



FALLOUT

by

Izzie

Category: Slash

Summary: How does Hutch cope when Starsky returns to work after Gunther's hit?

Notes: Special thanks to [Morgan Logan](#) for her encouragement and fantastic beta reading.

Episode Related: Sweet Revenge

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Hutch gazed at the stars through his greenhouse glass. Tomorrow was the day. The day his partner *thank God he could still say that and mean Starsky* would be returning to work after the assassination attempt in the police parking lot. Days when no one thought Starsky could survive the terrible damage inflicted by those bullets, and then months and months of pain and struggle to rehabilitate. Throughout all that time, Hutch had been there, hardly leaving his side in the hospital, and then, when the injured man had been allowed to go home, staying with him and caring for him. Doing everything a nurse would do — and more. Supporting his friend not just physically, but emotionally, psychologically; his whole existence centered only on Starsky's recovery and well-being. All Starsky had wanted to do was to prove he was fit to work again as a cop, and their joint endeavors had succeeded beyond the expectations of all the medical staff who had treated him during his long stay in hospital.

Hutch sighed heavily. It was a couple of weeks now since he had moved back to his own apartment at Venice, and he still could not get used to being on his own, without Starsky. The habit of care and worry was hard to let go of, and although he knew his friend wanted him to get his own life back, he found himself staying in every evening, unable to concentrate on the TV, books, even his music, and most evenings he just ended up where he was now — slumped in his greenhouse, staring unseeingly out of the window and worrying about Starsky. What made it so frustrating was that there was nothing he could do. Starsky no longer needed his constant presence, and however badly Hutch had wanted to stay with him he knew that he had to let go for Starsky's sake if not for his own. Having taken a prolonged leave of absence from the department, he had now been back at work for just a month, desk duty only, easing himself back in at Dobby's suggestion, but he found it harder and harder each day to believe that this was right, that this was how his life should be.

The memory of his partner's body, torn and bleeding next to the Torino, suddenly swamped his senses, and he gulped hard, trying to control the nausea that swept through him. That was another thing he was trying not to think about. While staying at Starsky's apartment he had had to eat, if only to encourage his partner to do the same. Starsky's huge appetite had suffered severely as a result of his injuries, and there were some days, even after he had been out of the hospital for a while, when he could hardly be persuaded to eat a thing. Sitting and eating together had been a ploy Hutch had rapidly adopted as a way of getting at least a bit more food into his too-thin friend, even though he had often felt as though he would himself choke on it. Now, however, with no one to put on a good front for, Hutch found himself unable to force food down most of the time. Starsky was so much better, able to cope with being on his own again, excited about returning to Metro the next day — and all of a sudden Hutch was the one with the nausea and eating problems.

Hutch sighed again. Who was he kidding? No one else would notice anyway; none of the other cops in the squad room would care what or if he ate, and he was trying his damndest to give Starsky space, so how would he know? *Besides, Starsky's so wrapped up in his imminent return to duty, he probably wouldn't notice if I grew a beard.* But he knew that *he* wasn't ready for his friend's return to work tomorrow. In fact, if truth be told, he probably would never be ready to see him go back on the streets, risk his life again. *I nearly lost him...God, it was so close. How could I bear it if it happened again... maybe this time we wouldn't be so lucky...I wouldn't be so lucky. But I have to let him do this. As if I could stop him — why I am even thinking this? For God's sake, Hutch, he's a grown man, he makes his own decisions. Yes, he was dependent on you for a while, but that was only while he was recovering. He's better now, the docs all say so, you know so with your head. The medical board wouldn't have passed him if they didn't think he could manage — so what's your problem? You want him to stay needy, relying on you? NO — but I want him to be safe, and how can he if he's going back to being a cop?*

His mind went round and round the familiar track. He seemed to have gone over this every night for the last few

weeks, and still the answer was the same. It was not Hutch's choice to make. He had to let go. Starsky was healed now, well, and no longer needed or wanted babying. Hutch knew he had to give back the independence his friend had had wrenched from him that May afternoon, but it was so hard to do. But if getting back on the streets was what Starsky wanted — and it was certainly what he said he wanted, frequently and loudly, even when it had seemed impossible — then there was nothing Hutch could do but support him in every way he could. If only he didn't feel that he was going against every impulse inside him; if only it didn't make him sick to the stomach every time he thought about Starsky back on the streets, facing more bullets...but that was enough. Hutch found the familiar nausea returning, and made it to the bathroom only just in time to lose the little he had managed to force down that evening.

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A month of desk duty together had passed, with Starsky at first coming in only part time, and then, for the last two weeks, managing a normal shift, getting himself up to date with what had been going on over the months of his recovery. No overtime for either of them, which made the days seem civilized, compared with their hours before the shooting, but still Hutch found himself surreptitiously scanning his partner for signs of weariness, and finding none. Starsky had been exuberant on his return, greeting everyone and being welcomed like a hero, while Hutch stood to one side, finding himself able to enjoy watching his partner's pleasure even though he felt none of his own. Dobby had come out of his office solely to welcome back the dark half of his favorite detective duo, and there were donuts sitting on his desk as if to welcome him back. Still, Hutch had a hard knot in his stomach that he couldn't shake, but he decided to ignore it. He had Starsky back, at work with him, healed and whole, apparently back to his old self — what more could he ask? So he carried on, feeling as if he was in a glass bowl while the rest of the world, including his partner, was on the outside. He was slowly becoming aware that that glass seemed to be losing its transparency.

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Another month and Starsky was declared fit for a return to the streets. He celebrated at Huggy's the night the medical board passed him, inviting everyone he could think of from Metro, plus many of those from the hospital who had helped with his care. Hutch left early.

His partner was engrossed and hardly noticed when Hutch slipped off, but Huggy followed the blond head with a frown as it ducked through the door. He glanced over at Starsky, laughing hard at something one of his nurses was saying, and hesitated, but then shrugged. Now was not the time, but he knew something would have to be said soon. Starsky was still on a high from his recovery. His encounter with death had been too close for anyone to survive unscathed, but Huggy had thought nothing would ever alter the partners' empathy towards each other. Yet it certainly looked as though Starsky's awareness of Hutch was dimmed at the moment. *Had no one else even noticed Hutch leave? and why was he so gaunt? Was he eating or sleeping at all?* But then Anita called him over to deal with more orders, and he knew he would have to put off this concern for the time being. *But not for long*, he swore to himself. *Starsky, my man, you have been the center of attention for a long time — maybe it's time someone looked at what the blond centurion has been going through too.*

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Starsky awoke with a groan. His head was pounding and one incautious attempt to sit up left him dizzy and nauseous. He yielded to the urge to lie back down and keep his eyes closed. How much had he drunk last night — and how the hell had he got home? He had absolutely no recollection of it. Perhaps Hutch...? But then he dimly recalled seeing his partner leaving The Pits, so it couldn't have been him. Starsky's brow wrinkled as he thought about that again, the uneasy feeling in his gut getting stronger. He felt that there was something there he should be focusing on, some problem that required his urgent attention — but then his insides clenched again, this time with a clear instruction to get to the bathroom now, and by the time his business there was finished the thought had retreated again to the back of his mind

But this time, it was not to stay there for long. As he emerged from the bathroom, he smelled coffee, and staggering into the kitchen he saw Huggy standing at the stove, spatula in hand. Huggy had been a regular visitor to Starsky's apartment for some time after he had been released from the hospital. He had stood in for Hutch whenever his partner had errands to run, and wouldn't leave Starsky alone, but it had been some time now since Huggy had last been there.

"Hey, m'man, so you're awake at last!" Huggy smiled at him and reaching for a mug that stood nearby, poured coffee into it and put it on the table in front of where Starsky now sat, slumped. "Get that inside you, and some of my special hangover breakfast, and you'll be able to face the world again," he proclaimed. Starsky groaned, but sure enough, after forcing down the laden plate of food and several mugs of coffee, he did feel more human.

"Thanks, Hug," he gave a muted version of his usual smile. "Guess I went a bit overboard last night. Did you get me home? I thought at first Hutch had, but I think I remember him leaving."

"You do, Starsky. He left not more than thirty minutes after you both arrived, and I have to tell ya, bro, he looked bad."

Starsky's head, which had drifted down towards where his arms rested on the table, shot up. "Waddya mean, bad? If he only stayed half an hour, he can't have been drunk, and he was okay yesterday —"

Huggy interrupted. This might not be the best time to talk to Starsky, given his current fragile state, but it looked like the best opportunity he was likely to get, and Huggy didn't feel he should wait any longer. "Okay? Starsky, Hutch ain't been "okay" for a long while now. Ever since he moved back to his place, he's looked like he's been wasting away." At the stricken look that crossed his friend's face, he tone softened, although the intensity did not. "Man, you've had a lot to deal with, but you're telling everyone you're back to normal now, so I think it's time you had a good long look at your partner. You may have made it back, but I think maybe you've left him behind somewhere, ya dig?"

"But Hutch would have said something to me if there was a problem," Starsky began, but again Huggy interrupted.

"Maybe he would, before you were shot." The time for tiptoeing round this subject was over. "But he's bin takin' care of you for months now, makin' sure nothin' bothered ya or stressed ya, so what makes ya think he'd talk to ya about something that was bothering him, huh? Especially if that thing was you?"

Starsky sat in frozen silence. His brain felt as if it would never function again, but slowly, images of the last few weeks began to parade before his mind. Hutch, moving back to his own apartment, a strange expression on his face that Starsky, in his own excitement at the significance of the event, the return of his independence, had chosen not to see; Hutch coming into work looking somehow stiff and strained, his clothes hanging off him as if he hadn't bothered to dress properly — *or as if they no longer fitted him properly*, Starsky realized suddenly in horror; Hutch's face, looking drawn and pale, with black circles under his eyes that Starsky only just now registered as he recalled his partner's appearance yesterday and a score of other yesterdays.

"Dear God, how could I have been so blind?" he whispered.

Huggy's expression softened as he heard this. "Starsky, you're not to blame, but Hutch needs ya, and I think he needs ya real bad and real soon. I was worried last night, man. He looked like someone who just wouldn't be able to keep going much longer, ya dig?"

Starsky jumped up, oblivious of his hangover, and without a word rushed into the bathroom. In record time, he had showered and flung on some clothes. Grabbing his car keys, and grateful that he hadn't taken the Torino to The Pits last night, he charged out of the door, calling out thanks to Huggy as he left. Huggy smiled ruefully and began to clear up the kitchen before leaving.

Mindful of how much he had drunk the night before, Starsky managed to keep to the speed limit — just- as he headed towards Venice and his partner's place. He drove automatically, his mind now racing as it assimilated all the signs that he should have noticed but didn't. How Hutch never seemed to want to eat with him, but made some excuse even while ensuring that his friend ate regularly, even if not sensibly; how the blond had not resumed any kind of social life after moving back to his own place, or not one that he mentioned — Starsky's mind stopped here, with a squeal as loud as the Torino's brakes. Had he actually bothered to ask Hutch what he was doing all those nights when he wasn't with Starsky any more? No, no more than he had noticed the increasing pallor of his friend's face, and lethargy of his movements, the depression that Starsky could see now had hung about him for weeks. *God, he moaned inwardly. What kind of a buddy am I, anyway? I've been so hung up on my recovery, on getting back to how everything was before Gunther, I just stopped thinking about Hutch. He's been through hell too, but has anyone helped him like he's helped me all this time? I guess not, because he wouldn't let himself need anyone else but me, ever, and I haven't exactly been there for him, have I? Shit, I can't believe I missed this. Thank God Huggy said something — I'm gonna make him talk, even if it takes days, and somehow we'll get this sorted out, whatever he needs.*

Screaming into a parking place just outside Chez Helene's, he leapt out of the car and charged up the stairs, hammering on the wooden door. "Hutch! Hey, buddy, come on — I need to talk to ya!" Even before he had finished shouting, his left hand was up, reaching over the door sill for the key his partner still kept there despite much evidence against this being a good idea. But there was silence behind the locked door, and his groping hand came up empty. "Hutch!" he called again, even more urgently. Still no reply, and with a sinking feeling in his gut he fished in his pocket for his key ring, on which was looped a spare key.

Somehow, he knew he would find the place empty before he even got the door open, and it was no satisfaction to discover that he was right. Perhaps his partner had just gone for a run? — but no, it was too late in the morning for that. He knew Hutch never ran except in the early mornings, when the temperature was cool and the sidewalks and beach paths quiet, and it was nearly lunchtime by now. He frowned, trying to recall if he had seen his partner's car anywhere outside. He couldn't recall it, but not trusting his memory he rushed back down the stairs and looked around. No sign of the beaten-up vehicle that was the latest in the long line of Hutch's sorry excuses for a car. He ran round the back of the restaurant, knowing that sometimes Hutch had to leave the car round there if the restaurant was particularly busy when he came home, but again he was disappointed. Swearing under his breath, he climbed up the stairs to the apartment again, and this time took a careful inventory of what he could see. No signs of any disturbance — in fact, if anything the place looked a little too tidy for his usually slovenly friend. A chill crept into his heart as he looked again. *The place looks too tidy. Almost as if he's left it this way deliberately — as if he was leaving for a while.* He shook himself, and forced himself into cop mode. *Okay, what would I need to look for? Signs of departure — clothes gone, suitcase missing, refrigerator emptied?* Five minutes later, Starsky was curled on the couch, clutching a cushion to his stomach for comfort. *He's gone. I can't believe it, but he's gone. Not even a note, although I guess I don't really deserve one. God, Hutch, where have you gone — and how long for? Are you planning on comin' back?*

How long he sat there, wallowing in misery and self-recrimination, he had no idea. But finally his brain began to operate again. Okay, so Hutch had run. Where would he run to? He remembered a conversation from some time ago, not that long before he was shot, when he had told Hutch "I know who you know, what you know and how you know it." So now, again, he would have to prove it.

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Hutch drove without thinking, automatically steering the car through the steadily thinning traffic, even stopping for gas without really registering where he was. That glass bowl enveloping him was nearly opaque now, and along with sight it seemed to be muffling his other senses too. His mind had pretty well shut down along with everything else, he was dimly and gratefully aware, and he just went with it, relieved at the numbness that had spread throughout his system. Blinking slowly against the setting sun, he drove.

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"Cap, it's Starsky". The large man's hand tightened involuntarily on the receiver. Hearing from either of this team when they were supposed to be having a day off did not usually bode well in his experience.

"Yes, Starsky?"

"Cap, I need some help. It's Hutch — he's gone!"

"Gone? What do you mean — gone? It's his day off, for heaven's sake! He's probably just out, enjoying some....."

"No, Cap, you don't understand," Starsky's voice was increasingly urgent, his speech faster as he tried to convince Dobey of what he knew instinctively. "I've just been to his place and he's packed a few things and gone. No note, nothing!"

"Starsky, if there's no sign of forced entry you know I can't do anything. Hutch is a grown man, he can go away if he wants to. If he's late reporting for duty tomorrow, that'd be different, but surely that's one day *neither* of you will be late, hey?" Dobey smiled, still amazed that this team was due to be back in action completely after all that they had gone through.

"But Cap, I think that's exactly the problem."

"Starsky, you're not making any sense here".

"Cap, I — hell, I think I'd better come in. I can't do this over the phone," and still mumbling, he dropped the receiver back in its cradle and rushed out of Hutch's apartment, locking the door behind him as he went.

Dobey was not surprised to see Starsky explode through his door without knocking a short while later, although he did wonder where the hell Starsky had been calling from to get here that fast. Mentally, he shrugged. Probably best not to know. "Well, Starsky?" he raised his eyebrows enquiringly, "What makes you think Hutch won't be in tomorrow, as if this isn't the day you've both been aiming for ever since Gunther's goons shot you?"

"God, Cap..." the groan accompanying these words made Dobey frown. "I thought the same as you — Hutch worked so hard to get me back together again — I'd never've made it without him, we both know that, an' I thought — I assumed — I never asked..."

Watching as the younger man's words faltered to a standstill, Dobey saw the pain sweep across his face and suddenly he understood what Starsky was trying to tell him.

"You think Hutch wasn't ready for this after all? But surely you must have talked about..." he stopped as he saw the stricken look on his detective's face. "Starsky, you must have discussed this?"

But Starsky shook his head slowly, eyes firmly down on his hands where they lay tightly clenched in his lap.

"I guess I've only just realized that we never did really talk about it, Cap." His eyes flew up briefly to meet Dobey's rich brown ones, before returning to gaze at his hands. "At first, it seemed so impossible that I'd ever get back that we just would never talk about it, then as it got to seeming more likely I guess I was scared of — I don't know — jinxing it or somethin', so when Hutch tried to bring it up I wouldn't talk and now I've only just realized that he hasn't tried for a long time. Too long." His voice fell to a whisper on the last words.

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It was the shudder the car gave as it drifted across the edge of the road that brought Hutch back from the haze

he was in. His mind was saturated now with exhaustion, not just from the drive but from the last months of suppressing fear, anxiety, worry...like a sponge soaked to full capacity, he was no longer capable of feeling anything new, barely able even to process the information coming at him now; that he had nearly driven off the edge of the road, that the gas warning light was flickering again. With the minimal part of his brain that was still functioning, Hutch knew he would have to stop soon.

After another twenty minutes, he saw a small town signposted. Pulling off, he found a motel and checked in, still on automatic pilot, only to discover that he no longer had enough cash left to pay for the night. He pulled out his credit card, his cop's instincts shrieking at his barely conscious mind that this was not clever, that if he wanted to run the last thing he should be using was his credit card, but he had no choice. He had to stop driving and seek oblivion in a bed. But he was able to force himself to respond to the warning just enough to demand a wake-up call at 8.30am, despite the fact that it was already well past midnight. This would give him time to get to the bank and withdraw the rest of his money in cash. There was no reason why anyone should be tracing his credit cards, he thought to himself fuzzily as he moved toward his room, after all I haven't done anything wrong — but the image of a narrow face framed by dark curls, vibrant blue eyes dark with worry, appeared in his mind, and he knew, unquestioningly, that if he did not want to be found he would have to be out of this place as soon as he could. Turning the key in the lock, he moved sluggishly across to the bed and fell on it. Within a minute he was asleep, sprawling fully clothed on top of the covers.

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"Starsky!" The phone had woken Starsky from a restless doze filled with nightmare visions of Hutch retreating from him, slipping off the edges of cliffs, sliding down mountainsides — always just out of his reach.

"Cap. You got something?"

"I think so. That trace you put on his credit card — looks like it's paid off. It was used early this morning, in a motel in some place called Oakburg, Oregon. It's a few miles short of Salem. You want me to get the local sheriff's people out?"

"No!" The reaction was instinctive. "No, Cap, I'll go myself. I can fly to Portland and track him from there. Just put out a notice for his license plate, huh? If you let the local PD know I'll be coming, then I can check in when I get there to see if he's been traced. But I don't want anyone else stopping him, ya hear?"

There was a heavy sigh on the other end of the line, and Dobey said, "Starsky, are you sure? By the time you get to Portland, he could be miles away again. He could even be in Canada, and then what'll you do? Wouldn't it be better to let the local people find him and..."

"Sure, they can find him," the other replied, grimly, "but they're not to stop him. Hutch hasn't done anything wrong, Cap, but he's hurting, real bad, and the last thing he needs is some guy in a cruiser coming all heavy over him because he thinks he's caught a criminal. I'm calling the airport now, Cap. I'll keep in touch."

Fifteen minutes later, Starsky was on his way to the airport. He made his plane with seconds to spare, and settled down for the short flight, hoping desperately that Hutch using his credit card meant that he wasn't really trying to run away from everyone so much as just escape for a brief while.

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At five minutes past nine, Hutch stepped out of the bank in Oakburg, having emptied the contents of his account and stuffed the cash in his pocket. He had hardly stirred all night, his body's need for sleep so intense it had, for once, driven away the nightmares that had been haunting him for months. While he did not feel refreshed, he knew he would be able to keep going for some time longer. The numbness in his mind had also lifted just enough for him to know that he had to move on, *now*. Using his credit card at the motel last night had been as

good as waving a flag in the air and yelling "I'm here" to anyone who wanted to know. He filled up with gas, handing over his card to pay — after all, anyone looking for him would already know he had been here, so he may as well save the cash for when he was out of this place.

Climbing back into the car, he felt his back protest the position, but ignored it. *Which way to go? Might be too obvious if I carry on in the same direction, but I don't want to go back, either. I don't know what I do want, but I've got to move.* Shrugging to himself mentally, he decided to head inland. It would be easier to lose himself upstate, at least until he decided what he was planning to do. Starting up the engine, he drove off.

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Several hours later, Starsky pulled into the parking lot of the motel where Hutch's card had been used. He jumped out eagerly, his gaze raking the other cars in case Hutch's beaten-up vehicle was still there. He knew it was unlikely, but the blond had to be tired and just perhaps he had slept in...? A small sigh escaped him as he realized Hutch's car was nowhere to be seen. He headed for the reception, and shoved his police ID in front of the bored looking manager. "You rented a room to a man called Hutchinson last night? Has he gone?"

The man looked at the ID, then up at Starsky. "Why, man, what's he done?"

"Nothing," snarled Starsky. "Just answer the question."

Nervously backing away a little, he glanced down at the ledger in front of him. "Y-yeah, he handed his key back this morning. Didn't get in till late last night, but wanted a wake-up call at 8.30am. Handed his key in about fifteen minutes after that, I guess. He looked kinda rough."

"Did he say anything?"

"Just asked where the nearest bank was."

"And where is the nearest bank?"

"Uh, just back down that road aways."

Starsky didn't bother asking anything else, just ran back to the car and jumped in. *Of course he'd go to the bank, so he won't have to use his credit card anymore. He must just have run out of cash last night, and had no other choice. Hell, that means he knows I'll be after him and he'll make sure we don't get another break like this. But he hasn't changed the car, so maybe there's still a chance.*

Ten minutes later, and Starsky knew for sure what Hutch had done. While his police ID hadn't been enough to persuade the cashier to tell him exactly how much money Hutch had withdrawn, she hadn't contradicted him when he'd asked if his partner had cleaned out his account. She had even watched Hutch pull away, so at least Starsky had an idea of what direction he had set off in. Grimly, he called the local sheriff's office and then set off in pursuit.

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Hours later, and still Hutch was driving, the setting sun behind him lighting up the road ahead of him as if it was guiding him on. *If only*, he thought. *If only I knew where I was going, what to do. I've run out on Starsky, my job — everything that matters to me, and it seems like I've got nothing left. I don't even know why I'm bothering to keep going. I can't go back, and I've nothing to keep going for...*

The familiar bleakness sunk even deeper into his heart. He had devoted his entire existence to his partner for the past year, and yet it seemed that he had only recently realized what had in fact been true for years before that — that his whole existence had depended on Starsky pretty much ever since they first met. Their partnership had

grown to such an extent that Hutch no longer knew where the dividing line between the two of them was, but it seemed to him that Starsky had no such problem. Clearly, now he was recovered, the dark-haired half of the partnership could function perfectly well alone, indeed relished being able to do so again; whereas it had been driven forcibly home to Hutch that without Starsky by his side he was somehow diminished. The months of caring for his partner since Gunther's hit had only made it worse for the blond. The misery of that last night at Huggy's had made him face the truth, however. He loved Starsky, and wanted nothing more than to stay by his side for the rest of their lives, protecting him, guarding him, cherishing him. But Starsky needed his independence; he needed to prove that he had recovered from the assassination not only physically but psychologically too. He wanted to return to life as it was before that awful day, but Hutch was unable to turn the clock back. He realized now that this was why he had left. He could not give his partner what he really needed, his pre-Gunther life, so the next best thing was to remove his own suffocating presence, and to allow Starsky the independence he craved. Lost in his musings, and dazzled by the sun on the road ahead of him, Hutch failed to see the sharp bend the road took to the left. One instant he was recalling his friend's face, the next, just aware of a loud bang, the feel of the car shuddering beneath him, the sensation of falling — then nothing.

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Starsky's hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. It was dark now, and he knew he should stop, but some instinct, the part of him that functioned in tandem with his partner, was screaming at him to keep going, and he didn't question it. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that he was getting close. Suddenly, the road ahead took a steep bend to the left, the warning chevrons glinting in his headlights. *Shit*, he thought, as he pulled the steering wheel sharply over, *I nearly missed that one. Guess I really should stop for a...* Without conscious thought, his foot slammed on the brake pedal. It took barely a second for his brain to register what his subconscious had clearly already noted. The crash barrier was broken.

Pulling the car over to the side of the road and hastily slapping the hazard lights on, he leapt out and ran back to the bend. With the headlights facing away, it was too dark to see anything, and cursing, he had to run back to the car and get the flashlight out of the trunk. Back at the bend, he shone the light over the surface of the road, his mouth twisting as he took in the tire marks looking fresh on the tarmac, and the gap in the crash barrier that looked recent. His breath caught in his throat as he scrambled to the break, shining the light across and down. The drop was not as steep as he had feared it might be, but the land did fall away and his light glinted off something below, something that looked like metal in the dim light.

Without hesitation, Starsky launched himself at the hillside, scrabbling through and down, frantically holding the light ahead of him with one hand while using the other to keep his balance on the rough ground beneath his feet. As he drew nearer the source of the reflected light, his stomach contracted. There could be no doubt. This was Hutch's car. *Please, please let him be alright, please, please let him be alright* was repeating itself over and over again in his mind as he reached the vehicle and stretched out a hand to the driver's door. It would not move. With a muttered curse, he bent down, shining the light through the window, and froze as a glint of bright gold reflected back at him from the inside. It was Hutch, and he was inside the car, apparently unconscious or he would surely have reacted to the light by now.

Taking a deep breath, Starsky tried to calm his racing heart. He couldn't afford to panic now. *God knows how long he's been here*, he thought. *I must have been at least four hours behind him. If he's been out for that long, he musta hit his head real hard.* The driver's door was jammed shut, and however hard he wrenched it, he couldn't get it to budge. With a curse, he scrambled around the back of the car and tried the passenger door, which yielded to his frantic pulling. As he clambered in, he directed the flashlight at the unconscious blond where he lay sprawled across the steering wheel.

"Hutch? Hutch!" His hand shaking, he reached out to his partner's neck, and sighed with relief as his hand found a pulse. Thready, too fast, but a pulse. Now he was closer, he could see the dark stickiness matting the fair hair and covering some of the face. Sparkles reflecting back from the flashlight showed where splinters of glass

from the broken windshield were scattered over Hutch, in his hair and on his face and upper body. His arms were caught between his chest and the steering wheel, and the impact of the car hitting the ground had crumpled the front of the vehicle, trapping Hutch between the seat, which had held firm, and the dashboard which had been forced back.

Starsky cursed again, his hand shaking so badly that the light jumped up and down, adding an eerie feel to the horror already in his heart. *How the hell am I gonna get him outta here? If I move him, I might make his injuries a lot worse.* Gently, he ran his hands along his partner's torso, his fingers feeling for broken bones. He was no expert, but his partner's back and neck showed no obvious signs of injuries other than cuts from the broken glass, so taking a deep breath, he decided to risk easing Hutch back against the seat so he could get a look at his front. As he rested the blond's head gently against the seat back, he felt rather than heard a faint groan. "Hutch? Can ya hear me, buddy?" Shining the flashlight down at his partner's chest, he caught his breath. He had clearly hit the steering wheel hard, and both arms, now lying limply in his lap, appeared to be broken, the wrists sitting crookedly in an obviously unnatural position.

Keeping the light pointing slightly away, Starsky tried to examine his partner's face in the glow. Gently, he felt around the lax head, trying at the same time to brush away as much of the scattered shards of glass as he could. He found a lump high on Hutch's forehead, where he must have hit the windshield. The source of most of the blood was a long gash on the top of his head, presumably made by the broken glass. He knew he couldn't risk moving the injured man any more, but it was one of the hardest things he had ever done to leave his unconscious partner and race back to the Torino.

He grudged every moment of the time it took him to get some response from his radio, to try to explain where he was when he didn't have any clear idea himself, but at last the call was made, the promise of help on its way, and he was free to get back to where he needed to be— his partner's side. He tried gently patting Hutch's cheek, hoping to bring him around and find out where else he might be hurt.

"Hey, buddy, how're ya doing, huh? Guess you've been out for a while, but it's time to wake up now and talk to me, pal. Come on, Hutch, open your eyes for me, please?"

Another groan escaped the blond, this time audible. Starsky kept the light from shining directly into his friend's face, but close enough that he could still see him. The pale eyelids moved slightly, and as Starsky continued to utter words of encouragement he could see Hutch struggle to open his eyes. At last, the lids drifted slightly apart, and finally the crystalline blue eyes succeeded in focusing. Hutch blinked slowly a couple of times, and then the frown lines on his forehead deepened. "S-Starsk?" The sound was barely more than a sibilant hiss, but Starsky's relief was profound.

"Shh, babe, don't try and talk. I'm here and help's on its way, but I need to know how bad you're hurt, okay? Just blink once for yes and twice for no. Can ya manage that?"

Hutch's eyelids closed slowly, and for a heartbeat Starsky thought his partner had lost consciousness again, but then the blue eyes reappeared.

"Terrific, pal! Okay, I know your head must hurt and your arms, but what about your back? Can you feel any pain in your back?"

The pale lids before him closed once.

"Okay." Starsky swallowed. *Oh God, his back hurts and I already moved him. What if I made it worse?* "What about your legs? Do they hurt?"

"N-numb." The whisper was so quiet Starsky could barely hear it over the noise of his own heart beating.

"God, Hutch, ya mean ya can't feel them at all?"

One slow blink, then another.

Starsky took a deep breath. Where the hell was the ambulance? The amount of blood in the car worried him, as did his partner's barely conscious state.

"Hutch, ya still with me, pal?" The pale eyes opened again, and slowly focused on his partner's face.

"N-n-not going anywhere, b-buddy."

Starsky tried to smile, but it was a feeble effort and almost immediately his face closed down again. "God, Hutch, what were you thinkin' of?" He knew this was hardly the time, but the words had spilled out in anguish before he could contain them. "Why did you...", but the eyes beneath his had drifted shut again, a strange expression overlaying the pain etched in the face under his hands that Starsky was unable to read. He bit down on his lower lip, stifling the urge to shout, to bring his partner back into the pain he had slipped away from for the moment, contenting himself with briefly resting a finger against the long neck to make sure the pulse was still there.

How long it was before help finally arrived, Starsky could never afterwards have said. Sitting there, one hand resting on the blond head matted with blood, the other gently stroking an arm, he seemed almost to have drifted off into a trance. Nothing mattered other than the skin beneath his fingers, the feel of breathing. Hutch was unconscious, but as long as the skin stayed warm, as long as breath continued to be drawn in and exhaled, Starsky found himself strangely calm.

The sound of sirens brought him back abruptly, and he lifted his head to see the emergency vehicles pulling over next to the Torino, bright lights already finding the gap in the barrier and reaching towards the wreck. He stayed still, knowing that all too soon he would have to let go of Hutch. As the first of the paramedics arrived at the car, he stroked his hand one last time through his partner's hair and, bending down, whispered, "Hang in there, babe. I'll be close by, but I've got to let the experts help you now."

Standing out of the way, but where he could still see, Starsky felt bereft. He could do nothing for Hutch now but watch, and watch he did, through the whole grim business of assessing the blond's injuries, stabilizing his back and neck, and the struggle to get the unconscious body clear of the wrecked car which seemed loath to let it go. Finally, Hutch was laid on a stretcher, and before he was covered with a blanket and hastily lifted into the back of the ambulance, Starsky was able to catch a glimpse of the damage to his partner's chest, the way his arms were carefully draped across his abdomen and, ominously, a large dark stain on the right thigh, above and below a steadily darkening bandage.

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Starsky shifted restlessly in the hard plastic chair, conscious of stiffness from injuries still lingering. *Four hours! It's been four hours since we got here. What the hell is going on?* The quiet sound of the waiting room door being pushed open sounded loud in the stillness around him, and he jumped up as a tall woman in scrubs entered.

"You're here for Mr. Hutchinson?" she queried.

"Yeah. How's he doin'?"

"He's come through the surgery well, but there are some issues I need to discuss. Are you family?"

"We're cops. He's my partner and closest friend. I even have a medical power of attorney for him, like he does for me. So, whatever ya need to discuss, you can discuss with me better than anyone."

The doctor looked at him closely for a moment, then gave him a small smile. "Fine, but let's go somewhere more comfortable." Before Starsky could protest, she half lifted one hand and said, "Your friend won't be going anywhere for a while, won't even be waking up for several hours. He's still in recovery and once he's settled in a room you can go be with him, okay?"

Silently, Starsky followed her along the corridor until they came to an office with a nameplate: Dr. A. Marsden. Unlocking the door, she led the way in and motioned him to a seat while she went to the coffee percolator sitting on top of a filing cabinet and poured two mugs. She handed one to Starsky and sat down wearily.

"Okay, doc. Now tell me about my partner." Starsky's tone was grim.

"Like I said, Mr..?"

"Starsky."

"Like I said, Mr. Starsky, Mr. Hutchinson came through surgery well, but he is still pretty sick at the moment. Both wrists are broken, but they should heal in time and with therapy there shouldn't be any lasting problems. His chest is very badly bruised from the impact with the steering wheel, and he also has a number of cracked ribs, so breathing is going to be pretty painful for him at the moment. We've got him on oxygen to ease that at present, and he'll need pain meds to help control it once he wakes up. Then there's..."

Before she could continue, Starsky interrupted. "No morphine. He doesn't take morphine or anything that has morphine in."

Dr Marsden raised one eyebrow. "Is he allergic?"

"Not exactly. Look, doctor, it's a long story and not really relevant, as long as you just make sure you don't give him anything with morphine in."

"Wait one moment," she said, and picking up the phone dialed quickly. Having identified herself, she asked the person on the other end of the line to add the comment about morphine to Hutch's medical chart. Putting the receiver back, she continued as if there had been no interruption.

"Then there's his leg. The wound on his right thigh was deep, and took quite a number of stitches. The muscle was torn, but again I think it should heal well and although there'll be a scar there should be no loss of function in that leg. Finally, the head injury." She paused for a moment, gazing down at her hands where they lay on the desk in front of her. "Mr. Starsky, I'll not conceal from you that that is my major worry at the moment. You told us that you thought he must have been unconscious for some hours before you reached him. We ran a scan, and there are signs of a build up of fluid in the cranial cavity." Starsky's sudden loud intake of breath made her look up sharply. Reassuringly, she said, "Now, most likely this is only temporary, but we will have to monitor it very closely. We'll know much more when your friend wakes up and we can see how lucid he is. The cut was bad, but we've stitched that one up too and once it heals most of the scarring will be hidden by his hair." She smiled faintly. "I know that seems trivial at the moment, but believe me as the patient gets better it always seems to get a lot more important." Starsky's lips thinned slightly at the thought of all the scars he and Hutch had accrued over their years on the force, but there were more important issues to deal with right now.

"He said his back hurt. Did you..."

"There were no obvious injuries, but the impact was pretty violent. Probably everything hurt at that stage."

"Yeah, but he has a problem with his back anyway."

"As I said, nothing showed up when we examined him, but we'll certainly look out for any problems."

Starsky waited to see if she had more to add, but there was nothing.

"Is that it? Can I go sit with him now?"

"Not just yet. There's something..." Her voice drifted off for a moment and she hesitated, as if unsure how to phrase what she had to say. Starsky shifted restlessly in his seat.

"Doc, whatever it is that's bugging you, just come out with, huh? I really need to see Hutch."

She took a deep breath. "Mr. Starsky, I do find it odd that Mr. Hutchinson is so underweight for his height. Has he been sick recently? Is there something else we need to know about when we're treating him? He's bordering on malnourished, and that will really slow down his healing."

Starsky felt as though someone had dropped iced water over him. With all the stress of tracking his partner down, and then the worry since finding him, the reason that he had been looking for Hutch in the first place had been pushed to the back of his mind. He swallowed hard, unsure what to say, then looked up at the doctor's face. Her eyes were non-committal as she waited for his answer.

"It's kinda complicated, doc," he managed at last. "He hasn't been sick, but he has been real stressed for a few months, and I guess he's not been eating that well. I think everything sorta caught up with him this week, 'cos he just took off a couple of days ago, and I've been looking for him ever since. I think he may not have been sleeping much, either, and that may be why he ran his car off the road, but until I can get to talk to him, I'm not real sure what's been going on with him."

Dr. Marsden frowned slightly. "This is not going to make his recovery any easier. Whatever's been going on, he's not going to be in any fit state to deal with emotional issues when he wakes up, even assuming he has no problems with the head injury." Starsky's face paled at the harshness of her words. "I want this entirely clear, Mr. Starsky. I will let you sit with Mr. Hutchinson and wait for him to wake up, but you are NOT to upset him in any way or you will be out of this hospital so fast you won't know what's hit you. And you won't be allowed back. Is that clear?"

Starsky nodded. He would have agreed to anything at this point, but he knew the doctor was right. Whatever was going on in Hutch's head had been there for a while. He could wait until the injured man was stronger before he started to push it. At the moment, he just hoped that chance would come. He couldn't get the words "build-up of fluid in the cranial cavity" out of his head. What would he do if Hutch never woke up — or woke up brain damaged? Mentally, he shook himself. He would not think like that, not yet. Problems like that would have to be dealt with if they happened, but he wouldn't borrow trouble.

"Let me just check if he's been moved to a room yet." Picking up the phone, she dialed again, spoke briefly and then replaced the receiver. "He's in room 317. You can sit with him as long as you like. I've cleared it with the nursing staff, and they won't ask you to leave when visiting hours are over. He's in a private room so you won't be disturbing anyone else." She pinned him with a glare. "Remember what I said about not upsetting him. His condition is still critical and he needs to be calm and quiet. The nurses will be checking on him regularly, but if he shows any sign of waking up, you're to call them at once. Okay?"

Starsky nodded and jumped up, eager to be with his partner. Halting briefly at the door, he flung a "Thanks, doc" at her before hurrying away.

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Thirty six hours later, and Starsky was still there, sitting by his unconscious partner. He had called Dobey and Huggy from the small hospital and filled them in. Dobey was predictably unamused at the prospect of his two detectives being absent, especially since they had hardly been much use to the department for several months

already this year, but his heart was much kinder than his official persona, and flowers had already arrived for Hutch with a brief note saying that they were both to take what time they needed, and that he and his family were praying for Hutch. Huggy had offered to come up, but Starsky had refused. Until Hutch woke up, his partner was in limbo and preferred to handle it alone. The nursing staff had squeezed an extra bed into Hutch's room, with the permission of his doctor, so he was able to get some sleep, and the hospital cafeteria was not bad. Now he sat there again, touching his partner's limp fingers where they protruded from the cast, and talking to him as he had for many of the preceding hours.

"Come on, buddy, it's time you woke up now, you know? We really need to talk, and I gotta know why you ran like that. I am so sorry, babe. How could I have missed that you were hurting that bad? I can't believe I didn't see it. But we don't have to deal with it all now. I'm here, and I'm not goin' anywhere. I'll be here just as long as you need me, and as long as it takes for you to get better. First, though, you've got to wake up." He ran his thumb gently over his partner's forearm above the cast, so lost in his thoughts that he nearly missed the faint expiration of sound.

"S-S-Stars..."

His head shot up. "Hutch? Babe, can ya hear me?"

"S-Stars..."

"I'm here, pal. Can you open your eyes?"

A frown deepened the lines of pain on the pale face lying on the pillow, but the eyelids fluttered open just a little, and Starsky was immensely relieved to see recognition in them as they focused on him where he was hovering anxiously over the bed.

"W-w-what happened?" Hutch barely managed to articulate the words, but Starsky had no problem understanding them.

"You ran the car off the road, pal. Don't worry about it now, though, okay? You just need to take it easy." He reached for the call button as he spoke, then gently brushed the hair off his partner's forehead, bringing his thumb down tenderly to smooth at the frown line still furrowed between his partner's eyes. The blue vanished from sight as Hutch's eyes drifted closed, a look of contentment replacing the pain that had been there a moment ago. "Hutch? You still with me? Don't go off just yet, babe. You need to let the doc take a look at you first. Please, pal, try to stay awake just for a little bit, huh?" The eyes cracked open, just a fraction. "That's great, buddy! Stay with me, okay?"

At that moment, the door opened, and Dr Marsden came in. "He's awake? Has he said anything?" she demanded sharply, but in a quiet tone.

"He tried saying my name," replied Starsky, his eyes not moving from Hutch's face, his thumb continuing to rub the gentles of circles on his partner's forehead. "He opened his eyes and he knew me. Wanted to know what happened, but he can't really stay awake."

The doctor leant over the bed, glancing at the monitors still tracking Hutch's vital signs. "Mr. Hutchinson. Mr. Hutchinson, can you hear me? You don't need to talk, but just open your eyes for a moment if you can hear me."

Slowly, Hutch opened his eyes.

"Are you in any pain, Mr. Hutchinson? If you can't speak, just blink once for me."

"M-M-y head. Leg. E-everyth..."

"Okay, Mr. Hutchinson, just take it easy. We'll get you something for that right now."

His eyes had drifted closed again, but at that they shot open, further than before, with an unmistakable look of panic, but Starsky was on it before he could even try to say anything. "It's okay, babe, no morphine. I promise. Just relax and let the doctor deal with it, okay? You need to rest." Pale blue eyes met his for a moment, and then Hutch's face relaxed. Less than a minute later, a nurse had come in and added the medication to the IV running into his left arm, and within seconds, he was asleep.

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The quiet sounds of a hospital at night were the first things to impinge on Hutch's returning consciousness. For a moment, he just lay there, eyes still shut, letting the noises wash over him as he tried to recall where he was and what had happened. He had spent so many hours by his partner's bed as Starsky slowly healed from Gunther's attempted hit that his confused mind at first believed that that was where he was now. But as he became more aware, he realized that this could not be right. The pain that he could feel growing throughout his body was more than he had ever experienced while dozing by Starsky's bed, even in the atrociously uncomfortable visitors' chair, and his arms felt strangely heavy, and one leg was wrapped in something bulky and uncomfortable. Gradually, memory returned. Starsky recovering from the shooting. Desk duty. Moving back into his own place as Starsky no longer needed him. Starsky returning to work, being pronounced fit to return to active duty. The increasing suffocation and isolation, and the fear he couldn't contain any longer. Leaving Bay City and just driving, anywhere to get away. *God, it all comes back to Starsky, doesn't it? I can't run from him — he's so much a part of me I can't leave him behind any more than I could leave my right hand, but nothing's changed.* Just the thought of his partner back on the streets made Hutch's chest tighten, and as he tried to draw a deep breath to relieve that tightness an agonizing pain shot through him, forcing out a groan. Immediately, he felt a familiar, warm hand on his arm, and a voice saying, "Shh, Hutch, just take little breaths, okay? Your chest's banged up a bit, it'll be alright, but it's gonna be sore for a while. Just little breaths."

Forcing his eyes to open felt like trying to lift his partner's Torino without benefit of a jack, but he managed it and focused blarily on Starsky's face, which relaxed into a wide grin as he felt his partner's eyes on him.

"Hey, buddy," Starsky whispered gently. "How're you doin' now?"

Hutch wanted to sink back into oblivion, the sight of his partner sitting by his hospital bed simultaneously filling him with relief and dismay. Relief, because they were always there for the other when one was hurt, but dismay because he now recalled so vividly exactly how he had got to this position and knew that nothing had changed. Knew, moreover, that he wouldn't have the chance to run again. As soon as he was well enough, Starsky would demand to know just what the hell Hutch thought he was doing, and lying in bed barely awake, he knew he would have to explain. *God knows, explaining will be hard enough, but what about what happens after? What if he despises me, or pities me? Oh God...*

His distress must have been visible, or perhaps it was that empathy they couldn't control and couldn't ignore either. Whatever it was, Starsky's eyes flew to his. The indigo eyes darkened as they gazed down at him, then the narrow face relaxed again into a gentle smile, and his hand rubbed Hutch's right arm, above the cast.

"Listen, babe, don't worry about anything at the moment, please? Whatever the problem is, we'll deal with it together, but not till you're stronger, huh? I promise I'll be here — like I said when you woke up before, I ain't going nowhere. You just need to concentrate on getting well, nothin' else matters at the moment." Hutch's misery barely lessened, the pain of the last few months still raw and hurting. "I promise it'll be okay. Me and thee, remember? You've no need to run from me and I sure ain't leaving you, so just accept that's the way it is and we'll deal with the rest later, huh?"

Hutch locked eyes with his partner for a long moment, then slowly nodded once. He couldn't manage a smile, but his expression lightened slightly and Starsky could see he was trying to change gear mentally.

"Okay, Starsk. You'd better tell me what the damage is and how long I'll be in here," he croaked.

"Hey, you want some ice? Your throat sounds like it could use it," and without waiting, Starsky grabbed the glass sitting on the small table next to the bed and poured some iced water into it, adding a straw and bringing it to his partner's lips. He watched as Hutch managed half a glass before stopping, then sat back down, this time very carefully on the edge of the bed.

"OK, pal, I'll give you the rundown on your injuries, 'cos I'm afraid you're gonna be here for a few days yet."

Hutch's eyes had drifted shut again before Starsky finished, but he was still awake. One Starsky had passed on all the information he had received from Dr. Marsden, he paused to see if Hutch had anything to say. His partner's eyelids open a fraction as he gazed at him for a couple of seconds before closing again, this time accompanied by a slight grimace Starsky had no problem interpreting.

"I know, pal. Sounds bad, but the doctor says you'll make a full recovery. Might take a while, but there's nothing we can't handle. So just sleep now, huh?" With relief, he saw the lines on his partner's face slowly smooth out, and soon Hutch was sleeping. Starsky sat back in the uncomfortable chair with a sigh. The injuries sounded bad, listed like that, but at least he no longer had to worry about brain injury resulting from the head trauma. Hutch's awareness, since awaking the first time, had been sufficient, combined with the results of the various tests and scans done while he was still unconscious, that Dr. Marsden had been able to reassure the injured man's partner that there was no permanent damage.

The other injuries from the accident would all heal in time, although the process might be painful and certainly protracted. It was clear that his partner would not be able to look after himself for some weeks, although Starsky doubted whether Hutch had realized this yet. With both arms in casts he would be unable to do much for himself at all, including use crutches while his injured leg healed, so a wheelchair would be unavoidable. Starsky was not relishing the moment that this became clear to his friend. Hutch was great at looking after Starsky when the latter had needed it, as he had proved only too ably in the recent long months of convalescence following Gunther's hit, but the blond seemed to have a lot of difficulty accepting the same sort of help. Starsky shrugged. He hadn't exactly enjoyed being utterly dependent either, even on Hutch, but had learned to accept it. If necessary, he would just have to spell this out forcefully to his friend.

The bigger worry was what had caused him to run in the first place. Dr. Marsden had Hutch on IV nutrients, but she was anxious that he should start eating again as soon as possible, as he had lost yet more weight even in the short time he had been in the hospital. So far, he hadn't stayed awake long enough for Starsky even to attempt to feed him, but next time Hutch woke up his partner was determined to get some food down him. He had promised the doctor not to press on the emotional issues until the injured man was stronger, and he would keep that promise if he could, but he knew Hutch was stubborn and guessed that just the act of trying to make the blond eat, especially since he would have to be fed, might well trigger an explosion. Starsky's face tightened and he clamped his jaws together. *He can fight it all he likes, but he's not running again. I'll force feed if I have to, and as soon as he's strong enough to be outta here we WILL talk about the past few months.*

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The next time Hutch woke, Starsky could tell immediately he was feeling a little better. The fuzziness in the pale eyes had gone, and now they gazed clearly up at his friend as he bent over the bed, smiling.

"Hey, babe. Welcome back."

"H-how long...?" Hutch's voice was raspy with disuse, and Starsky reached for the water on the table, carefully positioning the straw so the blond could drink.

"You've been here a couple of days, pal. The doc came round an hour or so ago to check on you, and she said

you're doing fine." He pressed the call button as he spoke. What he had just told his partner was the truth, but Dr. Marsden had qualified it within the context of the blond's overall state of health, which was still far from "fine". She had also insisted that Starsky alert the nurses' station as soon as Hutch woke up, as it was essential that he started eating real food again as soon as possible. "You wanna try sitting up a little? The doc said it would be okay."

When Hutch made no protest, Starsky eased the top half of the bed up gently, until the battered figure was half-propped up. He could see his partner squeeze his eyes shut for a few moments, and reached out to stroke the side of his face sympathetically. "Everythin' swimming around a bit? Just take some gentle breaths. It'll all settle down soon."

Hutch opened his eyes again just as the door opened, and in walked a nurse carrying a tray.

"Well, Mr. Hutchinson, it sure is good to see you awake at last!" she exclaimed with professional brightness. "I'll need to check your vitals, but your doctor is insistent that you eat first. I'll just take your temperature, than perhaps your friend here can help you with this soup."

Out of the corner of his eye, Starsky saw Hutch swallow hard, his whole body tensing. The nurse set down the tray on the table and produced the thermometer. Trying not to be caught by his partner staring, Starsky could nonetheless see the struggle Hutch had to release the tightness in his jaw enough to allow the nurse to insert the thermometer into his mouth.

*What's with ya, babe?* But suddenly Starsky knew. It had just hit Hutch that he was unable to feed himself. *Uh-oh. This is NOT gonna be easy.*

But one look at Hutch's face as the nurse left the room made Starsky blink. The blond wasn't fighting, was hardly even present behind his eyes. It was as if it was all too much to cope with, and he had retreated inside himself. Starsky swung the table over his partner's lap, and picked up the spoon. "Guess it's my turn to feed you, now, Blondie," he said cheerfully, willing his friend to respond to him. But Hutch said nothing. Lifting the spoon to the pale lips, Starsky nudged them gently, and obediently they opened. He tilted it, and soup ran into the barely open mouth and he watched as the tension in his friend's jaw finally relaxed enough for him to swallow. Keeping up a stream of inane chatter, he managed to get half the bowlful into the unresponsive form before Hutch clamped his jaw tightly shut again and turned his head away, his throat working convulsively as unsure whether to retain what had so recently been swallowed.

"Okay, pal, let's leave the rest for now, huh? How're you doing? You need some more painkillers?"

To his great relief, Hutch seemed to come back slowly from wherever it was he had retreated to. The bandaged head turned cautiously, and blue eyes met blue.

"No. I'm fine."

"Sure. You wanna watch some TV? I bet we can find something good."

"Whatever."

*Oh, boy. This is gonna be a long, hard haul.*

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Four days later, even Starsky's optimism was beginning to falter. Although Hutch had been staying awake for increasingly longer periods of time, nothing else much had changed. He seemed barely able to eat more than an absolute minimum, and the one time Starsky had tried to force him the blond had been violently ill less than half an hour later. The pain to Hutch's damaged chest caused by the retching could have been no more painful

than the guilt Starsky had suffered as a result. And the blond was still not speaking beyond the necessities. Yet Starsky could feel beneath the pain his friend was in that Hutch was not trying to drive him away; just that it was all too much to handle, and this gave him the patience he needed to stay in that small hospital room. He had asked to speak to Dr. Marsden in private today, needing to know when he might be able to take his partner home, and was now sitting in her office while she checked through Hutch's chart.

"I know you're anxious to take Mr. Hutchinson home," she started, "but I do still have some reservations about his progress. As I warned you when he was first brought in, the fact that he is so underweight is significantly slowing down his healing. His injuries are healing, and if he were eating properly now I'd be happy to discharge him, but he seems to be making little headway on that front." Starsky was aware of her steady gaze. "I'm wondering if it would help if I asked Dr Rodriguez from our psychiatric staff to speak to him."

"No!" The reaction was immediate and forceful. "No! If Hutch'll hardly speak to me, he'll clam up completely with anyone else. I know him. You have to believe me on this, doc."

"Then I really don't know what else to suggest. Unless he takes in more nourishment orally, I can't take him off the IV, and if I can't take him off that then I can't release him. It's as simple as that."

"Look, I know he'll do better at home. Suppose I talk to him and get him to agree to try to eat a bit more. Could you maybe draw up a diet sheet or something, with the minimum he should be eating every day? Then, if I can get him to agree to that, and he manages it for a coupla days here, would you let him go?"

The doctor thought for a few minutes. It was far from ideal, but she had come to realize over the days that these two had spent in the hospital that Starsky would not risk his partner's wellbeing from sheer pig-headedness, and she therefore believed that he would make sure her patient stuck to any such promise. "If I agree to this, you will have to make sure he keeps eating at least that minimum or take him straight back to hospital," she warned. "And he'll have to go back anyway to be checked over, have the stitches in his head and leg out, and the casts removed later."

"Sure."

"Okay. I'll get the nutritionist to draw you up a chart. You go talk to your partner."

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Hutch lay back against the pillows on the hospital bed, half-propped up to relieve the pressure on his ribs. The TV was on low, but he ignored it, staring blindly out of the window. While intensely grateful for his partner's presence since the accident, he was strangely glad to have the room to himself for a while. He frowned, trying to think why this should be. His brain only seemed capable of operating at half speed these days, but he recalled clearly the feeling of isolation that had driven him to run away. Did he still feel like that? Bleakly, he recognized that the answer was yes. Now that he was less fogged by pain medication, he had to accept that nothing had changed in him, that running hadn't helped at all. He snorted slightly in disgust. *Can't even do that right. The whole idea was to get away, to leave Starsky space to get back to his normal life, and what do I do? Go and crash the damned car and get hurt so bad that he has to stay with me, and now his life is put on hold again. He should have been back at work by now, back where he's wanted to be all these months. As if he hasn't had enough of hospitals to last him several lifetimes. God, I really have screwed up big time. What am I going to do now?*

Still lost in his despair, he was oblivious to the door of his room opening and only realized his partner was back with him when he felt a gentle squeeze on his upper arm.

"Hey, buddy."

Hutch just looked at him, hardly caring that his misery was deeply etched on his face.

"Listen, pal, I've just been talking to Dr. Marsden. I want to get you outta here as soon as possible, but you're gonna have to co-operate a bit." The words seemed to Hutch to be muffled, and he stared dully at the face before him. "Hutch! Are you listening to me? Hey! You with me, or you wanna stay here for ever?"

With an enormous mental effort, Hutch replayed what Starsky had said to him, trying to focus on it this time, and then nodded slowly. "Sure. The sooner I can get out of here, the sooner you can get back to normal."

Starsky frowned at this, but pressed on. "She says that your injuries are healing well enough now that you can go home, but only if you're gonna eat more, pal. She won't discharge you until you can come off the IV, and you've got to eat more than you have been so far before she'll unhook you. So, she's got the nutritionist getting together a list of how much you need to eat, and as soon as you've managed that for a couple of days — and kept it down — I can take you home. Will you try?"

Even in his currently disconnected state, it would have been hard for Hutch to refuse his partner anything when he was looking at him so intensely, the indigo eyes pleading. Starsky really wanted this, he could tell, and Hutch nodded faintly.

"I'll try, Starsk. I know you must want to get back. But if I can't keep it down, I want you to promise me something." Starsky raised an eyebrow, a wary look crossing his face. "I want you to go back home at the end of the week, even if I have to stay here a bit longer." The dark head was shaking firmly in a clear negative even before Hutch had finished speaking.

"No way, Hutch. You think I'd leave you here alone? When I go back, you're coming with me."

"But, Starsky..."

"No way, pal. Don't even think about it. *You* are gonna start eating more as of today, and we'll both be heading home in two days time. That's the way it's gonna be."

Hutch sank back against the pillows, frustrated. Going back home like that with Starsky was not going to resolve anything, he knew that much, even if he wasn't sure what the problem really was. But it didn't look like he had a choice, and despite himself, a small glow seemed to have started inside his chest, which had been one whole knot of tension now for months. Only the slightest of glows, but he felt a fractional release of the tightness around his heart, and tilting his head up slightly towards where his partner still loomed over him, one side of his mouth twitched slightly.

"Okay, partner. We'll try it your way."

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"For God's sake, Hutch, will ya quit that and let me do it!"

"I can manage!" snapped the blond.

"You *cannot* manage, dummy, and you're only gonna hurt yourself if you don't let me help. Honest, Hutch, anyone ever tell you what a pain in the ass you can be sometimes?"

"Yeah, dirtball, you. So just get out of here and leave me alone. I can manage perfectly well by myself and I do NOT need you babysitting me. I'm sick of it!"

"Yeah, well you're not the only one!" and the door slammed behind the dark-haired man as he stalked out of Hutch's apartment and took off down the stairs.

Not even waiting to hear the sound of his partner's car pulling away, Hutch went back to the bathroom, determined to have the shower which had provoked this confrontation. Carefully, he fitted a baggie round the cast on his left wrist, using his teeth and the fingers of his right hand to secure as tightly as he could. Unfortunately, he then had no fingers on his left hand free to secure the baggie over his right wrist cast, and in the end gave up in frustration. *Just have to be careful*, he muttered furiously to himself, switching on the shower and stepping into the tub. Unluckily for him, in the heat of the argument with Starsky, he had forgotten that his injured leg was still not up to bearing much weight. As he stepped into the tub, the sudden pressure on his right leg caused it to buckle and he slipped heavily. Unable to catch himself with his injured hands, he lay momentarily winded, feeling the new bruising on his already sore back. Catching his breath, he struggled to sit up just as the bathroom door opened and his partner reappeared.

"Hutch, I'm sorry..." he began, and then stopped short. "Jeez, Blondie, what did ya do? Here, just stay there a minute, don't move," and reaching down, he switched off the water. Hutch groaned slightly, defeated.

Starsky knelt by the side of the tub, and gently sat Hutch up so he could take a look at his back. "Well," he said cheerfully after a brief inspection, "you've added to your collection. I suppose green and yellow was just too boring for ya, huh?" Bending forward, he put in the bath plug and started the faucets running. "Since you're already sitting down, why don't we make it a bath today?"

"Starsky..."

"Hutch, look, I really am sorry for storming out like that. You never did that once all that time you were looking after me, and God knows you shoulda sometimes. And you've been home all of 24 hours and already I can't handle it." Hutch just glared at him as he continued, "Doesn't say much for my patience, huh? I'm staying put now, though."

"I hate this," the injured man ground out.

"You think I enjoyed it?" shot back Starsky, but mildly. "Listen, pal, has it ever occurred to you how much better we are at *being* hurt than watching the other hurt? God, I hated all those months of not being able to look after myself after Gunther, but I still wouldn't have swapped places with you for anything. And I can tell you," he added with a blinding smile that somehow reduced Hutch's resentment effortlessly to a simmer, "I would a lot rather be in your shoes than mine just now. But get used to it, Blintz, 'cos not only am I washing you now you're in here, but after that I'm feeding you."

The bath was completed in silence. When Hutch was out and clad in his robe, he sat down on the couch and watched Starsky open the refrigerator and select a carton of something. He was still finding it hard to eat much, but mindful of his promise, he had really been trying. He had managed to eat the minimum required by the nutritionist to enable his discharge from the hospital, and had to admit to himself that he felt a little better. His mind was less fuzzy, and although that could be because he was no longer taking any pain medication, he couldn't deny that keeping some food down would certainly be helping. Starsky had called Huggy the minute he had got Hutch settled back into Venice Place yesterday afternoon, asking the Bear if he could do a grocery shop and especially if he could bring round some food to tempt an invalid who couldn't feed himself. Hutch had been asleep when Huggy arrived, the lingering effect of the head injury making him fall asleep suddenly and deeply at any time of the day, and Starsky had made sure he was not disturbed. Huggy was accustomed to being the provider of food when either of the partners was ill, and after all these years was an expert at what would tempt a convalescent as well as knowing their individual tastes to perfection.

Within a short space of time, Starsky had put a gently steaming mug on the table, and this was quickly followed by a plate with cubes of bread piled on it.

"Huggy's special soup," he said, grinning at Hutch. "Come on, partner. Get yourself over here and eat."

Hutch eyed him darkly, then with a slight shrug got himself off the couch. A straw was sitting by the side of the mug, but before he could say anything, Starsky said, "I figured that would be easier than a spoon. Just be careful you don't burn your mouth!"

Actually, Hutch admitted to himself ten minutes later, the straw had been a good idea. Drinking soup through a straw might not be the best way to eat it, but it sure as hell beat being spoon fed. He'd even managed to eat most of the bread, the small cubes being light enough for him to pick up with his damaged hands. Combined with a tall glass of orange juice, that was the most he'd eaten in days, and it even felt like it would stay down.

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Hutch had resolutely refused any help with getting into bed, preferring just to take off his robe and slide under the covers than struggle with pajamas. He had also refused the pain meds he had been prescribed, which he was supposed to take just at night for another few days to help him sleep. He hadn't told Starsky, though — just pretended to swallow them and then spat them out as soon as the brunet left him. Shifting uncomfortably on the mattress, he managed at last to find a fairly comfortable position, and closed his eyes.

*He and Starsky were in the Torino, like any normal day, cruising their beat, watching the streets. A glimpse of frantic movement down an alleyway and the car screeched to a halt and they both jumped out, reaching for their guns. Starsky was ahead of him, and however hard Hutch tried, he couldn't catch up with his partner. The alley seemed to stretch endlessly ahead, narrowing and darkening, and suddenly Hutch was filled with foreboding. "Starsky!" he screamed, but no sound came out. He tried to make himself run faster, but his legs refused to obey. Hutch felt nausea bubble up inside him. He knew what was going to happen, and yet again he would be unable to prevent it. "Starsky, it's a trap. Stop! Please...oh, God..." and he had to watch as the sound of a gunshot burst through his skull and his partner fell to the ground, a red stain spreading rapidly across the back of his leather jacket, eyes staring sightlessly upwards. No! Noooooo...*

"Hutch! Hutch!" His whole body was shaking, he could feel his heart pounding, the blood roaring in his head and dulling all sound, but he was dimly aware of someone shouting his name. Slowly he realized that his shoulders were being grabbed, hard, and he was pulled up to rest against a warm body. The movement hurt his bruised chest, and the pain brought him a little out of the fog that surrounded him. "Hutch, for God's sake, take it easy, will you?" came an urgent voice in his ear. "Relax. Try to breathe, okay? Just relax. It was a dream, that's all. I'm here, everything's okay."

It was his partner's voice, his partner's hands rubbing his arms, smoothing the hair from his face. *How can it be Starsky? He's dead...I just saw him die again.* His breathing caught again at the memory, and instantly the soothing voice was there, "Breathe, Hutch, just breathe, nice and steady. That's good, you're doing fine."

Finally, Hutch risked opening his eyes a fraction, almost convinced now that it really had only been a dream. Sure enough, leaning over him he saw his partner's face, the eyes almost black with worry.

"Jeez, Hutch, that was some nightmare. What the hell were you dreaming about?"

Hutch shook his head, unable to face talking about what was his worst fear, but Starsky was having none of it.

"Not good enough, Blintz. I told you at the hospital we were gonna have a long talk when we got home, and I think this is the time. You really scared me just now, ya know? You were screaming and crying, and I just couldn't get you to wake up. Your heart was beating so fast I was afraid you were gonna have a heart attack. So give, pal. What was it about?"

Hutch's heart sank, but he had heard that tone of voice before and knew he was not going to be able to avoid this any longer. Taking a painful breath, he hesitantly began to describe his dream, gazing down at his hands, refusing to meet his partner's eyes. When he had finished, there was silence for a few moments, although

Starsky's hands continued to rub up and down his upper arms.

"Hutch."

No reply. He kept his eyes lowered, and an observer might have thought he had not heard. But he knew Starsky could feel the faint tremor that ran through him by the way the hands holding him tightened their grip.

"Hutch, look at me." It was that tone again, the one that Hutch knew meant business. Reluctantly, he raised his eyes. "Is that the first time you have this nightmare?"

The blond head moved fractionally in a negative.

"How many times have dreamt this, Hutch?" The soft voice was relentless.

Hutch's shoulders moved in a faint shrug.

"Twice? Ten times?" Starsky's gaze suddenly sharpened like a blade and the intense blue seared into Hutch's soul, laying it bare. "How about pretty well every night since I was shot?" Hutch's eyes shifted minutely, and Starsky's face tightened both with sorrow and relief. At last, some headway.

"Why didn't you tell me, huh?"

"What, you expected me to bother you with my stupid nightmares when you were the one that was shot, you were the one that *died*, for God's sake, you were the one with months of agony trying to get back to normal. It was all my fault, anyway, nightmares were the least I deserved."

"Huh? What d'ya mean? I thought we hammered this out months ago. It was not your fault, none of it was, you know that."

"I can't do it anymore, Starsk." The words tumbled out of Hutch's mouth before he could stop them. For a moment he hesitated, dismayed that he had finally spoken what he had been trying for so long to bury, then with a barely audible sigh he finally let go and repeated, "I can't do it anymore. I can't watch you die again." His voice was lifeless, drained of all expression, and his gaze had fallen to the bed again.

"Hutch..."

"No, Starsk, it's no good. I should have realized a long time ago — I guess part of me did, but I just didn't want to accept what a coward I am, but I can't pretend anymore. Whatever you say, I should have been able to stop you getting shot, I should have been faster to warn you. You nearly died, and it could happen again anytime. I'm scared, Gordo. Those days after you were shot, when your heart..." Even now, he couldn't bring himself to say it. "I had to try to accept that you would really be gone this time. All those close calls we somehow got through, but this time you weren't gonna make it..." He took a deep breath, trying to steady his heart. Starsky said nothing, but his hands, which had stilled as Hutch began to speak, began their gentle stroking again. "I realized something then, Starsk. I realized that I didn't know how to carry on without you." He lifted his head, for a moment meeting his partner's gaze, and Starsky's breath caught in his throat at the emptiness he saw in the blond's eyes. "You know how Huggy says we look lopsided without each other?" A wry smile twisted the corner of Hutch's mouth. "Well, if you were dead, I wouldn't just be lopsided, I'd only be half a person. Probably less than half. So when you started getting better, and you so badly wanted to get back to work, I did everything I could to help you. How could I do any less? But it was eating away at me inside, the thought of you going back on the streets, the thought of you maybe getting blown away again."

The bleak expression on Hutch's face was beginning to frighten Starsky now, and unconsciously he tightened his grip, as if afraid the other might escape from him.

"God knows I don't trust anyone else to watch your back, but I can't even trust *me* anymore to do it. Last time, you nearly died because I did such a lousy job of protecting you, next time you might die for real."

"Hutch, listen to me." This was Starsky's street voice, the one that meant he was not to be messed with, and instinctively Hutch responded, his gaze flying up to meet his partner's eyes. "I don't trust *anyone* else to watch my back, you know that. But sometimes shit happens. That shooting wasn't my fault or your fault; it was Gunther who ordered it and I'm just damned lucky to be here at all." His face softened, but the intense blue eyes never left Hutch's. "If it had been you they hit, would you have blamed me? Truth, Hutch."

"Of course I wouldn't, but you answer me this, wouldn't you have blamed yourself?"

Starsky exhaled sharply, then shrugged, a reluctant grin curving the right side of his mouth. "Damn, Blintz, you know I would. And you would have been on my case about it, just like I'm on yours. I guess it's just the way we are, but it's gotta stop now, pal. You've made yourself sick over this. You said you didn't know how to carry on without me, well," Starsky swallowed hard and looked away, "you oughta know by now the same goes for me too. Why do you think I worked my hide off trying to get fit enough to get back onto active duty? So I could be back out there with you, dumb ass." Shifting slightly, he moved to sit next to Hutch on the bed, wrapping an arm gently across the thin shoulders. "Bottom line, Hutch, is that nothing matters to me more than that. I don't give a shit what we end up doing, as long as we're doing it together. If you don't want to go back on the streets with me, we'll just hafta find something else to do, 'cos there's no way I'm working with anyone else."

"But, Starsk, being a cop is the only thing you've ever wanted to do. You can't give it up just because I can't handle it anymore. I can't live with that kind of responsibility."

"Did you hear what I just said, pal? I'm not doing it without you. Either we both go back, or neither of us does. And I don't want any of your martyr shit about this, Blondie, 'cos I'll know whether you're doing it because you really want to or just for me, so don't even think about it, huh?" Suddenly aware that Hutch's head was drooping onto his shoulder, Starsky shook him gently. "Come on, buddy. I think you've had about as much excitement as you can handle tonight. Let's get you lying back down so you can stretch out, okay?" With minimal help from his partner, he eased the lanky body back down the bed and covered him warmly. The last thing Hutch was aware of was a hand stroking the fine hair back off his face and a whispered, "Sleep, Hutch. Just sleep."

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Starsky sat on the couch in the darkened room for a long time, thinking about what had happened that night. He was relieved that they had started talking about Hutch's nightmare. He had guessed that something like this was going on, and bitterly regretted not having found out about it sooner. But something still seemed off. It couldn't just be the nightmare that had driven Hutch to run. Sure, he could understand the fear that his partner felt about his return to the streets — wasn't that fear an ever-present concern for both of them, albeit usually more buried than this? — but would that fear alone explain the constant nausea? Hutch running away? They had been afraid for each other before, had nightmares before, but always they had been able to talk it out, and that usually resolved the problem over a few weeks. *No, there is something else, and it must be real bad if Hutch can't bring himself to talk to me about it. Maybe he can't even face it himself? If only he hadn't fallen asleep like he did. I think we were just getting somewhere. That damned head injury; still making you crash out with no notice. God, pal, what the hell is going on in that knocked-about head of yours?* Finally succumbing to exhaustion, he pulled the blankets around him and slept.

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Breakfast was late the next morning, both men having slept long past their usual waking time. Starsky had finally surfaced at around 11am, and seeing his partner still asleep had decided to let him stay that way as long as possible. He had simply eaten some cereal straight from the packet and nobly refrained from putting coffee on, in case the smell awoke Hutch. When he heard sounds from the bedroom an hour later, the first thing

Starsky did was to switch on the percolator. Once that was done, he went back to see his partner struggling to sit up, a pained expression on his face. "Hey, let me help." He hurried forward, and with one arm supported the thin frame while his left hand grabbed the pillows and piled them up behind the long back. "Better?"

Hutch nodded tightly. His chest hurt like hell, and his leg still throbbed if he tried to use it at all, even to lever himself to turn or move in bed.

"You need to take one of those pills?" Starsky was concerned about the paleness of Hutch's face.

"No. I'm not supposed to need them now during the day, anyway. Just give me a minute," and he took some slow, shallow breaths, gradually relaxing as the pain eased up. After a couple of minutes, he managed a thin smile for his partner.

"Stop looking so worried, Starsky. I'm fine. Probably just stiff from being in bed so long."

"Yeah," muttered Starsky, but decided not to press it. There was nothing much he could say anyway, and he recalled only too well how irritating it could be when you were hurt if the only thing anyone ever did was go on and on about your injuries, and how you were feeling. He switched to what he knew already would be another delicate topic.

"Whaddya want for breakfast? I could do you some toast - you could manage that if I cut it up like the bread yesterday, and maybe some pieces of fruit?"

"Starsk, I'm really not..."

Starsky glared at him. "Don't even try to finish that, Hutch. We had a deal, remember? Either I do you some food you can try to eat on your own, or I make whatever else I feel like and I spoon feed it to you. Those are the only two options. So which one is it gonna be?"

Hutch knew when he was beaten. "Toast," he said meekly, and before long a tray was put on the night table containing a plate of toast and jelly, cut into bite-sized cubes, a tall glass of orange juice, with straw, and a mug a coffee, also with straw. A small bowl with a selection of chopped fruit completed the meal.

"Here," Starsky said, holding the plate with the toast in one hand and the glass in the other. "I can't put the tray on your lap in case it hurts your leg, so I'll just hang on to these while you eat, okay?" He kept up an almost non-stop stream of chatter while his friend ate, hoping to distract the blond from brooding on his current helplessness. Something seemed to work, as Hutch managed to eat half the toast and all of the fruit before stopping.

"You wanna sleep some more?" Starsky asked as he picked up the tray.

"No. I'm sick of being in bed. Think I'll go and sit in the greenhouse for a bit," and Hutch started to maneuver himself slowly out of bed. Starsky fought back the urge to assist him, taking the tray back into the kitchen and stacking the dirty plates in the sink instead. When he'd finished clearing up, he poured another couple of coffees, grabbed a straw from the packet and moved resolutely out to sit beside his partner. He had decided that now was as good a time as any to try to finish what they had started last night. As he put the mug on a convenient shelf next to where his partner was sitting, he could feel Hutch's eyes on him. The blond tensed slightly, clearly guessing what was coming.

Starsky took a deep breath, unsure if he wanted to do this but knowing he had no choice. "Okay, pal, you ready to talk to me yet, huh? Maybe tell me what's with the starving yourself routine?" Sitting on the bench next to Hutch, thighs lightly brushing, he kept his eyes fixed firmly on the greenery in front of him, feeling that it would be easier for his partner to talk if he weren't staring at him.

There was a long silence, and Starsky was beginning to think he was going to have to press harder. Then he felt a slight shift in the lean body next to him, and Hutch began to speak, so softly it was almost as if he was talking to himself.

"I just haven't been able to keep food down, for months now. I don't know why. I tried to eat, I really did, but it seemed that pretty much everything I got down came back up again, so in the end I stopped trying. It wasn't so bad when I was staying at your place, but since I came back here it just got harder and harder to swallow anything."

Starsky had meant to stay quiet and just let Hutch talk, but this was too much for his self-control. "Shit, Hutch, you mean it's been going on since before you moved back here? But that's a couple of months! How the hell have you kept going all this time? No wonder that doctor at the hospital was so worried about your weight!"

"I have managed to keep a bit down, and I could still drink, so just tried to make sure I had lots of fruit juice, stuff like that. It's not that big a deal, Starsk."

"That stinks, Hutch, and you know it!" Starsky shot back. "And you still haven't said *why*."

"If I knew that, don't you think I'd've done something about it?" Hutch's frustration was evident. "It just happened, right? I don't know why!"

"Okay." Starsky took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. There was no point getting angry about this before they'd even got anywhere. "Let's try and think this through a bit. You say it started when you were still staying with me, right?"

The blond head nodded slightly as Starsky fixed his eyes on him. Letting Hutch talk without watching him was one thing, but if he had to pry answers out of him, Starsky was going to need to see his face. "Right. Now, I know I was out of it for a while, but I seem to remember sitting and eating with you quite a bit, especially once I started to get better and didn't have to be in bed most of the day. So when exactly did it start?"

"God, Starsky, I don't know! I didn't exactly keep a diary!"

"When I first came home, were you eating okay then?"

He felt rather than saw the slight shrug. "Yeah, I guess."

"What about when I started getting around a bit more by myself?"

Another shrug.

"When you went back to work?"

Only stillness beside him now. *Bingo!*

"Okay, so it was something to do with you going back to work. Anything happen at Metro around then? Anyone..." Starsky's voice stopped mid-sentence. He could hear his partner's voice from the night before saying, "I can't live with that kind of responsibility.", and just like that, the answer was blindingly obvious. "It wasn't because of you going back to work, was it, Hutch?" His soft voice cut through the silence like a knife, and Hutch quivered as though his soul was about to be laid bare. "It was because you *could* go back to work, because I was well enough by then that you could leave me. Isn't that it? It was when you really began to accept that I was getting' better, that I might even make it back myself. That's when you started feeling sick all the time. Because you were afraid for me, afraid of me coming back to work?" He turned slightly so he could grab Hutch's arm. "That's right, isn't it?"

The pale blue eyes gazing at him seemed devoid of life, nothing showing but an emptiness that had no end. Then Hutch crumpled as if something had snapped inside him, something that had kept him upright and together, and Starsky was barely able to catch him before he fell to the ground. He managed to get an arm around the limp form and heaved him until Hutch was half-lying across his chest, Starsky's arm tightly round his middle. Even before he had finished settling his partner against him, he felt the spasm rippling against his arm, and with his free hand grabbed the nearest thing he could, an empty planter. He was just in time. Hutch retched miserably until all he had eaten that morning was gone, the pain from his damaged chest only serving to make things worse. When it was finally over, he sagged heavily back into Starsky's embrace, eyes shut and breathing shallowly.

"Come on, pal. You'll be more comfortable on the couch," Starsky whispered, and pulling Hutch up, he half-walked, half-carried him across the room and helped him lie down. Jumping up, he got a glass of water and put the straw to Hutch's lips. "Drink," he said, firmly. Obediently, Hutch drank. "Okay. Good. Don't drift off, buddy. We're getting' somewhere here, and we're gonna finish it before you get real sick. I don't care how long it takes."

Hutch raised his eyes to his partner's and what he saw there made a slight grimace cross his face. Starsky was relieved to see, however, that the emptiness had lifted slightly from the other's expression, giving way to resignation. He nodded once, sharply. *Good. If Hutch knows I mean business on this, perhaps we can really get to the bottom of this now. If I can only ask the right questions, I think we'll find out what's been going on all this time.*

"How about sitting up now? You feel up to it? That way maybe you won't fall asleep on me."

There was no reply, and Starsky took this as a yes, easing the thin frame upright and propping cushions where he thought they would do most good. He also took the precaution of positioning a trashcan within easy reach, just in case.

"Okay, so what have we got so far? You started having trouble eating once you could see I might really make it back on the streets. You'd worked your butt off trying to help me get well enough so I *could* get back to work, but when it looked like that might really happen, something in you couldn't handle it. Add to that those nightmares you've been having and what we said last night — you're really scared of me getting killed. But what's so different about now, Hutch? When I go back to work, it's not gonna be any *more* dangerous than it was before. If anything, it might be a bit safer since you got rid of Gunther so effectively," and he lifted an eyebrow at his friend, who was sitting watching him, looking like an animal trapped in headlights.

Starsky could see the exact moment Hutch gave in and stopped fighting the inevitable. "I t-t-told you last night, I couldn't s-s-see how I could c-carry on without you if you d-d-died. I meant it, S-Starsk. If you had died that day, I don't think I'd s-still be here either." Hutch's voice was strengthening as he continued, finally articulating what had been so deeply buried Starsky doubted that even his partner had known it was there until this moment. "I'm not s-saying that to lay any kind of guilt trip on you. I don't want to stop you from doing what you want to do, what you need to do, but that's the way it is. I've loved you for a long time, but I never realized how much until the hit." A light Starsky had never seen directed his way before flared suddenly in the pale eyes, before they were swiftly lidded. He saw the fingers of each hand tense where they showed beneath the cast, and then Hutch spoke again, in a dazed voice.

"God, Starsk, I'm scared. Not just that you might die, but of how much I love you." The silence that followed was the loudest Starsky had ever heard, full of unspoken thoughts, impossible dreams, unimaginable changes. Just when he could bear it no longer, Hutch whispered into it, "I'm scared of *how* I love you."

Starsky felt as though everything that had been out of kilter for months, maybe years, had suddenly, miraculously, been corrected. It felt like coming home. *Of course*, he thought dazedly. *That's it. It's so damned obvious. Why didn't I realize?*

It was a few moments before he could do anything other than revel in the joy dancing through his veins, the triumphant singing in his head, but then he looked at his partner and everything stilled, only to resume a second later, but more subdued. "Hutch!" Urgently, he reached out to grab the tense shoulders. "Hutch, listen to me. It's okay." His partner's face remained lowered, eyes firmly fixed on the casted hands. Starsky could feel the distress emanating from him, and wanted desperately to ease it. "Blintz, it really is okay. In fact, it's more than okay! I can't believe we didn't see it before. Look at me, please."

Hutch lifted his head as though any second he expected the axe to fall, but as soon as he saw Starsky's face, thrumming with happiness, hope spilled out of his eyes, lightening the darkness that seemed to have been part of him for so long. "I didn't know, Starsk, I swear I've only just realized..."

"Me too," interrupted Starsky, a grin on his face so wide it seemed impossible that his face hadn't split. "Me too, pal, but now we have —" and without another word, he leant forward and kissed Hutch. There was no withdrawal, no hesitation; just a melting into each other's kiss as if their entire lives had been lived solely to accomplish this moment, this expression of their love.

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It seemed hours later when they calmed down enough to talk, Hutch enfolded warmly in his partner's embrace. His injuries were still too recent for anything more energetic, and neither wanted to rush anything. This emotion that had overwhelmed them both was still so new, so powerful, that they were content to take things slow, but they already knew that there would be no going back. Nothing that felt this right could be rejected.

Inevitably, it was Hutch who brought up the question of what the end result might be.

"Starsk, if we go down this route, what'll we do if IA find out? I'm not sure we'll be able to keep this hidden, even if we really want to. We'll get thrown off the force."

"Babe, as far as I'm concerned, there's no *if* about it. It's a done deal. If IA find out," he shrugged, "it happens. I'm not sure I'd really care. What's happened this past year has made me see there's more to my life than being a cop. Sure, it's still important to me, but not as important as you. I can live without being a cop, Hutch. I can't live without you. Besides," and his partner saw the wicked glint in his eyes, "the Department owes us both something. Hell, I nearly died on duty, and you're the cop that brought down *Gunther*, for chrissakes! If they do find out, I reckon the very least they could do is let us resign with dignity rather than throw us out!"

Hutch stared at his partner for a moment. *It couldn't be that easy, could it? But then, why not? Our priorities have changed, that's all. He's right. Nothing else matters as much as this. We'll deal with the rest when it happens, if it happens.*

"More to the point, Hutch, how do you feel now about us both being back at work?"

Hutch's silence was profound. Starsky was just beginning to get worried, when finally his partner spoke. "I was worried about you going back on the active duty, Starsk, and I still am. But you're right, I guess — it's no more dangerous than it was before. I still don't like it, because everything I said about how I'd feel if I lost you is just the same. But — I think — I think I'll learn to cope with it."

"I meant what I said before, pal. You don't have to cope with it. If you can't handle it, we can quit now."

"No. The whole point of me leaving the way I did was so I wouldn't hold you back from doing what felt right to you. I know I can't wrap you in cotton wool anymore, Starsk, however much I might want to. This is my problem, and I'll handle it."

"*Our* problem." A nod was all the response to this, and only after some seconds, but Starsky was glad to see it.

"Hutch, I don't see this being for ever, ya know? Being a street cop? I guess I've just had something to prove since the shooting. I needed a goal to aim at, and now I've reached it, I don't know how long I'll plan to stay with it. Just because I'm going back now doesn't mean I'll still be doing this in a year's time." The look of relief that flashed across Hutch's thin face as he finished speaking was almost enough to make him call Dobby there and then and resign over the phone. But he knew that wouldn't work. He *needed* to demonstrate to himself as much as to his colleagues that he could carry on, but now he recognized deep inside himself that it wouldn't be for long. "Let's take it a day at a time, huh?" and he tightened his arms around his partner gently, careful of the injuries but wanting the closeness. He could almost feel it as Hutch finally let go of the worries that had been piling up inside him for so long.

"Starsk, how about heating up some of that soup, huh? That's all I can manage at the moment, but I think I'm actually hungry," and the eyes that met his were sparkling once more.

Starsky's heart could have burst with joy at the sight of his partner, whose face was finally free of the strain that had marred it for months, the laughter back in the crystal blue eyes. The smile he gave his partner was blinding. "Uh-huh, Blondie, from now on *I'm* feeding ya until those casts come off. I'm not leaving you to drink soup with a straw anymore. Nothing's going in that mouth except what *I* put in there, so you'd better get used to it." He raised his eyebrows suggestively, "In fact, that's not gonna change even after your wrists are back to normal, so why don't we start as we mean to go?"

A crimson wave flooded Hutch's face, and Starsky laughed again.