hutch know? What did this rare visit mean? How had he heard about Hutch's illness?

Starsky felt all at odds with nothing more specific to do to help Hutch. Callendar's blood was ready to be synthesized into the serum that should save the lives of all the patients. But, according to Judith, it would take more than twenty-four hours — possibly as much as forty-eight — to make. Thinking back to the urgent, desperate rush to find Callendar, Starsky had assumed that once Callendar was in the hospital and the medical staff siphoned off his blood, Hutch and the other patients would be set.

He'd thought it would be instantaneous. When he'd been told about the delay, the pit of his stomach had dropped into his shoes and still hadn't climbed back into its normal position. Yet, even without the magic elixir, Hutch seemed to have rallied. Judith and the other CDC guy were optimistic that Hutch might be — in a way — similar to Callendar, with some sort of natural immunity to fight off the virus. Maybe from all that rabbit food and jogging he did, who knows? For now, Hutch was still critically ill, with a high fever and congested lungs. The sound of his coughing was like sandpaper against wood, grating and horrible.

Sitting beside Hutch's bed, even while he slept, had given Starsky a measure of peace. Hutch hadn't coughed, and the lines of pain and fatigue on his forehead had smoothed out. Unlike poor Ritchie, Hutch had avoided the ignominy of needing a ventilator to aid his breathing.

Satisfied that Hutch was, if not recovering, at least vaguely within the boundaries of what the medical staff termed "stable," Starsky had decided to go home for some much needed sleep. He hadn't been home in days — sleep was a forgotten memory.

Until he'd seen Gunnar Hutchinson. Should he speak to the older man? Introduce himself? Or leave him be?

Starsky was never exactly sure what relationship Hutch had with his father. As far as he knew, there were no regular phone calls or communication. Hutch had told him precious little about his family. Gunnar had cheated — apparently repeatedly — on Hutch's mother and they'd divorced before Hutch was in high school. The divorce had been difficult for Hutch and his sister Karen to deal with, and a rift had opened between father and son that had never closed.

Starsky thought back on the few conversations he and Hutch had had about their parents. Those early gab fests over a pitcher of beer when they were both in the academy and the late night patrol car cruising when they were still in uniform and didn't know each other very well. Before they could simply while away an entire night talking about nothing and everything, just content to be together. He recalled Hutch's reticence to mention his father, his guarded reactions to even the most neutral of questions, such as, had his dad taught him to play baseball?

For Hutch to have called his father today meant that he had enough residual love to go to Gunner in a crisis.

He clearly knew the man's phone number, at the very least.

And birthday cards were sent to and from. Starsky recalled Hutch picking one out last January. Gunner was a New Year's baby; had apparently been in the newspaper as Duluth's first birth of the year in 1918. Needless to say, Hutch had mailed the card out late, what with them working both December thirty-first and January first.

But it was the thought that counted, right?

Starsky almost laughed as he stuffed his yellow paper gown and gloves into a trash bin. He could see Hutch's earnest and slightly worried face as clear as day. They'd gone into the overwhelming Hallmark store, brimming with cards of every sort, to buy a single one. It had taken Hutch half an hour to find the right card. Starsky had held his tongue, curious about why there was suddenly a need to buy the parental unit a birthday card, and yet not willing to poke at Hutch's fragile link to his father.

The man would have been — Starsky paused at the door of the ante room, watching Hutchinson talk with the doctor assigned to Hutch for the night — sixty at his last birthday. Could it be that Hutch, yearning to live a long and fruitful life, had realized he had less time to make it up with his father now that the man was getting older?

That Starsky could understand. He couldn't conceive of life without his Ma, although she drove him batty on a regular basis. He'd give almost anything to have had more time with his long-deceased father. Pavel Starsky had been a strict disciplinarian, quick to dole out the strap and a night without dinner. Still, he had been Dad.

Decision made, Starsky washed his hands and walked into the hall. "Mr. Hutchinson?"

Hutchinson turned from the window into Hutch's room. "Starsky, is it?"

"How do you do," Starsky said formally, putting out his hand. No surprise that Hutchinson's was firm and no nonsense, someone used to being in charge. "When did you get here?"

"A couple hours ago. Kenny called me..." He trailed off, biting his lips as a flicker of sadness and pain crossed his face. "He was afraid he was dying and wanted to..." He lifted a hand in mute resignation to a higher power. "So I booked the first flight. It's not long, from here to Portland."

"Glad you came," Starsky said honestly. It was eerie seeing Hutch's mannerisms, his facial expressions on another man. "Can I buy you some bad coffee or a grilled cheese sandwich? The cafeteria ruins just about any other food, but they can make a decent grilled cheese."

Hutchinson smiled tiredly. "That sounds...edible." He glanced back into the isolation room, the fear and pain back in his eyes. "How is Ken doing? I saw you in there."

"Did you go in and visit him?" Starsky asked. "Does he know you're here?"

"I got all garbed up briefly, but he was asleep."

"He's holding his own," Starsky said, staring in at Hutch, willing him the strength to survive and beat this foe. Hutch had his head turned away and the plastic oxygen tent was misted so it was difficult to make out his features, but it was enough to prove that he was still breathing. Starsky inhaled gratefully. "The doctors are working on this cure thing, with blood from the one guy who recovered..."

"The man who came forward? There was an article in the newspaper."

After the impassioned plea on television, the BCPD and the hospital's public relations departments had decided to come up with an explanation on why and how Callendar was involved. Instead of the truth — an assassin basically forced, with added guilt, to give his blood for the good of the afflicted — the newspapers had been fed a story about an altruistic man touched by Ritchie's mother's plea and Starsky's passion.

"It was a little more complicated than that," Starsky admitted, reluctantly leaving Hutch's proximity for the walk to the elevators. "Hutch is tough, he can beat this bas — virus." Who knew what Mr. H thought of bad language? Starsky wouldn't have been able to sit for a week if he'd said that word in front of his own dad.

At five minutes to seven pm, the cafeteria was almost empty, the staff ready to close up. The main entrees, pallid chicken in muddy gravy and spaghetti with an orangish sauce, were completely unappetizing. Starsky ordered two grilled cheese while Hutchinson got coffees and limp lettuce salads.

It felt right, almost comforting, to glance over and see the blond head bent over the salad bar. Starsky was surprised to realize that he was glad the older man was here. Someone else to help shoulder the — what should he call it? Not grief, 'cause Hutch wasn't dead. More like the waiting, the patience — something Starsky had never been good at on the best of days. Having Mr. H here, even for a short time, felt like having Hutch watching his back on a stake-out. Was that why Hutch had called him?

"American cheese and processed non-butter product, but you are correct, not a bad sandwich," Hutchinson said after his first bite.

Starsky chuckled for the first time in what felt like days. "You sound like your son."

"More and more, I realize that he and I are very much alike." Hutchinson took a pensive drink of coffee, looking at Starsky over the rim of his cup. "I know you have questions — go ahead. If nothing else happens tonight, at least we can get to know one another."

Starsky felt his eyebrows rise. That was a new one, a transparent Hutchinson. Hutch tended to keep his secrets close to the vest, even occasionally hiding things Starsky would have been better off knowing about, such as a mobster-connected girlfriend. "Hutch never talks about you. His mother maybe once or twice a year, but you never."

Hutchinson nodded somberly. "He has reasons — some of them my stipulations, some of them his own... misgivings."

"About what?" Starsky said far too bluntly, but he was too tired to be polite. He'd already used up all the social niceties he had to spare.

Hutchinson didn't reply at first, but the battle of emotions was evident on his face. He was weary, too, and he hadn't been here at the beginning of the viral war.

"I'm gay."

Not expecting that answer, Starsky rocked back in his chair, almost falling. He grabbed the edge of the Formica table. Of all the secrets he'd imagined in the Hutchinson family over the years, this was not one of them. "And here I thought you just had a bastard kid," he joked, realizing belatedly that the word had popped out this time.

He smiled ruefully. "That, too. Ken and I avoid that subject."

He'd thrown out every one of Starsky's preconceived ideas. It was almost enough to keep Starsky off his food, but he took a couple of bites of grilled cheese to recover. Now that Starsky thought about it, the last time he could recall Hutch mentioning either of his parents was his disappointment that his mother wouldn't

see his edited scene in Steve Hanson's cowboy movie.

"Thanks for the honesty," Starsky said finally. "Why now?"

"Is it all right if I start at the beginning?" Hutchinson played with his salad, rolling a cherry tomato around with his fork. "Such as it is."

"Go 'head." Starsky stirred two packs of sugar into his coffee, intrigued in spite of himself. Or maybe it was just something to get his mind off Hutch's terrible struggle, if only for a moment. "I know you and Mrs. H were divorced when Hutch was twelve, and he doesn't forgive that kinda thing easily."

"You've very astute. He's told me a lot about you, that you see through people easily."

Nice to hear he'd gotten a good report to the old man. Starsky glanced at the ceiling, sending Hutch healing vibes one floor up. There were no actual thoughts of Hutch's demise. Not now, not ever. Starsky would never be able to survive that blow.

"You and his mom had to get married?" he guessed. He was fishing, like he did with a suspect, bits of facts gleaned from various discussions that gelled into a hypothesis. Hutch had never said anything specific, but Starsky did know when Hutch's parents got married. The date had been stamped on the bottom of the single photo Hutch owned of the wedding: Louise in a tailored gray suit holding a spray of roses, Gunnar in his Air Force dress uniform, married January 27, 1945. Seven months before Hutch was born.

"You are a good detective." Hutchinson nodded, rubbing his chest absently, just as Hutch did when he was thinking. "Yes, Louise and I had dated before I went to the South Pacific. Soon after, she was in the family way and I took a liberty in Hawaii for us to get married. My son was born. After the war, I worked for an oil company. We had a second, a daughter Karen, but I didn't have much time with Kenny or Karen as children. Mostly trips to the zoo or at Christmas. I was sent abroad frequently, and I..." He ate the tomato and a couple pieces of lettuce before shoving the salad away. "I dabbled. A great deal."

"You had affairs?"

"Many," he confessed with a frown, eyes far away, recalling all the indiscretions. "My daughter Sophia's mother lives in Italy. But more and more, over the years, I began to meet with men."

"So Hutch was going to be opposite you in every single way," he surmised, watching Hutchinson absorb the slight. The man straightened his shoulders, as if he had to march forward in spite of his son's resentment. "Be a cop instead of selling what I bet Hutch considers something that damages the..." How would Hutch have said it? "The ecology."

And yet, he had copied Gunnar right down the line, Starsky thought privately. Luckily had divorced Van before they had children, but slept with every woman he could find — no men that Starsky was aware of. Even so, ever since John Blaine's death, Starsky had mulled over comments Hutch had made.

"You know him very well." Hutchinson smiled sadly. "I wish I knew him half as much, but even once Ken made contact, he's kept me at arm's length." He took a last sip of coffee. "Until today."

"When did you two start talking again?" Starsky asked.

Hutchinson tapped a finger on the table as if calculating the time. "Roughly two years ago? You were in the hospital."

Starsky held in the second shock of the evening. That long ago? A rush of unrighteous fury ran through him. *Why didn't you tell me sooner?* He had no reason to be angry at Hutch, no reason at all except he'd thought

they were mostly past hiding important facts from each other.

He wanted to give Hutch a shake. Would have, if his partner weren't so sick. Two years ago? This was November. In December of '75, he'd been shot in an Italian restaurant. "Yeah, Hutch got me through a really rough night — I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him."

"He told me." Hutchinson piled his used dishes on the tray and waited while Starsky added his to the stack. "Maybe talking on the phone freed us both to be something other than father and son, I don't know, but that night, for the first time in probably our whole lives, we opened up and talked. For hours — while you were in surgery."

"Ah." No wonder Starsky didn't have a clue about the change of heart. He barely recalled that rainy night. Except that he still harbored a strange phobia for linguini with clams, which was too bad because he'd previously liked the meal. His strongest memories were of lying in the back office of *Giovanni's*, Hutch's arms around him, holding him close, whispering in his ear.

Shivers went up his spine.

"Starsky?" Hutchinson asked with concern.

"Nothin'." Starsky swiped a hand through the air, dispelling the sudden strange emotion that clenched at his heart.

"When Ken called me this morning, he asked me to tell you something..." He ducked his head for a moment, clearly considering what he was about to say. "Which was why I was really glad to see you here."

"About what?" Starsky asked. He wanted to get back to the third floor and check on Hutch's progress. It had only been half an hour, tops, since they left, but he had an urgent need to see Hutch, to touch his face — palm to his forehead, feeling for a fever, that was all.

"In my own case, it took far, far too long for me to see what — or should I say who was right beside me all the time." Hutchinson paused, pulling his wallet out of a jacket pocket.

Starsky felt confused. What the heck was the guy going on about? He should be polite, this was Hutch's dad, after all, but he could barely sit still. "Maybe we could talk on the way back upstairs?"

"Certainly." Hutchinson fingered his wallet as he stood but didn't put it back into his pocket. "Ken told me about your friend, John Blaine."

"He died just over a month ago," Starsky confirmed, feeling on firmer ground. The conversation had come full circle, back to being gay. The heartache of John's — not dishonesty so much as lack of trust — still hurt. He'd considered John a second father; now he saw that fathers had mysteries all their own. "He had a secret lover. I didn't know, never suspected a thing. Some detective I am."

"Detectives would be the most likely to know how to hide a dangerous truth."

Starsky and Hutchinson walked outside the cafeteria, heading down the hallway. Hutchinson's thoughtful expression was so like Hutch's Starsky almost felt like his best friend was right beside him — and made him doubly want to be with Hutch again.

"Dangerous?" Starsky repeated, poking at the elevator call button. He wasn't sure he wanted to continue this discussion. "Who are we talking about here? John or you?"

"Both, any man who — " Hutchinson waited until the elevator doors opened, disgorging a nurse pushing a

woman and her newborn baby in a wheelchair. When he and Starsky were the only passengers, Hutchinson spoke again. " — loves another man. Ken told me his feelings about you."

"Wait a goddamn minute," Starsky snarled, smashing the stop button to halt the elevator in mid-ascent. "Are you saying Hutch is gay?"

Hutchinson opened his mouth but Starsky rushed in before a syllable came out. "He ain't just like you, he likes women!" But his own private musings mocked him. Hutch's haunted looks during the investigation into Blaine's death, the question about two men who spent seventy-five percent of their time together. Starsky felt sucker punched.

"He said me to tell you that he loves you." The words hung there between them, truly dangerous in their own right. "In case he didn't get the chance."

Hutchinson reached over and released the elevator from stasis. There was an abrupt lurch that knocked Starsky into the wall behind him. He steadied himself, breathing roughly through his nose as the car continued upward.

What did this all mean? Why did his heart clench and yet beat faster in what felt like joyous hope while his belly spasmed in fear?

"I — " He bit his lip as the elevator doors opened onto the third floor. The truth would set him free, yet how far could he go? He looked into Hutchinson's blue eyes, such familiar eyes, just like his son's. Older, more jaded but serene and understanding. "How did you accept it?"

"That my son loves another man?"

Starsky shook his head, staring down the hall, instinctively seeking Hutch, needing him. "How did you accept that you could — " he choked, summoning strength, " — make love to a guy?"

"It was surprisingly easy." He smiled, finally flipping open the billfold he'd been holding for the last few minutes. "This is Rick." The photo showed a slender, balding man with a thick mustache and the smile of a guy who'd won the lottery. He had his hand on Gunnar Hutchinson's shoulder. They looked like a married couple. "He wasn't any more sure about a — how should I say it? A switch in his life view." Hutchinson touched the photo fondly before closing the wallet. "We'd worked together for years. Flown to Algeria, Rome, and Alaska together, discussing pipelines, oil prices, and then one day, his hand brushed mine. It was like catching fire."

Exactly how it felt every single time Starsky's arm grazed Hutch's as they walked, or when he patted his partner's belly before going into a crime scene. "Yeah," he whispered. "I know how it feels."

Hutchinson guided Starsky into the anteroom, going past the viewing window so quickly Starsky had no time to look in at Hutch. His head and heart ached in a synchronous beat.

"Have you ever read the Kinsey Report?" Hutchinson asked, bending down to get the scratchy paper gowns out of a drawer in the cart.

Starsky's cheeks flamed. What did this guy take him for, a pervert? Just because — maybe, probably, definitely — he'd thought about Hutch as other than a pal. "No," he replied stiffly.

"Many men have it in us to be attracted to... other men," Hutchinson explained, his touch gentle as he placed the gown, rubber gloves, and mask into Starsky's hands. "Society has scared us into thinking this is wrong. But I can attest it has brought more love and joy into my life than any other thing on earth besides my son and daughters." He smiled, happiness radiating from his face. "Rick is who I was meant to be with. You've

tried women. Ken told me about Helen and Terry. Now take the leap." He gestured to the isolation room.

*Hutch's room.*

Starsky couldn't get the paper gown on fast enough. It ripped, from neckline to hem. "Damn!" he exploded, wadding the thing into a ball.

"Hey." Hutchinson started to say more when a knock at the door interrupted him.

"David?" Dr. Judith Kaufman poked her head around, glancing at Starsky and then at Hutchinson in surprise. "You must be Ken's father," she said, smoothing her wildly curly hair. Clearly exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes, she was still stunning. "I'm Dr. Kaufman."

"Yes, I arrived earlier," Hutchinson said, shaking Judith's hand. "I spoke with Dr...? He was a resident, working the late shift."

"Dr. Oliver. I've been looking for you, David," she said, beaming. "It's finished."

"The serum? So quickly?" Starsky's hands shook as he smoothed out a second yellow gown. His mouth went dry. This would all be over soon.

*Please, God.*

"It's experimental, but at this point, it's all we have." Judith nodded, curls flopping over her forehead. She pushed them away. "We've triaged the patients — placed them into categories, if you will, on severity of symptoms, strain on immune systems — " She looked between the two of them, obviously seeing their glazed expressions. "Anyway, the initial batch is tiny, but the lab is synthesizing more as quickly as humanly possible."

"So Hutch is getting a shot, right?" Starsky demanded.

"The nurse — " Judith gestured like a game show host as a dark-haired nurse came through the door carrying a syringe full of pale yellow liquid. "Here she is. Vicki will inject the serum into Ken's IV and we'll know if it is working in a few hours."

"How will you know?" Hutchinson asked anxiously, watching Vicki efficiently don the yellow gown and mask.

"We'll draw a CBC," Vicki answered. She slipped on the rubber gloves before going into the isolation room, syringe in hand.

"Ken's immune system has been working better than many of the patients," Judith said, tracking Vicki as she walked over to Hutch's bed.

Starsky turned to look through the window, scrutinizing Hutch's every movement. He shifted in bed as Vicki pulled aside the plastic curtain. She leaned over Hutch, apparently talking to him. Starsky's heart lurched, jealousy at that sweet scene flushing through his system. He yearned to be in there with his Hutch.

*I love him.*

So basic, really. Nothing to be frightened of, because the love had been there from the first, hiding in plain sight. Every time they'd ever spoken at the same time, read each other's thoughts with a glance, calmed with just a touch from the other's hand, there had been love. He simply hadn't recognized it as romantic love; had been conditioned not to. That had changed, all because of Hutch's father.

"Earlier complete blood counts showed a left shift, which means he had a proliferation of immature white blood cells going out to fight the infection," Judith said rapidly. "This shows that his body is mounting an offensive. The serum should support his body, give him the antibodies that Callendar produced, to fight off the virus and the secondary pneumonia."

"He has pneumonia?" Hutchinson asked.

Starsky wasn't listening any longer. He shoved both arms into the isolation gown, not bothering to tie the sash in the back. Knotting the strings of the mask behind his head, he was still working his fingers into the gloves when he pushed through to the inner sanctum. Somehow, just being this much closer reduced the clamor in his head, decreased his heart rate, and left him slightly dizzy.

*Hutch was going to live.*

They had a chance.

Expecting to die, Hutch had told his father that he loved Starsky.

It was all too much to take in at one time. Starsky stopped, inches from the bed, waiting while Vicki finished her chores. He hadn't managed to see her injecting the serum into Hutch's IV tubing, but the used syringe was on the bedside table.

"How's he doing?" Starsky asked, not really looking at Vicki.

Hutch's eyes were open, staring at Starsky with naked longing.

How had he never recognized that familiar expression for what it was? He'd been blind.

"Temperature's slightly lower," Vicki said, tucking Hutch's urinary catheter out of sight under the edge of the blanket. "And here I thought I could raise any man's temperature with a flutter of eyelashes." She winked saucily at Hutch. "You have ten minutes, Mr. Starsky, but I see there are other people waiting to come in. Don't tire him out."

"Wouldn't dream of it, sweetheart," he drawled in his best Bogey. Once upon a time, her brown eyes might have raised his temp, but she had nothing on a blintz with sweaty blond hair, a pale, drawn face, and big, broad hands clutching the blanket.

Vicki went back into the anteroom, stripping off her isolation garb. Starsky watched her speak to Judith and they both left, probably to give the serum to other lucky patients. He pushed past the plastic curtain and sat on the bedside chair, unable to say a word. He didn't know where to begin.

"H-hey," Hutch whispered hoarsely, his fingers moving restlessly over the edge of the blanket.

"Hey, yourself." Starsky caught his hand, marveling that he was holding Hutch's hand and really, really wanting to do more — maybe kiss? Would Hutch like that? "I met your father. Knew it was him the minute I saw him."

"He — " Hutch coughed, long, ragged and painful, his whole body spasming with the need to breathe and expel mucus at the same time.

It took a moment for him to be able to speak, but Starsky was patient. For once in his life, he could wait — forever, if he had to. He was content to simply be, holding Hutch's hand, listening to the harsh rasp of his breathing. Hutch was alive, and that was all that counted.

"He told you?" Hutch asked finally, the simple question using up all his air. His nostrils flared as he inhaled greedily.

"He did." Starsky smiled, even though the mask covered his mouth. Hutch would know he was happy. "I want to hear it from you."

Hutch's lips twitched up into a weary grin and there were tears in his eyes. "Always gotta... have the evidence, huh?"

"You know me," Starsky said softly, his heart full to overflowing. Hutch was his man. For now, for always. "A trained detective."

"I love you," Hutch whispered.

"I love you, too," Starsky replied, every cell in his being rejoicing. "Even if you do want to live to be 148."

Hutch chuckled silently, holding tight to Starsky's hand.

"I have to ask," Starsky continued, scooting the chair closer to the bed. He'd have gotten in, but it was a really narrow mattress. "What's this thing you have with Dr. Judith?"

"Make you jealous..." Hutch's smile was nowhere near full strength, but it was still the most beautiful thing Starsky had ever seen. "Worked, huh?"

"Not a chance, buster." Starsky gently stroked Hutch's cheek, not to check his temperature at all. Hutch still radiated heat, but his skin didn't feel as hot as earlier in the day. Could that serum work that fast or was his temperature lower by happenstance? "She looks like my sister with all those curls."

"Got me the serum f-first, didn't it?" Hutch's voice was giving out. He clung to Starsky a moment longer before relaxing his grip. "Lemme thank my dad..."

"He's a nice guy. Should have invited him over for dinner years ago." Starsky glanced over his shoulder at Hutchinson. The older man was pretending to peruse Hutch's chart. Starsky didn't believe for a moment that he was reading the medicalese, he was attempting to give them privacy. "Give him time to suit up."

"Suits me," Hutch breathed out with a hint of a smile. "You stay?"

"That nurse'll kill me if I wear you out. You and me got lots of time to talk when you feel better." The urge to kiss Hutch was back but Starsky wanted their first lip-plant to be skin to skin. No face mask.

It took every ounce of willpower to back away from Hutch and go through the door into the anteroom. "He's waiting for you," Starsky said.

"You look different," Hutchinson said wryly. "Made some decisions, did you? Heard some truths?"

"Don't get a swelled head." Starsky snapped the rubber gloves off his fingers. "You just opened my eyes to what was right in front of me." A truth that while exhilarating, was still terrifying. How could he and Hutch make this work?

Hutchinson nodded, donning his gear. He had an inner peace that belied his strong, reserved exterior. Starsky would not have seen it if he wasn't looking or known the man's history. Was it really that easy?

"It's not what you expected, eh?" Hutchinson asked with a twinkle in his blue eyes, as if, like his son, he could read Starsky's thoughts. "You'll get used to it."

He slipped inside the isolation room leaving Starsky feeling off-center and giddy at the same time. He watched hungrily as Hutchinson approached his son. How long had it been since they were actually face-to-face? Hutch looked wary as his father came to the bed, and he coughed weakly. But when Hutchinson leaned down, taking his big tough son in his arms, Hutch broke into tears.

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The next few days seemed to go by in a flash. Hutch rallied after the serum and his temperature normalized within twenty-four hours. He would need a full two-week course of antibiotics to clear the opportunistic bacteria in his lungs, but he was recovering far more quickly than many of the plague patients. Starsky came to visit as often as possible, dividing his time between Metro and the hospital, with nothing left for a social life.

He truly didn't care. Hutch *was* his social life; discos be damned. He reveled in Hutch's improvement. Each step took them closer to Hutch getting sprung from the hospital and giving them a chance to work out these new feelings between them.

Starsky walked onto the fourth floor, remembering the brief alone time they'd had the night before. Hutch had finally been moved out of isolation and into a small, semi-private room. There were so many recovering plague patients that they had to share rooms. No more medical staff constantly monitoring Hutch's every breath and peering through the window at him. Even with another man coughing and snoring behind the dividing curtain, there had been the illusion of privacy....

*Hutch had taken Starsky's hand the moment he walked in, as if there were magnets on their palms and they couldn't be separated. After a whole day apart, Starsky sometimes felt like he'd lost a piece of himself. Being with Hutch, touching him, was the only thing that completed him. So far, they hadn't done anything else — no kissing, or even full body hugging.*

*"Hutch," Starsky whispered, drinking in his fluffy blond hair — the nurse had given him a bath — and his clear blue eyes. "You're driving me crazy here. One kiss won't hurt."*

*"What if I'm contagious?" Hutch countered, attempting to keep a modicum of distance between them. "Starsk, we made rules, now we stick to them. No physical..." He glanced down at their joined hands. "Okay, no whadda you call it?"*

*"Second or third base?" Starsky pursed his lips like a fish. "Nuzzling, cannoodling?"*

*"Don't you need an old jalopy and a porkpie hat to cannoodle?" Hutch had tried to catch his breath, coughing slightly, but he'd been grinning, clearly enjoying the banter....*

As he walked the hospital halls, caught up in his memories, Starsky smacked into Gunnar Hutchinson.

"Didn't realize we needed a traffic light here in the hallway," Hutchinson joked, putting out a hand to steady Starsky. "You were miles away." There was an even taller man with him at the nurse's station.

"It was a good trip." Starsky laughed at his own joke, moving out of the way of the medical staff grabbing charts from a rack on the desk. "I haven't seen you in a few days."

"I distracted him," the man with the luxurious mustache said, patting Gunnar on the shoulder. "Rick Jackson."

"Ah, the famous other man," Starsky said, shaking hands. He nodded to Hutchinson. "You introduced him to Hutch?"

"Ken told me to stop hovering, so — " Hutchinson started, rolling his eyes.

"With his temper returning, I'll bet he didn't use his indoor voice, either," Starsky snorted. Hutch's ire with everything from the breathing treatments to his insistence that he could walk to the toilet and piss on his own without a damned catheter, thank you very much, were legendary. Starsky'd heard the nurses gossiping about him in the halls.

"With time on my hands, Rick came down and we spent the weekend in Malibu," Hutchinson explained, giving his partner a fond smile. "And then the obligatory meeting with the family."

"If I play my cards right, I might get to meet daughters Karen and Sophia next," Rick laughed. "I've always wanted to visit Duluth and Rome."

"One's cold, the other's cultural," Starsky quipped although he hadn't been to either city. He looked down the hall toward Hutch's room. Judith Kaufman was going inside with a clipboard in hand. Was she giving Hutch good news or bad? "Take your pick."

"I wanted to stay until Ken was out of the hospital, but I can't take off anymore time from work," Hutchinson said. "We're leaving on a flight to Portland in two hours." He brushed his fingers across Rick's plaid flannel shirt. Barely there contact, still manly and acceptable in public.

Starsky had often done the same to Hutch, long before he considered Hutch in a romantic light. Just the sight gladdened his heart.

"Sorry to see you go so soon." He'd liked getting to know Hutchinson — and now Jackson. He'd have loved to spend time picking their brains. How did they manage to stay a couple when there were so many strikes against two men in love? It was one thing in theory, but completely another on the streets, when he and Hutch would have to deal with their colleagues on the force and — "Hutch'll be taking some sick time, maybe he could come your way?" he said as a preamble.

"That'd be great!" Rick said enthusiastically. "We could show him around, Gun. All the hot spots."

"Rick likes bars and nightclubs," Hutchinson said, in mock consternation. "I'm sure if Kenny — " he shook Starsky's hand in goodbye, " — and David came up, we could find something more..." He glanced between Rick and Starsky with amusement. "Cultural to do."

"I'm all for Rick's suggestion," Starsky said, waving them to the elevator. So Rick was more like him, and Hutch more like his father than he'd probably ever want to admit. "Have a good trip."

It felt good to have mentors in this new stage of their lives. Knowing Hutch's father, seeing the way resemblance, mannerisms and even sexual preference had been handed down from parent to son was a revelation. Did he have his own father's movements and interests? At least he could ask his mother.

He almost ran down the hallway to Hutch's room. Judith came out beaming, her cheeks bright pink.

"David!" she exclaimed. "I'll let Ken tell you the news." Judith put a finger to her lips, clearly delighted. She hurried off with a flip of dark curls.

Poking his head into the room, Starsky noticed that the bed next to Hutch's was empty. He'd been in a hospital often enough to know that patients were moved to other rooms at what seemed to be nurses' whim. Good, he and Hutch could really be alone now.

Hutch was sitting up in bed with a decidedly smug expression. "Hey!" he greeted cheerfully, shucking off his hospital gown to pull on a pair of jeans.

Starsky enjoyed the distraction of Hutch's naked chest for half a moment. "What's going on?"

"Judith kissed me and said that I'm —," Hutch said, zipping up the fly.

"You kissed her before me?" Starsky asked all in a rush, stunned. What the hell?

Hutch's sudden silence told him more than words could have. He picked his pale blue shirt with the embroidered guitar off the bed, sliding his arms into the sleeves. "She kissed *me*," Hutch said in a tight, controlled voice.

"I thought —"

Hutch stood up far more quickly than Starsky had expected he could after such a long illness, using those two extra inches in height to intimidate. "Close the damned door," he ordered, wrapping all five fingers around Starsky's arm in a crushing grip, not an ounce of lingering weakness.

Startled, Starsky kicked back with one leg to swing the door shut, jerking his arm to escape Hutch's grasp. Hutch shoved Starsky up against the closed door, kissing him rough enough to knock their teeth together. Starsky's breath caught on an exhale. He was dizzy and so hard his groin throbbed.

Hutch's lungs sold him out. He had to break the seal of their mouths, panting as if he'd run a marathon. Starsky pulled him close, both arms around that big, solid body, amazed how huge Hutch felt in a clench. His sudden envy had evaporated completely with the full proof of Hutch's love. If the kiss hadn't provided enough evidence, the iron rod tenting Hutch's jeans, and ramming itself uselessly into Starsky's hipbone, settled the case.

"I've been wanting to do that for weeks," Hutch rasped, letting Starsky lead him back to bed.. "She was happy that I got better, that all the plague patients are recovering." He gazed at Starsky with a goofy grin. "I love you."

Starsky gently ran his fingers through Hutch's hair, smoothing it back into place. "I love you," he replied, certain in his love but not how to work out these new feelings. "You're always flirting with her."

Hutch shrugged. "She's a woman; I'm a guy. Flirting's expected, isn't it?"

"When did you ever go along with the crowd?" Starsky asked wearily. How could they make what they'd found between them work if they couldn't even get past social conventions. "We haven't even had any time to be together."

Hutch took Starsky's hand between both of his, holding it reverently. "The question inside me has finally been answered after all these years, but —" He glanced at the door, a decision made. "Can we talk about this in the car?"

"In the car?" Starsky asked stupidly, too many emotions broiling in his brain.

"Surprise!" Hutch chuckled self-consciously, acknowledging the subject change. He buttoned his shirt like a man on a mission. "I didn't tell you. Judith was here to give me my get out of jail card."

"That's terrific!" Now there was news to be excited about. Except, for some perverse reason, Starsky felt scared. "Is she sure? Did she do any tests? I mean, what happens if you... if you're still sick?"

"Starsk," Hutch said, picking up release forms from the bedside table. He grabbed his tan leather jacket in the other hand and headed out the door. "All signed and approved. Let's go!"

"The car's in the parking lot." Starsky followed, his heart bursting and he wasn't exactly sure the reason. Why wasn't this easy? They were in love — there should be angels with bows and arrows flying around them, not this sensation that they were standing on the deck of a ship during a hurricane.

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Hutch inhaled as he looked out the windshield of the Torino. Breathing still occasionally made his lungs ache, but each breath was precious, something to be savored. For the first time in seventeen days, he felt like he was home again. Funny that a car would be the place he'd missed the most. A car he wanted to repaint. But this rolling red and white Coke can meant normalcy, life, and most of all, Starsky.

*Starsky.*

He glanced at his partner's profile. Starsky was navigating the big car out of the hospital parking lot with single-minded determination. He didn't glance at Hutch once.

In spite of that — Starsky knew Hutch's innermost feelings. He hadn't run away or turned Hutch into some Anita Bryant group for sexual perversions. Starsky loved him! That admission was the main reason Hutch had survived, he was sure of it. His father's support and love had healed other internal wounds.

He'd loved Starsky silently for years, through more than one disastrous hook-up or affair with various women. Starsky was his soulmate, his intended.

"Drive up Mulholland, would you?" Hutch asked quietly, pointing at the sign for the famous road.

Starsky's lips twitched and his eyes slid in Hutch's direction. "You want to make out?" he asked sarcastically, turning off of Sepulveda onto Mulholland Drive.

"I want someplace private to talk, just the two of us, away from phones or well-meaning drop-in visitors," Hutch replied, watching the eucalyptus trees flash by as they climbed steadily up the steep roadway. Between houses, the hillside was dry, grass brittle as kindling. Southern California needed a good winter rain to renew and refresh. He knew the feeling.

"Whadda think the rent would be on a place like that?" Starsky asked idly, driving by an elaborate wrought iron gate. The house wasn't even visible behind a huge privacy wall. "Think a movie star lives there?"

Hutch was comforted by Starsky's emerging chatter. That meant they were back on square one. The trick was to pass go — without collecting two hundred dollars — and find their way. They were making their own path.

Eventually, Starsky bumped the Torino off the pavement and onto a dirt overlook. The entire valley was spread out below them: the Hollywood Bowl, the letters spelling out Hollywood on a hillside to the east, and even the familiar brick towers guarding the entrance to the police academy.

Hutch didn't look at any of the famous sights, he turned in his seat to gaze at his partner. The man he loved. Starsky was clearly tired, had probably lived on too much coffee and donuts and not enough healthy fare. Hutch knew the intense pressure of having a partner in the hospital; the jumble of fear and worry when he had to be on the job, unable to sit with his sick friend.

He reached over, brushing his hand through Starsky's halo of thick, soft curls. Starsky's hair spiraled out in a dozen directions, defying the BCPD rules about length. That was Starsky, going his own way. Hutch couldn't imagine not walking shoulder to shoulder with him. This love could make or break them.

"You need a haircut," he said softly. Simply an opening gambit. He had to approach the subject that stood

like an elephant between them carefully.

"Do not." Starsky didn't move away from the caress, however much he jutted out a stubborn chin. "Start talking. You're the one that wanted to go to Lover's Lane to chat."

Hutch trailed his hand down Starsky's shoulder and back into his own lap. He needed distance to get it all out. "You asked when I'd followed the crowd — "

Starsky nodded, his expression wary, waiting to judge.

Hutch swallowed. "I thought that's what it would take to fit in, that tagging along with the popular crowd would change the uncertainty I felt." He shrugged, recalling high school, even early college when the sole fact that his parents were divorced had been a strike against him. He'd walled off the unmanly urges that had him sneaking peeks at Jack Mitchell in the locker room instead of Lisa Lundgrin. "I kept looking for something that would make me... happy."

Starsky shifted in his seat, pulling his leg up until his knee was jammed against the gear shift in between the seats, almost touching Hutch's bent knee. He was listening, his eyes riveted on Hutch.

Stifling the cough that rumbled in his lungs, Hutch continued, "I married Van; I did what the guidance counselor, my grandfather — told me to do. Study, get a good career, and settle down. Nothing filled the ache. I kept looking for something that made me feel good about myself."

He frowned, impatient with himself. This was even more difficult than he'd expected and the fatigue left over from the plague was starting to eat at his willpower. He wanted to sleep, but he needed this resolved first. Whether or not he and Starsky went forward as a couple, he couldn't rest until things were okay between them.

"Not even sure why anymore, I chucked studying law for the police academy. Being a cop seemed like it would matter, like it would be giving back — to the universe, to... me."

Starsky smiled. "I remember orientation day at the academy. You were such a blond farm boy, those big feet getting in my way." He tapped Hutch's boot, leaving his hand there as if he needed the contact. "I couldn't take my eyes off you."

"Meeting you," Hutch said, covering Starsky's hand with his own. *Was the best day of his life.* "Being with you felt good, but that's not the way it was supposed to be, right? Another guy wasn't supposed to fulfill me the way a good woman would, a family, all that crap — "

"Yeah." Starsky rubbed his thumb against Hutch's palm. "When I talked to your dad, I..." He wet his bottom lip, emotions flitting across his face. "You and me, Hutch, we're like something I never expected, and until I met your dad, I would never've acknowledged that you — "

"You're the one person I love unconditionally," Hutch whispered. "Abby, Gillian — they were all wonderful in their own way, even Van, but they weren't you." He blinked, refusing the tears pricking his eyes and the back of his throat. *Just a side effect of the virus, that's all.* "Every time one of them left, I went back to you until... I opened my eyes, and recognized that you were the one who completed me."

"Damn, Hutch," Starsky ground out.

"You're my everything, nourishing my soul." Hutch flipped their joined hands, pulling Starsky's hand to him. He kissed Starsky's knuckles.

"This ain't gonna be easy, is it?" Starsky asked sadly. "We still have to act like regular guys in the eyes of

our friends, cops at work — Judith."

"By the way... Judith's leaving in two days, soon as the last of the patients are released." Hutch could drown in Starsky's blue eyes. He basically already had. "Besides... when did impossible odds ever stop us?"

Starsky grinned, one of his brilliant, crooked ones where his face radiated joy. "Never. C'mere." He jerked Hutch forward, kissing him as if releasing every ounce of love he'd been storing up.

Hutch was swooning when they came out of the clench. "Who's Judith?" he joked, surrendering to the cough finally. It ripped through his lungs but didn't shatter him the way coughing had only a few days earlier.

"That's my boy," Starsky said fondly, running a finger over Hutch's bottom lip. "You fought back and you won, Captain Marvel."

"I had a super hero in my corner." Hutch pressed a kiss against Starsky's thumb. This all felt so new, he wasn't quite sure where to begin. It wasn't anything like the relationships he'd had with women. He and Starsky had such a primal connection. There would be hurdles ahead, but they would go over them together.

A yawn that morphed into a cough definitely spoiled the moment.

Starsky regarded him fondly. "You need to be in bed. With soup."

"You going to feed me?" Hutch asked hopefully. That sounded nice. Better than nice. It sounded wonderful. Especially after over two weeks on hospital fare.

"I'll do better than that." Starsky started the car, backing up to drive down the steep curves of Mulholland once again. "Because you've been sick, I'll get takeout from that new organic rabbit food place you like so much. They must have soup."

"Farm Picked?" Hutch asked with delight, rubbing his aching chest. No peanut butter burritos or greasy pepperoni pizza? Starsky really did love him. "I wish my father could have stayed around longer. We could have shown him Bay City, maybe had dinner at Farm Picked — "

"That's going a bit too far." Starsky made a particularly gruesome face and stuck his tongue out at Hutch. "I liked your dad. And I figured, since you got sick leave coming... I haven't used a vacation day in over a year. Portland's s'pposed to be a nice place to visit."

"You want to visit my parent — " Hutch paused, considering his words. He'd never really thought about it but if Rick was his father's... spouse? That made him Hutch's stepfather. That was something else he had to get used to. The brief meeting in his hospital room an hour ago had left an impression of a nice guy. They had spoken on the phone a time or two when Rick answered Hutch's calls. "You want to visit my parents on the first date?"

"I figured the two of them could give us some pointers." He winked with a wicked gleam in his eye. "And if we get past the first date, maybe you'd take me to the prom, Kenny."

"Never call me that." Hutch stabbed his long forefinger almost into Starsky's nose. "Love only goes so far, buster." They had all the time in the world to perfect what was between them, as long as love was at the foundation.

FIN