



# **Borrowed Time**

by

**Mystic Whim**

**&**

**Hutchlover**

[Borrowed Time](#) by [Mystic Whim](#), [Hutchlover](#)

Summary:

Hutch goes to the doctor when he can't seem to shake the flu, and gets a shocking diagnosis.

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Story Notes:

Winner of a 2006 SlaSHies Award, Favorite Hutch H/C. Borrowed Time

Borrowed Time by Mystic Whim

**Borrowed Time**

by **Hutchlover and MysticWhim**

*Whoosh!*

The sound of a flushing toilet and then running water awakened Starsky. Gathering his bearings, he looked at the glowing red numbers of the clock on the bedside table. *1:15? What the...?*

Rolling over and squinting his eyes at the light streaming from the master bathroom's doorway, Starsky realized that the other side of the expansive bed was empty of its occupant. He raised himself on his lower arms, the white sheet falling down his chest in a single fluid motion.

"Hutch?" There was no response, other than the swishing sound of brushing teeth. "Hutch, babe?" he asked again.

"Be right there," came the soft response from the small bathroom. A few minutes later, the click of the light was heard as it turned off, and Hutch padded out dressed in his thin, light blue cotton pajama pants. He slowly, almost achingly, lowered himself to a seated position on his side of the bed. Resting a few seconds, he lifted his long legs and settled back on his pillow, pulling the sheet and thin blanket up to his neck.

Starsky watched Hutch's slow, labored movements. The manner of Hutch's actions made him uneasy, but he wasn't sure why. In the dim moonlight shining through the window, he could see that the blond hair was limp and Hutch's bangs were damp, as if Hutch had washed or thrown water on his face. "Everything okay?" His lover's eyes were closed as if in rest, but the tenseness of his face belied any impression of relaxation Hutch was trying to convey.

"Just tired."

Sensing Starsky studying him, Hutch mumbled for his lover to go back to sleep. However, it took more than an hour for Starsky to do so. There was something wrong...something he couldn't put his finger on. But he was sure it had to do with Hutch.

All throughout the following day, Starsky kept a furtive and concerned eye on his partner.

And each time Hutch stretched his back, sniffled or coughed, Starsky watched him; throughout lunch, of which Hutch ate little; while preparing reports; sitting in Dobey's office. Little nuances to Hutch's behavior began to concern Starsky, the apparent sluggishness in his movements, the tired eyes, lack of appetite, and continued coughing.

At the end of their shift that day, Starsky ended up driving Hutch's car home, as his partner had started to fall asleep at his desk. "Hutch, I know you don't wanna hear this."

"Then don't say it." Hutch spoke without opening his eyes.

"You need to take a day off, buddy, for some RandR."

Opening his eyes and looking over at his partner, Hutch retorted, "Says whom?"

"For cryin' out loud, Hutch! It's obvious you're not feelin' good. Why'd you gotta act the martyr all the time?" Starsky lowered the pitch of his voice. "Do it for me, babe. Please." Starsky's azure blue eyes pleaded for understanding.

Hutch closed his eyes in weariness. "I'm just tired."

"See? You're not feeling well. Probably got the flu, and you got sick last night, didn't you?"

Hesitantly, the blond head nodded once then fell back against the dark green seat of his 1978 Olds 98.

"So I'm calling you in sick tomorrow and that's final."

A quiet evening of snuggling on the couch together, reading, was followed by a night of mild lovemaking, relaxing both men to a deep sleep. In the morning, Starsky was careful not to wake his sleeping partner while he got ready for work. He knew that if Hutch woke, he'd probably change his mind and insist on going to work.

There wasn't much to accomplish at the precinct, other than making some bureaucrat happy by filling in missing information or making sure reports were in order for upcoming cases. Which Starsky could do without his partner, even though he hated paperwork.

Perusing his reports, while sipping just-brewed hot coffee, Starsky was unaware of his captain's approach from behind until the larger man peered over his shoulder to check on his detective's progress.

"Where's your partner?" Captain Dobey boomed into Starsky's right ear.

Startled, Starsky turned his head upward to look at his captain. "Not here."

"Obviously," Dobey snorted. He lowered his voice and let some concern filter through. "Look, Starsky, I wanted to talk to you about Hutchinson. He hasn't looked well the last several weeks. He's coming into work sick, and I don't need him infecting the entire squad."

The curly head lifted to look Dobey in the eye. "I know, Cap'n. He's getting all run down with the work on the house. Feels like he's got to do it all himself. I finally convinced him to take a day off and stay at home today to get some rest. I called it in to Minnie - guess she hasn't had a chance to give you your messages yet."

"Good. And if he doesn't get any better, get him to see a doctor. We need all the good men we can get-but

healthy." With that, Dobe stepped back into his office, but left the door open where he could keep an eye on the men under his supervision.

During the day, Starsky managed to keep his mother-henning tendencies to a minimum, and only called his partner once, at lunch, to check up on him. A sluggish voice greeted him on the phone and assured Starsky that 'yes, he had eaten lunch' and 'yes, Mother, he was resting.' Hanging up the phone, he felt more confident that Hutch would be fine with some RandR.

\* \* \*

Unbeknownst to his partner, Hutch hadn't eaten anything. He hung up the phone on the nightstand and rolled back over onto his side, but couldn't get comfortable. Everything ached, and he felt like he was running a fever. *I'll get up in a bit to eat, so I technically didn't lie to Starsky.* Soon he fell back into an uneasy sleep, all thoughts of food and promises forgotten.

\* \* \*

As soon as he got off work, Starsky rushed home. *Knowing Hutch, he probably has dinner already done and has been puttering around in the yard, not getting much rest.* But when he arrived at the blue-trimmed house, everything was quiet. No dinner cooking, in the oven, or sitting on the kitchen table. No gardening tools lying around the yard. Hutch's lime green car was still parked in its usual place on the street.

"Hutch?" Starsky removed his jacket, hanging it up in the front closet. He walked up to their bedroom to put his gun and holster away, to find Hutch still asleep in bed, huddled under the covers. By the grimace on Hutch's face, the movement under his eye lids, and the light sheen of sweat, Starsky could tell it was a restless sleep. He went to the bathroom and rinsed out a washcloth with cool water, bringing it back to the bedroom and began to swab Hutch's face, neck and chest with it.

The ministrations brought Hutch out of his uneasy slumber, eyelids fluttering lightly as he struggled to focus on the hovering individual. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself."

"You get off early?"

"No, Blintz. It's 7:30. You been sleepin' all this time?"

Lifting his head, Hutch looked out the window to see that Starsky was right, the skyline was bright orange and pink as the sun began its daily descent into the horizon. "Shit. I can't believe I slept all day." Shakily, he started to lift himself up.

Putting the washcloth on the nightstand, Starsky grasped his woozy partner's upper arm to help him sit up. "Hey, it's okay. You obviously needed it."

Looking into the concerned face, Hutch apologized for not having any dinner ready or any housework done. "If I'm off for the day, the least I could do is help around here a bit." He looked around the room as if searching for something and then back up at Starsky. "Is it hot in here or is it just me?"

Attempting to make light, Starsky replied with a grin, "We're hot together, babe." All joking aside, he put the back of his hand on Hutch's forehead. "You're not running a fever, but you are sweating. How's your chest feel?"

Several deep breaths indicated to Starsky that Hutch's chest cold appeared to be cleared up. "Probably too many covers. Lie back down and I'll give you a nice sponge bath."

"You just wanna take advantage of me," complained Hutch, but he complied, anyway.

"You got it, babe. Now lie your sweet ass down and let me do all the work." Starsky moved the washcloth down Hutch's chest and under his arms. He froze. Beneath his fingertips, between Hutch's skin and the cloth, Starsky felt a mass in his left arm pit. Not very large, perhaps the size of a garbanzo bean, but hard. "Hutch? What's this?" Fingers prodded around the nodule gently.

"Hmmm...what?" He reached over where Starsky's fingers were prodding to feel for himself. "I don't know. Probably swollen glands from this flu."

The lush mouth above him pursed downward. "Well, I don't like it. You're gonna see a doctor as soon as you can get an appointment. And those aren't just my orders, they're Dobey's, too."

"Terrific," Hutch mumbled Starsky's favorite word in defeat, as he sunk lower into the bed covers.

\* \* \*

Dr. Anthony Casciaro's stark white lab coat contrasted drastically with his deep tan and dark Italian good looks. His warm eyes and easygoing manner quickly put people at ease. Walking into the small exam room, he gave his new patient a confident smile.

"Hello, Mr. Hutchinson. Looks like you're one of the patients I inherited from Dr. Flannigan when he retired. It's a pleasure to meet you. What brings you here today?" He looked over the man sitting on his table as he offered his hand. The first thing he noticed was the dark circles under Hutch's tired eyes, and the red blotches on his skin.

Hutch returned the doctor's firm handshake. "I've got a persistent case of the flu that I can't seem to get over. It's been wearing me down for several weeks now, and I'm starting to wonder if I need antibiotics or something to beat this thing."

"The problem is that antibiotics may not help. Some flu viruses don't respond to them." Casciaro sat on the rolling stool beside the gurney that Hutch was sitting upon. "Why don't you tell me what sort of symptoms you've been dealing with?"

"I had a stomach flu several weeks ago, and I've never gotten over it. I still have trouble with fever, especially at night. I'm always tired, can't seem to get enough sleep, I have a persistent cough, and I feel achy. And lately I've developed this annoying itch, all over."

Dr. Casciaro took Hutch's arm in his hands and carefully looked over the blotchy patches and the harsh scratches. He jotted down notes in his folder as he asked, "You say this started with a stomach flu? Is your stomach still giving you problems, too?"

"Not really, but I haven't had much of an appetite since this began. It's like I'm too tired to eat. Oh, I had a couple beers the other night and they made me sick to my stomach. I guess my stomach hasn't completely recovered yet." Suddenly Hutch remembered the lump under his arm that had concerned Starsky. "I also have this lump." He lifted his arm and pointed to the raised spot. "I think it's just swollen glands, but it's pretty swollen."

The doctor put down his folder and felt the area that Hutch had indicated. He then proceeded to check the glands at Hutch's neck, and the opposite underarm. "How long has it been swollen like this?"

Hutch shrugged. "I'm not sure. I just found the lump yesterday. It may have been there prior to that, but I just didn't notice it before. I did notice that when I drank a few beers the other night, the area hurt."

"A few weeks is a long time to have swollen glands," the doctor mused. He took out a blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around Hutch's arm. "What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a police officer. A detective with the BCPD."

The doctor's eyebrows raised. "Do you ever work with the HazMat team?"

Hutch shook his head, surprised at the question. "No, why?"

"I wondered if you'd had exposure to toxic chemicals." He continued to examine Hutch's eyes and ears. "Have you ever had mononucleosis, Ken?"

"Yes, about a year ago. Starsky and I both had it."

"Starsky?" the doctor asked.

"He's my partner," Hutch explained.

"Your sexual partner?"

Hutch smiled nervously. "Yes, and my professional partner as well. He's also a detective."

Dr. Casciaro continued his exam, looking into Hutch's mouth, then listening to his chest. He had Hutch lay back, and began to push and prod at his abdomen. "Have you been sleeping well?"

"I sleep all right, but I can't seem to get enough," Hutch admitted. "I'm always exhausted."

The doctor finished his exam, then sat back on the corner of the desk and made his notes in the folder. "I don't think this is a flu we're dealing with here, Ken. It's possible that you have more than one health issue. I'd like to run some tests, starting with a blood work-up. I'd like to check your red and white blood cells, and test for anemia. I'd also like to run an AIDS test..."

"AIDS?" Hutch exclaimed, alarmed. "Since Starsky and I were never involved in a homosexual relationship before, I didn't think we were at high risk for that disease."

The doctor raised his hands in a calming gesture. "Relax, I doubt this is AIDS we're dealing with. It's just a precautionary measure. Doctors are kind of like detectives in a way. We need to look at all the possibilities and go through the process of elimination. AIDS can start with flu-like symptoms, though as a general rule they don't continue this long. I would just rather play it safe. I don't just test my homosexual patients. Contrary to what the newspapers say, the disease is not limited to gays or intravenous drug users."

Hutch felt a chill crawl up his skin at the words 'intravenous drug users'. He reluctantly told the doctor about his ordeal at the hands of Ben Forest, in which he was kidnapped, beaten and injected with heroin, in order to extract information from him. The doctor listened with empathy, offering a reassuring squeeze on Hutch's shoulder after he finished his story.

"Ken, I don't think you need to worry about contracting AIDS from that experience. That was several years before the first case of AIDS was diagnosed in Los Angeles. The chances of those needles being contaminated are extremely remote. But we'll run the test anyhow, and if nothing else, it may serve to ease your concerns." After Hutch nodded his assent, the doctor continued, "I do want to order a needle aspiration done on that swollen gland. And I'll have them do a skin scrape to find out if your itching is due to parasites, such as scabies."

"A needle aspiration? You're ordering a biopsy?" Hutch asked.

"Again, it's just precautionary." Casciaro smiled. "We'll gather all our evidence and clues and see if we can solve this mystery."

Hutch grinned. "We don't really talk like that, you know."

"Yeah, and doctors don't really say 'take two aspirins and call me in the morning.'" Both men chuckled. "Our lab is on the sixth floor. You can go straight up as soon as we're finished here." He filled out some forms and gave them to Hutch. "My nurse will give you a call as soon as all the results are in, and we'll schedule an appointment then for you to come back and go over the results. It'll likely be a couple days."

\* \* \*

Upstairs, the lab technician took three small vials of blood from Hutch's left arm. For the biopsy, she numbed under his arm with a local anesthetic, and he felt little discomfort when the needle was inserted. A small sample was taken, and he was bandaged. The skin test was quick and easy, just a simple scrape.

It took less than five minutes, but the results would not be available for a day or two. Hutch sighed when told, wondering why the medical establishment could collect samples so quickly, but not notify the patient in a more timely manner. He reminded himself that at last he would finally be getting some answers, even if it did take another couple days.

\* \* \*

Hutch curled up on the couch, exhausted from the trip to Dr. Casciaro's office. He was sound asleep when Starsky came home from work.

Starsky bent over him, gently putting his palm to Hutch's forehead to check for fever, and to wipe the damp hair from his face. He tenderly stroked Hutch's heated skin, brushing the perspiration away.

Roused from his slumber by Starsky's caresses, Hutch gave a sleepy grin and started to rise.

"Don't get up, love," Starsky whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Hutch groggily patted the couch cushion, inviting Starsky to sit down. When he did so, Hutch curled up beside him, his face resting on Starsky's lap. "Mmmm," he purred.

"Did you get in to see the doctor today?" Starsky asked quietly.

Hutch nodded.

"So is it the flu?"

Hutch shrugged. "Don't know. He ran a bunch of tests. Very thorough. Blood tests, skin scrape, needle aspiration..." His sleepy voice trailed off.

Starsky smiled. He was relieved that Hutch was finally getting this taken care of. Sitting back, he absently ran his fingers through Hutch's hair. He hadn't wanted to admit to Hutch how uneasy he had been feeling about this illness of his. Wanting to question him further about the tests, he looked down, only to find that Hutch had already fallen back to sleep. Starsky grinned and settled back, determined not to disturb his tired lover.

\* \* \*

During the night, Starsky had to coax Hutch into bed. The sick man had been so tired of late that he didn't

fully wake up. He slid between the cool sheets and sighed, instantly falling back into a deep sleep. Starsky spooned up behind him, protectively wrapping his arm around him.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Hutch awoke feeling more energetic than he had in weeks. Waking before the alarm, he snuggled into the warmth of the body that was still wrapped lovingly around him.

Reaching back, he ran his hand along the length of Starsky's thigh, caressing from the inside of his knee up the back of his thigh to the soft round curve of his backside and back again. He was rewarded with a soft murmur of delight at his ear, and a firm arousal nestling against his backside. Soon the two were frolicking between the sheets, enjoying a playful and enthusiastic lovemaking session, followed by a joint shower.

The pair headed in to work, both men happily sated; Starsky thrilled at Hutch's improved mood and state of health.

Late in the morning, Dr. Casciaro's nurse called to see if Hutch could come right in to discuss the results of the tests that had been run. He hadn't expected any of the results to be ready so soon, and was glad to drive over immediately to see if they had been able to find anything out for him.

Hanging up the phone, he looked across the desk to his partner. "That was the doctor's office. They have the results of my tests already and want me to come in to go over them. I'm gonna run over there. I'll be back soon. This shouldn't take too long."

"You want me to come with?" Starsky offered.

"Nah," Hutch shook his head. "It's no big deal. He's probably just gonna give me some prescription. I'll be back before Dobey even knows I'm gone."

\* \* \*

Upon arriving at Dr. Casciaro's office, Hutch was guided into a small conference room. The handsome doctor entered and greeted him, but Hutch noted that he was not as outgoing as he had been during their first meeting. Instead, he seemed to be more professional and solemn. That formality was somewhat unnerving.

"How's that arm feel?" Dr. Casciaro inquired as he rounded the desk. "Any residual soreness?"

"No." Hutch shook his head. "In fact I feel so much better today, I think I'm getting over whatever it was."

"Well, Ken, I'm afraid that isn't the case."

Unease washed over Hutch. "What did the tests show?"

Dr. Casciaro took a seat and glanced at the notes again. "Well, your blood tests came back good. Everything looks normal there. You have a slightly elevated calcium level, but that's not a big concern right now. Your AIDS test was negative. Your skin test showed negative for scabies or other parasites." Pausing for a moment, he added, "Your biopsy wasn't such good news, I'm afraid." He closed the file and placed it on the desk. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands in front of him, an earnest concern displayed on his features. "It confirms that you have a lymphoma, Ken."

Hutch's mouth went dry. "Lymphoma?"

"We found cells called Reed-Sternberg cells. They tell us that that we are dealing with a type of lymphoma called Hodgkins Disease."

Dread crept up his flesh as Hutch recalled his medical training from college. He faced the doctor bravely and asked, "Hodgkins Disease is usually fatal, isn't it?"

Dr. Casciaro met his gaze confidently. "No, not necessarily. Medical science has made many advances in the past ten years, and the prognosis is not nearly as hopeless as it used to be. Because of the tests we ran, we were able to classify your type of Hodgkins as mixed cellularity, which is common in about a third of the cases, and is only moderately aggressive. That's good. You'll need to have tests run to determine what stage you are at in the disease. That should give us all a better idea of your prognosis. There is good reason to be optimistic."

Hutch cleared his throat, struggling to remember what people were supposed to ask when confronted with such news. "What do I do now?"

"At this point I would normally refer you to an oncologist. I have a close friend who works in the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center in Los Angeles. He's an expert, Ken; tops in his field. I highly recommend you go to him, and to the Norris Center. It's one of the leading cancer treatment centers in the country, and they specialize in cancers such as yours. If you like, I'll get you his card as well as some brochures about the Norris Center."

"Yes, please," Hutch replied in a quiet voice.

"Is there anyone here with you I can call in?" the doctor offered, seeing the troubled countenance and soulful eyes of the man before him.

"No," he answered. "I'm here alone." Hutch saw the concern etched in the doctor's face and added, "It's okay... I'm okay."

The doctor rose to get the information for him. As he came around the chair that Hutch was sitting in, he squeezed Hutch's shoulder. "I'll put in a quick call to my friend; see if he can get you in right away for an initial appointment."

"Thanks."

The few minutes he had to wait seemed interminable to Hutch. On the doctor's desk was an analog clock, and in the oppressive silence, the ticking seemed to get louder and louder to Hutch's ears. He raised his eyes to stare at the clock's face, a painful awareness overcoming him of the fragility of the precious moments it measured. The snick of the door opening behind him startled the seated man, as he half-turned to see Dr. Casciaro return to his desk.

The doctor handed the pamphlets and business card to Hutch. "They'll see you Friday, 7:30 a.m. I'll have my secretary forward your records immediately." Hutch nodded his assent. "I'm sorry I don't have better news for you, Ken."

After glancing at the information, Hutch tucked the brochures into his inside coat pocket, and rose to thank his doctor. Seeing the sympathy and sadness in the other man's face, Hutch had trouble meeting his eyes. Instead, he quickly said his goodbyes and left the office, dazed by the unexpected news that he had been presented with.

Hutch slid into the front seat of his Olds. As he tried to put the keys into the ignition, he stopped, staring at his now trembling hand. He let his hand drop to his lap.

*How am I ever gonna tell Starsky?*

Hutch decided he needed time to himself before facing his lover, best friend and partner. Rather than calling

Starsky directly, he left a message with Metro's desk clerk to inform Starsky he wasn't feeling well. Then he went to the beach to ponder the upcoming changes in his life, and in Starsky's.

\* \* \*

When he got the message, Starsky knew something was wrong. He felt it deep in his soul. He logged out and went to look for his partner. Knowing that if something was bothering him, the first place Hutch would go was the beach, Starsky turned his car in that direction.

He found the blond man easily enough, seated on a bench staring out at the pounding waves. Quietly, not wanting to disturb him, Starsky walked over and sat down beside him, letting Hutch know he was there, but not intruding on his self-imposed silence.

Finally, Starsky could take the tension no longer. "Hutch? I thought you were sick?"

"And aren't you supposed to be at work?" Hutch countered.

"I could say the same for you." Starsky took Hutch's face between his palms and turned it toward him. The grief and sorrow in those pale blue eyes shocked him. "What's wrong, babe? Is it the doctor? Did he say something?"

Choking back words, Hutch shook his head slightly. "Not here."

Starsky stood up and grasped Hutch's arm. "All right, then. Let's go home."

Squinting his eyes against the sun as he peered up at his standing lover, Hutch asked, "Shouldn't you be going back to work instead?"

Exasperated by Hutch's reluctance, Starsky stood his ground. "Fuck work. You're obviously stalling about something and I wanna get it out in the open. If not here, then wherever." He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't care. But you gotta talk to me, Hutch."

Sighing, Hutch slowly stood up. "I should've known you'd find me."

"Of course I'd find you, Blintz. That's probably why you came here in the first place."

Silently Hutch agreed with his partner. No matter how much he wanted to be brave and get a handle on the situation himself, he knew he needed Starsky to bolster his emotions and his courage.

Starsky pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine, but behind his car, Hutch sat in his vehicle with the engine running. Getting out, Starsky walked over to the Ford and opened the driver's side door. "Hutch? Hey, you gonna sit here or we gonna spend all night in the car?"

When Hutch turned toward his lover, Starsky was taken aback by the bleakness in his eyes.

"Come on, babe, let's go in and talk," Starsky said gently.

Once inside, not wanting to push him, Starsky waited, let Hutch take off his jacket and followed him into the kitchen, where Hutch grabbed a can of ice tea.

"Okay, you're scaring me, Hutch. What's going on? What aren't you telling me?"

Hutch wrapped his arms around Starsky, burying his face in his neck. "Cancer, Starsk," he whispered. "I've got cancer...."

Starsky pulled himself back, stunned. "C-C...Cancer? Are... Are you sure?"

"Hell, no, I'm not sure, but the doctor's pretty sure."

Hutch waited and watched as the truth sunk in, as Starsky kept looking his partner up and down for confirmation. Denial, disbelief, fear, anger; all shone in the clouded blue eyes before him.

"How? I don't understand." He ran a hand through his abundance of curls and began pacing. "I mean, goddamn it. This isn't fair!"

"I know." A whisper of frustration.

Starsky ignored the remark as his anger grew. "I survived Gunther's hit, we've started a life together, dealt with prejudice when we bought this house, and then-blam!" Starsky slammed his fist into an open palm. "Why the hell can't we *for once* have a simple, normal life?!" He looked up at Hutch as the other man leaned against the counter watching him. "Aw, babe, I'm sorry. How are you doing? Tell me what's going on?"

"You mean beside the fact that my own body's turning against me?" Hutch was angry now, too. He didn't want to go through this. He didn't want Starsky to have to go through it. He was sick, but Starsky would have to watch as he fought this greatest of fights. And he knew from past experience how much harder that could be.

"I don't know what I'm feeling, to be honest. I'm angry, I'm scared." Hutch sighed and closed his eyes.

Starsky gathered him in his arms. "Tell me what I can do for you, babe."

"Just be here. Just love me." The plaintive blue eyes spoke louder than the words.

"Always." Starsky leaned in and gently kissed Hutch's eyelids and smoothed a flushed, pale cheek with his fingers.

Hutch reached up to grasp onto the hand that soothed him and held on tightly as if grasping for a lifeline while drowning at sea.

Pulling away, but not releasing the hand that held his, Starsky led his partner into the living room and onto the couch. "Tell me. Tell me everything the doctor said."

In a voice devoid of emotion, Hutch repeated everything Dr. Casciaro had told him, as well as the information he gathered from the brochure and library. As he began explaining about other tests he might be subjected to, he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out the card Dr. Casciaro had given him, fingering it while he told Starsky what would happen next.

"When are all these tests supposed to happen?"

"Day after tomorrow. Friday."

"I'm going with you," Starsky stated firmly, which was met with a relieved countenance on Hutch's face.

"What about work?" Hutch didn't want Starsky jeopardizing his income.

"Don't you remember? Guess not, with all that's been going down." He brushed the messy blond strands into a semblance of order. "We have Friday off."

"I doubt I'll be able to work for a couple of days afterward. The bone marrow test's supposed to be pretty

nasty."

Starsky winced at those words. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of Captain Dobey."

"You won't tell him?"

"He's gotta know, Hutch."

"Not yet. I don't want anybody to know yet except you and our families."

"What about Huggy? Or Gino and Grace?"

"No one, Starsk. Please? I mean it. Let me tell them in my own way."

Not happy, but nodding reluctantly, Starsky agreed, figuring Hutch needed control of something.

\* \* \*

Hutch went to work on Thursday and the two tried to act if everything was normal. Only it wasn't, and they couldn't pretend it was.

Hutch was to appear at the Norris Clinic at 7:30 on Friday morning, so the two made the most of Thursday evening by trying to relax and go to bed early so that Hutch would be rested. That night their loving was the most gentle and life affirming of their relationship, telling each other by touch what they had always told each other by action.

\* \* \*

Starsky pulled up to the large modern building, following the signs to the parking structure. "I always thought this was some kind of research lab. I didn't realize it was a hospital, too." He glanced up at overwhelming façade he had passed many times, but hadn't given much attention to.

"I think it used to be one. The brochure said they added the hospital about a year or so ago." Hutch sighed, wondering what lay beyond those walls for him.

"Do they work much with Hodgkins?"

"Yeah, it's one of the things they specialize in."

Starsky put the car into park and turned to Hutch with a hopeful smile. "Let's see what they can do for us then, huh?"

\* \* \*

The test they wanted to start with was a CAT scan. Hutch drank down the odd orange liquid they instructed him to, thinking that the concoction tasted an awful lot like Tang, the powdered orange drink. He couldn't help but wonder if that's what was actually used to flavor it. After finally stomaching the liquid, he was hooked up to an IV. The technicians soon had him lying on his back as a large cylindrical machine whirled and clicked overhead and around him. A distant voice came over a speaker directing him to hold his breath every so often. The procedure was not unpleasant, but terribly monotonous.

As he hadn't been allowed to eat or drink since the previous evening because of the CAT, after the test was completed the kind lab tech brought him his first cup of coffee of the day, much to his delight. She then directed him across the hall to the phlebotomist for more blood tests. By this time, he had been in the labs

for over two hours. After a moderate wait, blood was drawn, filling several small tubes, all lined up in a little rack.

X-rays followed, with the bone marrow test last, as it was the most uncomfortable. Hutch was sedated with a spinal and laid on his stomach on a gurney. A small area of his hip was swathed and then a long, hollow needle inserted into his flank. Starsky was seated at the front of the gurney, holding onto Hutch's hands and out of view of the procedure. Even with the anesthesia, Hutch felt the needle as it sank deeply into his bone, and grunted, pulling Starsky's hands as he fought the pain.

The clinic kept him several hours while he waited until the anesthesia wore off. As it dissipated, the pain and soreness became worse and he was given some Tylenol with Codeine to help alleviate it.

Several hours later, Hutch was released to go home. As Starsky helped him slip into his jacket to leave, the tech that had brought him coffee came up to them with a cheery smile. "Good luck with your test results," she said good-naturedly.

"Thanks." It was obvious Hutch was tired and sore, so Starsky took hold of his upper arm to help steady him.

"Do you know when the results might be in?" Hutch asked the technician.

"Probably not until next Monday at the earliest."

Hutch's shoulders slumped and he squeaked in dismay, "Next week?"

The lab technician was apologetic. "Sorry. I know it's hard to wait that long, but we have to be thorough."

Looking at his partner's demeanor, Starsky mumbled as they walked out, "No, lady, I don't think you have *any* idea how hard it is."

Starsky took Hutch home and got him settled, then went to get his Tylenol 3 prescription filled. He also picked up some word game puzzle books to help keep Hutch occupied during the next few days.

\* \* \*

As expected, Hutch was unable to work on Saturday. Starsky covered for him by telling Dobby that Hutch was ill, but he'd seen the doctor and it was being taken care of and Hutch would be back on duty Monday.

\* \* \*

The following week and a half, Hutch's emotions ran the gamut from forced optimism, to frustration, to fear, and then anger. Starsky dealt with all of it resolutely and tried not to let Hutch's snapping remarks or forgetfulness bother him.

However, it became a problem at work and on the streets. Hutch would snarl at other officers at times, then plaster on a false smile and joke around. Most of their perps got the same angry and abusive treatment. Starsky knew what Hutch was thinking: the unfairness of it all. *He's led a good, law-abiding life and these jerks are wasting theirs.*

*Why me and not them?* Hutch thought to himself as he slammed a thief up against a brick building a little more forcefully than usual. Immediately, he felt contrite. *I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy, would I? That wouldn't make me any better than them.*

\* \* \*

By Thursday evening, both men's nerves were shot and they had taken to spending their off hours pursuing separate activities. Starsky went to the movies and Hutch went to the beach or park; or Hutch worked outside, while Starsky stayed inside.

This particular evening Hutch was out for a walk and Starsky needed someone else to talk to, so he decided to call his mother a day early.

Starsky knew his mother looked forward each week to her son's phone call, but she sounded surprised when he phoned earlier than expected.

*"David? Honey, is everything okay?"*

Starsky let the tension in his body release at the sound of his mother's voice. "No, Ma. Hutch is sick."

*"Ken is sick? Does he have pneumonia? You told me once that he's more susceptible to lung infections."*

"No, Ma. I wish it were as simple as that. Hutch...Hutch has cancer. It's called Hodgkins Disease and it usually strikes younger men, but for some reason he got it now."

He could hear her gasp through the phone. *"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. Do you want me to come out there?"*

"No, he's okay right now. Maybe later if...if he gets real sick."

*"What can I do? I can maybe call your Aunt Rose and have her bring over some meals."*

"I guess. I just... We don't know all the results yet and it's been a tough week. Hutch is going through a lot right now. I feel like I'm walking on thin ice and I can hear it cracking beneath me."

*"Don't let this pull you apart, honey. You made a commitment to each other even though you never said the vows."*

"I ain't gonna leave him." He didn't mean to growl at his mother.

*"I know, dear, but when you feel like railing at the world, you call me. Try not to let Hutch see how upset you are."*

"Okay, Ma."

*"Now what about Hutch's family? How are they taking the news?"*

"Hutch said his mother was upset, and his sister Karyn, too. Wanted to fly out right away, but he wouldn't let them come."

Mother and son talked for a little while longer until Starsky heard the key turn in the front door, signaling his lover's return.

*"Call me when you know more, honey. Keep me informed."*

"Sure, Ma." Starsky was feeling a little better; talking to his mother always helped calm his overactive psyche.

*"I love you, honey. Both of you. My prayers are with you and Ken."*

"Bye, Ma. Love you, too." He hung up the phone just as Hutch approached him.

"That your mom?"

"Yeah. I, uh, I told her." Starsky trod warily, not knowing Hutch's mood. "That okay? You said we could mention it to our families."

"Sure. She's practically my mother-in-law." Hutch turned, taking off his jacket and hanging it up. "She okay?"

"Yeah. She wanted to come out, though." At Hutch's grimace, Starsky assured him that he convinced her not to come. "Maybe later, huh?" he asked as he fingered the collar on Hutch's green shirt.

"Sure, maybe later." Starsky's fingers were distracting him.

"How 'bout I get you into a nice, hot shower and then into bed?"

"Starsky, I'm not in the mood for sex right now," Hutch snapped as his large hand batted Starsky's fingers away.

"That's not what I want, Hutch. We don't have to do anything. I just want to spend time holding you. We can talk...or not. Up to you."

The shower calmed Hutch considerably and soon they were settled with a glass of wine in the bedroom. For the first time in a week, he opened up and haltingly told Starsky of his fears, not only for himself, but for Starsky as well.

Wrapped in the warmth of his lover's arms, Hutch relaxed and slept contentedly for the first time in days. Starsky also drew comfort from the body he held, and let go of his worries for one night.

\* \* \*

As promised, the doctor's office called the following Monday and set up an appointment to see both men at the end of the day. They were told to see Dr. Edward Newman, an oncologist who specialized in lymphatic cancers and a friend of Dr. Casciaro's, once they arrived at the Norris Center.

Dr. Newman greeted both detectives warmly and with solemnity and offered chairs opposite his desk. As an introduction, he recited some of his credentials to assure them of his capabilities.

Hutch gave a small cough during a break from the recital, unintentionally focusing the eyes and attention of the other two men on him. He lifted his chin defiantly, and with intense eyes asked, "Just tell me. How bad?"

Dr. Newman, a bland-looking brunet the same age as Dr. Casciaro, met his eyes with sincerity and forthrightness. "Because of the tests we ran, we were able to classify your illness into a stage. There are four stages, one having the best prognosis, four having the least favorable prognosis. You are classified at this time as Stage 2B. This means you have more than one tumor, and they are all above the diaphragm. The B indicates you have symptoms. I know Dr. Casciaro has already explained your type of Hodgkins is mixed cellularity, which is common in about a third of all cases, and is only moderately aggressive. This is good, as is the fact that your tumors are relatively small."

"But, Doc," Starsky struggled to find his voice, "what does 'moderately aggressive' tell us? What I wanna know is, he's gonna beat this thing, right?"

"Mr. Starsky, keep in mind that the staging can change as more tests are run. For example, if another bone marrow scan is run, and it turns out to be positive, it can jump him into a higher stage. However, at this

point, the prognosis is fairly optimistic. It's about a 50/50 chance to survive five years."

Starsky's jaw dropped and he looked with shock at his partner.

Hutch had expected a much lower chance of survival, based on what he remembered from his college courses. This bit of news was rather encouraging, considering what he thought he'd be facing. He took a large breath and exhaled slowly, feeling almost as shaky on the inside as he did on the outside. Looking to Starsky, he studied his partner intently. And Starsky was not nearly as relieved as Hutch.

"Fifty-fifty, Doc?" Starsky challenged. "You make his chances sound like a flip of a coin!" He stood up and nervously started to pace. "I don't accept that! I *won't* accept it!" He stopped pacing and faced Dr. Newman with penetrating eyes. "I don't care what your books tell you. You don't know Hutch. Don't underestimate him!"

Dr. Newman smiled. "I like to hear that. A patient's attitude has much to do with their chances of survival, Mr. Starsky. So does the attitude of his loved ones."

Surprised that his angry outburst did not rattle the doctor in the least, and in fact seemed to please him, Starsky visibly calmed. Hutch reached up and took his hand, and Starsky turned to him, his heart in his eyes. Only Hutch knew the grief and frustration he was suppressing. Starsky's eyes softened. He mouthed 'I love you,' and the corner of Hutch's mouth curved into an understanding grin.

Unaware of the unspoken communication between the two, Dr. Newman spoke up. "You don't care much for the medical profession, do you, Mr. Starsky? You have no faith in it?"

Starsky whirled about to face the doctor again. "No, I don't," he answered bluntly. He immediately felt contrite. "Uh, nothing personal, Doc."

"I'm not offended. I respect your honesty. What is it that gives you such a negative opinion of us?"

Starsky gave a small chuckle as he sank back into his seat. "That could take a while."

The doctor sat back leisurely and clasped his hands across his belly. His movements clearly showed that he was quite willing to listen.

Starsky grinned. "Hutch and me, uh, we don't get along with doctors or hospitals..."

"Speak for yourself," Hutch teased. "I wasn't the one who got thrown out of physical therapy for spraying a water bottle filled with Gatorade into the face of the therapist!"

"Ha! That's right. You were the one that got thrown out of Memorial for setting off their fire sprinklers!"

"That wasn't my fault. They blamed me, but it was Huggy who pulled that little stunt."

"You also nearly got banned from visitation for smuggling food and champagne into my room!"

Hutch laughed now. "Yeah, come to think of it, I did, didn't I?"

Dr. Newman was watching the two men closely. This was his first glimpse of them without fear and illness clouding the issue. "It sounds like you two have quite a history with hospitals and doctors."

"Yeah, well, we've gotten pretty chummy with the entire staff at Memorial, let alone the trauma units in every hospital in this county. If it's not one of us that's hurt, then it's one of our colleagues. The nature of our job, I guess. It's just that me and Hutch and doctors don't get along too good," Starsky grinned.

"Why is that?"

"We don't play by the rules, Doc. Hutch and me are a team. We work well together, but that doesn't work in your world. You have your rules and your policies, and we don't fit into that. You're always trying to keep us apart, and you don't listen to us. If Hutch is hurt or sick, I end up feeling like I'm the enemy."

"I can understand that," Dr. Newman replied. "But I want you to know that it isn't like that here. You both have a huge say in what goes on. I want to know how best to treat you, Ken. I want you to feel like you can talk to me. It's important that you feel positive about your doctors and your treatment." He looked to Starsky. "And if you are worried that I may not have the expertise to treat your partner, I would be happy to go over my credentials in greater detail. Or you are welcome to check me out on your own, if you prefer. I want you to have trust in my abilities, and in my intentions."

Hutch liked this man. He exuded a confidence that made Hutch feel good about everything he said.

"I can tell you one thing I need," Hutch offered quietly. Both men gave him their full attention. "I want the truth. Don't hide it and don't sugarcoat it. I want to know everything."

Dr. Newman nodded his head once. "Done." He sat forward in his chair. "And Mr. Starsky, I would value your input as well. I have no intention of excluding you from Ken's treatment. I'll work with you both as best I can, even if it is unconventional, as long as it's in the best interests of Ken. You describing your relationship as a 'team' is actually quite encouraging to me. You may need to depend on that teamwork to get through some rough patches ahead. Both of you."

Hutch reached up and put his hand on Starsky's shoulder, squeezing slightly. "So, what's next, Doc? Where do we go from here?"

"We'll start with radiation. Since you are at stage two, and your tumors are small, we may be able to just use the radiation. You'll be treated five days a week for four weeks. We can evaluate the size of the tumors after the treatments and see if chemo is warranted."

"Will this make him sick?" Starsky asked.

"It might. I suspect it will. Few people can go through radiation without side effects. The area will be red and dry, probably itchy. Like a burn. You may lose hair, especially in the area treated. Some lose their appetite, some get sick to their stomach, and some say food tastes different. I can list out all the possible side effects, but you won't really know until you go through it which combination of side effects will be yours, if any at all. I'll give you some information before you leave, about radiation and what you can expect. We also have information about diet and exercise and how that will impact your treatment."

Starsky's voice was quiet. "Will it hurt?"

"No, not the radiation. The treatment itself is completely painless, Mr. Starsky."

"Just Starsky," he replied. "You can drop the Mister. Or you can call me Dave, if you like."

The doctor nodded.

"Will I be able to work while going through radiation treatments?" Hutch asked.

"You might. Again, it depends on the side effects. There will be bad days and good days. You'll need a lot of rest, but we encourage you to go on with your normal life as much as you are able."

"When will the treatments begin?" Hutch inquired

"We'll start them next Wednesday. We'll have you come in Monday for a simulation, a sort of test run to acquaint you with the treatments, and to give the technicians a chance to prepare for them; get you marked for where the radiation will be directed and such."

The two men continued to question the doctor about the procedure, then took their leave. Their exit from the facility and walk to the car was quiet, both men lost in their thoughts and worries. Driving toward home neither spoke. Hutch hadn't even noticed when Starsky pulled off into the parking lot of a small park.

Glancing up at the children playing Frisbee in the distance, he asked, "What's this?"

"We need to talk," Starsky said softly.

Hutch looked over at him. "You okay?"

He shook his head and looked away out his side window. "No." He paused before continuing. "When the doc said you had a 50/50 chance, I was sitting there with my guts all spilled out on the floor, hearing the worst news I've ever heard, and I look over and you look...I don't know...relieved. *Pleased*."

"I thought the prognosis would be worse," Hutch admitted.

"You *knew*, didn't you? You knew right from the beginning!"

"When I took those courses in pre-med, I covered a bit on Hodgkins. Back then, it was pretty much a death sentence. Dr. Casciaro said the chances are not as bad anymore, that treatments have improved."

"You coulda told me, ya know!" Starsky was struggling, trying not to get angry at Hutch, but furious nonetheless. "You coulda warned me!"

Hutch dropped his head. "I know. I should have said something. I guess I was hoping you wouldn't have to know."

Starsky fell silent. His breathing was quick and ragged, causing Hutch to wonder if he weren't going to break down. He finally looked up at Hutch, unshed tears in his eyes. "I woulda preferred to hear it from you."

Hutch pulled him into a tight embrace. "I'm sorry, Starsk," he whispered into his curls. "I'm sorry."

Starsky dug his fingers into Hutch's jacket, clinging to the garment with a ferocious grip. Finally he pulled back, without releasing his hold on the cloth. His head was bowed and his eyes locked on the front of Hutch's jacket. "Don't hold out on me like that. You want the truth, and you don't want it sugarcoated, so don't go givin' me lies and stories." He raised his eyes to meet Hutch's. "We're in this together, 'kay?"

"Kay, partner," Hutch answered softly.

"Oh, an' Hutch? One more thing." His eyes sparkled. "If I ever hear you say you only have a fifty-fifty chance, I'm gonna deck ya. You got that? I never wanna hear that again."

Hutch grinned. "Got it."

\* \* \*

Monday came quickly for the sick man, far quicker than he would've liked. If Monday could somehow be avoided, then he wouldn't have to face his illness. Unfortunately it was inevitable that the day should come, and with trepidation Hutch put in for a couple of hours of personal leave, then went for his first visit prior to

going to work.

Luckily, Dobe was off, so Starsky didn't need to come up with yet another excuse for his absentee partner.

"How'd it go?" Starsky asked his returning partner as he walked into the squad room following his initial visit to the radiology department at the clinic.

Hutch shrugged his shoulders and looked around at the nearly empty room. "Okay. They really didn't do much. Just made all these marks in ink along my chest and under my arm where the beam'll be focused. And they made this plastic shield of my body and marked that, too."

"Ink, huh? Guess you'll need someone to scrub you real good to get those marks off." Starsky's eyebrows lifted suggestively above gleaming blue eyes.

"And who would you recommend for the job?" Hutch appreciated the banter with his partner more now than ever.

Flexing his fingers palm up, Starsky replied, "Oh, I'm sure I can find ten friends willing to take on that job."

"Hmmm... Only ten that wanna play?" Eager eyes shifted to Starsky's groin. The pointed remarks causing the other man's pants to tighten uncomfortably.

"Dammit, Hutch!" Starsky hissed. "Now I'll be stuck behind this desk all day."

The blond chuckled. Starsky had given him many hard-ons during work. "Payback's a bitch, huh?" He sat in his seat across from his partner.

Changing the subject in the hopes of easing his erection, Starsky asked, "How about we go to Huggy's for dinner?"

"Sure. The brochures Dr. Newman gave me talk about trying to keep as much of a normal routine as possible."

The blunt reminder of Hutch's illness helped to dissipate Starsky's erection quicker than usual. He coughed lightly, to cover his threatening emotions. "Yeah, well, let's hit the road and earn our keep."

\* \* \*

Huggy greeted his friends by placing two cold Budweisers on the bar top. He peered closely at the blond man. "Hey, Hutch, you feelin' all right?"

Exchanging a warning glance with Starsky, Hutch nodded with constraint. "Yeah, just getting over a bout of the flu."

Huggy accepted the explanation at face value. "So that's why I haven't seen your two pasty faces 'round here."

Nervously, Starsky got up and wiped his hands against his blue jeans. "Hey, Hug, you got any new music in that old juke box of yours?" He pointed to the colorful machine that had followed Huggy from his old bar, and which now sat in the corner at The Pits.

"Sure, I got me this new John Lennon single just the other day. It's cool, you'll dig it."

Hutch perked up and handed Starsky a quarter. "I like Lennon. I didn't know there was more of his music

unreleased. Go punch it in, Starsk."

"Hey, Hug, what's the special?" Starsky called from across the bar room.

"Well, my bottomless-pitted friend, today's delicacy is country-fried chicken and slaw."

Waving his hand forward, Starsky told him to bring 'em on.

"Uh, not for me Huggy. I'll just stick with a salad."

Starsky also ordered a side of fries for the two of them, figuring Hutch could always be counted on to snag a few of the fried potatoes off his plate.

Huggy left the two men to drop their order off in the kitchen and refill their drinks.

As Starsky walked back to their favorite booth, he leaned close to his partner so his words wouldn't travel.

"Hutch, you gotta eat."

"I'm really not hungry, Starsk. I'll eat something later."

"You better." Starsky tried to imitate the Hutchinson point, with little success. Then he froze as the sounds of John Lennon's posthumously released song 'Borrowed Time' floated out of the speakers and through the bar.

*When I was younger  
Full of ideas and broken dreams (my friend)  
When I was younger, ah, ah,  
Everything simple but not so clear.*

*Living on borrowed time  
Without a thought for tomorrow  
Living on borrowed time  
Without a thought for tomorrow*

*Now I am older  
The more that I see the less that I know for sure.  
Now I am older, ah, ah,  
The future is brighter and now is the hour.*

*Living on borrowed time  
Without a thought for tomorrow  
Living on borrowed time  
Without a thought for tomorrow*

"Boy, that's a beautiful tune." Hutch didn't notice Starsky's behavior as he pulled the bottle of amber fluid up to his lips.

Hutch's remarks seemed to release Starsky from his stupor. "How can you say that?!"

"Huh?"

"Hutch, that song sounds like..." he lowered his voice to a whisper, "like he's singing about his death."

Setting the bottle down, Hutch tried to placate his partner. "Aw, Starsk, you're reading too much into it. Just

listen to the words. It's about a man looking back on his life. He was forty years old, just like us, and..." He stopped at the glare from Starsky.

"Well, I would appreciate it if you didn't talk about liking songs that talk about death. And don't go comparing yourself to a singer who died when he was forty!" Starsky shook away the shiver that was running down his back.

As he sat down on the creaky vinyl, he noticed a piece of light blue paper lying on the seat. Sliding in while simultaneously picking it up, he read it and blanched. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, crumpling the paper in his fists.

Hutch noticed the change in his demeanor. "Starsky? You okay?"

Shaking his head, Starsky got up from the booth and threw the crumpled form onto the table.

"Starsk? What's wrong?"

He looked back at Hutch with misery in his eyes. "I ain't doin' this, Hutch. I can't. I can't not tell Huggy."

"Tell me what?" Huggy had appeared back at the table with more drinks and the fries. "Hey! Where you off to, Tonto? This ain't no garbage can. Come and pick up your litter from my fine table." Huggy stared after his curly-headed friend as the other man hustled into the restroom. Throwing his thumb over his shoulder at the just retreated man, Huggy asked, "What's up with Starsky?"

"I don't know." Hutch picked up the blue paper and uncrumpled it, laying it on the table.

"What's that?"

"Whatever it says, it got Starsky all upset."

The two men peered at it, Huggy leaning over Hutch's shoulder.

## Join NORML!

(National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws)



**3<sup>rd</sup> Annual 'Smoke Out'**  
**Saturday, June 23, 1984**  
**USC University Park Campus**  
**9:00 p.m. - ?**

### Medical uses of marijuana

NORML supports legislation to allow physicians to legally prescribe marijuana for those suffering from a range of serious illnesses, including glaucoma, the AIDS syndrome, the nausea and vomiting related to cancer treatments, and the muscle spasms of patients suffering from MS. Thirty-six states have passed legislation allowing medical marijuana, but none of these programs can be implemented until the federal law is changed. A medical marijuana bill will soon be introduced in Congress, and if Congress hears from the American public, this important piece of legislation could finally become law.

**Join the rally! Only YOU can change the laws**

"This is what Starsky's upset about?" Huggy looked closely at his friend through narrowed eyes. "Okay, lay it on me. What's going down?"

Looking around to avoid the inevitable, Hutch saw Anita waving for the barman's attention. "I wanna check on Starsky. You go see what Anita wants."

"Oh, I know what Anita wants, but she ain't gonna get to sail that boat," he said, looking pointedly at Hutch. "However, this conversation ain't over. I'll be back in a few, and then you and me and Curly are gonna have a chat."

In the restroom, Hutch found his partner leaning with both hands on the sides of a sink, staring into the large mirror that ran the length of the wall. "You okay, buddy?"

Taking a breath, Starsky looked in the mirror at his partner standing behind him. "Yeah, it just.... Seeing that flyer, and hearing that song, and to top it off, your first visit with the radiologist today, just made it all come home I guess."

Hutch put his hand on Starsky's shoulder, giving as well as drawing comfort. "I need you, Starsk. I can't do this alone."

Starsky turned around and pulled Hutch into his arms, holding him close. "You're not gonna have to, babe. I'm gonna be here with you all the way. 'For better or worse'. But you're gonna need to lean on others, too. You can't leave everyone out."

"Shit, Starsk. I forgot how hard all this's been on you."

"Me?! That's just like you, Hutch. You're the one who's sick and you're worried about everyone else. What I'm going through, what Huggy's going to think, what Dobey's going to do...." He trailed off, raising a hand to brush through Hutch's soft blond hair. "But I love you the way you are, anyway."

"How about a compromise? I'll tell Huggy and some of our other friends, but I don't want Captain Dobey to know yet. I can still do my job and if he knows, I'm worried it'll get out elsewhere at the precinct and they'll ground me."

"Deal. On one condition."

"Name it."

"I want you to honestly let me know when you don't think you can handle bein' on the streets. I don't need to be worrying about you getting sick in my car."

Hutch smiled broadly. "Deal. I'd never put your life in danger, Starsk. You know that."

"It ain't my life I'm worried about," Starsky mumbled. At Hutch's frown, he added, "It's my car. You know how much Merle would charge me to clean it?" He pulled out of the embrace and patted Hutch's back, the meaning behind the pat saying more than the words that accompanied the gesture. They left the restroom together.

"There you two gents are!" Huggy called to them. "You two go to the bathroom together more than any females I know." He lowered his voice as they came closer. "You all gotta be careful, people are gonna talk."

Starsky snorted. "They already do. They've been doing that for years."

"Yeah, well, now it ain't nothing you can brush off like earlier times." As his two friends sat down, he brought forward two more beers and their dinner plates.

Waving off the beer, Hutch asked for coffee instead. "Alcohol doesn't seem to sit too well with me these days."

"Why? You're not pregnant, are you?" Huggy joked alone at his lame humor. Seeing he was the only one of the threesome to chuckle, he looked back and forth between the two. "Okay, you gonna spill it or what?"

Looking deeply into Starsky's eyes for strength, Hutch told their friend, "I've got cancer."

"*What!?* And when did this big news hit the fan?"

"Earlier this month. I had my first visit with the radiologist this morning." Hutch nodded over at his partner. "That's why Starsky got all upset. Too many things hitting him from all sides."

"Oh, man, Hutch. Tell me about it. Did the docs give you any kind of..." Huggy looked a little uncomfortable, "you know, um, odds?"

"Pretty good, considering." Hutch heard Starsky take a shuddering breath, but ignored him. "Around 50/50."

Its called Hodgkins. I start radiation treatments Wednesday, everyday for the next four weeks."

"What can I do? You just tell the Bear whatever you need and I will deliver."

"Well, how about some tea to start with. I don't know if I can handle coffee right now, either." He reached out to put his hand on Huggy's silk paisley-covered arm. "And, Huggy, thanks."

Huggy covered the large hand with his own long, manicured fingers. "Anything, Hutch. And you, too, Starsk. You need anything, even talk, you come and see me."

"But, Huggy, one thing." Light blue eyes looked deeply into Huggy's brown ones. "I don't want Captain Dobey to know yet. If you happen to run across the captain, don't let loose anything. Right now I'm feeling okay and I can back up my partner. I'm worried that they'll ground me when they find out and leave Starsky alone on the streets."

Nodding, Huggy agreed. "Gotcha, kemosabe. Don't spill the beans to the warden."

\* \* \*

## WEEK ONE

Week one brought little change to Hutch, other than the difference in his routine whereby he went to treatments during lunch. Setting them up for that time alleviated the need to tell Dobey where he was going everyday, or why he was coming in late.

As long as Hutch didn't seem outwardly sick, Starsky could force the reality of his lover's cancer into a closet in his mind and slam the door shut. Yet on some nights, like tonight, Starsky found himself sitting on Hutch's side of the bed, next to the long legs, watching him as he slept. Starsky reached over and twirled the long, thin strands of golden silk through his fingers as he thought how the radiation was beginning to show its affects on Hutch's mannerisms.

Countless times over the last two days, Starsky found Hutch reaching for his throat and rubbing or pulling on it. And his appetite had decreased since he'd started the treatments. By the end of the day, his big blond was exhausted and usually fell asleep in the car on the way home. Starsky wanted to make things lighter and easier for his partner, but he knew that Hutch would realize what he was doing and why. He didn't think he could handle a full-blown Hutchinson lecture right now.

\* \* \*

Starsky shut off the lawn mower with a satisfied smile. He had been tinkering with the machine, trying to adjust it so that it didn't cough out so much smoke as he pushed it across the lawn, and had finally gotten the adjustment just right. Straightening, he brushed his filthy hands across his denim-clad thighs. Feeling eyes upon him, he turned to find Hutch standing off behind him, watching him work.

"Nice," Hutch stated appreciatively. "You fixed it. Here I was going to suggest we give up and buy a new one."

"I like the way this one cuts," Starsky countered. "Look how nice the grass looks."

Surveying the yard, Hutch nodded in agreement. "You're right. It does look great." He turned his eyes back to his partner. "You finished here? I thought maybe after you clean up, we could go out to dinner. You up for it?"

Starsky smiled. "Yeah, I'm up for it. We haven't been out in a long time."

"Good. It's a date, then."

\* \* \*

Hutch had chosen a secluded, upscale Italian restaurant, calling in advance to request a booth. Louisa's was famous for their marinated steaks, a particular favorite of Starsky's, and for their intimate setting. There were several private booths set back into small cubbies, not completely closed off from the rest of the dining room, but enough so that it gave a much more secluded feel to the atmosphere.

"I already know what I'm ordering," Starsky grinned, placing the menu aside. "A steak sounds really good right now." He saw Hutch studying the menu and felt sad. "You can't eat that, can you? You wanna go someplace else?" He hadn't thought about how Hutch's sore throat would make it too difficult to eat steak.

"No, it's okay," Hutch reassured him. "I'm in the mood for pasta. That's why I picked this place." Then he added with a pleased grin, "And since you're getting the marinated steak, I don't have to worry about ordering something with garlic. Your steak is smothered in it."

Since Hutch was not letting his discomfort take away from the evening, Starsky decided not to let it take away from his enjoyment, either. They both relaxed and enjoyed their time together. After a while, the conversation led to the previous day. Hutch had been scarce the whole day, and had been evasive when Starsky questioned his disappearance.

"It's the wrong season for Christmas shopping," Starsky noted. "So why the secrecy?"

Hutch gave up the pretense. "I was taking care of some things. Making preparations."

The word 'preparations' had an ominous ring to Starsky. "What are you preparing for?" He was afraid of Hutch's answer, but was hoping he would be told something that would put his fears at ease.

"I stopped by work. I filled out some paperwork to change my life insurance policy there. It still listed my folks as my beneficiary. I want it to list you. I had already updated my personal insurance policies years ago."

Knowing there was more to this than a simple paperwork adjustment, Starsky coaxed, "Yeah...?"

"Then I had an appointment with my financial advisor, and another appointment with my lawyer."

"What about?"

Hutch hesitated, calculating Starsky's reaction. "I'm drawing up my Will."

Starsky looked away. Instead of being angry, he felt an intense sadness. "Don't talk like that, Hutch. You aren't gonna die."

"Everybody dies. This just got me thinking that I should make sure everything is in order, for whenever it does happen."

His voice was even quieter. "Writing up a Will, it sounds like you're giving up."

Hutch reached out and grabbed Starsky's hand. "Giving up?" he said gently. "David, I haven't even *begun* to fight yet."

Starsky gave him a small smile.

"I just want to be sure that if something should happen to me, that you would be protected."

"Protected? I don't know what you mean, Hutch."

"You have no legal rights to my estate," Hutch explained.

Starsky waved his hand, brushing off his concerns. "I don't care about that."

Hutch raised his eyebrows. "That's a lot of money, babe. And it's not just the money, it's the house and everything in it. What if my family decided to fight for all that? You could lose the house."

"Hutch, without you, the house and the money mean nothing to me. Nothing."

"*I love you,*" Hutch declared. "In my heart, we are married. I would marry you legally, right now, if I could."

"I know, babe. I love you, too." Then he added teasingly, "You've been a good wife to me."

Hutch laughed, then shook his head. "Even if we found someone who would marry us," he sighed, "it still wouldn't be recognized legally. You would still have no rights to my estate."

Starsky shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I don't need the money. I need you, right here beside me."

"It matters to me, Starsky. I want you taken care of. I want you to have what rightfully belongs to you. It isn't right, that I can't provide that for you. If we were a man and woman, none of this would be an issue. We'd get married, I'd write a basic will; everything would be set. My lawyers are working it out so you'll have no worries from my family. Let me do this. It'll give me peace of mind to know that you're legally protected."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Starsky nodded. "Okay. But I want you to stop worrying about me, darlin'. Fretting about all that legal mumbo jumbo is gonna wear on you, and you need that energy for getting well. Just tell the lawyers what you want done and let them figure it out. I'll be fine either way. Let's put the focus back on you getting better, where it belongs."

"All the talk with the lawyers about our relationship really got me thinking. It's frustrating that because we aren't a husband and wife that we can't have what other spouses do. We've made a lot of sacrifices to be together."

"I don't feel like I've made sacrifices," Starsky stated, deep in thought. "It isn't a sacrifice to be with you."

"No, I mean we could get married."

"Hutch, we are married."

"We made that commitment, yes," he nodded. "But we could have that ceremony, that celebration with our friends. The public recognition that we are one. I want to be able to kiss you in public, to hold hands with you, to refer to you as my husband or my spouse... All the things that other married couples take for granted."

"You know why we've never done that. It could jeopardize us at work."

"Fuck work," Hutch spat out. "We're more important."

Startled by his vehemence, Starsky reminded him, "But it could put us in danger, remember? You wanna

end up needing backup that never shows?"

"I'm not so sure anymore that would be an issue. I mean, we're damn good at our jobs. We've earned respect there. And there's always been talk about us, even before we became lovers. I think if we were going to run into that kind of hatred, we would have seen it by now."

"What about Internal Affairs?"

"They aren't gonna fire us. They'd be shooting themselves in the foot."

"They'd split us up. Spouses can't work together as partners. Not even heterosexual ones."

"We could fight it."

"There's no chance we'd win."

"It's just a job, partner. I'd rather be your partner in love than in work. You're more important."

Starsky sat quietly for a moment. "Yes."

Hutch's eyes widened. "Yes? You agree? I expected more of an argument."

Starsky shook his head. He thought heavily about his answer before replying. "Hutch, if you aren't here in five years, do you really think my biggest loss will be of my *working* partner? Like you said, it's just a job. I can find other work. I can get another partner. *You* aren't replaceable."

Hutch smiled. He pulled a box from his pocket and placed it on the table. "I got us something." Sliding the small box to Starsky, he waited.

Starsky opened the lid of the box to find two gold bands nestled in navy blue velvet, one sized slightly larger than the other. "You bought us rings?"

"If you don't want to wear it at work, I'll understand."

Starsky removed a ring from the box and lovingly examined it. He smiled. "Can I wear it now? Or do you want to wait until we get married?"

"Now," Hutch smiled in return. "I don't want to plan a marriage ceremony right now, not knowing how these treatments will affect me. Let's wait until the treatments are over and we see what's going to happen next."

Instead of putting his own ring on, Starsky grabbed the larger ring from the box and slipped it onto Hutch's right ring finger. "I love you, Ken." He pressed his own ring into Hutch's palm.

Hutch slid the other ring onto Starsky's matching finger. "And I love you, David."

Gazing at Hutch, Starsky sighed. "I want to kiss you," he said plaintively.

Hutch cupped Starsky's face in his hands and kissed him reverently. At first Starsky was tense, unused to being publicly affectionate with Hutch, but he soon warmed to the tender lips. When Hutch finally ended the kiss, he smiled. "I'm not hiding anymore, babe. I'm not denying, and I'm not pretending we're no more than friends. I love you, and I'm not afraid to show it."

"I can see this is going to take some getting used to," Starsky grinned. "I think some practice is in order..."

He pulled Hutch closer to kiss him again.

\* \* \*

Starsky insisted on accompanying Hutch to his radiation treatment on Friday. He had gone the first day, but had not been back with him since. Hutch decided that it wasn't necessary, and it served them well to have Starsky back at Parker Center, able to cover if Hutch took longer than expected.

Hutch underwent the treatments alone, closed off in a small room. No visitors could participate with him, due to the radiation exposure.

"It's okay, Starsky," Hutch soothed. "I really can't feel anything. It doesn't hurt at all. Piece of cake." With that, he smiled and left with the technician, leaving Starsky alone in the waiting room.

The waiting room was well stocked with current magazines, but Starsky couldn't concentrate long enough to read a single article. He debated turning on the tv in the corner, but he knew he wouldn't really watch it, either, so he left it off. He sat back in a chair against the wall, and watched the activity around him. There was a steady stream of patients coming and going from treatments, in varying degrees of good and bad health. A few were like Hutch, appearing to have no health problems at all. A few arrived in wheel chairs, looking extremely unwell or with a ghostly hopelessness in their eyes.

A shudder ran through Starsky. He wondered how Hutch would respond to these treatments. For the first time, he allowed himself to imagine Hutch battered by chemotherapy and radiation, and he felt a heartsick pain in his chest. He kept reminding himself that Hutch might never get that sick, that the radiation could shrink the tumors and might not make him ill at all; but a nagging dread still laid claim to his heart.

A small voice in his head taunted him. *What if he doesn't make it?* The idea of living his life without Hutch was unfathomable. In one devastating blow, he could lose his best friend, his confidant, his working partner, his family and his lover. The ache in his heart grew stronger, but he fought it down. *He will make it. He has to.*

Toying with the ring on his finger, he smiled. *Married.* He had always considered himself married to Hutch, ever since they became lovers, but the ring added something more. He had a symbol of his love with him at all times, for all to see; a part of Hutch in his hand. The notion delighted him.

Remembering Hutch's words from the other night, Starsky was touched that Hutch felt the need to protect his interests. Knowing Hutch's family, and their dismay over the partners' relationship, he could see why Hutch worried about them contesting his will. While they had always treated Starsky respectfully, it was easy to see that Hutch's father was not at all pleased with his son's choices. From past experiences, he was well aware that death could bring out both the best and worst in those left behind, and he wouldn't want to be pitted against Hutch's family in a courtroom. If it came down to that, Starsky knew he would walk away, let them have it all. He wouldn't fight them; couldn't battle against Hutch's loved ones. He didn't have the strength, nor the desire to hurt someone so important to Hutch, especially when all he would really want to do is turn to them, share his grief with them, because they were the only other people who loved Hutch as much as he did.

The aching in his chest flared up again, and he squeezed his eyes shut. *He's going to make it! He's not going to die! The treatments will work. They have to work.*

Feeling someone sit down beside him, Starsky's eyes flew open. A pretty, young woman in jeans and a polo shirt had made herself at home, and was in the process of putting her sneakered feet up on the coffee table and crossing them at the ankles. Her long sandy hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and it appeared as if she wore no makeup. She clasped her hands on her belly and turned to give Starsky a warm smile. "Hi."

"Hi," he replied awkwardly, wondering if she was waiting for someone, too.

"You waiting for a patient?" the cheerful girl asked.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Radiation therapy."

The girl nodded knowingly. "It's a bitch, isn't it? You're left out here, not knowing what's going on, all wrapped up in your fears and worries. Is it your wife?"

"No," Starsky replied automatically. "It's my...husband." He smiled to himself, aware that the comment was bound to evoke a shocked reply, but not caring. It felt good to indulge in the things that other couples took for granted, just as Hutch wanted him to do. Somehow it made him feel like Hutch was right there with him.

The comment didn't ruffle the girl at all. "I'm sorry. I know it's hard to watch him go through this." Her expression showed great understanding.

Starsky liked this girl. It was rare for him to find someone he could talk to, who could relate to what he was experiencing. "How about you? Are you here waiting for your husband, too?"

She shook her head. "No, I work here. I saw you sitting in here looking miserable, and thought I'd come by and introduce myself. I'm Bunny Salizar. I'm one of the social workers on staff here."

"Your name is Bunny?" Starsky blurted out.

Her mouth curved into a beautiful smile. "My business card says Roberta," she confessed, "but sooner or later everyone ends up calling me Bunny anyhow, so I've given up the fight. And you are...?"

"I'm Dave Starsky. He held out his hand, and she returned a firm handshake. "Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, too," she answered. "I wish it were under more pleasant circumstances. How's your husband doing?"

"He's doing pretty good so far. This is his first week." He drew in a deep breath and expelled it.

"Scary, isn't it? Not knowing?" She shook her head. "You don't know what he's going through, you don't know what's going to happen down the road..."

"I hate when we have to be pulled apart like this. I wish I could be in there with him," he sighed.

"You want to see him?" she offered.

"No," he lied. "I don't want to interrupt the session. I just...wish I could talk to him, be there for him, you know?"

"Come with me," she invited happily, getting up.

"Oh, no," Starsky declined, remaining right where he was. "He's in the middle of his session. I'd feel foolish..."

"Relax," Bunny interrupted. "You won't be stopping or interrupting anything; it's like 15 minutes of preparation, one minute of treatment. I'm gonna show you how you can talk to him, share this with him." She reached down and took his arm. "What's your husband's name?"

"Ken Hutchinson."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Hutch! You're Hutch's partner!"

"You know Hutch?"

"We met earlier this week. I make it a point to meet all of the new patients here."

"And all the sad sacks in the waiting room?" Starsky grinned.

She winked. "Yep, them, too."

She took him directly to the radiology lab, and knocked on a door. Pulling a reluctant Starsky in with her, she confidently introduced him to the technician who was treating Hutch. "Randy, this is Dave Starsky. He just wants to come in and watch, and say 'hi' to Hutch. You don't mind, do you?"

Starsky could see Hutch through a large window, but he appeared to be either sleeping, or just lying with his eyes closed. There was a clear plastic mask over his face, and he was lying on a form-fitting chair.

Randy grabbed a chair and pulled it up for Starsky. "No, I don't mind. Have a seat." He pointed to a microphone and said, "Just press this button and talk into that. Don't get too close. Yeah, like that."

"Hiya, babe," Starsky spoke into the mic.

Hutch's eyes flicked open immediately. "*Starsk?*"

"Just wanted to say hi. I met a friend of yours. Bunny said I could come in and chat with you for a minute."

*"I knew I liked that girl. Tell her thanks for me."*

Bunny leaned over Starsky's shoulder and pressed the button. "You're welcome."

"She asked me who I was waiting for, and I told her my husband," Starsky informed him.

Hutch laughed. "*Did you really? I love you.*"

"I love you, too. I'm gonna go back and let Randy here do his job. Just wanted to say hello."

*"Thanks, Starsk. I won't be much longer."*

Starsky and Bunny walked back to the waiting room, with Starsky in much better spirits than earlier.

"Thanks, Bunny. I didn't know I could do that. It's good to see for myself that he's okay in there."

"It's good for him, too. He perked up the second he heard your voice. He's probably been lying there worried about you out here all alone." Reaching into her back pocket, Bunny pulled out a small case. She took a business card from it, and handed it to Starsky. "Here's my card. You can call me anytime. You or Hutch. I'd be glad to help if I can, like just now, or even if you just need to talk. And my office door is always open." Then she added, "But if you show up unexpectedly during my lunch hour, be so kind as to bring me a burger or something, will you? I get grumpy if I miss my lunch."

\* \* \*

## **WEEK TWO**

Over the weekend, without having had any treatments, Hutch seemed to perk back up to his old self. He still had little to no appetite, much to Starsky's chagrin, but he didn't seem as tired or slow of gait. And as if

Hutch's good disposition was rubbing off his partner, Starsky's swagger and confident air rebounded, even though he hadn't realized he had lost them.

Once the treatments started back up the following Monday, however, the nausea began. They decided, or rather Dobey decided for them, to stay at the precinct after lunch and finish the reports they owed their superior. Starsky looked up at one point when the tick-tick of the typewriter across from him had stopped, and saw his partner staring down at the black keys and leaning to the left. He reached over and tapped the end of his pencil on Hutch's desk to draw his attention.

"Hutch? Hutch, you okay?"

"Huh?" Blond hair flew in all directions as Hutch shook his head to clear it. "Sorry, Starsk. Started to nod off there for a minute." Deep blue eyes filled with concern bored through Hutch's soul as his partner tried to get a bead on what was happening. He smiled wryly over the desks. "Honestly, Starsk. I was feeling a little queasy for a minute, but I'm fine now."

Starsky stared for a half minute more. "You wouldn't be thinking of lyin' to me, would you? Remember, I can tell when...."

"... When I'm not telling the truth," Hutch finished the oft-said sentence. "I know. And, no, I'm not covering up."

"Then why aren't you telling me what you're going through, Hutch? Why all the pretense? That's what I'm here for. 'In sickness and in health,' right?"

Hutch looked down at his lap. "Sorry, Starsk. I just... I want to make things as easy for you, too." He raised his head and looked directly at his partner and lover. "My throat's been sore a lot and I think I'm getting some canker sores in my mouth."

"That's why you're not eating much, then?"

Reluctantly, Hutch nodded. "Yeah, it just hurts too much."

"Hutch, you could've told me. We'll just get stuff to eat that's a little easier on ya. I can live on applesauce and ice cream for the next couple of weeks, as long as you let me have the occasional chili dog," he added with a grin.

"And baby food?"

Starsky crumpled his nose. "Baby food? That's gross, Hutch. Even grosser than your usual health shake concoctions."

"What's this about baby food?" Unbeknownst to the two detectives, Dobey had entered the squad room to make sure his men were doing as he requested. "I hope to God it doesn't mean what I think it means?"

Starsky leaned back and looked up at his superior. "And what do you think it means, Cap'n?"

"Never you mind, just get back to work on those reports and quit stalling!" Dobey hung around for a few more minutes, grabbing some coffee and pulling files, while glancing over at bent heads to make sure his men were working.

\* \* \*

Tuesday evening found Starsky sitting on the bed by Hutch's side again as he watched the prone man sleep

heavily. Hutch had been exhausted when they got home and immediately took a shower and went to bed without eating. Starsky wondered how much longer Hutch would be able to keep up the pretense of being able to work. *Always so strong for everyone else, ain't ya, babe? But then the mask drops. And if so, what was that all about today, huh?*

Starsky thought back on the 245 they'd been called to that morning. A young woman had been assaulted, robbed and almost raped when two uniformed cops happened upon the situation. They'd chased the suspect into a small diner on porno-row and he'd held them at bay behind the counter with a Python similar to Hutch's. While the two young uniforms flanked the man from the side, their hands on their pieces the entire time, Starsky and Hutch approached him from the front. Rather than following procedure to talk the man into surrendering, Hutch had continuously walked forward toward the pointed weapon, while speaking softly to the gunman. Starsky could tell by the violent jerks of the man's hands and the wild, rushed look in his eyes, that he was on something. When he brought his gun arm up, Starsky dove to protect the young women at the table next to him, and Hutch jumped straight into the line of fire and tackled the gunman. No shot was fired, but for several seconds, Starsky's heart almost burst through his chest.

When all was said and done and the perpetrator was on his way to the booking station, Starsky turned to confront Hutch about his reckless action. Seeing the question in his eyes, though, his partner turned away and refused to talk, so Starsky let it go, hoping it was an aberration.

\* \* \*

Starsky continued watching his partner closely all week and finally realized what Hutch was doing.

*Goddamn you, Hutch! Taking risks like that because you'd rather-* Starsky couldn't finish that thought. *I thought we were done playing supercops after the Gunther hit went down.* He slammed the file drawer shut after pulling out the last form he needed for the day.

"Watch it, Starsky! That isn't your property, so don't go around treating it like it was Hutchinson's car door." Captain Dobe was standing at the opened door of his office. For such a big man, he carried himself lightly and Starsky hadn't even realized he was there.

Since his partner had gotten sick earlier in the day, Dobe ordered him home, which gave the police captain a chance to speak with the other half of his dynamic duo, alone.

With a tilt of his head, Dobe indicated he wanted to see Starsky in his office. Closing the door behind his curly-haired detective, the captain indicated that he take a seat.

Starsky waited until Dobe was seated behind his desk before asking what was up.

"You tell me."

"Huh?"

"Point blank, Starsky." Dobe looked directly into his eyes. "What's up with your partner?"

*Oh, shit! How do I handle this without Hutch?* Starsky looked down at his shoe crossed over his knee and began playing with the laces. "Hutch?"

"You have another partner I don't know about? Don't play the dumb cop routine with me, Starsky. And no pretending you don't know what I'm talking about. I want to know what's going on with Hutchinson."

Coughing, Starsky asked, "why do you think anything's wrong?"

"Several reasons." Dobey opened a folder on his desk and began reading aloud from it. "First, on Tuesday, he placed himself in the line of fire without reason when there were two other cops in addition to yourselves at the scene. Secondly, I had a report from Officer Dyer that you responded to a call on the docks and that the two of you were heard arguing after the fact that the call wasn't for your jurisdiction. Thirdly, he ran out in front of a speeding hijacked armored vehicle yesterday and, according to the witnesses, he was going to let the driver hit him, if it wasn't for a gunshot wound to the arm throwing the driver off balance and turning the wheel. Fourth, this morning-" He didn't get a chance to finish as Starsky cut him off.

"Okay, Cap'n, I get it." *Yeah, I get it all right. I can't stop running those images through my head myself.* "But in all honesty, I can't say anything without Hutch bein' here himself. I made a promise."

Dobey folded his hands together on top of the desk and looked at his slouching detective with compassion. "Starsky, if there's something going on with Hutch that's letting him make rash and impulsive decisions in the field, then perhaps he needs to talk with someone professionally. We do have doctors equipped to handle our emotions when they get the best of us."

"Yeah, well, no offense, Captain, but your doctors won't be able to help Hutch any more than..."

"Any more than what? What are you holding back from me, Starsky?"

Both men stared at each other, neither wanting to give. Finally, Dobey looked away and sighed. "Let me ask you this: is Hutchinson able to handle himself and your back?"

"Absolutely. There's no doubt in my mind," Starsky said firmly and with conviction.

"It isn't your mind I'm worried about, Starsky. It's your back. And Hutch's mind."

"Captain, let me talk to Hutch tonight and we'll get back to you tomorrow. Promise."

"I'm going to hold you to that, son. I don't want to push, but I'm responsible for all the men under my jurisdiction, and when there's cause for concern with one of them...."

Just before Starsky walked out the door, Dobey called him back once more. "And I want you to know that if you need to talk about anything, I'm here."

\* \* \*

All during the drive home, Starsky tried to come up with some way of telling Hutch that he needed to tell Dobey what was going on. He was afraid that Hutch wouldn't agree with him and argue the continued need for secrecy.

But Hutch was more amenable to the idea than Starsky thought, which made Starsky wonder if his lover wasn't becoming fatalistic about his illness. Especially with his recent behavior.

Reading Starsky's thoughts, Hutch scolded him. "Stop that."

Confusion lit the darker features. "Stop what?"

"You're thinking that I'm losing hope."

"No, I'm not," Starsky protested.

"You're not a very good liar, Starsk."

Starsky waved him off. "Yeah, well, don't I got a reason to think you're giving up?"

Hutch's head jerked back at that statement. "Why, for God's sake, would you think I'm giving up?"

Looking him squarely in the eye, Starsky asked about his recent recklessness. "Hutch, you've been putting yourself in the line of fire the last couple of days. How'm I supposed to back you up, if you're going to go off half-cocked?"

Hutch looked intently at him. "Starsky, I'd rather buy it doing my job, than sick in bed. Didn't we always say that we wouldn't mind getting burned on the streets?"

"But, Hutch, that was when we were younger and didn't know any better."

"And I'd rather get burned saving your life or someone else's than be lying there," he threw his hand toward the master bedroom, "not knowing what was going on around me, soiling my clothes and the bed. Or worse, being in some cold hospital setting."

Starsky rubbed his hands up and down Hutch's arms to calm the upset blond. "Hey, I understand. I just worry that you're pushing yourself too hard."

Sighing, Hutch brushed back his hair. "I know, babe. And I'm sorry for worrying you. I'll tell Dobe in the morning, but if he puts me on desk duty, I don't want any arguments. To be honest, it's getting harder chasing down the bad guys. If it wasn't for you being out there without me, I'd ask for something a little cushier."

Sitting down on the couch, Starsky patted his lap. "Here's something cushy for you right now. Just lay right here and let me take care of you."

"Cute, Starsk."

"Ain't I just?" he answered with an impudent grin, relieved that hiding Hutch's illness from their boss was soon to be over. *One weight lifted...*

\* \* \*

Early the next morning, before checking the duty roster, the two detectives walked into their captain's office, intent on telling him everything.

Rather than utter his usual gruff demand that they knock first, Dobe just nodded at the two to have a seat. Something told him that this was serious and scolding the two wouldn't be in their, or his, best interest at this point.

"You have something you wanted to talk about?" he opened with, addressing his blond detective.

Licking his lips, Hutch dove right in. "I need to tell you about something that's going on with me."

Dobe waited patiently, while Hutch exchanged glances with his partner, then looked down at his shirt, fingering the buttons.

It all came rushing out, as if he needed to say it quickly or he would never get it out. "I've got cancer. It's called Hodgkins, Stage 2B. I've been getting radiation treatments for it for the past two weeks at lunchtime." Hutch looked up, afraid to see the pity he knew would be on Harold Dobe's face.

Instead, all he saw was shock, then concern, as the older man took in the news. "Okay. That explains a lot."

Dobey leaned back in his chair watching Hutch, then slowly got up to sit on the front edge of his desk near the chairs where his detectives were seated. "I don't know what to say, Hutch. I'm sorry. I've known a few friends from church who've suffered from cancer and I can't imagine what you're going through."

"Well, we're hopeful. It's got a fairly good cure rate." Hutch chortled, not happily. "For cancer, that is."

Starsky piped in optimistically. "Yeah, Hutch's gonna beat this thing."

"How're you feeling, son?"

"I'm starting to feel some of the affects of the radiation. That's why I decided-we decided-that you needed to be informed. I don't want to put anyone, especially Starsky, in danger."

"Personally, Hutch, whatever I or Edith can do for you-or you, Starsky," Dobby looked over at the other man who was affected by this news, "you tell us. And Edith is on the prayer chain at our church, she'll make sure that you're put on the list."

"Thanks, Captain. I'll take all the prayers I can get."

Dobey looked up, knowing that the next bit of news was not going to be taken as well. "However, professionally, Hutch, I have to be concerned about your ability to handle the job while you're receiving treatments. I'm somewhat familiar with what they entail, and I know it isn't pretty or comfortable. I'll have to contact your doctor and have him send over copies of your records and the treatment details. I'd like to recommend you go on desk duty, perhaps in Records or Intake. But the department doctors might recommend that you take temporary leave, until you're in remission. It's not completely up to me, Ken."

"You hear that, Starsk? He called me 'Ken'." Both detectives grimaced, remembering another life threatening time when Dobby had called one of them by their first name.

"You're scheduled to work through Sunday, right?"

Both Starsky and Hutch nodded.

"Fine. Get me copies of those records ASAP and I'll forward them to Dr. Byrd and hopefully we'll have a plan of action when you come back. I'd also suggest that you make use-both of you-of the department psychologist. I'm sure this is overwhelming for you both, and that's what they're here for."

The rest of the day seemed easier on Hutch, especially now that he didn't have to hide his illness from Dobby. So Starsky suggested they get out for an evening at The Pits.

\* \* \*

Huggy took a good long look at his two friends as they walked into his establishment and sat down at their regular booth along the wall. Even though he'd seen both men several times over the last week, those visits were usually business related. Now he was viewing them through knowing eyes. When they didn't have their 'cop' persona cloaked around them.

Hutch was pale, and walked with a slower gait, but seemed to be holding up well. His face reflected an attitude of solace.

Starsky, on the other hand, looked worn. There were circles under his eyes, his shoulders were slumped and his confident swagger was missing. He almost seemed fearful, and his eyes watched every movement Hutch made as he followed him to their usual booth.

The proprietor watched his blond friend head toward the restrooms and walked over with a beer bottle in one hand, and an iced-tea in the other. "You look like you're in need of someone with an ear to talk to, my friend," he said as he slid in across from Starsky and handed him the beer.

"I'm worried, Huggy."

"He worse?" Huggy looked back toward the door to the men's room for Hutch's appearance.

Taking a swig of beer first, Starsky shook his head.

"Then why's the Starsky strut gone into hiding? Something's bothering you, and Huggy Bear's got the time and the heart for a Starsky spilling."

Sighing, Starsky stared down at the bottle, peeling the label slowly. "I'm worried about him, Hug. He's pushing himself too hard and I'm worried he's getting careless."

"How?"

"He's taking too many chances. He even told me yesterday that he'd rather get burned on the street than end up a vegetable in a bed."

"I can see that. I don't disagree."

The tension and fear that Huggy had seen when Starsky first walked in now showed full force. "Dammit, Huggy! He's gonna get himself killed if he keeps it up. It's not like Hutch to go off half-cocked."

"True," Huggy agreed "that's usually your role."

Shoulders slumped as Starsky's anger retreated. "And he won't listen. I tried to talk to him about it, but he doesn't seem to get it. He's not gonna give himself a chance to get better if he keeps doing what he's doing."

"You talk to Dobey yet?"

"Actually, Dobey kinda forced the issue, because he's been worried about Hutch's behavior, too. It's almost like he doesn't believe he's gonna make it, so he's trying to get himself killed."

"You think maybe the big man'll pull him?"

Starsky shrugged his shoulders in response as he saw his partner walking toward him. "Don't say anything, huh, Hug? I don't want him worrying about me. He's got enough to worry about."

"I think he has to, Starsky. What does Captain America do best, huh? Worries 'bout other people, most especially you, my friend. If he spends his time worrying about himself and dying, that's all he's gonna be focused on. If he worries about you worryin' about him, then his focus'll change to gettin' all well so you won't worry."

"You're making my head hurt, Huggy."

Huggy got up from the booth to let Hutch sit down when he came back. "You guys ready to order?"

Starsky ordered a burger with the works and a side of fries, then took his leave to go to the restroom. Huggy took the opportunity to lecture his blond friend.

"Hutch, I hear you been charging into scenes like ole T.R. goin' up San Juan Hill."

"Starsky say something?"

"He didn't have to say much. It's written all over his face."

"I'm not *trying* to get killed, Huggy. It's just... It's hard to explain."

"Try, anyway."

Hutch rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure how much longer I'll be out there, on the streets. I want to do all I can to protect Starsky and others. Wouldn't you rather die protecting the one you love, than comatose in some bed, not knowing what was going on around you?"

"So you *are* trying to buy the farm out there on the streets. Man, I thought you were bigger than that."

The blond detective was affronted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hutch, there's one thing you're forgetting here. You putting yourself on the line the way you are is promptin' Starsky to die a little bit at a time. Not physically, but emotionally. He's already walking a tightrope, and it's unraveling right before both of your eyes, but you don't want to see it."

"I don't need a lecture, Huggy. I can get that from Starsky any time."

"Tough. You're bein' selfish and somebody's got to smack you upside to get your head on straight and see what you're doin' to your partner. You won't listen to him, so you're gonna take it from me."

At that moment, the object of their discussion came back out into the bar and stopped at a table to chat with another friend.

"Look at him, Hutch. Take a good look at what you're doing and what it's doing to him."

Hutch saw what Huggy had seen of Starsky's internal demeanor, and closed his eyes against the truth. "I don't want to hurt him," he whispered.

"He ain't hurt 'cause you're sick. He's hurt because you're not giving yourself a chance to beat this thing."

"I'll try to be more careful, okay, Huggy? Besides, it may be a moot point if the department grounds me."

"I'm hurtin' for ya both, man. It hurts me to see you guys go through this, but if anyone can beat it, it's you two. You're stronger together than anyone else I know."

\* \* \*

### **WEEK THREE**

Over the weekend, Hutch made good on his promise take it easier at work and be more careful. When his treatments started back up on Monday, Starsky once again went with him and sought out Bunny to discuss the latest round of emotions they had dealt with.

She assured him it was normal; and that now, by week three, Hutch would probably start to become sicker and the focus of his emotions would be on fighting the illness and the frustration of his body's reactions to the treatments.

Bunny was right, as immediately upon getting home, Hutch made a beeline for the bathroom. Starsky was behind, rubbing his back and wiping his face with a warmed cloth; his actions speaking louder than any

words he could verbalize.

Once the episode was over, both men sat quietly on the bathroom floor for a few more minutes, Hutch gathering strength and Starsky fortitude, their breathing patterns the only sound in the inner sanctum of this latest battle.

Starsky finally broke the silence. "Let's get you up off the floor, babe, before you get chilled, and get you onto the couch. I'll make some soup or something for lunch."

"No. Just wanna lay down. Please, Starsk." Hutch's blue eyes beckoned to his partner.

"Hutch, you gotta eat. You just lost all the breakfast you ate, which wasn't much in the first place. You need the strength."

"Please, Starsk. I'm tired. I just want to sleep for a bit. I'll eat something when I wake up. Okay?"

"Promise?"

"I promise."

The light blue eyes were bleak with pain and tiredness, and Starsky didn't have the heart to argue, so he helped his lover off the floor and into their bedroom. He closed the blinds, shutting out the blinding summer sunlight, but leaving the windows opened. The sounds of summer-children laughing, dogs barking, birds chirping-and the light breeze that wafted through the slats of the blinds soothed the sick man to an easy sleep.

As promised, Hutch ate later and kept down a small container of plain yogurt topped with fresh blueberries and a dash of sugar. A plain buttered piece of toast was also laid on a plate in front of him, and Hutch nibbled on it while telling Starsky of the decision he'd made while lying in bed.

"Starsk. I can't do this anymore."

David Starsky's heart stopped beating for half a second as an iron band wrapped itself around his heart.

"Can't do...do what?"

"Be your partner. At least not right now. I'm too sick and I'm going to get worse before I get better."

The pounding of Starsky's heart stopped reverberating through his shirt as he realized that Hutch meant the job, not the fight for his life. "Hutch, it don't matter, babe. I don't care if you're not there beside me on the streets. But I do care if you're not beside me here. If you want to tell Dobe you're taking leave, I won't argue."

Hutch reached over the table and brushed Starsky's beloved cheek. "But I'm going to worry about you being out there without me to back you up. I can't entrust you to just anyone, you know?"

"I know. It'll be okay, though. If Dobe wants to pair me with some greenhorn, then I'll deal with it. I handled you, didn't I?"

Hutch grinned and rolled his eyes.

"Besides, I can take care of myself," Starsky tried to reassure him.

"Not as good as I can."

\* \* \*

When the two returned to work on Tuesday morning, the first visit they had planned was to the personnel department. The assistant director met with them and was ready with papers for Hutch to take home to review, sign and return since she had already been informed of Detective Hutchinson's situation by his captain.

Then they went to meet with Dobby. "Uh, Captain, I need to speak with you." Hutch had poked his head into the door that abutted the hallway.

Waving his arm to indicate their admission, Captain Dobby bellowed, "Where the hell have you two been? Do you know you're more than half an hour late? And, Hutchinson, you look like hell. Should you even be here?" His bellowing was more from concern than anger.

"That's what I want to talk to you about. We just came from personnel, so we're running a little late."

Dobby calmed, but the tension in his body increased. He had a feeling he knew what this was about. "You're taking leave, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I haven't been feeling good lately and I'm only gonna get sicker." Hutch didn't dare glance at his partner, knowing that Starsky got uncomfortable when Hutch talked about getting sick. He couldn't handle Starsky right now; that would have to wait. He needed to get through this first.

"It doesn't surprise me, Hutchinson." Dobby was afraid he'd have to bench the man and he didn't want it to come to that; though he would've if Hutch had continued with the rash behavior. "I have to say I'm sorry, but this is for the best thing for you right now. You need to concentrate on getting well and if you have to worry about what's going down out there, you'll only get more tired and less prone to recovery."

"Me and Hutch've got it figured out if it's okay with you, Captain. I'll take my lunch hour and run him over to the Norris Center, and Huggy said he'll drive him if I can't make it."

"I'm sure Edith would be willing to help out also." *If he's so sick he can't drive himself, then he must be real bad.* Dobby was upset over the thought of losing not only one of his best detectives, but also a friend.

"That'd be great, Captain. Check with her first. I can still handle the driving, but I get so tired..."

"And sick," Starsky added.

"...That it's probably best that I don't drive myself," Hutch finished.

"I hate to ask this, but you know you'll have to turn over your weapon and your shield, don't you, Hutchinson? At least until your status changes, or becomes more permanent."

Starsky was bothered by that remark. "That *ain't* gonna happen. He'll be back before you know it."

Coughing gruffly to cover his embarrassment, Dobby agreed, but added that he had to follow procedure. He also asked if there was anything else he or Edith could do for them.

"Just pray, Captain," Starsky replied quietly as he closed the door to the squad room behind him.

Captain Dobby watched the two men leave and continued to stare at the closed doorway-not seeing it, but imagining what was happening on the other side, worried about the future the two men faced, and how Starsky would handle it if his partner never returned to work.

Or if he died.

\* \* \*

Starsky sat on the edge of the bed, Hutch's head in his lap. With his free hand, he held a small waste basket near Hutch's mouth as the sick man vomited repeatedly. His left hand continued to stroke Hutch's damp forehead, pulling the hair back from his eyes, soothing his brow. "That's it, buddy, don't fight it. Try to relax..."

Hutch tensed as another wave ravaged his body. He wretched again and again, until there was nothing left. His stomach still rebelling, he pulled his knees up in pain as he dry-heaved several times, until he finally collapsed in exhaustion.

Setting down the wastebasket, Starsky pulled Hutch into his arms as he shifted himself on the bed. Hutch was devastated by the physical exertion, completely limp in Starsky's arms. When he had them both settled more comfortably, Starsky looked up at the ceiling. Tears filled his eyes, finally cascading down his cheeks. He sobbed soundlessly, silently cursing the radiation treatments that caused such suffering, and the cancer for starting this damn fight. He wished he could trade places with Hutch, give him some kind of respite from the misery that he had to endure. He felt so damned helpless....

\* \* \*

Huggy looked up to see Starsky walk into the bar alone. His shoulders were slumped, and he looked despondent.

Concerned, Huggy put away the rag he was wiping the bar down with, and came around to join his friend. "Starsky. You look like hell, man. Your fair-haired half doin' okay?"

"He's really sick from the treatments. He's sleeping now. Had a really bad night." Starsky finally met Huggy's worried eyes with pleading eyes of his own. "I need to ask a favor, Hug."

"Name it."

Slipping onto a barstool, Starsky inhaled deeply. He wasn't sure how Huggy would react to his question. Letting the air out slowly, he watched Huggy cross his arms and wait patiently for the request. Starsky's voice lowered when he said, "I need you to help me get some marijuana."

Huggy's eyes widened. "Grass? You want *me* to get you grass?"

"Huggy, this is for Hutch. It's supposed to help with the nausea from the treatments."

Huggy laughed. "No, Starsky, I'm not surprised you want to try it. I'm just surprised you're asking *me*."

"I don't know who to go to for this, Hug! I'm a cop; no one's gonna sell to me. And I don't know who to trust. I can't risk having this get back to the department. I know you don't do that shit; I was just hoping you could tell me someone who does, someone I can trust."

"Starsky, I ain't offended. It's just that if it's the wacky weed you be needin', you should be talkin' to your old pal Flower Pot."

"Flower Pot!" Starsky exclaimed, slapping his hand to his forehead. "Why the hell didn't I think of that? I guess I got so used to pretending I didn't know, that I actually forgot." He chuckled at his own oversight.

"Gino can get you anything you need, Starsky. You tell him it's for Hutch, he'll set you up right."

"Thanks, Hug!" With a tired smile, Starsky jumped from the stool and rushed out of the bar.

\* \* \*

Starsky knocked on the small, cozy bungalow that Flower Pot and Grace owned. It was a cozy little place, surrounded by a lovely cottage garden that Hutch had helped Grace plant. Playing in the backyard was an adorable eleven-year-old boy, Garrett, busily working with a young puppy that he was diligently trying to train to fetch.

Gino opened the door dressed in worn blue jeans and a ragged t-shirt, with his waist-length hair hanging freely. The amiable man was thrilled to see Starsky at his door. "Hey, man! Good to see ya! Come on in!" He waved him into the living room. "Where's the ball and chain?"

Laughing, Starsky chided, "Hutch would throttle you if he ever heard you call him that!" He patted the shorter man on the back affectionately.

Flower Pot grinned. "Nah. I got names for you when you aren't around, too." He winked mischievously. "So how come you're out alone?"

Just then, Flower Pot's wife came into the room, instantly gaining the attention of the two men. The small living room seemed to get just a little brighter in Grace's presence.

Pleased to see her, Starsky wrapped his arms tightly around the woman, feeling the comfort of her embrace. "Hi, beautiful!" He squeezed. "I've missed you, sweetheart!"

"Ah, Starsky! It's so good to see you!" she beamed. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, just fine," he replied, pulling back slightly so he could see her shining face. "Whaddaya say, gorgeous? Ya ready to dump this guy and run away with me?"

She giggled. "Still a flirt, I see." She shook her head in mock disapproval. "And what would your husband say if he heard you talking like that?"

It was Starsky's turn to laugh. "He'd probably fight me for you, doll."

"Okay, loverboy," Flower Pot playfully swatted at Starsky's arm, "take your hands off my ol' lady. You got a tall blond at home, though I can't for the life of me figure out what you see in him."

Starsky released Grace and her husband scooped her into a warm hug and a tender kiss. The two had been married for twelve years now, but still looked at each other like kids in love. It was heartwarming to see, and Starsky felt somehow nourished by it.

"So, where's Hutch?" Grace asked. Fear swept over her as she witnessed the smile fade from Starsky's face, and a sadness come over him. "Starsky? What's wrong?" He sank into a chair, Grace on the couch beside him. Flower Pot took the other matching chair.

"Hey, man, is Hutch okay? He's not hurt again, is he?" Flower Pot asked.

"Hutch is sick," Starsky admitted. "Really sick." He hesitated before continuing. "He's got cancer..."

"Oh, Starsky!" Grace cried. She hurried to Starsky, kneeling before him, and took both of his hands firmly in her own.

Starsky flinched at the touch of her hands. The genuine caring she displayed brought all of his raw pain to

the surface, and he struggled to keep control of it.

"Aw, hon, come 'ere," she tugged lightly at his hands. Starsky leaned forward and laid his head on her shoulder, his eyes tightly squeezed shut to hold back the burning he felt there. She enveloped him in her comforting arms, cooing softly, "He'll be okay, Starsky. Hutch is a fighter. He's such a strong man, nothing's gonna stop him..." She continued a non-stop string of faith and assurance.

Wanting more than anything to believe her optimistic words, Starsky wrapped his arms around Grace, holding so tightly, desperately clinging to his friend and her hope. It was the first time he had heard anyone speak with such certainty of Hutch's survival since he had first heard of the cancer.

Flower Pot rose quietly and went to the kitchen to pour them all something strong to drink. By the time he returned, Starsky had reluctantly pulled back from Grace's embrace, in an apparent attempt to keep from falling apart. Gino wished Starsky *had* fallen apart; he looked like he could use it. Gino passed the glasses to his wife and his friend, ordering, "Here, drink this."

Gulping down a huge mouthful without question, Starsky made a face and asked, "What was that?"

"Blackberry brandy," Flower Pot smiled. "Give it a sec. It'll warm you up from the inside out."

Taking a more moderate taste this time, Starsky cocked his head. "That's not bad."

Flower Pot leaned forward, speaking with gentleness. "What kinda cancer has Hutch got?"

"They call it Hodgkins Disease. It's cancer of the lymph system. He's got a tumor under his arm, and another in his chest. They're giving him radiation treatments now. That's supposed to shrink the tumors."

"How bad is it, Starsky? Did they tell you what kind of chance he's got?"

Starsky took a deep breath, his head bowed. His voice was soft as he admitted, "Yeah. They said he's got a 50/50 chance to survive five years." He looked up at Gino with shining eyes. "But they don't know Hutch. I know he's got a better chance than that. They don't know what a strong will he has."

Flower Pot got up and put his hand on Starsky's back. "And they don't know you, Starsky. They don't know how you two work. As long as Hutch has you on his side, he'll fight like hell. That cancer hasn't got a chance in hell against you both, man."

Starsky reached up and grabbed Flower Pot's arm, pulling him into a hug. Patting him on the back, he said, "Thanks, Gino."

Sitting on the couch beside his wife, Flower Pot inquired, "Anything you need, Starsky? Anything we can do?"

"I could bring over some meals," Grace offered. "Maybe some casseroles, fried chicken, stuff like that...?"

Starsky grinned at the mention of food. "It sounds wonderful, Grace, but I'm afraid I'd be the only one eating it. The only stuff Hutch's been able to eat lately are soft foods, like applesauce and yogurt." His grin faded away, replaced by a deep sadness. "The damned radiation is not only making him sick as a dog, but he's had sores in his mouth, and a bad sore throat. I even went to the health food store to get him some of that rabbit food he likes so much, but he says it doesn't taste the same. He didn't touch any of it."

"I'll make some things that you can both eat," Grace decided.

"Did they give him any drugs to make him feel better?" Flower Pot asked.

Starsky nodded. "Yeah, but they don't help much. The sores in his mouth are nearly gone, but that's the only thing that's better. They gave him something for nausea, but he's still puking his guts out. That's one of the reasons I came by today...I was hoping I could ask a favor."

"Sure, man," Gino replied. "What do you need?"

"I heard that marijuana is supposed to help with the nausea and some other side effects associated with cancer treatments. I was hoping you'd help me get some for Hutch."

Gino's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Sure, man. You know I'll help you." Then he leaned forward, looking to his right, then to his left, as if making sure no one could hear him. He looked conspiratorially to Starsky and, with all the mock seriousness he could muster, asked, "You know that's illegal, don't you?"

Barely suppressing a grin, Starsky responded, "Yeah, Flower Pot. I know."

Grace giggled and swatted at her husband. "Don't give him a hard time, Gino. It was probably really hard for him to ask you."

Gino smiled broadly. "Come on, sweet thing! We've both pretended for all these years that I don't get high. Let me have a little fun, huh? This is too good to resist! I got a cop asking me for pot!"

Just then the back door banged shut and the sound of sneakers dashing through the kitchen were heard. "Mom!"

"In here, honey," Grace called to her son.

Garrett appeared, breathing heavily. He had his mother's lovely eyes and his father's gentle smile. "Josh and Sam are going to the park to play ball! Can I go?"

"Sure, sweetie. Put Snickers in his kennel before you go."

Quick as lightning, the boy dashed off, shouting "Thanks, Ma!" over his shoulder.

When he was out of sight, Flower Pot turned to Starsky. "I don't keep anything in the house because of Garrett," he explained. "I'll come by, and I'll bring some stuff for Hutch. That okay with you?"

Starsky smiled, pulling his wallet from his pocket. "That's great, Flower Pot. How much do I owe you?"

Grace shook her head. "Oh, no! This is on the house. It's the least we can do for you guys."

Gino smiled at Grace and then nodded once to Starsky, indicating that her word was final. "Pro bono, man. Pro bono."

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Gino and Grace showed up as promised. Grace brought fried chicken for Starsky, and a batch of homemade chicken noodle soup for Hutch. Gino brought the requested weed.

Starsky had warned them both in advance that Hutch did not look well. He had lost weight, and was more pale than usual. Wearing loose clothes because of the tender skin on his chest, he looked almost frail. His hair was thinner from the radiation, particularly at the sides and back, though a new haircut had helped to make that less conspicuous.

The four sat down in the living room, Hutch and Starsky taking the couch, Gino and Grace sitting in the

matching loveseat. They chatted for a while about the doctors, and the tests that Hutch had undergone.

Flower Pot stared into Hutch's eyes as the other man talked about his treatments. The sick man's eyes had changed. They reflected an old soul within, a new sense of self that Hutch hadn't possessed before. The disease and its treatment may have ravaged his body, but the man inside had grown, blossomed, in personal strength and wisdom. There was an understanding in his eyes, an acceptance. Flower Pot could sense the passionate fight Hutch was capable of, and the endurance he hadn't yet tapped into.

Hutch was aware of Flower Pot's scrutiny, and recognized that the emotional and spiritual changes he'd been experiencing were evident to his friend. He smiled, and received a knowing smile in return.

"You look good, man," Gino commented sincerely.

Hutch marveled at how perceptive his friend could be, and was relieved that Gino was not intimidated by the transformation he saw, physical or personal.

After a while, Flower Pot casually reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the supplies he brought with him. As the rest of the group kept talking, he proceeded to roll several large and compact joints.

His actions eventually caught Hutch's eye, and he looked at his friend in shock. "Gino! What the hell are you doing?" He could not believe his friend had brought marijuana into his home. Flower Pot had never done anything like this before! What was he thinking?!

Grace reached over and laid a hand upon Hutch's. "This is for you, hon."

"I asked him to bring it," Starsky confessed.

Hutch looked at the rest of the group, confused. Gino got up and handed a joint to him. Hutch stared at it dumbfounded. "Flower Pot, you know I can't do this."

Starsky put his arm around Hutch. "It helps the nausea from the treatments," he said gently.

"I know, Starsk. But I can't smoke this." He held his hand out for Starsky to take the joint.

Instead, Starsky folded his hand over Hutch's. "Smoke it, Hutch. Do it for me. Please. Just try it."

Hutch couldn't refuse the imploring eyes. "Okay," he nodded in defeat. "But you smoke it with me. We all smoke it."

Gino laughed at the distaste on Starsky's face. "Don't look so bummed out, man! We'll have a good time, you'll see." His reassurances did nothing to cheer the reluctant pair on the couch.

Hutch handed the joint back to Gino. "Light it, Flower Pot."

Pulling out his lighter, Flower Pot lit the joint, taking a very long drag, and handed it to Grace. She repeated the actions of her husband, and passed it on to Hutch.

Gino warned, "Don't try to take in as much smoke as we did. You aren't used to smoking, and you're bound to choke on it. Just lightly suck in a little smoke, and try to keep it in your lungs as long as you can."

Hutch took a drag, and felt the smoke burn his raw throat. Before he could stop himself, he was coughing deeply, hurting his throat further. With watering eyes, he shook his head. "That tastes terrible," he complained hoarsely. In spite of his failed attempt, he took a sip of tea and tried again. This time, he was able to get a little more smoke in and hold it for a while.

"Way to go, man," Gino praised. "You learn quick. You'll be tokin' like a pro in no time." He cast a wink at his sick friend.

It was Starsky's turn, so he took the offered joint, taking a deep drag and holding it just as Gino and Grace had. Hutch's eyes widened. It definitely appeared that this was not the first time Starsky had done this.

Starsky gave Hutch an innocent grin. "What?"

"Starsky, you've been holding out on me," Hutch chided, still hoarse from the smoke. "No way are you going to convince me that you've never done that before."

Gino laughed. "I gotta agree with him, Starsky. Hutch is the only virgin in this room."

"Virgin!" Hutch cried, placing his hand on his heart as if wounded. "I beg your pardon? You didn't just call me a virgin, did you?" He crumpled into the couch. "God, this is so humiliating." He looked at his partner and shook his head. "Spill it, babe. Why do you look so at ease with this?"

Starsky smiled. "The army," he answered simply. "Haven't touched it since I got back. I guess it's kinda like riding a bike."

The joint made the rounds until it finally bit the dust. By the time it was finished, Hutch had gone from paranoia over their chances of getting caught, to a fit of giggles over Starsky's bungled attempt to recite the *Late Lament*, the Moody Blues' poetic finale to *Nights in White Satin*. A strong surge of the munchies chased the healthy three into the kitchen to cook, but the mention of Flower Pot's famous peanut butter omelet forced Hutch to decline their attempts to get him to eat.

"I'll eat something," he promised. "Something edible." Finding a bowl of oranges on the counter, Hutch grabbed one and darted out of the kitchen's chaos.

Starsky wandered into the living room, delighted to see Hutch had peeled the orange and was actually eating it with relish.

"Starsk, these oranges are wonderful!"

"They are good, aren't they? I got those at the market by Frankie's house. They're really juicy."

Hutch held the orange to his nose before pulling off another segment. The smell was especially pleasant after all the smoke he'd been inhaling. He took another bite into the orange, feeling the juice fill his mouth. "Mmmmm," he moaned in pleasure. "It's exploding in my mouth! Try one of these, Starsk! It's like a carbonated sensation!"

Starsky burst out laughing. "A what?! Did you just say 'carbonated sensation'?"

Still holding a segment out for Starsky to try, Hutch smiled broadly. "Try it, Starsk! You'll see! When you bite it, all the pulp pockets explode like bubbles... You can feel it!"

Taking the orange piece from Hutch's hand, Starsky laughed again. "You are *stoned*, love."

"Am I?" Hutch laughed.

Hutch looked so happy and seemed to be enjoying himself so much, that Starsky would have been flying on that alone. He gazed adoringly at his partner and reached out to caress his face. "You are dazzling," he said breathlessly.

"Kiss me," Hutch demanded, playfully pulling Starsky down onto his lap.

"Can't," Starsky shook his head. He held up the orange piece that Hutch had given him. "I'm eating." He popped the fruit half into his mouth.

Chuckling at the sight of Starsky with half an orange segment sticking out of his mouth, Hutch suddenly leaned in, and started to suck on the available half of the orange, his lips caressing Starsky's as he did so.

Starsky moaned and quickly bit the orange so that he could get on with tasting the mouth that was so invitingly close. As he bit, however, the juicy tidbit generously squirted both of their faces, causing them each to erupt in merry laughter as they fought to lick the juice off of each other. The silliness ended with a long and loving kiss.

"Aren't they adorable?" Grace sighed to Gino. The pair had come back to the living room to check on their missing friends, only to find them wrapped in each other on the couch. "There's so much love, there."

"Almost as adorable as you, sweet thing." Flower Pot gave his wife an affectionate smack on the backside.

Grace's muffled yelp caused Starsky and Hutch to fly apart on the couch. "Oh! Sorry!" Starsky chuckled, swiping at his wet chin with his sleeve. "Didn't hear you come in."

Flower Pot tugged at Starsky's sleeve. "Mellow out, man. It's cool."

"Come and eat," Grace invited. She saw that Hutch wasn't getting up. "I have a plain old cheese omelet for you," she tempted, "light on the cheese."

Smiling, Hutch got up. "That doesn't sound half bad, Grace."

As they walked back to the kitchen, Flower Pot nudged Starsky and said, "You've got orange pulp on your chin."

Starsky's hand flew up to his chin. "Where?"

"I got that," Hutch declared. He tilted Starsky's chin up and kissed the pulp away. Gino laughed and patted Hutch on the back.

\* \* \*

## **WEEK FOUR**

Starsky dialed his mother's number, his body aching with exhaustion. The past week had been hard, and he was in desperate need of a good night's sleep.

His mother's voice was good to hear. "Hi, Ma."

*"Davey, how are you doing honey?"*

He sighed deeply. "I'm okay, Ma, just really tired."

*"How is Ken doing with his treatments?"*

"Not so good. He's on medical leave from work now. He feels lousy all the time, and the radiation is making him sick to his stomach. He's not eating much."

*"That's not good, Davey. He needs to keep up his strength."*

"I know, but I can't get him to eat. I've tried everything. He's pretty much living on pudding, applesauce and frozen yogurt. I can't get him to eat anything else."

*"Have you tried marijuana? I have heard that it's supposed to help with the side effects of cancer treatments."*

Starsky laughed. "Yeah, Ma, I tried that. And it did seem to help some. But Hutch is reluctant to smoke it since it's illegal. And it's not like I can keep him stoned out of his mind for the next couple weeks."

*"Why not? If it helps..."*

"Ma! When did you get so liberal, huh?" This unexpected support from his mother was truly amusing him.

*"Oh, honey, I know when you're watching someone suffer, you'll do anything in your power to help. I'd do the same thing."*

"It's so hard to watch him go through this, Ma. He's been losing his hair, even his eyebrows. He's so skinny, and he's just miserable. He can barely move without it hurting, and he's throwing up several times a day."

*"Is he okay there alone while you're at work?"*

"He's done all right so far, but I think I'm gonna ask Huggy and Gino and Grace to come over next week while I'm working. Every day it's been getting worse, and he gets sicker and sicker. I'll feel better if someone's here."

*"Do you want me to come out?"*

Starsky wanted to jump on the offer, but he knew he couldn't. It would upset Hutch, and that was the last he wanted to do. "No thanks, Ma. Hutch doesn't want any family here to see him like this. I appreciate the offer, though."

*"If you change your mind, you call me, Davey. I'll get on the next flight."*

"Thanks. I love you, Ma."

*"I love you, too, dear."*

Starsky hung up the phone and stared wistfully at the receiver. He almost called her right back and asked her to come. He would have, if Hutch hadn't insisted that he didn't want family here. Still, he would feel better knowing that his mother was caring for Hutch.

He decided to go to bed, knowing that it was bound to be a very long night.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Starsky emerged from the bedroom carrying the bowl and washcloth he had used to mop Hutch's face and neck with ice water. It had been a particularly bad night, though he had finally gotten Hutch settled and back to sleep a few short hours ago. He wished he could let his partner sleep indefinitely, but he had to wake him for his medicine soon. Placing the bowl in the sink, Starsky absentmindedly went through the motions of starting the coffeemaker, then went into the living room and collapsed on the couch. Throwing an arm over his eyes, he figured he would rest until the coffee was done.

The doorbell rang, rousing Starsky from his cat nap. He padded to the door, expecting to see Huggy stopping by for a visit before heading over to The Pits. Starsky was glad he'd come by, for he wanted to ask their friend to spend some mornings with Hutch, so that he wouldn't be alone when he was so sick.

Opening the door, Starsky was startled to see his mother standing on his front porch, a huge suitcase at her feet. A cab was just pulling out of the driveway. "Ma!"

"David Michael Starsky!" the woman scolded. "Didn't I raise you better than to have you open the door to a complete stranger in your underwear?!"

"You're hardly a complete stranger, Ma," he laughed. "Come in! Here, leave that bag; I'll get it!"

"Yes, well, you didn't know it was me when you opened that door. I *could have* been a complete stranger." Rachel Starsky blew through the door like a gust of fresh air. Starsky was elated to see her, even through his sleepy haze.

"I'll put this in the spare bedroom," he said, indicating the suitcase, "and be right back."

"Where's Ken?" Rachel asked as she looked around the living room.

"Still sleeping," Starsky called over his shoulder.

Rachel wandered through the living room, shaking her head. The room begged for a vacuum and a good dusting. The scent of brewing coffee pulled her into the kitchen, and she surveyed the room with a critical eye. She could see this room could use a good scrubbing as well.

Starsky came into the kitchen, donned in a t-shirt and sweatpants. He put his arm around his mother and kissed her on the cheek. "It's really good to see you, Ma."

She smiled. "You don't really think I'm going to be satisfied with this getup, do you?" she teased, gesturing at his clothing. "You need a hot shower, a shave, and some decent clothing."

"Yeah, maybe, but first I need a cup'a coffee. You want some?"

"Please."

"What'd ya do? Jump on the next flight out?"

"Of course."

He smiled broadly. "I'm really glad to see you!"

"Ah, you might not say that in an hour. I'm gonna put you to work, kiddo."

"At your service, Ma!" He gave her a mock salute.

She reached under the kitchen sink and pulled out a can of furniture polish. "Go get your vacuum, son. And find me some dust cloths. I'm also gonna need a mop and some Pine Sol. Oh, and a scrub brush, too."

"Ma! You're not gonna scrub my floors!"

"Quit your complaining, Davey. And turn off that air conditioner! It's absolutely gorgeous outside, and this place needs some fresh air. Open that sliding door. We're gonna clean this place up and air it out."

Starsky scrambled to get the requested items, and to open all the windows in the house. By the time he returned, she was rifling through his kitchen cupboards. "Whatcha lookin' for, Ma?"

"I'm trying to see what you've got for Ken to eat. Do you know what he puts in those horrid shakes he drinks?"

"Yeah, I have the recipe, but I'm out of goat's milk."

She smiled. "Good. You get me the recipe, then run to the store." She put a notepad and pen in his hands. "Here, write this down. Goat's milk, vanilla ice cream, plain yogurt, bananas. Get the yellowest ones you can find. Chocolate syrup. Have you got honey?"

"We've got honey."

"Good. Oh, and Jell-O. Lots of Jell-O. Cream of Wheat. Do you have maple syrup?"

"We've got maple syrup, too. And the Jell-O's over here." He opened up a cabinet door, revealing a dozen boxes of the powdered mix.

"You have pudding, too? Fine. Now for some real food. Get me some fresh vegetables. None of that frozen stuff. I want peas, green beans, cauliflower, carrots, broccoli, oxtails... You getting all this?"

"Ma, slow down! Oxtails? Are you making oxtail soup?" His voice took on a distinctly delighted note.

"Yes, dear. Now give me that list. Carrots. You forgot carrots. Here, let me." She began to scribble down a lengthy list of groceries. "Okay, this should keep you busy. Now go shopping and get out of my hair so I can get to work here."

He folded his mother into a tight embrace. "I love you, Ma."

"Honey?" She pulled from his hug. "Shower first. And shave. Then shopping. Now march!"

"Yes, Ma."

After his required shower and shave, Starsky dashed off to the store to fulfill his mother's request. By the time he was heading out the door, she had already swept and was in the process of scrubbing the dear life out of the kitchen flooring.

As the floor was drying, she moved onto the living room and attacked it with a dust rag. Unwilling to run the vacuum while Hutch was sleeping, she decided to instead run a carpet sweeper over it, until there was a more appropriate time to wield a noisy appliance. Some Windex shined up the windows and the kitchen appliances.

Several hours later, Starsky returned, completely shocked by the rooms' transformation. In no time, Rachel had turned their main living space into a sparkling clean and inviting home.

"Ma! How did you do this so fast?"

"Well, it really wasn't that dirty, sweetheart. It just needed a little care, that's all. And it wasn't so fast. You've been gone for a long time. It still needs a good run-through with the vacuum, but I didn't want to wake Hutch. I'll start on the bathrooms next."

"I have to wake him now, anyway," Starsky said sadly. "He needs the sleep, but he's due for his meds."

"It won't hurt if you wait a few minutes, dear. Let's whip him up one of his shakes first. He needs something nourishing."

Starsky proceeded to put the groceries in their place as his mother mixed up the distasteful drink. When it was done, they both went upstairs to wake Hutch.

Rachel sat on the edge of the bed and gently stroked Hutch's forehead. His eyes blinked open, and quickly registered recognition and surprise.

"Rachel?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Ah, ah, ah," she softly crooned. "You agreed to call me Mom, remember? I made you something to drink, sweetheart. Do you think you can sit up?"

Hutch sat up and Starsky quickly slid pillows behind him to prop him up. "You made me something to drink? Oh, thanks, Rachel, but..."

"No buts, dear. Here, drink this." She dropped a straw into the glass, and pushed it into his hand. She held her hand out to Starsky, who gave her the pills he was to take. "Wash these down with that drink."

Hutch obeyed without question. Popping the pills into his mouth, he washed them down with the shake, and continued to drink as Rachel watched. He eventually handed the empty glass back to her. She smiled broadly, then kissed him on the cheek and left the room with the dirty glass.

"What's she doing here?" he whispered to Starsky after she had left the room.

Starsky shrugged. "She just showed up. I told her not to come."

Hutch sighed, miserable.

"Might as well make the best of it, blondie. She's not going anywhere. And I can tell ya, she don't take no for an answer."

Hutch got up and dressed. He was already feeling a bit nauseous from the shake, but felt that it would stay put, at least for now. He came into the living room, and stopped in his tracks. "Wow, what happened in here?"

"My mom," Starsky laughed. "She's like a reverse tornado. She just plows through a room and leaves clean in her wake."

Hutch smiled. Still shaky from the long night of throwing up and dry heaves, he took a seat on the couch, stretching his legs the full length.

"How ya feeling, babe?" Starsky inquired.

"Not so hot, but I don't think I'm going to be sick. Just queasy."

A soft swishy sound could be heard in the other room. "Starsk, what's that noise?"

"I think that's Ma, scrubbing the bathroom."

"You aren't serious. She's not really scrubbing, is she?"

"I'm very serious. Wait 'til you see the kitchen."

"She cleaned the kitchen?"

"Not just cleaned. I think she sterilized it."

Hutch grinned. "We're under siege, aren't we?"

"Uh-huh."

"Gimme the phone. I'm calling Dobby. I think I'd rather be at work."

"No ya don't, buddy. She came here for you. You're stuck with her." Starsky went to the closet and got his jacket.

"Where you going?" Hutch questioned.

"Mom gave me strict orders to go find you some more pot," Starsky replied, his eyes twinkling merrily.

He was nearly out the door as he heard Hutch holler, "*WHAT?!* Starsky! Get back here!" Chuckling, he scooted out to do his mother's bidding.

After Starsky had gone in search of Flower Pot, Hutch eventually fell back to sleep on the couch. Rachel came through and covered him with a light afghan, then slipped away to work on her soup.

A couple hours later, Hutch awoke from his nap, feeling better than he had earlier, and sat up on the couch. Rachel walked in moments later and smiled to see him up.

"Feeling any better, dear?"

"Hi, Mom," Hutch grinned. "Yes, actually I am. What is that smell? It smells like... cooking."

"Ah, that's dinner. Are you hungry? You really should try to get something solid in you. Let me go whip something up for you."

"No, thanks, Rachel, but I..." His voice trailed off as he watched her leave the room, determined to feed him. She completely ignored him. He laughed to himself. Starsky was right; she wouldn't take no for an answer.

She was back in no time with a steaming bowl in one hand, and a tall glass in another. "I made you some Cream of Wheat," she chirped. "Here, try this."

The thought of pasty hot cereal had no appeal to Hutch at all. He tried to decline, "No, Mom, I can't..."

Without ceremony, she plopped the spoonful of cereal into his mouth. Hutch was so surprised by the unexpected spoon, that he found himself swallowing the mouthful just to be able to respond. Equally surprising was the fact that it was actually pretty tasty. Instead of a mucky paste, it was creamy and sweet. "This is good," he blurted. "What did you do to it?"

She grinned slyly. "A little milk, a little butter, a little maple syrup. Not bad, huh?"

Taking the bowl from her, he nodded. "Not bad. Thanks."

Rachel remained seated beside him, making sure he ate every bit. Try as he might, though, Hutch couldn't do it. "I'm sorry. I can't eat anymore." He handed the bowl back to her, more than half empty.

Satisfied that he was truly unable to eat more, Rachel smiled. "At least you got something in your stomach."

"Are you thirsty?"

"Yeah, I'll get a glass of water," he stated, when she held out a hand to stop him.

"Don't get up," she ordered. "Drink this." She handed him the glass that he had forgotten on the table.

He took a sip through the straw and smiled. "You made me a milkshake?"

"It's a special recipe," she laughed. "When Davey had his tonsils out, it was the only thing I could get him to eat. You aren't the only one who has health shakes," she winked.

"There's chocolate in here," he noted. "And bits of something..."

"Banana. High in potassium."

"This feels so good on my throat." He kept taking small sips to continue the cold flow going down.

"You poor dear." She shook her head, giving his arm a comforting squeeze. "I'll see if I can't help you with that." She went back into the kitchen. Soon she returned with a tablespoon of honey. Hutch had finished the shake and looked skeptically at the spoon. "Just swallow that. It'll make your throat feel a little better."

Hutch did as he was told. The intense sweetness made him grimace, but he did feel like his throat was slightly less pained. "That was just honey?"

"Just honey." She took the spoon and hustled back to the kitchen.

Half an hour later, she peeked in on Hutch, only to find him with his face buried in his hands, looking a little green around the gills. Quickly she ran a cloth under cool water, grabbed a pan, and came to his aid by placing the cloth on the back of his neck. "Lay back here," she directed, fluffing some pillows behind him.

"Rachel, I think I'm going to be sick," he warned.

"Let's see if we can stop that, okay, son? Nice even breaths now. Yes, that's good. Do you know anything about meditation, hon?" At Hutch's affirmative nod, she continued. "Good. Listen to me. We're going to relax now. Don't worry if you get sick, I've got something here. Just concentrate on relaxing, a little at a time. Start with your toes..."

She kept up a slow and quiet stream of words, her voice melodic, lulling him into a deeply relaxed state. Coaxing him to relax each body part, starting at his feet and moving upward to his brow, she had him first tensing then relaxing each muscle. As she worked her way up, his color began to improve, and he melted heavily into the couch. She covered him again with the afghan, and quietly left him alone. He had fallen asleep.

The roar of Starsky's Torino pulling into the driveway had Rachel coming outside to meet her son. Starsky leapt from the car in alarm. "Is Hutch okay?"

"Yes, dear! He's asleep. He had a bit of a hard time earlier, and I just wanted to catch you before you came in. Try to be very quiet, all right?"

Relieved, Starsky nodded. "Did he get sick, Ma?"

She shook her head. "No, but almost. I got a little food in him. Some hot cereal and a milkshake."

"Ma, you are a godsend. How did you get him to eat?"

"I just handed it to him, dear."

Starsky put his arm around his mother and walked her into the house. "I'm so glad you came."

They went around to the back of the house and sat on the patio for a while, leaving Hutch to the quiet solitude of the house. Rachel told Starsky about helping Hutch through his queasiness with meditation.

"Hutch meditates all the time, and he's never said anything about it helping with nausea. Where did you learn that?" he asked, astonished.

"Six and a half months of morning sickness," she sighed. "I had a heck of a time with it, through both pregnancies. My midwife suggested the meditation, and talked me through it the first few times. After that, I could do it myself." Then she added, "It doesn't always work, but it sure made it easier. Even when I did throw up, it didn't seem quite as rough. It helped with labor, too."

Hutch stepped through the sliding door onto the patio and walked straight up to Rachel, giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

She patted his hand. "Sit down and join us."

Looking up at the sun, Hutch squinted. "I better not. I need to avoid the sun." He looked back to Rachel. "Thank you. You really helped me in there."

She smiled and nodded at him.

He then turned to Starsky and gave him a sweet kiss, before heading into the house. Starsky watched him walk back into the house, then looked back to his mother smiling.

"You know, I think that's the first time I have ever seen you two kiss," she mused.

Starsky blushed crimson. He looked away, embarrassed, but never lost his smile. Turning back to meet her eyes, he asked, "Does that bother you, Ma?"

"It bothers me that you felt you couldn't kiss in front of me," she retorted decisively.

\* \* \*

Flower Pot arrived late in the afternoon, and he and Hutch discreetly disappeared to indulge in the medicinal marijuana. This time, Flower Pot brought a bong-a water pipe-in hopes that it would be easier on Hutch. While it did help to have the smoke filtered through the water before he inhaled it, Hutch still found inhaling to be a bit harsh on his throat. Flower Pot offered to have Grace bake the pot into brownies so that he didn't have to smoke it, but Hutch appreciatively declined. He'd rather tolerate the smoke than try to force down a spiked baked good. His stomach just wasn't up to it.

The visit from Gino did wonders for Hutch's appetite, and when Rachel served her oxtail soup for dinner, Hutch shocked her and Starsky both by asking for seconds. Later he was persuaded to drink a yogurt smoothie, and then a small bowl of Jell-O before bed.

He and Starsky slept well that night. Hutch made it through the night without waking, giving them both a much needed break. The next morning Starsky slipped off to work, careful not to wake his sleeping partner.

When Hutch finally did awaken, it was with an immediate need to dash to the bathroom. The nausea had returned with a vengeance, leaving him retching long after his stomach had been emptied.

Rachel had heard him run for the bathroom, and hurried to help him. She came to the bathroom door, and the sight before her tore at her heart. Hutch was draped over the commode, looking like he didn't have the energy to hold his head up. His heaving was so violent, it hurt to witness it. Quickly wetting down a towel, she gently stroked the beads of perspiration from his face.

Hutch was so pale, even his eyes seemed to have lost their color.

He tried to pull an arm down in a vain attempt to modestly cover his chest. The leathery redness stood out in stark contrast with the rest of his pale flesh. It looked as though he had been burned. He couldn't effectively keep his balance with a single arm, and had to give up trying to hide his radiation-ravaged skin.

"Rachel," he rasped, his throat raw from the exertion. "Please. I don't want you to see me like this..."

Ignoring his pleas, she continued her ministrations. Hutch closed his eyes, soothed by her touch, relieved the worst of the sickness had passed.

"Can you sit up, Ken?" she coaxed.

Hutch barely shook his head. "I'm sorry, Rachel," he whispered. "I don't think I can." He rested a moment, then said, "Give me some time. I need...to recover."

She squeezed his hand gently, and left him for a moment to get a cup and a straw. When she returned, he had pushed himself away from the toilet and was draped against the bathtub, the side of his face pressed against the cool surface. Rachel knelt beside him and scooped his head onto her shoulder, pressing the cooling towel to his cheeks. Weak as a kitten, he could do nothing to protest, so he rested in her arms. Soon he was able to sip at the water she had brought him, and could finally sit up with the support of the tub against him.

"This is so humiliating," he whispered with a sad grin. "How low can I get? Puking on my mother-in-law."

"You didn't puke on me," she smiled.

He reached out and lifted her hand, revealing a few small stains that had splashed upon her sleeve.

"Oops," she laughed. "And on my sexiest pj's, too." She held out her arms to show off the plaid flannel top and bottoms that resembled a man's pajamas. They were about as sexy as a burlap sack.

Hutch couldn't help but laugh in response. Soon the laughter died, and he looked totally miserable.

"Don't even give it a second thought, honey." She patted his hand. "You can puke on me anytime. I can take it."

"Rachel, I hate this," he whispered.

She slipped her hand into his and held it. "Of course you do."

"I always thought I was a strong man. But now...." He shook his head.

"You are stronger now," Rachel said simply. "You don't see it yet, but you are. You are sick, and your body is weak, but the thing that makes you the man you are, is stronger."

He looked into her eyes and said softly, "I want to believe that." Then he sighed, closed his eyes and looked away. "I don't feel strong, Rachel. I feel weak; and it's not just the physical stuff. Sometimes I feel emotionally weak." He looked to her guiltily. "Huggy chewed me out a few days ago because he thought I

was subconsciously trying to kill myself."

"Is that what you were doing?"

He shook his head. "I didn't think so. If I was, it wasn't on a conscious level." He gave her a sheepish grin. "I have been reckless. But not with suicidal intent. It's as though I don't have the fear of death anymore. I'm not frightened of dying, and so I don't have that fear to keep me from getting too close to the edge. It scared the hell out of Starsky. I don't know if I'm explaining this right. I don't feel like whether I live or die is an option, that I can do anything to prevent one or facilitate the other. This disease is taking away my options, and it's affecting my decisions." He ran a hand over his face. "When I realized that, I took medical leave. My actions were hurting David-I didn't mean for that to happen. Huggy said I was being selfish, that I wasn't giving myself a chance to beat this."

"I think you're being rather hard on yourself, Ken. Your priorities are changing, or at least taking on a different intensity, and you're still coming to terms with that. Give yourself some time to sort through everything. Huggy and David are scared, sweetheart. They're afraid of losing you, and they're sensitive to anything they perceive as a threat to you. Be patient with them." She smiled fondly at him. "You don't strike me as suicidal. Frustrated, maybe, but not suicidal. And you aren't weak. You're adjusting. That takes time."

"I'm not giving up," he confirmed. "I may be weary of the battle, but I haven't grown weary of the challenge." His eyes twinkled.

"Do you feel well enough to stand?" she asked as she rose to her feet and extended a helping hand.

"I think so." He stood on wobbly legs and let her guide him back to his bed. As she was pulling the door closed, Hutch called out to her in his scratchy voice, "Rachel? Wake me in an hour with one of your shakes, would you, please?"

Her face lit with a broad smile. "You got it, sweetie. Your special recipe?"

"No, the chocolate banana one."

\* \* \*

Starsky came home during the afternoon to check on Hutch, and to see how his mother was faring. It was disappointing to hear how sick Hutch had been.

Rachel only spoke of Hutch's physical sufferings, and remained silent regarding his more personal revelations. It was her hope and expectation that Hutch would share that with his partner in his own good time.

Without hesitation, Starsky embraced Hutch and kissed him tenderly. "I'm sorry you don't feel good," he soothed. "Anything I can get for you on my way home from work?"

Hutch shook his head and gave Starsky a genuine smile. "I'm fine now. Stop worrying about me. I'm in good hands." He looked to Rachel with warmth and appreciation. He inquired meekly, "Did she tell you I threw up on her today?"

Starsky laughed at Hutch's embarrassed expression. "Welcome to the club, pal. Been there, done that."

"Yeah, Starsky, but you were, what, five years old?"

"No, really," he insisted. "When Mom came to help out after the shooting. I got sick on that medicine, remember?"

"I remember you getting sick," he replied hesitantly, "but I don't remember you throwing up on your mother..."

"That's right, you did, didn't you!" Rachel lied. She had caught on to her son's attempt to ease Hutch's embarrassment by stretching the truth a bit. Starsky had thrown up after taking a strong medication, but he hadn't in fact actually thrown up on her. "Remind me to wear a smock the next time I come out here to visit you boys..."

Hutch knew they were deceiving him, and he loved them for their effort to make him feel better. He entwined his fingers with Starsky's, toying with his ring and gazing at him devotedly.

Rachel watched the two, pleased to see how their love and happiness were recharging them both. Their actions drew her attention to the rings she had overlooked before.

"Are you two wearing wedding rings?" she asked, coming over to take Starsky's hand in hers, inspecting the new gold band.

"Yeah," Starsky grinned proudly. "Hutch picked 'em out. Aren't they nice?"

"Lovely!" she exclaimed. "Did you two get married? Is that legal in California?"

"No," Hutch answered. "We plan on having a ceremony when I'm feeling better. And as far as I know, it isn't legally recognized in any state. But there are ministers and justices willing to perform the ceremony, regardless."

"There didn't seem to be any reason to wait on the rings," Starsky added. "I mean, we both feel like we've been married for a long time now."

"Yes," she nodded. "If you think about it, the marriage ceremony actually acknowledges something that already exists, a union that has already been made. The wedding just celebrates it, it doesn't create it."

Starsky put his arm around his mother. "You'll come when we have the ceremony, won't you, Ma?"

"Of course, honey. I wouldn't miss it."

\* \* \*

Rachel sat beside Hutch on the couch. "Goodbye, sweetheart."

Hutch took both her hands in his. "I'm sorry I can't go with you to the airport."

"Oh, hush," she brushed off his concern. "You don't need to be running around that big old airport when you aren't feeling well. Davey can see me off just fine."

He squeezed her hands. "Thank you so much for all you've done, for both of us."

"I didn't do so much," she retorted. "Besides, a mother likes to be needed once in a while."

"I didn't know how much I needed you until you arrived," Hutch admitted. "And it wasn't just the food, or the cleaning or the nursing care." He pointed to his heart. "It was in here. You helped me find some peace, and helped me see things more clearly. I'm grateful to you."

"I didn't tell you anything you didn't already know, son." She smiled at him. "You just needed to hear it from somebody else."

"You really helped me, Rachel. Thank you." He pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Ah, ah, ah," she chided. "You promised to call me 'Mom', remember? You're one of my boys now, Ken. I love you like one of my own."

He smiled. "I love you, too, Mom."

Rachel placed a kiss on his cheek, then got up to go. "You just get better now, honey. I want to hear that you're back to your old self again."

"It should be downhill from here," he said with relief. "The radiation is just about done, so I should start feeling better pretty quickly."

"If you need me, you just call. I'll be on the next flight out."

"It's nice to know I can count on you."

\* \* \*

Starsky went with Hutch for his last radiation treatment in the series after he dropped his mother off at the airport. He had requested and gotten the day off from Dobey so that he could take care and comfort his lover following this important treatment.

Once home, Hutch had wanted to go lie down without touching the special shake Rachel had left for him.

Starsky was aware that Hutch would need a few more weeks of radiation 'just to be cautious' as Dr. Newman said. *If they've worked, that is.* He silently yelled at his inner voice. *Of course they worked. There's no other answer, it's the only thing I'll accept.*

The ringing of the phone jostled his thoughts, and he hurried to grab it before it woke his sleeping lover. "Yeah? Hello?"

"Dave? It's Karyn."

"Oh, hey, Karyn. How's it going?" he greeted Hutch's younger sister.

"*Shouldn't I be asking you that?*"

He ran a hand through the top of his hair and down the back of his abundant curls. "It's going. He had his last treatment today. Well, the last one for now. The doc says he'll probably have to have a few more weeks to be on the safe side."

"*How are you holding up?*" she asked, the concern in her voice warming Starsky.

"It's been hard, but I'm handling it. My ma just left. Since she's been here, she's gotten Hutch to eat more."

"*Good. Then it's my turn now.*"

"What do you mean?"

"*I'm flying out as soon as I can get a flight. Probably tomorrow, but I'll let you know definitely.*"

"Karyn, you know how Hutch feels about anyone coming out here." But Starsky knew he was fighting a losing battle. Once Karyn got her mind set on something, she was more stubborn than Hutch himself. In

fact, she was a lot like him, which was part of the reason they got along so well.

*"He'll learn to live with it. Remember I lived with Ken for 17 years. I know how he can be, and I'm not taking 'no' for an answer this time.*

Starsky chuckled, glad that he could still do so now and then. "No, I want you to come. And Hutch does, too, he just won't admit it. It'll help me out. I don't like leaving him here alone when I'm at work. Just make sure you bring lots of pictures of my nephew."

*"Excellent. I'll call you back with my flight information. I can get a cab to bring me to the house."*

"No, I want to be there to pick you up. I'll get Frankie or Gino or somebody to stay with Hutch."

\* \* \*

The plane carrying Karyn Hutchinson Atkins into LAX was due to arrive about 7:30 Saturday night. Perfect for Starsky since he was off duty by then and able to pick her up. Getting someone to stay with Hutch was never a problem, since there were many cops and friends who had volunteered to help out once the news of Hutch's condition had made the rounds. Tonight, it was Minnie's turn.

Starsky pulled next to the United baggage terminal, where Karyn was already sitting and waiting. Putting his car in park, he helped load her two suitcases and one carryall-*Three pieces of luggage for one week?!-* into the trunk of the car, then turned and gave her a big bear hug.

Releasing the petite blonde woman, he looked her up and down. "Lemme see ya." He grinned mischievously. "Not an ounce of baby fat on you. You look sparkling, darlin'. Motherhood looks good on you."

Karyn blushed at Starsky's lopsided grin, though she noticed it didn't quite reach his eyes. She looked him over closely and saw the circles under his eyes, the exhausted slump in the shoulders and the longer than usual ruffled hair. "Well, you obviously need some beauty rest. And lots of it, by the look of you."

He playfully punched her upper arm. "Very funny."

"Seriously, Dave, you look tired. This has got to be hard on you. All the running around, working, keeping up the house, shopping, taking care of Ken..."

He couldn't pretend with Karyn or hide behind jokes, so he decided to be honest. "Yeah, that's partially why I'm glad you came. My mom bein' here last week really helped, but there's still a lot for me to do. Not to mention I *want* to be the one to take care of him, hold him when he's not feeling well, wipe his face when he's been sick; doin' all that stuff for him."

Hand on her elbow, Starsky directed Karyn to the front passenger door. "Why don't we talk on the way? Minnie's at home with Hutch and I don't want to take too much of her time."

"Minnie? Is that the police lady friend you guys talk about all the time?"

"Yeah. All the cops in our precinct have offered to help. Some to stay with him while I go out or to work, some cook-or their wives do. Lots have donated blood, even though Hutch hasn't needed any transfusions, it makes 'em feel like they're doing something helpful."

"Which they are," Karyn pointed out.

"Yeah. Everyone's been great."

They drove in silence as Starsky navigated the car out of the complex terminal.

"You know it's really good you came out this week especially."

Karyn looked away from the window and over at Starsky. "Why's that?"

"Because Monday he has some tests and we should have the results by the end of the week. You can help us celebrate. You're staying the whole week, right?"

"As long you need me. Bob's off for the next two weeks taking care of Jared."

"That explains all the luggage," he chortled.

"Oh, shush, you. Mr. 'All I need are jeans and a t-shirt and my red long johns.'"

"Hey, who told you about those?" Starsky pretended to be affronted.

Blushing, his passenger admitted, "Uh, that year I was still in college and you guys came out at Christmas to tell Mom and Dad that Ken had been promoted to detective?" Starsky thought a few seconds, then nodded. "Well, I had a crush on you and I...I kind of went through your suitcase."

"Damn me. I hooked up with the wrong Hutchinson."

"You can't tell me that Ken hasn't gone through your underwear."

Both of them blushed at the faux pas-Starsky as red as his car.

"Oops."

They burst out laughing until there were tears in their eyes.

As Karyn calmed down and wiped her face, she glanced beside her and saw that Starsky's tears of laughter had changed and were now pooling in the corner of his eye and dripping down the side of his nose.

"How are you guys doing with all this-really?"

The atmosphere in the car changed from laughter to anxiety as Starsky told Karyn how the last two weeks had been hard on both of them, but especially Hutch. "But it's almost over now. We've rounded third and are heading home."

"How is he dealing with all this? He hasn't said much to me and Mom or Dad about what he's feeling. Has he talked to you? Or anyone else?"

"No, but you know Hutch. Keeps everything to himself; doesn't want to be a bother."

"Sounds like my big brother." She looked closely at the intense man. "What about you, have you talked to anyone?"

Starsky grew uncomfortable. He didn't like to talk to psychiatrists. It was bad enough the department had made him talk to one after his near-assassination. "We've got lots of friends helping out. I can talk to them. And my ma, and you, too."

Out of the corner of his eyes, he caught her staring at him. He clenched his jaw and spit out, "He's gonna make it. He'll be fine and then everything will get back to normal."

*Oh, Dave. I hope you're not setting yourself up for a fall if the news on Ken's tests isn't all good.* She patted his right shoulder. "Of course he will, Dave. You just have to have faith."

Starsky was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry, Karyn. I didn't mean to snap at you. Lately my emotions have been all over the place."

"That's why you should talk to someone, too. Being very close to somebody who has a life-threatening illness is hard on all those around that person."

"Well, it won't be necessary after this week. Or after he's done with all the radiation."

*I hope you're right, Dave. Thank goodness I came, just in case. I can see you need me even more than Ken does.*

\* \* \*

Minnie was in the living room folding blankets when the two arrived back at the detectives' home. Starsky introduced her to Karyn, then asked where Hutch was.

"He's in the bathroom. He'll be right out."

"He's not..."

"No, he's fine. He was just cleaning up to make sure he looked good for his sister." Minnie peered at him over her heavy glasses. "Too bad you didn't think of the same, sweet thing." Minnie was one of the few in the police department, other than Dobey and their friend Frankie, who knew the real relationship between the two first class detectives, but that didn't stop her from flirting with Starsky or vice versa.

"Aw, Minnie, you love me just the way am I and you know it."

"Sure, and the only reason Hutch has his hands on you is because you can't handle me and you know that." She smirked back.

Karyn watched this back and forth play with amusement. She'd heard about Minnie from both Ken and Dave. "You're just as brassy as the guys told me, Minnie." Both ladies laughed.

"You gotta be to work around male chauvinists like your brother and his boyfriend."

Hutch came out of the hallway into the living area, to laughter that lifted his spirits. He was tired of people walking on eggshells around him, and wanted life to be as normal as possible. "Hey, little sis."

"Kenny." Karyn walked over to her brother and gave him a hug. Pulling away, she looked closely at him.

"You're looking okay."

"Sure, I am. You hugged me tight enough to tell that's not true."

"So you've lost a little weight."

Hutch patted his head. "And hair."

"But you look okay. You'll get your color back, and your hair. The weight, well, you could stand to keep that off," she joked.

"Very funny. Have you lost all the weight you gained carrying Jared?" he teased her back.

"Okay, truce."

"I'm glad you came, sweetie. Starsky really needs the help, he's wearing himself out."

"I'll see you at the station, Starsky. You call if you need anything, okay?" Minnie took her leave while Hutch helped to get Karyn settled in the spare room.

\* \* \*

While sitting on the deck later in the evening, over a glass of wine, Karyn watched her brother and took in how he looked and moved.

Hutch's face was drawn and pale. Not quite gaunt, but the cheekbones were definitely more prominent. His eyes were pale and watery, but still sparkled. His skin tone was ruddy, due to the effects of the radiation, without even a tan to give the illusion of good health. His beautiful blond hair was thinning more than usual and flat, almost dull in sheen and color.

And all along, her brother kept watching Starsky watch him. Everything about Starsky said that he was on alert, and she didn't know if Starsky realized it.

Not only was Karyn worried about her brother's health, but she was also worried about Starsky's reaction to his partner's illness.

\* \* \*

## **WEEK FIVE**

Hutch, Starsky, and Karyn went to the Norris Center Monday morning for Hutch's tests, to see if the radiation treatments had been successful. He had the same tests performed that were initially done, minus the painful bone marrow test.

"Now comes the hard part," Bunny said. She had joined them in Hutch's outpatient room, where he waited in between tests.

"How long do you think before we'll know?" asked Karyn.

"Tomorrow afternoon, Wednesday maybe. Depends on how quickly the techs and doctors can read the results."

Starsky drove the brother and sister home, then headed for work, since he had plans to take the day off when Hutch went to get the results of his tests.

The day was still early enough to enjoy sitting outside on the patio while eating a late lunch. Karyn warmed herself some leftover spaghetti, while preparing a lunch of canned fruit and yogurt for her brother.

She caught him gazing through his sunglasses at the backyard. "Whatcha watching?"

"The birds." He pointed to the tray with two bowls. "That my lunch?"

"Peaches and yogurt. Do you want anything else?"

Hutch sighed. "I'm so extremely sick of yogurt and baby food and even my shakes." He looked over his glasses at Karyn. "Don't tell Starsky I ever said that, I'll deny it with everything I am."

She chuckled and crossed her heart with her forefinger. They sat quietly enjoying each other's company and the lovely weather for a few more minutes before Karyn asked Hutch how he really was doing with his illness. "You keep everything to yourself. I don't think I've seen you get angry or show any emotion since I've been here. And even on the phone you rarely sound down."

"I'm doing okay. And believe me, I've had my moments. But I try not to let it get to me." Hutch waved his arms. "All this. It's just another trial and I'll get through it, one way or the other."

"Stop being so stoic," Karyn scolded him. She sat beside him, putting her hands in his. "It's okay to be upset. You can let other people see what's going on in that thick head of yours."

Hutch stared at their joined hands for a few moments. "It was a big shock at first, and I felt like I got slammed upside the head. But I've realized how lucky I've been in my life and I look for the positive. Even when I'm throwing up, I try to think how much worse I could have it."

"Have you and Starsky talked about what will happen if this session of treatments doesn't work?"

"No, but we have discussed our wills. And-you'll be the first one I'm telling in the family-we want to have a ceremony when all this is over."

"A ceremony? Like a commitment ceremony?"

"Yep. What do you think?" Hutch knew he could usually count on his sister's support, but with something like this one never knew.

Karyn's eyes widened in excitement and she asked Hutch if she could help plan it. When he agreed, but said Huggy would be affronted if he weren't in charge, she jumped up and started counting on her fingers all the things that needed to be done. Then Karyn turned around, realizing what her brother had done. "You changed the subject on me."

Leaning back in the lawn chair, Hutch closed his eyes and sighed. "All right. You want to know what I feel?" His sister's blonde head nodded as she took her seat again. He opened burning, shining eyes. "I'm angry. I'm pissed and hurt and frustrated and afraid. Sometimes it's all bunched up inside, and I just want to yell at the world at the unfairness of it all. But I can't let all the things I feel get to me. Otherwise I'll blow up. At Starsky, at Bunny, at the doctor."

"Kenny, you need to talk to someone professional, who can help you let out what you're feeling without worrying about hurting the ones you love. Can't your doctor refer you to anyone?"

Hutch looked down at his now unappetizing, congealed yogurt. "He gave me a couple of names. I talked to Starsky's mom. That helped."

Karyn got up and bent down to give him a hug. "See? You don't always have to be so strong, Ken. Let others be strong for you sometimes. That's what love is about: giving and taking. Sometimes you've got to give a little or soon you're not going to be able to take any more and you *will* blow up." She paused before leaning back on her ankles. "And if things don't go the way you hope with the tests?"

"I'm not counting on anything, Karyn. The statistics the doctor gave me initially are more than anything I was hoping for in the first place."

"I'm glad I'm here to be with you both. Just in case."

Hutch's arms went around her and he pulled her close. "Me, too, sweetie."

\* \* \*

The phone call they were waiting for came Thursday morning. For several days, Starsky and Hutch had been able to pretend that there was no black cloud hovering over their lives, but now they were reminded once again how much had changed.

The clinic requested that Hutch come in that day during lunch, when Dr. Newman had some available time. Unfortunately, they couldn't-or wouldn't-give him any information or hints over the phone regarding the tests' results.

Since the doctor's office didn't have regular visits during lunch hours, the waiting room was empty as Starsky, Hutch and Karyn entered. None of them had spoken on the way over, or in the vacant room, each occupied with his or her own thoughts. Karyn prayed, Starsky told himself over and over that everything would work out fine, and Hutch tried to settle his stomach and resign his mind to accept whatever the doctor said.

The nurse admitted them into the same conference room they'd met in before and then closed the door while they waited for the doctor.

They didn't have long to wait. "Ken, Dave. Thanks for coming in today." Dr. Newman carried a large manila slipcover obviously meant for x-rays or scans, and Hutch's patient folder.

Hutch stood up and shook Newman's hand, introducing Karyn. "Dr. Newman, this is my sister, Karyn. She's in town to visit." For support, his lover and his sister had taken the seats on either side of him.

"Nice to meet you. I'm glad you came with the guys today."

Rather than sitting down at the table, Dr. Newman set the folders down and took out two large colorful scans of Hutch's upper chest. He slid them under the snap on the x-ray light and grabbed a pen from the pocket of his lab coat.

"The radiation hasn't completely eradicated the tumors from Ken's system. But it did reduce them, so we've made some headway," Dr. Newman spoke optimistically. Turning to the three at the table, he paused for their reactions.

Karyn had grabbed her brother's hand and was holding tightly, liquid pooling in her pretty blue eyes.

Hutch had bowed his head, sighing, trying to convince himself that he could handle this. *I've known this was a possibility. But, dammit! It's not fair. I don't want to die.*

But Starsky was numbed. "What do you mean? It didn't work? I thought...." Dazed, widened blue eyes looked around the room, not seeing. *This isn't how it's supposed to work! Hutch is supposed to be cured!* He started shaking and breathing harshly. Rising, he cried, "No! Run them damn tests again. It can't be true."

A large hand reached up and grabbed his arm to focus him. "Starsk. Please, don't. It's not the doctor's fault. I think I've always known that this wasn't the solution."

Angry midnight blue eyes turned down to meet Hutch's light crystal ones. "Oh, no, Hutchinson. Don't think like that. You are *not* leaving me! Not now, not ever."

"Starsky, sit. Please. You're not making this any easier. I need you to be strong."

"Aw, shit, babe, I'm sorry, but this isn't fair! Maybe they got the tests mixed up." He looked up to the doctor hopefully.

"Ken...Dave... Listen, this is not a death sentence. We just have to adjust the treatments and work a little harder." Having had to dish out this type of news many times, Dr. Newman knew exactly how to refocus his patients and their families.

Pointing to several reddish-orange blurs on the first scan, Newman explained that it was taken prior to Hutch's radiation treatments. He pointed to the same locations on the next scan. "And these are their appearance as of Monday. The difference is noticeable, even to the naked eye."

He sat down at the table and opened Hutch's file. "However, too much radiation therapy is poisonous for the body, so instead we'll try chemotherapy."

Karyn bit her lip. "How bad are the side effects?"

"I won't lie, they can be rough. But Ken has handled this well so far and he's got a good outlook, plus a strong support network. Those are always some of the most important weapons when fighting against a life-threatening illness and dealing with the changes that the treatments do to one's body."

Hutch spoke up. "How long will the chemo take?"

"You'll be given six cycles, or twelve treatments, of ABVD, which stands for Adriamycin, Bleomycin, Vinblastine and DTIC. Basically it's a chemical cocktail that was introduced about ten or fifteen years ago, and has shown excellent results. You'll have these treatments about two weeks apart."

"Twenty-four weeks?" Hutch was distraught. "You mean I'll be on chemo for six months?"

"I'm afraid so," Dr. Newman answered. "It's possible we may end them sooner than that, if your cancer goes into remission, but it's very likely it will take the entire six months." After witnessing the horrified look on Hutch's face, the doctor asked, "What kind of concerns or questions do you have, Ken?"

Hutch gave a weak smile. "I'm not looking forward to puking my guts out for six months."

"No, no, it won't be like that," the doctor assured him. "We'll be giving you medications for the nausea. I won't kid you, it's not going to eliminate it entirely, but it won't be like you're throwing up for six straight months, either. You'll probably be your sickest about three days into each treatment. Some get sick during the treatment itself, especially if you have too large a meal prior to it. I've also had many patients tell me that the best way to fight the nausea, though, is to eat, eat, eat, strangely enough. It appears that an empty stomach is something to avoid. But I think you will find your own best way to combat the nausea, when to eat and when to fast. But, please, if you are having problems, tell me. I'll try to find the right medications to help you. You'll have good days and bad days. You may find that you're able to continue working during the six months, at a diminished capacity, with time off for the days you don't feel well. Your energy level will be much, much lower, and fatigue will be a problem. But you can continue to work and socialize. It isn't as though you'll be bedridden for six months."

"Will he lose his hair, Doctor?" Karyn asked.

"Very likely. The loss will be slow at first, but you'll probably find that about halfway through the treatments or so, the hair loss will be significant. It will grow back, however. Probably about a month or so after you finish. I can't promise you it'll be the same color, but it will grow back. I had one patient who started the treatments with brown hair, but it grew back fair. It has seemed to have darkened somewhat over the past year, so maybe it will go back to his original color."

"And if this ABVD doesn't work...?" Hutch questioned. Karyn gripped his hand tightly.

"Then we try a different chemo," the doctor replied. "But let's not jump the gun here. It's important to

remain positive. Let's try not to go into this assuming it won't work."

"Why did the radiation fail?" Karyn asked.

"It didn't fail," Newman told her. "It did shrink the tumors significantly. It just didn't go as far as we had hoped. I believe the chemo will finish the job." He smiled confidently.

All during Dr. Newman's recital, Starsky remained seated and quiet. His slow burning anger and fear reflected only in the narrowed eyes staring straight ahead, and the clenched fists on his lap. Finally, he acknowledged that he had heard the doctor. "And when's this all supposed to start?"

"Well, we'd like to get Ken set up as soon as possible, for obvious reasons. Why don't you three discuss it and I'll go see my assistant to find out what time slots are available." Dr. Newman got up from the table and turned at the doorway. "I know this probably doesn't apply to you, Ken, but I would be remiss if I didn't explain that another of the side effects of chemotherapy can be sterility."

"Doc, if Starsky and I get pregnant, then I think we've got bigger problems than the cancer."

Smiles and light chuckles rebounded through the room, lightening the tension and dead air, mirth pushing aside the anger, smiles pushing aside the darkness.

Dr. Newman coughed slightly into his fist. "Ah, no. It's something I need to inform you legally, regardless of your lifestyle. Perhaps you might have wanted to consider donating your sperm at a future point." Red-faced, he left the room to instruct his assistant to get Hutch scheduled for chemotherapy treatments.

\* \* \*

Starsky slammed his glass down on the kitchen counter, startling Hutch and Karyn. "We're not going back there! We'll find another doctor, a better doctor! There's other clinics, other cancer specialists. We'll get another opinion!"

"Starsk, the tests don't lie." Hutch shook his head sadly. "Let's just give the chemo a chance, huh?"

"End of discussion!" the curly-haired man blurted, throwing his hands up to emphasize his point.

Karyn silently watched Starsky stalk from the room. Turning to her brother, she advised, "He's in trouble, Kenny. He's wound so tight he's gonna explode."

Hutch stared after his lover. "I know," he said softly. "I've got to talk to him."

"He's got himself barricaded behind so many walls, you're gonna have a hell of a time breaking through. And he's so far in denial..."

"I know exactly how to break through," he said almost to himself. "He can't shut me out forever."

She stood up and reached for her purse. "Why don't I run some errands? Give you two a little privacy, hm?"

"Thanks, Kar. Do me a favor, huh? Give me as much time as you can."

"No prob." She kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck."

Hutch walked into their bedroom, and picked up his guitar. Starsky had been stalking around the house, seemingly very busy and distracted, but in actuality he was doing little more than a glorified pacing. Hutch paid him no attention, but instead sat on the end of the bed and began to play his guitar. He sang some soft

old folk songs, carefully watching for an appropriate time to capture Starsky's attention.

After a while, Starsky came in and started rummaging through the adjacent bathroom's drawers in search of something. Next he approached the chest of drawers, and began looking through that as well. Suddenly he stopped, his actions frozen. Hutch's voice singing softly had figuratively arrested his heart, paralyzed his body.

Hutch continued with the song, pretending not to notice Starsky's reactions. "*Living on borrowed time,*" he crooned, "*without a thought for tomorrow...*" He boldly sang the John Lennon song that had so deeply upset Starsky when he'd heard it before.

Regaining himself, Starsky became furious. He slammed the drawer shut and rounded on Hutch. "*Stop!*" he screamed.

Ignoring him, Hutch continued with the song. "*Good to be older, would not exchange a single day or a year...*"

Starsky was overcome with a blind rage. His eyes were black with fury as he pounced on Hutch, tearing the guitar from his hands. "*Stop! Stop it!*" He grabbed the guitar by the neck and raised it over his shoulder as if to swing it like a baseball bat into the nearest wall.

Hutch jumped up and grabbed Starsky by the arms. "*Starsky! No!*" He pinned his partner's arms, preventing him from following through with his destruction.

So far gone with anger, Starsky stared right through him. "*Stop!*" He wrestled to free himself from Hutch's tight grip.

"*Starsky!*" Hutch cried again. He didn't know how much longer he could hold the enraged man.

Starsky looked at Hutch, and with relief Hutch felt their connection spark again. "Make it stop!" Starsky wailed.

"David..." Hutch's eyes filled with wet sorrow. His grip on Starsky changed from restraining to clinging. He helped Starsky slowly lower the guitar to the carpet, and it dropped gently back against the dresser. Starsky's now empty hands gripped Hutch's arms like a lifeline.

Starsky looked at him, really seeing Hutch for the first time since his rage took over. "Hutch," he rasped. "I can't stop it."

"David..."

"Make it stop, Hutch," he broke into a sob. "I can't stop it from killing you." He choked on the words.

Tears streaked down Hutch's cheeks. "I'm trying to, babe... I'm trying."

Starsky's sobs were heartbreaking as he folded himself in Hutch's arms and buried his face in Hutch's neck. "I can't stop it... I can't... It's taking you...away from me...and I can't...I can't stop it..."

Hutch pulled him onto the bed and tightly wrapped his arms around the grief stricken man. Starsky let out a mournful wail, gripping Hutch with bruising hands, until he could hold on no longer. Collapsing against Hutch, he wept as his heart let go of the pent-up anguish. Hutch kissed his head, his curls, his shoulder; anyplace he could reach. Stroking and caressing, Hutch's hands soothed the misery and torment, as Starsky's plaintive cries filled the night.

"I love you..." Hutch whispered. "I love you... I love you..."

Starsky cried for a long while, Hutch holding him, watching over him, encasing him in his protective arms.

The tears finally succumbed to sleep, and Hutch cried his own gentle tears in the privacy of his lover's slumber, wrapped around Starsky's unaware form.

\* \* \*

Hutch woke early, but did not leave Starsky's side. He lay holding Starsky, unwilling to leave him alone for more than just a moment. His lover slept deeply, his body completely spent from his emotional outburst and his exhaustive tears.

Hutch watched Starsky sleep, wishing he could touch him, but reluctant to disturb his needed slumber. Hutch ached to see the depth of the pain that Starsky felt, but was relieved he had finally opened up. It was his hope now that once the door had been opened, it would remain so. He needed to be open with Starsky, especially since the treatments were going to get more aggressive.

It was getting late in the morning when Hutch heard a tentative knock on his bedroom door. "Come in," he called softly, and watched the door creep open just a little.

"You two decent?" Karyn quietly asked through the cracked door.

Hutch chuckled. "No, but we're dressed." They never had gotten undressed during the night, nor turned down the bed, sleeping on top of the covers. At one point, Hutch had reached down and pulled up the quilt that was draped across the foot of the bed, gently blanketing them in its warmth.

Karyn pushed the door completely open, and waltzed into the room with a large tray. She slid the tray onto the nightstand and turned to survey her brother. "Aw, Kenny. You look awful." Cupping his face in her palm, she noted, "You've been crying."

He nodded, casting a worried glance down at Starsky. The sleeping man was oblivious to their presence. "It was a rough night," he told her.

"Are you okay?"

Again he nodded, giving her a small but genuine smile. "We both are."

"I brought you guys some coffee and breakfast." She gestured to the tray on the nightstand. "I went out this morning and picked up some croissants and jam. I think you'll like them."

"Thank you, Karyn. I appreciate it."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I can't think of anything."

"If you're not down by lunch, I'll bring you another tray." She winked as she walked to the door. She turned to wave before she slipped out, and Hutch blew her a kiss.

A short while after Karyn left the room, Starsky began to stir. Hutch was still enveloped around his partner, and Starsky snuggled into the embrace. Unable to withhold his affections any longer, Hutch began to sprinkle Starsky's face with tiny feather-light kisses, wanting his love to wake up to something pleasant, rather than waking up to the memories of the anguished night.

Starsky's face scrunched into a sleepy grin. "Kinda tickles," he protested.

"You want me to stop?" Hutch asked as he continued the light kisses.

"No." Starsky scrunched his eyes to the kiss that tickled his eyelashes. "Just not so light," he suggested with a little laughter in his voice.

Obediently, Hutch lowered his lips to firmly capture Starsky's in a loving kiss. He pulled back and gazed at his face, his eyes glowing with devotion. "I love you."

"Yeah, I think you said that a few hundred times last night."

"Tired of hearing it, huh?"

"Never," Starsky shook his head.

Hutch caressed his cheek. "I don't want to leave you," he said carefully.

A single tear slipped down Starsky's cheek. "I know." He tried to smile. "I don't want you to go."

"I'm not giving up. I'm gonna fight this thing." He kissed the tear from Starsky's face.

"How can I help?"

Hutch smiled. "Kick me in the ass when I get too tired to fight."

"I can do that," Starsky said thoughtfully, causing Hutch to grin more broadly.

Hutch's grin faded and he became sad. "I'm scared, David."

Starsky's voice was small. "Me, too."

"I'm not afraid of dying. I've had a great life. I've got everything I ever wanted," he squeezed Starsky tightly, "right here."

Wrapping his arms around Hutch, Starsky asked, "What are you afraid of, then?"

"Leaving you. Hurting you."

Starsky took Hutch's face in his two hands. "Don't you know you've never given me anything but happiness? You make life beautiful, Hutch. You can't hurt me. Only the cancer can. It's not you."

Hutch hugged Starsky tightly, feeling the curls caress his face. "Thank you."

Hugging back just as tightly, Starsky vowed, "We'll beat this thing, love. Together. I'm gonna help you."

\* \* \*

Karyn, Hutch and Starsky walked into The Pits in a somber mood. The fear over Hutch's unsuccessful radiation treatments, coupled with the dread of the pending chemotherapy, served to dampen the spirits of all three.

Huggy was blissfully unaware of their negative news, and was in fact quite pleased to see them. He handed them each a beer and threw his arms around the necks of both Starsky and Hutch, giving Karyn a huge smile. "Welcome to my humble establishment, my compadres! Are you ready for a night of abandon and

celebration?"

Karyn cast her eyes downward, not in the mood for any form of celebration. Starsky stared at Huggy as if he didn't understand him.

"Uh, Huggy," Hutch began, "we're not really up to celebrating..."

"What are you talking about, my fine friend?" Huggy laughed. "The radiation is over and done with, is it not?"

"Yes," Hutch replied truthfully, wishing he didn't have to take the wind out of Huggy's sails. "Yes, there's not going to be any more radiation..."

"Far out!" Huggy squeezed his friend a little tighter. "That's a good enough reason for us to take in some libations and party on! Oh, wait! Let me get the cake!" He turned to Starsky and stated proudly, "I baked it myself, and it is a masterpiece of the first order, if I do say so myself!" Slapping both men on the back, he happily rushed off to the kitchen to obtain the promised treat.

They slid into a booth and Karyn reached over and touched Hutch's arm. "Kenny, do you want me to tell him? I could go back there..."

"No," Starsky interrupted. "Huggy's right."

The siblings turned to stare at him.

"What?" Starsky asked. "Don't you think he's right?"

"Starsky," Karyn began, "had the treatments been successful..."

"No," Starsky shook his head. "The treatments were successful, right, Hutch? The tumors are smaller, right?"

Hutch nodded once to Starsky, surprised by his attitude.

Starsky turned to Karyn. "He went through hell with those treatments, and he's starting to feel a lot better now, right?"

Karyn nodded slowly. "Yes, but..."

"No buts." Starsky shook his head, then smiled. "We do have a lot to celebrate. Hutch is feeling better, he's winning the battle, he's finished one round of hell, and we're all here to celebrate it. Let's do it!"

Hutch smiled at his partner. "You know, you're right. We should be celebrating." Picking up his beer, he toasted, "One down, one to go."

Karyn smiled, too, raising her glass. "To no more radiation."

"To an even bigger success next round," Starsky raised his beer. The three clinked their bottles and drank, just before Huggy returned with the cake.

"Ah! That's more like it!" he chimed in. "Let the party'in begin!" He set the cake on a fold out tray beside their booth. It said **RADIATION SUCKS** in bold letters across the delicate frosting.

Hutch laughed. "I want a piece of that!"

Huggy reached over and cut a large piece of the cake and placed it in front of Hutch, who broke off two pieces. One piece he popped into Starsky's mouth, the other into his sister's.

"Oh, no, you don't," Starsky chuckled. "I want my own piece. Huggy?"

"Ask and ye shall receive," Huggy declared, setting a healthy helping in front of him. "You, too, Little Hutch?"

"Absolutely," Karyn replied. "A piece of that 'sucks' section, if you don't mind."

Huggy got a devious look on his face, and opened his mouth to reply to her comment, but was stopped short by Hutch's glare.

"Hug, that's my little sister you are about to say that to," Hutch warned. Karyn blushed, amused and embarrassed.

"Wasn't gonna say a word, my good man," Huggy laughed. "However, I might point out that her tastes are very much like her big brother's."

Starsky laughed, choking on his cake. He gulped down a swig of beer. "Hug, anyone ever tell you, you have a dirty mind?"

The evening continued in light-hearted celebration and companionship. Hutch was enjoying himself a great deal, and his enjoyment was encouraging the others. After a teasing round of competitiveness, Hutch agreed to play his sister in a game of pool, promising to uphold his undefeated record against her, and they left the other two men alone in the booth.

"Huggy, there's something I need to tell you," Starsky began.

"Lay it on me, Starsky my man."

"The radiation didn't work, Hug. The tumors are still there, they're just smaller."

Huggy's expression turned from happy to appalled. "Shit, Starsky, why didn't you tell me? I feel like a fool, bringing out a cake and all..."

"Huggy, no. Look at Hutch. He's having fun tonight. This is the first time I've seen him have fun like this since this whole thing began. He needed it." Then he shook his head. "Hell, I needed it. We all did."

Huggy looked over at the pair playing pool. Hutch was smiling broadly, as was Karyn. They did indeed look like they were having a wonderful time. "What happens now? Are they going to do radiation again? Is Hutch gonna...be okay?"

"They can't. He's gonna have to have chemotherapy. And, yeah, we hope this will wipe out the tumors."

"Damn," Huggy exclaimed under his breath. "Chemotherapy. That's a bitch."

"We're not thinking about that tonight, Hug. We're celebrating that he finished radiation. And we're celebrating that the tumors are smaller."

"That's a lot to celebrate," Huggy stated as if to convince himself. "I see what you're sayin' here, Starsky," he pointed a bony finger to his temple, "but it don't feel so happy in here." He turned the same finger to his chest.

"Yeah, well, we're not allowing those feelings here tonight," Starsky said quietly. "This is a party. We gotta be positive. For Hutch."

Huggy smiled. "For Hutch." They clinked their beer glasses together.

\* \* \*

It was late at night, and Hutch was in bed. Starsky had stayed up to watch an old movie, his mind too cluttered to sleep. He sat on the couch with a bowl of popcorn in his lap and a Coke in his hand. The lights were off, and he watched the dim glow of the flickering television.

Karyn walked up, sat down next to Starsky and snuggled close, wrapping her arms around his neck in a tight hug. Starsky set down the can and nearly empty bowl on the table in front of them.

Surprised, he started to smile and was about to ask why he was deserving of a hug, when she suddenly and quietly gasped and tightened her grip. Starsky realized she was crying, and he hugged her back in a firm embrace. "Hey, hey," he murmured, "what's wrong?"

Unable to answer, her gasps turned into soft sobs, as she cried on his shoulder.

"Karyn? Hey, it's okay, it's okay," he soothed.

"Dave, I'm scared," she whispered.

Squeezing her, he nodded. "Me, too, kiddo. Me, too."

"I don't want to leave..."

"Is that what this is about?" he asked quietly. "Going home tomorrow?"

"I...I don't want to leave him. What if... What if I never see him again?"

In response, he held on tighter. "Aw, hon." He let her cry for a while, then gave her the box of Kleenex from the end table. "Karyn, if you're worried about leaving him, you can stay as long as you like. You know you're always welcome. But we're not giving up here."

"I'm not giving up, either," she shook her head. "I just hate the idea that he's so ill, and I'll be so far away. I won't know what's really going on...."

"Karyn," Starsky tilted her chin up to look him in the eyes, "I'll tell you everything, I promise. And you can call here any time you want. The door is always open if you want to come back. I'm not going to keep anything from you."

"Thank you, Dave. I appreciate that."

"Hutch is doing okay right now. Sure, we all wish that it was over and he was cured, but he's going to be fine. You'll see."

"I love him so much," she choked out. Looking directly into his eyes, she asked Starsky, "What if he doesn't make it, Dave? What are we going to do?"

Starsky looked at her, struggling with his own emotions as he tried to comfort his sister-in-law. "We've got each other, Karyn. We'll be here for each other, help each other. Okay?" He tried to smile for her, but it was a sad smile. Taking a deep breath, he continued, "But he's gonna make it, Karyn. He's got good doctors, a

good hospital, good treatment plans. We're not going to lose hope. And you know how stubborn your brother is. You don't think he'll give up without a helluva fight, do you? I'm not gonna let him give up, either."

Karyn finally smiled. She sat back from Starsky's arms and pulled herself together. Reaching over, she smoothed the front of his shirt that had gotten all scrunched because of her crying. "You're right, Dave. I'm sorry." She wiped the last of her tears away. "No reason to be losing hope." She squeezed his hand. "Thank you."

"Thank you," he smiled at her.

"For what?"

He was silent for a moment. "For treating me like family. For coming to me just now when you were hurting. For asking what *we* would do if anything happened to Hutch. It means a lot to me, to know that I have you to turn to; someone who loves Hutch as much as me, someone who knows what I'm going through."

Hutch's smooth voice cut through the room. "It means a lot to me, too." His voice seemed loud, after their soft whispers.

Startled, Karyn and Starsky both turned to see Hutch standing at the far side of the room, leaning against the wall.

Stepping forward into the light of the television, Hutch approached the two, who were still holding hands on the couch. "You know, I've worried a lot over how the family would treat Starsky if something happened to me. I was concerned that everyone would turn their backs on him when I was gone."

Karyn held Starsky's hand more firmly. "You don't have to worry about that, Kenny. Dave and I would help each other through it. You know I wouldn't do that to him, or to you."

Hutch sat beside Karyn, and pulled her into his arms. Kissing the top of her head, he said, "Thank you. And stop worrying about me, Kar. I'm okay. I'm very optimistic about this chemo. It's got a good success rate."

She playfully swatted at him. "I'm your sister; I'm allowed to worry about you."

"Yeah, yeah, you're just like Mom."

"Ack!" Horrified, she smacked him a little harder. "Take that back, Kenny, or I'll start comparing you to Daddy!"

"God, don't do that," he laughed. "I take it back."

Karyn hugged her brother affectionately, then kissed each man on the cheek. "I'd better finish packing," she sighed, then headed up to her room.

"You heard all that?" Starsky inquired.

"Every word. I came in just behind Karyn." He grinned. "Like it or not, looks like you're a member of the Hutchinson clan now. She considers you family."

Smiling, Starsky replied, "Yeah, well, the feeling's mutual."

"You know, we've never really talked about what you're going through, Starsk. What's going to happen if,

by some chance, the chemo doesn't work."

Starsky was startled, and a little worried. "You just told Karyn that you were optimistic."

"Sure, but I'm also realistic. There's still a good possibility that it won't work, or that it will take several rounds of chemo to put me into remission."

Shifting on the couch cushions, Starsky closed down. "Well, it's gonna work. So we don't need to talk about it. Besides, you heard us. Me and Karyn'll get through it together."

Hutch knew that when Starsky put his guard up, there was no use trying to talk him around his emotions. He put his hand on Starsky's arm. "Come on, babe. It's late. Let's go to bed."

\* \* \*

## **MONTH ONE**

It was a beautiful sunny late afternoon the Friday after Hutch's second treatment. He and Flower Pot were seated in the backyard, or rather lying in the grass, when Starsky arrived home from work with a surprise visitor.

"Hutch? HUUUutch?" he called through the house. "Where are you, babe?"

"Maybe he's not feeling well, Starsky. If that's the case, I won't bother you further."

"I think it's okay, Cap'n. If he wasn't doin' so hot, he woulda called me."

Privately, Captain Dobey thought otherwise, knowing how closed-mouthed Hutch could be, but he didn't say anything to burst Starsky's bubble. "Why don't you go check upstairs? I'll just wait down here."

While Starsky was upstairs looking for his partner, Dobey went into the kitchen for a glass of water. The mess he saw surprised him, as he knew both detectives, but especially Starsky, did not stand for a messy house. There were two opened bags of pretzels and chips, with scraps trailing out the bag onto the countertop. The kitchen tabletop consisted of a ripped open box of Hostess Twinkies, and the leftover makings of deli sandwiches. An opened jar of mayonnaise with a knife jutting out of the mouth was sitting on the countertop also.

Hearing laughter coming from outside, Dobey opened the sliding glass door to the patio. Hutch and another man, who looked somewhat familiar to the police captain, were lying in the middle of the yard, staring at the sky and pointing to the clouds. On the small patio table were two emptied bowls of snacks, a single plate and several discarded paper towels. There was also a sandwich bag filled with some dried brownish-green weed. Captain Dobey knew immediately what he was looking at and why the men lying down seemed not to realize he was there.

Hutch passed a joint to Flower Pot, who proceeded to take a deep drag. Still holding in the smoke from his own toke, Hutch finally spotted his boss standing near the patio table. He coughed and sputtered out the smoke, urgently tapping Flower Pot on the shoulder. Flower Pot quickly put out the joint in the grass, away from Dobey's sight.

Hutch sat up and shook the grass and dirt from his hair. "Oh, hey, Cap. Come all the way out here to see me?" He did not look well, but whether that was from the effects of what he was smoking, or his illness, was not clear.

Coughing lightly, the captain admitted that he had. "I just wanted to see how you were making out in R & I

with the conversion, son." Since he couldn't work the streets and his time in the office was limited to every other week, Hutch had been temporarily reassigned to Records to help with their conversion of records to computer files.

Hutch started to get to his feet, but his boss gestured for him to stay put.

"Doing fine, Cap," Hutch replied to Dobey. "No problems."

Remembering his manners, Hutch introduced Flower Pot-whom Dobey glared at-then asked if his captain wanted anything to eat or drink.

"Why doesn't it surprise me that your friend's name is Flower *Pot*?" Dobey glowered, holding out the offending bag of marijuana in front of him like a dirty diaper.

"Captain, this isn't what you think..." Hutch began. His boss cut him off.

"I need to find your partner." Dobey turned around on his heel and marched stiffly back into the kitchen. "*Starsky!*"

Hutch dropped his head between his knees, and Flower Pot patted him on the back. "Don't worry, man," Flower Pot consoled. "If he was gonna bust us, we'd know it by now."

"He's my superior, Gino," Hutch groaned.

"Come on, man. We're doin' this to help you through the chemo. It's not like you're breakin' the law for the fun of it. The law is wrong if it keeps you from a medicine that will help you."

"It's not a medicine, Flower Pot. It's an illegal substance."

"It's an *herb*, Hutch. An herb. Indians used it as medicine long before our laws made it wrong."

"But I'm supposed to uphold the law, not break it for my own selfish purposes."

Flower Pot shook his head, giving Hutch's shoulder a squeeze. "Not wanting to puke up everything you eat is not a selfish purpose. It's survival."

Hutch looked to the house, wondering what was taking place between his partner and his boss.

\* \* \*

Starsky had finished checking the upstairs by this time, and was wandering into the kitchen looking for everyone. Finding Dobey as the other man walked back in from outside, he asked, "You find Hutch?"

"You might say that. As well as a questionable friend and some other things?" He held up the bag of pot, swaying it between his thumb and finger.

*Oh, shit! I forgot Flower Pot was coming over today.* "Uh, I can explain that, Cap."

"Do tell. And while you're at it, explain this mess," he waved around the messy kitchen, "and the two stoned men in the backyard. And why I shouldn't take in your 'friend' out there for possession."

Starsky shifted his weight from one leg to another in discomfort. "It's not Gino's, Captain. It's Hutch's." At Dobey's wide and shocked gaze, he explained further. "Well, it's, uh, it's like this. Hutch's been real sick lately. Not eating, barely drinking. So we heard about the positive uses of medicinal marijuana." He

shrugged and gazed plaintively at the large man who had his arms folded in front of him. "It helps Hutch, Cap'n. He's eating, and he's keeping it down better. The drugs the doc gives him don't help much, but this does."

Dobey seemed to think about it for a moment. "I'll reserve judgment for when Hutch comes back, but in the meantime I have to confiscate this." He tucked the bag in his jacket pocket. "You're just lucky I don't take in your 'Flower Pot' on a distribution charge."

Walking toward the front to leave, Dobby turned. "Tell Hutch I stopped by. I doubt he'll remember I was here. And, Starsky?"

"Yeah, Cap'n?" Starsky guiltily turned to face his Captain's wrath.

"I suggest you two be more careful in the future," he said pointedly as he took his leave.

Sighing with relief, Starsky surveyed the mess in the kitchen. He couldn't be angry with Hutch and Flower Pot, but he certainly felt frustrated with the circumstances.

Starsky walked out to the back yard and sank down beside his partner.

"What's he going to do?" Hutch asked.

Shaking his head, Starsky replied quietly, "Nothing. For now. He's pretty upset, though."

"He had to have seen me taking a hit," Hutch confessed.

Seeing his misery, Starsky squeezed Hutch's leg. "Give him time, darlin'. He just got a big shock. Let him cool down."

"You think he'll report him to IA, Starsky?" Flower Pot asked.

"No. I told him why Hutch is smokin'. I really don't think he'll hold it against him." Then he added, "I'm not so sure he'll be so forgiving with you, though, Flower Pot. I wouldn't put it past him to go after you for distribution. I think he kinda looks at it like you're contributing to the delinquency of his fair-haired son, and he's taking it personal."

Flower Pot laughed. "Let him try, Starsky. I ain't afraid of a little heat. Comes with the territory. I can handle Dobby, and anything he wants to throw at me." He winked at his friends with confidence.

\* \* \*

## **MONTH TWO**

Starsky slashed off another week with a red marker on the calendar in the kitchen. Karyn had bought the calendar right before Hutch started the chemotherapy treatments. It was covered in beach and ocean scenes, and she hoped that the calming pictures, combined with the noticeable passing of weeks, would bring hope and peace to both Ken and Dave.

They had finished the third treatment yesterday, and Hutch was currently lying in bed, curled up on his side with a wash cloth over his forehead. This session seemed to be a little rougher on his system than the previous two. Starsky had arrived home from work and relieved Edith to go home to her family.

They'd had to learn how to schedule things in advance, which they found was not so easy, since being cops usually meant there was little or no time for advance planning. Whenever Hutch had treatments, if Starsky

couldn't go with him, he always made sure that whoever took Hutch was able to stay afterward. If Starsky had to work, then various friends would usually stay with him for a day or two following the treatments, as well.

On a tray, Starsky placed some hot tea and warmed biscuits and honey for Hutch, since Edith told him the sick man hadn't eaten much all day. He carried it up to the bedroom, where Hutch was still awake, still curled on his side, covers bundled up to his chin. He had scooted closer to the edge of the bed and his head lay half on, half off the mattress.

"Babe, I've got something soothing for your stomach." Starsky set the tray on the nightstand and sat down in the little space of bed near Hutch's middle. He leaned over and took the now warming cloth from Hutch's head. "That's gotta be real uncomfortable like that. Why don't you move more to the center of the bed and sit up for a bit."

"Too hard."

"I'll help." Putting his arms around the thin frame, Starsky shifted his lover's long body and turned Hutch onto his back. He plumped the pillows, then helped Hutch to lean forward so he could place them behind him. "How's that? Feel like eating something?"

A big sigh was all the response Starsky got at first, but then Hutch acquiesced. He didn't have anything left in him to argue with. "Okay, if I have to."

The smile that crossed Starsky's face was enough to make Hutch eat if it killed him. *Which it might. I'd do anything to see that smile more.*

"Whatcha thinking about, babe?"

Hutch's light blue eyes deepened as they looked over the beautiful, sculpted man sitting before him. "How much I miss that smile. How I'd do anything to see it more."

Starsky looked down, flustered. "You're making me blush, babe. Getting all mushy on me?" But it made him feel warm all over when Hutch complimented him, and his lover knew he secretly like to hear the words.

"You enjoy listening to me talk about that gorgeous bod of yours. You're such a hedonist, you can't get enough."

"You getting all amorous on me?"

"In my condition?" Hutch shook his head. "I don't have any energy for anything more ardent than talk."

"I know, I just want to hold you tight."

Hutch's heart melted and his arms opened, as Starsky smiled the special grin he saved just for him.

\* \* \*

Hutch looked in the mirror as he brushed his teeth, eyeing his thinning hair. *It's time*, he thought. *I look worse with it than I would without it.* Finished with his brushing, he rummaged through the bathroom drawer in search of scissors. He laid a pair on the bathroom counter, then pulled out his shaving cream and razor.

Starsky came into the bathroom and realized what Hutch was preparing to do. He came up behind him and put his arms around him. "Let me do this," he requested.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Hutch grinned. "You want to shave my head?"

Starsky nodded, smiling back at him. Hutch placed the scissors in his hand with complete trust.

"Wait, let's do this right," Starsky directed. He left the room and returned a moment later with a chair. Hutch sat down and was draped with a large bath towel, like a cape in a barbershop. Rolling up his sleeves, Starsky proceeded to trim the sparse blond strands as close to Hutch's scalp as he could. He wrapped a warm wet towel around Hutch's head as he changed blades on the razor, then with great care, shaved his partner's head clean. Hutch just closed his eyes, enjoying the attention.

"Tah-dah!" Starsky bowed dramatically as he placed a mirror into Hutch's hand so that he could view the back. The towel cape was removed, careful not to spill the blond contents, and Hutch turned to survey his new hairless style, or lack thereof.

"Nice job, Starsk. Not even a nick."

Bending down to place a kiss on top of the bald head, Starsky caressed his cheek against the now bare skin. "Mmm, smooth as a baby's butt."

"Okay, back off. Let me get used to this." Hutch got up with a smile and kissed Starsky's cheek. "Thanks."

Starsky grabbed the scissors and raised them to his own hair next. Alarmed, Hutch grabbed his arm. "Starsk! What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna shave my head, too. We'll be a matching pair." He grinned happily.

"No, Starsk, don't." Hutch looked into his eyes. "I appreciate the gesture, I really do. But I don't want you to do this." He ran his hands through Starsky's hair affectionately. "I love these curls. Don't take that away from me."

Disappointed and relieved at the same time, Starsky sighed. "Okay." He dropped the scissors back into their drawer. Hutch patted him on the back and left the bathroom.

Hutch noticed little blond flecks of hair wherever the towel didn't cover, and decided to change clothes. Movement in the mirror caught his eye, and he turned to watch in puzzlement as he saw Starsky in the bathroom behind him, painstakingly picking up all the little clumps of hair from the floor and towel. Once Starsky had finished his task, he scooped up the pile of hair in one hand and covered it protectively with his other as he left the room.

Hutch entered the now vacant bathroom and looked around in the garbage canister. The majority of his hair was picked up, yet none had been thrown in the trash. *Why didn't he just toss it in the garbage?* Curious why Starsky would carry the hair off, he went in search of his partner.

After looking through the house, Hutch finally spotted Starsky. He was in the spare bedroom that they had converted into a studio of sorts, where Hutch could work on his painting, and Starsky could work on his models. Starsky was seated at his worktable, intently concentrating on his task.

Leaning against the doorframe, Hutch watched Starsky work. He was taking the blond hair and gathering it into neat little clumps, then tying them with a thread. The little clumps were transformed into small locks of hair, which he then placed into the pages of a book as if to press them. The sight reminded Hutch of watching his grandfather meticulously tie the hand-worked flies he'd once made for fly-fishing.

Starsky had been so deeply engrossed in his work that he hadn't noticed Hutch at the doorway. Hutch cleared his throat to make his presence known.

Startled, Starsky looked over and smiled. "Hi."

Hutch walked in, waving his finger at the little locks of hair, asking, "Whatcha doing?" He came up behind Starsky and put his hands on his shoulders.

"I'm saving it," the man replied, looking a little embarrassed at being found out. He shrugged. "I couldn't bring myself to throw it away." Starsky placed the finished locks into the book with the others, and closed it up. "My mom has a little metal tin in her nightstand that has my hair in it. She saved it from my very first haircut. I never understood why she would keep something like that...not until now."

Warmth spread over Hutch, touched by his partner's gesture. He leaned down and kissed the back of his neck, then whispered in Starsky's ear, "Sentimental softie." Picking up the scissors, Hutch pinched a small lock of Starsky's hair between his fingers and asked, "Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead."

Snipping the lock of hair, he handed it to Starsky. "Tie that together with one of those locks, will you?"

Smiling, Starsky did as he was asked. He handed the finished bundle to Hutch, who tucked it into the center of the book. "I like that."

"Did your mom save your hair, too?" Starsky asked.

Hutch shook his head. "Only you, Starsk. Only you."

\* \* \*

### **MONTH THREE**

Edith Dobby sat at Hutch's side, rubbing his back as he hunched over the emesis basin with his right arm curled around his waist. The nausea that normally came on the evening of or the morning after his chemo treatments, had hit with a vengeance in the midst of his seventh session.

His body was racked with pain from being contorted, he couldn't seem to get warm from the cold of the chemicals dripping into his left arm, and his upper body shook from both exhaustion and the effort of trying to keep his stomach from violently erupting through his esophagus.

"I can't.... No more," Hutch panted, tiredly. "I just need a break."

"Shhh. I know. The nurse'll be back shortly, sweetie. She's bringing some medicine to help settle your stomach." The pale skin combined with the neckerchief around his head and the purpled circles beneath his eyes made them appear as if they were bulging. Edith knew it all only temporary, but it still alarmed her to see the once vital, healthy man reduced this way.

"Did you...ugh... Did you call Starsk?"

"Yes. I left him a message and told him I would stay until he could get home." She brushed a stray tear from his cheek with a cool washcloth. "Look, here comes the nurse with some medicine for you."

"Hi, Ken. I see you're not doing so good today." Since Hutch usually saw the same nurses each time he came to the clinic, they had gotten to know each other well. Sometimes it was Anne-a brunette his own age; sometimes Hazel was there-an older woman with soft, sad brown eyes. Today it was Megan, a young Irish girl who had recently graduated from nursing school. Her empathy belied her experience since her brother had died of leukemia.

"I've got something to help settle your stomach." Without causing additional discomfort to Hutch, she opened the port on the I.V. and inserted the medicine directly. "Give it a little bit of time to work."

Both women watched as Hutch struggled to reduce his breathing rate, and began to relax.

"Take your time before leaving today. Rest a bit, try to drink some orange juice and maybe eat some crackers, if you can." The young nurse went over to the sink and rinsed out the cloth, freshening it, then laid it back down on Hutch's forehead.

Hutch shook his head; he wasn't going to tempt fate. "Can't."

"Yes, you can. You need to try to keep something down, Ken."

"Just let me rest for a while." The combination of the medicine's side effects, along with his worn out body, left little energy for Hutch to keep his eyes open.

"Sleep, honey. I'll be here when you waken. You just take your time." Edith settled into the chair next to his and opened a magazine as the remainder of the chemotherapy drugs dripped slowly into the catheter inserted under Hutch's collarbone.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, when Starsky walked through the swinging door to the treatment room, Hutch still appeared to be sleeping. He approached the curtained area where his lover lay quietly, and placed his hand on Edith's shoulder to let her know of his presence. "I got your message. How's he doing?" His dark head nodded toward the chair where his lover leaned back.

Before Edith could respond, Hutch answered himself. "*He's* doing better. But he's still tired."

"Hey, babe. You about done here?"

One blurred eye opened to peer up at the man hovering over his chair. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"I got off early. Edith called me."

"You didn't have to come, Starsk. I just got a little sick." He tried to sit up, but fell back, still dizzy from the trauma of throwing up. Raising his eyes and arms to Starsky, he sighed and asked, "Help me up?"

Edith Dobe set aside her magazine and reached for her purse. "Hutch, didn't Megan tell you that you needed to drink something before you left? I'll go get some juice from her."

"I just want to go to bed."

"You are in a bed, babe, of sorts."

"No, *our* bed."

Starsky lifted an eyebrow devilishly. "Yeah? Feeling that much better, are we?"

"To sleep, dummy. To sleep."

Starsky soothed Hutch's forehead, just as if he still had tousled hair falling into his eyes. "I know, babe. But let's do what the nurse asks first, okay? Then I'll take you home and we can lie down together."

As promised, Edith came back with two small containers of orange juice. "Megan said to try to drink both of these." She emptied the styrofoam cup of its remnants of lukewarm water, and poured one of the orange juices in it. "Let's do one at a time, okay, Ken?" She placed the cup on the tray in front of him.

"Starsky's here now, Edith, you should go home to the kids." Hutch was trying to avoid putting anything in his stomach. It was infinitely easier to get away with things with Starsky, than with their captain's stronger-willed wife.

But Edith would not be put off. "Drink this first. I'm not leaving until you drink at least one of these."

Hutch looked at Starsky plaintively. "She's not being fair."

"No, you're not playing fair, Hutch. Edith has been great, helping out and making meals. Now you're not going to disappoint her by behaving like a spoiled kid." Sometimes Starsky knew he had to push Hutch a little, play the guilt card. He didn't like it, but if it worked, he'd use it.

Grumbling, Hutch sipped the juice carefully at first, to make sure it would stay down, then finished the small amount with a gulp.

"Excellent. Now how about this one?" The tenacious woman refilled the cup with the other juice container. After handing it to Hutch, she pulled on her sweater and left them both with a kiss on the cheek. "You call if you need anything."

Seeing the worry on Starsky's face, Hutch tried to relieve some of it by joking. "A good thing about chemo..."

Wrinkling his brow as if he smelled something offensive, Starsky asked, "Huh?"

Hutch lifted the styrofoam cup in a salute. "No mouth sores."

"Only you, Blintz; only you."

\* \* \*

Once home, Starsky practically carried his weakened lover up the stairs to their bedroom. Hutch tried to help, but it was all he could do to lift his feet up, leaning on the shorter man the entire way. Rather than undressing him, Starsky helped Hutch slip between the sheets, then took off his outerwear and holster, and got in beside him.

Soon, Hutch began to shiver. "Hold me, Starsk."

Gentle arms wrapped under and around the sick man, as Starsky pulled Hutch closer to lend some warmth to his lover's frail body, careful not to hold on too tight. Before long, the shivers changed to deep quakes. Starsky rose up and leaned over to see Hutch sobbing quietly. He rubbed the thin arms. "What's wrong, hon? You feelin' sick again?"

Embarrassed at being caught in a vulnerable moment, Hutch sniffled and shook his head. "I'm okay. I'm just tired and sore. I think it's all just catching up with me."

Starsky gave up for the moment and lay back down until he heard the deep, even breathing coming from the form wrapped in his arms. Then he gently removed his arms, re-tucked the sheets around Hutch, and went downstairs to start dinner.

\* \* \*

Hutch didn't wake up for dinner, so Starsky let him sleep, checking on the exhausted man from time to time. When he went to bed after the late news, he found that Hutch hadn't moved. The dark-haired detective fell into an uneasy sleep, left arm gathered around the other man's chest so he could detect any movement coming from him.

Starsky was awakened in the early pre-dawn by a tightening of the muscles beneath his hand and the sound of pants coming from his lover's mouth. He looked over with blurred eyes to see a fresh sheen of sweat on Hutch's face, which was tightened in pain. "Hutch?" There was no response between the clenched teeth, but Starsky recognized the signs and turned Hutch onto his side, while climbing over him to grab the wastebasket kept at the side of the bed.

Even though it had been 12 hours since Hutch last consumed anything-the orange juice at the hospital- his stomach was rebelling, and the remnants of the juice came up, along with a small amount of bile.

Emptying his stomach didn't stop the contractions and pain, however. For several more hours, Starsky and Hutch battled the vomiting actions, and the soreness that accompanied the tensing and releasing rhythm. By the time the alarm went off for Starsky to go to work, Hutch could barely move and was in severe pain, yet the contractions refused to stop. Both men were covered in sweat, bile and bits of blood.

"That's it, Hutch, we've got to get you to the hospital. I'm calling an ambulance." He got off the bed and reached over for the phone, then went to the tall dresser that Hutch used and pulled out a clean shirt. "Come on, babe, let's get you changed."

Pain-filled, vague eyes looked up at Starsky. "Help me, Starsk," Hutch whispered. "It hurts. Oh, God, I can't do this anymore." He seemed unaware that Starsky had said he was calling an ambulance.

"I know, babe," Starsky choked out. He hated to see his partner in any kind of pain, but this was more than physical pain that was battering Hutch. His eyes filled as he whispered, "Hold on to me, okay?"

\* \* \*

At the hospital, the attending doctor quickly determined that Hutch was anemic, dehydrated and that his white cell count had dropped dramatically since being tested prior to yesterday's treatment. They wanted to keep him several days to build up his white count and to replenish the lost fluids and electrolytes lost during all the vomiting. Normally, Hutch would have demanded to be taken home, but he was too weak and sore to care. He just wanted it all to end.

\* \* \*

After three days in the hospital, Dr. Newman felt that Hutch was well enough to go home. His white count was rising, they had re-hydrated him, and also added some nutritional support via I.V.

Starsky had wanted to take the three days off and stay with Hutch, but his lover had convinced him that there was nothing he could do, that he'd be better off going to work. Edith and Huggy and Grace had also stopped by to visit, but Hutch sent them on their way, too. The crossword puzzles and books that friends had brought lay on the nightstand without being touched.

Nothing or no one could bring Hutch out of his funk.

He barely talked to Starsky, his visitors, or the nurses. And even then, it was in short words and sentences. Dr. Newman had the staff psychiatrist up to visit with Hutch, but he was even less inclined to talk to a stranger.

His dejection was reflecting onto Starsky, who was becoming mired in gloom and quiet also. But Starsky

didn't know how to combat it. It was a vicious circle. They wanted to talk, but wouldn't listen to each other. Starsky didn't want to hear what Hutch was saying, and Hutch didn't want to hear any positive clichés.

The drive home was quiet, as Hutch was still weak and not up for small talk. When they arrived home, Starsky helped him to the bedroom where he promptly fell asleep, while Starsky went into the kitchen to prepare dinner, hoping he could get Hutch to eat. Just then the phone rang, and Starsky hurried to grab it so the ringing wouldn't disturb Hutch.

It was Huggy, calling to check on them. *"Hey, my man. How's Hutchie?"*

Starsky leaned back toward the doorway to check on his partner and sighed. "He's doing better, Hug. He's lying down right now."

*"But?"*

"But what?"

*"I know you, Starsky. There's a 'but' underlying that sentence."*

"Never could hide anything from you, Huggy." Starsky rubbed his face with his left hand, and lowered his voice. "He's just so down right now. He doesn't want to do anything but sleep and watch TV when he's feeling like this. I don't know if it's because he's not feeling good, or if he's losing hope after having to go to the hospital."

*"They tell him anything new when he was there, about the big C?"*

Starsky shook his head while answering, "Not really. Just that his white count was real low and he needs to bring it up to measurable levels in the next week. He'll have to postpone the rest of the chemo unless it comes up."

*"How does one do that?"*

"Resting and eating, mostly. But he won't eat unless, well, unless he's been smoking."

*"I'll make somethin' so delectable that even Mr. Persnickety won't turn down. Leave it to the Bear."*

Starsky thanked Huggy, though privately he doubted anything would tempt his lover to eat much.

Since Starsky hadn't eaten much either, while Hutch was in the hospital, he eagerly devoured a plate of scrambled eggs and biscuits. Even the soft eggs weren't tempting to the other man in the bed, but Starsky brought him a health shake and was able to get Hutch to drink some of it down.

After dinner, Starsky joined his lover on the bed and cuddled up to him to watch some television. Hutch rarely had any use of the appliance, but he seemed to watch more of it lately, as he had no energy for anything else. Reruns of *M\*A\*S\*H\** was one show both detectives liked. They were catching up on the episodes of the show they had missed initially. This particular episode focused on Hawkeye Pierce as the sole doctor of the unit not felled by a flu bug.

Watching the character, Hutch was reminded how much like Starsky he was.

Knowing Hutch, Starsky asked, "Whatcha thinking?"

"Hmmm. How much you remind me of Hawkeye."

Starsky leaned to the side and grinned wryly at Hutch. "Yeah, he is a handsome man."

The joke failed to illicit so much as a chuckle from Hutch. He clarified. "You've got the same adolescent nature, always gotta be the center of attention, you both feel deeply for wrongs done to anyone else, and just like him-you're wearing yourself out taking care of the sick-namely me."

His lover tilted the thin, pale chin to look into his face. "Hutch? You don't think that I get bothered or upset by taking care of you, do you?"

"Starsk, for the last four months all you've done is clean up after my puke; helped me bathe, walk, dress; had to work with a new partner; turned into a felon by procuring an illegal substance; not to mention lost your lover."

"Hutch, all those things don't mean diddly squat. How many of those did you do for me when I got shot? Well, minus the lover bit." He grinned briefly, then dropped the façade. "How many months did I rely on you? I'll tell you-too many. But it don't matter. This ain't about keeping things equal between us. This is about love. I do all this for you because I love you, and I want to help you. Make you feel better." He hugged his partner lightly.

Closing his eyes and sighing, Hutch's voiced question could barely be heard. "Starsk? What if I don't get better?"

Starsky pushed Hutch out of his embrace and grasped both arms, causing the sick man to open his eyes. "Don't even think like that, Hutch. You gotta think positive. For me and for your family, if not for yourself."

*How do I explain this without worrying Starsky?* Hutch thought. It wasn't that he was giving up, but he wondered if a long continuous fight was worth it. Would he want to go through another extended treatment of chemotherapy? Would the quality of his life make it worth going through that? And it wasn't just himself, he hated people seeing him like this, cleaning up after him, worrying about how Starsky was holding up. At times like this, sometimes Hutch wondered if it wasn't better to just let what was going to happen, happen. But he couldn't find the right words to tell Starsky all this.

Instead, he just looked up at him with light blue eyes that were grayed and bleak. "I don't know if I can anymore. I'm too tired to think anything. It hurts too much."

Gathering Hutch in his arms again, Starsky rubbed his back. "Okay, then I'll just have to work at bein' stronger until you feel a little better."

Shaking his covered head against Starsky's upper chest, Hutch disagreed. "No. It's not just that. I...I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. It's not only draining me physically, but emotionally, too. And what about you? Look at what taking care of me and watching me die a little everyday is doing to you. What you're going through, how you'll handle it if I don't make it..."

"You ain't giving up, Hutch. Tell me you ain't giving up," Starsky pleaded as he grasped his lover closer, not wanting to hurt the frail body.

"No, I'm not giving up. I'm just so tired of everything. I just want it to end." Hutch looked up into dark, pleading eyes. "I'm sorry, Starsk. I don't mean to sound so selfish."

"You know what, babe? I think you need more rest. You'll be feeling better in the morning once you've gotten your beauty sleep."

He knew that anything else he said would be argued with, so Hutch went silent as Starsky helped to cover him up. Hutch grasped his wrist. "David, look at me. What do you see?"

Starsky couldn't lie about Hutch's physical appearance. "I see the man I love. Sick, yes. But as long as there's breath in that body, I'll do my damndest to fight with you or for you."

Hutch turned away and curled up on his side. "I'm tired, David. So damn tired."

The sick man drifted away as Starsky stood in the doorway watching. His breath caught in his throat as Starsky let loose the emotions he was holding back while talking to Hutch. *I need Ma.*

\* \* \*

As soon as he could escape downstairs, Starsky called his mother. "Hello, Ma?"

*"Davey, is that you? Is everything okay?"*

Hearing her soothing, concerned voice was enough to break Starsky's tight hold on his emotions. He choked back a sob. "I don't know, Ma. I just..." He trailed off, not wanting to admit any weakness.

But Rachel understood. *"You needed someone to talk to. I understand. Is it Ken? Honey, he's not..."* She couldn't voice the question.

"No, he's home now. But I'm worried about him, Ma. I think he's giving up."

Rachel tried to reassure him. *"Not Ken. He's a strong individual. He's just going through a rough spot."*

"But he's so sick, Ma. And he's depressed and all he wants to do is sleep."

*"Is he eating?"*

"Not really. Sometimes when Flower Pot comes over. Or when he starts feeling better, his appetite will come back, but even then he still doesn't eat much. It's all I can do right now to get him to drink a health shake."

Her voice resounded with intensity. *"This is what I want you to do. First, he needs to get out of bed. Let him lay on the couch, or outside on a lounge chair. But he needs to stop hiding away from life. Then you force feed him something."*

Starsky nodded his head as she ticked off the items, even though his mother couldn't see him. "Huggy said he's gonna bring over something easy for him tonight."

*"Good. The more you can get into him, the stronger he'll feel, and the less depressed he'll be."*

"What if that doesn't work?"

*"Tell him I'm coming back out there on the next flight and he doesn't want to deal with a demanding Jewish mother-in-law."* She paused, thinking of something else. *"Have you talked to his mother? Mentioned any of this to her?"*

"No. I was gonna call his parents tonight to let them know that he was home."

*"Call her. Keep her informed. I think you'll find that she'll come out and help get Ken back on his feet. Don't underestimate her, Dave."*

"I'm so afraid, Ma."

Rachel Starsky's tone of voice went back to soothing. *"What, dear? Tell me."*

"I'm afraid of losing him. What if...what if he leaves me? He's my life." The short sentence was said with a world of emotion behind it.

*"Have you two talked about that? How you'll handle it if he does die?"*

Starsky flinched at the word 'die'. "No. Except that Hutch told me he re-did his will and stuff. But that's it."

*"You need to talk about it. Mostly for you, but he needs to know that you'll be okay, just in case. But don't dwell on it. Keep positive."* Starsky heard a 'thwack' in the background. *"Sorry, Miles was trying to stick his paw in my cookie batter. Now how about you? Do you feel better?"*

"It always helps to talk to you, Ma. You know that. And you're right. Hutch can't spend his days alone upstairs lying around. I'll go up and make him move down here."

*"Good. And don't forget to call Margaret."*

"I will. You keep Miles off the table, or he'll keep getting into your cooking." Starsky chuckled at his mother's very rambunctious and curious cat. He felt much better upon hanging up the phone, and took a deep breath. There was a new resolve growing through him to help his lover fight, and to see that the war was worth winning.

\* \* \*

"Hi, Margaret. This is David." Starsky nervously clutched the phone tight in his hand.

*"David? Is everything all right?"*

"Yeah, sure, everything is fine," Starsky began with a false cheerfulness. He squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry. No. No, Margaret, everything's not fine. Ken is doing as well as expected physically, but he's really discouraged. I told you that he had a bad time of it a few days ago and ended up in the hospital, right? He was a little dehydrated and anemic, but the docs, they got him back on track and he's home now, but he's been really down ever since."

*"Oh, dear,"* Margaret said with concern. *"Has he talked about his feelings? To you or his doctor?"*

Starsky sighed. "He says he doesn't know if he can do this anymore, that he's tired. I'm kinda worried that he'll give up."

*"If he's still talking to you, he hasn't given up, David,"* Margaret reassured him. *"Do you think that you're getting through to him at all?"*

"That's just it. I can't seem to reach him, not like I usually do. He's depressed, and all he wants to do is sleep. I'm not sure what to do."

*"It might help if you could get the focus off his illness,"* she suggested. *"Get his mind on something else. Do you think he'd be up to it if I came out for a visit?"*

"Actually, I was kinda hoping you'd come," he admitted. "I think it would mean a lot to Hutch. I know he's told you he doesn't want any family out here. He just gets funny about people seeing him when he's sick, and he doesn't want any help. But he was really glad Karyn came, and I'm sure he'd love to see you, too."

*"I'll make arrangements to come out right away, if that's all right with you."*

"Yeah, of course, that's great. Do you want me to pick up you and Richard from the airport?"

*"Oh, no," she insisted, "you have your hands full there. I'm perfectly capable of handling my own travel arrangements. And it will just be me. Richard is in Dallas on business. Will you have room for me to stay at your home, or should I find a hotel?"*

"Sure, you can stay with us!" Starsky sputtered in surprise. "We'd love to have you!"

*"Wonderful. I'll call you later with my itinerary. I'll try to be there tomorrow, if possible. And, David?"*

"Yeah, Margaret?"

*"I'm so glad you called me. I've been worried sick about Ken. I would have been out there sooner, had he not dissuaded me from coming. Thank you for calling."*

"I'm glad I called, too," Starsky said sincerely. "And I'm really glad you're coming. I'll talk to you later, Margaret."

They said their goodbyes, and Starsky hung up the phone. He was immensely relieved that Hutch's mother was coming, and he was shocked that she wanted to stay at their house. She and her husband Richard had only come to Bay City once since Hutch had told them about Starsky's and his relationship, and they had never seen the house.

No one had ever said so, but Starsky knew that the Hutchinsons were not comfortable around him or with their relationship. Hutch had invited them many times, and they almost came out for Thanksgiving, but Hutch's nephew Jared's early arrival had canceled their plans at the last minute. At that time, Richard had insisted that they would stay at a hotel, refusing to sleep at their house. It had hurt Hutch's feelings, though he'd never admit it.

But Starsky had seen the disappointment in Hutch's eyes. To help him forget the slight, Starsky had come home with a huge teddy bear for their new nephew, and insisted that they had to take it to him personally because there was just no easy way to ship the large toy out to Minnesota. Hutch had jumped at the chance to fly out to see the baby, forgetting all about his father's refusal to stay in his home.

Now Margaret had not only asked if she could visit, but had asked if they would put her up in their home; a truly surprising, yet welcome, request. Starsky immediately went to inspect the spare room, to be certain it would be up to his mother-in-law's standards. He went so far as to raid Hutch's flower garden to place a small vase of flowers on the dresser.

After preparing the room to his satisfaction, Starsky went in to check on Hutch. His partner was still sleeping, so Starsky went down to fix him something to eat. He remembered his mother's suggestion that he try to push food on Hutch, so he whipped up one of her banana chocolate shakes for him.

He sat on the edge of the bed, and gently coaxed Hutch awake. "Here, babe, I brought you something to drink."

"No thanks, Starsk."

"I want you to drink this for me. Please." He pushed the drink at Hutch and gave him a pleading look. Hutch relented and took a sip of the drink. Starsky smiled broadly. "Good. Keep drinking. As soon as you're done with that, I want you to come for a walk with me."

Hutch looked at him warily. "A walk? Where?"

"Just a walk," Starsky replied with a shrug. "We're gonna get outside and get some fresh air. Get a little exercise."

"I'm too tired..." Hutch started to protest.

"Which is exactly why you should get some exercise. You've been lying in bed for three days and you're still tired. You need to get that blood pumping."

"I'm not up for..."

Starsky's eyes flashed with determination. "You told me you wanted me to kick you in the ass when you were too tired to fight, so I'm kicking. Now get your tired ass out of that bed and get downstairs, 'cause you and I are going for a walk!" He flung the covers back for emphasis.

Hutch looked at him with a mixture of irritation and resignation. He finished the shake, then reluctantly got out of bed and slipped on some comfortable clothes. He pulled on a baseball hat, but after staring at his reflection for a few moments, threw the hat aside in disgust. Instead he grabbed a bandana and wrapped it skillfully around his head.

Starsky held the door for him to leave, and noticed the change in headgear. "Give up on the hat?" he asked.

"Felt scratchy," Hutch complained. "My scalp must be more sensitive than before. Can't stand the way that cap feels."

Starsky looked at the discarded hat on the floor, then escorted his partner out for a stroll.

\* \* \*

Driving past a strip mall after work the following day, a store sign caught Starsky's eye. He decided to check it out and see what the store had to offer. A short time later, he left with a large box, and a big smile on his face.

Arriving home, he found the house quiet. According to Maloney, who stayed with him that day, Hutch was still in bed, and had been since Starsky had left early that morning. Heading straight for their bedroom, Starsky brought with him the gift he'd purchased.

Sitting on his own side of the bed, he placed the box on the floor. "Babe? You up?" He rubbed Hutch's back.

Hutch was turned away from Starsky. He opened one eye, then quickly shut it again, hoping if he ignored the man, Starsky would let him be.

Starsky, however, was not so easily deterred. "Hutch? Come on, darlin'. Let's go for a walk, 'kay?"

Groaning inwardly, Hutch continued to ignore the man.

Starsky rubbed Hutch's back some more. "Wake up, Hutch. It's a beautiful day today. Perfect day to go for a walk."

"Go away."

"You're up! Good. Roll over, babe. I wanna show you something."

Hutch sighed. "Later."

"I'm gonna wait right here until you do."

Hutch rolled over and looked at Starsky's eager face. "I don't want to go for a walk, Starsk. I'm tired."

Starsky grabbed the box from next to the bed and held it out for Hutch. "I gotcha something."

Hutch let his head fall back against the pillows. "Starsk, you didn't have to get me anything."

"Open it."

Hutch sat up with dismay and looked at the rather large box. He opened it slowly, much to Starsky's frustration. As he looked inside, his mouth fell open in shock. "Starsky, oh, my God!"

Starsky grinned from ear to ear as Hutch lifted the object from the box.

"This is beautiful!" Hutch exclaimed. "It's a Stetson!" He stared at the impressive cowboy hat in his hands, his expression filled with awe. "El Patron? Starsky, what did you pay for this?"

"It's a present, Hutch! You're not supposed to ask that!"

"But, Starsky! This is a Stetson! This must've cost you a fortune!"

"Try it on!" Starsky coaxed.

Hutch looked at the hat again with admiration then placed it on his head. He looked at Starsky with a happy smile. "How's it look?"

Starsky smiled back. "Sexy as hell. Is it too loose? The sales guy said it might be, until your hair grows back."

"No, it's not too bad. It feels good. How did you know the size?"

"I checked your dress uniform hat last night when we got back from our walk. I was gonna get you some kind of hat, but I didn't know what kind. I saw this and just had to get it for ya. It had your name all over it."

"Aw, Starsk, it's a beauty. My grandfather used to have one like this. Silver belly, too, just like this. My dad still has it. I always wanted one, but..."

"Well, now you got one," Starsky stated triumphantly. "Come on and get dressed, cowboy. We're goin' for a walk."

Hutch grabbed Starsky's shirt and pulled him close. "Thank you," he said just before he captured his lover's lips with his own and kissed him ardently.

Starsky pulled back from the heated kiss. "You keep kissin' me like that, cowboy, and you're gonna get a lot more exercise than you would from a walk. Now get outta this bed and get dressed!"

\* \* \*

Starsky had not spoken to Hutch of his mother's impending visit, expecting that a surprise might have a greater impact on the man. Margaret had called and filled Starsky in on her flight plans and her intent to rent a car, planning on arriving there just before dinner.

While Hutch was in slightly better spirits, he was still not himself, and was still spending more time in bed

than anywhere else. Knowing that his partner's health and spirits normally would have both improved by now since several days had passed since his previous treatment, Starsky worried that Hutch was not rebounding as he should. It frightened him to think that Hutch might go in for the next session of chemo in this current frame of mind.

When the particularly bad reactions to the chemicals hit Hutch, usually three days after treatment, how would he react if he were this bad to start with? Starsky hoped Margaret's visit would help bring him around.

Hutch's mother arrived exactly as scheduled, and Starsky went outside to greet her. She hugged him, and kissed him on the cheek, then turned to survey their new home. "David, this is lovely. And I love the landscaping. It makes such a fine presentation."

Starsky smiled with pride. "Hutch did the landscaping, Margaret. The only thing here was the front tree. He planted the rest."

She glowed, hearing of her son's handiwork. "I can't wait to see the inside."

Laying a hand on her arm, Starsky stopped her. "Margaret, before you go in, I should warn you about Ken. You haven't seen him in a while, and I don't want you to be too surprised at how he looks."

"Karyn told me he was quite thin," she nodded with understanding.

Starsky looked away, unable to meet her eyes. "Karyn hasn't seen him like this. The chemo has really taken a toll on him. He's very pale, and he's lost his hair. He's got dark circles under his eyes, too. He looks pretty sick, but that's because of the chemo, not because of the cancer. According to the doctors, the tumors are shrinking, so that's going well. It's just that the treatment is harder on him than the disease is."

Margaret took Starsky's hand in her own. "It's okay, David. I expected this. I do appreciate the warning, though. May I see him?"

"Sure, sure," he said, grabbing her bag from the trunk. "He's probably sleeping, but he really should be getting up to eat something now, anyhow. Come on in."

He took her inside and showed her to her room. Setting her suitcase down, he took her arm and brought her to Hutch. She stopped in the doorway and just watched her sleeping son for a few minutes. Starsky squeezed her shoulder and whispered that he would wait for her downstairs.

Margaret stood in the doorway for a while, then approached her son. She sat down on the edge of the bed and laid her hand on top of Hutch's, as it rested upon his stomach.

Hutch stirred, and his eyes opened slowly, sensing that something was different. He looked at his mother, but his gaze was absent as he tried to clear the sleep from his mind. Soon, recognition dawned in his eyes, and he realized what he was seeing. "Mother?"

"Hello, Ken," she smiled softly. "How are you feeling, honey?"

"Mom, what are you doing here?" he asked confused. "Where's Starsky?" He looked around the room, still in a bit of a fog.

"David is downstairs, honey. I think he wanted to give us a few minutes alone. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, Mom. You didn't have to come all the way out here. Where's Dad? Is he here, too?"

Margaret shook her head. "No, your father is in Dallas on business. I came out alone. I wanted to see how you were doing." She laid a soothing hand on his cheek. "Can I get you anything?"

Hutch pushed himself to a half-sitting position as Margaret leaned over for a kiss. "I can't believe you're here. It's so good to see you." He held her for a long time. Finally pulling away, he grinned sheepishly. "I need to get cleaned up. Why don't you go downstairs, and I'll join you shortly?"

"Take your time, honey. David has promised me a tour of your house. Just come down when you're ready."

"I won't be long, Mom." Hutch watched her leave the room, closing the door behind her. He shook his head, as if shaking the cobwebs from it. Forcing himself out of bed, Hutch took a quick shower. Even though he moved slower, he was anxious to get clean and dressed and join his mother and partner downstairs.

By the time he entered the kitchen, Starsky had given the grand tour, and was fixing Margaret a cup of tea. Hutch came in and hugged his mother again, then went to Starsky and kissed him on the cheek, hugging him around the shoulders. "Thanks for keeping my mother entertained while I got cleaned up," he said to his shocked partner. Starsky hadn't expected Hutch to be openly affectionate in front of his mother. Margaret couldn't have missed the gesture, though she politely sipped at her tea as if nothing were amiss. Seeing no negative response, Starsky decided to follow Hutch's lead.

Hutch pulled down a jar of biscotti from the cabinet and placed a couple on a plate. He brought them to his mother, asking, "Are you all right, Mom? Anything I can get for you?"

She pointed to the empty kitchen chair and ordered, "Sit down, Kenneth. I did not come here for you to be waiting on me. I'm not here as a guest. I'm family. If I need anything, I'll get it myself. Now, sit."

Hutch obeyed instantly. "So where are you staying? And how long are you here for?"

Margaret smiled and sipped at her tea again. "I'm staying right here with you, thanks to David's kind invitation. And I'll be here a few days, unless you have an objection."

"Objection? No! Of course not," Hutch stammered. "I'm glad you're here, Mom. It really wasn't necessary for you to come all this way. I told you on the phone, I'm fine."

"I know what you said, dear, but I needed to see for myself. I've been very worried about you. I was telling this to David on the phone the other night, and I asked if he would mind if I came for a visit. He was very sweet, and told me that you would both be pleased if I would come. I also asked if you two would have room for me here, and he graciously told me I was welcome to stay. So here I am."

"He never mentioned any of this to me." Hutch glared at Starsky. Starsky raised his eyebrows innocently.

"Don't be cross with him, honey. I wanted to surprise you, and I feared that if you knew of my visit, you might try to talk me out of it."

"Not because I didn't want you here, Mom. I would prefer to have planned this when I wasn't in the middle of treatments, and we could have a nicer visit."

"Don't you worry about a thing, dear. David's been taking good care of me. He gave me a tour of your house. It's quite charming, Ken. Very warm and cozy. And your greenhouse is lovely! I'm glad you finally have a place for all of your greenery."

Hutch smiled with obvious pride. "Thanks, Mom. Starsky built the greenhouse. He tried to scale it to the shape of the house. I thought he did a great job."

"Yes, indeed. It blends in quite well with the architecture." She looked around the room again, commenting, "I just love this natural woodwork. You so rarely find a house that hasn't painted over it."

Starsky sat down next to Hutch. "It *was* painted over when we bought the house. Hutch and I have been stripping it, a room at a time, since we moved in. We haven't done much lately, but I think we've made some good progress."

"Oh, yes," she nodded. "It looks marvelous. You've been putting a lot of care into this home, and it shows."

Hutch looked over and smiled at Starsky, taking a hold of his hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze. He was thrilled with his mother's praise of their home, and his delight shone in his eyes.

\* \* \*

Starsky stepped out onto the patio where Hutch was seated with his mother, catching up on the news from Minnesota. Hutch was wearing a long sleeve t-shirt and his new cowboy hat, in an effort to take shelter from the sun. He looked up at Starsky with a tired smile, and reached out to take his hand. Starsky took the offered hand and leaned down to kiss him hello, then sat at the table to join them.

"How was work, David?" Margaret inquired cheerfully. "Nothing too strenuous, I hope."

"Nah, it was quiet today," Starsky responded, placing a bag on the table. "Had to spend most of it catching up on paperwork. I did have an interesting chat with the captain, though." He gave Hutch a meaningful look.

Hutch instantly became suspicious. "Yeah? What about?"

"About the future," Starsky relied cryptically. He reached into the bag he had placed on the table and withdrew a book. He slid it across the table to his partner.

Hutch picked up the book with a frown. "Police Sergeant, Lieutenant and Captain Promotion Exams," he read from the cover. Withdrawing a booklet that had been tucked inside the cover, he again quoted aloud, "A Study Guide for the BCPD Police Lieutenant Exam." He flipped through the studyguide. "Practice exams, oral exam strategies, psych exam strategies..." Tucking the paperwork back inside the book's cover, he asked, "What is all this, Starsky?"

Sliding another piece of paper over to Hutch, Starsky remained silent.

Hutch snatched the paper up, not bothering to disguise his irritation. "BCPD Department of Personnel, 1985 Promotion Exam Processing Schedule..." He tucked the piece of paper inside of the book with the other papers and disrespectfully tossed the book back in Starsky's direction. It flopped onto the table and slid off right into Starsky's lap.

"Kenneth!" Margaret chastised.

"Mother, I have too much going on right now to be thinking about any promotion exams!" he declared, exasperated. Turning on Starsky, he snapped, "And you know how I feel about this! Why did you bring all this stuff to me?"

Completely unruffled by his partner's behavior, Starsky calmly and purposefully handed the book back to Hutch. "Yeah, I know how you feel about it. It's time to reconsider." He held the book out until Hutch reluctantly took it back from him.

"There is nothing to reconsider. I'm not going to take the test and risk leaving you on the streets without a partner!"

Margaret was puzzled. "Wouldn't they assign David a new partner?"

Hutch growled. "Some goddamn greenhorn that doesn't know his head from his ass and will likely get him killed!"

"Hutch!" Starsky gave him a warning look.

"What is the point of all this, Starsk? You want me to plan for the future? Well, I got news for you, pal! There might not *be* a future for me! I might not be here in five years, and you want me to throw all this work and effort into something that isn't gonna mean a goddamn thing to me?!" The expression on Starsky's face brought his tirade to a halt. Something in those eyes tore at his heart.

"*HUTCH!*" Starsky roared. He jumped to his feet, his face bathed in fury. "I never wanna hear you talk like that again! Get this straight, buster! You're gonna be here in five years if I have to drag you kicking and screaming into the future *personally!* Now you're gonna sit here and discuss this with me whether you like it or not! I'm not gonna take this from you! You ain't dead yet, buddy boy, and you're not gonna stop living your life as if you were! And *another* thing! It's one thing if you wanna hurt me with talk like that; I can take it. I expected it. But you're *not* gonna talk like that in front of your mother!"

Hutch stared at Starsky with a mixture of regret and admiration. Something unspoken passed between them, and Hutch's anger dissipated, replaced with contrition. Looking sheepishly to Margaret, Hutch saw that her head was bowed, eyes downcast. Her hands were tucked neatly in her lap.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Hutch spoke softly. "We've argued about this before, and Starsky knows my feelings on the matter. It upset me that I had to go over this again with him. I shouldn't've let my anger get the best of me."

Margaret recovered quickly. She reached out and patted her son's hand.

He looked up at Starsky with remorse. "I'm sorry, Starsk."

Starsky nodded and sank back slowly into his chair. "Just hear me out," he said at last.

Hutch was still frustrated. "Starsky, we've been through this. Nothing's changed! Why are you pushing this on me? I make Lieutenant, I get pulled off the street. That leaves you without a partner. I don't want that. You're more important to me than any promotion. I'm not leaving you with some incompetent fool to watch your back! So until you're ready to leave the streets, I'm not considering the exam!"

Clearing her throat, Margaret inquired, "Why doesn't David take the exam with you?"

Hutch sighed. "Because he's ineligible. He doesn't have the required college courses to be considered for promotion." He looked up to Starsky and challenged, "You want me to work my tail off to get this promotion, but you aren't willing to do the same, are you, pal? It's pretty easy for you to throw all this stuff in my lap when you don't have to do the work yourself!"

Starsky tried to suppress a grin, but didn't succeed. "Actually, I was thinking we could take the test together. Study for it together, too."

Hutch was suspicious and bewildered. "What? I don't get it. You aren't eligible for the test."

Crossing his arms, his grin broadening, Starsky leaned back in the chair looking quite pleased with himself. "According to Dobey, I *am* eligible."

"How can that be, Starsk? To be considered for Lieutenant, you have to have taken college courses..." His

voice trailed off at the self-satisfied smirk on his lover's face.

"I've been grandfathered in," Starsky replied triumphantly. "Anyone hired before 1975 doesn't have to meet the new education requirement. It isn't considered in our promotion review."

Hutch's face lit up in pleasure. "Are you serious? Starsky! That's fantastic!"

Starsky laughed. "Yeah, I was pretty pleased to hear it, too. The cap'n was real excited I was asking about this stuff. We talked for a long time. He's really pushing for us *both* to take the test. Says we got a real good chance, and it's time."

The smile faded from Hutch's face. "When is the exam?"

"Not 'til January," Starsky assured him, knowing he'd be worried about the exam's timing in relation to his chemo treatments. "You should be all through with chemo by then."

"Unless it doesn't work," Hutch muttered.

"I called Doc Newman. If you need more treatments, he said they'd give you a rest period between. It shouldn't be a problem."

Hutch's eyes brightened again. He started to look through the book more seriously this time, lost in the pages.

Margaret caught Starsky's eyes, her own twinkling with delight. Starsky smiled in return.

"I'm going to look through this," Hutch murmured, as he got up from the table and headed into the house, his nose buried in the book's pages.

"Nice work, David!" Margaret praised.

"Yeah, a smart lady told me I should get his focus off his illness, get his mind on something else. I thought it was a pretty good idea."

"Hmm, and a diplomat, to boot," she smiled. "You're a man of many talents, aren't you, David! It's easy to see why my son is so taken with you."

"I'm pretty taken with him, too, Margaret."

\* \* \*

## **MONTH FOUR**

Margaret had her bags packed, ready to leave. She walked into the living room and handed Starsky a package. "I meant to bring this to you at Thanksgiving," she explained. "I intended it to be a housewarming gift of sorts, even though you've been here quite some time now."

Starsky smiled. "Thank you, Margaret. You didn't have to bring us a present. We're just glad you came."

"Your mother helped me with this, David," Margaret smiled mysteriously.

"My mother?" Starsky blurted.

Margaret nodded.

He glanced at Hutch, then hurriedly unwrapped the rectangular package, awash in curiosity. When he saw what she had given them, his face broke out into a huge smile. It was a dozen pictures that were matted and framed together; six pictures of Hutch as a baby, and six of Starsky. Some of the poses were very similar; two bare bottom photos, two bath photos, two messy-faced babies enjoying baby food. There were first steps and crawling, plus some delightful happy smiles; one shy and toothless, the other charismatic and crooked.

"Wow, Margaret, this is fantastic!" Starsky exclaimed. "I love this!"

Hutch was delighted. "This is great, Mom! Thank you!"

"You're both welcome," she smiled. "I'm glad you like it." Then she added, "You'll have to mention it to Rachel, David. She's been dying to hear if you liked it. I called her and told her what I wanted to do, and asked if she could spare some baby pictures of you. She had copies made and rushed them right out to me. She was probably disappointed that she couldn't see it when she came out here last."

"That's okay. She can see it when she comes back," Starsky replied. "She'll love it."

"That reminds me, Mom," Hutch spoke up. "After my treatments are finished, Starsky and I are going to plan a commitment ceremony. I was hoping you and Dad would come out for it." The last was spoken with a hopeful tone.

"A commitment ceremony? Like a wedding?" she asked guardedly. "Of course we'll come, Ken. But..."

"But what? Don't you think Richard would come?" Starsky asked.

"He'll come. Of course he'll come," she assured the two skeptics. "You just tell us when."

She still looked worried, however, and Hutch forced the issue. "But what, Mom?"

"But don't you think that's dangerous in your positions? I mean, if your department finds out?"

They looked at each other, and grasped hands. "Well, our captain already knows. And after going through all that we did these last few years, we don't care anymore if Internal Affairs finds out," Starsky stated.

"Besides, we've been thinking about a career change, anyway. Taking the Lieutenant's exam is one way to get off the streets. However, we'll tackle that if and when the time comes."

"Can they fire you?"

"Not anymore, not with all the gay rights issues coming to the forefront of politics. But they can break up our partnership." Hutch paused and leaned in to give his mother a kiss. "Don't worry, Mom. We'll be okay."

\* \* \*

Starsky and Hutch walked into the doctor's office for yet another review of Hutch's progress. It had been the same thing, session after session. The x-rays would be checked, the tumors measured, and assurances would be made that the treatment was indeed shrinking them. Yet, this appointment, the doctor threw them a curveball....

"I called in Dr. Casciaro," Dr. Newman explained. "I thought he should be here for this."

Cold fear poured over Starsky. He had anticipated another optimistic review. He'd expected the doctor to go over the measurements and assure him that things were still progressing well with Hutch's treatments. He

did not expect or anticipate Dr. Newman calling in reinforcements.

Dr. Casciaro shook the hands of both men, who were rather wary of his presence. The feeling of dread and concern in the room was thick. After greeting Starsky and Hutch, Casciaro took a seat behind Dr. Newman's desk and waited for his friend to continue.

Dr. Newman stood by the lighted board where they always reviewed Hutch's progress. Placing the latest x-ray on the board, he switched on the light. "I want you both to take a close look at this," he instructed. The nervous partners leaned forward and examined the picture. "What do you see?"

Starsky spoke up nervously. "Doc, I don't know what to look for here. Can you just spell it out for us? Is something else wrong?"

Dr. Newman smiled. "No, nothing is wrong, Dave. What you see, or rather, what you *don't* see, are the tumors. Gentlemen, Ken is in remission."

Hutch sat back in the chair, feeling lightheaded. The news hit him like a Mack truck. "Remission?" He wasn't sure he remembered to breathe.

Starsky gripped the arms on his chair until his knuckles blanched. "Remission? Doc! What are you saying? Are you saying he's cured?!"

Dr. Newman held up two hands in a gesture of surrender. "Hold on a minute here, Dave. We don't use the word 'cured' at this point. The cancer can come back, though we will monitor him in order to catch it if it does. We use the term 'remission.' But, yes, at this time, the cancer is gone."

Starsky leapt from his chair and grabbed the doctor by his arms. Then he reached up, took Dr. Newman's face in his hands, and kissed the man full on the mouth. Aghast, the doctor just stared at Starsky in shock.

Hutch watched the scene in numb disbelief, until he saw his lover's joyous response. Seeing Starsky kiss Dr. Newman broke through his mental fog and he burst out in hearty laughter. Poor Dr. Newman stood there in complete confusion while Dr. Casciaro roared with laughter.

Whirling around, Starsky grabbed Hutch by the upper arms and hauled him up, then hugged him so tight he pulled Hutch right off his feet. Finally, Hutch touched ground, and found his voice.

"Doctor, what about the chemo?"

"You're done," Dr. Newman muttered, not looking up. "No more chemo, unless it comes back."

Hutch looked at Starsky and the two said simultaneously, "No more chemo!" Starsky kissed Hutch with total rapture.

Still laughing, Dr. Casciaro came from behind the desk and slapped his friend and colleague on the back. "Eddie, I'm glad you invited me here. I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

Dr. Newman just shook his head, eyes downcast and face reddened, reeling from embarrassment.

Hutch eventually broke away from Starsky's kiss, and extended his hand, first to Dr. Newman, then to Dr. Casciaro. "Thank you," he managed in a choked voice. "Thank you both."

"You're very welcome," Dr. Newman managed. He had finally regained his composure after Starsky's unexpected outburst.

"I'm glad Ed was able to help you," Dr. Casciaro grinned. "He keeps telling me he's the best, and I took him at his word." He winked at his friend.

"Go home," Dr. Newman ordered, holding up a hand at arms' length to keep Starsky from repeating his previous actions. "Celebrate. It's a good thing. I'll see you Ken, in a few months to check you again, and we'll keep our fingers crossed that after five years of clear semi-annual checks up we can declare you cancer-free and you can call yourself a survivor." Starsky slapped Hutch in the chest with the back of his hand. "Come on, buddy! Let's get out of here before they change their minds!"

Hutch didn't need any persuading. He yelled another 'thank you' to the two doctors and scrambled after his partner out the door.

The two men were practically walking on air down the hallway when an unsuspecting Bunny came around the corner, nearly colliding with them both. She ducked out of the way, and plastered herself against the wall just in time to see them jaunt past.

Hutch skidded to a stop and dashed back to Bunny. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shouted, "Bunny, I'm in remission!" He then pulled her into his arms and kissed her just as passionately as he had kissed his lover moments before. Bunny threw her arms around him, and went with the kiss.

Releasing her, Hutch smiled broadly, and watched as she stepped back shakily, bumping right into Starsky.

Starsky grabbed her and twirled her in a dance step, then swung her into a low dip. Almost as quickly, he brought her back to a standing position, then started to dance her down the hallway. By this time, Bunny was giggling with delight, completely caught up in their joy. Finally Starsky released her with a twirl, and grabbed Hutch, and the two walked off hand in hand, straight out the door of the Norris Center.

Bunny hugged herself in pure happiness, thrilled that they had gotten such incredible news. The electricity from Hutch's good news kept the hospital staff giggling and buzzing with pleasure for the rest of the day.

\* \* \*

Hutch nuzzled his partner's soft curls as Starsky lay blanketed across him, completely consumed by the passionate lovemaking they had enjoyed since arriving home from the doctor's office. "David, that was incredible."

"Mmm," Starsky murmured, "I'm not letting you out of this bed."

Hutch smiled. "Babe, you're weak as a kitten right now. I hardly think you're capable of keeping me prisoner here."

"I'll find a way. I know... Give me your handcuffs. Mine are in my jacket and I'm too comfortable to go get 'em."

Ignoring his request, Hutch declared, "I've spent too much time in bed lately. Let's go out."

Starsky lifted his head and gazed adoringly at his lover. "You wanna go celebrate?"

Hutch smiled, his blue eyes sparkling. "Yeah. Let's celebrate. We can hit The Pits and tell Huggy the news."

"Let's make a real party of it," Starsky suggested. "I'll call the gang and have 'em meet us down there."

"You do that. I'll grab a shower while you make the calls."

"I have a better idea," Starsky leered. "Why don't we grab that shower together?"

"No, you don't," Hutch shook his head. "You make phone calls. I'll shower first. If we get in that shower together, we'll never get out of here."

Starsky groaned his disappointment. "Remind me why that would be a bad thing."

Hutch kissed him. "You're insatiable. And tempting. But for once I'm starving and I want to go out."

"All right, all right," he sighed. "I'll tell them all to meet us at eight. That'll give us time for a steak dinner at Louisa's first." Starsky got out of the bed and walked naked through the house. "Save me some hot water," he called after Hutch.

"Ah, some cold water will do you good," Hutch grinned.

Starsky made the calls to their friends, and was delighted that everyone was able to attend. He was deliberately mysterious about the reason he wanted them there, simply stating that he and Hutch wanted to meet them at The Pits, and wanted to discuss something important with them. Since this was Hutch's big news, he wanted to allow Hutch to break it to them himself.

"Your turn," Hutch announced as he dropped into a chair. He was wearing a light blue turtleneck that matched the intense blue of his eyes, and charcoal grey dress pants. On his head sat the new cowboy hat, as if he were born to wear it. The way Starsky's eyes lit up when he walked into the room told Hutch he had chosen his clothing well.

"You look nice," Starsky murmured as he leaned in for a kiss. He got up and went to take his shower, giving Hutch a nice view of his shapely backside as he walked naked from the room. "Everybody's gonna be able to make it tonight," he called over his shoulder.

Reminding himself that it was *he* who wanted to get out of bed and go out to celebrate, Hutch shook off his amorous thoughts. He picked up the phone and placed calls to his mother and Karyn while Starsky showered. Then he phoned Rachel and broke the good news to her as well.

Starsky walked into the room wearing charcoal grey pants similar to Hutch's, but his shirt was black, as was the long leather duster coat he wore with it. "Ready to go?" he asked.

Hutch stood and pulled Starsky into his arms. "Starsk, you look so dark and sexy in that," he said with a hungry gleam in his eyes.

"Nobody'll notice me with you looking like *that*," Starsky retorted with an appreciative smile. "Come on, cowboy. Let's head on out and rope us up a coupla steaks, okay?"

\* \* \*

They enjoyed the special marinated steaks at Louisa's, then pulled into the Pits right at eight o'clock. Starsky and Hutch walked into the bar arm in arm, still glowing from their good news, good loving and good meal.

All eyes turned to meet them. There was tension in the room, as all the invited guests had been wondering why they had been summoned, and if Hutch had heard some discouraging news about his cancer.

The first person to greet them was Frankie. Beside Frankie was his closest friend "Malo," short for Maloney. Flower Pot and Grace were there as well, having been playing a game of darts with Frankie and Malo while they awaited Starsky and Hutch's arrival. Flower Pot and Grace had known these two men for a very long time, and all of them had often met with Starsky and Hutch at Huggy's to enjoy each other's company and to

play some pool or darts.

Minnie was seated at the bar near the foursome, smiling wickedly as Huggy relentlessly flirted with her. Seeing Starsky and Hutch make their entrance, she walked up and stood before them, shaking her head. "Starsky, I don't know which of you two looks more delicious tonight," she declared, blatantly eyeing each man up and down.

Starsky put his arm around Minnie's shoulder. "Minnie, you know your heart belongs to me. Admit it."

"Well, I must admit the smell of leather really does something to me, so you do have a slight edge tonight. But that man of yours is looking mighty hot in that hat. And his eyes are just glowing! Don't tell me you make him look like that, or I'm gonna be jealous as hell."

"I can't take sole credit for that tonight," Starsky replied. He turned to his partner and suggested, "Hey, Hutch! Why don't ya tell 'em why we're all here tonight?"

Hutch smiled broadly. He looked at all the expectant faces before him and glanced from face to face. These were his closest friends, the people he felt truly blessed to have in his life.

"First, let me thank you all for coming down here on such short notice," he began. "You have all been so supportive of me as I've struggled with my illness, and you've been a big help to Starsky, too. We're both grateful to you all. And because you have shared so much in my battle, I wanted you here to share in my good news as well. I went to the doctor today for a review of my progress. He told me that the tumors are gone. I am officially in remission."

Joyous shouts were heard as the group reeled from the happy news. Huggy immediately ran for his best champagne, and ordered up several trays of snacks and such for the crowd. Minnie hugged Hutch tightly, as did Grace, and Frankie slapped him on the back just a little harder than he intended, nearly knocking him off balance. Malo shook his hand with hearty congratulations, and Gino walked up and embraced his friend.

The celebration continued for several hours, and Hutch started to feel the day's events catching up to him. He slipped away from the rambunctious group and took a seat in the booth where Gino had been sitting alone.

"You feeling okay, man?" Gino asked.

Hutch gave him a weak smile. "Yeah, Flower Pot, I'm great. Just tired. It'll be a while before I'm a hundred percent. That chemo is pretty tough."

"Yeah," Gino nodded, "I know."

"You've been a big help to me, Gino. I want you to know that I really appreciate all you've done for me."

"It was my pleasure, Hutch." He smiled, but the smile soon faded and he looked reflective. "I'm really gonna miss getting high with you. Don't suppose you'll want to keep that up, now that the chemo is done...?"

"No," Hutch grinned. "I'm all through with that. But it was definitely an enlightening experience."

Flower Pot chuckled. "It was a good time, man." His somber mood quickly returned as he said quietly, "I don't really want to go back to being the bad guy again."

"What do you mean, Gino? When were you ever a bad guy?"

Flower Pot looked at Hutch seriously. "All these years I've had to pretend that I don't get high, and you've

had to pretend that you don't know I do. For a while, we were all on the same side. I liked that. Now I have to go back to being the bad guy."

"You've never been the bad guy, Gino. We've never looked at you with judgment," Hutch assured him. "We've always been on the same side. The only way I have ever looked at you is as a friend."

Flower Pot smiled slyly. "Hutch, for a *cop*...you're pretty cool."

"Who's the bad guy now?" Hutch challenged, but Gino just laughed at him.

Starsky slid into the booth beside Hutch and wrapped his arms around him. "You tired, babe?"

"A bit," he confessed, leaning into Starsky. "I guess I'm not much of a partier, huh?"

"Hutch, if you're tired, we'll go."

"No. These people all came here because of me. I can't just run out."

Gino piped up. "Hey, man, we all know you're not well yet. Go on home, Hutch. We understand." Then he added, "Knowing this group, they'll probably stay here and keep partying long after you leave. You gave us a lot to celebrate."

Hutch gave in to Starsky's and Flower Pot's urging to go home. He said his goodbyes and left with his partner. As Flower Pot predicted, the rest of the gang continued to celebrate, until Huggy finally declared 'last call' at the bar's closing time.

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## **EPILOGUE**

**March, 1986**

**6:30 p.m.**

The sun was beginning its late winter descent and the vibrant colors reached outward like splaying fingers to paint the sky in varying shades of orange, red, yellow, purple and blue. It was the perfect background setting for this special celebration at Bay Village Park. The park was often a setting for formal events with its 70 acres of parkland, including a 250-capacity log cabin and 100-capacity gazebo, in addition to its park and recreation facilities, duck breeding pond, jogging trails and flower gardens.

Approximately 50 people had shown up this evening to witness the formal commitment ceremony between David Starsky and Ken Hutchinson. It was just after 6:30 as the guests gathered on the gazebo and began to be seated for the 7:00 ceremony.

White Christmas lights were strung around the gazebo and the cabin's exterior to provide additional lighting. Bunches of sweet flag were bound in blue ribbons and set in dry vases around the gazebo and the deck of the cabin. White *Horkelia Clevelandii*, with its delicate, star-shaped flowers, were placed onto pads and floated in the nearby pond, as well as used as table centerpieces. Gentle music radiated around the gazebo as a violinist softly played classical Brahms and Beethoven to get the guests into a mood of reflection and celebration.

Inside the rustic cabin, while Huggy was giving last minute instructions to his staff in the kitchen, before preparing to take his place as best man, the two men of honor were putting the finishing touches on their dress, Starsky adjusting Hutch's blue bow tie that matched his own.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Hutch grumbled as he raised his neck so Starsky's nimble fingers could better access the tie.

Fingers faltering, Starsky looked up guardedly at his lover. "Into what?"

Gesturing up and down his torso with his hands, Hutch said, "This. This suit."

Relieved, Starsky grinned. "What?" He eyed the tall man in front of him; long blond hair flowing to his nape, muscular body encased in a classic white tuxedo. "You look hot, babe. Like the White Knight for real." He ran his fine-boned fingers through the blond hair and murmured, "I love your hair like this. It's even softer than before, you know that?"

"Well, at least you didn't say I make a beautiful bride."

Smoothing his hands over Hutch's broad shoulders, Starsky gazed at him in love and desire. "No one could ever mistake you for a woman, babe."

"Ahem, I hate to interrupt you two lovebirds, but you gotta have the ceremony before you can get to the honeymoon." Huggy had poked his head in to find out if the two men were ready. Looking back and forth between his friends dressed in black and white tuxedos, he remarked, "I guess I don't have to query which one is the bride." He grinned broadly at Hutch.

"That's it! I'm not going out dressed as a bride to your groom." Hutch loosened the blue tie that Starsky had just perfected.

The other men in the dressing room laughed.

"Huggy's just teasing you, Hutch. You're all man." Starsky leaned in and whispered to his lover, "And you can prove it to me later."

At which Huggy nodded his head, presuming by Hutch's slight coloration what Starsky had whispered to his mate. "Curly, you just finish dressing your partner, and I'll go keep the Honorable Ms. O'Donnell company." He winked at them. "Don't be too long. Can't keep the guests waiting."

Starsky re-tied the royal blue satin tie on Hutch's tuxedo, patted down the hair he'd mussed, and gave his lover a quick kiss as they turned to leave the cabin. A light swat on own his rear told him that Hutch wasn't upset about the white tuxedo Starsky had rented for his partner for this occasion. He turned his head to leer at the white-encased man who was responsible for the tap. "Watch it, fancy pants, I can give as good as I get."

"That's what I'm counting on," Hutch leered back.

They exited together with one last quick kiss at the doorway of the cabin, then walked down the steps and turned in opposite directions, Hutch to the right, Starsky to the left. They walked around the sides of the gazebo and walked up the front edge to stand in front of the officiating judge, their routes drawing a heart-shaped path around the gazebo.

Huggy took his place to stand between and slightly behind the two.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Judge O'Donnell began, "we are here today to celebrate the union of Kenneth Richard Hutchinson and David Michael Starsky as a committed couple traveling through life together. While this is not a legally recognized marriage, these two men desire to celebrate their love and commitment to each other with their friends and family." She looked at the two men before her.

"Long ago, ancient Egyptians and Romans kept their wealth in their household or in strongboxes and the 'key' was attached to a ring worn on the finger. When the owner took a spouse, that spouse was endowed with the same ring and key, denoting that the wealth of one was shared by both. Today, Ken and Dave will exchange rings denoting that the wealth of their persons-in all its forms-belong to each other." The judge looked between them to Huggy. "Mr. Brown, the rings, please."

Huggy stepped forward and removed two broad, plain gold bands from a blue velvet box. The larger-sized one he gave to Starsky, the smaller-sized one to Hutch. They turned toward each other and looked at the woman in front of them.

"Repeat after me. We, Ken and Dave, promise to love, honor and cherish each other in sickness and health, for richer and poorer, for better or worse, until death us do part."

They repeated the decades-old verse and exchanged rings, each placing the band he held onto the third finger of his partner's right hand.

"Now, Ken and Dave would like to state the vows they wrote for one another for today."

Hutch smiled at Starsky. "David, I give to you all that I have, all that I am, and all that I will ever be. I offer myself to you as companion, lover and friend. I vow to laugh with you, toil with you, and have fun with you. I vow to support your dreams and to respect our differences, to love you and stand by you, in complete trust. With you at my side, my goals are clear, my hopes are high, and my life is full of purpose. You are my beloved, my best friend and everlasting partner. Today I take you as my eternal mate."

Starsky swallowed hard, then gazed at Hutch with love in his eyes. "Ken, you're my best friend. You're my protector, my comforter, my hope, my mentor, my faithful partner, my love. I promise to stand by you in everything, from laughter to tears; in life and in death. My wish is to be by your side always. I know I don't say it often, but I love you. With these words I vow for eternity."

In the background, the gold-red sun touched the horizon and reached out its rays, coloring the landscape in a muted, reddened glow, as the two men leaned in for a soft, sweet kiss to seal their love.

A smattering of applause greeted their show of affection, as they drew apart and smiled at each other; Hutch blushing at the greeting by their small audience.

Huggy stepped forward and addressed the small gathering. "Ladies and gentlemen, Ken and Dave would like you to join them in the cabin to partake of some celebratory libations."

Starsky and Hutch led the way down the center aisle, smiling broadly at the sight of their families, and into the cabin where the band had already set up and Huggy's employees were waiting by the buffet-style table to serve the food.

The only reserved seating was the main table stretched along the far wall. It was reserved for Starsky, Hutch, their families, and Huggy, who sat at the end. Captain Dobey and Edith sat with Frankie, Malo, Grace and Gino-which made for some very interesting conversation between the staid police captain and the aging hippie.

Just before dinner was served, Frankie came up to the newlyweds and offered his congratulations. Then his eyes took on a particularly mischievous gleam as he inquired, "Does the fact that you're dressed in white indicate that you're a virgin, Hutch?"

Hutch opened his mouth to respond when Starsky cut him off.

"He's wearing white because it goes so well with this," Starsky declared as he pulled Hutch's Stetson from

the table behind him and placed it atop Hutch's head.

Hutch pulled the hat low on his forehead and sat back, balancing on the back two legs of his chair. His legs were stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. "If there are any virgins 'round here, Frankie, I'll leave 'em to you."

Grace came up behind Frankie and leaned over his shoulder. "If there are any virgins in this room, Hutch, they're gonna be so blinded by the sight of you in white, and in that hat, that they won't even notice poor Frankie here."

Rachel Starsky spoke out, straightening her youngest son Nick's black tie and smoothing the lapels of his suit, "I don't know about that. A Starsky dressed in black might just out-shine anyone in white," she announced, casting a wink at her oldest.

Starsky smiled broadly at his brother. "Do you think she means me or you?"

"You, of course," Nicky answered quickly, a little reluctant to have the spotlight turned on him at a ceremony of which he wasn't entirely in approval.

In the middle of dinner, Huggy stood and addressed the audience:

"Can I have everyone's undivided attention, if you please. My friends here, Ken Hutchinson and Dave Starsky asked that I say a few words. And for me to say a few words, is like for the sun to dry up the Pacific Ocean." His best friends rolled their eyes, while Huggy waited for the chuckles to die out before continuing.

"I've known these two-dare I say it-gentlemen for many a year now. They've not only been great friends, but as cops, not a one can touch them in their dealings with the little people. You notwithstanding, Captain Dobey." Huggy tilted his glass in acknowledgement of the captain. "They always treated this brother like family, and I consider them family. And they've always been each other's immediate family, through Starsky's recovery and Hutch's illness; through poisons and knife wounds and missing partners; heartbreaks and questionable affairs of the heart. Even when they quit several years ago, they stayed together just like when they was working. They don't know how to do without the other. From evil Satanists, wicked drug lords, and crazy ladies, they've put up with each other." Looking around, Huggy shook his head. "And from that list, I can see now why no one else would have 'em."

"Very funny, Hug. Seems to me like you're unattached, too," Starsky shouted.

Ignoring the dark-haired man of honor, Huggy continued. "Be that as it may. Ever since Curly introduced me to his partner, I've never known a Starsky without a Hutch. They've always loved and been more important to each other than to anyone else, and all I can say is, it's about time you two took this step." Long slim fingers picked up a delicate champagne glass. "Everyone, raise your glasses." Waiting until the crowd had lifted their drinks, he smiled at the two men and raised his own.

"To Starsky and Hutch, my best friends. To all that you are, all that you have been, and all that you will be. Together as one."

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