

Category: Gen

Summary: Starsky is back at work after Gunther's hit, and everything seems just fine. But appearances can be deceptive.

Notes: With thanks to [CC](#) and [Sheila](#) for finding time to comment. This was written for the "Make Starsky Bleed" 2005 challenge on the [Me&Thee](#) list.

Episode Related: Sweet Revenge

A Time to Heal

by Izzie

"Freeze! Police!" Starsky's voice bounced off the walls of the narrow alley as he pointed his gun steadily at the wavering figure in front of him. One part of his mind stayed alert for the sound of his partner, who had been chasing the other suspect, but most of his attention stayed focused on the man he was confronting. By the looks of him, he was probably high on something, and just starting to come down. He could do anything, and Starsky wasn't willing to take any chances.

"C'mon, man, put the gun down. You ain't goin' nowhere." He took a step forward, eyes fixed on the man's gun hand. "Just drop the gun and maybe we can get this sorted out," he continued, trying to lull the edgy figure into co-operating. He took another step forward, but even as he thought he saw the gun sag slightly, a sudden sound of running footsteps from the mouth of the alley startled them both. Without conscious thought, Starsky hurled himself, down and to the right, skidding up against the wall of the alley as he heard the gun go off. He felt a sharp pain in his chest as he reached up with his own gun, aiming and firing in one smooth move. Even the slight effort required to pull the trigger was enough to make him sag back to the filthy ground, gasping, as darkness swallowed him.

~oOo~

Hutch handcuffed the suspect he had been chasing and hauled him across to one of the uniforms who had also responded to the 211 call. "Take him in, will you? I'd better go see where my partner's gotten to." Without waiting for a response, he took off in the direction he had seen Starsky's pursuit. The sound of a gunshot a little ahead of him made him run faster, blanking out all thought. Except that he couldn't stop his brain identifying the gun, and telling him in no uncertain terms that the sound was not made by his partner's Beretta. Which meant...

Grimly, he reached the mouth of the alley and raked the narrow space with eyes that had gone the cold gray of an Atlantic storm. He saw a figure lying in a heap towards the end of the alley, but disregarded it. Where...? Then his eye was caught by a crumpled form huddled against the wall. The leather jacket, the blue and white sneakers, the stillness of the dark head—he had seen this before, less than two years ago. All that was missing was the Torino sheltering the motionless body, and the presence of many cops, shouting and milling around.

It was as if the world around him had stopped, caught in a moment of time so horrible that nothing could continue as before. Somehow, he forced one leg off the ground and pushed it numbly forward. Then the other. His body had forgotten how to walk; it took all his concentration to get it to co-operate, to move him across to the place he most wanted to be, and yet most dreaded reaching. His legs gave out as he reached his destination, saving him from having to work out how to kneel down by simply dropping him to the ground.

I can't do this again. I just can't. Maybe if I walk away now, it will all be a dream. God knows, I've dreamed about this happening so many times. Maybe I just can't tell the difference anymore.

He needed to reach out, to touch his partner one last time, but he couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't think. The world had stopped, and he had stopped too. Stopped thinking, feeling, caring. If Starsky was gone, he knew this time there would be no coming back for him either.

One of the uniformed officers had followed Hutch as he pursued his partner, and now trod softly up to the unmoving figure. Like all the officers at Metro, he knew about the near-legendary friendship between Starsky and Hutch, and about what had happened to Starsky in the police parking lot nearly two years before, and his heart ached for the slumped man kneeling beside his fallen friend. His training had never prepared him for this moment, but he tried desperately to think of something—anything—to say. But he couldn't. There was nothing to say. Shaking his head slowly, he decided to do the only thing he could think of; go back to his car and call the

detectives' Captain. He would know how to deal with this. Besides, it was procedure. If an officer was killed on duty, his superior officer had to be informed immediately. It would be the best thing to do. He was just about to turn and head back to this car when it happened.

~oOo~

Starsky shifted uncomfortably, aware that whatever he was lying on was cold, hard, and distinctly smelly. What the hell was he doing lying on something that smelt that bad? He shifted again, this time more purposefully, and rubbed at his chest with one hand. It stung. Irritated now, he opened his eyes and looked down at himself. There was a smear of red across his tee shirt, bright against the white cotton, but it was nothing major. His head felt a little tender, and his questing hand found a slight lump at the back. *Must have hit my head when I jumped out of that goon's way. Lucky I didn't hit any harder.* Shaking his head gently to try and clear the muzziness, he pushed himself into a sitting position. There was a sound behind him, and he began to turn his head to see what had caused it when he froze. Hutch was on his knees, an arm's reach away, face dead white in the stippled light that filtered into the alley. His eyes were completely blank.

"Hutch? Wha..?" Starsky looked down at himself again, this time seeing more than the stain on his teeshirt. He saw himself as Hutch had seen him, blood on his chest, sprawled anyhow across the ground. Realization hit him with the chill of an icy downpour, clearing his head instantly. He had seen photos of himself taken in the police lot before the ambulance came, and the similarity struck him with the force of a hammer blow. What must that reminder have been like for his partner? "Hutch?" He stretched out a hand and clasped Hutch's arm, not gently. There was no response. Before he could move again, he heard a voice from behind him.

"Sergeant Starsky, are you okay? Were you hit?"

Leaving his hand on Hutch's arm, he twisted round and saw a young uniformed cop looking down at him somewhat shakily.

"I'm fine. The bullet just grazed me. Look, can you take it from here? I need to get myself cleaned up and—"

"Yes sir. I'll see to it right away," and he was gone. Starsky forgot him, and the perp, instantly.

He got to his feet, pulling Hutch up with him. His partner moved like an automaton, responding to Starsky's guiding hand but apparently incapable of initiating anything. Starsky was beginning to get seriously worried. Carefully, he led his friend back to the Torino, and got him inside. After a quick internal debate, he logged them both out with dispatch and headed for Venice Place. As he drove, Hutch started to shake in the seat next to him. At first, it was just the occasional shiver, then tremors which racked the lanky frame until the whole seat vibrated.

"Just hang on, pal, till we get to your place, okay? Just hang on. We're nearly there. Don't fall apart yet, Hutch, let's get you inside first, huh?" Keeping up a litany of soothing words, Starsky drove as fast as he dared towards Venice, knowing that he had to get Hutch inside. The front seat of a car was no place to deal with what looked as if it might be a full-blown breakdown.

~oOo~

With a sigh of relief, Starsky kicked the door shut behind him and maneuvered his still unresponsive partner to the couch. He propped him up, then made for the cupboard under the kitchen sink where Hutch kept his strong liquor. Grabbing the bottle and a couple of glasses, he headed back to the couch and poured a couple of stiff shots before settling himself next to his partner, thighs touching. He turned Hutch's face towards him and lifted one of his partner's hands, resting it lightly on his chest, right where the shirt was torn and bloody.

"Hutch, feel that. It's just a scrape, okay. Hardly hurts. The bullet just grazed me, that's all. I'm okay. I know

what you thought, but I'm okay. Feel my heart. Relax, buddy. Just feel it."

It was so slight, at first he almost missed it, but then it happened again. Hutch's hand moved where it rested on his chest, searching and then it settled, right above the heart. Some awareness began to creep back across the pallid face, and finally he took a deep breath and slumped forward, both hands now supporting his head. Starsky rubbed a hand gently up and down his partner's back, waiting for the outburst he felt sure was coming.

But Hutch just continued to sit there, face buried in his hands, making no sound. Starsky was beginning to get really worried when, at last, Hutch straightened. He stayed still for a moment, then reached for the glass in front of him and drank its contents in one swallow. Letting it drop back on to the table, he turned to face Starsky. His face was still white, and his eyes looked bruised and tired, but they were aware again. Almost too aware. Starsky shifted uneasily under the stern glare that raked him from head to toe.

"Are you okay?" Hutch's voice sounded tight and strained, as if he was trying to control it and only succeeding with an effort.

"Me? I'm fine, Hutch. What about you? You had me worried there for a while, pal. I thought you'd lost it."

"The blood—what happened? Were you hit?"

"Just a scratch, buddy. The bullet ricocheted off the wall, and just caught me. Honest, it's nothing."

"Let me see." There was no resisting that voice, and Starsky unprotestingly stripped off to bare his chest. Looking down, he could see where the line of the bullet crossed his scars. A little dried blood marked the trajectory, but as he had said, the injury was slight.

Without speaking, Hutch got up, went to the bathroom and returned with a damp washcloth and a first aid kit. Gently, still silent, he blotted the wound clean and covered it with a light dressing. Starsky watched edgily as his partner returned the items to their proper places before heading for the kitchen. Hutch was altogether too quiet. By now, he would have expected some kind of reaction, even if it was along the lines of "what the hell did you think you were doing". This protracted silence was unnerving.

Before he could think of anything to say, Hutch spoke.

"You hungry?"

"Huh?"

"You want something to eat? I haven't got much here—I was gonna to do a grocery run after work today—but I could make a tomato sauce for pasta if you're interested?"

"Uh, sure. Sounds good." Starsky watched in bewilderment as Hutch began to get out the ingredients and started chopping onions and tomatoes. What the hell is going on? One minute it looks like he's about to fall apart on me, the next it's just like normal. He moved across to the kitchen area and leaned against one of the wooden chairs, his eyes absently following his partner's movements.

"Hutch, you okay now?" he asked softly.

"Sure, Starsk. I'm fine. Why shouldn't I be?" There was an air of puzzlement to Hutch's reply. "I'm not the one that nearly took a bullet. Could you set some water to boil for the pasta?"

~oOo~

By the time Starsky went home that night, he was, if anything, even more confused than when he'd arrived. The

rest of the evening had passed as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened that day; in fact Starsky was beginning to wonder if his partner even remembered blanking out so totally. Perhaps he really didn't realize what had happened? But he hadn't once mentioned Starsky's injury after that reference while he was preparing the meal, and that struck Starsky as being very out of character.

He climbed into bed, but found himself unable to settle into sleep. Finally, he gave up and propped himself up against his pillows, staring across the dimly-lit room at nothing in particular while he gave himself up to serious consideration. Hutch's reaction to his partner's injury might at first sight seem extreme, but only to someone who didn't know their shared background. It occurred to Starsky that this was the first gunshot wound he had suffered since his return to work after Gunther's attempted hit. It was strange that it hadn't affected him more, although of course he had had to confront the possibility that it might happen. Counseling sessions were mandatory for a cop who hoped to return to active duty after a work-inflicted injury, and he had talked all this through then. Of course, talking something through was no substitute for facing the real thing, but now it had happened he was far more concerned about what was going on with Hutch than his own reactions to it.

It must have been much harder for Hutch, seeing him lying there on the ground, with blood on his chest, just like before. He could understand why his partner had frozen; what was harder to get to grips with was the way he had refused to discuss it later, as if it had never happened. In their jobs, a bullet wound was not altogether unexpected; although they did their best to avoid it, it was an occupational hazard. Hutch must have known the chances were that this would happen again.

Starsky gave up. Maybe he could get Hutch to open up the next day. He would have to try, but it was late and he was tired.

~oOo~

But Hutch didn't open up the next day, or the next. In fact, he ignored all Starsky's careful overtures, and when at last Starsky snapped and tried to force Hutch to talk about what had happened, his partner simply stared at him in that irritating patrician way he could muster on occasion before stalking away.

After a week, Starsky simply had no choice but to admit defeat. But he was still uneasy, and found himself keeping a closer-than-usual watch on his partner.

They often did come into work separately, but it was rare for it to happen more than a couple of times a week. But Hutch started to drive himself in every morning, arriving before Starsky. By the time Starsky walked in, clutching coffee and doughnuts, his partner had usually cleared a good pile of their ever-present paperwork, and had a schedule for the day lined up. Of course, they never normally managed to stick to the schedule, but at least it gave the day some structure. That was Hutch's reasoning when Starsky quizzed him about it. At first, Starsky rather liked this new arrangement. He wasn't exactly late, but if Hutch was willing to work on reports by himself, that was fine by him. What made him uneasy after a while was that Hutch seemed to stay on after him, too. After a particularly trying day, when their shift overran by several hours, all Starsky wanted to do was get a cold beer and something to eat.

"C'mon, Hutch. Let's get outta here before anything else blows up requiring our immediate and urgent attention. Haven't seen Huggy for a few days anyway, so let's go grab something to eat there."

"You go ahead. I'll just finish up here."

"Uh-huh, no way. You're coming with me now. You need feeding, and so do I."

"Starsky, you always need feeding. I'm fine and I'm busy. You want to go eat, just go. I'll see you in the morning."

Starsky marched off. His partner was an adult, right? If he didn't want to come out for something to eat with his best friend, that was his choice, right? Even if said best friend was worried about him, right? This mood lasted until halfway through his first beer and a Huggy Special. *Dammit, no. It's not right. There's something really bugging Hutch and I'm gonna find out what the hell it is. I'll go over there early in the morning, pick him up and maybe we can talk on the way in to work.*

He set his alarm for what he regarded as an obscenely early hour of the morning. He wasn't going to take any chances of missing Hutch, and he wasn't too sure just how early his partner had been getting in to the precinct recently. Driving over to Venice so early was almost a pleasure; the roads uncluttered and almost peaceful. Hutch's wreck was parked outside the block. Starsky decided against knocking, not wanting to wake Hutch if he was still in bed, but preferring the idea of waiting in the comfort of his partner's apartment than the car.

But when he let himself in, the place was empty. He shrugged, and went to put some coffee on. *Must be out running. He only does a mile in the mornings, so he should be back anytime. Terrific. Maybe we can do some talking over breakfast.*

But half an hour later, Hutch still wasn't back. Starsky was beginning to get fidgety. Where the hell was Hutch? The sound of a key in the lock made him jump up in relief.

"Hey, Hutch, how're you doing? Want some coffee?"

Hutch didn't spare him a glance as he headed straight for the bathroom. Five minutes later he was out, a towel wrapped round his middle and another concealing half his face as he rubbed at his dripping hair. Starsky held out a mug of coffee, and his partner took it with a mumble.

Starsky followed Hutch into the bedroom, and leant against the wall while his partner dressed.

"So, you started running the city perimeter or something?"

"Just thought I needed to get more exercise in. Don't want to get flabby."

"Yeah, like you need to worry about that at the moment."

"That's because I exercise."

"I thought you just ran a mile in the morning? You said anything more took too long."

"So I'm getting up earlier. Was there something you wanted, apart from to quiz me about my running?"

"Just thought I'd pick you up."

"Fine. Give me five minutes and I'll be ready."

"Hey, what about breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I am!"

"Then you'll have to pick something up on the way. I don't think there's anything here you'll eat."

Starsky gazed at him in dismay for a moment before going off to check the kitchen thoroughly. Not only was there nothing there he would want to eat, there was nothing there, period. Well, almost nothing. Certainly no evidence that anything like eating went on there. With a quick glance to check he was still alone, he opened the

trash can. Nothing. No cartons, no pizza boxes, no empty cans. He returned to the living area thoughtfully.

When Hutch emerged from his bedroom, strapping on his shoulder holster, Starsky looked at him properly. Now he was really looking, he could see that Hutch had lost weight. Starsky was unsure if this was because of the increased exercise or lack of appetite, but he suspected it was a combination of both. Hutch was prone to dietary fads, but he usually ate something during the course of an eight-hour shift, even if it tended to be greener and leafier than Starsky thought normal for a human being. But not recently.

In fact, as Starsky cast his mind back over the past week or more, he couldn't recall one occasion when he had actually seen Hutch eat anything. Coffee, sure, he drank a lot of coffee, black and unsweetened, but food? Nope. Whenever Starsky suggested picking up something for lunch, Hutch made some excuse. Maybe he had an errand to run, or he didn't like the taco stand, or he wasn't hungry. If he couldn't get out of it completely, he just ordered coffee or iced water. Never the same excuse two days running, but now Starsky was counting, there hadn't been that much variety. This morning was no exception.

He decided not to make a big thing of it now. They had a full day ahead of them, including testifying in court, and this was not the best time to start what could become a messy confrontation. Starsky's partner instincts were on high alert now, but he knew he had to choose his time carefully.

Silently, they got into the Torino and headed for Metro. Starsky stopped off to pick up some breakfast, and when he returned he picked up Hutch's hand and dropped a banana into it.

"Eat it," he said quietly.

Hutch took one look at his face, shrugged, and began to peel the fruit. Starsky didn't start the engine again until the banana was completely gone.

They got into the squad room early, and began to review the case notes for the upcoming trial. Starsky took a deep breath.

"Hutch, I'm coming round to your place when we get off shift tonight. We need to talk."

"What's to talk about?" Hutch didn't even raise his head from the report he was reviewing. "Anyway, I'm busy."

"So cancel."

"Cancel what?"

"Whatever it is that you've gotten planned to stop me coming round."

"I can't just cancel my plans because you suddenly decide to visit, Starsky."

"Yes, you can. I'm not letting you outta my sight when we log off, so live with it, pal. We need to discuss one or two things, and this seems like the only way we're gonna do it." His expression was challenging, but his partner merely looked at him for a moment as if trying to remember where he had seen him before, and then returned his attention to the papers in his hand. Starsky was sure Hutch would try to slip out of the coming confrontation, but he was determined that this time there would be no escape.

~oOo~

The court case was finished unusually fast, and they were free of it by mid-afternoon. Starsky was still trying to settle on the best method of approach for the evening, when they were called out to a hostage situation. It wasn't the kind of call they usually handled, but as they headed off, more details came over the radio. A man armed with a shotgun had marched into a kindergarten, taken a few shots at the ceiling and threatened to start killing

the kids one by one if his demands were not met. Every available cop in the vicinity was being called out, as much to handle the crowd building up outside the kindergarten, and getting ugly with it, as to help handle the situation inside.

When they arrived, Lieutenant Kaminski was just starting to brief the other detectives on the scene.

"Okay, guys, here's what we have so far. The guy says his name is Hewison. He's on his own, so far as we can tell, but we don't know what he wants yet. We're trying to find out now if he's gotten any kind of record.

"The room he's holed up in is for the older kids; four and five year olds. The younger ones are all out, and the rest of the staff. The woman in charge is Mrs. Davis, and according to her there are ten kids in there with him, and two members of staff. The room has two access points, the one you can see from here, and another that leads into a corridor linking the rest of the building. Mrs. Davis says they don't use that one much, as they like to keep the kids separated, so the door is kept shut at all times and has lots of pictures and stuff hung on it—so I'm hoping that it might just look like a closet door. We can see in to the room, and so far he's kept facing this way, with his back to this other door. He's made the kids sit on the floor in front of him, and put the adults one on either side, and he's keeping the gun on them; but so far he hasn't hurt anyone. I'd like to keep it that way."

At this point, he was interrupted by a voice bellowing through a bullhorn near to where they were all standing.

"Mr. Hewison, this is the police. If you come out now, no-one need get hurt. You could—"

A gunshot tore through the window, narrowly missing the group of cops who hastily backed away. Clearly, they'd misjudged the range he had.

"Mr. Hewison—"

Another shot. As the sound died away, all those outside could hear the screams of the kids and they turned to the cop who was monitoring the inside of the building with binoculars. After a tense moment, he called out softly, "Just another ceiling shot, but it brought down some plaster and stuff. He's trying to make the kids sit still, but he won't let either of the women go help."

An abrupt movement out of the corner of his eye caught Starsky's attention. Swinging round, he saw Hutch dragging Kaminski to one side and talking urgently to him in a low voice as he gestured to the side of the building. Hastily, Starsky moved up until he could hear what his partner was saying.

"—you can't afford to waste any more time, you know that as well as I do. Those kids aren't gonna be able to sit still and quiet; they'll wind him up and he's already on edge. The next shot might not be at the ceiling. You've got to let me go round the back."

"Hutch!" Starsky was horrified. What Hutch was proposing made sense in a suicide-mission sort of way, but the chances of him emerging unscathed from the scenario he was painting were almost non-existent. "Kaminski, you can't. It's too dangerous. What if Hewison hears him coming? He could kill Hutch and still have the gun back on the kids before we could do anything."

"No." Hutch's voice was determined. "If I can get close enough to the door, I can make some kind of noise on purpose. He'll turn toward the sound, with his back to the kids, and if I can't take him out then you can, from right over there. You'll have a clear view, but you'll be perfectly safe because he won't be able to see you coming if you take cover behind that black and white until the last minute. I'll take a radio with me and let you know when I'm in position and about to distract him."

Starsky's gut instinct was against it, but he could see Kaminski was buying Hutch's plan. The fact that the hostages were kids meant that they had to take higher risks than they might usually have been willing to do.

Starsky had been trying to block out the sounds of anguish coming from the crowd behind him, but he couldn't help but be aware of the cries and screams of the parents whose kids were holed up with a madman waving a gun at them. If only he could think of another plan, one that didn't involve Hutch risking his life. But he couldn't. He did try to argue that he should be the one to go in, but Hutch hardly listened to him, shaking his head in a firm negative before saying briefly, "It's my plan, and I'm going in. Get in position, Starsky, and don't argue."

"At least put a fucking vest on. You can't go in there with no protection."

Whatever else Starsky may have said was drowned out by another shot. Hutch's voice in his ear said, quite clearly, "There's no more time, Starsk. I have to do this." Then he was gone, clutching the radio and running out of sight without a backward glance.

Starsky ran for the police van pulled up nearby, reaching for the rifle Kaminski was already holding out for him. He hurled himself across to the nearest cover, ready to get into position as soon as he heard. He pressed the radio to his ear, concentrating only on the slight sound of static.

After what seemed like an age, the crackle from the radio sounded louder in his ear. "I'm in position. On the count of three. One, two, *three!*"

Starsky ran, lifting the rifle to his shoulder as he did so. He could see a large, bulky figure through the rifle sight, swinging round, his back just coming in to view now—

He pulled the trigger and watched as the man fell to the floor. How many shots had he just heard? Was it two? But he had only fired once. A swarm of police officers moved in, securing the building and carrying the kids out to safety, to the arms of the parents waiting in such fear for them. Starsky dropped the rifle and looked around him. Where was Hutch? Why hadn't he come back round? He stepped forward again, and then started to run round to where Hutch had gone. He skidded as he reached the doorway, catching himself on the frame and swinging himself inside. There was a paramedic kneeling on the floor, beside a still figure covered with blood.

The world around reeled, juddered, and resumed. Noise he had not even realized was missing returned at full volume. He could hear the paramedic shouting for his colleague, hear Kaminski bellowing at a uniformed guy to clear the area, could hear cries and shouts coming from everywhere. But he couldn't hear the sound he needed to hear. He took a step forward; then another. Was this how Hutch had felt, he thought, as he rounded the Torino after Gunther's men had shot at them in the police parking lot? Was this what Hutch had relived, day after day and night and night? He knew about Hutch's nightmares, although his partner had never discussed them.

But his had a happy ending! I'm alright, I made it. But Hutch—

He felt a hand gripping his arm, tugging, and swung round. It was Kaminski, looking at him with sympathy. He was speaking, but the words made no sense. Starsky shook his head and tried to concentrate.

"—go with him in the ambulance, but you need to get out of the way so they can get him out. Starsky, do you hear me?"

"Hutch? He's not—?"

"Let's just clear the doorway, okay? Then you can go with your partner. They'll know more when they get him to the hospital."

The next thing Starsky knew, he was crouched in the back of the ambulance, his hand on Hutch's shoulder. His eyes were still failing to register his partner's injuries, and it was with an odd sense of relief he heard his name.

Kaminski was standing in the open doorway, ready to slam the doors shut. "Starsky. You and your partner did good today. Thanks to the both of you, all those kids are going home safe to their moms. Hang on to that, okay?"

The doors closed, the ambulance moved off, and there was nothing any longer to distract Starsky's attention from his partner. He looked down, eyes skimming over the pale face down to the bloody chest, where the paramedic was working intently.

"How's he doing?" Starsky's voice was so hesitant he had to repeat himself before he was heard.

"The bleeding's under control now. I think the bullet missed anything major, but you'll have to wait for the doctor to confirm it. He's coming round a little—can you get into his sightline? If you can keep him calm and still, it would help."

~oOo~

Hours later, Starsky was sitting by Hutch's bed, one limp hand held lightly in his own, his mind wandering as he remembered how he had planned to spend this evening. Certainly not like this, although at least he knew now that Hutch would make a full recovery. He shuddered as he recalled seeing his partner lying where he had been shot, blood covering him—and the insight was so vivid, so shocking, he couldn't believe he could have been so stupid not to see it before.

What he had just experienced had been bad, yes, but short-lived. Hutch had lived for days with the fear that he, Starsky, would die as a result of Gunther's hit, and then had had to watch his partner's painful climb back up to health. For many months there had also been the fear that there might be another attempt on his life, or Hutch's, but Hutch had said nothing to Starsky about this. He had not exactly lied, Starsky realized now, but the subject was never mentioned and somehow it had never really bothered Starsky.

Hutch was carrying all that worry, and helping me get better, putting the case together against Gunther. He did all that, and then, when I made it through the medical, it was just back to work like normal. I didn't want to think about what had happened to me, I was so bored with it all I just wanted to move on. But I don't think Hutch ever had the chance. I never let him talk about this, and who else could he talk to? Not his parents, for sure. Not my mom. Huggy? Nah, he would have said something to me, so probably that's why not. Dobey? Can't see it. So he's been carrying all this, and buried it, most likely.

That's what the past few weeks have been about. He thought he buried it, but then he saw me hurt and it brought it all back. He's been falling apart, and I haven't helped. Why the hell couldn't I see this?

Unaware that his hand was now clamped around his partner's, Starsky stared sightlessly ahead. They had both had close calls, but there had been time to try and do something, or at least to express how they felt, in a hug on a staircase, or a name written in lipstick. But Gunther's hit had happened out of the blue, with no opportunity for Hutch to do anything. He remembered Huggy telling him how his doctor had told Hutch to prepare for the worst, that the body could only withstand so much damage. He forced himself to consider, for the first time, how he would have felt if he had been the one receiving that news about Hutch. Even the thought drained the color from his world.

~oOo~

Hutch sat in his greenhouse, one arm wrapped gently around his still-sore chest. The ever-present hum of traffic was reduced at this hour of the night to a murmur from the daytime roar, and with the windows open there was a pleasant feeling of air moving against his skin. Out here, surrounded his plants, for a little while he could imagine everything was normal again. He tried to hold on to the unthinking moment, but it was useless. As soon as he realized his mind was a soothing blank, thoughts and emotions crowded back in, demanding space and

attention.

There was a sound of rustling in the room behind him, followed by soft footsteps and then his partner's voice.

"Hutch? You okay? Your chest hurting?"

"I'm fine. Just couldn't sleep, is all. Didn't mean to disturb you."

"You didn't. I was thirsty. All those anchovies on that pizza, I guess."

Hutch didn't bother to reply to that one. He heard Starsky head for the kitchen and fill a glass with water, hoping he would go back to the couch where he had been sleeping the past two nights since Hutch's release from the hospital. Instead, as he had known all along would happen, his partner came out and settled himself on the floor near Hutch's seat.

"Hutch, why'd you go charging in like that? If you'd waited for a vest—"

"Starsk, I don't want to do this now. It's the middle of the night, you're tired, I'm hurting and I just don't want to think about it."

"Huh. Knew your chest wasn't *fine*." Starsky got up again, and a moment later was back with another glass of water and Hutch's pain medication. "Take it," he said, in a tone that brooked no argument. Hutch took the pill and swallowed it, avoiding Starsky's gaze. The light in here was dim, just coming up from the street, but there was enough to see his partner's determined expression.

"That's gonna take a few minutes before it does much good, and I think now is as good a time as any to talk about this, buddy. You went charging in there as if you didn't care what happened to you. That's not the way we do things now, you know that. We talked about it when I made it back to the streets. I thought we had a deal."

Hutch dragged one hand down his face and looked away. "You saw how that guy was reacting. He was getting to be trigger-happy. Like I said, the next shot could have been into those kids, not over their heads. There wasn't time to wait."

"*Bull.*" Starsky grabbed Hutch's hand and held on to it tightly. "That's crap, Hutch, and you know it. Don't try and feed me that line. Things have been wrong with you for weeks. What were you trying to do, get yourself killed?"

"No, I was trying to make sure you didn't go in and get killed *yourself*," Hutch shot back, only realizing as the last words left his mouth that he had really blown it now. He had sworn not to coddle his partner when they had returned together to active duty, knowing that nothing could more surely ruin their working relationship and present a greater threat to their safety on the streets. Until recently, he thought he had done a pretty good job, but now his secret was out.

"Good." With a gentle shake, Starsky let go of his partner's hand. Hutch let it fall limply on to his lap and blinked down at Starsky, who was now back on the floor.

"Huh?"

"I said, good. At least we both know what you were doing. Now all we've gotta do is work out why, but I guess we both know the answer to that one, too."

"If you know it already, why bother?"

"C'mon, Hutch, you know why. Since I got back to normal, we've been fine on the streets. We've done over a

year of good work, and neither one of us has had more than a scrape from falling over or maybe a little roughing up while trying to secure a suspect. Then I get grazed by a bullet, right in the same place those goons shot me. How do you think that made me feel?"

Hutch simply stared into space, but the words were clawing their way into his head, pincers digging in and uncovering parts of him he had buried deep.

"Well, if you're not gonna guess, I'll tell you. It didn't make me feel *any* different. And you know why? Because I'd already gone through the whole 'how will you feel when someone points a gun at you' thing before I was allowed back on duty. Sure, I didn't like being shot, but it's a risk of the job and I can handle it. It was my choice to come back."

His voice softened, and Hutch could feel it weaving its way into his consciousness, laying bare parts of himself he had vowed never to uncover. "But you didn't really deal with any of this, did you? You were offered counseling, but Dobey says you only went once, and I bet you didn't actually open up about anything, right? And we never really talked about it. It just seemed easier all round to concentrate on the future, not the past, so that's what we did."

"Starsky, I wasn't the one who was shot. I'm real glad the counseling helped you, but there was no need—"

"No need for what?" Starsky jumped up and began to pace, his hands clenching into fists. "No need for you to talk about how it felt to see your partner nearly killed in front of you? No need for you to deal with how it felt when that doctor told you I was gonna die? That it was just a matter of time? Hutch, there comes a time when you have to deal with stuff like this, or it'll drown you. You just pushed it all away after it happened, and I let you. But ever since I was grazed by that punk a couple of weeks back, it's all been coming up to the surface, hasn't it? All that stuff we never talked about. That's why you've been acting so strange."

Hutch could hear the words reverberating inside his skull. A tension he had barely felt until now tightened further, then released as he accepted the truth of his partner's words.

"God, Starsk." The words poured out of him now, like murky water finally escaping a dam. "I just couldn't stand it. Seeing you in that alley, covered in blood, lying so still... It was just like before. Then when you got up and you were alright, I just pushed it all away. I wanted to pretend that everything could be the same as before. But every time I went to sleep, the nightmares came back. I stopped having those nightmares not long after you came out of hospital, you know? Never had them since. Then, suddenly, every night, sometimes more than once, I had to relive you getting shot, and listen to them telling me you were dead. I thought maybe if I got real tired it would help, so I've been running more, and going to Vinnie's in the evening, but nothing made any difference. Every time we went out on a call, it was like I could see you, lying dead on the ground. But I still had to do my job. I couldn't let you down. All I could do was try to keep you as safe as possible."

He stopped abruptly, and covered his face. His words had summoned those same, vivid pictures to his mind, and he couldn't go on.

Starsky had stilled as soon as Hutch began to speak, and for a moment after his partner had finished he stayed where he was. Then, in three quick paces, he was beside him. Gripping Hutch's shoulder, he crouched down, and touched his forehead gently to his partner's. "Buddy, just having you there like normal keeps me as safe as possible. It cuts both ways."

Lifting his head, he waited until Hutch met his gaze before continuing. "But we can't ever guarantee *safe* safe, as in no bad guys out there with guns. No one can. Not even if we were teaching kindergarten. Look at what happened to those poor women. Bet they thought they had a nice, safe job, where the worst that could happen would be little Tommy puking up over them, and then they have some madman walk in waving a gun around and threatening to shoot them.

"We have to take risks. It's the job. But we don't have to take stupid risks. Kaminski shoulda never let you go in like that, with no vest. What you did was great, Hutch, but there was no need to do it like that. How d'ya think I'd have handled it, if his shot had been just that inch more to one side, and you'd died?"

Hutch murmured something.

"What?"

"I just said, 'it's always harder on the one left behind'." A moment's chill went through them both, and Starsky's grip on Hutch's shoulder tightened.

"Yeah, well just remember I don't want to be the one left behind anymore than you do. If you can't handle the risks anymore, then maybe it's time we started looking into doing something else."

"No, I don't... I mean, I can handle it, I'll be okay, really I will, it was just seeing you like that... It felt like it did when it happened before, you know? Like I was already mourning you. But I know you're right. I can't live the rest of my life waiting for you to die."

"It's no way to live, pal, that's for sure. Let's enjoy what we've got, huh? Let's start living again. Put Gunther and what he nearly managed to do behind us, shove him away in that box with Bellamy and Slater, Forrest and Marcus and all the rest of the bad guys we've really pissed off. Then let's forget about them and get on with life, huh?"

Hutch stood and smiled at his partner. If it wasn't quite the wide smile he produced when he was truly happy, it was certainly much better than anything he had managed over the past few weeks, and Starsky's own response lit up the room.

The two men just stood there for a moment, smiling at each other, and then Starsky took Hutch by the arm to lead him back to bed.

"Ya know, maybe it is time to think about the future anyway. We can't be street cops for ever."

Hutch shook his head at him as he tried to remove his robe without hurting his chest. "It's a big decision, Starsk. We didn't have much luck last time we tried looking for a job, if you remember."

Starsky completed the removal of Hutch's robe, and pushed him down gently on to the bed, reaching for the covers. "Yeah, well, with my scars and now yours, we're one occupation down, at least. No one'll be interested in giving us a job as porn stars any more."

Hutch snorted as Starsky headed back to the couch. "Maybe we should try horror movies instead," he called after him, but his partner pretended not to hear. Hutch rolled cautiously into a more comfortable position and closed his eyes. He was asleep within seconds.