Crab Sandwiches Book Two

by Dawnwind

Summary

This is a story about life and the end of it. It helps to read Crab Sandwiches book one first
Chapter 1

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Staring out the car window, David Starsky watched a giant Santa Claus whiz by on a gilded sleigh, loaded with presents for good girls and boys as they passed a mall.

Seconds later, he caught sight of another red coated Santa, this one inflatable and flapping in the morning breeze, with his huge feet planted on top of a car dealership. Two more Santas decorated the bakery and a bail bonds office. Massive silver snowflakes adorned every lamppost along the street and even the police headquarters had a cheery 'Happy Holidays' in neon on the roof. The Christmas season had descended while he was doing other things.

While the weather in Southern California didn't jibe with traditional white Christmases, and very few people were bundled up in woolens, there was definitely a festive spirit in the air. Starsky wished he felt it. He wanted to. Despite a Jewish upbringing, he'd always gloried in the glow of the holiday. The happiness, the parties, the gift giving--it was all wonderful and he'd loved it, in the past. This year was a different situation all together.

He was on his way to have more blood drawn for tumor markers, those invisible but insidious indicators of cancer in his body. Osteosarcoma. In the three months since Starsky had been diagnosed, he'd learned to pronounce the tongue twisting name, and a lot of other unpronounceable words that he would have been just as happy not to know.

The last of six rounds of chemotherapy had ended one week ago and now came the denouement. Did his bones still harbor deadly cancer cells? Sliding his left leg over slightly, Starsky winced, dreading what the afternoon held. His leg, broken in a fight with a murderous drug dealer, revealed a malignant tumor when the surgeon went in to pin and screw his shattered tibia back together. It had been pain and vomiting ever since.

Glancing over at the man driving the car with single-minded purpose, Starsky knew he should have admitted to Hutch how much his leg was hurting recently. But he hated giving Hutch anything more to worry about. The man already did too much, dividing his time between teaching at the police academy, working as a detective and taking care of Starsky. He was the rock Starsky clung to when everything else was going to hell in a handbasket. Even when Starsky had tried pushing Hutch away to protect him from the realities of the disease, Hutch had stayed.

Studying his friend's profile, Starsky was swamped with love for him. With his beauty: blond hair, perfect aquiline features and fathomless summer blue eyes, he could have been an actor or a model. Instead, he'd broken away from his family's plans to send him to medical school, or as a second choice, law school, and became one of the best street cops Starsky had ever known. Starsky wanted to do something for his lover, to thank him for the support and faith he'd shown in the last months.

After today things would get better, wouldn't they? They had to. This had to be a day to celebrate, right?

"Can we go to the mall after?" Starsky asked softly, willing Hutch to turn and look at him. Hutch
had been so withdrawn all morning, bustling about the house, getting everything ready to go without a single word on how he was feeling.

"Yeah, sure, if that's where you want to go," Hutch agreed tonelessly.

"We need…Christmas shopping, to get stuff…" Starsky trailed off, the gulf between them so gaping he was afraid of falling in and never landing. "Hutch, please…"

"Starsky?" Something in Starsky's voice must have finally penetrated the protective shell Hutch had erected. He focused those intense blue eyes on his passenger just as he was turning the car into the parking lot of the medical building. "Are you in pain?"

"Yes--and so are you!" Starsky shouted, then stopped abruptly, stunned by his own reaction. "We both sit here scared out of our minds and act like this is, I dunno, a trip to the dentist."

"But it's not," Hutch said, not disagreeing with Starsky but rather reaffirming the obvious. He parked the car and then put out his hand, running long fingers over the tiny needle mark scars on the back of Starsky's hand. "Yeah. How're you doing?"

"I didn't want to get up this morning. I didn't want this day to start because if we never got to Davies' office we could just go on believing that the chemo was over, I'm in remission and everything was fine…"

"It could be."

"I want it to be. I want this over."

"But?" Hutch waited a moment before pulling on Starsky's hand to get a response. "Starsky, what aren't you telling me?"

"My leg hurts--a lot."

"That's why Dr. Bernardi wants to do more surgery."

"I'm just…scared, y'know? What if…?"

"None of the 'what ifs'," Hutch said firmly. "We're here, we'll know in just a few hours. We'll go to the mall, you can sit on Santa's lap, and then we'll go eat in the fanciest place we can find, have champagne…"

"Lobster and steak," Starsky said defiantly, even though those were some of the last words he'd ever spoken before being gunned down in a hail of automatic gunfire five years before. "And crab."

"All the shellfish your ancestors told you never to eat," Hutch laughed, tears filming his eyes.

Starsky grinned with sardonic wit, turning to look up at their destination. "Why did you park here?"

"Because it's near Davies' office," Hutch said with long suffering patience, pointing to the door not five steps away.

"No, I mean in this space."

Not flinching from the incendiary anger Hutch answered succinctly, "You qualify."
"Fuck you, Hutch!" Starsky exploded, grabbing the handle to pry open the car door. As with most of Hutch's older vehicles, this one had a sticky latch and he struggled briefly with it before thrusting the door forward.

"Stay there until I can get the wheelchair." Hutch got out, pulling the lever to pop the trunk.

"Don't bother, I'll walk!" Starsky balanced enough on his good leg to snatch the crutches from the back seat. "It's not far."

"You are so damned stubborn."

Starsky lifted his chin to look Hutch square on, his rage draining away. "Yeah, wanna make something of it?"

"Just stating the obvious."

With a deep breath that was halfway to a laugh, Starsky crutched his way into the lobby, Hutch trailing behind. There weren't many people waiting for the elevator, but it was enough that the first car was too full, so they waited for the second one.

"You should have gone to class this morning." Starsky watched the floor indicator flash down the numbers in reverse order. "I'm not gonna get any results until this afternoon. This is just going to be a lot of waiting."

"So, we'll wait together." Hutch shrugged. "This is the last week at the academy before exams and then graduation. All the cadets want to know is what will be on the test."

"They all make it? Didja have to boot that kid Joshua? Y'know, he kinda looks like you."

"We're both blond, that's where the resemblance ends." Hutch groaned. "No, he shaped up, pulled up his grades. He'll be graduating." When the doors of the elevator opened he steadied Starsky's arm as they crossed the threshold. After the doors closed, Hutch tightened his grip and pulled Starsky into a bear hug. "I love you, you know that?"

"Picked a helluva time to get romantic," Starsky squeezed his eyes shut, crushed against Hutch's plaid lumberjack coat. Very glad that Davies' office was on the 24th floor, he burrowed into that hug, soaking in all of the love and strength it offered. "I love you, too, blintz. Don't forget it."

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"So what's the scoop, John?" Starsky asked, trying to ignore the pounding of his own heart in his ears. He'd had all morning, hell, the last week or more, to adjust to bad news. He knew in his heart that it wasn't good, but there was always that tiny shred of hope that maybe he was wrong.

Maybe the pain in his leg was just a misplaced screw or unhealed bone that could be fixed. But he really didn't believe it. He was incredibly aware of how tightly Hutch was grasping the arms of the chair. His partner looked as if he would fly out if he weren't holding on.

John Davies' handsome face was grave as he stood in front of his desk holding a manila folder containing all the current medical data. "Starsky, the tumor has grown back."

Even though he'd suspected, it was hard to hear. Beside him, Hutch gasped softly. "You've been taking x-rays all along," Starsky stated for clarification, his body suddenly so cold he wanted to shiver. "Why didn't you notice before this?"
"It's a smaller lesion and up higher, hidden by your knee cap. Dr. Bernardi and I suspected something for some time, especially when the tumor markers in your blood never dropped to the levels we wanted."

"Does this mean another round of chemo?" Hutch asked in the heavy silence.

"Yes." Davies nodded, tapping the file once on his desk before placing it flat on the blotter. Starsky could tell he was stalling, which wasn't the blunt doctor's usual style. "And I highly recommend amputation beforehand. It's your only option."

"No," Starsky spat vehemently.

"Starsky," Hutch said on an outward breath, the word barely more than sibilant hisses. "This is your life."

"That's right, it's my life!" Starsky shouted, struggling to stand. "No amputation."

"Starsky, sit down!"

"Hutch, being a cop was my life. Without a leg, I'm not a cop," Starsky pleaded, knowing in some hazy part of his brain that he was being irrational.

They'd already talked about leaving the force; he couldn't work as a cop even with a bum leg that refused to heal. But to have no leg at all. That took away all his chances, all his dreams. The terror of it beat at him like frantic wings of a captured bird, battering away inside a cage he couldn't escape. "No, there has to be another way. Radiation? More chemo…"

"The first round of chemo didn't stop the tumor growth," Davies explained patiently. "If we don't remove all the cancer cells, and the diseased bone, you will die."

"Either way I die," Starsky stated blandly, getting the crutches under his arms. "Cause I can never be a cop again." He fled the room as quickly as the clumsy wooden crutches would go.

Hitching a breath caught between tears and panic, Hutch whispered, "John? He needs that surgery." Not entirely sure whether he was asking a question or stating a fact.

"Yes, but he has the right to say no, Ken." Davies eased down into his padded black leather chair, favoring his lower back with a sigh. "We can't force this down his throat. If it happens, it has to be his decision."

"The amp--surgery, and then more chemo?"

"Yes."

"Will that guarantee remission?"

"I can't guarantee that the coffee machine will still be working every morning." Davies looked over at Hutch with compassion in his eyes. "But, no, I can't say for sure that he'll go into remission after another course. He has a very aggressive form of the cancer and it grew even during treatment."

"God." Hutch bit down hard on his lower lip to keep the tears at bay, half of him wanting to go out after Starsky and the other half resigned to giving his partner some space to work things out. "But it would give us time?" He didn't even want to ask how long.

"Yes, and if I upped the dose of the chemo, pushed a little harder, perhaps we could win this
thing."

Staring at the doctor for a moment, Hutch couldn't even guess whether he was trying to placate or if he truly believed a miracle could happen. But miracles did happen--five years ago Starsky had come back from the dead, regained his health, and rejoined the force. If it was possible then, it was possible now.

"Let's do it," Hutch nodded. "I'll talk him into it."

As he was striding through the waiting room he saw a jumble of People magazines on the coffee table and remembered a picture of a handsome young Kennedy skiing down the side of a snowy mountain on one leg.

*Life was possible; they only had to fight for it.*

Hutch found Starsky sitting sideways in the passenger seat of the car, his legs still dangling over the edge of the doorframe. The cast on his left leg was, as usual, scuffed and dirty from ill use. Told not to walk on his injured leg, Starsky did everything but actually bear weight on it. He'd dug in their garden, grimming the plaster cast with earth, encouraged Rosie Dobey to scrawl pictures on the rough surface with magic markers, and had recently splashed through puddles, wetting the cast so thoroughly Hutch was sure he needed a replacement. But Dr. Bernardi was used to his recalcitrant patient by now, and had examined Starsky's leg without comment earlier, setting up the usual appointment for a recasting at the end of the week instead.

Now Hutch wondered if there would be surgery, and no more need for a cast, by Friday. Dr. Bernardi had apparently left all the bad news to Davies, opting out of the difficult session all together.

"Ready to go?" Starsky asked, still staring at his feet.

"Where?"

"To the mall," Starsky emphasized each word separately as if explaining to a child.

Leaning against the car, Hutch chose what he wanted to say carefully, aware that pushing Starsky when he was already up against a wall already was not the optimal course of action. "We have to talk about this. You can't just ignore what Davies said in there."

"No, not now," Starsky insisted, raising his tear-streaked face.

Hutch saw his lover's vulnerability so naked for a moment that he nearly fell apart entirely.

"I want to go do all those things we were talking about. Celebrate---life. Christmas, Chanukah, all the holidays rolled up together. Buy presents, drink eggnog and champagne. Kiss you under the mistletoe and eat food that's tref. Cause . . . I might be in the hospital later on in December."

"Oh, Love." Hutch gathered him close, not caring that they were standing in a very public place only blocks from the building where they both worked. That at any moment a colleague could drive by. Starsky was his world, and while he hadn't said yes to the surgery, he wasn't saying no anymore.

"Aren't you s'posed to buy gifts for the birthday of some little Jewish kid at the end of the month?" Starsky sighed against him, still talking as if he could cover up their fears with chatter.

"Your birthday isn't until March, but I'll buy you a present anyway," Hutch laughed.
"What I want is hard to wrap." He snaked his arms around Hutch and hugged him back.

"Let's always celebrate." Starsky held up his champagne flute, clinking it lightly against Hutch's. There was a desperate quality to his joy, but he refused to let that spoil the fun. "Even when there isn't any reason to. Arbor Day, Nurse's Day, Bastille Day…"

"You really want to celebrate a holiday in honor of getting out of a French prison?" Hutch asked amused, sipping his champagne, surrounded by the mounds of their purchases. Shopping bags from all the major department stores were represented; all decorated with festive holiday scenes in red and green.

"Especially that one," Starsky agreed with enthusiasm. "And if there isn't an obscure saint or some out of the way country having a bank holiday, we can still make one up."

"Like National Eat Lobster and Crab Day."

"I knew there was a reason I saw all those cards with claws at Hallmarks." Starsky downed his wine, giggling when the bubbles went up his nose.

"Starsky, that was Claus you saw--as in Santa."

"Oh my God, when Hutchinson starts punning, I know we're in trouble."

"That's it, no more champers," Hutch sighed, up-ending the bottle in the improvised trashcan turned ice bucket. "We gotta wrap all these gifts an'…" He shrugged, clearly in his cups. "I forget."

"Wrapping can wait until tomorrow." Starsky gave his partner an ineffectual shove to get him off the couch. "Somebody needs to go to bed."

"You come with me." Hutch held out his hands. "I need help getting up."

"Won't be getting any from this camp." Starsky pushed on his shoulder again. In the part of his brain not befogged with liquor the reminder that he wasn't the same man he'd been three months ago hurt just a little. Last summer, he could have hauled Hutch off the couch easily, but now even if he could put both feet on the floor to brace himself, he simply didn't have the weight to counter Hutch's larger mass.

Not that Hutch was overweight by any stretch of the imagination, but six courses of chemo had stripped Starsky of muscle mass and poundage that he hadn't put back on. With another course of the toxic drugs in his future, he probably wasn't going to.

"Then, I'll have to help you." Hutch nodded at this decision, attained his feet with a minimum of wobbling and yanked Starsky upright in the process.

"Whoa, gave me a head rush!" Starsky held onto Hutch, barely keeping his balance.

"You okay?"

"I'm more than that, I'm sloshed," Starsky laughed, Hutch's arm tightening around him.

"You're too skinny and you ate all that seafood, too." Hutch's fingers roamed over Starsky's multi-hued sweater, dipping under the ribbed band and connecting with the t-shirt underneath. "Got too many clothes on."
"Not that I'm not interested, believe me." Starsky gasped when Hutch yanked the t-shirt out of his jeans to press the flat of one hand against his now naked abdomen. Hutch's palm was still cold from the icy champagne bottle, feeling like a freezing brand on Starsky's warm skin. "But neither of us can see straight."

"And whose fault is that?" Hutch murmured, coming in close for a kiss that wobbled Starsky's already unsteady knees. "Two beers--each, wine with dinner, port after, and champagne…"

"But who's counting?" Starsky giggled, kissing back whenever he had a chance. Hutch tasted of grapes, apples, and pears, a fruit salad of a kiss. He wasn't nearly as drunk as Hutch, having sipped most of that long list of alcoholic beverages, but he was far from sober. For the first time in a long while, his touchy belly hadn't protested a single morsel he'd stuffed into it.

"I just did," Hutch snorted with a touch of irritation. "Want me to carry you?"

"No, no, I'll hobble." Starsky hung on as Hutch towed him along to the bedroom, chuckling all the way. This was fun, spontaneous…like the old days. He'd hated waiting for the right day between chemo doses when he didn't feel nauseated and had half a chance of getting an erection. Planning sex was so--planned. When Hutch backed him onto the bed and shoved his shirt up to his shoulders, Starsky was in heaven.

Hutch attacked one brown nipple, lapping gently with the rough part of his tongue while unbuttoning the silver buttons on Starsky's 501 jeans.

"I shoulda gotten you drunk more often, I like you this way." Starsky ran his fingers through Hutch's golden blond hair. It was finally growing back to pre-head shaved lengths and he liked the feel of the silky strands sliding over his skin. With any luck he'd just be starting to get a few brown curls just about the time Davies ordered the next round of chemo. Not wanting to go there, Starsky concentrated on the gorgeous man in front of him, kneading the strong muscles of his neck and massaging the long biceps and triceps that rippled as Hutch finally managed to pop the last button out of its hole and push the jeans aside.

"Nice shorts, Starsk," Hutch teased, threading his fingers under the elastic of the boxers printed with a large Rudolph. His red nose was poised right below the convenient slit in the fabric. "Too bad you're going to lose them."

"S'okay, I can live without 'em." Starsky lay back on the red and gold spread, passively letting Hutch divest him of his pants. He liked watching the way the overhead light backlit Hutch with a silver halo. Like an angel was making love to him. "But I wanna be inside you . . . "

"Yeah?" Hutch's delight was peppered with uncertainty.

It was as easy to read on his face as if it were printed there in large letters. Starsky understood completely. It had been a long time since he'd had any staying power at all and although the spirit was willing tonight, there was no telling if the flesh could keep it up or not.

"Yeah . . . " Starsky breathed out on a sigh as Hutch slipped one hand around his phallus and began stroking with just the tips of his fingers, feather-light and highly erotic. "Oh, yeah. Just get me ready and then get those clothes off fast because I'm primed . . . "

"I can do both at the same time." Hutch demonstrated a one handed technique while unzipping his trousers and toeing off his shoes.

"I always knew you had a talent, just took a bottle of champagne to bubble it to the surface,"
Starsky teased, even happier to watch Hutch's ferocious erection spring forward, bright red and ready for action. "Lean down here . . . " he encouraged. Hutch straddled Starsky's body, resting on his knees. "Closer . . . " Starsky wheedled until the lovely big rod was within reach. Then he opened his mouth and sucked it in hard and fast. Hutch gasped in ecstasy, bracing himself on his hands to keep his weight off Starsky's chest.

Breathing slowly, Starsky hummed deep in his throat, sucking on his prize with pure delight. He could sense Hutch's mounting excitement and kept a steady pressure with his lips, allowing the vibration from his humming to rumble down the length of the cock until even the balls seemed to be reverberating from the sound. Starsky reached up, giving the scrotum just a glancing bounce but Hutch cried out, shoving forcefully into Starsky's mouth.

He came in short order, pulling out fast so that some of the cum splattered down Starsky's chest, both of them panting and laughing with the sheer thrill of it all. That after so many years together just the simple act of oral sex could be so satisfying and so arousing was testament to their love of each other. Yet, this was no simple act of lovemaking. It was laughing instead of crying, spitting in the face of death, and providing a firm foundation to hold them up when things got much worse. It was survival.

"You liked that?" Starsky smiled up at his amour, their faces only inches apart. A drop of sweat dripped off the end of Hutch's nose, landing on Starsky's cheek.

"I liked that, yes," Hutch confirmed. "But we'll both need a shower after this."

"You don't like shared body fluids? I can always come back later . . . " Starsky rocked his hips forward, his thick cock jutting forward; a rocket ready for takeoff.

"Learned to share in kindergarten." Hutch rolled over on his side, curled up against his partner.

"Kindergarten? You musta had some progressive teachers in Duluth!"

"Have to keep warm in the winter somehow."

"You're drunk."

"I thought we already established that." Hutch laughed. "How do you want me?"

"So now you'll take orders from me? Roll the other way. I'd prefer looking into those baby blues, but this way is easier." Starsky sighed at his own shortcomings. He simply didn't have the stamina to stand or kneel in front of his love and push into that beckoning hole. But the view from the backside, while not quite as enticing as a pair of adoring eyes in a beloved face, wasn't bad. Hutch's pale skin, sometimes lightly tanned in mid summer, was peachy pale pink in the winter, his buttocks rounded like a baby's.

Starsky reverently curved his hand over one cheek, feeling the solid, healthy muscle. It was too easy to get caught up in admiring the merchandise, with a little bit of jealousy for what he didn't have anymore--he could only see wasted flesh when he looked at himself in the mirror--but he wanted action, and soon. Without much ado he carefully prepared Hutch's entrance with a liberal dollop of lubricating jelly and slid in two fingers. It had been a long time since he'd been able to service his lover and the fit was a tight one. Hutch gasped, pushing against Starsky's hand urgently.

"You all right? You're almost virginal again," Starsky said anxiously.

"I'm not seventeen, and more importantly, I don't wanna be . . . do it!" Hutch insisted.
"You were seventeen your first time?" Starsky slicked his cock, need quickening his breath and tensing his balls. He used the chatter to slow himself down, pushing into the waiting anus on an exhalation, desire building up too quickly for him to be careful.

"How old were you?" Hutch laughed, but there was a slight strain in his voice. He pulled one knee up towards his chest, panting.

"Eighteen . . . just," Starsky managed to get out. His whole body shaking, he shot his load in one hard burst. "Fuck--and it ended just about as quickly." He ejected quickly from the perfect sheath with a sigh of regret, one hand lingering on Hutch's hip.

"Hey, nobody said this was a marathon…" Hutch turned, pulling Starsky's hand down so that he had to lie next to him, which put Starsky slightly below his lover. Hutch kissed him on the crown of his head, cradling him like a baby. "I kinda like you bald, y'know that? No hair to get in my teeth."

"The drink has affected your eyesight, Mr. Hutchinson," Starsky responded shakily, pressing his lips against perfect, unscarred skin.

"Love is blind, Starsk," Hutch said, tipping his chin up so they could look into each other's eyes.

"Romantic fool," Starsky muttered. Hutch managed to flip the covers over both of them and they fell asleep, entwined like the dark and light sides of yin and yang.

Hutch half woke when the mattress jittered for a moment. He smiled against Starsky's warm neck; that was just Pansy jumping up on the bed. But then the whole bed frame shook violently, rolling more than a foot away from the wall and then back again. A weird rumbling groan was rising out of the earth, the floor seeming to liquefy like so much wooden jello.

"Starsky! Earthquake!" Hutch yelled, jerking him out of the bed with a burst of adrenaline that got them both across the room and under the doorframe. By that time the powerful quake had abated, leaving only the sway of the curtains and the disheveled heap of books out of the bookshelf to betray the earth's brief temper tantrum.

"S'over?" Starsky muttered, bracing himself against the wall. He was still more than half asleep.

"I think so. Need help there?" Hutch laughed self-consciously. He had never grown accustomed to the way the ground shook in California. Back in Minnesota, the ground was solid and dependable, not like here. His heartrate still hadn't settled into a normal rhythm when a second smaller aftershock rattled the house, the windowpanes clattering against the frames like maracas. Pansy howled from somewhere in the living room.

"Musta made the big guy mad, eatin' all that shellfish," Starsky announced loudly over the sudden barking of neighborhood dogs.

"Don't think your breaking a dietary law warranted an earthquake." Hutch pawed through the jumble of shoes in the closet for his slippers and a pair of sweats. He tossed a second set at Starsky. "Get back into bed, I'm going out to see if anything's happened in the street." He could hear the irritating whoops and screeches of car alarms all up and down the block. Made him proud he'd never bought one.

"You're not leaving me behind at a time like this," Starsky declared, dressing quickly. "Where're the crutches?"
"Then be careful, there could be glass . . ." Hutch cautioned, feeling his way along the wall to the living room. He located the wooden sticks by the couch, and backtracked to the hall to hand them to his partner. The living room was in good condition with only a few plants and knickknacks on the floor. One of Starsky's delicate ships in a bottle had taken a fatal plunge, but otherwise there was no major damage.

On the usually quiet suburban street most of the inhabitants were out in their yards at 3:45 in the morning. None of the nearby houses had sustained any obvious damage, and Hutch concluded that no one was hurt after conversing with the neighbors on both sides. They had been incredibly lucky, and while he probably should be checking in with the department to help out, Hutch realized he was still drunk enough to be more of a hindrance than a help. He turned back in time to see Starsky depositing most of his crab meal and all the subsequent alcohol he’d imbibed into the rose bushes.

"Hey, how're you doing?" Hutch caught him by the arm as Starsky wiped his mouth with a trembling hand. Helping him back into the house, Hutch realized the electricity was out, the room swathed in darkness. While he tried to remember where he'd last left candles and matches, Starsky dropped down onto the couch without speaking.

Hutch sighed. It had been so easy to think that the chemo was all over until they'd been hit with the bad news, and he'd almost forgotten that it had only been five and a half days since Starsky was curled around an emesis bowl, sicker than a dog. Starsky had done too much yesterday.

They never should have gone shopping after the doctor's office. And neither one of them should have drank so much. Hutch's head was pounding and his guts churned ominously, but the last thing he wanted to do right now was follow Starsky's lead. Finally locating the matches in the breakfront, he lit one of the dining table candles giving the room a shadowy illumination. Taking one last look at his partner curled up miserably on the couch with the afghan pulled tightly around him, Hutch headed for the kitchen. The sight of Starsky like that was too reminiscent of so many days in the last months.

Memories of the awfulness of chemo overwhelmed him and he had the absurd urge to cry in frustration. Instead, he dumped out four aspirin and downed them with a swallow of milk straight from the carton.

"This was a sign."

"What?" Hutch stepped back into the living room. He couldn't see Starsky over the back of the couch.

"This has gotta happen, huh?"

Starsky's plaintive tone cut Hutch like a knife, leaving a wide swatch of pain behind. He didn't need any explanation for the almost nonsensical question. Starsky was referring to the surgery--and not just the surgery to insert a few more pins and screws but the grim reality of the amputation surgery. "Yeah, Stark, I think it has to."

"It's like my life is on this balance, y'know? This lady holdin' up two little gold plates on chains. And I don't know which side is the right one--either way I lose."

"You don't lose, Starsky." Hutch was on the sofa and gathering him into his arms in a second. "You win. Life."

"But what kinda life is it?" Starsky was openly crying but he kept talking, the words tumbling out so quickly he was panting with exertion. "No more bein' a cop. I'm so…Goddamned it! S'good
thing my ma ain't here…I won't be whole--why would you wanna stay now? I'll be a gimp, can't drive. No job. No job! Fuckfuckfuckfuck…I don't wanna go right now, Hutch."

Unable to give any kind of counseling, Hutch just hugged him tighter, infusing his arms with all the love he could muster. He ached all over for Starsky's grief, even though he'd always supported the idea of amputation. If losing a limb meant Starsky stayed alive, he was all for it.

"I don' wanna die, Hutch, but it's not living if I can't walk!"

"Sssh, I know the last thing you want to hear right now is rationalizations, so I'm not going to even try," Hutch murmured in Starsky's ear. "Just know I love you. I'm not leaving, no matter how many times you push. This is awful stuff, Starsk. Horrible, and I'd cut off my own foot if it would change things."

"no."

Starsky spoke so softly into the soft cotton of Hutch's 49'ers sweatshirt that Hutch wasn't sure he'd said anything at all. "I can't hear you," he said gently, rubbing light circles on his partner's back.

"No. Never say that. Like when you shaved off all your hair. I don't want to see any part of the cancer touching you." Starsky sucked in a lungful of air, his eyes still wild and wet, but he had a fearsome, determined look. "You have to stay whole, clean. I don't want this--shit--to touch you. If it was contagious, I'd leave in a minute, I swear, and hide. Hutch, you're the keeper of the flame. Y'know, when things get so hard I can just look at you and you're so solid, and strong, and there… don't change, please?"

"I'm here." Hutch clung to him, tears streaming down his own cheeks. Why did it have to come to this? What quirk of fate had dealt David Starsky such a shitty hand? As if surviving an assassination attempt wasn't enough, he had to slog through months of chemo only to crap out afterwards with this diagnosis.

They stayed wrapped around each other for so long Hutch thought Starsky had gone to sleep, but Starsky stirred, bringing one hand up slowly to wipe at his eyes. "My head hurts."

"I'm not surprised, you must have the king of all hangovers. Want some aspirin?" Hutch untangled himself, resuming the steady circles on Starsky's back.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure it'd stay down." Starsky leaned his head on Hutch's shoulder, but the turbulent emotions had passed. He was almost limp; lethargic.

"That bad?"

"Mmmm." He gave a half a chuckle, a sound Hutch hadn't expected to hear. "How come you're always pushing the health food and the alternative treatments, but get a headache and you're handing out aspirin like it's candy."

"Aspirin works. Good old Bayer," Hutch said in defense. His own headache was abating with every passing minute and he'd just about decided to get up and make some coffee, or at least do something constructive, when the phone rang loudly.

"It's the department," Starsky muttered.

Hutch answered with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. It was indeed Dobey, checking up on them. Begging off coming in immediately, Hutch promised to show up as soon as he could find someone to stay with Starsky.
"I can go in with you."

"Starsk, I don't want to go--you certainly don't have to." Hutch got up, running his fingers through his unruly hair. He still felt like the earth was moving even though there had only been the two shakers. And Starsky was so unbalanced right now, the last thing he wanted to do was leave him.

"What do you think they do with it?" Starsky asked when Hutch had dumped some frozen orange juice into a pitcher and was attempting to stir the icy mass into liquid.

"With what?" Hutch asked distractedly, wondering if it was worth going back to bed at this point. He was exhausted but hyper-alert at the same time. Bed still beckoned and he decided that was the best course of action.

"My leg. Where does it go?"

"Starsky!" he groaned. "Why are you thinking about that? I don't know, ask Bernardi."

"I won't make two footprints in the sand."

"Oh God, Starsk," Hutch choked, his heart breaking. With trembling hands, he gathered up the aspirin and a glass of juice, bringing them over to his friend. "Your footprints are indelibly stamped on my heart, my love. They'll be there for all eternity."

The next few days were a blur of activity with doctor appointments and lab visits. Luckily, Bay City had sustained very little damage from the earthquake. The epicenter was located way out in the desert beyond the Los Angeles area, but the original jolt and subsequent aftershocks had been enough to tumble a few walls, knock down one off-ramp on the 405, kill three people and a dog. All of this impinged very little on Starsky and Hutch, who were immersed in their own little upheaval. Even the most innocuous conversation seemed charged with emotion as the day of surgery approached. Starsky alternated between unfocused fear and almost violent rage. He threw a cup of cocoa at Hutch, and radiated such intensity that Pansy avoided him altogether.

Still, between the squalls on the home front and lending a hand in the squadroom, Hutch found some time to stop off at an upscale gardening boutique that featured DIY stepping stones. He bought two, and so armed, headed over to the hospital where Starsky had just been admitted.

"Hey," Starsky greeted him almost shyly.

"Hi, yourself. I asked Dr. Bernardi's assistant to meet us here for a little ceremony," Hutch explained, laying out his packages.

"What've you got there?"

"All will be explained soon enough," Hutch said mysteriously, ducking into the tiny bathroom to get a pitcher of water.

A thickset man carrying a cast saw came in at just that moment, watching the activity with interest. "Mohammed Masour," he introduced himself in a thick Middle Eastern accent. "You needed a cast split?"

"Hutch?" Starsky asked in surprise.

"I discussed it with Dr. Bernardi," Hutch said, addressing the tech to keep Starsky in suspense a
while longer. "He said it would be all right to remove just the foot part of the cast tonight."

"Okay by me." Masour nodded, getting to work.

Hutch smiled indulgently at Starsky's mystified expression. Did Starsky good to be curious, interested in something. He'd become so entrenched in anger he needed a little whimsy in his life.

In short order, Masour had removed the bottom of the grimy cast and dumped it in the trash. "Anything else?" he asked, brushing the plaster dust off the bed.

"No, thanks," Starsky said finally, staring down at his foot, naked for the first time in months. "This is great." He wiggled his toes experimentally, wincing. "Hutch? If you're planning to get me up and running around tonight, I'll have you know my 50 yard dash needs some work."

"No track and field events, just this." Waiting until Masour carried his saw out, Hutch placed a round frame filled with wet cement beside the bed. "Stand up and be immortalized."

"Oh, my God," Starsky whispered, his dark blue eyes filling immediately with tears. He wiped them away impatiently. "Like in front of Grauman's, I mean Mann's Chinese Theatre?"

"Just like Marilyn Monroe."

"Me and Humphrey Bogart have the same size feet," Starsky chattered, shifting around so that he was positioned over the small target. "In high school, I went there with a Kathy Phillips, my girlfriend in 10th grade, and stood in his footprints."

"Better get to it, then, Sam Spade. The cement is quick drying." Hutch held out a hand to help him up. Starsky grinned, placing his stronger right foot in the smooshy goo. Gripping Hutch's proffered hand, he gingerly lowered the weaker foot beside the first one, standing for the first time in months.

"This is like wading in mud in the vacant lots after it rained when I was a kid. The mud squooshes up between your toes." Starsky giggled.

There was an edge to even his joy as if he had to work hard to maintain any level of happiness, but all the same Hutch was pleased beyond measure that he was making the effort. "You gotta make one, Hutch, so we'll both be immortalized."

"I bought two kits," Hutch agreed happily. Starsky had accepted his gesture of love at face value, using the paving stone to commemorate of the last night he'd had his foot. Hutch had thought about bringing a camera, as well, but Starsky was so self-conscious about his appearance post chemo, that he'd left the camera at home. There were only a handful of pictures of Starsky since he'd lost his hair, but that wasn't half as important as renewing his sense of self worth. "Sit back now and I'll wash off your feet."

"You thought of everything," Starsky crowed as Hutch produced one of the pink hospital basins filled with soapy water. He wiggled his dirty feet, splashing water over the sides of the basin.

"Just read the instructions on the package. Said not to let the cement harden on your feet." he shrugged. "D'you want your whole name on the stone or just Starsky?"

"Just Starsky. And the date."

Using a wooden Popsicle stick Hutch scratched the letters into the moist mortar above the footprints. The outline of those ten toes lined up next to one another twisted him inside, but he
didn't want Starsky sensing pity. The whole situation was so tenuous, both of them knowing that the morning would bring a life altering surgery, and both of them afraid to confront the reality. Tonight they were living in the moment, the future cordoned off with the yellow tape police use to keep the public out.

"I wanna watch you do it," Starsky kicked water intentionally onto Hutch's slacks, laughing.

"Gotta mix up more cement." Hutch demonstrated, pouring water on top of the powdered cement in a second frame. Rolling up his now damp pants with a grimace at his amused partner, he pulled off socks and shoes. When the solution of pulverized rock, clay, and water was just right, he stuck his feet in. The wet mixture did squoosh up in between his toes in a weird sensation, and he grinned over at his partner, who laughed aloud.

His face alight, Starsky glowed with happiness. That was the Starsky Hutch wanted to remember forever. On impulse Hutch leaned over, planting a kiss on his lover's face while the cement hardened.

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"You can go in now, Mr. Hutchinson." A stout nurse Hutch didn't know beckoned from the recovery room, smiling gently, obviously aware of his nervousness. "He's beginning to wake up, but he's groggy and will sleep for hours, most probably."

Donning a surgical gown and little paper booties for his shoes, Hutch worked to slam the lid down on all the frightening images he'd conjured up while sitting bolt upright in the waiting room for the entire length of the surgery. Both Huggy and Daisy had sat with him, but their presence had somehow just intensified the idea that there was something to be worried about. If the operation had been for something benign, like an impacted wisdom tooth, Hutch wouldn't have needed an entourage of supporters. But when his best friend--his lover--was losing part of his anatomy, people showed up in droves. Either that, or they called. Even Starsky's brother Nick had called, from prison back East. For an event of such rarity Hutch had managed to be civil to the man. It would have been nicer if Nick had managed to call when Starsky was around to talk to him, but no, Nick had called after his brother had gone into the OR.

Flowers had crowded the room just before Starsky was taken away on the gurney. Bouquets from the guys in the detective squadroom, the Dobeys, and several other friends. Hutch started sneezing at a quarter to seven in the morning from the proliferation of flora and hadn't stopped since. At least the recovery room wasn't wall-to-wall posies.

Approaching the curtained area, Hutch felt the queasiness in his belly swell to almost overwhelming nausea. He avoided looking at the lower end of the bed, concentrating on his partner's pale face. And with that, the sickness abated, substituted by love. It was Starsky, after all. Just Starsky, his eyelids bluish on his pale cheeks, a plastic nasal cannula bringing supplemental oxygen to his body. Nothing had really changed.

Perching on the little round stool, Hutch picked up one limp hand, squeezing gently. "Hey, you big lug, you awake?"

"Hu'sh?"

Hutch grinned. He'd always liked the way Starsky slurred his name when sleepy, making it sound like a request for silence. "Sssh, yeah, it's me. Just sleep, Starsk."

"Is it…gone?" Starsky opened his eyes, staring up beseechingly.
Knowing that he had to look, but still not wanting to, Hutch glanced swiftly to his left, sighting the narrow mound of blanket covering only one leg. "Y-yes."

Starsky turned away, his whole body seeming to shrink just a bit, pulling away from Hutch's grasp.

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Starsky's withdrawal included every aspect of life. He didn't eat, refused to do the exercises the nurses and therapists insisted on, and hardly spoke a word to anyone, even Hutch. He spent most days sleeping or staring blankly out the window of his room at the unceasing rain. TV weathermen were calling it one of the rainiest years in a decade.

Whatever it was, Starsky's depression was contagious. Hutch found it harder and harder to get out of bed, go to work, and go about his daily duties. He even began to find excuses to get out of visiting Starsky at the hospital. This intensified the already overwhelming guilt swallowing him up. He was the one who'd pushed for the amputation and now, instead of keeping Starsky alive, it had deadened his spirit. And Hutch hadn't a clue how to fix things.

Sitting next to the bed when Starsky practically ignored him was a crushing blow. He knew he was the one who should be providing some kind of entertainment. After all he was the able-bodied person. Starsky was sick—he needed support and encouragement, but Hutch had none left. He was exhausted, mentally and physically. More than once he found himself cutting his hospital visit short to seek out someplace with noise, energy, and alcohol.

"Blondie, you been in here more often in the last week than in the last three months," Huggy observed, drying off a beer glass before placing it next to its brethren on a high shelf.

"Can't a guy get a quiet drink around here?" Hutch snapped irritably. Even though he'd craved a change from the deadly quiet of the hospital, the cacophony of the bar was adding to his perpetual headache.

"Mosta the time, 'cept I kinda figured you'd be spending time with that other guy…what's his name?" Huggy frowned as if trying to remember, then snapped his fingers. "Starsky, that's it! You remember him, he's in the hospital?"

Hutch jerked up from nursing his beer, hearing the accusatory tone in Huggy's voice. "Hug…I…"

"Down would be up for you, huh?" Huggy relented, leaning against the bar. "I saw Starsky this morning. He's in a bad way and it don't help with you moping around, too."

"Did he talk to you?" Hutch asked hopefully. He'd only stayed long enough to see Starsky staring sightlessly at a game show he normally hated, pale face slack and blue eyes dull. Starsky had barely greeted him before turning away again. Since the surgery Hutch had a tight knot of tears lodged in his chest that clogged his throat. He could barely swallow liquids and food was practically a thing of the past. He felt desperate, like some vital organ had been cut off along with Starsky's leg.

"No." Hug shrugged, pursing his lips. "Daisy's gone over there now."

"Daisy?" That surprised Hutch, as he'd never known her to visit Starsky on her own before.

"She had something she wanted to tell him, but she didn't tell me." Huggy busied himself behind the bar, filling a few drinks as waitresses came up with orders, letting Hutch finish his beer in silence. When the busy spate ended, Huggy called out an order for two burgers to his cook, then inclined his head towards his cramped little office. "C'mon, Hutch, may be a no bigger'n a closet,
but it's the only place I'll ever be king."

Smiling wearily at that, Hutch followed, sitting down in a lumpy overstuffed chair probably found in the local Goodwill reject section.

"Your cadets graduating?" Huggy asked conversationally.

"Yeah, no more teaching until after the new year," Hutch answered, his heart constricting as he suddenly recalled Starsky's proposed date for New Year's Eve. Starsky had hoped for some hair, a little sex, and a big crab feed. Now, all of that was in limbo. Chemo would probably be started by then, with all the joys it brought. Hutch seriously wondered if he could stand another round of chemo, and doubted that Starsky could in his present condition.

"You got any cases going on?" Huggy asked as if he didn't have his ear on the street and usually knew the latest before the police did.

"Mostly shuffling paper for Dobey," Hutch said dispiritedly. "Co-ordinated the big drug bust earlier this week, and we may turn Schroeder's case over to the FBI--he's gotta be out of state by now. Any word on that scum?"

"He's always been a snake, low to the ground, and just about as slippery." Huggy cleared off his desk by shoving most of the ledgers and liquor invoices over onto the filing cabinet. "Even with Supervisor Michaelson-Hsieh keeping Emerald's murder alive on the news all the time, nobody's seen him in weeks. I'd'a told you, man,"

"Yeah, I know." Hutch rubbed the tightness in his chest, wishing he could just sleep for a million years.

"So, what do you need, Hutch?" Huggy waved in his latest favorite waitress, Demelza, who delivered two plates of Huggy Bear specials with a smile and a wink. "Besides a good meal?"

"Me?" Hutch regarded the food with as much enthusiasm as he would a root canal.

"Eat it all, like the good little boy your mama raised you t'be and start talkin', Farm Boy." Huggy took a generous bite out of his own burger.

"Wasn't raised on a farm," Hutch retorted, resigned to eating the meat, if not the French fries. "Just summered there."

"Yeah, but you look like a farm boy, all them blond locks and Scandinavian brawn," Huggy teased. "C'mon, spill to old Hug, get it off your chest."

In fits and starts, Hutch began to talk. Of his concern for Starsky, his self-hatred for encouraging a surgery he knew Starsky didn't want, and his over-identification with a recent case. Even though Hutch had never seen the body of a man found dead in his apartment, he'd read over the case files because of family claims that the police had misidentified the death as a suicide instead of a murder. They'd insisted that their beloved son and brother would never blow his brains out with a handgun, that he wasn't that kind of person. Yet, a note and the recent news that his brain tumor was terminal had all pointed to a desperate man unwilling to prolong his life any further. Hutch was certain, from all the facts presented, that the detectives investigating the case had done a thorough job. It had been suicide, and that scared Hutch more than anything in a long time.

"Starsky wouldn't, Hutch," Huggy said softly.
"You don't know that!" Hutch shouted, pain and anger infusing his body with more passion than he'd had since the night of the earthquake. "I don't know that! He's changed. He...he's fading away, Huggy!"

"Then find a way to bring him back."

David?" Daisy stood resolutely in the doorway of the pleasant hospital room, girding up her courage. She'd had to force herself to even enter the hospital itself, memories of childhood swirling around her like ghosts.

Luckily, the surroundings were quite different. In fact, the whole atmosphere of the Rose Tree Unit had surprised her with its pretty decoration and quiet air of competence; a welcome change from the places she'd once visited. There wasn't the specter of death clinging to the place, as she'd expected. A sweet-faced young nurse wearing a flowered top pointed out Starsky's room, smiling in a friendly way to allay her fears. Now, if Starsky would only talk to her. Huggy had come back from his morning's visit saddened and worried about the man. Daisy had spent the rest of the day baking Yule logs, resolving herself to the fact that the time had come. She had to fess up with the secret she'd kept from all her new friends—even her fiancé.

She'd actually meant to tell all the day of the surgery, but Hutch's visible pain and her own remembered terrors had kept her silent. Waiting in that stifling little room had been a true test of will. She'd spent the remainder of the day making hundreds of Christmas cookies alone in the steamy bakery, staying up the whole night rather than trying to sleep and dreaming of the one whom she missed most on earth. What quirk of fate had brought her to Huggy Bear at the same time his old buddy was diagnosed with osteosarcoma? It still sent shivers down her spine. Was this to be her atonement for past wrongs, or her gift to Starsky?

Bearing a basket of cookies and fudge, Daisy advanced into the room even though Starsky hadn't answered. Was he asleep? The TV was on, Hogan coercing blond braided Helga into letting him into Colonel Klink's office. Setting the basket on the bedside table, Daisy hesitated, wondering if she should forge right ahead or wait for Starsky to respond.

"I've brought you some treats," Daisy finally said lamely, surprised when Starsky turned dully towards her. "I know you're not eating a lot lately, but you could share it with the nurses. All kinds of cookies—shortbread, Mexican Wedding Cakes, frosted Santas…"

"Russian Tea Cakes," Starsky said.

"What?"

"Those, my ma used to call 'em Russian Tea Cakes." He pointed to the small, round cookies covered with powdered sugar.

"Oh, those have lots of names, I've even heard them called Pecan Balls," Daisy babbled, wondering how they'd gotten off on such a tangent and should she bring up the subject that had brought her here, or let it lie for now. "D'jou want one? I like Stained Glass cookies the best--they're so pretty." She held up one of the delicate confections, angling it so that the overhead light shone through the strawberry jelly 'glass' in the center. She sometimes thought they were too pretty to eat.

"My ma made those, too." Starsky said softly, his voice husky.

"Where is she?"
"She died," he answered flatly.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not, not any more." Starsky selected a Santa, touching the red frosting of his suit with his forefinger. "I don't want her to be here, see me like this. It's better she died."

"But you must miss her badly."

"She used to bake. We were Jewish, but she liked to bake all these cookies. Lots of 'em, for the whole neighborhood. The--the local Catholic school would have a party…" Starsky crushed the Santa into crumbs, his wan face hard. "I'd bring them down there and the nun, Sister Therese, would give me a blessing on my head to protect me cause it was usually snowing." He hitched a breath, close to crying but holding it in. "Useta feel special, like God smiled on me those days. Not any more."

"Starsky." Daisy wiped away the remainder of the Santa cookie, dusting off her hands over the metal trashcan. "I have something I want to tell you. I've wanted to tell you since the day we met, but there never seemed to be the right time."

"I'm really tired."

"I understand--more than you know." She put her hand down gently on the blanket right over what was left of his left thigh. "Does your foot hurt? Can you still feel your calf?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?" Starsky stared at her with evident surprise.

"I had a twin." Daisy looked down on the wealth of her talent, the basket of cookies. Somehow they helped center her, remind her of all she'd accomplished. "His name was Flori--Florian. In Italian it means flower. I used to wonder a little at my parents' sense of humor. Naming a boy flower. My elder sister's name was Marigold, though."

She refrained from looking at her audience, turning to face the window instead. Starsky's wavy reflection watched her, listening to her story. She briefly wondered whether he was actually paying attention, or just waiting for her to leave. "My maiden name is Bouquet. Is it any wonder he was a tough kid who got into fights all the time?"

"He was 14, just beginning to get his height, taller than me finally. My mother thought it was growing pains." She could feel the tears welling up inside, pricking the underside of her eyelids until she had to blink repeatedly. "When the doctor finally diagnosed osteosarcoma, it was almost too late…they took his leg the next day." One stray drop slid down her cheek but she scrubbed it away. "Flori--Flori was so incredibly brave, but this was 1968. The treatments were not as good then. He died while undergoing chemo."

"Your twin?"

"Yes," Daisy agreed miserably. "I just wanted you to know--to know that in a small way, I understand what's happening to you. It's more powerful that anything else, cancer. Strips you down
to the soul. At least Flori and I could talk to each other." She finally looked up at Starsky who was
listening with a rapt but unreadable expression.
"I know it's hard, but keep talking, keep communicating, even if it's only to me. I don't know you
very well, and maybe that makes it easier." She trembled, the tears releasing what was too hard to
keep inside any longer.

What surprised her the most, though, was when Starsky pulled her into his arms. It felt amazingly
cleansing to cry for Flori 16 years after his death. She'd been lost then, her grief submersed by her
mother's pain over losing a child, and the myriad details involved in a funeral. After that, her
mother had shut down, her father immersed himself in work, and her older sister left for college.
No one paid any attention to good little Daisy, leaving her to bake bread late into the night. She'd
baked so much bread she'd had to sell it, just to get it out of the house, earning surprisingly good
money which she'd used to leave home with. But out on her own, she'd been lost again--until
recently.

Wiping her eyes with the back of her sleeve, Daisy looked around for a box of Kleenex. Starsky lay
back on his pillows as if embarrassed for participating in that display of emotion, but there was a
strange change in him that Daisy couldn't quite put her finger on. Finding the tissue box, she
cleaned herself up, crumpling the Kleenex into a soggy wad.

"Can I have one of those?" Starsky nodded at the cookie basket.

"Sure, I brought them for you. Which one?"

"Fudge," he decided, glancing over at the TV. Hogan was in a confab with the other prisoners, and
LeBeau was making some French gourmet meal. "D'you know how to make stuffed veal?"

"I've got a recipe, why?"

"Hutch…Hutch likes it." Starsky tasted the fudge tentatively, then ate the piece in one bite.
"Thanks for telling me about Flori. You got a picture?"

"Sure," Daisy pulled out the snapshot she always kept in her wallet. Taken only a few weeks before
her brother's fatal diagnosis, it showed them standing side by side at some carnival. She had cotton
candy, he had a corndog.

"Looks a lot like you," Starsky remarked. "Did he know he was going to die?"

"Yes." Daisy stared at the picture for a moment before tucking it back in her purse. "My parents
didn't want him to know how bad it was, but he did. He did."

"I've thought a lot about death this week." Starsky reached over and snagged another piece of
fudge. "But, I'm not ready, and I know Hutch isn't. He's so damned scared I can't bear to be around
him lately. Seein' all that fear in his face really tears me up inside."

"Did you tell him?"

"Sometimes it's all I can do to breathe, talking takes so much more work."

"Life's a bitch, and then you die."

"Huggy teach you that one?" Starsky quirked a rare smile.

"It seemed apropos. I can get you a t-shirt printed up."
"Do that." Starsky nodded, taking a shuddery breath.

"A Chanukah present, maybe."

"When is that? What day is it?" he asked sounding startled.

"Next week? I've got an order for dreidel shaped cookies coming up for the Levenstein's party on the 20th. Today's the 14th."

Starsky chewed his fudge thoughtfully, swallowed, and then coughed. Daisy poured him a glass of water, but the cough persisted even after he'd drunk his fill.

"You all right?"

"Yeah, that's been happening all day." He waved away any concern for himself, closing his eyes tiredly.

"I'll be going then," Daisy said awkwardly.

"Oh--thanks." Starsky opened his eyes again. "For the cookies, and Flori. You told me before you told Hug?"

"I knew you'd understand."

Starsky frowned, looking at her for the first time like he really saw her. "He will, too. He loves you. Come by again."

"I will." Daisy gave a little wave, turning towards the door. Filling the frame was a tall, good looking blond.

"Hutch?" Starsky said from behind her, and there was such need and love in his voice that Daisy had to duck her head not to weep in front of the detectives.

"Huggy told me she was here," Hutch said as Daisy passed by with a nodded greeting.

"Yeah, brought some cookies. Have a couple, they look good." Starsky sucked the last of the fudge off his lower lip

"Did you try one?"

Starsky shrugged, grappling with the misery that blackened his world, but oh-so-glad to see Hutch. He hadn't expected him to come back so soon after he'd basically ignored him earlier.

Hutch selected a spritz cookie shaped like a green wreath with a cheery red hot for a holly berry. "I missed you," he said at the exact moment as Starsky spoke the same words.

"Hutch," Starsky whispered, grabbing his lover's hand like a lifeline. "I'm so deep in shit I can't see the surface."

"Then just hang onto me, Starsk," Hutch hitched himself onto the edge of the mattress, pulling Starsky into his arms for the first time in a week. "Breathe in and out. Don't think, just be."

"This some gestalt crap you learned in a transcendental meditation book?" Starsky asked cynically, but he molded himself into the warmth and security that was Hutch.

"Nope, just how I've gotten through this week on my own," Hutch answered with heartbreaking simplicity.
Starsky coughed, but the pain in his chest had nothing to do with cancer or surgery. "You gonna eat that cookie?" he asked finally, not quite strong enough to accept Hutch's pain as well as his own yet. Still, just the closeness of their bodies lifted off burdens he hadn't realized he was carrying.

"You want this?"

Starsky could feel his friend's grin against his naked temple. Hutch kissed him feather soft, butterfly wings fluttering on his skin, and held the cookie up to Starsky's lower lip. Opening his mouth Starsky took a bite from the buttery confection, the sharp flavor of the red hot a surprising contrast to the crumbly texture of the cookie. "

Want another?" Hutch asked.

"You, I'll feed you." Starsky coughed again because the crumbs irritated his throat but he craved the feel of Hutch's body against him. Tiny connections re-established, healing balms on his bruised psyche. "Pass the basket over. You want a tea cake?"

"That one," Hutch voiced into his ear, a long finger pointing to a five-pointed star iced in yellow and gold.

"You been eatin' enough?" Starsky asked as casually as possible but once again, every word seemed charged with so many conflicting emotions that he was afraid anything he said would push Hutch away again. Why did he keep doing this? Turning away from the only person who kept him sane, and then wallowing in despair when Hutch wasn't nearby?

"I could ask you the same thing." Hutch munched the cookie, sliding his hand gently around Starsky's prominent ribcage.

"TPN." Starsky pointed up at the bag of yellow IV fluid hanging next to the bed. The plastic tubing snaked up under the sleeveless sweatshirt he was wearing to the port in his upper chest. "Total parenteral nutrition. Don't need anything else. The food's lousy here anyway."

"That's a crock and you know it." Hutch wiped crumbs off his face. "You just need the right incentive."

"Like what?"

"A burrito?"

Starsky huffed a laugh, cupping his hand over Hutch's still resting on his sternum. Laughing hurt, a heaviness settling in his lungs like he was catching a cold, but he paid little attention to that. All of a sudden it was like the ominous black clouds that hovered one inch above his head lifted up several feet. He'd laughed, just for a moment, and it felt strange but satisfying. "Where you gonna find a burrito around here?"

"I wasn't thinking in the hospital. I'd go get one for you. Any place, any where?"

"Break me out of this joint and we can high-tail it south of the border in a couple of hours," Starsky said. He and Hutch, their hair blowing in a hot wind, streaking down the highway towards Mexico in the Torino. The Torino had wheels and he had two legs. Tears pricked at him, but he refused them entrance. "Pepi's Burrito Supreme with sour cream."

"Beef or chicken?" Hutch asked, sounding choked up himself.

Starsky looked aghast at his partner, seeing the lines of fatigue that had altered his face in just a
week. Hutch smiled at his expression, ducking his head when Starsky pushed a stray lock of fine blond hair off his forehead. "You have to ask?" Starsky played with Hutch's bangs for a moment before letting his hand drop down into his lap. He couldn't shake the leaden weariness. It innervated him, making every motion exhausting.

"Beef, with extra jalapenos and salsa."

"And Dos Equis."

"Now you're just being reckless." Hutch kissed Starsky's ear, then his lips.

"You always said that was my biggest problem."

"No, talking too much..." Hutch kissed him again, then pulled back in confusion because Starsky was sobbing. "What, baby?"

"Hutch, don't leave. I don' wanna burrito, just stay. Hold onto me, and tell me it'll all be all right." Starsky hiccuped, unable to stop crying.

"It'll all be all right." Hutch smiled, kissing a tear-streaked cheek.

"Liar." Starsky pressed hard on his ribs. The coughing must have pulled a muscle, because he hurt inside and crying didn't help, but the tears kept falling, even when he took big gulping breaths to stop them. "My calf hurts," he said instead.

"Want me to rub it?" Hutch asked sympathetically, pulling him closer.

"Can't," Starsky turned, burying his face in the soft wool of Hutch's green and gold plaid shirt.

"Why not?"

"The left one hurts," Starsky ground out, hiccuping again. "When I woke up, in the recovery room, I could feel it."

"But Starsky." Hutch drew in a breath as if he didn't really want to say anymore. "It's gone. There's no leg there to hurt."

"But it does--more than before." Starsky massaged his forehead with the heel of his hand, pushing down hard against the bone, wishing he could reach right in and pull out all the headache, the pain in his chest, and the sometimes agonizing cramps in his missing leg. "Back around Thanksgiving, both legs used to tingle all the time--really annoying. That's why I fell that day and got a nosebleed, felt like pins and needles in my feet all the time. Davies said it was another side effect of the chemo, like I don't have enough of those." He paused, surprised at how much calmer he felt. Being able to talk--to communicate as Daisy had said, helped so incredibly. "But now it feels like it's knotted up, like I ran down some turkey in an alley and got a charley horse."

"That's weird."

"I'm beginning to think that if there's a rare side effect or unusual symptom, I'll get it." Starsky quirked a tired smile, leaning back on the pillow. He hadn't talked so much to anyone of late, and two visitors in an hour had completely worn him out.

"Remember that relaxation exercise we used to do to help the pain after the shooting?" Hutch scooted over to help him lie down, smoothing the sheets and tucking another pillow under his head.
"Going to a restful place where I just drift away on a painless cloud? Ain't such a place."

"You're always so hard to get along with. C'mon, humor me."

"Don't I always?"

"Close your eyes, Grumpy."

"I'm not one of the seven dwarfs."

"I dunno about that, I've seen you pretty dopey."

"Shithead," Starsky said without a drop of rancor, closing his eyes. He tucked his left hand into Hutch's for safekeeping.

"Asshole to you, too." Hutch smiled fondly, watching Starsky wiggle and squirm into a comfortable position. "Relax each part of your body separately, working from the feet up to your head." Remarkably, the exercise took almost no time at all because Starsky fell asleep before Hutch finished isolating the lower half of the body.

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The Rose Tree Unit expected family to stay over with the patients. In fact, it was encouraged, something Hutch still found surprising. They supplied a bed, narrow and short, but complete with a scratchy blanket and flat pillow. This was far superior to anything he'd ever slept on the entire time Starsky was at Memorial after the shooting. They even kept the lights down low in the rooms whenever anyone came in to check on the patients. Hutch awakened, pleased that he'd slept the whole night far better than in his bed at home for the past week. Talking things out with Starsky had eased the tension considerably. He stretched carefully since the bed wasn't quite sufficient for his length, working out the kinks in his back before getting up.

The nurse had just come in to take Starsky's early morning vitals, receiving a grumbled "Leave me 'lone," for her troubles.

After cleaning himself up as much as possible, Hutch leaned over to kiss Starsky good-bye before going.

"You leavin'?" Starsky asked sleepily, clearing his throat.

"Gotta check in at work."

"Aren't the cadets graduating soon?" Starsky rubbed his eyes, coming up on one elbow to be more on Hutch's level.

"Next Friday, actually, but I'm involved with some case reviews with Dobey."

"You coming back?"

"Of course, tonight. Bringing you a burrito, remember?" Hutch grinned. "Or has your short term memory gone on the fritz?"

"My short term memory is fine, dork, I just wanna get out of here, too. Nurses won't let me sleep." He stifled a cough, grimacing and rubbing his chest.

"Soon, Starsk." Hutch patted him on the back with concern. "You all right? That cough is still with you."
"'S'nothing," Starsky dismissed. "You remember to bring me some real food, huh? Maybe some root beer, too, 'cause I know your feelings on the good stuff."

"We aim to please," Hutch assured, still worried about Starsky's health. Davies had warned them that he was susceptible to anything since the chemo had lowered his immune system. Luckily, one of the first people Hutch encountered out in the corridor was Starsky's favorite nurse Mika Jones, a pert thing with pixie short hair, who barely reached up to Hutch's shoulder.

"You're getting up early, Hutch," Mika greeted, writing notes on her clipboard.

"So are you, don't you usually work evenings?"

"Doing a double." She dimpled. "Want to do some Christmas shopping."

"How's Starsky doing?"

"He was so depressed last week," Mika said honestly. "I was glad when the night nurse, Mary Ellen, told me you pulled him out of the doldrums last night."

"I don't think it was me, a friend was here with him--she must have said something that turned him around," Hutch replied, wondering just what Daisy and Starsky had talked about. Surely her upcoming wedding plans hadn't cheered him up that much. "But he's got a cough this morning, is there anything to worry about?"

"Temp's up just a smidge, 37.5, that's above 99 to you on Fahrenheit, but I'll keep my eye on him," Mika promised. "He's due to go home so soon, can't get sick now!" She patted Hutch on the arm, "Keep the faith, Hutch. He's coming along."

"Thanks." Hutch headed for the elevator, still vaguely unsettled. She hadn't said Starsky was doing well, but maybe that was just a nurse's natural conservative nature not to reassure the family overly much. Putting it from his mind as much as humanly possible, he headed over to Metro, wishing with all his might that he could just chuck the whole work thing.

Maybe Starsky's medical school idea had some merit--certainly his first inclination was to burrow into the medical section at the library and read up on pain in a missing limb, and whether a minor temp elevation was expected or not. During the run of chemo, Starsky had maintained a temperature over 37.5 on more than one occasion. But it had been weeks since chemo. With that unsettling thought gnawing on his belly Hutch stopped for a strawberry-banana shake with extra protein powder at the 'Berry Good Smoothie Bar' on 21st Ave. The smooth, sweet shake filled his stomach but not the ache in his soul.

As usual, when Hutch desperately wanted to get out early there was more than enough work for two men, if not three. Dobey had a captain's meeting at another station house, leaving Hutch in charge of an emerging murder investigation which necessitated him actually heading over to the crime site to get the whole picture. It was a grisly scene, body parts severed, and not all accounted for. He hearned for Starsky's intense presence at a time like this, helping him to center on the investigation instead of losing himself in sympathy for the victims. He could almost see Starsky lift the sheet covering the woman's body, glancing at the corpse quickly with a mixture of compassion and repugnance before flicking the sheet back over her face. Those dark blue eyes would have sought out his, pain transmitting silently between the two of them before Starsky went diligently back to work, his natural curiosity ferreting out clues other detectives often missed.

"Looks like our killer used something big--like a double-edged sword on some of the bigger pieces," Ginny, the coroner was saying. "Hutch? Did you hear me?"
"Yeah, sorry. A sword, you say?" Hutch grimaced, but the mere thought of Starsky helped him cope with the horrific crime. "Give this your top priority, Ginny. Some sick bastard's at work here. Three bodies, who knows if he's finished his spree or not?"

"Most of three bodies," she corrected, wrinkling her nose. "I've got my work cut out for me tonight."

"What time is it?" Hutch asked, reaching out to grab her wrist and turn the watch face towards him. Just in time he remembered she wasn't Starsky and stopped. Ginny gave his flailing arm a raised eyebrow, but checked her timepiece.

"Just after six," Ginny informed him.

"Damn." He'd last called the hospital at noon over a rushed turkey on wheat with tomato, but Starsky had been sleeping, his temperature then 37.8. Anything could have happened since then. "Have you got the bodies loaded up?"

"Yep."

"Good, then I'll leave the techs to do their magic." Hutch glanced around the blood spattered room one last time, thinking he really didn't want to have to return any time soon. He no longer had the drive to find out what happened. Out of mercy for the dead, he wanted to solve the crime, but it no longer was a passion. His only passion was in the form of one man, David Starsky.

The phone at the nurse's station rang for a long time before a breathless voice finally answered. "Rose Tree Unit, sorry to keep you waiting."

Hutch realized it must be really busy if the ward clerk was out of breath, and simply asked for Starsky's room. He got a nurse instead, not even Starsky's, ratcheting up his nervousness in a matter of seconds. "Gemma, is something wrong?"

"Oh, Ken, David's had a hard afternoon." The English accented nurse's voice was always lovely to listen to even when she was relating bad news. "We drew blood about two hours ago to check for an infection. The CBC came back showing a probability so he was started on antibiotics, but his temperature spiked since then. Mika's in with him now."

"How high?" Hutch asked tightly, berating himself for not calling sooner.

"39.5. Um--one hundred and three."

"Damn," Hutch swore. "Gemma, tell him I'll be there in 20."

"Lovely, we'll be expecting you then."

Not even sure how he managed to make any sense at all, Hutch reported what he knew in a brief, but competent manner to his replacement then broke a couple of local traffic laws rushing across Bay City to the hospital. Conversely, the Unit was quiet when he stepped off the elevator, since most of the patients tended to have visitors in their rooms in the evening, The doctors made their rounds early in the morning, and after main visiting hours were over, to cut down on disturbances to family time.

Taking a deep breath to slow his heart rate, and finger combing his fine hair so Starsky wouldn't comment on how rushed he looked, Hutch walked past the ward clerk, who sported a spiky Mohawk styled haircut dyed bright orange. He paused at the door, listening to Starsky's rapid, wheezy breathing with a chill of fear.
"How does that feel?" Mika was asking him.

"S good." Starsky assured her, his voice airy and forced. Hutch could hear him taking gulping lungfuls of air as if he couldn't quite get enough.

"What's been going on, buddy?" Hutch asked with intentional lightness, entering the room. Appalled at the change in Starsky, he tried to hide it, but knew his partner read the truth in his eyes.

"Doc says I got pneumonia," Starsky said, pulling away a green plastic mask to speak. He looked apologetic, his skin tone almost gray, and papery brittle from the heat of the fever. Every breath was a struggle, his shoulders lifting as he tried to bring in more oxygen.

"Put that back on," Mika admonished. "His lungs are full of fluid so it's hard for him to breathe. A respiratory therapist is coming to give him a treatment soon." As if she'd announced him, a small Asian man came in with a bag full of plastic tubing and medications. Hutch watched while Starsky inhaled the aerosolized meds, battening down his own terror for what looked to be a long night.

Coughing raggedly, Starsky tried to wave away the rest of the regimen, but the tiny RT persisted until the little flow chamber was empty.

"You need to use the spirometer every hour, get some of the phlegm up," the therapist advised. "I'll be back later with another treatment." He pushed the green mask back in place with a frown that cautioned any derivation from the way he'd placed it.

"Terrific," Starsky deadpanned, moving the mask to one side, then coughing again. He scratched at a red patch on his arm, moving restlessly even though it was obvious he was so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open. "Where's my burrito?"

"I was in a rush to get over here, didn't have time to stop."

"What kinda friend are you?" Starsky sniped lightly, then covered his mouth, coughing for so long Hutch was afraid he'd rip his throat raw. Finally the spasm ended, but Starsky looked close to collapse. He sipped gratefully from the cup of water Hutch held up for him. "Then w-what'd you been up to all day, Hutch?"

Mentally sorting what to tell Starsky, since a full description of the murder scene wasn't exactly the fodder for discussion in a sick room, Hutch said lamely, "Looks like a guy may have hacked up a few bodies."

Starsky's eyes brightened at the mention of a murder investigation. It wasn't that he got any jollies from mayhem, rather, Hutch suspected, he was just bored to death with staying in bed.

"G-got any suspects? Where'd you find the bodies? Who called it in?" Starsky pestered. The long string of questions wasted his breath and he slumped back, his respiratory rate so quick it exhausted Hutch just to watch. Like a hummingbird hovering in midair, his movements too fast for the eye to see. And Starsky kept rubbing at several large red splotchy places on both forearms which seemed to be spreading.

"Starsk, stop it!" Hutch grabbed one of his hands where he'd left a long bloody scratch, inspecting the rash. "You've got hives."

"Huh?" Starsky held up his left arm, turning it over to examine the blotchy marks. "Wasn't there an hour ago."

"That's how hives work, they just appear." Hutch grabbed the nurse call button, remembering one
summer when he'd gone away to camp only to come down with bronchitis. The camp doctor had prescribed an antibiotic and within a few hours he'd been covered with hives. He'd itched like crazy until they'd covered him in a pink ointment that dried to a crust, making him feel like a dweeb. Hopefully, modern medicine had something more effective than that now. "Try not to scratch."

"Easy f'you t'say. Keep telling me about…" Starsky gasped, his face so pale he almost matched the white pillowcase. He coughed, deep and rough, his chest heaving from the strain.

"As long as you stop talking!" Hutch cautioned, smiling to cushion the words. He repositioned the oxygen mask over Starsky's mouth. "Three bodies, not all of them complete."

Mika stuck her head in, assessing the situation with a brief glance at the glaring evidence. "You need some Benadryl, and the doc wants an arterial blood gas to see how you're doing. He's ordered some steroids to help with the inflammation in your lungs."

"Thanks, sweetie." Starsky flashed her a smile that melted Hutch's insides. Starsky was working so hard just to stay alive and he still charmed the socks off of the nurses.

"Let's get you up more." Hutch slid onto the bed next to his lover, needing to feel his warmth and realness. Pushing aside some of the pillows, Hutch raised Starsky's unresisting body until he could squeeze behind him and then let Starsky rest against his chest. Even through a layer of clothing, Hutch could feel the machine gun tattoo of Starsky's heart beat. And his skin gave off heat like a blast furnace. Putting both arms around his partner, Hutch sat listening to Starsky's labored breathing for a few seconds. "Three bodies, not all of them complete," he repeated. "One woman, two men…found by a neighbor in a suburban home--the Westminster district." He could feel Starsky's concentration hone in on his narrative, minutely soothing his pulse and breathing.

When Mika came in to administer the meds, she didn't say a word about the seating arrangements. She'd seen it all before, many times, when Hutch had crawled into Starsky's bed to lure him to sleep. "I'm going to do an arterial stick, which I know hurts like hell, but you can have a lollipop after, if you're good." Mika grinned at Starsky, probing the inside of his left wrist with her forefinger.

"Rather have a kiss," Starsky said in a hoarse voice. Behind him Hutch chuckled.

"And not from me, unfortunately," Mika teased, the needle poised in place. "One prick and it's over."

"That's what they all say," Starsky muttered, then went rigid with a hiss when the needle slid home.
Hutch tightened his grip around Starsky, kissing the back of his neck with apology for the indignities he had to put up with. Starsky held his breath for the length of the stick, then resumed on a stuttered inhalation, his rib cage slamming against Hutch's.

"Sorry, but you got that kiss, I think." Mika smiled her regret, hurrying off with a syringe of bright red blood.

"And another one," Hutch whispered, kissing him on the ear. Starsky was lax against his torso, his too-fast breathing the only sign of life. "You gonna go to sleep?"

"K--keep talkin', the crime scene," Starsky wheezed impatiently. "S'no way I'm gonna sleep anytime soon. S'like I'm high or somethin'. All jittery inside."
The combination of drugs needed to combat his symptoms provided a bounty of contrasting side effects so that he was exhausted, but unable to relax. The antibiotics fought the bacteria, but caused hives. Benadryl helped the hives, but made him dry mouthed and sleepy, and the one-two punch of steroids and Theophylline left him wired and jittery. A couple of times, Hutch even had to restrain Starsky from trying to crawl out of the bed. Sometime around ten p.m., he started babbling, insisting that ants and spiders were crawling up legs, even after Hutch threw back the covers to convince him otherwise.

It was Hutch's first real view of the stump, wrapped neatly in a stretchy cotton bandage, and he had to gulp back tears. "No bugs, Starsk, see?" he pleaded, not sure what to do any longer. Starsky was so damned sick, and all the drugs seemed to be doing was making him worse.

"They're inside," Starsky said desperately, pushing aside the breathing mask for the umpteenth time. "'M so tired, Hutch. I know I sound crazy…"

"C'mere." Hutch hugged him closely, cursing the powers that be who'd conspired to bring Starsky to this place. "C'mere. You're not crazy, it's the drugs talking, but you've got to calm down or that baby faced intern's gonna come in and tube you." He rocked them both, clutching Starsky to his chest, afraid.

Mika had come in after the first arterial stick to report that Starsky's respiratory carbon dioxide levels were too high and if they were worse in a few hours he'd have to be put on a ventilator. Hutch had seen Starsky vented on more than one occasion, the worst being after the shooting, but he didn't want to see it again. Starsky could beat this pneumonia, with a weak immune system and all.

Twisting in Hutch's embrace, Starsky shoved at his restricting arms. "Too tight, I can't…What about those bodies, huh? You never finished," he panted. "You think it's a one time thing? Wha… what about Frank Du . . . uh? Dutcheuy?"

"Duchene," Hutch corrected in awe of Starsky's ability to interpret the evidence at a time like this. Frank Duchene had murdered his parents and siblings in an almost identical manner over ten years ago. That was the first time Starsky and Hutch had ever investigated a multiple homicide together, and they'd tracked down the killer squandering the family money on women, living the high life. Could Duchene be out of prison already? "I'll call it in to Dobey in the morning, good suggestion. Now, can you calm down?"

Starsky twitched, but lay against Hutch's chest, huffing and puffing like he'd run around the track at the Academy one too many times. "You remember when we found his family, Hutch?" Starsky rasped. "Blood all over? I thought I was gonna see that for the rest of my life. Got so drunk . . . "

"And we sat there at bar where Huggy used to work. The one old Jasper White owned?" Hutch bit his lip, remembering his fear that he wouldn't be able to go back to the job the next morning. The incredible inhumanity of the murder had stunned him, surpassing anything he'd ever seen previously, especially in criminal justice textbooks.

It wasn't until Starsky started crying, mourning the victims, that he'd gained some perspective. If a streetwise man who'd survived the atrocities of the Viet Nam War could cry for Duchene's family, then so could he. They'd ended the night, arms around each other, buying a bouquet of day-old roses from the cooler at a 24-hour Safeway, and scattering the petals in a park across from Duchene's home to memorialize the slain family.

What had happened to that integrity? Today, although he'd hated seeing the butchered bodies, he hadn't felt the empathy. He'd only thought of having Starsky by his side to ease his own
discomfort.

"What happened to those roses?" Starsky asked, still skirting the edge of delirium. "Yellow roses. Those bugs'll eat'em." He fidgeted, picking at the bandage Mika had put over the scratch on his arm.

"We scattered them in the moonlight, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Starsky heaved a breath, clawing at his sweatshirt. "I'm too hot."

"Let's try that relaxation thing again. Relax, baby, c'mon, work with me here," Hutch comforted, dunking a washrag in the nearby water pitcher, and wiping it over Starsky's superheated skin. "That feel any better?"

"Can I sleep, huh? Gotta get rid of those damned b-bugs…"

"There now, close your eyes…focus on your feet--foot, relaxing all the muscles, letting everything flow away…."

"Bugs feelers are creepin' me out," Starsky said lazily after a few minutes, but at long last his breathing seemed to have slowed and his heart wasn't trying to escape his chest. "Tickles an' hurts at the same time."

"Bug spray," Hutch said, feeling slightly hysterical himself. He made a psst sound, waving his hand at the end of the bed. Starsky sighed, his whole body suddenly limp. "Loosen up your hips and back muscles, let the blood flow down to your fe--foot and circle back again. You can't move, every part of your whole body--arms and hands, totally relaxed."

"Y'think Duchene got outta prison?" Starsky asked softly, the muffling effect of the plastic breathing mask making him hard to understand.

"You're supposed to be asleep."

"You get a…an ID on the vics?"

"Ginny was going to start the autopsy when I left." Hutch stroked his hand down Starsky's body, soothing and calming him but still very aware of what the medical types termed tachycardia, an overly fast heart beat. "Sleep, Starsk."

"Kin hardly keep my eyes open," Starsky admitted, and then without warning he was asleep, completely knocked out.

Hutch cradled him like an infant, holding that hot, sweaty body to his own and never wanting to let him go. His last recorded temperature had still been above 103, the antibiotics not doing anything to stem the infection.

It might have been a few minutes or thirty when a short heavyset woman with blond hair eased the door open and peeked inside. "Sorry to bother you. I'm Ginger, the night nurse. I have to get a set of vitals and draw some blood. An arterial gas."

"He just got to sleep." Hutch shook his head, unwilling to subject Starsky to more pain.

"Dr. Weaver needs a current CO2 level," she explained, going about her job swiftly. Starsky was so asleep that when she inserted the needle into his right wrist, just above the thumb, he never moved, but Hutch jerked, sure he could feel the bite of the sharp metal in his own flesh.
The news wasn't good; despite all the drugs and oxygen, Starsky's lungs weren't breathing effectively enough to ensure that his body got the necessary oxygen to every cell. The decision was made to put him on a ventilator until his blood gases improved. Hutch felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach when he was escorted from the room to give them medical staff room to work. He almost put up resistance, because he really didn't want to see the hard plastic tube forced down Starsky's throat. In the end, he left on his own, afraid to look back on the bed at his ailing buddy. 

Huddled in the family room, Hutch wanted to cry, to shout, maybe scream and rail against someone, anything that could change what was happening to his best friend. Gunfire hadn't stopped him, Cancer hadn't killed him, but now pneumonia was bringing him to the edge of the grave. What kind of sense did that make? Stupid pneumonia--a disease that anyone could get--a disease that the right antibiotic could stop cold.

What was he supposed to do now? The feeling of finality was too reminiscent of a time before, waiting in the hospital after Starsky collapsed on the roof of Vic Bellamy's crappy apartment building. Hutch hadn't given up then, and he wouldn't now. There had been a cure to the unknown poison, there would be a cure for some piddly case of pneumonia.

"C'mon, Starsk, work with me here," he whispered into the empty room.

Starsky slitted his eyes open, but the yellowish light was too bright, too overwhelming, and he squeezed them shut again. To say he felt like crap was an understatement of mammoth proportions. If this was heaven, somebody else could have it. He'd always heard rumors of a bright light, although during his brief sojourn into the afterlife six years previously he hadn't seen any white light or long dead relatives. Besides, weren't you supposed to feel all better after death? Therefore, logically he must not be dead--just still in the hospital. The brilliance that had awakened him wasn't the light normally found in a hospital, so what was it? Even moving his head an inch was innervating, his whole body feeling like it had been crushed in a car smasher and then only partially reconstructed, but Starsky slowly turned back to the light, opening his eyes again, squinting.

"Welcome back." Hutch smiled.

"Wha's that?" Starsky raised one finger, the most he could manage without help.

"A menorah." Hutch struck a pose like Vanna White on 'Wheel of Fortune', presenting a black rack of candles topped with flame shaped light bulbs. Two were lit. "A candelabra used in the Jewish faith to commemorate the miracle of the oil lamp that lasted eight nights longer than expected."

"I know the tradition," Starsky wheezed a laugh that ended in a barking cough. "But why is it here?"

"Cause it's the first night of Chanukah."

"Last thing I really remember it was December 15th."  

"You were really sick." Hutch sat down by the bed, taking his hand tenderly. "You remember being vented for three days?"

"Not really." Starsky rubbed his neck, his throat certainly remembered. Felt like the time he'd had Strep throat, raw and painful. He had mercifully brief flashes of being held down and a giant tube
in his throat, of being terrified and soothed by familiar touch and voices, but nothing more.

"That's good, then. They doped you up pretty much all the time."

"You musta been scared, all alone."

"Everybody came by, kept watch. Brought me food and made me sleep," Hutch said softly, gently caressing his hand. "Then yesterday I couldn't sit here any longer, so I went out, got that..." he chuckled, waving a hand at the clunky menorah. "And prayed. When I got back to the hospital they'd already pulled out the tube, and you were breathing on your own."

Starsky blinked back tears, not sure what to say. He'd lost nearly four days, but Hutch had suffered through every one of them. "Menorahs usually have candles," he said instead.

"Head nurse told me I couldn't have an open flame in the room because of the oxygen," Hutch tapped the nasal cannula on Starsky's face. "So I had to find an electric one."

"My ma always got me a present on the first night," Starsky teased warily, wishing he could sit up and give Hutch a hug, but there wasn't enough energy to raise his arm much less sit. That would have to wait.

"I got one, but it wasn't ready to be picked up this morning," Hutch leaned over, kissing him gently. "Wait'll tomorrow, then we can celebrate, okay?"

"Okay, I love you, Hutch." Starsky agreed sleepily.

"Love you back, Tiger."

Thursday presented with typical December weather, cold, blustery, and wet. Rain lashed the windows intermittently all day long, but nothing could suppress Starsky's mood. He was buoyant. Between having Hutch almost all to himself and eluding death once more, Starsky was on top of the world. If only he could get over this rotten pneumonia. The infection backed off, cut down by a change in antibiotics, but the cough and malaise persisted.

Starsky wanted to go home, but the doctors insisted he stay. The nurses and RTs wanted him to deep breathe and get some exercise, and Hutch wanted him to take it easy. A compromise came in the form of sitting up in a chair for as long as Starsky could tolerate it. To his dismay, he couldn't tolerate being upright for very long but he persisted, wanting to be up for the candle lighting ceremony in the evening. Hutch had gone off to pick up the mysterious gift, giving Starsky some time to spiff up. Gemma gave him a bed bath and pulled on the t-shirt Daisy had brought by, except it didn't say the expected sentiment. Instead, the letters on the front spelled out, "When life gives you lemons make lemonade." He still wanted the 'Life's a bitch and then you die' shirt, too.

"You clean up well, Mr. Starsky," Gemma teased in a cockney drawl.

"Wish I could do any of this myself," Starsky sighed, already worn out. How could he be exhausted when the nurse had done all the work? "Gonna just lay here awhile until Hutch comes, okay?"

"You tell him if he gets you out of bed to treat you like rare porcelain, understand?" she scolded, gathering up the old bed linens and damp towels.

"Not a problem," Hutch said with a grin, coming in behind her.
"Judas!" Gemma exclaimed, dropping her bundle. Hutch juggled his purchases and scooped up the sheets, tossing them all into a blue bagged linen hamper. "You gave me such a fright!" Gemma rolled her eyes, slapping him lightly on the shoulder.

"He has that effect on all the women," Starsky said wickedly.

"Watch out, you, or you don't get anything," Hutch cautioned, then gave Gemma a gentle squeeze. "Thanks for taking such good care of him. I left three boxes of See's candy out at the nursing station. One for each shift."

"Ah, an' we all thought you were such a handsome devil before, but now you're surely on the nurses' good side." Gemma dimpled with a gleam in her eyes. "I think I need a sit down now with a few chockies."

"Get me any?" Starsky asked, spying a familiar bag from the candy shop.

"Down, Fido." Hutch arranged the bags on the floor beside the bed. "I've been shopping for hours in those crowds. Do you have any idea how vicious some of those people can be? You'd think Armageddon was approaching instead of Christmas the way some of those women fight over a damned sale item. I'm pooped."

"Try having Gemma give you a bath," Starsky muttered, holding out his hand. "Somebody lost the holiday spirit in a hurry. Not feeling any of that old euphoric sentimentalism?"

"Never going to let me live than one down are you?"

"It's got such a great ring to it," Starsky laughed, but it quickly changed into a full blown coughing spasm that left him sweaty and gasping.

Hutch helped him up to a better position for breathing, called for the RT, and waited through a treatment. Starsky was feeling a great deal peppier by the time all that was finished, and watched Hutch putting out a special meal, sniffing appreciatively.

"Look at this. Brisket?" Starsky identified the meat. "Like my mom used to make?"

"It may not be a Paul Muni special, but I thought you might like something homey after a week of not eating anything."

"I won't be able to do this justice," Starsky smacked his lips, savoring the plate of beef, potato latkes, and vegetables Hutch set in front of him. "You make all this?"

"Daisy did."

"Oh, yeah, she tol' me she was making cookies for some party, but I didn't know she was cooking all this." Starsky forked up some brisket, tasting it with the finesse of a connoisseur. "This is great."

"She's already branching out into the catering business, from what I gather." The end of Hutch's reply was muffled as he began eating his own portion.

"Huggy better watch out, he's got a live one." Starsky had managed two bites of meat and a few more of the crispy potato pancake, but even the slightest pressure from his stomach onto his lungs made breathing uncomfortable.

"What did you two talk about the night she came over?" Hutch asked casually, bending over to
retrieve something out of one of his bags.

"I'll tell you another time." Starsky glanced over at the menorah, still unlit despite the fact that the sun had set, and they'd already eaten dinner. "We forgot to light the second candle!"

"Your turn." Hutch produced a flame shaped bulb.

"No, I want to be up, not lying like some cripple in bed."

"Starsky!" Hutch recoiled, appalled at his choice of words.

"It's true, isn't it?" Starsky said tightly, the bleak self-loathing suddenly back in full bore when he'd thought he'd buried it deeply. "Get me up, I need help."

"Then do it yourself, gimpy. Get up," Hutch replied, his jaw twitching. He stepped back as if distancing himself from his lover, his back as stiff as a Marine plebe on his last day at boot camp. Starsky felt the retreat like a slap in the face.

"Gimpy?" he shot back, stifling an errant cough. "I've been sick, remember? D'dja hear what Gemma said? Treat me like rare porcelain."

"You're not, Starsk," Hutch said softly.

Starsky could almost hear the tears in his tone, but Hutch hardened his voice, speaking deliberately.

"Yeah, you're broken, and seeing you like this hurts me like hell, probably almost as much as it hurts you. And this isn't at all how I planned this night to go, but the only person who can put back the pieces is you. So. Get. Up."

Memory was a damnable thing, because Starsky suddenly recalled with absolute clarity the weekend he'd watched Hutch going cold turkey off of heroin. He'd pushed and cajoled his partner, forcing him to dredge up the descriptions of the men who'd assaulted him. He'd held on to Hutch when the withdrawals were so severe he convulsed, and then remained firm when Hutch begged for 'just a little help here'.

He wanted to shout, rail against Hutch that this wasn't the same thing. He'd never stood alone before--hell, he'd never stood on his own volition. The week before he got pneumonia the physical therapists would come by, pull him up, and force him to stand between them with a walker for support. To prevent muscle atrophy, they'd said. To strengthen him for a prosthesis, they'd said. To keep him limber, they'd said. He'd just said stuff it, and fuck it, and a lot of other hateful, spiteful words that meant nothing.
"I can't, Hutch," he said finally. "I need help here."

"Try."

"I can't!" Starsky repeated, anger burning away all that bleak hopelessness. "I don't want to!"

"Why not?" Hutch challenged, unbending, his blue eyes like polished stones.

Starsky resented that even stance, both feet planted widely like he was ready for anything. He wanted the solicitous Hutch from the morning, heeding to his every beck and call, not this neo-Nazi.

"Because!" But that sounded stupid, the reasoning of a third grader on the playground. "Because it
would validate this." He gestured to his left leg. "Make it real."

"This is real, Starsk," Hutch said gently. "As real as it's gonna get. You've got one leg, now get up on it."

"One and a half," Starsky said defiantly, looking at the ground to judge the distance to the floor. Even when he had lowered the height of the bed with a hard stab on the controls, the linoleum seemed really far away.

"One and a half," Hutch repeated, and there was a hint of a smile there.

Pushing himself to sit on the edge of the mattress Starsky paused, waiting for the vague lightheaded sensation to abate. Sharp twists of pain sparked up and down his left thigh, and the missing foot ached like a sore tooth in need of a root canal. None of that was new, unfortunately, he'd already become accustomed to a certain level of pain. It was the background noise of his body. But he was so tired, even with the stimulating jolts from the adrenaline in his veins he was still weary, gravity threatening to pull him back on the pillows or, conversely, dump him in a heap on the cold floor.

With a breath that was nearly a sob, he lowered his right leg to the ground. The floor stayed solidly flat beneath his foot and he realized the earthquake had rattled his confidence more than he'd expected. For some reason, he'd expected some massive temblor to rumble up from the earth's core the moment he stood. But he was only leaning against the bed at present, butt still touching the mattress. The true test was pulling himself upright. Gripping the metal bedframe, he balanced with both hands on the bed. It was distinctly strange to feel his left leg just dangling in space and he looked up, searching for his champion. "Hutch?"

And then Hutch was there, pressed against him, keeping him strong. "Hey, did you think I'd let you fall?" Hutch asked fondly, both arms holding him so that Starsky didn't have to bear his own weight, just lean into that sturdy presence.

"I was scared to death," Starsky whispered.

"Don't know what there was to be scared of." Hutch gave him careful hug. "I'm proud of you for having the courage to try, but you know I'll always be right behind you."

"You can be a real jerk, sometimes, y'know that?" Starsky berated affectionately. "And if you start singin' 'He ain't heavy, he's my brother' I'll smack you."

Chuckling, Hutch hummed the first few notes, nuzzling Starsky's cheek. He straightened with an amazed expression, the sudden movement almost toppling Starsky off his unsteady perch. "You've got stubble!" Hutch exclaimed, stroking the soft bristles with a grin. "And hair." Tiny, baby fine curls dusted Starsky's scalp.

"Been so many other things going on you didn't notice, huh?" Starsky beamed, and the universe slipped back into proper alignment again. He still wasn't sure how to deal with the loss of a limb, and his lungs constantly itched and ached from the pneumonia but it was Chanukah, and there was a menorah to light. "Gemma wanted to give me a shave but I told her not to." He coughed, hacking long enough that Hutch lowered him back onto the bed, hovering with one hand poised over the nurse call button.

"I'm good," Starsky huffed, sitting up straighter with a ragged breath. "Where're those light bulbs?"

"L'chaim." Hutch passed the flame shaped bulbs over and flicked the switch after Starsky screwed
them into the appropriate candlesticks.

Starsky held his hands above the candles, reciting the Hebrew prayer his mother had always said each night of Chanukah, finishing with a fervent "Amen."

"You okay, there, gimpy?" Hutch asked sweetly, his hand back on Starsky's cheek like he enjoyed the rasp of whiskers on his palm. Starsky certainly enjoyed it.

"Worn out."

"Then lie back and I'll tell you a strange tale of two men," Hutch encouraged. "Or more correctly, four men."

"Who?" Starsky got comfortable on the pillows, nibbling on the remainder of his potato latke.

"Frank Duchene, his penpal Dougie Mason, Ken Hutchinson and David Starsky."

"Three out of four I recognize, but who's Dougie Mason?"

"Strange you should ask that, Detective, since you're the one who provided the link to his capture."

"I did?" Starsky regarded his partner in bewilderment.

"You compared Frank Duchene's murders to the murder of the Mason family in Westminster last week."

"The night I got sick."

"Yeah. First thing I checked was Duchene's status in San Quentin. He's still there, thank God, but the oddest thing happened when we went through the Mason house. We found some letters in a locked box. Dougie Mason, the eldest son, had been writing Duchene for years." Hutch shook his head in disgust. "He copied Duchene's crimes exactly--including some earlier mutilations of pets and racist graffiti."

"That's sick!" Starsky pushed away the food, appalled by anyone who could admire a mass murderer.

"When interrogated, he freely admitted the murders, and asked if Duchene had heard about it, and could he be sent to Quentin and be Frank's cellmate."

"Always gotta have a goal in life." Starsky rolled his eyes.

"The thing is, Starsk, how did you remember that?" Hutch asked. "It never occurred to me, and I was there, at the crime scene."

"I saw them in my head--when you were describing the scene, it was like both of 'em were superimposed one on top of the other." Starsky yawned, his eyes drooping shut for a moment. "Where'd you find--uh--Dougie?"

"Turned himself in. The kid's not right in the head." Hutch grimaced. "I hope he gets psychiatric care, but living the rest of his life in prison will probably just fuel his fantasies, even if he doesn't get to bunk in with Duchene."

"What a waste of life," Starsky murmured, reaching out to grab Hutch's warm hand. "Never waste one minute of what you've got." He closed his eyes again and then was asleep.
"Not one second." Hutch laid his hand on Starsky's arm, content to sit on the side of the bed and listen to his wheezy breathing for as long as the nap lasted.

Starsky slept for an hour and a half, through the nurse's visit for vital signs, and Hutch turning on the TV to watch a ballet. When he finally woke again, the room was dim, lit mostly by the flickering light of the television. The delicate notes of the 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy' filled the room with tinkly magic. Starsky slowly eased himself up to look at the TV screen.

"It's Anna," Hutch said pointing to the blond ballerina pirouetting around the stage in a frothy pink tutu.

"Anna Akana…akanatov…"

"Akhanatova," Hutch rattled off with a superior tone, but a grin on his face. "Star-evsky."

"That's Starsky to you, bub." He wiped the sleep out of his eyes, biting his bottom lip with a slight wince. "Any brisket left? I'm kinda hungry."

"Whenever you're hungry. Want me to go warm it up in the microwave?"

"Yeah, give me a chance to…uh…"

"Take a leak?"

"I've said it before an' I'll say it again," Starsky groaned in mock disgust. "Crass is your middle name."

"Takes one to know one," Hutch chuckled amiably, carrying the plate over to the family room. He signaled to Gemma that Starsky needed some relief of the bladder, and more importantly, from the pain. He didn't have ask to know that Starsky was in pain just then, and required a few minutes of privacy. The little signs were all there; his slow movements, the tiny tightening of muscles in the jaw, and a guardedness in his eyes. Starsky kept his own council on a lot of the aspects of his disease, which Hutch understood and respected.

As much as he was with Starsky nearly every day, there were still things he'd never totally understand unless he went through chemo and all the rest, too. That was just the way Starsky had always been. He'd grouse for hours over a stubbed toe or a paper cut, especially if it were received 'in the line of duty' filling out arrest reports, but get shot, or worse, and he plastered a smile on his face and rode out the hurt. He'd admit it privately to Hutch maybe, but to the public at large Starsky was frequently stoic, proud, and uncomplaining.

A few minutes later when Hutch returned with a steaming plate of beef, Starsky was watching the TV with a rapt expression. "Those corps de ballet sure are beautiful and Anna Ak-hana-tovna is pretty light on her feet." Except Starsky pronounced the 's' at the end of the word 'corps' and probably deliberately mangled Anna's name again, Hutch suspected, just to tease him.

"Cor' de ballet," Hutch emphasized the French accent. "For someone who's been learning the language now for what--three months, your pronunciation is lousy."

"Merci, monsieur 'Utchinson," Starsky retorted sarcastically, but the lines of tension were gone from his body, and he tucked into the late night snack with enthusiasm. "Do you think about her ever?"

"Who?" Hutch asked, watching the dancers on the screen leap and twirl.
"Anna." Starsky looked up at him and his deep blue eyes were guileless. He wasn't asking for some validation that Hutch loved him best and never gave a thought to past girlfriends, he obviously wanted to know. "You liked her."

There they were, all those memories that had been tucked neatly away in the mental file cabinet under 'A' when Anna Akhanatova flew back to Moscow. Hutch could almost feel the drape of her shining flaxen hair against his shoulder, her muscular thighs gripping him and her sexy, throaty voice vibrating in his ear as they made love. He literally hadn't thought of her in years, not until he'd recognized her name in the cast list of the ballet.

"Not until tonight--I really haven't," Hutch admitted. "If she'd lived close, maybe San Francisco, or something, where we could have gotten together for a long weekend--yeah, I think we might have had something. But she's from Russia, for God's sake, and…it wasn't meant to be." For some illogical reason he was suddenly restless, his thoughts traitorous because the memories of her long naked body seemed very real, but as he turned away from his present lover to look out at the dark rain he felt that jolt of truth. Anna had been gorgeous, and funny, and great in bed, but she wasn't Starsky. She wasn't his love, period. All those memories were just that, and nothing more. They didn't change how he felt one iota.

"I got you a present," he said. Tchaikovsky's vibrant music swelled just then as if underscoring his words like a scene from a sappy romantic movie.

"Yeah, you told me yesterday." Starsky coughed into his fist. "But I haven't seen so much as a bow yet."

"Had to have some adjustments made," Hutch answered, feeling in his pocket for the little box. Just the touch of the velvet lid did something to him inside, and suddenly he wanted Starsky to open it up immediately. He climbed back onto the bed, giving Starsky a shove to get him to move over. "I…"

Whatever he was going to say died unborn when he looked into Starsky's face. That familiar mug, too pale right now, cheeks smudged with a hint of dark beard, was more dear to him than any single thing on earth, and he kissed Starsky quick, dropping the velvet box into his hand at the same time.

"You gotta way with deliveries. Even play spin the bottle?" Starsky spoke, their faces so close together Hutch could see himself in Starsky's eyes.

"Not since the ninth grade, at Sally Abrams' birthday party."

"Your mom let you go to a mixed party when you were a freshman?" Starsky babbled, opening the box. He took a look at the contents and hitched a little sigh, swallowing reflexively. "Damn, Hutch," he whispered, poking a thumb into the space where his eye met his nose to block the tears. "What'd you go an' do that for?"

"Read the inscription," Hutch detached one of the rings from the little velvet bed and tilted it into the light.

"Print's too small." Starsky wiped at his runny nose, blinking.

Hutch smiled, taking Starsky's hand and sliding the smaller of the two otherwise identical bands on his ring finger. "Says 'From Here to Eternity'."

"Does that make me Robert Mitchum or Debra Kerr?" Starsky chuckled, closing the other ring in
his palm to warm the metal. He kissed the golden circlet before sliding it onto Hutch's fourth finger.

"I think the real question here is who wants sand in their butt when they've got a nice comfy hospital bed to cuddle up in?" Hutch asked huskily.

"Who said anything about comfortable?" Starsky remarked, placing his ringed hand over Hutch's. "Eternity, Hutch."

"That's forever, and then some." Hutch curled Starsky into him so that he was practically sitting on his lap.

"I read Webster's, I know what it means," Starsky snarked with a punk-ass grin, his breath warm on the collar of Hutch's shirt. "But I didn't get you anything..."

"Starsk, I got what I asked for." Hutch kissed him again holding onto his precious gift from God.

"Got any bedpans?" Starsky peered over the fan of his cards at his friend's poker face. Tired of the usual four suits in a deck they'd renamed them using familiar hospital paraphernalia. Spades were bedpans, clubs became blood pressure cuffs, diamonds turned into pills of various sorts, and hearts were nurses.

"Go fish," Hutch urged with a grin. It was Christmas Eve and Starsky looked as fit as he had in months. His appetite had really improved without chemo to deaden his taste buds and churn up his belly, so he'd been gorging himself on the rich assortment of holiday treats offered. There was color in his cheeks, and joy in his outlook. Hutch was already looking forward to their long planned 'date' on New Years Eve, with lots of wine, crab and hopefully, sex.

"Ah ha!" Starsky lay down two 'bed pans' with a flourish. "Told you I'd win."

"I have all the nurses, and I'm keeping them," Hutch informed him loftily.

"Then you'd better put them back before the charge nurse finds you're the reason for the staffing shortage." John Davies rapped his knuckles on the open door before entering, and flipped Starsky's chart open to take a look.

"Busted," Starsky chortled.

"Merry Christmas Eve," Davies greeted with a courtly bow once he'd finished scrawling his name below an order. He had a small sprig of holly pinned to his lab coat.

"It'd be a lot more merry if I could go home," Starsky stated bluntly.

"Starsky, I'd like that, too, but you're still on IV antibiotics until the 28th, and then we're restarting the chemo."

This announcement was met with deadly silence for a moment as Starsky and Hutch digested the information. "The same day?" Hutch asked finally, a heavy band tightening around his chest.

"I would have liked to start this whole thing sooner, but the pneumonia put us behind schedule," Davies explained.

"Damn," Starsky said softly rubbing his forehead. "Can't it wait until after the new year?"
"The sooner we start the better off you are. Your cancer has already proved to be a resilient son of a bitch, we have to strike even harder this time," Davies answered. "I'm readjusting the dosages higher."

"What about anaphylaxis?" Hutch absently collected up the cards from the game and shuffled them back into the deck to give his hands something to do. He'd become complacent, almost forgetting the main reason Starsky was in the hospital. Osteosarcoma. That tongue-twister of a cancer that had already taken far more than it had any right to. World War III was about to begin, and Starsky's body was the battlefield.

"Studies have shown after allergic reactions most patients react favorably when given lower doses of the drug and then titrating them back up to maximum levels," John said. "I can't stress how important it is to get this ball rolling again if we want to achieve favorable results."

"What other options do we have?" Hutch asked relentlessly. He noticed with some concern that Starsky hadn't contributed much to the conversation. "Radiation, radical treatments? Any new research or current studies of one chemo drug versus another?"

"Been reading up, Ken?" Davies grinned, fiddling with the cap on his pen before stowing it into a pocket. He liberated his stethoscope from around his neck in preparation for listening to the patient's breathing. "Unfortunately, we were already using what is considered top of the line drugs for his sort of sarcoma. But I can still pull a few tricks out of my hat. The cocktail will be a little different this time around, only two drugs instead of three, Cisplatin and Adriamycin."

"Why didn't you use Adriamycin before?"

"Different treatment options, as I mentioned," the doctor shrugged. "That one's somewhat more commonly used in the UK."

"What about radiation?"

"It's not effective for the kind of cancer he has." Davies gave Starsky a quick examination, which Starsky submitted to without a word.

That, most of all, caught Hutch's attention. Normally his loquacious partner either bitched sourly until the 'doctoring' was over, or chatted unceasingly, teasing Davies about every aspect of his bedside manner.

"Starsky, you have anything questions? Comments?" the doctor asked finally replacing the stethoscope around his neck.

"Like I have a say in the matter?"

"Always, buddy," Hutch assured.

"What…what if we did nothing? What would happen?" Starsky asked quietly, not looking up at either of them.

"Starsky!" Hutch objected, horrified. What was he thinking?

"Is that what you want?" John Davies asked seriously.

Shaking his head, Starsky plucked at the sheet over his legs. "How long before I'd die?"

"There's no way to tell." Davies sat down carefully in the bedside chair, favoring his back.
"Chemotherapy does save lives, Starsky. There's no denying that it's a hard road, but most people come out alive on the other end."

"On their second go round?" Starsky shot back bitterly.

"I've had patients who had three or four courses."

"You never answered my question," Starsky interrupted.

Hutch felt his stomach plummet; he really didn't want to hear this conversation. There was no way Starsky could be considering this. It was virtual suicide not to continue with his current regimen. What had brought this on? Sure, Starsky had been depressed about the surgery, but that had all passed. It was Christmas, for God's sake, the Jewish elf's favorite time of year. He could not be discussing death with his oncologist.

"You would die within the year," Davies said grimly. "I think. Starsky, medicine is not an exact science, I can't predict your death anymore than I can predict the weather in a week."

"Then what good are you?" Starsky raged, his eyes dark with anger. "What good is all this? Fucking chemo, surgery? I've been dead once already, and you know what? It doesn't scare me. Some days there's nothing good anymore!"

"Starsk?" Hutch entreated, fear gripping him like a monster in a nightmare. "Please…do this? For me?" Because he was terrified of watching Starsky die. Didn't think he could ever handle that day, that week, that entire year. This one was drawing to a close with Starsky alive, if slightly different than when he'd begun 1984. Somehow Hutch had the notion that if Starsky greeted 1985, he'd be there in 12 months to toast December 31st with a glass of champagne.

"Hutch?" Starsky pleaded as if he'd only just woken up. "Oh, damn…"

Hutch wrapped his arms around his partner, enveloping him in a blanket of love, hanging on for dear life. When he looked up, John Davies was standing in the doorway, watching them with such compassion it made his heart hurt.

"Give me your decision on the 26th," Davies said unobtrusively and left.

"Starsky, you're scaring me here," Hutch whispered, feeling Starsky snuggle into his embrace. "What's going on?"

"S'nothing…"

"Don't give me that," Hutch responded far more angrily than he'd expected to. "You're talking about not going through with all this!" He backed away suddenly, as angry as Starsky had been, a firestorm blasting through his entrails. "When were you going to tell me, huh? Last week you pledged to be with me for eternity! I guess your definition--out of Webster's--is a lot different than mine!"

Starsky just sat there, his face an unreadable mask, only the wet lines down pale cheeks betraying his composure. In a fury, Hutch jerked the plain gold band off his finger and threw it onto the bed where it lay in the 'v' between Starsky's thighs.

"You're a hypocrite!" Hutch accused. "You promise a lifetime, which is apparently one week. I guess there's no more me and thee, huh? Cause…"

"Merry Christmas."
"What?" Hutch erupted, still all adrenaline and spitfire. Starsky, by comparison, was calm, a Sphinx. "What the hell?"

"I don't want to fight about this," Starsky said placidly. "I'm tired, Hutch. I'm not sure what I want anymore. But it's Christmas in about six hours, and I can't... take this. Not right now. Can't we..." his face crumpled but he didn't cry. "You want me to do the chemo?"

"Yes." Hutch was exhausted, his emotional outburst depleting him of every ounce of energy he possessed.

"I want eternity," Starsky nodded, rolling the ring around on the blanket. "I'm just not sure I have it to give."

"You'll do the chemo?" Hutch repeated to make sure he'd heard right.

"Yeah," Starsky acquiesced without a fight. He held out the golden symbol of their love as a peace offering. "I got you a present, too. Not quite in the same class as this, but it's for the future. I guess we both had the same things in mind."

"Yeah," Hutch took the ring with shaky composure. He'd never had Starsky's ability to shift instantly from one subject and emotion at the drop of a hat. He needed time to adjust, to reacclimate. "Uh... you want to open presents now?"

"The one with a red bow and Snoopy wearin' a Santa hat," Starsky directed.

They'd erected a miniature artificial tree in one corner, festooned with colored lights and a handful of ornaments. Wrapped gifts clustered around, piled almost to the uppermost branches of the tiny evergreen. Hutch located the indicated gift, hitching an unsteady breath. The goofy antics of Snoopy and Woodstock, cavorting across the green paper with Santa hats and candy canes, brought a smile to his face. He sat down feeling like he could do this.

"Open it," Starsky urged.

Carefully picking off the abundant tape Starsky had used to secure the ends, Hutch folded back the paper to reveal a large paperback book. The title stared back at him, daring him. *Taking the MCAT, Negotiating the Confusing Roads to Medical School.*

"I figured you could use some incentive," Starsky gave him a tentative smile. "But I was wrong. Just now you sounded just like every over eager first year resident who ever trooped through. You don't need any encouragement. You've already decided."

Hutch discarded the colorful paper, letting the book flop open. There were sections on mathematics, English, and science. A diagram of the heart with arrows and blanks to fill out looked easy enough. The atrium was there, the ventricle... With a mental shake, he confronted his own truth. Some time when he hadn't realized it, he had decided.

"When were you going to tell me?" Starsky asked kindly.

"You're the first one who knew, literally." Hutch sat down next to his best friend, close enough to feel Starsky's sigh of relief. "Reading my mind again?"

"It's a scary job, but somebody's gotta do it." Starsky leaned into him, his body melting into Hutch's. "The chemo scares me so much more this time, Hutch, cause I don't wanna go through all that again."
"I know, baby." Hutch slung his free arm around his shoulders, still holding the book, pulling Starsky closer. What could he say that hadn't been said all before? There was no consolation that wouldn't ring false because he hated the chemo almost as much as Starsky did. "But I gotta tell you, you're the best vomiter I've ever met. Olympic caliber…"

Starsky's astonished laughter rumbled against his ribs; such a comforting, real sensation that Hutch wanted it to continue all night. "Wheelchair racing, bed pan discus throwing. and the ever popular one-and-a-half-legged dash." Starsky giggled wearily.

"Howard Cosell could provide the color commentary."

"Whadda they call the Olympic swimmer with no arms and legs?"

His brain still half in shock, Hutch was momentarily stunned. Oh, this was a joke. "I dunno, what?" he replied weakly.

"Bob. You know why the blond nurse always carried a red crayon at work?" Starsky asked, his head on Hutch's shoulder so that Hutch had an eyeful of fluffy new grown brown hair.

"No, why?"

"In case she had to draw blood." Starsky's laughter turned wheezy, ending in a barky cough, from the lingering effects of the pneumonia.

"Where'd you hear those?" Hutch groaned good-naturedly.

"Nurses have the worst jokes. They're always telling me the really bad ones to make me laugh and deep breathe. Claim it's therapy…" Starsky linked their two left hands, the gold rings winking in the overhead light.

"What ever works, babe," Hutch said. "Cause one round of pneumonia was bad enough."

"I guess this nixes our date for New Year's, huh?" Starsky tugged at the short hair on his scalp. "Unless we did it early?"

"I don't see why not," Hutch agreed, tucking his arm behind Starsky's bony back. "December 27th work for you?"

"I'll have to check my engagement calendar, but I think I can squeeze you in," Starsky quipped, but he was working at the lightheartedness. That alone was enough to send an ache through Hutch's soul. "I mess everything up these days."

"Starsk! How many times did we change plans before just because of a long stake-out or overtime? I've learned to be flexible over the years, if nothing else. As long as we spend the time together."

"I love you. I'm not sure I always say it everyday."

"Whether you say it or not, I hear it." Hutch kissed his ear, the side of his cheek, until Starsky turned his head to receive the last one on the lips. "I hear it."

"I hear music--caroling." Starsky broke away, looking towards the door. "'Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer'."

The festive holiday sound was growing louder with each verse. The word 'history' could barely be heard over loud applause.
Mika poked her head in, a headband with two bobbing clusters of plastic mistletoe crowning her dark hair. "You've got some visitors," was all she managed to say before half a dozen gymnasts crowded in.

"Merry Christmas," Rosie, Samantha, Rainbow, and the others shouted. They were all pink cheeked from the cool weather, bringing exuberance and youthful energy into the room.

"We're caroling," Samantha announced. "I was in the hospital with my knee operation last Christmas, and the caroling just cheered me right up."

"Are you cheered up?" Cait asked.

"Most definitely." Starsky grinned. "Sing something else."

"We only practiced two," Rosie warned. "One-two-three..." The girls launched into 'Jingle Bells' with enthusiasm, a few pulling strings of bells out of their coat pockets to accompany the song.

Hutch was glad for the distraction. The whole evening had been too overwhelming. He'd never really entertained the idea that Starsky might not want to go through with a second course of chemo. It cast a pall over him that was hard to shake just because they'd been joking and kissing. This was major, it was earth shattering. He looked up over the heads of the singers, spotting Edith and Harold Dobey in the doorway listening. The two older people didn't look any more cheerful than he did, as if they too could read his thoughts. Was he really that transparent?

"That was great!" Starsky applauded with gusto. "I got you all presents, too. Look under the tree."

"Presents?" some girl, Hutch wasn't sure who, cried out in excitement before they all clustered around the colorful mound looking for the right tag with their name.

"Merry Christmas, Dave, Ken." Edith came in finally, giving each a kiss on the cheek. "Hope the girls weren't too distracting."

"They've been practicing for two weeks, kept the neighbors up," the Captain said. "Hit the old folks' home, and the local mall. Rosie made more money than she ever did babysitting."

"Look, Daddy!" Rosie held up a pair of dangly earrings and a matching bracelet. On the whirlwind shopping spree early in December, Starsky and Hutch had bought gifts for nearly all of their friends. Starsky had just grabbed up six sets of the pretty, inexpensive jewelry but his choice seemed to be spot on. All the girls were thrilled.

"Just like Cyndi Lauper wears in her video," Aria proclaimed.

"You tol' me they all went out and got pierced ears." Starsky grinned at the parents who were busily admiring the gifts.

Hutch did his share of oohing and aahing, reflecting that Starsky always seemed to have the knack of picking out what the recipient would enjoy. Even some of the more outlandish presents Hutch had received from his partner over the years had grown on him. He'd gotten a definite kick out of the ant farm, for instance, watching the ants industriously digging through the sand below the plastic farm, and the do-it-yourself beer brewing kit a few years later had been a real hit, even though they'd never managed to produce any drinkable beer. It had provided hours of laughter, and just a little bit of frustration, but all in all, Starsky bought good gifts. More so than Hutch, who found it difficult to get just the right something.

"Well, this is for you." Rosie held out an envelope and a large square box. "My mom picked out
the bigger one, but I thought up the other all on my own."

"I can't wait!" Starsky ripped open the envelope, spilling out a picture of Pansy and a gift certificate. "Free cat care?" He laughed. "You don't think Hutch is doin' a very good job?"

"I've been distracted lately," Hutch answered straight-faced. "So I keep calling Rosie up to feed the cat."

"I ride my bike over, Pansy's been lonely," Rosie said. "This way, you don't even have to pay me."

"Between the caroling and Hutch paying her for the cat food, she's made enough to pay for her college tuition." Dobey grinned at his daughter.

"Daddy! This is for the trip to the nationals…” Rosie protested indignantly.

"We're going to Washington DC to be in the national competition in the spring," Samantha explained, pushing her new earrings into the tiny holes in her lobes.

"Have to learn all new routines," Cait added.

"New leotards, that's why we're earning money," Kristianne, the shyest of the group, put in.

"Could you come, you think?" Rainbow asked hopefully, flipping her wrist so that the colored stones on the bracelet flashed like a reflection of her name. "We could always use chaperones…”

"Rainbow…” Edith said sharply, embarrassed. "You know Dave is…”

"He may be sick then, honey," Hutch said softly, even though the words hurt just to say. Several of the other girls looked stricken, their mouths dropping open.

"And maybe not," Starsky refuted. "Give me a rain check, Rainbow bright, and check back in a couple of months."

Hutch didn't know what to say after that. Only an hour ago, Starsky was trying to get out of a treatment to save his life and here he was making plans for the future.

Luckily, the opening of the second present, a Trivial Pursuit game, filled the awkwardness. The girls chattered about their favorite questions, holding up various cards to ask Starsky, who impressed them all with his phenomenal knowledge of minutia. But it was obvious he was getting tired and very soon the Dobeys shepherded the gymnasts out with a last "Merry Christmas!"

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With Christmas past and the new year on the way, Hutch was preoccupied at Metro. As usual, there were grumbles about having to work on holidays and the higher than normal number of requests for schedule changes made assigning enough manpower per shift a nightmare. He was glad that two of his recruits from the Academy had joined Metro. At least there'd be enough blue uniforms covering the biggest party and drinking night of the year.

More and more he was finding the two halves of his life as disparate as the moon from the earth. At Metro, or the Academy, he was looked up to as someone with experience and wisdom in the arena of policework. At the hospital, he felt like a rank amateur, nervous and frightened of each new day and what it might bring. It was beginning to give him headaches and sleep problems, and Starsky hadn't even restarted the chemo yet. Six more rounds. It made him nauseated just thinking about it--not exactly the frame of mind he'd wanted on their special night. New Year's was still five
days away, but this was the last time they'd have to party freely.

The nurses were all quite excited by the prospect of the 'date' and had pitched in to ensure that he and Starsky had a good time. They were planning on decorating the pretty solarium at the end of the hall, usually used by visitors when a patient was feeling well enough to be up and out of his room. Tonight it would be for a private party only. In spite of himself, that made Hutch smile. The thought of Mika, Gemma and the rest of the hard working nurses going out of their way like that was pretty special.

If they could get into a party mood, so could he. Just as soon as he sorted out the schedule requests, read over the arrest reports from the last day and a half, and called the state prison about a transfer occurring that afternoon. A prisoner in for life had had a heart attack that morning and was being transported to hospital for treatment--the same hospital where Starsky resided. Hutch had never thought much about the prison ward on the fourth floor, one floor above the Rose Tree Unit, although he'd occasionally gone up there to interview a suspect injured during an arrest. Now, just the presence of those criminals one floor above Starsky gave him the heebie-jeebies. One more thing to stress about.

Punching the necessary ten digits into the phone number pad, Hutch asked for the prison warden.

Starsky jiggled the little car in his hand, running his thumb over the sleek lines, and then set it on the table that fit over the bed. With a flick of a finger he sent the miniature red and white Torino careening across the flat surface. It crashed into the Matchbox versions of a black and white and a paddy wagon he'd used to form a tiny roadblock, and all three vehicles went plunging over the edge onto the rumpled blankets. Hutch had given him the custom painted Torino for Christmas, admitting that he'd had to add the distinctive white stripe himself. Starsky had been inordinately touched, since Hutch had rarely had anything good to say about the 'Striped Tomato' in all the years they'd driven in it.

He was as restless and jittery as a teenager waiting for a prom date. This night had to be special--there wouldn't be anymore for some time to come, and he wanted everything perfect. Luckily, Mika had pitched in with exuberance, and a knowing twinkle in her eye. She'd just been in to report that the solarium looked like 'a palace', and she'd give him the high sign the minute Hutch came off the elevator. Starsky wanted to make an entrance, but he had to conserve his energy. Wouldn't pay to get ready too far in advance. He already felt like he was poised on the edge of a knife blade, emotions labile, and far too volatile. Like a firecracker, he could either go up in a blaze of glory that lit the sky or flame out in a single instant. Admitting to Hutch that he really didn't want to go through the chemo wasn't optimal at this time. He'd already promised that he would undergo the arduous treatments again.

Trying to distract himself, Starsky flipped the channel selector up and down with a practiced thumb. A commercial for Dick Clark's Rock and Roll New Year's Eve, a countdown of some of the most popular videos on MTV for the last year, and evening news on almost all of the local channels. He paused on 7 long enough to hear about Ernie Mancuso, an inmate at the state prison being admitted to St. Joseph's Hospital for observation after a heart attack in his cell. Starsky glanced up at the ceiling, knowing full well that the prison ward was directly above his head on the fourth floor.

"Just got a call from security downstairs, Starsky." Mika grinned at him from the doorway. "He's on his way up."

"Geeze, does everyone know about this?" Starsky could feel a blush heating his cheeks. Like the
gossip in high school--who was going with whom.

"Just Roger--he's my boyfriend." She winked. "Do you need help with anything?"

"Nah, I've been doin' this on my own for--a couple of days now. Piece a'cake," he assured, locating the Canadian style crutches from their station against the wall beside the bed. "Just stall him at the nurse's station for a coupla minutes." He'd been working hard with the physical therapist to build up his strength using the crutches and walking. Trying to keep it secret from Hutch, he'd been practicing when his partner was at work. So this would be a big surprise.

Levering himself up, Starsky slipped his hands into the supports and made his way out to the hallway. Hutch was chuckling at something the punk styled ward clerk was saying but his Starsky radar must have been on full bore because he looked up at precisely the moment Starsky came into view.

"Starsk?" Hutch said and there was such unabashed love in his voice that if anyone on the Rose Tree Unit staff were still in the dark about their relationship they wouldn't be now.

"Been waitin' for you." Starsky laughed and Hutch grabbed him up in a tight hug, one of the crutches falling to the floor with a loud clatter. Behind them the nurses and several of the more mobile patients on the unit broke into applause.

"Does everybody know about us?" Hutch whispered into Starsky's ear. It tickled, and he laughed harder.

"Apparently we're the equivalent of Chuck and Di around here."

"More like 'La Cage Aux Folles'," Hutch muttered. He retrieved the errant crutch, presenting it to his partner with a little flourish and then stood, watching Starsky walk down the corridor.

"Are you coming? Dinner's served in the solarium--just like we were royalty."

"I'm watching you," Hutch said, his eyes drinking in every movement.

Starsky felt adored which gave him a warm glow inside, and he glanced over his shoulder at Hutch, not having quite enough maneuverability to turn on a dime.

Hutch looked divine. It had been some time since he'd been in a position to admire his partner in such an amorous way. It was an enjoyable occupation that he really wished he'd spent more time on. Ken Hutchinson might be half a year away from his 40th birthday but he still had the fair hair of a man half his age. Oh, it was just a bit thinner on top, and his figure wasn't the trim one Starsky remembered from their dual races across the Academy obstacle course, but he was still a head turner. Dressed in a green plaid long sleeved shirt and khaki trousers Hutch managed to look accessible and suave at the same time, a feat Starsky had never quite managed.

Mika's magic had turned the drab solarium into a magical place. There was a table set in the middle of the room arranged with sparkling china and silver. Bright confetti was sprinkled liberally over the tabletop, and a dozen balloons decorated the windows. At each place setting was a gold foil covered hat and a noise maker just perfect for New Year's Eve. What Starsky liked even more was the scruffy sofa at the other end of the room had been transformed with a multi-colored patchwork quilt as a cover, and a bucket holding a bottle of champagne sat on the low table next to it.

"Looks pretty good, huh?" Starsky asked when they'd closed the door behind them, and placed a sign purloined from some hotel on the knob. *Do not disturb.*
After only one glance at the room, though, he stared up at Hutch, his heart fluttering in his throat. Starsky would have sworn to anyone on the planet that grand gestures such as single roses and sappy sentimental poetry were all the claptrap of cheap romance novels, but at that moment he just wanted to be swept off his feet again and kissed. Hutch must have read his mind because an instant later they were kissing like they'd never touched lips before. Each kiss was more satisfying than the last, and their ardor for one another grew exponentially.

"I love you," Hutch managed between kisses.

"I know," Starsky returned the favor with heat and then sighed, leaning against his strong man without a care. This was where he was meant to be, forever, and if it meant puking his guts out for two or three more months, he'd do it.

"Hungry?"

"For you." Starsky started kissing lower on his lover's chin, ear, and collar bone, tired of having to bend his neck backwards because of those extra inches Hutch came with. The usual two had been supplemented by the cowboy boot heels Hutch was wearing, while Starsky had on a scruffy bedroom slipper.

"For food." Hutch tenderly cupped his hand at the base of Starsky's skull, stroking his hair. "Got to keep your strength up."

"I'd eat a can a' spinach for you, Olive Oyl."

"Luckily for you, Popeye, that's not on the menu." Hutch snagged a chair, positioning it behind Starsky so all he had to do was sit down and be pushed in to the table.

Still very self-conscious about his new body image Starsky appreciated the casual manner Hutch handled that. No sympathy or hovering, just a simple act of kindness from a very kind man.

"What is?" Starsky plucked a silver cover off the plate revealing pieces of succulent crab sitting on a bed of fresh green lettuce. Shimmering red cherry tomatoes were situated around the plate, and a bowl of dressing sat to one side, ready to be added. A basket of crusty French bread completed the meal, with an interesting covered plate on a small side table for later. Probably dessert.

"You order, your highness?" Hutch bowed graciously, unfurling a napkin for Starsky and one for himself.

"Do you believe it's good luck to have crab for New Year's?"

"At my house we used to have rice pudding--with an almond in it." Hutch took a bite of the juicy white shellfish, nodding in appreciation. "Whoever got the almond had a good year."

"Got any almonds lyin' around?" Starsky caught his partner's wintry blue eyes and smiled to soften the bittersweet flavor of the question. Their love hung between them like a physical thing that he could have reached out and touched. An ache centered up under his breastbone, made swallowing almost painful, but he didn't mind. He was on a date with Hutch, and this night would have to sustain them for a long while.

"Whatever I have is yours, you know that, Starsk," Hutch promised. He poured wine and they touched glasses before drinking.

Starsky liked the dry, pear/apple tang of the wine but his throat was tight with emotion.
Concentrating on his meal for a few moments, Starsky savored every morsel. Even though he didn't want to think about it, the memory that he'd be back on the horrible chemo kept rearing up to demoralize him at the most inopportune times. Tomorrow he'd be sick again, no longer able to eat luscious food like this. Tomorrow he'd crawl back into that detached place that helped him cope with the nastiness of the wretched drug that was supposed to cure him of the scourge. All too soon he was full, and he watched Hutch eat happily, teasing him about a smudge of dressing that dotted the other man's top lip.

"You didn't finish," Hutch pointed out.

"Had my fill of shellfish, and I'm ready to start on a rare Scandinavian delicacy," Starsky purred.

"No rice pudding in sight, babe."

"I can't believe anybody'd willingly eat rice pudding when there are so many other better things in the world." Starsky slipped his foot out of the slipper, running it up the slick fabric of Hutch's pants.

"What would you like better?"

"Chocolate?" Starsky suggested wiggling his toes into the narrow crevice created by Hutch's thigh and the burgeoning bulk of his penis. "Ice cream with cherries and peanuts sprinkled all over the top…maybe a pink, smooth sucker I can swallow whole."

"Afraid you're outta luck, sailor, nothing like that around here." Hutch wrapped his long, dexterous fingers around Starsky's ankle, delicately tickling the underside of his arch.

"That's 'cause it's hiding," Starsky giggled trying to pull his foot out of his lover's grasp.

"You're a detective, find it," Hutch said lazily, an enigmatic smile transforming his face into something rare and beautiful.

Starsky knew he was the cause of that look, that sultry, hungry look, and he wasn't sure he deserved it any longer. He'd gained weight, sure, but he didn't fill out the jeans he wore like he once had. Hell, these were a size smaller than his old favorites, and they were still a little loose. A long sleeved dark blue flannel shirt over a red t-shirt covered him, hiding the ravages of bullet scars, needle sticks and IV ports, and suddenly Starsky was ashamed of his inadequacies in the face of Hutch's bold masculinity. He let his foot drop away, picking up his fork as if he were going to eat a little more but just poked at the remaining crab.

"Starsk?" Hutch asked sounding confused. "Don't bail on me now, baby."

"I…" Starsky shrugged, unwilling to admit why he was so embarrassed about his body. He wasn't whole and beautiful like Hutch. He'd so wanted sex today, been so ready, but now when the moment was upon him he was scared. It had been almost a month since they'd been intimate, and he knew full well Hutch wasn't repulsed by the results of all his medical treatments, so why did this feel so scary? What if he no longer had what it took to arouse his lover?

"C'mere." Hutch pulled him up, guiding him over to the patchwork covered couch. "It's been a long time since we were alone like this, I want to make every minute count."

"Yeah, seems like any minute Mika or some other nurse'll come in here and poke me with a needle, and then listen to my heart," Starsky said, surprised at how bitter he sounded. "Vital signs and drug schedules wait for no man."
"Now, I was promised three undisturbed hours, and I want them." Hutch pushed Starsky's flannel shirt off and loosened the t-shirt from his jeans.

"No," Starsky protested, melting under Hutch's adoring gaze. "Leave it on."

"You cold?"

"I just want to see you first."

"You always were a voyeur at heart," Hutch chuckled, unbuttoning his shirt with a slow seduction.

"All those nights spent on stake-out." Starsky couldn't help smiling. For whatever reason, stake-outs were one of the things he missed most. Hours spent alone with Hutch. They'd discuss everything under the sun sitting there in the Torino or the crummy LTD, and then lapse into comfortable silence. A lot of times there had been boredom and arguments, but Starsky wouldn't have given those times up for anything. The good times and the bad--that's what he'd had with Hutch. If only there could be a few more of the good times. He resolved to make this night one of those.

Hutch stood smiling in all his nakedness, his long cock butted almost straight up against his belly, ready for action.

"That all for me?" Starsky sighed, still uncertain about his own attributes.

"Now, you." Hutch knelt reaching for Starsky's fly.

"Hutch, I'm not…"

"Starsky."

Those clear water blue eyes caught him like a fish in a net. Starsky couldn't look away, mesmerized by the devotion pouring out of the blond man.

"You're always you, no matter what the doctors and nurses do. I've loved you for a long time, and none of this," he laid his hand on the truncated left thigh, "changes my mind."

Starsky closed his eyes, concentrating on that goodness dispelling all the negative emotions he had about his leg. There was still some physical pain emanating from the surgical site but it was low level and easily ignored. What was more insidious was the elusive and aggravating phantom pain, but Hutch's presence even dispelled that.

"I don't care, do you believe me?" Hutch kissed his thigh through the cotton of the pants.

Starsky nodded, afraid to speak. Hutch unzipped his jeans, kissing Starsky on the patch of abdomen revealed by the open fly, and then began to shuck the pants off him. Slipping off the boxers, Hutch patted Starsky's groin with tenderness.

"See, there, I knew I had an old friend here. He's ready," Hutch said sweetly, cupping his big palm around the swelling phallus. "Are you?"

"Yes," Starsky breathed. He was more than ready. "Inside me, please, Hutch?"

For a moment, Hutch looked uncertain himself and Starsky expected an objection, one of the litany of reasons why he shouldn't be penetrated just because he had cancer. Instead Hutch nodded, bending down to take Starsky's cock into his mouth.
Like dipping into warm pudding. Starsky dropped his head back, basking in the sensations that swirled around him. He let Hutch service him, releasing all of the fear and hurt that had been his world for the last month, and would be for some time to come. Hutch's tongue displayed intricate moves like a synchronized swimmer performing just for one, slipping and sliding around the length of Starsky's pole. Starsky grunted as the need surged inside him and he clamped his mouth shut to stifle the urge to vocalize his exhilaration. He came hard, panting as millions of points of light tickled his soul.

"Don't pass out on me." Hutch rubbed his belly soothingly. "Or they'll never let us out alone again."

"Not--gonna--pass--out," Starsky gasped, gulping in air. A cough welled up, but he swallowed and it went away. "'Sides, the respiratory therapist'll love you for making me do my deep breathing exercises."

"Sex, the ultimate therapy workout," Hutch laughed.

"You were always the best workout partner I ever had," Starsky said when he'd gotten his breathing more under control. "But you were like some sorta drill sergeant after the shooting, always after me to do one more rep on the weights or another lap around the track at Cal's high school, remember?"

"Paid off, didn't it? You have the stamina of a horse."

"Not anymore. Maybe a little pony."

"It's my turn in the saddle now, Trigger," Hutch sat on the couch facing Starsky and arranged their legs so that Starsky's were resting on his thighs.

"I'd rather be Silver."

"The Lone Ranger? What does that make me, Tonto?"

"My faithful sidekick."

"Did Tonto ever do this?" Hutch reached underneath, sensuously rimming Starsky's puckered opening.

"Not in any of the Saturday afternoon matinees I ever watched..." Starsky didn't protest in the least when Hutch pushed his right leg up over the back of the couch. "Course, maybe my ma just didn't let me go see those."

"If the Lone Ranger set that kinda example you probably would have done it way before the age of eighteen. And they used to say rock and roll was a bad influence," Hutch said massaging Starsky's buttocks and anus.

"All that hip movement."

"Gyrating pelvises," Hutch slicked up his fingers with surgical lube, the only lubrication available in the hospital, and pushed inside.

Starsky grunted with the pressure; it had been so long. He exhaled languidly, feeling his muscles grow slack and receptive to the intrusion.

*Oh, yeah.*
Hutch smiled down at him, wiggling his fingers inside the moist, hot passage. "You like that?"

"You can do it again," Starsky responded automatically, still entranced by the buzz vibrating through his body from the first time Hutch had stroked his prostate. The second time was even better, a warmth and joy cramming his cells to the overflowing. "Please, Hutch," he begged. "Inside."

"Take it slow, baby," Hutch whispered, kissing the inside of his left thigh.

Starsky closed his eyes as a thickness battered against his weakened defenses and then slid in. Hutch was big, and every time Starsky was snared in that web of pain/pleasure as his interior walls stretched to encompass the welcomed invader. Then Hutch thrust forward, gently but purposefully, and Starsky lost all semblance of coherency. He grabbed onto the arms that clasped his waist, holding on with all his strength. This was health, and goodness and life. It wasn't staying in the hospital, his vitality leaking out with every dose of chemo. If only he could convince Hutch of that. If only sex could cure cancer.

Hutch climaxed, his spasms rocking Starsky to the soul. More, more! He'd heard of people dying during sex and couldn't think of any better way to go. Opening his eyes, Starsky stared up at the adored man with his blond hair falling over his forehead who looked slaked and gorgeous in the aftermath.

"Thank you," Starsky sighed, even though he ached now in places that hadn't chimed out in months.

"No thanks needed, Starsky. Love is all we need."

"Love makes the world go round." Starsky added, since Hutch was quoting song titles. "I love you, a bushel and a peck."

"Love will keep us together." Hutch sang softly. He draped the patchwork quilt around them, cradling Starsky. "Think of me, babe, whenever some sweet talking girl comes along…"

"Like I ever stop thinkin' of you."

"Singing' a song."

"I kinda like your voice…sounds kinda familiar in a strange way," Starsky interrupted the song.

"Just stop, cause I really love you. Stop, I been thinking of you…"

"Don't mess around," Starsky joined in the chorus. "Love will keep us together."

Hutch laughed, his face all soft and lit up from inside, and Starsky had to kiss him. "Didn't recognize you without your yachting cap, Captain."

"Ditched Tenielle for a sexy brunet with curls." Hutch rearranged their positions until they were slouched together, arms intertwined, staring out at the dark sky through the floor to ceiling windows. Silky curtains veiled the heavens, but the moon was a sharp golden sickle even through the draperies.

"The moon is getting' higher," Starsky said quietly. "Time is passing, hours winding down…"

"Will be New Year in just a few days."

"1985--you think things'll be better?"
"I have to believe that," Hutch said confidently. "The new chemo drug will do the trick, Starsk, you'll go into remission. You believe that, don't you?"

Starsky looked at that noble profile for a long time, the long incline of a nose, high forehead and forthright eyes, and lied because he loved this man so much. "Yeah."

Hutch sat beside the bed feeling like he'd been locked into some perverted loop in time, relentlessly repeating the worst days of his life. Starsky was back on chemo and had again spent the last few days hunched over a basin throwing up his guts. Two days had gone by, the IV infusions finished until next time, but some things never changed. The smell of sickness, sweat, and fear. Starsky was completely depleted after the first round--what would the next five hold, and could he survive them? Hutch had such a bellyache he was beginning to wonder if he were developing an ulcer. Just what he needed under the current circumstances. He couldn't get sick, too. With this in mind, he'd been working hard to eat right and get as much physical exercise as he could cram into his already overflowing schedule.

"Happy, happy New Year!" Huggy crowed, marching into the sickroom wearing an outfit guaranteed to brighten the darkest corners. He sported a bright red and yellow striped jacket, matching yellow shirt and red slacks. A red hat with a yellow band completed the ensemble. 1985 was printed across the front of the shirt in huge letters.

Next to his parrot-inspired clothing, Daisy looked positively demure in a short black skirt and low cut black and white striped, boat-necked tee. As usual, she carried a covered picnic basket full of wonderful smelling goodies.

"Happy New Year," Hutch responded automatically, just as he'd been doing all day long, even though his mood was far from chipper. He glanced over at the occupant of the bed, surprised to see that Starsky had opened one eye and was watching the proceedings as if deciding whether he wanted to join in or not.

"You plannin' on entering the Rose Parade, Hug?" Starsky slurred, pulling himself up in the bed. Hutch reached over to fluff up the pillow, but Starsky shrugged him off.

"Bro! It's a whole new year and a whole new atti-tude," Huggy announced, puffing out his chest. "Me an' Daisy are gonna open a restaurant."

"I'm thinking of calling it 'Mama Bear's,'" Daisy grinned, unpacking the bonanza of food she'd brought.

"Giving up 'The Pits', Huggy?" Hutch asked in astonishment. That would take getting used to. While Huggy had worked in various dining and drinking establishments, and in a range of other fields of endeavor, 'The Pits' had fit him like a 'T'. And it had become almost a second home to both Hutch and Starsky.

"No, 'course not, that's the cornerstone of our soon to be all encompassing network of food emporiums!" Huggy spread his hands wide, taking in half of Bay City in the sweep. "Bars, bakeries, restaurants, the Bear family will provide a haven of good food, fine drink, and scrumptious delights to all citizens of this fair metropolis."

"Superman lives here?" Starsky remarked with an enigmatic grin.

At this point Hutch was happy for even the smallest signs of life from his partner. And as usual,
Starsky was rising to the occasion, pulling out all the stops for his guests. He'd be exhausted after they were gone, leaving Hutch to deal with his grumpy disposition.

"Doesn't Superman live in Gotham City?" Hutch asked with a tad too much innocence. He knew full well he didn't, he just wanted to get Starsky's goat and rev him up a little.

"Hutch! When was the last time you read a comic?" Starsky protested, the light of indignation in his eyes.

"Blondie, everybody knows Batman and Robin live in G. Ci-ty." Huggy held out a bottle of champagne. Not as good a label as the one Hutch had shared with Starsky three days earlier, but not exactly Thunderbird, either. "Bubbly anyone?"

"I'll toast to your venture into the world of financial tycoons," Hutch agreed. "But Starsky gets…"

"Starsky wants champagne," Starsky said testily, reaching for a glass. "And Starsky can speak for himself."

Okay, Hutch thought silently, he was in for an argument later. Starsky was in a peevish mood and not about to hold it in.

"I've brought sparkling apple cider if anyone wants it," Daisy offered.

"What else didja bring, sweetheart?" Starsky asked, pointedly ignoring Hutch.

"In keeping with the California tradition of crab at the new year, I've made crab salad on focaccia bread, with corn pudding on the side, tomato and jicama slices for the vegetable, and eggnog cheese cake for dessert."

"Sounds delicious," Starsky said, watching while Huggy poured out the drinks. When everyone had a wineglass full of champagne, they clinked them together, the chime of good crystal tinkling like fairy bells. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year," Daisy echoed with a grin. "I can't believe the way my life has turned around in such a short time. Last January my ex was sentenced to twenty in Soledad, and I was about ready to join the girls on the corner to make a living."

"But you went back to what you do best, cooking," Hutch said, sipping the effervescent wine.

"Oh, that ain't what she does best, if you know what I mean." Huggy rolled his eyes suggestively.

"Huggy!" Daisy groaned, smacking his arm. "Crude, rude and unrefined."

"She's tryin' to instill a little fin-esse in the Bear." Huggy took a mouthful of corn pudding. "Tasty, my dear. Goes right on the menu."

"What will be the slant of the new place?" Hutch asked.

"Very eclectic--diverse, and we'll change the menu frequently to keep people coming back," Daisy enthused.

"Of course, there'll be a few regular items on the menu--decided to include an old favorite around here, with the name changed just a little," Huggy said. "A hamburger with all the trimmings--and extra hot sauce, is now the Starsky Special."

"Thanks, Hug," Starsky murmured, sounding surprised, but there was a brittle edge to his voice
that worried Hutch. Starsky was brewing for an explosion, and he hadn't the slightest idea why.

"This is really good, Daisy." Hutch ate much of what was on his plate, eyeing his partner the whole time.

Starsky was making a good show of eating, but mostly the food was scooped up on the red plastic fork, brought to his lips, tasted briefly and then put back on the plate. He did drink the whole glass of champagne and ask for more, but luckily Huggy had drunk the last of it, so Daisy poured sparkling cider into Starsky's glass.

"Is there really a prison ward upstairs?" Daisy asked, glancing at the light fixture in the ceiling as if expecting to see criminals coming out from the heating ducts.

"I have it on good authority that Ernie Mancuso has the room right above mine." Starsky put aside his barely touched plate of food. "But supposedly he's goin' back to a cell in the morning. Heart attack doesn't get you outta the slammer for good."

"Aren't you worried?" She shivered, piling plates back into the basket.

"The ward is locked," Hutch assured. "No one's escaped from there in years--they're usually too sick, and then sent back to prison before they're any threat to the staff or other patients."

"I just never knew until I heard about Mancuso on the news." Daisy laughed self-consciously. "That they put the murderers in with everybody else in the hospital. Seems like this ought to be a really safe place."

"It is," Hutch defended.

"Like hell it is," Starsky negated, straight faced.

"I'll keep you safe, babycakes," Huggy promised, giving Daisy a quick kiss on the lips. For a second they lingered, locked together in passion then parted hastily, their ardor only partially quelled. "I think we need to get going, huh?"

"The Pits will be packed again tonight, and you've probably got a bunch of visitors wanting to welcome in the new year," Daisy agreed, then took Starsky's hand. "Oh, you've got warm hands. Mine are always freezing this time of year. I just wanted to tell you talking to you helped me, too… and I did tell Huggy."

"Yeah?" For the first time that day Starsky really smiled, his expression soft and wistful looking at the pretty girl. "Shifted some stuff into place, that's for sure. That was nice a'you."

"Any time. And if you have any of your mother's old cookie recipes, I'd be happy to try them out."

"I'll call Aunt Rose." Starsky nodded.

Once Huggy and Daisy left most of the light left, too, a distinct chill settling over the hospital room. Hutch was surprised how wary he was of being alone with his lover. He didn't know why, just that the very air felt oppressive and heavy. "What did you and Daisy talk about?" he asked lightly.

"You bent on prying every last secret out of me?" Starsky snarled.

"No, Stark, just asking." He held up his hands in apology, palms out. "She did help you, I was just curious. You weren't very…friendly today until the end, is all."
"Oh, yeah, I just love having people come in here all excited about the future while I'm stuck in bed heaving up my insides," Starsky attacked. "Like I asked to have that thrown in my face! The Starsky Special. Shit. You know he did that cause he thinks I'm going t'die, don't you?"

Unable to breathe, Hutch just stared at his partner in shock. He truly had no idea where this was coming from, and yet, from a back corner of his brain, there was something horribly familiar about it. "Don't say that."

"Why?" he shouted in return. "It's true, isn't it? Life is all about death. Start dying from the minute we're born. I'm just one of the lucky ones, I get to go twice."

"Starsky." Hutch touched his arm in supplication, but Starsky recoiled. Stunned, Hutch stood still trying to process what was going on, and it was then that something finally registered in his tired brain. Wanting to be sure, Hutch sat on the edge of the bed to gently lay the back of his hand on a flushed cheek. Although Starsky looked about ready to bolt, he didn't move. "Just hold still for a minute. Do you have a temperature?"

"I don't know," Starsky wiggled away from the touch, irritated. "Does every single body function have to be up for discussion?"

"I'll call Katie…"

"No!"

"Starsky, you could be sick."

"Big surprise there, huh? Gemma'll be in here precisely at sixteen hundred hours, 'cause that's the kind of nurse she is, and she'll write down all those stupid little numbers all over again." Starsky closed his eyes, wiping sweat off his forehead. "What does it matter if Katie takes 'em any sooner?"

"That's two hours from now," Hutch said quietly.

It was just coming up on two o'clock, and the nurses would be finishing up assignments before shift change at three p.m. He was fully aware that if Starsky was sick he'd need a full compliment of blood work up and antibiotics started, meaning a lot of work for the nurses at the end of the day shift. On the other hand, if they waited until Gemma arrived, Starsky could be even sicker, as quickly as these things seemed to come on.

"It matters to me," he said softly, looking back at Starsky. The sick man still lay back on the pillow, eyes closed, arms crossed over the top of his head like he was protecting himself from some menace from above. He looked weary, and very ill. "I'm going to call Katie," Hutch decided.

"So now I don't have any control over my own body whatsoever?" Starsky growled. "Like I've been raped, every damn person in the whole universe can come in here an' do what they damn well please, cause I've ceased to exist as a thinking, breathing person. And you think I'm not dead yet?"

The pain in his chest almost unbearable, Hutch struggled to keep calm. Starsky was irrational right now, he'd be better when they gave him meds and painkillers. Except, to a certain extent Hutch agreed with him. The doctors and nurses had stripped away nearly every shred of autonomy Starsky had left. Did he have the right to insist that Starsky get treated for whatever was currently affecting him? It was perilously close to rape, without the violence. Violating Starsky's body without his consent--some of the tests were very painful. But it was for his own good, wasn't it? To save his life.

Almost unsteadily, Hutch walked out into the hall. Katie, a very young nurse who'd only recently
graduated from school, looked up from writing her shift summary report.

"Ken?" she asked with concern. "Does Dave need something?"

"He's...I think he has a fever," Hutch managed.

"Oh, I'll be right there. Thanks for telling me," she answered cheerfully, tucking a strand of dark blond hair back into her bun.

A simple taking of vital signs did reveal a high temperature, which in turn led to a septic work-up where blood was drawn for several tests. The charge nurse who was helping Katie explained that these were to determine the presence of bacteria in the blood, and how the immune system was working. Starsky's wasn't working very well at all, and his bacteria count was high. By the following shift, he was started on antibiotics, and more tests were ordered, including a spinal tap. Hutch's already acidy belly lurched towards his knees at the very mention of the procedure.

"Doesn't that mean you think he has something really serious?" Hutch questioned the earnest looking Dr. Lloyd. He was one of the two other oncologists who regularly worked in the Rose Tree Unit. Many of the patients came from other hospitals to this one because of the exemplary care here, and brought their own cancer specialists with them, but John Davies, Mitchell Lloyd, and Ellen Weaver were the main doctors on the Unit. Hutch had often heard from other patients and their families that Lloyd was a little too eager to do every test in the book even after a bacterial or viral culprit had been found.

"Well, in David's case we need to err on the side of caution. He's had a UTI before--and pneumonia only a few weeks ago." He pushed up the perpetually crooked wire-rims he wore. "In a healthy person, with a working immune system, the infection can be isolated to a small area of the body, but for someone like him, the chemo has pretty much wiped out his ability to fight disease. Thus, the bacteria can run rampant and attack areas usually off limits."

"So you know he has a urinary tract infection, again?" Hutch asked in dismay.

"Very likely, from all indications. What I'm afraid of is bacteria getting to his brain and causing meningitis. In his present condition, that would be fatal, which is why I need to do a tap."

Hutch nodded, walking with leaded feet back into Starsky's room. Starsky's mood had only darkened with repeated needle sticks and new medications. The doctors were having some difficulty finding antibiotics that didn't cause adverse side effects for him. The one that had produced hives was out, as was another that brought with it immediate vomiting, not an easily dismissed reaction for someone already constantly retching.

"You've got that look in your eye," Starsky accused.

"Lloyd wants to do a spinal tap," Hutch said wearily.

"Lloyd can fuck himself."

"He's worried about an infection in your brain!" Hutch flared.

"Have him stick a needle in his own spine, see how he likes it."

Terror coursing through his veins, Hutch slammed his palm against the nightstand, making Starsky flinch in surprise. "I get that you're fed up with this! I get that you're tired. Well, I'm tired, too, dammit, but you have to keep fighting."
"How? There's nothing left, Hutch! I don't care anymore! And you know that crap about eatin' the crab? It's a crock a'shit," Starsky raged, and as scared as Hutch was right then, he also knew Starsky needed to get out the anger or it would fester inside. "I was deludin' myself big time to think that would get rid of the cancer."

"Creative visualization is a useful tool…"

"Everything sucks, and if I died right now, I'd be glad."

"You'd leave me?" Hutch asked, totally spent, sinking down onto the side of the bed. Starsky looked like crap, there was no arguing that. The sweet, short curls that had grown in, soft as a chinchilla pelt, were damp with sweat, plastered to his skull. Fever had produced the overly bright red cheeks that glowed obscenely in his otherwise pale face, and he had the look of someone who'd been ill for a very long time. "Without so much as a good-bye? Is that all there is between us?"
Hutch entreated.

Starsky looked away, but his shoulders heaved when he took a breath in.

Knowing he was manipulating the situation shamelessly, Hutch still plowed ahead, desperate for this all to be over. "Please, Starsky, do this for me?"

"God, don't you know I do everything for you?" Starsky said despairingly.

Hutch cupped that beloved face between his hands, turning Starsky to face him, feeling the abnormal temperature burning his palms. "Never forget that I love you."

"Yeah."

"And we have to really work hard to keep a good attitude through all this--you most of all, because you're fighting the hardest. But, Starsky, everything I read says that a positive attitude works."

Hutch kissed each eyelid reverently, feeling Starsky's acquiescence down to his soul. "It really can work miracles."

"Helps to believe in 'em."

Since Gemma had the needed equipment all ready, Starsky was prepped and draped for the procedure within minutes. Hutch held his hand as he was curved forward so that the doctor had a good view of the spine.

"This won't take long," Lloyd said. "I'm going to numb the area with Lidocaine, so you'll feel this needle stick, and not the one…"

"I've had one before," Starsky said flatly, his tone implying that he wasn't in the mood for explanations or platitudes. "Just do it."

Hutch, having spent all of his recent free time studying the MCAT book, not to mention every other beginning level medical text he could get his hands on, watched the procedure out of the corner of his eye, feeling Starsky's grip tighten. As much as he hated that Starsky had to have another painful test, he was also becoming so much more fascinated with everything medical. Reading about procedures in a book was one thing, physically manipulating a needle into the spaces between the vertebrae was quite another. All of it just emphasized how little he knew, but the general Ed. questions in the MCAT were proving easier than he'd expected. Every time he breezed through a problem, his confidence soared. If nothing else, he'd go into medical school with advanced knowledge of anything pertaining to osteosarcoma treatments.
He almost laughed, despite the grim situation, realizing he was already imagining himself in medical school, and he hadn't even taken the test yet. That certainly counted as creative visualization.

"There, all done, and the fluid looks clear, which is a good sign." Lloyd pressed a small Band-Aid over the tiny mark and Starsky stiffened.

"How you doing?" Hutch asked gently, smoothing his forehead as Gemma helped Starsky lay flat once more.

"Terrific, can't you tell?" Starsky replied with sarcasm.

"Stay prone for a few hours, it will help prevent a headache, but if you do experience pain, I'll write an order for a painkiller," Lloyd said, directing the nurse to clean up the mess he'd made before leaving.

"I'll bet he's a joy to work with," Hutch observed, helping Gemma wheel the small Mayo stand out of the room.

She pursed her lips, trying unsuccessfully to hide a smile, but her dimples gave her away. Gemma might be old enough to be his mother, but Hutch had discovered she had a wicked sense of humor. "Some of the girls call him Lloyd the Droid."

"Behind his back, of course," Hutch chuckled.

"See if David will drink something," Gemma said. "And I'll be back to check up on him after I see to the Colonel's dressing change."

"The Colonel?" Hutch asked.

"He fought in the Pacific theater in World War II and in Korea," Gemma said. "Very interesting stories."

"Sounds like someone Starsky'd get along well with--he loves all those fighter pilot movies."
Hutch looked back at his partner lying in the bed. Starsky appeared to be asleep, but was probably just lying with his eyes closed. "Starsk, you want a soda?"

"Nope."

"I could go down to the machine in the cafeteria, get some root beer or Orange Crush," Hutch wheedled.

Starsky opened one eye, squinting up at him. "With ice cream?"

"You gonna eat it if I do?"

"Yeah."

"You're on." Hutch grinned, hoping that this was a signal that Starsky's attitude was changing. It was a whole new year, filled with hope and promise, but for Hutch only one thing would make it a happy one. If David Starsky went into remission.

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January was a month of rain and vomiting. Whole days, even whole weeks, went by with Starsky only marginally aware of life outside his room. He was down to basic survival.
Hutch despaired of ever getting the old Starsky back. Glimpses of his cocky grin, quick wit and playful personality were few and far between. Cancer was whittling Starsky away bit by bit—hair, weight, a leg. Hutch had begun to hate the beast in a way he had never done before. After the initial diagnosis, he had just feared that the disease would take his partner away from him—to death. But now he found that Starsky had already been taken away, even though he was still alive.

Hutch's hatred of the disease now matched Starsky's own, which spawned his desperate search for alternative treatments. Cancer was the enemy, and he was going after it with both barrels. He haunted Chinese herbal shops, pored over books from health food shops, and questioned every person at the precinct for new remedies. Most of what he found were easily dismissed as hoaxes or sugar placebos, leaving Hutch lost and fearful. Here he was interested in medical school, and was rejecting current medical doctrine for any cure he could latch on to.

One of the few things that offered any help at all was fennel tea. Starsky, when he was up to talking at all, claimed it tasted like shit, but it did help relieve the nausea if he took it first thing in the morning, especially before his IV infusion had started. But over time, Starsky began to retreat completely from the world.

Hutch was back at the Academy with a whole new class of cadets. He really enjoyed spending time with young men and women who were excited and passionate about their blossoming careers in law enforcement but he was experiencing a feeling of detachment most of the time. He had to force himself to join in discussions with any amount of enthusiasm, and annoying projects such as grading papers and tests were almost beyond him.

Mid-January, he caught a mild cold which banned him from the Rose Tree Unit for five days. Hutch felt a fleeting sense of relief at the reprieve, but that was short lived. He then spent the remaining four days worried sick that something fearful would happen to Starsky while he couldn't be there, only intensifying the already crippling stress and depression that saddled him. Luckily, Starsky was in between treatments at the time and was, in the nursing parlance, stable.

The third round of chemo was completed on schedule but after that Starsky couldn't even muster the strength to sit up in bed. He had absolutely no energy whatsoever and even shifting positions with the help of a nurse was more than he could manage. He slept most of the time.

Hutch spent the morning of Sunday, January 27th, at home working on lesson plans and sundry teacher duties. Since he had taken over for the late Ben Logan after the fall semester had already started, the early lectures were all new territory for him. Plus, his concentration was nil these days. While he could have done the work in Starsky's room, to be near his friend, he was finding that such an ordeal lately that he'd begun to wonder about his own loyalty. How could he be so cruel, staying away when his lover, his very soul mate, needed him the most? The problem was Starsky was hardly there, rarely communicating and barely civil when he did.

After stopping for a bean sprout sandwich on whole grain bread with a side of broccoli salad for himself, and a banana smoothie with extra protein powder for Starsky, Hutch headed over to the hospital. He tried to maintain an ultra-healthy diet, as he'd done so strenuously in his younger days, and had lost several pounds. In fact, Huggy and Daisy were beginning to worry about him, which he totally blew off. Starsky was the one who was hanging onto a thread; he deserved all the worry. For himself, he needed to shed the extra weight to keep up with his cadets.

Just stepping into the lobby elevator suddenly ratcheted up Hutch's adrenaline levels. Something was wrong, he could feel it down to his bones. He carefully wrapped the second half of the sandwich in cling wrap and stowed it in his pocket, wondering whether to just pitch the smoothie in the trash before even he got to the unit. Starsky probably wouldn't have taken more than a sip or
two anyway because the Adriamycin had given him a stomach ulcer. Hutch watched the ascending numbers on the elevator monitor with the growing fear that this was going to be one of those bad days.

"Hutch!" Calliope, the punk rocker ward clerk, who now sported green spiked hair and a safety pin through one ear, exclaimed. "How'd you get here so quickly? I just left a message on your machine."

"I was on my way, what's wrong?" he asked, just managing to keep his anxiety suppressed.

"Dr. Davies just wanted you to know that he's ordered some tests for another septic work-up. Dave wasn't feeling so good this morning."

"Damn," Hutch started to race to the room, then paused, handing Calliope the smoothie. "You want this? Banana with extra C and protein."

"My favorite, thanks!" she grinned, sipping from the straw. "It's good."

John Davies was just leaving Starsky's room when Hutch rounded the front desk for the hallway. "Glad to see you, Ken," he greeted.

"How is he?"

"His temperature went up a few hours ago, we drew some blood, and I've started antibiotics. It's another waiting game," Davies said quietly. "It's probably pneumonia from the way his lungs sound, but..."

"What the hell is going on here, John?" Hutch barked louder than he should have. "Why does this keep happening? In a hospital? Isn't this where people go to get well, not sicker?"

"Ken," Davies pronounced his name sharply, indicating the open door of the family room. "Let's take this where we have some privacy and won't wake the other patients."

"I've heard all your platitudes before, John," Hutch ripped out savagely once they were in the pleasant room. "But I'm tired of them. What are you going to do about this, now?"

"Prepare yourself to accept that Starsky may be dying," the doctor said carefully, his handsome face compassionate and sad.

"NO!" Hutch shouted, anger surging up like an Atlantic storm. "No, that I don't accept! I am not ready, and neither is he. What antibiotic is he on, huh? Not the one that made him vomit, right? Will this get rid of the pneumonia? Because there is no way this is killing him, no fucking way."

"It's still too early to identify if the drug is specific to whatever bacteria is in his bloodstream." Davies took a deep breath. "You have to know that this is not easy for me. I really like Starsky, and I don't want...sometimes things are out of our hands, no matter how hard we try to change them."

"So what was the...what...eight, no, ten years of medical school good for, then, huh?" Hutch raged, terrified of what the doctor was telling him. He paced around the perimeter of the room, bypassing the coffee machine and TV twice before Davies spoke again.

"We are taught to try to save lives," he answered tiredly. "But there comes a time when we also learn that...nature takes its course."

"Crock of shit, and a cop-out for you, huh?" Hutch said savagely. "Cause this way it's out of your
hands. So the patient died, couldn't save him. That's the way things were meant to be." He jerked the door open, not even glancing back at the other man. "Starsky's proved you doctors wrong on more than one occasion, and he's going to do it again. To think I considered going to medical school!" He stomped out, crossing the hall to Starsky's room in only a few steps. But he faltered at the doorjamb, almost afraid to go in.

Was this his penance for not being supportive enough? Would Starsky have stayed healthy--well, less sick than he was now--if Hutch had come through more? Could he have changed anything, or was Starsky's body truly just giving up on him?

Walking into the familiar room just far enough to watch the sleeping man, Hutch was overwhelmed with misplaced guilt. He knew he wasn't at fault here, but he felt so bad, so culpable, nonetheless. He leaned against the wall, weeping for all the good times they'd lost to this scourge. Tears slipped silently down his face and he gave into the pain, hugging himself tightly to keep from making a disturbance. At long last, he scrubbed his cheeks dry, approaching the bed to be that much closer to the only man he'd ever loved.

Starsky's skin was as dry and brittle as autumn leaves, his body limp and unmoving. Hutch was almost afraid to touch him anymore, afraid of feeling that horrible heat again. His temperature kept rising as if his body were defying natural law. A glance at the nurse's notes showed that he was currently at 40 Celsius which, if Hutch remembered correctly, was something over 103 Fahrenheit. The numbers scared him. How long could Starsky's already frail body withstand such a strain?

"Hey." The word was merely an exhalation of air, but Hutch could have heard his partner's voice in a howling hurricane.

"I thought you were asleep," Hutch said fondly, finally stroking Starsky's overly hot cheek with the back of his hand.

"I was, heard you…" Starsky squinted, barely moving his head. He was wheezy, but not coughing, which Hutch hoped was a good sign. "Wha' time z'it?"

"Noon--twelve thirty. I heard you had a rough morning."

"Jus' hot." Starsky pushed away the sheet covering him. His thin t-shirt and drawstring pajama pants were clinging damply to him. "'M too hot."

"You've got a temperature again, but John started antibiotics." "Damn," Starsky muttered. "Again? Nurses were sticking me." He held out a bony arm to show.

"You're all bruised," Hutch agreed sympathetically, but strangely cheered just the same. This Starsky was far too normal. He couldn't possibly be near death, and be this chatty. "You want me to get a wet rag, cool you off?"

"Yeah."

Hutch rinsed a washrag in cold water, wrung it out and wiped it over Starsky's face. He did the same on his chest and arms, helped Starsky change into clean clothes, and lastly folded the rag into a rectangle to place on his forehead.

"Feels good," Starsky sighed, curling his lax fingers into Hutch's. "Love you, Hutch."

"I love you, Starsk, more than all the stars in the sky," Hutch responded, barely able to keep the tears out of his voice.
"S'good, then," Starsky agreed and was asleep.

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"Why is it we always dwell on the worst case scenario?" Hutch mused aloud. It was February first, nearly a week since Starsky's recent pneumonia scare, and once again the patient had rallied. To John Davies amazement, and Hutch's relief, Starsky was on the mend again.

Hutch was taking a rare break from the bedside to fill Huggy in on the latest. He slumped against the bar sipping his beer, so weary he couldn't think straight. He'd taught a class at the Academy in the morning, visited Starsky at lunch time, overseen a crime scene at a jewelry store in the afternoon, and been back at the hospital for dinner. He'd had over-baked cod, and Starsky had actually eaten two mouthfuls of rice pudding. Despite Starsky's disparaging comments about the creamy dessert, he'd developed a fondness for Mika's mother's secret recipe. It was the only thing he was currently keeping down.

"I sit and think about him...getting sicker," Hutch continued, turning the beer stein around in his hands. "Imagine him failing...instead of just the opposite. He could just as easily get better, right? He did get better--but I'm not as happy as I should be. Why is that?"

"It's the same as when you're a little kid hiding under the covers scared of the bogey man comin' down the hall," Huggy said. "The same ol' room where your brother's sleeping in the other bed becomes a haunted house in the middle of the night with creaks and groans like ghosts floatin' around." He clutched at his heart like that scared child. "No matter what the reality, the brain automatically conjures up what scares you the most. Death's at the top of the heap, my man."

"John Davies started talking about death--that Starsky wouldn't make it." Hutch stared down into his beer, tiny waves lapping the sides of the glass because his hands curled around the outside were shaking.

"Have you talked to Starsky?"

"I can't do that! He knows how I feel! He has to live."

"Yeah, man, I hear you, but do you know how he feels?" Huggy asked shrewdly.

"He doesn't want to die," Hutch said automatically, shaking his head, but he couldn't shut out the echoes of the conversation he'd had with Starsky on New Year's. That he was one of the lucky ones who got to die twice. Starsky could not be consciously thinking that death was a good thing. That was impossible.

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"Mika?" Starsky plastered on his most convincing and winsome grin. "Can I sit up for a while?"

"Dave, it's nearly 11 p.m., you should be going to sleep," she threatened with mock severity.

"I slept all day long, physical ther'pist says I gotta get up more," he wheedled.

"This shift is almost over, you should be in bed." Mika sighed, recording the last of his vitals on her sheet. Starsky was proud that they were as average as anyone walking around Bay City who didn't have a terminal disease. "Ken is asleep."

"He's had a long day." Starsky glanced over at his slumbering partner. Luckily, as quickly as Hutch had gone down he'd be out for a while, giving Starsky a long time to put his plan into action.
Starsky had made a decision that had been long coming, to retake control of his own life. It felt really satisfying, like he'd finally taken a positive step, even though Hutch might not think so. In fact, just thinking about Hutch's opinion on the subject unnerved him just a tiny bit, so Starsky was trying not to look in his direction. "C'mon, schweetheart, just for a while. I'll watch the Friday night news. When Ginger comes on night shift she can help me back to bed."

"I'll tell her to add a sleeping pill to your late night cocktail." Mika rolled her eyes, but expertly transferred him into the wheelchair next to the bed. She made sure the TV remote and a glass of water were on the nightstand and waved good-bye.

Once she was gone, Starsky reached casually over and disconnected the tubing from the IV port sewn into his chest. He was getting to be an old pro at that, having helped with the easy procedure countless times. Depressing the red button on the IV pump, he switched off the power. First part of the plan carried out flawlessly. It had been weeks since he'd had the energy to do anything even as strenuous as sitting up like this, but adrenaline barreled through his veins, giving him the strength to do what had to be done before he crashed and burned.

Starsky actually did flick on the TV, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the somber anchorwoman describing a deadly car crash on the 405. He was focused solely on the contents of the nightstand, and nothing else. Starsky had watched carefully when Hutch stripped down for bed, seeing him place his long barreled Python pistol in the drawer.

With a calm resolve born of desperation, Starsky removed the gun and hid it under his thigh. The cold steel seemed to seep right through his pajama bottoms into his soul. Knowing Hutch would never leave the gun loaded, Starsky propelled the wheelchair a few feet forward to a pile of clothes casually tossed over a chair, and went through the pockets. He found what he needed, his heart banging like a drum.

Hutch grumbled in his sleep and rolled over. Starsky froze, staring at him, but Hutch had long grown accustomed to sleeping through the sounds of a hospital at night. Nurses talking, the TV on, movement, were all nothing new, and he rarely awakened anymore.

"I love you, Hutch," Starsky whispered under cover of the TV weatherman predicting more rain. All the exertion had loosened the phlegm in his chest and he stifled a cough with his fist, furiously wheeling the wheelchair one handed to get as far away from Hutch as possible.

Once out in the hall, he looked furtively about, but apparently had timed things perfectly. Just after 11 p.m. nearly all the evening shift nurses, and all the fresh night nurses, went to the nurse's station for report. The only remaining nurses were either finishing up last minute patient care or counting narcotics in the med room. The long corridor was empty. Starsky took a deep breath that threatened to bring on more coughing, and headed for the solarium where he and Hutch had spent such a wonderful evening only one month ago; before the resurgence of chemo, puking, and hair loss, much less two bouts of bacterial infections, countless lab draws, and the end of any real joy in Starsky's life.

He'd had it. This had to end now.

"Where is he?"

Hearing the words in his sleep, Hutch tried to turn away from the noise. He was getting better about sleeping through the frequent disturbances from the medical staff who came into the room at all hours of the night, but he rarely got a completely uninterrupted night's sleep.
"Ken? Where's David?" The nurse's voice was sharp and well on the way to concerned.

That banished any last vestiges of sleep. Hutch sat up fast, scanning the dim room. A plump nurse stood in the middle of the room in front of an obviously empty bed.

"Where's Starsky?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Ginger replied. "I already checked the bathroom, he's not there. Mika said she got him up into a wheelchair to watch the news just before 11."

"What time is it now?" Hutch asked, scrambling out of bed. He always wore sweats to bed in deference to the nurses, so once he slid his feet into slippers he was dressed.

"Almost 11:30."

"Damn," Hutch swore, swallowing any outright terror. There had to be a logical explanation. Starsky was in no shape to have gotten very far, and while there was a slight possibility that some criminal bent on revenge might have sneaked in and taken him off, Hutch discarded that theory immediately. Starsky must be close by, probably on this floor.

"I need to tell the charge nurse."

"Keep things quiet for now," Hutch advised. "I'll search down to the end of the hall, you go up that way. Isn't there a nurse call button in every room?"

"Yes, even places like the family kitchen and solarium."

"Good, if I ring in the next few minutes, see if you can be the one who responds." Hutch concentrated on maintaining a calm, controlled exterior, his police training an advantage. But inside he was quaking. What the hell had Starsky done?

He paused momentarily as Ginger hurried off in the other direction. Where would Starsky go?

The Rose Tree Unit was shaped like a donut; the main elevators opening onto a small waiting area directly in the center, with the ward clerk's desk to one side, and the nurses's station on the other. Medical staff conference rooms and med rooms were situated behind, with therapy and exam rooms on the opposite end behind the elevators. The patient rooms marched down each corridor connecting at one end with the solarium, and on the other with a wide view of the ocean. There was a flight of stairs to upper and lower floors at each end to comply with fire laws. The eastern end of the middle bank of rooms housed space for supplies, treatment, cooking and visiting. Many of those had two doors giving easy access to both sides of the wing and there was one connecting hallway that stretched between. But after considering and rejecting most of the available options, Hutch headed straight for the place that called to his heart rather than his head; the location of their last and most memorable date.

Starsky sat with his back to the door, apparently watching the night sky through the floor to ceiling windows, and Hutch felt himself sag with relief. Nothing bad had happened, the errant one was all unharmed, and only a relatively short distance from his bed.

"God, Starsk!" He grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and pulled it around, his adrenaline edged fear not thinking about the consequences. "You scared me to…"

"Death?" Starsky asked remotely.

Hutch recoiled, scrambling back from his partner in surprise. Starsky was holding his Python, the
long barreled pistol looking large and awkward in the emaciated man's grasp. The gun barrel was resting in his lap, the weight obviously too heavy for him to heft for long periods, but one finger was pressed tightly over the trigger, the business end pointed straight up so that a bullet would rip through his jaw and face.

"What are you doing?" Hutch asked breathlessly. "Please Starsk... put the gun down."

"Why?" Starsky's voice was composed, his face devoid of any emotion Hutch could read.

"Because you could hurt yourself." Hutch mentally scrambled on how to handle the situation. He'd negotiated with a number of potential suicides in his years as a cop but had no idea how to defuse things when the victim was his own partner. "We need to talk, but I can't with you holding..."

"Why not, Hutch? I've already hurt myself. I just want to stop hurting."

"So you stole my gun?" He needed to find the call button and summon support but he was afraid to take his eyes off Starsky. He felt cut off from the rest of the hospital, hoping that someone--anyone--would eventually come looking for them before it was too late.

"I knew this is the only way I could get you to come," Starsky said, and Hutch could see the utter weariness evident in every line of his body. Starsky looked spent, the sharp lines of his gaunt face etched with fatigue and pain. "So I waited."

"To do it in front of me?" Hutch cried, appalled. "Starsky, this is suicide!"

"I wasn't going to..." The dark blue eyes filled with tears, but he blinked them away, his back stiffening with determination. "Hutch, I don't want to live like this anymore--not with all this shit in my body."

"So you're just giving up? Choosing death?"

"No, I'm choosing to live a life I know will end, just like everybody else's."

"You won't live very long if you pull that trigger," Hutch said harshly, barely able to breathe.
Starsky's finger eased off the trigger, but he kept possession of the weapon. "I have an ultimatum."

"I'm listening."

"I want to stop the chemo--today. No more chemo, ever."

"Then you'll die," Hutch said flatly, his belly cramped so tightly he was having trouble taking in sufficient amounts of air. He felt like he was drowning, water closing up over his head.

"I know, but Hutch, that was always going to happen, don't you see?" The heretofore controlled tears slipped down his cheeks, but Starsky didn't succumb easily. "I was dyin' every time they pumped me fulla Cisplatin and Adriamycin, and then everything else to keep me alive long enough for the next course. It was hell, there wasn't any kinda life left there."

"What's left?" Hutch begged in despair.

"I don't want to die tonight. I don't," Starsky promised. He let go of the gun so abruptly it would have slipped right off his lap if Hutch hadn't lunged and grabbed up the weapon. Hutch dumped the bullets out and pushed the disarmed gun far across the linoleum where it landed under the table.
"I want to live out what time there is with you. Not so sick I can't even bear t'be in my own skin."

"Oh, God, Starsk." Hutch knelt down to his level, wrapped his arms around Starsky's thighs and clung to him.

"Hutch, I know you're scared but I can't do this anymore."

"I just wanted you to get better, to go into remission. I wanted you safe. The chemo was supposed to be the cure."

"Maybe it's a cure for some people, but I don't think it's the cure for me." Starsky bracketed Hutch's face with his hands. "You can't make this better."

"Then what can I do?"


"I'll do anything--but maybe there's some new treatment out there? In Europe? I've been reading…"

"You remember tellin' me about that death and dyin' crap? The five stages?"

"Kubler-Ross."

"Saw a program on PBS 'bout her." Starsky rubbed his thumbs in concentric circles through Hutch's hair, just above his ears. "Acceptance is one of 'em. Hutch, I never wanted any of this." He hiccuped which turned into a cough, but the spasm didn't last long. "I've been angry, fighting, depressed…and everywhere in between, but I ain't tried acceptance yet. I think it's time."

Neither spoke. Hutch sat numbly, wondering if the only reason his head didn't split in half was because Starsky was holding the two sides together.

Out in the hall they could hear a commotion, Ginger's increasingly frantic voice describing her search to someone else, concluding with, "Ken said he'd hit the call button, but he didn't. This is the last place to look…oh." She trailed off, seeing the two men in the solarium. Two other nurses ran smack into her back, exclaiming in surprise.

"He found me," Starsky said simply, taking charge.

Hutch didn't move until Starsky stopped stroking his temples. Then he slowly got to his feet, holding onto the wheelchair for support, Starsky's closeness the only thing he could handle right then.

"Is Dr. Davies in house?" Starsky asked with authority.

"He is," the charge nurse said.

"Call him. Hutch'll get me back to my room."

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"Starsky, you could work on your timing." John Davies strode in, his lab coat flapping. Despite the hour he was nicely dressed in a button down shirt and pleated slacks, not comfy scrubs like some of the other doctors wore at night. "It's after midnight. I was planning to schedule a conference with you both in the morning."

"About?" Starsky asked, now back in bed.
"The chemo hasn't been as effective as I'd hoped," Davies began.

"You mean it isn't working," Starsky stated bluntly, glancing over at the still stricken Hutch. He really did regret the drastic measures he'd used to get his lover's attention but he felt so inordinately lightened, as if the poison from all the drugs was already flushed from his bloodstream.

"More or less, yes."

"What are our other options?" Hutch asked hopelessly, slumped on his rumpled cot.

"There aren't any right now," Davies said gravely.

"So no more chemo," Starsky determined.

"I'd still like to finish the course. It could slow the growth of any future tumors…"

"No, that's what I wanted to tell you." Starsky tilted his head to look the tall man directly in the eye. "No more, ever. I'm dropping out of this now."

"Medically, I don't advise that," Davies argued.

"He pretty much already decided," Hutch spoke up. "Stubborn."

"You do have that right," the doctor conceded. "But Starsky, can I ask you why? What changed your mind?"

Turning towards Hutch, still a little guilty at his ruthless tromping on his partner's emotions, Starsky explained. "I never wanted to start the second time, but I did it for Hutch."

On the smaller bed, Hutch inhaled noisily, but didn't say a word.

"But it was only takin' me away from him. I wasn't living anymore, I was just existing. Now, before I die, I want to live for real. No puking, no vital signs every minute and a half. I want to go home, John."

Sitting down in the unused wheelchair, John steepled his fingers pensively, "You'd have to sign some against medical advice papers, for legal reasons."

"Yeah, okay."

"Did you ever make out a living will?"

"Not formally." Starsky looked over at Hutch again, his energy level dropping fast. He was so tired, and starting to regret how much he hurt the man he loved. Would he be able mend the wounds, or would Hutch resent his decision too much to forgive him? "We talked about it. No ventilator when it gets really bad. I don't want to linger."

"I'd strongly advise you to make one up--and maybe even sign a DNR."

"What's that?" Starsky lay back on the pillow because even talking was sapping his strength.

"Do not resuscitate," Davies explained quietly. "It's basically the same thing as a living will, but some doctors prefer that one over the other."

"God," Hutch whispered.
"So after that, when can I go home?"

"You're still on IV antibiotics, and your platelets are in the toilet, Starsky. I won't beat around the bush, as sick as you are right now, I am not comfortable with you going home."

"When?" Starsky pressed, ready to walk out that door tonight.

"When your blood levels rise, when you've gained some weight." Davies frowned, obviously unhappy with his patient's turn of events. "When I say you can."

"That's not fair…!"

"Starsky," Hutch said sharply, turning blazing eyes on him. Starsky gulped, recognizing Hutch's ire. "He's the doctor here. You won your victory, so listen to what he has to say. No way would I take you home in this condition, you're weak, and I'M. NOT. READY."

"Hutch…"

"Starsky, get some rest, we can talk more in the morning, hammer out the details," Davies said carefully, taking his leave.

"Are you satisfied?" Hutch snarled.

"I…?" Starsky started, confused. He just wanted Hutch to understand his reasons, his need to live a life that wasn't bound by drugs, needles, and doctor's rules.

"Starsky, I'm so scared right now. How do I cope with this? What happens now?"

"I don't know," he admitted, spent. "I think we gotta make it up as we go along. This is all new territory for me." Starsky shivered, the last few hours taking their toll. "Come here, please?"

Hutch approached the bed warily, his face a picture of sorrow and disorientation. He stood two feet away, not completely committing himself to anything.

"Get in?" Starsky offered, still shivering, really cold now. He truly didn't know how he would cope if Hutch didn't surrender. He held up the sheet in invitation.

Very slowly Hutch bent down, then crawled into the narrow space. Starsky moved back a little until his spine was pressed up against the safety railing, but he didn't care in the slightest. Hutch curled, as much as a man his size could in that amount of space, putting his cheek on Starsky's shoulder.

"Are we still friends?" Starsky asked forlornly.

"Aw, Starsk," Hutch said, crying openly. "How can you even ask? You just threw me for a loop. I didn't have any idea…"

"No?" Starsky gently kissed one tear stained eyelid and then the other. "None at all?"

"Maybe a little, but I just wanted to believe in a miracle."

"This is the miracle, Hutch," Starsky assured him. "Us, we're together, and that's always been the only one for me."
"Hang on!" Katie advised, pressing the button for the sling that hoisted Starsky up off his bed and calculated his weight. He hated the thing; it always made his already dicey stomach even queasier, although today wasn't as bad as previous days because he was off chemo for good.

"What's the verdict?" Starsky asked when he was safely back on lumpy mattress and not swinging in the air like a flying Wallenda.

"Well." Katie grimaced, writing down the number in her notes. "You've got a ways to go before you get to Dr. Davies' magic number of 120 pounds."

"I don't see what's so magic about it--he's just setting down draconian rules to keep me here," he grumped. "Will you tell me, for crying out loud?"

"108," Katie announced.

"One hundred," Starsky repeated aghast. "And eight? Where'd it all go?" He really should have been paying more attention on weigh-in days, but most of the time he was just trying to ignore the nurses' interruptions.

"Remember you lost about 15 pounds after your surgery."

"Oh." He hadn't looked at it that way. Besides, there were some days that he felt the phantom leg so strongly that he was sure he could reach down and feel flesh below the thigh. His calf was so there, so evident he often forgot for long stretches of time that it was gone. Especially on days like this when it ached, sometimes cramping up until he tried to curl his invisible toes up to relieve the pain.

"Got a long ways to go," Starsky echoed Katie's original statement, wondering how much food would make up the difference between 108 pounds and 120.

"Does that inspire you to eat some of this yummy breakfast Enrique just delivered?" She poised her hands over the tray a la Carol Merrill presenting a prize on 'Let's Make a Deal'. "Banana, corn flakes, milk, toast, and juice. Very nutritious."

"No donut?"

"Make you a deal." Katie winked conspiratorially and Starsky was cheered to no end by her blatant attempt. "Doctors gave us a couple of dozen this morning because we're sweet." She wrinkled her nose, sticking out her tongue. "So, eat this up, and you can have dessert."

"I always go by that saying 'Life is uncertain, eat dessert first'."

"I prefer 'Life's a bitch and then you die'." She grinned, tidying away the blood pressure cuff and wrapping the stethoscope around her neck. Enrique had wheeled the weight sling out on a little dolly.

"I gotta shirt with that one!" Starsky laughed. Nurses always had the blackest humor. Hutch had gone off to work this morning, still shaky from last Friday's events, his eyes dreading that Starsky might expire at any moment. Starsky just knew the morbid saying on the shirt was exactly the right outfit for the day to shake his partner out of the fear.

"Then eat your breakfast and you can wear it while you have a donut," Katie trounced him, her youthful looks belaying a tougher exterior.

"Yes, ma'am," he sighed, pouring milk over the corn flakes. His tummy was still leery of most
foods, but the perennial cereal was bland enough. The actual evidence of how much weight he'd lost was sobering—nearly fifty pounds since prediagnosis. At least he had a goal for the month.

He felt like he was going to Weight Watchers, only in reverse. Weight Gainers Anonymous. How much corn flakes did a person have to eat to gain even half that weight back? And why did it matter when he was eventually going to die anyway? As much as he was inordinately relieved that there would be no more of the horrible Cisplatin and its terrible twin, Adriamycin, the future was a cloudy, scary thing. How long would he live? What would death be like? Even though he'd gone halfway down that road once before, Starsky had been unconscious at the time, so he had little, if any, memories of dying. This time would be different, and while he was trying to accept it, he wasn't sure he was all the way there yet. What was that saying he'd seen on a bumper sticker just before his last hospital admission? 'Life is a work in progress'.

Katie appeared only a short time later, helped him wash and change, and presented him with a chocolate donut sprinkled liberally with pink and red jimmies. An early Valentine assortment, no doubt, Starsky mused, taking tiny bites. He'd wanted the donut, but after a small bowl of cereal and most of the glass of orange juice, he was no longer hungry. This gaining weight thing was going to be harder than he'd expected, especially because eight days after chemo he was just as likely to lose what was in his stomach as keep it.

Pulling the covers up to his chin, Starsky stared sightlessly out at the gray morning sky through a slit in the window curtains. Had he done the right thing? As elated as he was to be rid of the nastiness of chemo, he was still stuck in the hospital for the foreseeable future—and then there was Hutch. The look in Hutch's eyes when he'd left for work had haunted Starsky. What had he done to his best friend? Hutch had basically clung to him both Saturday and Sunday, leaving his side only once when Daisy came in with the new shirt. And after she'd heard his decision to stop the chemo, she'd wanted to take the belated gift back. Hutch returned after Daisy left, his blue eyes rimmed with red. Starsky couldn't shake the feeling that he needed to do something to spare his lover further pain, but he didn't know what.

"David? May I come in?"

Rousing himself from a half daydream, half nap, Starsky rubbed his eyes, nodding. "I haven't seen you in a while, Saiisa."

"I was on a vacation—to see my relatives in Nigeria."

"They got lions there?"

Saiisa Borunda laughed, taking a seat by the bed. "Yes, although not downtown in Abuja where I was. I did take a drive out to see some gazelles."

"That must be an amazing sight."

"They are such swift beings, running across the grass. It is a beautiful thing to see them so wild and free," she agreed, folding her hands in her brightly colored lap, exuding elegant serenity, as always.

Starsky always enjoyed seeing what Saiisa wore; her clothing an ever-changing array of color and pattern. Today she was dressed in an ethnic styled dress of gold and green patterned with maps of Nigeria in brown and ochre. The turban that twisted around her proud head was of the same fabric.

"Did you get that outfit there?"

"My grandmother made it for me," Saiisa said proudly. "You have on a rather spectacular outfit yourself." She raised her eyebrows at the T-shirt's sentiments. "So, what has been going on while I
was gone? I heard you caused some commotion, made some hard decisions?"

"Yeah," Starsky sighed, all the guilt washing back over him full force. He explained what had happened in a quick monologue, concluding with, "I--couldn't do it any longer, you know? The chemo and all the drugs weren't helping. But Hutch…"

"Hutch doesn't accept your decision?"

"This hurt him bad." He shook his head. "I hurt him."

"You didn't. What has happened has, and Hutch has to sort through his own emotions as carefully as you did." Saiisa took his hand, pale and almost transparent next to her chocolately coffee color. "You didn't just wake up on Friday and decide to stop the chemo, did you?"

"No, I'd been thinking about it for a long time," Starsky admitted.

"You understood the risks, but you decided anyway--which is your right," she said positively. "Hutch may be a little hurt that you didn't confide in him ahead of time…"

"I kind of hit him over the head, huh?" Starsky asked ruefully, remembering the weight and solidity of the Python in his hand. Strangely, just holding something of Hutch's had made him feel so safe and protected while he was waiting for his partner to come find him. He'd never meant to pull the trigger, but the desire to end it had been real. And when he'd slipped his finger into that little curve of metal that fired the weapon he'd almost been seduced by how easy it would be just to do the deed. But then he'd thought about Hutch, his beautiful blond, and what it would do to leave him so unprepared for the death. So, Starsky had bided his time until his shining one had arrived.

Now, days later, he wondered if there was something he could have done differently. No, he knew there were things he could have done better, but he'd been so out of control, so scared of continuing down a road he believed to be fruitless, that he'd let momentum carry him forward. Hutch hadn't found a dead body. Instead, he'd been stunned by the revelations, and was still recovering from the shock.

"Give Hutch the time to come to terms with this," Saiisa advised. "Everyone has to grieve in their own manner, but the love you share will guide the way. He'll cope, in time. Until then you can give him unconditional support in the way you have always done."

"That's not hard to do." Starsky grimaced, not sure which was more annoying, the phantom cramp in his leg that was so real he could feel the balled up muscle, or the queasiness in his stomach since the donut.

"Would you like anything? A cup of peppermint tea, perhaps?"

"You got a ghost masseuse who can rub a leg that ain't there?"

"Ah, Nettle tea helps body aches. I'll brew up a pot." Saiisa stood decisively, her brown and gold skirts rustling in her wake. "Won't be a moment."

"Wasn't going anywhere," Starsky shrugged, his mind mostly on Hutch and how Hutch was doing right then, alone for the first time in days.

Hutch had such a hard time focusing on his cadets he finally tossed out the touchy subject of suspect profiling to the class at large, and sat back numbly listening to them bat the discussion
around. He put in two words during the whole thing, but none of them seemed to take notice. One particularly vocal African American man had such strong views he got most of the class on his side by the time they had to file out for target practice. Hutch sighed in relief, unsure how he was going to get through the rest of the day on three hours of sleep and the certain knowledge that Starsky was going to die, and possibly soon. He'd been unable to close his eyes each night, even though he could hear Starsky breathing in the next bed. Every time he allowed himself to relax and fall asleep, he'd awaken in terror, sure that Starsky had died in the intervening hour.

Back in the security of his tiny Academy office, he grimaced at the pile of papers waiting to be graded, and found himself staring, instead, at the MCAT book. Until recently, the book had been a never-ending source of comfort--a representative of medical science, and the power it held. Now he wasn't even sure why he was carrying the tome around anymore except that he'd become accustomed to studying during his lunch break.

Well, no longer. He was disillusioned by the panacea of medicine. He'd so wanted to believe that Starsky could be cured that he'd blinded himself to how serious osteosarcoma could be. Others had survived the disease, why not his lover? Deep down in his heart, he despaired that the chemo hadn't worked, but he still wanted Starsky to continue--to give him a chance, right? Or was it just to give Hutch more time? Time he no longer had. Because Starsky was rejecting what medicine had to offer for a more holistic, surprisingly life-affirming attitude. Once upon a time, Hutch would have applauded Starsky's alternative views, when they hadn't meant his ultimate death.

He lowered his aching head onto his folded arms, ironically right on top of the MCAT book. So it was still to be his support in stressful times. As much as Hutch wanted to turn away from medicine which had so thoroughly failed them both, he couldn't. Somewhere in the midst of this he'd heard a faint but audible calling. Ken Hutchinson could make a difference in medicine--perhaps even pave new avenues in the field of cancer medicines and alternative treatments. Starsky had shown him the way and would be his support, more than any old thick paperback book. Medical school would be hard, but he'd start out with Starsky's blessing--the terrible thought that he might graduate without Starsky cheering him from the audience clenched Hutch's belly. What would the future hold, and could he survive it?

He'd fallen asleep on his pillowed arms, because when the phone right next to his ear blared raucously he jerked up in surprise, momentarily unable to use his still numb hands. Waggling his fingers to rid them of pins and needles, Hutch fumbled with the receiver, tucking it between his chin and shoulder. "Ken Hutchinson speaking."

"You fall asleep on your desk again?" Starsky asked lightly, but Hutch could hear a nervousness in his voice.

"Hard to get any work done this morning," Hutch agreed.

"You okay?"

"I'm feeling really hopeless here, Starsk. I can't see any good coming from this." Hutch despaired. "You're going to die."

"Well, unless the Big One hits today," Starsky's emphasis capitalized the words. "I'm sticking around for a while. Hutch, I had to let go in order to live. I needed to feel good now, while I can, instead of puking up my guts every morning…that was hell, and it wasn't going to stop the inevitable." He took a deep, steadying breath, rushing the next bit as if tacking it on for Hutch's sake. "I ate breakfast today--cereal, donut, all of it…gonna gain weight, Hutch, grow my hair back, you'll see. It'll be all right."
"You ate breakfast?" Hutch repeated, wanting desperately to hang onto something good. It had been a while since Starsky had eaten much of anything, period, although his appetite had begun to improve over the weekend.

"Knew you'd approve of that," Starsky answered smugly. "Wearing my new shirt, too. Must be my day for old sayings, I tried that one 'Eat dessert first' on Katie, but she didn't bite."

"She's smart."

"Maybe I can get a buncha t-shirts--one for every day of the week. What d'you think about 'Die young and leave a beautiful corpse'?"

Even Hutch managed to chuckle at that macabre humor, clearing his throat of the tears that hid there. "You're pushing forty, old man, not all that young."

"I'll be forty," Starsky said in wonderment. "We'll have t'have a big ol' party." He paused, then continued ruefully. "Not all that beautiful, either."

"You are to me," Hutch replied honestly, emotions crowding his soul until one more would surely rip him to shreds. This wasn't fair! It wasn't right, but it was truth, and reality, and stark, pure survival. Starsky had acted on instinct, doing what he needed to do to survive, and Hutch could only follow suit.

"I wasn't fishing for a compliment."

"I know, I still meant it."

Starsky swallowed audibly and Hutch clutched the phone, seeing that beloved face in his mind's eye. "I'm sorry, Hutch."

"I'm sorry, too." Hutch gulped, feeling Starsky's strength of will buoying him up. "Now, let's get on with the rest of our lives, and forget that phrase ever existed," he declared as forthright as it was possible to be, under the circumstances. It would take time, for both of them, but they'd find their support and commitment from each other.

"Yeah."

"Do you still have that list of dates for the MCAT?"

"It's somewhere in the mess of papers in my box."

Hutch smiled, just a little one, but it was the first one of the last four days. Starsky had a large blue plastic storage bin in his hospital room for all the books, magazines and correspondence that had accumulated since he'd taken up residence at St. Joe's. For all Starsky's tidiness at home, he was just the opposite with papers and filing. Hutch had no doubt that Starsky could find the registration forms without any problem, but anyone else would be sorting through get-well cards and old crosswords for a week.

"Then fill it out for me, Homer, 'cause I want to send it out before the deadline."

"That's my boy." Starsky's voice was full of smiles. "Can you bring me a pizza?"

"Sausage'll give you heartburn, and pepperoni's been known to do worse."

"Not true. It's..." Starsky paused, obviously weighing his options. "Mushrooms and olives then,
with extra cheese."

"That'll be 12.95 and a tip," Hutch teased, lighthearted and happy.

"Will you take a kiss?"

"From you, several, and we'll call it even."

With the return of his appetite, Starsky also gained stamina and his old joie de vivre. His immune system and platelet count were still dangerously low and he'd been unable to shake a persistent bacteria that left him with a vague but annoying cough, and the need for IV antibiotics. Despite these limitations, he still wanted to be up and around as often as possible, and took to cruising the halls, first in the wheelchair, but quickly graduating to Canadian crutches, which helped immensely to bolster his self-confidence and upper body strength. The nurses were continually having to hunt him down for his meds and therapy because Starsky made friends with everyone on the unit from the oldest, sickest patient to the youngest and most frightened.

As Hutch had predicted early on, Starsky got on famously with the Colonel, listening to the old man's war stories with obvious interest, and joining in with a few lurid tales of cop life. Nobody was at all surprised how easily Starsky slipped between the generations; he'd always been a gregarious, fun loving person. Now with his newfound freedom, he exploited every opportunity to rejoin the world, even if it was only in the confines of the Rose Tree Unit. He loved going over to the children's playroom and joining in the games. The hospital had purchased a portable Donkey Kong game, and there were tournaments nearly every afternoon. Starsky gained quite a reputation with two teenaged boys, since he not only shared their interests, but also their cancer diagnosis.

Getting out more also helped with the loneliness, since Hutch was in charge of an investigation into a drug ring that had ironically come to the attention of the police after his search of Vinnie Schroeder's basement cache. Big time criminals, some of whom Schroeder had named in his plea bargain, were involved and Hutch was out for blood. They might not be Schroeder himself, but it was still a victory for the department.

Starsky completely understood his partner's need to be involved in the case, but it also meant that Hutch was working long hours just when Starsky was feeling better and getting back into the swing of things. It was frustrating, and a bit scary to think of him out on stakeout, possibly in danger, even though Hutch assured Starsky that because he was the lead detective, he was not in the line of fire. He was, however, gone many nights in a row, and no matter how much Huggy, Daisy, Minnie Kaplan, and a host of other friends tried to divert him, Starsky still missed his number one fan.

Thus, it was that Starsky woke one night very late, thinking that some new nurse was making a hell of a lot of noise, and found his blond standing over the bed just watching him.

"Hey," Starsky said sleepily. "You make the bust?"

"We did indeed." Hutch ran the back of his finger down Starsky's cheek. "You're getting some peach fuzz."

"Yeah," he agreed. The hair was slowly growing back again, since it had over two weeks since he'd had chemo. Just a few wisps so far, but his hair had proven to be amazingly resilient.

"Siddown and tell me all about it," Starsky waggled his eyebrows like Groucho Marx proposing the secret word. He pushed himself up in the bed, leaning back on the plethora of pillows behind
him, a random cough escaping before he could prevent it.

"Carmen de la Rosa and Mike Hennessey had joined forces on the West side to corner the market--producing crack like it was sugar rock candy and selling it to all and comers. We had a couple of really young looking African American guys undercover there, they made some contacts, turned out to be easier than anyone could have expected," Hutch summarized, sounding tired.

"Must be more to it than that," Starsky guessed, watching his lover shrewdly.

"Details, Starsk, just the usual politics and rigamarole that I don't want to get into right now," Hutch sighed. "The kind of stuff I want to leave behind. Didn't see hide nor hair of Schroeder, end of story. But hey, I mailed the MCAT forms in, and we should know when the testing date is in a month or so."

"Good." Starsky nodded with satisfaction. "What else is going on in the real world?"

Hutch snorted a laugh at that, going back to stroking Starsky's cheek and the few strands of hair on his head. "Finally went over to the house to collect the mail and get some clean clothes. There's a letter from Nicky for you, and one from my sister Karen--wonder how we rated both siblings in one week?" He bent forward from the waist, kissing his partner with a sweetness that wrenched at Starsky's heart. "And I don't know what kind of food Rosie is feeding Pansy, but that cat is getting fatter by the day."

"Hmmm, enough about the cat. More on the subject you introduced to the committee just previously to that, Senator," Starsky muttered.

"The finance committee for the war on drugs?" Hutch asked absently, kissing Starsky on the nose, eyelids, and both cheeks before going back to his lips.

"No, something more on the line of sex education…"

"Hmm, seems to me you must have already passed the class." Hutch chuffed a laugh, wiggling when Starsky's hand went straight for his belt and fly.

"Got an A plus, but I need some remedial extra credit 'cause it's been a long time," Starsky answered, going after his prize despite the constant interruption from Hutch's kisses. "Been missing you, Sunshine."

"I'm here now." Hutch sat back, watching Starsky's deliberations. "Need any help?"

"Nope, I know my way around men's underwear." Starsky smiled triumphantly, slipping his hand inside the slit of Hutch's boxers. "Seems like it's been forever."

"It has." Hutch caught his breath and closed his eyes in bliss when Starsky curled his fingers around the hardening length. "I couldn't at the end of January… not right away. I was too scared."

"S'okay, not like anything was happening in this camp, either." Starsky bit down on his bottom lip, thrilling in the contact of his palm with Hutch's cock. Now, if only his own plumbing would join in the fun and games, everything would be perfect. He'd always loved the spontaneity of their sexual exploits, and cancer had put a severe crimp in that. But this was perfect--unexpected, joyful, and healing for the both of them. Rubbing his thumb over the head, Starsky closed his eyes, slipping a hand into his own pajama bottoms. His cock was definitely interested, but having some difficulties in execution.

"Let me do that," Hutch whispered. "As long as you keep doing what you are right now."
"It's a deal," Starsky sighed with pleasure when Hutch slid the pajamas down his hips enough to unveil his penis, and began lightly stroking the sides. The sensation was electrifying, sending tiny shock waves of joy up Starsky's spine, and he redoubled his efforts on Hutch's silky skin. Already, the long shaft had swelled to capacity and throbbed with a steady pulse that Starsky found comforting and exciting all at the same time. He could feel the sticky wetness leaking from the tip, and used the fluid to slide his fingers under the foreskin and circle the head once, then twice.

Hutch shuddered, clamping his mouth shut to stifle a cry and came, the intensity of the action commuting down his arm to his hand. Starsky froze when those fingers compressed around his penis, but the action only made him increase in size, bursting out of both ends of Hutch's fist like a sausage in a too small casing. It felt fantastic, magical, and he thrust into the warmth of that grasp, his completion following Hutch's by only a few moments.

"Think we woke anybody?" Starsky giggled weakly, a tickle of a cough irritating the back of his throat. It always happened when he exerted himself in any way. Damned inconvenient.

"Nobody came in with a code cart." Hutch nuzzled the side of his neck.

"Nah, this kind of thing gets my heart going without a single zap from the defibrillator." Starsky petted Hutch's long blond hair, working his fingers through it as if he could weave it into cloth.

"You ever listen to the radio an' your favorite song seems to last on a second or two, and you wish it would play twice, but some crappy song you hate seems to take about half an hour to finish?"

"Yep."

"That's how it is in here some days, Hutch." Starsky leaned into the other man's warmth, forcibly clearing his throat, but the cough still burst forth with a harsh sound. "When you're here it's okay, but the rest of the time..."

"I'm sorry, baby."

"I'm not complaining to make you feel guilty, or anything. Just statin' the facts."

"Just the facts, sir."

Starsky elbowed Hutch in the ribs with a giggle, but another cough interrupted and he lay back, breathing raggedly, the spasm harsh enough to make his chest ache.

"Still fighting that last infection, huh?" Hutch rubbed his chest in sympathy.

"Doctors can't seem to tell if this is the same old one that won't leave, or a new one." Starsky sighed. "I'm not getting any sicker, but they have to keep switching antibiotics 'cause it's not going away, and John thinks a virus came in on the coattails and it's mixing things up."

"Antibiotics don't fight viruses, only bacteria," Hutch agreed.

"See, I never knew that 'til John told me. You'll ace those MCAT tests," Starsky said positively. "My Hutch, the doctor."

"My Starsky, the optimist."

"S'what got me through, imagining you sitting there on stake-out without backup--without me." Starsky ducked his head down, the fear that had kept him awake several nights in a row back full force. He despaired of not being there for his partner during the investigation, fearful that even with Hutch in the background a stray bullet could still find him.
"Starsk, you know I had backup, I wasn't alone."

"Were any shots fired?"

"A couple, for a minute or two," Hutch admitted.

"Anyone get hit?"

"No," Hutch replied tightly, obviously unwilling to talk about it but still curious as to why Starsky was being so insistent. "What are you so worried about?"

"What if you got shot?" Starsky asked, the stark pain and fear as real as if it had already happened. How could he go on without his rock? "What if you died?" His voice broke on the last word, and he would have sobbed outright, but instead pushed a hand into his mouth, using it like a dam for his emotions.

"Starsky!" Hutch looked astonished, and completely flummoxed. "Sweet boy, I didn't even come close to the action." He reached out, stroking Starsky's cheek again and easing the balled fist out to cradle it between his palms. "I'm not going to die."

"I kept seeing you lying there, bleeding…like you always said I was, against the Torino, curled over."

"I promised not to go out by myself, and I stand by that vow," Hutch murmured, curling Starsky in towards his chest. Placing his hand over the healed bullet wound on Hutch's upper left shoulder, Starsky could feel the heart beating steadily under the cage of ribs and skin, and willed his own heart into a matching beat. "And I was driving an old Buick. The Torino was nowhere in sight."

"You went against Gunther by yourself."

The statement hung in the suddenly heavy air like a grenade with the pin pulled free. "T-that was… different," Hutch whispered thickly. "W-why'd you bring that up?"

"Cause we do for each other." Starsky closed his eyes, his ear to Hutch's broad chest, listening to the comforting lub dub of the valiant pump, his fear retreating. "What stopped you, huh?"

"Stopped me from what?"

"Huggy told me," Starsky said simply. "The first night you were on stake out, I wasn't feelin' too hot. Guess I did too much during the day, and sure paid the price. When Huggy came over, I wanted a diversion to get my mind off stuff, and we started talking. I dunno how it came up but he told me about the days after the shooting, when I was out of it."

"Why?" Hutch sounded scared in a way Starsky had never heard before.

"Because he said you had that look again. You hide it, but it's there." Starsky didn't even want to look up at his lover's face, but he could hear the effect he was having on Hutch. The heart he so treasured had picked up speed, pounding twice as fast as only a moment ago. "And that he thought, if I died, you'd go out and destroy something... cause 'a me."

When Hutch didn't answer Starsky continued, smashing down all the walls surrounding those taboo subjects they weren't supposed to discuss. His death was number one, right at the top. The thing was, he had died, for almost ten minutes according to Huggy, and yet returned, like a phoenix from the ashes, only to be facing death from a different source. Internal instead of external menace. "But you didn't. Gunther went to trial. So how'd you do it, Hutch? I woulda shot him
where he sat if the tables'd been turned."

"Oh, God," Hutch said, and it sounded like a prayer, a supplication for strength. "You don't know how hard it was to handcuff that bastard and bring him in. The S.F. cops were right outside the door, I hadn't gone in completely alone, but I needed that moment to look into his eyes and try to understand, try to know why he took you away from me."

"I didn't go away," Starsky whispered, as shaken as he had been when Huggy told him of Hutch's terrifying obsession with Gunther.

"I was so afraid, Starsk. You were hooked up to all the machines and there wasn't anything I could do. And the one thing..." Hutch grit his teeth, the words like knife wounds. "The one thing I wanted to do wasn't legal, and I was a cop. I think most of all, that's why I don't want to be a cop anymore. Because if you die...I want to be a doctor, one who can fight cancer and stop it from killing somebody else."

"Amen," Starsky said softly, pushing back Hutch's shirt so he could kiss the old shoulder scar that had pillowed his head.

Hutch rushed down the corridor of the hospital, afraid he was too late, but the bustle of activity at the door to the auditorium proved that the presentation had not yet begun. Slowing his speed, he took a deep breath, swiping his longish bangs off his forehead. The weather had heated up considerably and it was a sticky, muggy day for February. Rumors of Schroeder sightings had surfaced late the day before and Hutch had spent most of the morning with his task force going over strategies. He'd even handed his Academy class over to a teacher's aid to get more time in on building the case.

Apparently, in the week since the round up of De La Rosa and Hennessey, their absence had put a big hole in the drug supply. Speculation on the street was that Schroeder was going to attempt a come back despite the warrants out for his arrest, and the ongoing efforts by Bay City Supervisor Adrianna Michaelson-Hsieh. Hutch had already spoken to the supervisor and her husband Cam Yin, vowing to bring Schroeder to justice. But without a concrete lead he had time to attend the latest display of limberness from the Bay City Girl's Gymnastics team.

The large room was already crowded with a variety of spectators--half friends and family of the performers, and the other half ambulatory patients from the hospital. Many of the people wearing robes and slippers, some pushing an IV pole beside them, looked excited to get out of their dreary rooms for half an hour to enjoy the show.

A few nurses hovered around a group of children from the peds ward, but Hutch could easily see over their heads to that of his partner. Starsky was wearing a surgical mask to minimize his exposure to germs, which had prompted a long argument with John Davies, the night before, when the order came down that he had to wear it to leave the Rose Tree Unit.

Obviously Davies had won. Hutch smiled to see Starsky in his element--noise, gaiety, and lots of friends and children of all ages. Starsky's blue eyes glowed over the edge of the pale blue paper mask, his curls were coming back in a wiry tangle, and he'd put on another couple of pounds, unless Hutch was very much mistaken. Starsky looked like he was recovering, coming back from a long illness, which was ironic since he was far from healthy.

Still, Hutch was determined not to ruin his lover's first foray into the real world. He waved a long arm, catching Starsky's attention. He navigated through the crowd to join Starsky and Edith Dobey, who was fussing with an oversized boombox and an assortment of cassette tapes.
"Hutch!" Starsky called, his voice only slightly muffled by the paper covering. "Edith said they collected enough money for everyone to go to the nationals in Washington, and today will be the first show with the new routines." He gestured at the girls warming up on the mats laid out in front of all the chairs. Rosie saw Hutch and dimpled before spreading her legs and sliding down into the splits. "They leave in late spring--March 27th, right after my birthday," Starsky chattered. "How’d you like that?"

"Wonderful," Hutch agreed, who'd given a substantial donation to the cause. "Those new leotards look nice," he said, admiring the matching outfits, green with a pink diagonal stripe and a small team logo just above the right leg.

"Aria designed them. She seems to have a real flair." Edith nodded. "I've got to round up the girls for the opening routine. Rainbow is having her usual stage fright, already vomited once. Looks terrible."

"After performing for so long?" Starsky asked sympathetically. "Hutch gets stage fright, too. Hey, why don't you go give her a patented Hutchinson pep talk?"

"Oh, that's all right, she'll survive. It's probably because her mother couldn't make it today," Edith assured.

'I'll do it," Hutch said. He'd have done anything right then to keep that happy glow on Starsky's face. The characteristic, lop-sided grin was covered, but Hutch knew it was there.

Rainbow did indeed look terrible. She was sitting on the floor with her legs spread, apathetically going through the motions of stretching. Even her Shirley Temple curls were droopy. Hutch was vaguely reminded of Starsky on a day after chemo, and pushed that dismal thought away. He remembered Rainbow had lost her lunch on Mickey Mouse's shoes in Disneyland, and decided to stay away from that memory as well. "Hey, sweetheart, worrying about the performance?"

"My tummy always feels like a washing machine going full blast before a competition," Rainbow admitted sorrowfully. "Today it's worse than ever."

"I've had more than a few butterflies myself whenever Starsky convinces me to get up in front of a crowd and sing." Hutch commiserated. "Anyone ever tell you the secret of pretending the entire audience is sitting around watching you in their underwear?"

Rainbow giggled faintly, bright discs of red blossoming in her sallow cheeks. "That's funny. What kind of underwear does Starsky have?"

Ah, Hutch chuckled to himself, another Starsky fan. "He sometimes wears shorts with smiley faces on them."

This started a gale of laughter from Rainbow. The other girls who'd come over to collect their comrade for the show heard the tail end of Hutch's comment and started to laugh, too.

"So does my older brother!" Rosie crowed. "I gave 'em to him for Christmas."

"Cal wears boxer shorts?" Samantha Goldwyn asked in a tone that proved to Hutch she'd shifted her crush from Starsky onto Cal Dobey. Still an older man to the 14 year old, but probably a better choice, since Starsky was already taken.

"Get into formation, girls!" Edith called, pressing down on the cassette recorder's play button. The bouncy music of one of Madonna's top forty hits began and the girls scooped up long wands topped with colorful ribbons, launching into their first number.
Hutch sat down next to Starsky, his left leg pressed up against Starsky's right one. They'd always sat closely together, even before they became a couple, but now every time Hutch did so he cherished the warmth and solidity that was his best friend. He truly couldn't fathom life without David Starsky.

"Whatever you said to her, she's doin' fine now," Starsky whispered.

"Told her your underwear had smiley faces," Hutch said innocently, pretending to focus on the girls but watching Starsky out of the corner of his eye. Starsky's eyebrows shot upwards, his expression one of disbelief and amazement. Hutch couldn't help himself, it felt good to be able to rib Starsky like the old days. Maybe he'd come around to accepting Starsky's decision, finally.

"So what're you wearing under those khakis, Mr. Clean?" Starsky snarked under his breath, moving his hand just enough that it 'accidentally' brushed Hutch's fly and the mound underneath.

"Starsk," Hutch hissed, his cheeks burning. "Pay attention to the show."

Starsky's dark blue eyes were like shining bulbs above the mask, laugh lines crinkling them into a web of joyfulness. He'd gotten Hutch back by invoking the oldest trick in the book, just to embarrass him. And Hutch reflected ruefully that it worked just about every time.

The girls put on a fantastic show, following up their ensemble piece with individual floor routines just like the last time Hutch had watched them at Disneyland. Kristianne, always the shyest of the bunch, had gained some confidence in the last few months and performed an astonishing dance across the floor that had her in the air more often than on the ground. Rosie Dobey was just exceptional, all of her moves graceful, precise and perfectly balanced. She never wavered, never tripped, tumbling through her moves with a smile that shone brighter than stars. This girl was going to go far.

Once the applause had died down and everyone was congratulated, Hutch accompanied Starsky back upstairs, quite impressed at how far his partner had come in such a short time. This was not the man who couldn't even sit unassisted at the end of January. Starsky played with the elevator buttons, tapping his crutch against the floorboards, radiating unfocused restlessness. But there were moments, every now and then, when Hutch saw the sadness behind the façade. Starsky was trying to live everything to the fullest, to store up what time he had left, and neither of them knew how long that might be.

"Oh, Hutch!" Calliope, the ward clerk, had changed so dramatically Hutch barely recognized her, and he'd seen her the day before. Gone were the punk rock trappings, replaced by short-sleeved pink sweater above a pink and white mini skirt. Her short hair was fluffed out in a vaguely poodle-like do, still showing vestiges of the various colors she'd dyed it all winter, but now more blond than green and orange.

"Calliope." Hutch stopped in shock, then gave an astute guess. "New boyfriend?"

"Yeah." she grinned at him, fiddling with dangly silver earrings. "How'd you know?"

"He's psychic," Starsky said straight-faced.

"Wow, like that's so cool. Anyway, your Captain Dobey? The big bear kinda guy? He called to say some sort of major police thing is going on, and where were you?" She held out her hands like a milkmaid hefting her buckets. "I didn't know you were here. But now you are, so that's the message."
"How long ago?" Hutch asked, the performance only last half an hour, and Dobey had known he'd be there.

"Five minutes?"

"I've give him a call back from Starsky's room," Hutch promised, heading down the hall. "Is it my imagination or has all that hair dye gone to her brain?"

"She's an original," Starsky settled onto the bed, closing his eyes with fatigue for a moment before stripping off the surgical mask. "I hate this, makes me feel like I can't breathe." He tossed it into the trashcan next to the nightstand. "Calliope's really pretty smart. She's like going to college to be a pharmacist, but has to make money to pay her own way. She just sounds goofy."

"Takes one to know one?" Hutch teased lightly, dialing the station's number.

"You're on a roll today, buddyboy."

"Captain?" Hutch asked when the operator transferred him to the correct office. "What's going down?"

"The undercovers officers--Cooper and Farnham, called in. Schroeder is in the city, and staying at the Alhambra Hotel on 38th Avenue. We're getting a team into position, but you need to be there."

"Of course," Hutch agreed. "On my way." He ended the connection, giving Starsky the exciting news. "You okay?" he concluded, still not used to Starsky being up and about for extended periods of time.

"Yeah, got a nap planned for after lunch, and then there's the Donkey Kong tournament of champions going on for the rest of the afternoon. Jeremy Keller's back for his next chemo, but his drip doesn't start 'til tonight, and he's a powerhouse on wheels until then."

"Have fun with the other kids, Starsky." Hutch ruffled his curls. "And eat all your veggies at lunch."

"118 pounds this morning, Hutch. John says I'm out of here at the end of the week!" Starsky crowed.

"I'm holding you to that."

"It's a promise. Just think what we could do alone in our own house."

"You would mention that right before I have to go…"

"Hey." Starsky caught him by the arm, pulling him down into kissing range. His lips pressed almost savagely against Hutch's, the emotion intense. "Be safe, for me. I hate when you're going out there without me."

"I'll stand behind all the younger guys and wear a vest. I've got something to look forward to, too."

Hutch returned the kiss with heat, fervently wishing he didn't have to leave so soon, but the imminent arrest of Schroeder was a powerful motivator.

Just before he crossed the doorframe he heard Starsky say "Hutch?" in a tiny voice that nearly severed all of Hutch's resolve.

"Yeah?" he said carefully, afraid that anything more would betray how needy he was feeling just
"Just wanted to say your name again," Starsky replied.

When Hutch looked back at him, Starsky lifted his chin in a brave little gesture, but there was no denying the fear reflected there.

"You always have my back, Starsk," Hutch promised and then he left, almost running out of the hospital as if his haste could get the whole arrest over sooner so that he could get back to Starsky that much faster.

Nothing ever goes as planned. Everything started out well enough, Hutch's handpicked team ringing the Alhambra, ready for whatever came down, were confident that the felon would soon be captured. Unfortunately, word had somehow spread farther than just the police department, and as Hutch was adjusting his bulletproof vest in the shadow of a building across from the fated hotel, a startlingly familiar figure strode across the street and entered the front door of the Alhambra.

"Sarge!" Billy Saeteurn, one of his former students from the Academy had been assigned the role of street cop walking his beat. Not exactly a stretch, since it was his usual bailiwick and the locals had gotten to know him in the short time he'd been around, so he didn't look at all conspicuous. His older advisor, Mac Smithy, had the hotel side of the street. "It's the supervisor's husband!"

"What the hell?" Hutch caught sight Cam Yin Hsieh's back disappearing through the scarred brown door. "He's going to cock this whole thing up for sure."

"We go in?" Lucy Hazard, one of the few female marksmen on the force, stood poised for assault, her dark weapon held like it was an extension of her body.

"I will," Hutch decided swiftly, his gut clenching. This is when he needed Starsky at his side. Starsky centered him, gave him focus. With Saeteurn and the rest of them around him, he just felt burdened by the responsibility for their well-being. "Are there people stationed at the back and on the fire escape?"

"Check," Lucy intoned in such a cop-like way Hutch was vaguely irritated.

"Hold all fire unless I give a signal," Hutch leveled a stiff finger at her, holding up his walkie-talkie. "This goes down as planned or I want chapter and verse as to why it didn't."

Approaching the hotel, Hutch didn't allow himself to dwell on the fact that he was ripping to shreds the promise he'd made to Starsky. He couldn't think about personal matters, the way his head and jaw were aching, and the tension knotting up the muscles along his upper back until he felt like his shoulders were butting up to his ears. Such things were minor distractions and had no place on the battlefield.

Hutch walked forcefully into the lobby, but there wasn't a soul to be seen, not even a desk clerk. He had only one second to assimilate this fact when shots came from the stairwell to his left. Flattening himself on a threadbare carpet, Hutch bellywalked backwards towards the door, breathing in shallow puffs to slow his racing heart.

Oh God, let him get out of this alive, and before Starsky heard it on the news, so he could explain why he'd gotten himself into such a stupid-ass position!

"Lucy!" Hutch held the walkie-talkie as close to his mouth as he could lessen the chance of anyone overhearing him. "Shots fired on the first floor landing, get in here!"
A pepper of gunfire forced Hutch to keep his head low, but he managed to pull off return fire of his own, still unable to see who was doing the firing. What had happened to Cam Yin and the desk clerk? Not to mention the other tenants in the hotel?

The thunder of boots tromping through the front and back doors just increased the ear splitting cacophony, but Hutch felt bolder with such a force beside him. Getting to his feet as Lucy and her troop stormed the stairs, he followed behind, Python held ready.

Cam Yin was slumped against the wall, blood staining his chest and arm, and from several feet away Hutch couldn't tell if he was dead or not. There was a pistol in his hand, something German made, perhaps. At the far end of the hall, a half dozen cops surrounded their quarry, the gruff sound of someone reciting the Miranda in an uninflected voice making Hutch inordinately tired. How had this gone from a well planned maneuver to a farce of a movie shoot out?

Striding down to the huddle, he watched as a grim faced Lucy pulled Schroeder to his feet. Despite what had to be an excruciatingly painful wound on his left shoulder, the weasel gave Hutch a feral grin. "Hutchinson, shoulda known. How's Starsky?"

It took every ounce of willpower not to pound the drug dealer into dust, but Hutch gritted his teeth and returned the smile. "Sorry that he missed the show you put on, Vinnie. I'll tell him you asked about him." He turned, not wanting to look one second longer at the man who'd turned Starsky's world upside down. It didn't matter that the cancer had ultimately been the perpetrator of that offense, Schroeder would always be linked to the events that lead up to the osteosarcoma diagnosis. "Don't let him out of your sight, Hazard, even when the doctors examine him."

"Never entered my mind, Sergeant," she replied tightly.

Doors up and down the corridor began to open, frightened faces peering out, and suddenly there were people everywhere, all talking at once. It took Hutch only a short time to divvy up the jobs to his fellow officers, some to interview the tenants, others to guard the crime scene, and a few to control the crowd that now ringed the hotel as the wail of sirens closed in on the building.

Not one of the officers who charged in had been shot, although one had wrenched his knee pretty badly climbing in the second story window from the fire escape. Just the image of the curly haired cop entering through the window reminded Hutch of Starsky. How many times had they burst into a suspect's place, Starsky going low and he higher? Always together, although their separate strengths complimented each other in the field. He was the steady one, most often, holding back, keeping his eyes out for action. Starsky was the go-getter, charging ahead when others might have waited. Hutch had always kept up, even though Starsky was faster, Hutch's longer legs kept him in good stead. Starsky's amazing agility and speed often had him racing down alleys, careening up stairs, leaping from window ledges onto fleeing felons, never worrying that his body would give out on him before his time.

Hutch felt old, used up, and too fearful now. This kind of life was so hard, and he was ready to step aside for the younger generation. Even Schroeder's arrest didn't provide the satisfaction it once would have. Because Vinnie Schroeder may had swung the bat, but Starsky's leg had already betrayed him long before. And there was nothing Hutch could do to change that.

"Hutchinson!" Dobey's voice bellowed from the police band radio. Hutch leaned against a black and white, holding the mic in one hand while he massaged his aching shoulders with the other. He felt like crap warmed over for the third time--not good. It was already full dark, and there were no signs that he could leave anytime soon. Once he was done on-site, there were mounds of
paperwork to do at the station.

"Yes, Captain?" he sighed.

"What the hell happened there?"

"Cam Yin Hsieh decided to take matters into his own hands, Cap. From witnesses who had rooms to both sides of Schroeder, Hsieh pounded on his door, demanded to be let in, and when Schroeder opened up, they must have both fired. I had just entered the lobby and heard the shots--two in quick succession and then several a few seconds later."

"How's Hsieh?"

"Paramedics said he had a bullet up under the collar bone. He was out cold but breathing when they loaded him on the rig--he must have ducked fast cause there are four or five slugs in the hall from Schroeder's gun, and three in the wall of Schroeder's room, probably fired from Hsieh's H&K pistol."

"And Schroeder?"

"On his way to St. Joe's," Hutch closed his eyes tiredly. Where he would like to be, with Starsky. "With an entourage of police. He had a through and through on the left arm, but was lucid and yelling for his rights when I last saw him. I let Hazard take him in, she'll question him after the doctors check him out."

"You did what you had to, son."

"Capt'n, I didn't do a thing," Hutch said with disgust. In truth he hadn't wanted to be near Schroeder. Something about the perp made him want to wad him up and stuff him down the nearest garbage disposal. "I gotta go--mopping up in progress."

He stayed in place a moment longer, staring down the avenue, over the revolving lights of countless police and emergency vehicles. Schroeder had come back to his old stomping grounds--not two blocks away was the little alley between Del Prado and 39th Ave. where he had hidden the drugs. Shaking his head, Hutch headed back into the hotel.

The night seemed endless, and Hutch ached from every limb. He eventually located the absent desk clerk. The man claimed that he had no prior knowledge of any gun battle, and had been his break. He even pointed to the tattered copy of the OSHA rules providing all employees with a half hour lunch and two fifteen minutes breaks in an 8 hour work shift.

"Sure it was exactly 15 minutes?" Hutch asked sourly, leaning his head on one hand while Perez fidgeted in his chair. "Maybe you took a little longer because you knew something was going down?"

"No, I swear! I gotta--what you call it? Alimony?"

Used to Starsky's malapropisms, it didn't take Hutch too long to decipher Perez. "Alibi?" he corrected.

"Yeah, that's it. I was with Xiocia."

"Sho-sha?" Hutch asked. "How do you spell that?"

"With an 'X'. "
"The rest of the letters would be helpful."

Perez spelled out his girlfriend's name. "She's a housekeeper--cleans the first and second floors."

"Where did the two of you stage your assignation?"

"What?"

Hutch had the urge to use language frowned upon by the department, but bit down on his tongue instead. He longed to talk to Starsky, and not just because his partner was much more suited for this kind of off-kilter interview. "I take it you and…" he consulted his notes, "Xiocia were doing more than having a snack. Where were you?"

"Oh. Right here. In the break room. 'Cause we were on our breaks."

"Lucky for all of us. Did you know Mr. Schroeder was a wanted felon?"

"I seen that lady supe on the TV talkin' about him."

"And you didn't inform the police of his whereabouts?"

"I gotta keep my job, man. I'm married, got four kids at home. I can't call the cops on ever' person rents a room there. I'd be fired on the spot."

So much for the loving, faithful husband and community spirit, Hutch grumbled to himself. "Not even with Supervisor Michaelson-Hsieh offering a substantial reward?"

"Oh, yeah." Perez brightened, then frowned. "I coulda been rich, huh? Wanna know about anybody else? We got ten guests right now, I think some of 'em are wanted."

"Thanks, we'll get back to you." Hutch waved over a blue uniform to escort Perez out, and pressed the heel of his hand into his forehead. The headache had only gotten worse as the night wore on, and he was dead tired. Perez was the last of those needing to be questioned, and if Hutch drove fast, and typed even faster he could get to the squadroom and finished possibly sometime before two in the morning. Possibly.

He'd barely slid into the security of his battered car when the radio squawked.

"Got a call for you, Hutch," Mary Jane, from dispatch called. "It's Sergeant Hazard, at the hospital."

"Lucy?" Hutch answered, rubbing his eyes. "What'd you get from Schroeder?"

"The doctors gave him something for the pain while they were bandaging him and he's out until morning. Currently ensconced in a private bed in the prison ward."

Right above Starsky, Hutch thought. "Get some rest, you earned it. I can get over there for interrogation in the morning." That is, if Dobey let him. Seemed very much like Dobey didn't want Hutch's emotional involvement in the case to hamper his job. On some level Hutch knew that was a valid point, but he would so like to wrap his hands around the drug dealer's neck and squeeze.

The squadroom was nearly deserted by the time Hutch reached his desk. As expected, he found mounds of work on his desk and grimly started in on reducing the pile, but the jangle of the phone broke his concentration.

Guilt rising, Hutch grabbed the receiver. He should have called Starsky, reassured him that he was
all right. Reporters and news crews had swarmed around the hotel despite all efforts to keep them away. Starsky probably knew more about the shoot out than Hutch did.

"Hutch?" Starsky's voice wavered for a moment, although it could have been static from the connection. Hutch could easily imagine his partner stuffing down any worry under the cover of light banter, their usual form of communication in a tense situation. "You get the bastard? News showed him being hauled off in an ambulance."

"Well, it's not for public consumption yet, but Cam Yin Hsieh got to him first."

"Do tell? Old fashioned eye for an eye?"

"Don't usually sanction biblical retaliation, but Schroeder had it coming in spades."

"You all right?"

"Yeah, partner." Hutch smiled. "I could feel you right beside me the whole time. I got a mountain of official rhetoric to get through before morning. See you tomorrow, okay?"

"Can you bring me a coupla new shirts? I wanna look good when I walk outta here on Friday. Mika says she's gonna take pictures."

"Red shirt or blue?" Hutch leaned back in his chair, enjoying the brief respite from his job. Imagining Starsky pulling one of the shirts over his short crown of curls.

"Both, then you can tell me which one looks best."

"Always did like the red one, Gilligan."

"Then, just bring that one."

Hutch could hear the smile in Starsky's voice which made him smile in return. "I may surprise you, babe." He knew he should get off the line and back to work, but he was loathe to end the connection. "Hey, how'd your Donkey Kick game go?"

"Donkey KONG, Hutch. I left those kids in the dust."

"Starsky, you're older than they are, shouldn't you be a little nicer?"

"Hah, when Jeremy first taught me how to use a joystick he used to kick my butt daily. It's payback time."

"How's he doing on his chemo?"

"Jeremy and Farley are tough, man. Farley's nearly through with his course, and it looks really good. He doesn't puke all the time like I used to. Jeremy was only diagnosed at the beginning of the month so it's rougher on him."

"Love, Starsky, that's all I needed." Something in his chest twisted and Hutch wished he were there right now, to see Starsky's face when they talked about this. It almost seemed as though Starsky only brought up some of his feelings for his illness when Hutch wasn't able to talk long, as if he didn't want to dwell on what scared him, but still needed to talk about it.

"And the Colonel, and Marian…"

"And the Colonel, and Marian…"
"Who's Marian?"

"A really nice lady--she came from up North, in the San Fernando Valley, I think, cause her local hospital couldn't provide the care we got here," Starsky related. "Brain tumor--on her second surgery. She's got this big scar across her head. I showed her the ones on my chest."

Hutch pressed the palm of his hand against his mouth, not sure whether to laugh or cry at this sweet gesture. Starsky had long gotten over his self-consciousness about the lasting aftermath of Gunther's attack, but he didn't usually show them off to many people. His soft heart was both an asset and a detriment in a ward where everyone had a terminal disease. "Starsk, you're becoming a good friend to these people."

"I never thought of it that way. But it's nice t'get out, see that I'm not the only one…" Starsky stopped himself, stuffing away the maudlin emotions. There was a long pause and Hutch expected Starsky to say good night, but then he spoke again. "Hutch, remember when Daisy came that day, brought over some cookies?"

"Back in December."

"Yeah. She-she used to have a twin, Florian. Ain't that a weird name for a boy?"

"Never heard that name before," Hutch said, anxious for reasons he couldn't account for. "He had osteo when he was fourteen. He died," he said, sounding detached and flat as if he really didn't want to be discussing this right now. "That's what she told me. I don't know why I couldn't tell you…it just…" He stopped again, and Hutch could almost imagine him sitting there, one hand propping up his head, the other holding the phone to his ear. "And she said that the only way to survive was never stop communicating."

"Aw, Starsk…"

"I love you. That's all I gotta say. I'm pooped."

Hutch could tell when he was being warned in no uncertain terms not to say anything that would make either of them any more emotional that they already were. "S'been a long day. I love you, too, you big lummox."

"You coming by tomorrow?"

"Guarantee it."

Surprisingly cheered by the call, Hutch tackled his work with more enthusiasm. As it was, he left for home at one minute to two. His whole body ached with a fierceness he hadn't experienced for a long time. The headache had never gone away, pounding steadily behind his forehead with a steady beat that was very nearly nauseating. He didn't even get fully undressed before falling into bed, never even noticing when Pansy burrowed into the curve of his warm body.

++++++++++++++++++++

Starsky loved wearing shorts. He'd always been a big believer in recycling ruined jeans by cutting them off, fraying the ends and extending their wear for years, but now with one leg far shorter than the other, shorts were practical as well as comfortable. He pulled on a pair of red jogging shorts that Edith Dobey had donated earlier in the month. They had once been Cal's before the boy hit the 6'2" mark, and these had a narrower waist size than Starsky's old ones.
Dressed for the day, he poked his head out of his room, snooping unrepentantly. After all, he was a detective, snooping was what he did best. Freed from all but a generalized feeling of illness, Starsky enjoyed participating in the rhythm of life that made up the unit. These people had become part of his family and he was interested in each and every one of them. The Colonel already had visitors, so Starsky didn't go in to suggest a game of checkers. Further down the hall, a nurse was carrying a chemo bag into Sherry Martin's room, and Starsky made a mental note to go visit Sherry later with some moral support. In the other direction, John Davies was schmoozing with the nurses at the main station, a file of papers tucked under his arm. Starsky headed that way, since it looked the liveliest.

"Hey, you old reprobate," Starsky greeted his doctor by poking the rubber bottom of his crutch against John's Achilles tendon. "Shouldn't you be healing the sick and raising the dead?"

"Well." John wiped his fingers on a napkin before signing a med order with a flourish. "You survived my bedside manner so far, even oncologists get a break once in a while."

"Doctor Davies just wanted donuts." Katie grinned, flipping her hand over a tempting selection as if wafting the donut aroma towards Starsky. "Only reason he ever stops here."

"And you're always promoting all that dark green leafy rabbit food," Starsky sneered good-naturedly.

"Course, it's the only reason Starsky ever emerges from his room, either," she laughed. "Which one do you want? Jelly or custard filling?"

"Jelly," Starsky ordered.

"No wonder you actually put on some weight," John observed. "I hope you're getting some nutrition with those empty calories."

"Took his multivitamin this morning like a good little patient," Katie promised because Starsky's mouth was full.

From her desk adjacent to the nurse's station Calliope answered the phone with an efficient, "Rose Tree Unit, may I help you?" Listening for a moment, she waved at Starsky. "Just one moment, please, David Starsky is right here." Placing the caller on hold, she told the surprised man to pick up line 36 on the phone by his elbow.

"Is it Hutch?" he asked, licking jelly off his thumb.

"No, a woman. Edith Dobey?" When Calliope said the name, tendrils of fear dripped acid into Starsky's belly.

Starsky put the receiver to his ear, "Edith, is something wrong?"

"Oh, David, I'm so sorry, I never…"

"Is something wrong with Hutch?" Starsky blurted, now scared out of his mind.

Edith laughed slightly, "Not that I know of, I was worried about you. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," Starsky answered shakily. As long as Hutch wasn't hurt, everything was great. "Is it Dobey? What's happened?"

"I really didn't know Rainbow was sick when she did the performance yesterday, or I never would
have let her come--not to a hospital. I thought it was her usual stage fright."

"Rainbow's sick?"

"Not just Rainbow, now Rosie and Aria have the flu, too," she sighed, sounding more upset than Starsky had heard in a long time. "They'll recover, but what about you? Are you having aches, nausea, fever?"

"No to all of the above," Starsky vigorously assured her. "Past all that. So half the troop has the flu, and you were afraid I got sick, too? Hutch was the one who talked to Rainbow."

"Oh, dear, I'll call Harold to send him home."

"I'll tell the nurses here, but Rainbow was pretty far away from most of the audience. I don't think you need to worry about it. But send Rosie-posie a kiss and a hug for me, will ya?"

Starsky replaced the phone thoughtfully, giving Katie the news. She called over to the regular peds ward where a majority of the audience had come from, but not one of the children there were showing any symptoms. Starsky then tried Hutch at home, but only got their answering machine, so he left a few sweet words for Pansy to listen to, and hung up.

"I'll try later, got P.T. right now," Starsky said just as his therapist, Paolo, got off the elevator. He was back to being worried again. Hutch was doing too much, overworked with the Academy and the recent shootout with Schroeder, just ripe to catch a virus. Glancing up at the ceiling in the direction of the prison ward Starsky curled his lip, hoping that murdering drug dealer Schroeder was having some really painful needle stick, or better yet, a urine catheter placed just then.

"Come on, David," Paolo said, pronouncing the name as if Starsky and the famous statue by Michaelangelo were one and the same. "More practice with the prosthetic."

Starsky grimaced. He hated the odd looking artificial limb. It clamped on tightly to his stump, hurt like the dickens, and was difficult to walk on. Just when he'd gotten quite limber with a single crutch, the doctors decided he needed two feet again. "My leg hurts today," he proclaimed defiantly, eyeing the unwieldy bundle Paolo had under his arm. "Can't we just go to the pool for a swim, and a massage after?"

"Show 'em all by walking out of here," John Davies said mildly, strolling towards the elevator.

"Yeah, I could," Starsky groused, but followed the physical therapist down to the therapy room located near the solarium.

He did not enjoy himself at all. Some days therapy, while painful, could be challenging and fun, but this had been just brutal, agonizing work. He wasn't lying when he'd said his leg hurt. It still ached nearly all the time; cramps as if his foot was locked into a ballet point giving him hell at the most inopportune times, such as when wearing the prosthetic.

Exhausted, Starsky retired to his bed for an hour, dozing. The phone rang loudly, jerking him out of a nice dream where he and Hutch were surrounded by three overly large bad guys. but he flipped two of them without batting an eye while Hutch disposed of the third. And he was wearing his blue and white striped Adidas on both feet.

"Hey," Hutch said, and even his voice sounded sick. Starsky wondered if he'd sounded that way after every single round of chemo and had immediate empathy.

"Hey, yourself. You got the bad guy, huh?"
"You already knew that."

"I meant Rainbow's flu."

"I got to work, sat down in front of a pile almost as big as the one I'd just dispatched with the night before, and Dobey comes out yelling 'Hutchinson'!"

"Sounds about right."

"Sent me home."

"Are you there now?"

"Yep, on the couch, but Pansy's so fat she can't jump up here anymore."

"How're you feeling?"

"A little like you used to--sore, tired, temperature, don't want to move…"

"It's all coming back to me. Rest, liquids, aspirin, and afternoon TV."

"You think that'll cure me, doc?"

"Ah, mais oui, mon petit chou-chou."

"What did you just call me?"

"The French consider cabbage to be the ultimate sexy vegetable. Suits you."

"If I'm a leafy green, are you a big slab of chocolate?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Ugh--now I'm nauseated again."

"I always seem to have that affect on people." Starsky grinned affectionately and kissed the phone wishing it were pale Hutchinson flesh. "There, right on your hot forehead. Go to sleep."

"For once I'm the sick one."

"Yeah, an' I don't like it any better. Wish I could be there to make you some of my famous chicken soup."

"You don't have any famous chicken soup recipe."

"Yes, I do. It comes in a red and white can. Andy Warhol even did a painting of it."

"I'm going to bed, Starsky."

"G'night, John-boy," Starsky said, and hung up. He hated knowing Hutch was sick at home alone and there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't call Edith Dobey, since she certainly had her hands full with a sick daughter, and Starsky wasn't quite as cavalier about his own health as he liked to pretend. As much as he wanted to race over to Dahlia Street to nurse Hutch back to health, he didn't want to come down with the flu himself, on top of everything else. He'd finished the neverending course of antibiotics for the pneumonia one day ago, and had only three more days to go before his release. The last thing he wanted was a relapse when he was this short, as they used
to say in Viet Nam before a discharge date. He'd have to stick it out, keeping in contact with his lover by phone. Maybe Huggy could brave the sick room?

One day was very like the next in the Rose Tree Unit when there were no visitors to look forward to, and therapy was a torture session to be endured. Starsky found he was growly and out of sorts on Wednesday morning. Hutch was still convalescing, although less feverish, and Dr. Davies had declared that he had to stay away until Friday morning before he would be allowed near someone with an all but nonexistent immune system.

Starsky figured some of his white blood cells must be doing their jobs, since he hadn't gotten what Rosie Dobey termed the Rainbow plague, so he considered the whole quarantine vastly unfair. Even Dobey and Huggy couldn't come up to the hospital since they'd had contact with the flu sufferers. Since Starsky was due to get out on Friday, he'd hoped to see his lover before then--preferably with the asked for clothes. He couldn't decide whether he felt even more in prison than usual, or that Hutch had been assigned to some far off Siberian Gulag. Made for nice, melodramatic self pity to wallow in, but served little other purpose except to highlight how much he missed Hutch.

In that evening he'd talked on the phone with all the sickies, including Patient Zero, Rainbow, who was now on the mend, and visited both Sherry Martin and Jeremy after their respective chemo doses. Starsky was beginning to feel like the only even halfway healthy person on the planet, and that wasn't saying much. For that matter, with his annoying phantom pain, and the real one caused by extensive use of the artificial limb in the last few days, he wasn't feeling all that well, himself. He didn't go out for a morning donut as he had for the last week, and curled up with his old favorite TV program, Telefrancais with the French speaking Pineapple, during lunch.

About three thirty in the afternoon, Starsky was seriously bored. He needed something to distract him from his miseries, and finally hauled himself up out of bed and down the hall for a chat with whoever might be found at the nurse's station. It was a busy day, since Marion-of-the-brain-tumor had had a stroke, and much of the staff were helping with her. Calliope looked frazzled by the sheer number of calls on her switchboard, and with shift change happening at the moment, all the nurses were rushed and harried, even the new group just arriving. Starsky helped himself to a chocolate from an open box of See's near the main desk telephone, listening idly to the day shift charge nurse giving report to her evening shift counterpart.

"Marian Vaughn with a brain tumor in 303 is really bad, cerebral hemorrhage this morning, we nearly coded her," Linda said sadly, rattling off a series of vital signs and lab values that Starsky knew were abnormal. He grieved for the sweet woman who'd come with such high hopes for the Rose Tree Unit.

"The Colonel, pancreatic cancer in 305, is doing very well and should be going home soon--he's tolerating his chemo without many side effects, and a home nurse will be administering it from now on," Linda continued and glanced over Mika's head at Starsky with a teasing frown. "David Starsky, osteosarcoma, in 307 continues to hang around the nurse's station stealing sweets, and will be leaving us by Friday as long as Hutch gets over his flu. His vitals have been rock stable and…"

"We'll all miss you." Mika winked at him. "But not too much. I've got Jeremy this afternoon, David. Can you go check on him so I can finish here? Katie said he's still having some emesis."

"What, am I suddenly an expert on that?" Starsky pretended to complain, but he liked that the nurses trusted his judgment. He'd had enough experience in the field of hurling to know whether Jeremy was just feeling like shit, or really needed extra fluids and more anti-vomit meds.
He practiced a pretty decent swagger with the aid of one crutch, humming to himself, thinking of Hutch, and found Farley in Jeremy's room trying to interest the patient in a game of cards. Jeremy, who looked decidedly pale green, was giving the game his best shot, but didn't have the concentration for Gin.

"Not your best color," Starsky remarked, feeling the boy's forehead with the back of his hand. "Mika's on her way. You want a pill, or can you manage a soda?"

Jeremy scrubbed his balding head tiredly, coming away with a handful of brown locks. "Not thirsty, but I'm okay for now."

"Hang tough cause everything's shit time, huh?" Starsky took the cards, shuffling for another round. "How about you and me against Farley?"

"That's no fair, two against one!" Farley complained good-naturedly. "He was winning before."

"You were lettin' me," Jeremy pointed out, pursing his lips and turning an even paler shade of sea foam.

Starsky just handed him the emesis basin, dealing three hands of Gin without a word. All three of them were far too used to the side effects of chemo to fuss much over puking. In a way, it was liberating, and strangely, Starsky could relax with these boys in a way he couldn't do even with Hutch. They all were all in the same boat; sick, bored, tired of having nurses hold their hands. Tired of the sympathy of friends over the loss of their limbs, tired of cancer.

Sometimes, just acting like all of this was normal, in a gruesome sort of way, was a relief. The empathy for each other's pain and suffering was there, but it was tempered with an acceptance that you just had to wade through the cesspool on your own to get to the other side. The goal was remission, and each knew the mingled joy and hope of having that in sight.

They played three hands before Starsky noticed that Mika had never come in, as promised.

"Think I'll go get some sodas for everybody." Starsky glanced over at the wheelchair Farley had been using, knowing he couldn't juggle three cans and use a crutch, too. "Gimme your ride, Far."

"Custom wheels, man, don't dent the fender," the boy cautioned, hopping into a bedside chair and flipping on the TV remote.

"You've obviously never seen me drive." Starsky executed a flawless wheelie, to the admiration of his teenaged audience, spinning the chair around so he was headed out into the hallway.

A loud noise, almost like a gunshot, stunned all three of them. For a moment, Starsky wanted to believe that it came from the TV, but he knew differently. The sound had emanated from somewhere near the nurses' station.

"Stay here," he barked, changing back into a cop as fast as Superman in a phone booth. "I'll be back."

It was one of those seminal moments when a boring day transformed into the kind of afternoon TV movie writers base their scripts on. Propelling himself forward at all speed, Starsky made the distance in a flash, coming around the corner of the desk with a squeak of rubber. Calliope, her blue eyes as wide with shock, gave an echoing squeal, scrambling to her feet so quickly she knocked over her own chair. Standing in the small area between the ward clerk's desk and the nurse's station were three men, two of them holding guns.
Starsky stopped his forward motion by grabbing his wheels, burning the pads of his fingers. No need to ask who the invaders were, he recognized Vinnie Schroeder instantly. The other two were unknown factors, but if they had allied themselves with Schroeder, they couldn't be trusted. One of them, a lumbering hulk of a man with stitches running from hairline to jaw, had a Saturday night special trained on Mika and Gemma while his partner was busily severing phone lines with a scalpel blade.

"Mika?" Starsky asked, immediately calculating the number of patients and nurses on the floor versus three dangerous fugitives from the prison ward who all had guns. As far as he knew, there were 8 cancer patients, four nurses, and Calliope on the Rose Tree Unit, and with any luck, a housekeeper of some sort. Unfortunately, that meant mostly women, a little girl, three guys with only one and a half legs each, and an 80 year-old man. Starsky wasn't enough of a chauvinist to dismiss any input from the females, but the odds looked pretty dismal.

"David, go back to your room," Gemma answered instead.

Mika, her jaw tight, just nodded and pointed back the way he had come, which was not his room. "Security is aware there's a problem."

"Starsky?" Schroeder shifted his focus from the nurses, swiveling the gun towards his new prey. Despite a large bandage wrapping his left shoulder and upper arm, he didn't seem to be having any problem holding the gun. Starsky hoped his wound opened up and started to bleed. "Hey, pig, long time no see. Guess I really knocked you off your feet, huh?" he jeered.

"You got off on the wrong floor, Schroeder," Starsky said as casually as possible. "Murderers belong on the fourth with the rest of the vermin." Hutch had always accused him of letting his mouth run away with him.

One of the other vermin finished slicing his way through phone cords, and took a swing at Starsky. Under the circumstances, such a blow could have knocked him senseless, but Starsky darted the wheelchair back with a single revolution of the wheels, narrowly avoiding the meaty fist.

"Shithead, get back here. Keep the exits covered. Nobody gets off this floor alive until we get a decent ride and some cash."

"Go to your room, David," Mika said more urgently.

He got the message that time. She wanted him on the offensive, out of the eyes of these three goons. But how? Even if the hospital security had already been called, they were next to useless. Not allowed to carry guns, they had a tendency to stand back and watch the action until BCPD arrived. Unfortunately, in this situation, they probably couldn't even get onto the floor in the first place. Starsky had no doubt that Schroeder was smart enough to have blocked the exits. There were only four ways to get on or off this floor, the two main elevators and the stairwells at each end. Since Schroeder's little band of merry makers hadn't walked past Jeremy's door, they must have used the stairwell from the far end of the third floor, beyond Calliope's desk and the extra therapy rooms. The only patient rooms in that direction were the special isolation rooms for people requiring bone marrow transfusions. Luckily, all four were unoccupied this week, since Angel Conway had gone home after going into full remission.

"Losing a leg drain all the fight outta you, pig?" Schroeder taunted.

Damping down on his rage, Starsky ducked his chin in a defensive posture. "Yeah," he said softly, turning the wheelchair around in a tight circle. Shithead was halfway down the hall, opposite Jeremy's room, and Starsky's already racing heart stuttered a couple of beats before resuming at an
Don't let him hurt the boys.

"Leave them out of it," Starsky warned, trying to sound cowed. "The police will be here soon…"

"Just one crip in there, like him, Schroeder," Shithead called.

One? Starsky thought worriedly.

"Looks like he's going to hurl!" Shithead laughed.

"You moron, it's a cancer ward--not a single ball left between 'em," Schroeder sneered. "Round up the rest of the nurses and lock 'em inside a room. And remember to cut the phone lines. We're only keeping one open, for the negotiations. Gonna get us a jet outta here, and a pile of cash for this bunch o'corpses."

"They're going to kill us!" Calliope wailed.

Starsky would have spun around and popped Schroeder right in the face for that one, but he needed to play the role; remain passive. Let them think he was washed up and useless until the time to strike back. He'd had seminars on hostage situations, done role playing to out-think and out-maneuver the captors. He just had to retrieve that knowledge from whatever dusty shelf almost six months of sickness and chemo therapy had stashed it.

"Found one!" Frankenstein's Hulk yelled, hauling a heavyset woman out from Sherry Martin's room.

"Get your hands off me!" Ester Hawkins cried indignantly, swatting at the man.

"Hey, you're a feisty one, old woman." Schroeder pushed his gun straight into her plush bosom, copping a feel with the other hand. "Watch your mouth or you'll be goin' home in a body bag."

"Why--huh!" Ester exclaimed, fear written plainly on her dark features.

"There's a door behind that desk. Put all three in there, with the rainbow haired ditz, too," Schroeder commanded. The Hulk pulled open the door, herding the woman inside.

"Wait a minute," Schroeder said, grabbing Mika's arm.

Her eyes slid over to Starsky with a silent plea before she turned, standing up to the criminal with an iron will. Starsky was never more proud of her. Taking that as his cue, he wheeled back to Jeremy's room, still wondering where Farley had gone.

"You can't leave all these patients without nursing care," Mika insisted. "They're sick, most of them need constant monitoring."

"Well, boo hoo," Schroeder scoffed. "Ain't that a shame, they'll all have to die just a little bit sooner than expected, huh? Where'd you keep the drugs? Not any old cancer shit. Morphine, Percocet, stuff like that."

"It's locked up!" Mika said.

"Well then, give me the key, girlie, or I may have to put a bullet right through your pretty chest, and wouldn't that be a shame?"
"Take it." Mika tossed the med room keys at him.

Grimly, Starsky watched as Shithead blocked the fire door at the far end of the hall with a broom handle through the push bar. Nobody would be able to get up from the lower floors that way. The weasely-faced man poked into a few doors, but seemed satisfied that all was secure, and headed back towards the nursing station. Starsky sat his ground, guarding the entrance to room 312. Once Shithead had passed, a blond head poked out of 316, her eyepatch askew.

"Davey?" Julia's voice quavered. Starsky often read novels aloud to the girl who had already lost one eye to cancer and would probably lose the other one soon. She was teary and emotional on the calmest of days. "What's happening?"

"Julia, find Megan, and get in here," Starsky ordered tersely, holding open the door to what would be their headquarters.

In a few minutes, Jeremy's room was full. Farley had hidden from Shithead in the tiny adjoining bathroom, which Starsky silently applauded. One less hostage for them to be aware of. The two girls, Julia and ten year old Megan, were terrified, and Jeremy was pale gray with mottled green overtones. Starsky had seen better color on bodies in the morgue. Not exactly a crack fighting team, but they would have to do. He had no way of knowing how the Colonel, Marian, and Sherry Martin were faring on the opposite hall. Also, who was the one remaining nurse, and where was she?

"Farley," Starsky said briskly. "Can you navigate stairs with a crutch?"

"No problem," the boy boasted. "Me and Paolo been working on that for weeks."

Starsky explained about the broom handle through the stairwell door. "You know where the housekeepers hide their carts?"

"Across from the solarium. There's a little door between there and the supply room."

"Good, go through the junction between this side and the supply room, and hide there until you can get down the stairs safely. Get to the police, tell them Vinnie Schroeder and two other guys have Saturday night specials. You got that?"

"Got it, count on me." Farley nodded, a lanky scarecrow of a boy, far too skinny for his height, but with the determination of a pit bull. He'd survived two courses of chemotherapy. By comparison, this was nothing.

"What we need first is a diversion." Starsky surveyed his troops. Megan, in particular, had the rapt expression of an adrenaline junkie for all her earlier fear. He recognized a bit of his own need for action in her intensity.

"I can," she said, tugging at the bandana that covered her bald head. "I can throw up."

"We all can do that!" Farley scoffed.

"On cue?" Megan challenged. "And I cry good, too. My mama says I'm a regular Natalie Wood."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, sweetheart," Starsky discouraged her gently. "Those guys are pros, and really dangerous."

"What choice do we have?" Jeremy spoke up from the depths of his pillows and blankets. It was he Starsky felt most sorry for. To be feeling that bad, and be held hostage on top of it all, was like
visiting hell and finding out you'd already been there.

"If I can get across to the Colonel, he and I can…" Starsky started, but Megan dashed out the door, her red headscarf floating to the floor in her wake.

"Gemma!" Megan cried, running down the hall. "Where'd you go? I gotta…"
There was the sound of spectacular retching and a nasty plop. Megan's already loud wailing turned into huge sobs.

"Gotta go." Farley sketched a quick wave, shoving the supports of the aluminum crutches around his forearms. "Back with the cops in a flash."

"This is like--uh--we have to be the heroes, huh?" Julia asked, gulping against the tears running from her undamaged eye.

"You've been a hero your whole life," Starsky assured her, listening to the sounds of Schroeder and his henchmen trying to calm the marvelous Megan. She was making enough noise to raise the dead, until Schroeder threatened to blow her brains out. Dead silence after that.

Starsky's already clenched belly threatened to imitate Megan's example, but he held firm, peering out the door at the little girl. Being small, she simply ran under The Hulk's spread legs and over to Calliope's desk, disappearing under the counter. He could only hope her adrenaline would last long enough before she exhausted herself. There wasn't much meat on the tiny, bald headed child.

"You need to be the strong one right now, and stay here with Jeremy, in case he needs anything," he said sternly, but Julia nodded, her face as luminous as the moon through her tears. "I'm going to get the Colonel. Stay here, and do not go anywhere."

"You're repeating yourself, man," Jeremy teased wearily. "We'll be okay."

Megan was still leading the bad guys on a merry chase, and from the disgust in Shithead's voice, had decorated his shoes. She squealed loudly just as Starsky grabbed up the only crutch left, an old fashioned wooden one with a rubber armpit brace. He swung across the hall to the relative shelter of the passthrough between the nurse's break room and the family room. Glancing down each way like a child crossing the street, he spotted The Hulk standing guard near the nurse's station brandishing a pistol. He didn't see Megan, but her shrieks must be audible in the next county, and then heard Gemma's gentle voice cuddling her.

"Sergeant Starsky!" The Colonel beckoned from Starsky's own room.

Lying on the couch with Pansy cuddled in the curve of his knees, Hutch was feeling a bit better than the previous day, and especially the previous night when he'd gotten no sleep whatsoever. Aching joints were still being heard from, but definitely on the wane, his headache had diminished to acceptable ranges, and his appetite was improving enough that he was beginning to contemplate getting up to fix a piece of toast. But lassitude won out. He wasn't quite hungry enough to get up from the comfortable spot under Starsky's favorite afghan for a measly piece of bread and butter, especially if it meant disturbing the cat. She had gotten immensely fat over the last month and if he hadn't felt so crummy he figured he'd probably be more curious about the cause. The drone of dull afternoon TV had lulled him into a light dose.

Abruptly coming awake, Hutch wasn't at first sure why. His sudden movement startled the cat, who lumbered off the couch with a dissatisfied miow, but by then Hutch was riveted to the scene
on the TV. An Asian woman with the 'do and wardrobe of a TV newscaster was talking rapidly, gesturing at a building all too familiar to Hutch.

"Police have cordoned off the building, and are in the process of trying to establish a communication with the men holding the cancer patients hostage on the third floor, known as the Rose Tree Unit." A piece of stock footage, apparently culled from some old piece featuring the hospital, showed a brief montage of the Unit featuring the ward clerk's desk and a few of the patient rooms.

Hutch had to will himself to breathe, listening intently to what the reporter was saying. A crawl identified her as Nina Yee of channel 7.

"According to hospital sources, three armed men stormed onto the third floor from the prison ward on the fourth floor, and took over the Rose Tree Unit at about three thirty this afternoon. One of the patients, a Farley Ryge, managed to elude his captors and escape unseen. He told police that Vinnie Schroeder, a drug dealer suspected of murdering his girlfriend Emerald Hsieh, the sister of Supervisor Adrianna Michaelson-Hsieh's husband Cam Yin, had threatened nurses and cancer patients alike. Two other men, both patients who had been incarcerated with Schroeder on the fourth floor, were with him, and all were armed. Schroeder was injured in a shoot-out with Cam Yin Hsieh only two days ago, and police arrested him after a prolonged manhunt. The names of the patients on the Rose Tree Unit have not been released until family members are apprised of the situation."

His heart trying to climb out of his mouth, Hutch had a moment of panic, not sure what was the best course of action. Call the precinct first, see what Dobey knew, or just drive down to St. Joseph's? He was on his feet to go get clothes when the phone rang, rattling his already shredded nerves.

"Hello!" he shouted.

"Hutchinson," Dobey said tersely, and the sound of his superior's voice helped lower Hutch's tension level.

"Starsky's one of the hostages?" Hutch asked, his anger spilling over into his words.

"Yes, from what we can determine there are seven patients…"

"Captain, I'll be down there in ten minutes. Apprise me then," Hutch barked. He couldn't think, couldn't let himself imagine what was going on in that pleasant, homey unit. Moving solely on instinct, he dressed quickly and left, flu symptoms completely submerged by his concerns for the people Vinnie Schroeder had taken hostage.

The road in front of St. Joseph's was cordoned off, blocked by what seemed like dozens of police and emergency vehicles. Ringing the perimeter were the hordes of news crews who converged on any tragedy, bringing it immediately to the public's eye. Hutch hardly saw any of them, bursting through the lines of uniformed cops with steely determination. Luckily, two of his former cadets were holding the on-lookers back and recognized him, letting him through to the main staging area without delay.

"Detective Sergeant Ken Hutchinson," Hutch identified himself to a short, rotund man behind the SWAT van. He only vaguely recognized the cop, who was from the precinct bordering his own. Technically, St. Joseph's lay in their vicinity, but because the entire Los Angeles county used the hospital for wounded or sick prisoners, Hutch had authority to be there. "What's the plan?"
"We've established a phone dialogue with Schroeder," Ed Crais said in his brusque clipped manner. "He wants the usual--money and a jet to the Islands."

"Got a sense of humor, huh?" Hutch said without any trace of a smile. "How are the patients?"

"He says they have 12 hostages, but didn't specify how many patients and nurses." Crais lit a cigarette, pulling in a lungful of smoke. "The kid who came out the back way said he thinks there are seven patients--two of 'em really sick."

Thank God Starsky was as healthy as he'd been in months. "I want to talk to Farley Ryge, is it?"

Hutch turned, searching the surrounding area for the boy, but didn't see anyone who appeared to be the right age. "What about the rest of the hospital? Are you planning on evacuating?"

"Not now. There's only three gunmen. If we can get out team up on the roof and have them come down from above, we can get a shot at them easy enough."

"There must be other options."

"Not from where I stand, bucko," Crais all but sneered, flicking cigarette ash to the ground. "The kid's in the Red Cross van over there. Stay out of the way of my team."

Yeah, just watch me, Hutch wanted to say, but he didn't. Discretion was his watchword until he could come up with something better than blasting through the hospital endangering patient's lives. Feeling the warm metal of his wedding ring like it was a physical manifestation of Starsky, he stared up at the blank windows of the third floor, wondering where his partner was just then.

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Starsky watched the TV without speaking, the picture on the small screen mocking him. Cameras were trained on the front of the hospital, practically looking right through the window of the room he was standing in, but there was no way he could signal them, or use them to his advantage. Abruptly the scene changed to a short, stout man smoking a cigarette. He gave a brief statement to the press, stressing the importance of getting the hostages out safely, at all costs, and that they would not be lenient to the kidnappers. Then, in the unfeeling way of television, a commercial for hemorrhoid cream followed immediately.

"Sergeant?" The Colonel broke into Starsky's thoughts.

"Yes, sir." He straightened his spine.

"I feel an all out strike is our best offense."

"I agree, Colonel." Starsky kept one eye on the door. Luckily, Shithead was patrolling the hallway, and apparently didn't seem to find the need to part the privacy curtain around the bed and check on the inhabitants of room 307. Since Starsky's room was furthest from the nurse's station, they had gone undisturbed for the better part of an hour. Megan had finally been corralled, and locked into the nurse's break room with Mika, Gemma and Ester.

Sherry Martin, rising to the occasion, had made a brief foray down the hall, when Shithead was over on the children's side, and discovered that a tiny Asian nurse named Do Trang was hiding out in Marian's room to watch over the comatose woman. Starsky worried that her brave stance might get her shot, but he admired her determination to stand by her charge.

Using the supply room as an arsenal, Starsky had stocked his pockets with everything lethal he could come up with, and had piled the results on his bed. He and the Colonel had divided the
spoils between them. Both carried a scalpel and scissors. Sherry was piling bags of IV fluid into a heap by the door for ammunition. Now all they needed was opportunity. Starsky had the bad feeling that the SWAT teams he'd glimpsed on TV were even now sneaking in through whatever access they could, to shower the place with bullets. This, in his opinion, was to be avoided at all costs. Too much danger of stray bullets hitting one of his friends.

Not for the first time, he wished Hutch were right next to him, to shoulder half the burden. He could almost feel his presence, urging him to be cautious, but also to do what needed to be done. He looked back at the TV mounted high on the wall, frowning. If only he could signal those people below. He wanted to mount an attack on the invaders, but it would help a great deal if he knew where the three of them were, to utilize his small army as efficiently as possible.

"Sherry," Starsky said, catching the tall, slender woman's attention. She wore a silk scarf tied gypsy style around her head, which, combined with the paisley bathrobe she wore, made him think of a fortuneteller. "You said you had some marking pens?"

'Yes, in my pocket." She pulled out a handful of colored pens. "I was planning to sketch the ocean from the bay window at the far side of the unit this morning. For some reason, it helps me ignore the nausea."

"Have I got a job for you." Starsky grinned ferally, yanking the plain white sheet off of his bed.

Under any other circumstances, Hutch would have enjoyed meeting one of Starsky's friends whom he'd heard so much about. As it was, he was surprised at how ordinary Farley Ryge looked. Except for his baldness, he seemed like any other 14 year old. Sweat pants and a huge T-shirt emblazoned with the tour schedule for Bon Jovi disguised his thin frame, and he was wolfing down some cookies in the Red Cross van when Hutch found him. The only other person in the large vehicle was a woman wearing a Red Cross badge, watching a portable TV.

"Farley?"

"Hey, you're Hutch," Farley said with a certain awe in his voice. "I've seen your picture--and you were on TV when you collared Schroeder."

"Which seems to have come around to bite us in the butt," Hutch muttered. He put out a hand, shaking Farley's bony one. "Nice to meet you. Starsky tells me you play a mean game of Donkey Kick."

"Donkey Kong, man."

"I keep forgetting that," Hutch said mildly, having made the gaff deliberately to put the boy at ease. Despite his casual slouch, Farley looked far from calm. He had that strained, pinched expression Hutch often saw on accident survivors. "Is there anything you can tell me?"

"I told that Lieutenant Crais guy everything I can remember." Farley shrugged. "Starsky was like--you know, totally in charge. He knew what to do. I went out the back, by the stairs near the solarium."

"I know that door."

"This guy put a broom handle through the pushbar, but I took it out," Farley said proudly. "He probably put it back, though. I don't know how anybody's gonna get back in there." His teenaged pride had held the fear at bay up until then, but just the memory of his flight to safety must have
brought it back because Farley's voice squeaked up half an octave, and he fell silent.

"Farley?" From behind them, a woman's voice broke Farley's composure and he started to cry.

"Mom?" In a moment a plump woman with matte black hair had her arms wrapped around the boy, both of them crying.

"The police called me," Mrs. Ryge kept repeating, kissing her son's head reverently. "They said you were so brave."

"Mom!" Farley wiped tears from his eyes, gathering himself together. He glanced over at Hutch. "This is Starsky's friend. They're cops, like in Miami Vice."

"Your son was indeed brave," Hutch agreed. "It's not many people who could have snuck out past gunmen like he did."

"Thank you so much," Mrs. Ryge gushed, still petting her son's arm. "Will the others be getting out soon?"

"That's the plan," Hutch said evasively. "Farley, do you remember anything else?"

"I never saw Schroeder." Farley bit his lip. "I was hiding in the bathroom when one of 'em searched Jeremy's room. He never saw me."

"Quick thinking."

"Yeah, but maybe I could have helped more, you know? Like describe the other two guys?"

"I'm sure the hospital has records of who was up on the prison ward with Schroeder," Hutch assured, disappointed nonetheless. He'd hoped Farley could give him some pertinent tidbit that would mean something just to him, and not to Crais. Questioning the boy was getting them nowhere, but he didn't know what else to do. "You escaped with details the police needed, and did it safely. That's the important thing."

"I'm just worried about Jeremy. He wasn't looking too hot. And the old lady in 303. I think she was dying this morning. The nurses were really busy." He chewed on his lip again, turning away from his mother and Hutch, then stiffened, pointing. "Look at the TV!"

The Red Cross woman cried out in surprise, pointing as Farley was. On the screen was a picture of a third floor window. A sheet had been hung over the curtain rod, with the message 'Call Schroeder on the phone at 5:15," printed in crooked green letters.

Hutch laughed. Starsky must have a plan.

With his back pressed against the wall, Starsky didn't have to rely on the crutch for balance, and he allowed himself a moment to rest. He was beyond tired. A week flat on his back on the couch was beginning to sound pretty good again. His head ached, his belly churned, and worst of all the phantom pain in his foot had decided to cramp up into what felt like a tight ball of misery. He'd been warned right up front about the phantom pain. Even before the surgery, a pain specialist had come in to explain about the poorly understood phenomenon, but hearing a dry recitation of the symptoms and experiencing them were two different things entirely. He remembered dismissing the warning, figuring on a little achiness below his knee, not very real cramps that wouldn't go away.
Willing himself into a calmness that had no basis in reality, but helped nonetheless, Starsky shrugged the old fashioned crutch back into his armpit, waiting for the signal. His troops were in readiness. All the wandering he’d done in the last few weeks, prowling the ward, learning the shortcuts to get from his corridor to the children's side, finding out where the nurses stashed their candy; it had all paid off. He knew the Rose Tree Unit so well he’d kept the kidnappers bamboozled now for over an hour and a half without one of them seeing him or the Colonel sneaking about.

Starsky was once again in the opposite hall, near Jeremy's room. Julia stood just inside the door, with her good eye to the space between the barely open door and the wall, poised to do her part. Giving her an encouraging smile, Starsky started walking toward the nurse's station, his whole body tingling with repressed adrenaline. Even so, the ringing phone seemed louder and shriller than on any ordinary day.

"You got my jet?" Schroeder demanded aggressively into the receiver.

With Schroeder momentarily distracted, Starsky called out, "Hey, Shithead, the SWAT guys are coming up the back stairs!"

Meaty fists clenched, the vermin came down the hall at a run. Starsky used his crutch like a battering ram, shoving the rubber tipped end into his beer gut just as Julia threw a bag of lactated ringers down the hall like a water balloon, smashing him right in the face. Shithead hit the wall, stunned, as Julia lobbed another IV bag at him. The second one knocked him to the ground and she giggled triumphantly.

Taking one minute to remove the barricade keeping the nurses and Megan in the break room, Starsky shooed them out. "Go, go! The door near the solarium--tell the cops we're taking back the hospital."

The women streamed past him, but Mika and Gemma separated, going for their charges while Ester and Calliope went after Megan. Tossing Mika a length of tubing, Starsky whispered, "Tie his hands before he can get up." She paused for half a second, but went resolutely to her job, tying the knot like a surgeon finishing off a line of sutures. From the other hall, Starsky could hear sounds of a struggle, proving that the Colonel and Sherry were doing their part with Frankenstein's Hulk.

"Fucking cops!" Schroeder slammed down the handset. "Cosgrove! Where'd you get to?"

Hoping that the drug dealer would come this way, so Starsky would have a chance to wreak a little personal revenge, he skirted the now struggling criminal on the floor and walked out to where Schroeder could see him. "Looking for your henchmen, Vinnie? They're not gonna be much help to you, and the cops'll be here any minute." He smiled lazily, feeling cocky. "You could just give yourself up right now."

The only thing Starsky didn't want to deal with was Schroeder's pistol. Taking a stance like the Karate Kid going into his one legged crane, Starsky swung his crutch, glancing it off the barrel of the gun as Schroeder turned the weapon on him. The gun flipped out of Schroeder's hand, and amazingly, over the top of the nurse's station onto a pile of patient charts.

"You never did know when to give up!" Schroeder snarled, lunging at Starsky. The attack was too sudden and Starsky's balance wasn't that good without support. Schroeder crashed into him, sending them both over a metal cart parked near the med room door.

Starsky felt a sharp pain shoot through his left side, but he rolled to protect his abdomen, kicking back at Schroeder while reaching out blindly with his right hand. Closing his fingers around
smooth wood, Starsky gasped when Schroeder punched him hard in the kidneys. He was used to working through pain, though, and scrabbled across the linoleum to get a better grip on the crutch. Behind him he could hear a commotion, voices raised and the thunder of trampling feet, but Starsky stayed focused. With his breath wheezing in his chest, he evaded another punch from Schroeder, and swung around, the weight of the crutch giving him counterbalance. With a jarring blow, he nailed Schroeder in the knee, shattering his kneecap.

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Starsky would have bounced, but the gurney he was sitting on wasn't the softest, and his ribs did hurt. Still zinging with left over adrenaline from the afternoon's action, he'd been waiting in the Rose Tree examination room since Mika left him. She had given him the once over before she left to give her story to the police. Starsky suspected he would have to take his turn soon, but because of his status as a cancer patient, he'd been isolated from the hordes now crowding the unit's halls.

By total coincidence, both the attending doctor, Ellen Weaver, and Lynwood, the oncology fellow for the day, had been taking a late lunch together when the kidnappers arrived. Once Dr. Weaver arrived back on the unit she had hustled all the immuno suppressed patients back to their rooms, ordering the investigating officers to conduct all questioning of witnesses with medical personnel present. After hearing that there hadn't been a single doctor around during the crisis, the hospital administrators immediately made a proclamation that there should always be a doctor on the floor at all time.

Starsky wasn't sure exactly how that would have helped matters, in the long run. He looked up expectantly when the door opened, and grinned widely.

"What'd you do, break quarantine?" he asked, more glad than he could say to see his partner.

"How bad is it?" Hutch asked tightly, pointing to the blossoming bruises on his side.

"Mika thinks it's a cracked rib."

"One?"

"Feels like two," Starsky admitted with a wince.

"You are so lucky. If it weren't for that, I'd beat the shit out of you. What the hell were you thinking?"

"That I was a cop."

That simple statement doused Hutch's anger like water on a flame. "You are a cop."

"I got him, Hutch, tricked the bastard and took him down. No gun, no cuffs, just a trusty crutch. You oughta start carrying one in the trunk of your car."

"I'm getting out of this racket, remember?" Hutch molded his hand to Starsky's cheek, stroking his thumb across Starsky's bottom lip.

"Tennis racket would work, too," Starks added mischievously, still aglow with his success.

"Stop that racket while I'm kissing you," Hutch insisted, suiting action to his words.

"Hutch--it felt so good, though!"
"I should hope so."

"Not that." Starsky grinned and kissed him back quickly, joy bubbling out of him like a boiling pot of water. "Catching the bad guys! Gettin' in on the action. I was slick, man. I want t'go back to work."

"What?" Hutch asked incredulously.

"This could really work, I'm tellin' you! We'd be terrific together. If nobody ever spotted us for cops before, think what kind of a disguise this is!" Starsky patted his truncated thigh. "I'm not good on the running and jumping stuff, but I can go low--real low, keep my eyes open…"

"You're higher than a kite."

"Natural high, it's great stuff. Better'n chocolate."

"Better than sex?"

"Well…" Starsky took a deep breath, forgetting the ribs in his excitement. He wrapped his right arm around his torso, splinting his chest. "Damn."

"Hurt, did it?" Hutch asked dryly, easing Starsky's arm up slightly and very gently palpating the bruised area. Starsky gasped at the contact, Hutch's hand cool on his warm skin. It would have felt a lot better if he wasn't so battered. "Bones don't shift when you breathe, and you're talking a mile a minute, so it can't be that bad. Might not even be cracked, more like deep bruising."

"Well, well, well, where did you get your medical degree, Dr. Hutchinson?" John Davies asked from the door, a smile ruining the stern tone. "I can't take a day off without all hell breaking loose around here?"

"Just trained under the accident prone one here." Hutch lightly flicked Starsky's knee.

"Am not," Starsky said, all but pouting. His enthusiasm had fled abruptly with the renewed pain, and the memory of all that had transpired between 3:30 and 5:30. Thoughts of his valiant troops assailed him, and he was astonished that he'd been so cavalier as to forget the other patients for even a short time. "John, how's Marion?"

Washing his hands, Davies shook his head sadly. "She died--just after four, as far as Do can tell."

"Would she…?" Starsky asked, stricken. "Could she have survived if they hadn't…?"

"I wasn't with her this morning, but Ellen Weaver's notes aren't encouraging. She was probably already dying, Starsky," John said regretfully. "Let me take a look at your war wounds."

"First fill me in on everybody else. Was the Colonel ok? He was going like gangbusters, and Farley!" He hitched a breath, rubbing his side. "He was brave, huh, Hutch?"

"Starsky, I can put a thermometer in your mouth to shut you up," John threatened. "I need to listen to your breathing."

"Farley said you were totally in charge," Hutch answered. "The kid was great. All of you were."

"Megan is soundly asleep, according to Gemma, completely knocked out from what sounds like quite a performance. Julia is talking a blue streak to the police, more than I've ever heard her say at one time, ever." John smiled, placing the stethoscope on Starsky's chest. "You get the rest after I do
Starsky complied with a wince, waiting fairly impatiently for the examination to finish. Now that his burst of energy was draining away, he felt exhausted, lightheaded, and in pain from a variety of sources. Amazingly, the agonizing phantom cramp that had bothered him earlier was completely gone. A small relief, but welcome, nonetheless.

"Your lungs sound clear, but I'll wait for an x-ray. Did Mika give you anything for pain?"

"Nope."

"I'll order something for the next day or two. Then see how it goes." John scribbled down his observations on the patient chart.

"I'm going home on Friday," Starsky said petulantly. He saw Hutch begin to speak and stop. Starsky glared at him.

"Not now," the doctor answered, still writing.

"John!" Starsky protested, anger flaring up like a white flame in his chest. "I did everything, followed every damned rule you made to get outta of this place!"

"And now you're banged up, and if you keep shouting, it will hurt worse," Davies said reasonably. "Do you want to hear about the rest of your merry band of men, Robin Hood?"

"Even if he doesn't, I do," Hutch spoke up.

"Traitor," Starsky hissed.

"The Colonel says Starsky made an excellent second in command. He and Sherry used several lengths of IV tubing tied together to trip up their man, then apparently threatened him with a scalpel." Davies shook his head in wonderment. "I'll be looking at all the stuff in the supply room with a different eye from now on."

"Farley, Julia, Megan, The Colonel, Sherry, Marian..." Starsky swallowed against the pain that lodged in his throat at the thought of the brave woman who had faced her brain tumor and lost. "And Jeremy?"

"Resting as comfortably as anyone can on the regime of chemo he's on," John said. "But he said to tell you he hadn't had such excitement since his older brother took him on a camping trip and they encountered a bear. Could be a compliment, but I'm not sure."

"The kid was sick as a dog but he never complained," Starsky said softly. "Can I go back to my room? Hutch, too?"

"In as much as you've thrown my quarantine completely out the window, I guess that would be the best thing," Davies turned, regarding Hutch with a practiced eye. "How are you feeling? Heard the current strain going around is a doozy."

"Nothing about two days of sleep won't cure," Hutch waved away the concern. "I can sleep here better than at home, to be truthful."

"Get back to your room, then," Davies ordered genially. "I'll send Mika over with something for the pain, Starsky."
"It's not so bad," Starsky lied, then groaned when he climbed off the exam table, his muscles screaming from the twisting motion. Hutch took his arm, steadying him, and Starsky was never so grateful for that small gesture of support. Biting back another moan, he relented to the wheelchair Hutch had positioned right in front of him.

"Starsky, thank you," John Davies said, rubbing the small of his back without seeming to notice he was doing it.

"I was just doin' my job," Starsky answered. He was silent as Hutch took the chair on a round-about route to room 307, to avoid the police still combing the unit. In that short space of time, Starsky felt something elemental drop into place, balancing his psyche in a way that was healing and powerful. "Hutch?"

"Yeah?"

Starsky could hear, for the first time since Hutch had arrived, how tired he sounded. Hutch shouldn't even have been off his sickbed, yet here he was pushing a wheelchair, and assuming the burden of provider, once again. Things would be different once Starsky got back home. "I could still do the job, couldn't I?"

"You proved that well enough today, slugger."

"I didn't mean to prove anything to anybody. I just wanted to be a cop," Starsky took a careful breath in, panting against the sharp pain under his left arm. "I still am a cop. I thought that losing my leg would take away who I am, but it didn't."

Hutch set the hand brake on the chair, coming around to squat down so he was level with Starsky. "The person I loved never changed, Starsk."

"But I thought I had--until today, I thought that part of me was gone." Starsky grit his teeth, warring with the tears welling in his eyes. "I-I know I can't go back, there's no point in that, but I still am a cop."

"You are," Hutch whispered, pulling Starsky forward. The transfer of weight nearly bowled Hutch over, but he staggered, then lifted Starsky up in his arms.

"Put me down, you'll drop me!"

"Nope, but you've definitely gained weight, Rocky." Hutch settled on the bed, gathering Starsky closer up on his lap. "I hated being out there looking in. I think now I know what it feels like to be a cop's wife."

"You're the wife?" Starsky swallowed, knuckling away the stray tears that had escaped. "Cause I sure felt like that th'other day when you went after Schroeder."

"Then we're even," Hutch said lightly, playing with the curls at the back of Starsky's neck.

Starsky turned his face into Hutch's shoulder, relishing the warmth and safety that surrounded him. He wanted to melt into that strength, wallow in the love for a couple of hours and forget the hospital, the cancer and, most of all, Vinnie Schroeder. "I wanted to hurt him bad."

"Mission accomplished, Mr. Phelps."

"I wanted to give him cancer," Starsky whispered into Hutch's warm neck, ashamed of the intensity of his hate for Schroeder. Rationally, he knew the man hadn't had anything to do with the abnormal
cells in his bones, but he would always link the drug dealer with his diagnosis.

"I know," Hutch said, tightening his hold.

When Mika came in to administer Starsky's pain pills and take him off to x-ray, she found the two of them curled around each other, asleep.

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The next few days were a blur of interviews and frequent visitors. The Rose Tree Unit had never been so busy with all the constant comings and goings of police, TV people and newspaper reporters. Cancer patients taking on three armed felons was big news, and the media coverage was extensive. Even with the restrictions imposed due to the Rose Unit Six's medical needs, most of them got their moment of fame in either the daily paper, or on local and national chat shows. Tom Brokaw did an edition of his news show from the lobby of the hospital, talking to the Colonel and Farley Ryge.

Starsky tried to stay under the media radar, having had his fill of being misquoted in his years on the force. Even so, his picture was on the front page of the Bay City Chronicle and the LA Times on Thursday morning. The wire services picked up the story, bringing in attention from all over the U.S. Nick Starsky called from prison, because he'd seen the Brokaw show and now wanted the full scoop from his famous brother. Their grocer, Perry, phoned to say he wanted his copy of the Times autographed and framed so he could boast about his famous clientele. When Daisy heard about this, she wanted one, too, for the bakery.

"I've never even been to Daisy's place!" Starsky laughed, signing two copies of the article anyway. "Nick called this morning, when you were at the academy."

"Yeah?" Hutch asked evasively. "What he have to say?"

"He's getting out, y'know that? Good behavior!"

Hutch hesitated, never quite sure what to say about Starsky's wayward brother. He'd never really liked Nick's slick, con artist style, but since he was family, Hutch had always forced himself to be civil, if not totally friendly. Starsky had been devastated when his 'baby brother' was indicted for numbers running, extortion and illegal gambling, earning himself five years in prison. He'd served roughly three, so far. Hutch trusted Nick's good behavior about as far as he could throw it, but vowed to be happy because Starsky was. "Good news. Did you tell him you were being sprung in the morning, too?"

"He didn't know I'd been here so long." Starsky shrugged. "I wrote him, but maybe he forgot."

Because the last time he called you were in surgery, Hutch wanted to shout, but he didn't. Starsky deserved better than the schmuck he had for a sibling.

"D'you think Nick could come out? T'visit before…" Starsky fiddled with the pen he was holding, doodling on a pad of paper. He drew a series of spirals, then sketched out a long dark rectangle. Hutch had a sudden overwhelming sense of the whole room tilting, of himself sliding forward, the floor rushing toward him. His vision darkening, he sucked in huge quantities of air, just managing to avoid passing out completely.

"Hutch?" Starsky was shouting when Hutch finally felt the ground firmly under his feet again. He was hanging onto the arms of the chair, his fingers aching from the strain, and from all appearances, hadn't actually pitched onto the linoleum, but it had been a near thing.
"You're white as a ghost, what the hell happened?" Starsky demanded, looking pretty pale himself.

Still trying to regain his equilibrium, Hutch wasn't entirely sure. Then he saw the coffin Starsky had drawn, and closed his eyes. "I'm afraid of being alone."

"Aw, Hutch," Starsky said, and they both jumped when the pen rolled off the bed, clattering loudly when it fell to the floor. "I never planned on going first."

"Starsk, up until recently I thought the hardest thing I ever had to do was watch you being wheeled away with Jennings' poison still inside you," Hutch started slowly, his momentum building. "Then I had to drive you to the hospital, knowing you'd have your l-leg amputated in the morning. But I'm not sure I can do this. I'm so afraid of watching you die."

"Don't watch, then," Starsky said simply. "Watch me live. And live right along with me. Y'know, I've been thinking about Terry lately."

"Yeah?" Hutch nodded at the memory of the vibrant young teacher, watching Starsky through a film of tears. He hadn't planned on starting any of this, bringing up the subject of death, but it hovered over the two of them like the cartoon black cloud which only rained on Wyle E. Coyote. They always skirted around it, pretending that if it never came up in conversation, it wouldn't happen. The problem was, as Starsky's discharge came closer and closer, Hutch feared the inevitable all the more. He'd been vastly relieved when Dr. Davies postponed Starsky's going home for two days, giving him that much longer to ignore what was right above their heads.

"She thought it was silly to have a little piece of metal in her head dictate her life." Starsky had that sweet, sad smile Hutch had seen so often after Terry's death. "I couldn't even begin to fathom what she was talking about, how she could go around knowin' that she was going to die--really soon, maybe."

"Like walking on a frozen lake," Hutch said almost inaudibly, his heart breaking. "You never really know when that crack is going to shatter the ice to pieces."

"Yeah!" Starsky nodded, blinking at the tears in his eyes. "I thought that if I could keep her so still, perfectly still, in the bed, that she'd survive. It's not possible." He tucked his fingers under Hutch's, like a prairie dog burrowing into its hole. "And I know you've got the hard part here, Hutch, but I don't know if I can cope without you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Hutch said forlornly. He thought he should give Starsky a hug, snuggle close while there was still time, but he just stayed seated by the bed, cherishing Starsky's hand curled so safely under his. If he were given three wishes right then, they'd all be for Starsky.

Give him back to me, even if I have to keep him perfectly still in bed, at least he'd be here.

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Wanting to escape any media coverage of 'the first cancer patient to leave the hospital since the hostage crisis', Starsky engaged Linda and Katie in a fairly elaborate scheme to keep the reporters from knowing when he left. Really, all the nurses did was pretend Starsky was still on the floor after he'd already been discharged, but the ruse worked.

After handing out presents to all the other patients, and flowers and boxes of candy for all the nurses, Starsky was hustled down the backstairs to a lower floor and onto the freight elevator to the loading dock. Hutch had already loaded up the trunk with Starsky's accumulated detritus from nearly three months in the hospital, and driven around the back to meet his partner in relative
seclusion. There was a camera crew hovering in the hospital lobby, so Hutch made doubly sure they didn't see him circling around to the loading dock.

Starsky climbed wearily into the car, automatically stowing his crutch behind the seat, and leaned his head against the headrest. "Those stairs wore me out."

"Well, you'll be glad to know you missed Donna Kelly from channel five weekend edition," Hutch said, steering out of the parking lot.

"Donna Kelly?" Starsky griped. "Didn't even rate the top brass like Cronkite? Man, I'm bushed. Wake me when we get home."

"I told you not to climb the stairs yourself, what was Linda thinking?"

"Hutch, I can walk, get over it."

Starsky never even opened his eyes when he spoke, just sighed, squirming around to get comfortable in the patched seat. Hutch had never felt so completely cut off from Starsky, and he knew it was entirely his own fault. Ever since they'd broached the whole watching-Starsky-die subject, Hutch had been sick with anxiety. They both could banter just like normal, but each word was strained, filtered through so many emotions and reactions it was exhausting to try and sort them all out. Mentally beating himself up for not being more compassionate and supportive, Hutch drove silently. He was so gripped with such fear for something that might not even happen for months that he could hardly sleep, much less breathe. The waiting was the worst, giving the immediate future a shifting murkiness where every step, every minute, held unknown dread. When would it happen? How would he react? He flashed on his mother, the epitome of propriety and proper decorum--she'd know how to act when a loved one was dying. She'd have the correct thing to say to convey all that had been left unsaid up until then.

Left unsaid. That was the gist of his fear. How did one cram a lifetime of love and commitment into so short a time? Would he be allowed time, or would the end come shockingly soon, like here in the car with Starsky looking so normal? Would he know in time?

With an ache that bored through his heart, Hutch wished he could reach out right now and hold onto what was most precious; somehow preserve some part of Starsky for ever and for always.

It wasn't possible and he despaired, turning from Magnolia Road onto Dahlia Lane. Their pretty white house sat back on a smooth green lawn that Hutch hadn't mowed, or watered, in months. He wasn't even sure he knew who had tended the grass, and was humbled by that simple act of kindness.

"S-starsk?" he called, ashamed of the revealing stutter. Starsky knew him too well. He'd be able to read the pain Hutch wanted to hide. "We're home."

"Look at that," Starsky said in wonder, rubbing his eyes. "Cherry blossoms."

Each house on Dahlia had a blooming cherry tree planted at the bottom of the lawn. The trees were in full regalia, puffed out like pink cotton candy in the warm March air. Sprinkled across many gardens were vibrant red tulips, yellow daffodils, and purple crocuses announcing the joy of Spring. Southern California might not have the obvious changes of season that Hutch remembered from his childhood in Duluth, but there were still reminders that winter had left, and Spring was bounding forth.

"I went in at Christmas time and came out just in time for the Easter bunny," Starsky said quietly,
"Passover and Easter come the same weekend this year, which is over a month away." Hutch spoke heartily to disguise his shakiness. "Enough time to eat a couple chocolate bunnies and all the challah you want." He walked briskly around the car, unloading the trunk with jerky, tense movements.

"You okay?" Starsky asked astutely. He'd gotten out far more quickly than Hutch expected, and was standing with one hand on the car door, looking over at Hutch with tenderness. "It's okay to feel like you do. I've had more time to get used to th'whole thing, y'know?"

"You're not supposed to be comforting me," Hutch snapped, setting a potted palm down on the sidewalk. How had Starsky collected so much junk? There were stuffed animals, stacks of 'get well' cards, a cardboard box of t-shirts he hadn't had in December, and the huge plastic storage bin full of magazines, puzzles and games. On top of Starsky's bulging duffel bag of dirty laundry Hutch placed the grimmest and most recent acquisitions; more than a dozen meds, several bags of IV fluids, "just in case he gets dehydrated", along with tubing, syringes and alcohol wipes. Hutch had learned how, and why, each were necessary, even if his heart lurched every time he looked at them.

"Why not? Cause I'm the one with actual diagnosis?" Starsky said. "You're holding yourself together with coffee and grit, Hutch. Let go, for my sake."

"Yeah, well, I've got work to do," Hutch retorted, stung nonetheless. Starsky was right, so why couldn't he relax? The need to be vigilant, to guard against attack was so strong that he couldn't drop the act even though rationally he knew he couldn't prevent a microscopic cancer cell from taking Starsky away from him. He lugged several armfuls of stuff up to the front door before unlocking the knob and tossing the duffel bag and box of shirts inside. Pansy was sprawled on the carpet just beyond the foyer, miowing her welcome.

"Mail's here," Starsky called, peering into the box. "Don't you ever take the mail in? Must be coupla days worth crammed in here." He extracted a wad of envelopes, flipping through them. "You got a long one. From the state testing board."

Too distracted to remember why he'd received anything from that source, Hutch stopped, the sack of narcotics and other painkillers hanging limply from his hand. "For the MCAT?" he asked hollowly.

"Won't know until you open it, huh?" Starsky pressed the envelope into his hand. "C'mon in the house, open it up!"

Hutch let Starsky propel him onto the couch despite the trail of potted plants and plush toys left on the front walk. He stared stupidly at the envelope, wondering why this mattered any longer. As if his going to medical school would change anything. He'd be forty years old before he even got near a classroom, and closer to fifty before he finished his residency. Who the hell would put themselves through that when he had a fine job of teaching cadets at the academy? Dobey wanted him to take the lieutenant's exam, a much more reasonable course of action. He'd ace the lieutenant's exam, no doubt about it. Except that there was no spark left in him for those jobs. Medical school, on the other hand, held a kind of allure, an almost palpable enticement, even in his current state of suspended animation.

"Hutch, you're killin' me here," Starsky drawled dramatically. "Open it up, or I will."

Sliding his forefinger under the flap, Hutch extracted the letter. "Testing date for the MCAT is
March 25th, in Torrance. Please arrive promptly at 8 am with a number two pencil," he read aloud.

"That's terrific!" Starsky grabbed the letter, examining it with typical Starsky enthusiasm. "Hey, aren't you excited? You been studying that book since December, must have it memorized by now."

"It's…great," Hutch agreed, wondering if he had the energy to go out and pick up all the rest of Starsky's toys before the neighbor kids had a field day.

"Hutch, are you mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad at you?" Hutch asked irritably.

"Because I stopped the chemo," Starsky said in such a vulnerable voice Hutch swung around to stare at him. Starsky still looked frail. No longer bald, and no longer so thin he would have keeled over in a stiff wind, he now possessed a sort of unworldly beauty, pale skin stretched over sharply peaked cheekbones and chin. For a moment Hutch imagined he was carved out of pale pink marble, one of Michaelangelo's masterpieces.

"No, I'm not…" he started to lie, but the honest pain on Starsky's face slayed him, and he was compelled to tell the truth, as hard as it was to admit. "Yes, I'm angry."

"I won't restart the chemo."

Hutch swallowed, eviscerated yet somehow still alive. "I know. I--I'm not mad at your decision, or you, Starsk. I hate the cancer, what it's done to us. And I can't help it--maybe I shouldn't be around you right now because I feel like shit, and I'm having a hard time getting past…"

"That Davies let me out of the hospital, and now it's all on you," Starsky finished in a muted voice.

"I don't know, maybe." Hutch ground the heel of his hand into his breastbone; his heart hurt. That would just be the icing on the cake, if he had a heart attack right then and there. "Maybe I'm just not strong enough to see this through." He dropped his hand down over the edge of the couch and felt Pansy butt her head up against his palm. "I love you, Starsk."

"I love you, too." Starsky stroked Hutch's hair, his hand feather light as it slid down the back of his skull. "Life sucks and then you die, huh?"

"I thought it was 'Life's a bitch and then you die," Hutch corrected, on the verge of tears but fighting them. Pansy butted his hand again, demanding to be petted and he obliged half-heartedly, simply to appease her.

"Same difference." Starsky craned his neck to see what Hutch was doing, and chuckled low in his throat. "Hutch, when was the last time you really looked at Pansy?"

"She and I shared the same couch the other day." Hutch picked up the little cat, surprised at how truly heavy she'd become. He felt around her rotund belly as his mind struggled to accept the new information.

"Blondie, that cat ain't fat, she's…"

"Pregnant," they both said together, and in that instant Hutch felt the tension slip away, leaving him slightly giddy and light headed. There was nothing to do but live for the moment, and it appeared
that at any moment they were going to be fathers of a litter of kittens.

"Number four is out!" Starsky announced in a low but triumphant voice. He'd been in complete awe for most of the evening, watching Pansy deliver four tiny bundles of mewling fur. The last one was coal black, now lying limply between his mother's paws as she briskly cleaned him up with her rough, pink tongue. The other three were already trying to nurse, their tiny brown and white heads butting their mother's round belly. "Think there are any more?"

Gently probing Pansy's still distended body, Hutch nodded. "Feels like there's a fifth one in there, but she's worn out. I hope she can manage…"

Pansy gave an agonized moan, her abdominal muscles rippling as if in response to Hutch's concern.

"Yep!" Starsky grinned. "I think I see another black one!"

"Pansy obviously cross-pollinated." Hutch laughed.

"What d'you mean?"

"Uh--when cats do it…"

"You're such a prude," Starsky teased. "Fuck the word you're looking for?"

"Thank you, Miss Manners," Hutch said with a supercilious air. "Every time a Tom cat pokes the queen…"

"This is giving me such ideas."

"Are you listening? Every penetration makes another kitten. And most Tom cats do it more than once. So, I'm guessing that those two," Hutch pointed to the two white ones. "Were from one cat, and the three darker ones were from another guy."

"Pansy!" Starsky chided lightly. "You're easy?" He held his breath in anticipation as a fifth ball of fur emerged wetly when Pansy gave a mighty heave. "This is just terrific! I got home in time to see this!" He held out a tentative finger to kitten number one who had stumbled drunkenly away from his mother, curling up in a compact bundle to sleep. When the kitten had settled, Starsky carefully stroked the minute skull, marveling at the angel softness of newborn fur. "Can I name him?"

"Or her," Hutch corrected. "Hard to tell at this age. Name them all." He scooted backward until he was leaning against the laundry room wall, knees drawn up under his chin.

Starsky studied his lover, worried at how tired and stressed out Hutch looked. "You never got any rest after bein' sick."

"Starsky, I bounced back. Had to."

"You didn't have to, you did it for me." Starsky worked Hutch's right cowboy boot off his foot and then the left one. He disposed of the socks by flipping them over his shoulder into the laundry hamper and began to massage Hutch's long feet, concentrating on the ball and the arch. In a matter of minutes, Hutch was purring louder than any cat.

"Starsky…" Hutch heaved a sigh, his whole body seeming to loosen up and relax. "I should be
"You can, later, and it'll only take half as long." Starsky quirked a grin to soften the self-deprecation. "You've been doin' too much, baby. Let me do something for you." He kneaded the curved sole with his thumbs, then lightly pulled on each toe. "Feel good?"

"Feels fantastic. Let's give Mama Pansy and her brood some bonding time so we can do a little bonding of our own."

"Never heard a better plan, but you're going to have to haul me up off the floor."

"Did you decide on names?" Hutch asked, bracing Starsky until he got a foot and crutch under him.

"Eenee, Meeny, Miney and Moe," Starsky said.

"Forgot how to count, Einstein? That's only four." Hutch held open the door to the kitchen.

"Oh, yeah." Starsky looked back at the kittens with delight. This was life. This was how mankind--and animal kind--survived. Birth and then death, on a continuous circle. No escaping the end, but the ride around the giant Ferris Wheel was seldom boring. His ride would be shorter than Hutch's, but he wasn't about to jump out of the gondola before that ride operator with the black cape and the scythe forced him to. "L'chaim--to celebrate life."

"That's the best one of all." Hutch kissed him sweetly on the lips, but suddenly Starsky was ravenous and it wasn't for food.

"Harder," he whispered. "All night long."

"We have to take it easy, neither of us is getting any younger." He towed Starsky through the house, his mood lightening with every step.

"Are you making disparaging remarks because my birthday is coming up?"

"That's what that big red circle on the calendar was for!" Hutch feigned surprise, pulling Starsky onto their bed.

"Did you get me a present yet?" Starsky asked, yanking on the tail of Hutch's button down shirt to pull it free of his slacks.

"I've been kind of busy."

"Not busy enough." Starsky arched against Hutch, their groins aligning like two heat seeking missiles. "I think I can find something for you to do." He wanted sex, but his body was achy and tired after a full day, and little Davey wasn't responding as quickly as Starsky had hoped. He reached down towards Hutch's fly to liberate the more willing participant.

"Wait, it's my turn to give you a massage." Hutch ran his hands along Starsky's spine to demonstrate.

"I only did your feet," Starsky protested, but willingly lay down on his belly, the soft comforter inviting him to stretch out. Hutch worked Starsky's t-shirt over his head but suddenly Starsky could feel every one of the bumps and bruises acquired in the last few days, and his energy was waning rapidly. "You'll put me right to sleep, y'know, and then we won't have any fun."

"I'll still have some fun," Hutch said. "Does this still hurt?" He gently palpated the greenish-brown
bruise that encompassed Starsky's left rib cage.

"Just don't rub too hard there," Starsky warned, trying to breathe through the brief spasm that caught him unawares. "Go further down…" He sighed in total bliss when Hutch began to knead the muscles of his lower back, using his palms like rolling pins. Hutch had always had a definite talent for back rubs. Starsky let out all his latent tensions, melting into a warm puddle under Hutch's skillful manipulations. "Yeah, there…and that place, those hospital beds are murder on my…" He gasped when Hutch knuckled a particularly tight knot, which caused warm tingles to run down the full length of both Starsky's legs until his feet flexed in response. "Hutch! Do that again!" Starsky urged.

"There?" Hutch hit the exact spot unerringly, and Starsky rejoiced in the complete absence of any cramping pain in his missing left foot.

Starsky rolled over, grabbing Hutch's hands. "You found the right spot!"

"For what, Starsk?"

"My damned foot hurts all the time, like the toes are curled under and I can't straighten 'em out. You fixed that!"

"Reflexology." Hutch grinned, snaking his arms around Starsky's narrow waist and lightly probing the area just above his butt crack.

"Reflex--whooee?"

"It involves hitting certain places on the body that correspond to other areas, in just the right way." Hutch pulled Starsky forward so he was practically sitting on Hutch's lap.

"Then do some on this part here." Starsky guided Hutch's fingers back around to the front, and helped him zip down his pants. "Cause there are so many other areas that correspond to that one."

Hutch chuckled deep in his chest, and Starsky could almost feel the rumbles travel down the length of Hutch's arms and fingers, communicating that laughter to his cock and rumbling into his own battered chest. A closed current, as his old science teacher used to say. Connection of a most primal kind; touch, closeness, holding, and shelter. What a person needed to live.

"Did you know that if babies aren't held close, they could die? I…read an article…" Starsky closed his eyes, catching his breath as Hutch delicately brushed the tips of his fingers along Starsky's cock, never settling in one place, but roaming freely, stimulating sleeping nerve endings. The resulting erection was a thing of beauty: full, strong, and pulsing with blood.

"That's what I like to see," Hutch said smugly, closing the turgid muscle in his fist. "Starsky so turned on he can't speak."

"Y-you try it sometime," Starsky managed weakly, all of his senses going haywire. When Hutch licked the tip of his penis once, Starsky exploded, thrusting with exhilarating force. It hadn't felt so good in a long time.

"Relaxed now?" Hutch asked lazily, watching him. He was still playing little finger games, investigating along the ridges and valleys of Starsky's ribs and abdomen. "You're so skinny."

"Not skinny," Starsky argued with a teasing glint when he was incapable of movement. "Stream lined for more power."
"That what they're calling it these days?" Hutch kissed one brown nipple, circling the other with his thumb. "Seems strange to have that IV thing on the other side."

Starsky tucked his chin down, staring down his mapped and charted body. With forty rapidly approaching in just over three weeks time, he was nothing like the gloriously muscled specimen he'd been at 21. Scars, bruises and the subclavian IV port all marred his chest. "They moved it once when I was so out of it I didn't even remember the doctor doin' anything. Infected, or something. So now it's on the right 'stead of the left."

Hutch kissed the site, then kissed Starsky's lips, stretching out so they were close, but not totally touching along every point. "We should get ready for bed."

"We are in bed," Starsky pointed out, covering Hutch's prominent bulge with his hand. "Warm."

"Yeah, so are you. I got tired of sleeping here alone."

"When did you ever sleep here?" Starsky murmured, too content to move. "You were at the hospital nearly all the time."

"Isn't the same." Hutch sounded almost asleep.

"Won't ever be," Starsky said mournfully. He was too tired to stay awake long, but lay there for a while, staring up at the darkened ceiling, never moving his hand from its favored spot. He was never going back to the Rose Tree Unit for another stay. Doctor visits, maybe, but he wasn't ever going to let anything separate him from Hutch again. This was where he was meant to be.

March roared in like a lion--not the weather, but the ebb and flow of life for Starsky and Hutch sped up. Starsky found adjusting to life at home much more difficult than he'd expected. Three months was a long time to be away. Everything seemed different and yet the same. Just walking through the living room he'd pause, wondering if that lamp had always been there. Had Hutch moved that old ship in a bottle Starsky had painstakingly constructed so many years ago? Was the early morning light through the side window always so captivatingly beautiful on a spring morning?

Starsky was no longer as incapacitated as he had been in the fall, so he no longer required a full time home care nurse. Strange that the loss of a limb gave him more freedom. Sophie started coming for a few hours every other day, just to keep tabs on his health and general well-being, but Starsky was alone more than he had been before. That was not to say he wasn't busy; there was physical therapy, occupational therapy, wellness support groups, and doctor visits, not to mention friends and neighbors dropping by at all hours, all excited to see Starsky 'back in the land of the living' as he put it.

Hutch was more than busy coordinating his classes at the academy, working at Metro, and polishing his studies for the MCAT. Starsky joked that Hutch had the prep book memorized, but Hutch wasn't taking any chances. Once he took this test, there was no going back in his mind--he was hell bent on a medical career now, there would be no second thoughts.

Because of the on-going case against Schroeder, Starsky more than satisfied his wish to go back to work for a few days. He spent several days huddled with the D.A.'s team, and later, giving his testimony in front of a grand jury regarding his part in Schroeder's arrest. This also gave Starsky time to schmooze with old colleagues, put his foot up on his desk, and revel in the atmosphere.
But as he'd anticipated, secretly, things had changed too much. There was no going back. In the same way that Hutch was now looking forward, in a different direction, Starsky knew his own feelings had changed majorly. This wasn't home anymore. This was no longer his future, just his past, and surprisingly, he was becoming more content with that. However, it did cause him to feel disconnected from those around him once in a while, as if he were no longer quite in the here and now, but somehow already linked to something less tangible. That was scary, and he sometimes clung to Hutch in the night.

In the light of day Starsky tried to maintain his equilibrium, his tough-guy image, but there were nights were he mourned his life in ways he couldn't quite voice. He couldn't quite shake a certain sadness, but there was also peace because he was no longer fighting quite so hard. That was not to say he was ready to give up by any stretch of the imagination. He was conflicted some days, but generally rejoiced in the serenity the decision about his life's course had brought. Hutch still had a ways to go, but he, too, was making headway.

Starsky collapsed onto the sofa, expelling a lungful of air. He'd had a busy day, starting with early morning appointments with Dr. Davies, the physical therapist, a pain specialist, and a rejuvenating session with Saiisa Borunda. Her quiet strength always worked wonders on Starsky's sometimes jangled emotions, especially on this most anticipated of days. Hutch was taking the MCAT.

Starsky had specifically scheduled all these appointments in one day to keep himself from obsessing on how Hutch might be doing--had he remembered to bring a number two pencil? Because Hutch always lost his pencils. Did he remember what a parallelogram was, and the name of the capital of Sierra Leone?

So, Starsky had managed to fill his day, lunch with Huggy and Daisy, who were in the midst of planning their wedding, and then over to Pane Peducci for his first ever visit to Daisy's prospering bakery. He'd selected a box of pastries to bring with him to watch the Bay City Girl's Gymnastic team practice their new routines. After applauding every girl's floor exercise until his hands ached, Starsky was exuberant but worn out. Edith Dobey had driven him home. Now, he just had a short time before Hutch would be home. Starsky hoped he'd be able to stay awake that long. There was a bucket of take out fried chicken keeping warm in the oven for dinner, just in case neither of them felt like cooking.

Upon hearing their master on the couch, all of the kittens bounded into the living room with Pansy following at a sedate distance. Now several weeks old, the five bundles of fluff were developing distinct personalities, and starting to play. Starsky laid his head back on the couch to watch the kittens pounce and roll over each other, brown fur mixing with white and then black until they were just a blur of softness. Their tiny mews and musical purrs reminded him of the Tribbles on the old Star Trek, and he chuckled, cuddled up one, and then another, whoever was nearest.

Eeney, Meeny, Miney and Moe began to weary of their tussle with a pompom and toppled over into a swirl of multicolored fur--one giant kitten with four sets of limbs, but L'Chaim kept romping. He made an awkward leap for the red ball, resulting in an over the head somersault that sent him crashing into his siblings. Starsky laughed heartily at the uproar. Caterwauling kittens were sprawled everywhere, and Pansy had to wade in the middle to separate them. She spent some time scolding L'Chaim, who looked completely unrepentant, and Starsky laughed harder. Finally, Pansy bopped several babies on the head with a maternal paw, and settled her brood down for some mother's milk.

His chest starting to ache from laughing so hard, Starsky caught his breath, still giggling. It wasn't
until he put up one hand to wipe away the tears that he realized he was actually crying, and that broke the dam. Suddenly he was bawling; violent, wracking sobs hauled up from the darkest depths. He wasn't quite sure why he was crying, just that he couldn't stop. Every few minutes he thought he had a handle on the deluge, only to find himself sobbing harder, gasping for breath, anguished wails ripping out of him.

"Starsk?" Hutch asked worriedly, dropping a pile of mail and official looking papers onto the floor. "What's wrong, baby? What happened?" He pulled Starsky into his arms, murmuring quieting comforts.

"N-nothing," Starsky stammered, hiccuping between quieting sobs. "The kittens were playing."

"And that reduced you to tears?" Hutch's voice smiled, and Starsky closed his eyes, absorbing the love through his skin.

"I was laughing," Starsky said into Hutch's soft old blue shirt. He knew that if he reached up one hand he'd feel the soft threads of embroidery on the back—a guitar stitched artistically by one of Hutch's more talented ex-girlfriends. "It's stupid." The need to cry had almost gone, the tears evaporated, but every now and again he could feel a ripple of grief shiver over him, goosebumps rising on his upper arms.

"Hey, I'm the only one who can call you stupid, I though we agreed," Hutch teased gently.

"I was just laughing, and then I was crying."

"You've been coping with a stress level that would topple an elephant, Starsk. Sooner or later everybody's got to fall apart." Hutch kissed him on the earlobe.

"I thought I was handling everything."

"True, and doing it a lot better than I was." Hutch briskly rubbed Starsky's arms, dispelling the last of the goosebumps. "How're you doing, now?"

"I'm good," Starsky said wearily.

"What did John say?" Hutch got up, stretching his long body and working out the kinks in his spine.

"Nothing new." Starsky watched the performance with some interest, but not enough energy to initiate anything.

Hutch gave Starsky a patented 'I know you're not giving me the whole truth' stare before gathering up the mail, and sorting through the envelopes. "One for you," he tossed Starsky a postcard. "And one for me, and one for Pansy." Hutch tucked one under his arm, and fluttered a circular for a local pet store to the floor. Pansy spat with a hiss when the papers landed too near her nursing babies, and Hutch had to gingerly pat her head to mollify her. "Two more bills, and an ad for cable."

"We got cable."

"Yeah, but we could get Playboy channel," Hutch laughed. "Wink, wink, nudge-nudge, know what I mean?"

"You want to watch girls scampering around with their jugs bouncing?"

"Can be fun."
"Yeah," Starsky said wistfully, remembering when girls were all he looked at. That redhead who'd gone to Malibu with him, let him remove her bikini top. And ditsy, funny Nancy, as tall as he was, her breasts overflowing his hands. That had been fun, and joyful, but none of them compared to Hutch in any way. "You want Playboy?"

"We can get it for the trial and then cancel before we have to pay." Hutch read the fine print on the flyer. "Just for Susan Anton, you know."

"She's so seventies, Hutchinson. Think Brooke Shields, Barbie Benton." Starsky knew Hutch was waiting him out, using the conversation as a cover until Starsky 'fessed up. "There's Kentucky Fried in the oven, but I got you the kind without skin."

"You do the nicest things for me." Hutch headed into the kitchen to deposit the rest of the mail into the recycle bin, pulling the last envelope out from under his arm as he did so.

"John said in all likelihood the cancer will metastasize, probably to my lungs." Starsky said, eyes focused on the guitar on Hutch's shirt.

Hutch swallowed audibly, never turning around. "Does he know for sure?"

"Yeah, he's a doctor, he's got all those books…"

"No, I mean, has it already happened?"

"Oh." Starsky forced himself to ignore the absurd urge to weep. "No, the tumor markers are the same. I mean they haven't changed since I went off chemo. Not any higher, not any lower."

"That's good," Hutch said with finality. He flipped the last envelope onto the counter, and got out an oven mitt. "Do you want a breast or a drumstick?"

He wasn't really all that hungry, but Starsky nodded, the raw emotion weighing the air like pollen. He wanted to sneeze just to relieve the pressure. "Drumstick."

"Did you get any slaw?"

"In the fridge, on the top shelf," Starsky directed. "And beans. You can nuke them."

Hutch busied himself in the kitchen, dishing out the food onto two plates. He set the table with forks and spoons, then placed a bottle of beer on one place mat.

"Me, too," Starsky instructed.

"Are you going to get up and eat over here?" Hutch asked without getting a second Heineken.

Starsky set his jaw, unaccountably annoyed at Hutch for no particular reason. They were both just overly tired and snappy, like toddlers who hadn't had their naps. As a matter of fact, he should have taken an afternoon siesta, but five thirty in the evening was a little late for that. Maybe later, while Hutch watched Nova.

Standing up, Starsky picked up one crutch and loped the distance between the couch and table with a minimum of effort, chiding himself for letting Hutch get to him. He sat, looking across at Hutch through the half filter of his eyelashes. Hutch was tense, it showed in the set of his shoulders and the tight way he clutched the beer.

"I love you," Starsky said simply.
Hutch nodded, one side of his mouth lifting up. "I love you, too."

"I totally forgot to ask you about the test!" Starsky broke off some of the crispy fry on the side of the drumstick. "Didja pass?"

Hutch was chewing cole slaw and had to take a long pull on his beer before speaking. Starsky noticed he almost drained the bottle in one go. "Too early to tell," Hutch answered. "But the questions were easier than I thought." He leaned back just far enough to reach the refrigerator, extracting two beers, a second for himself, and one for Starsky.

"See," Starsky brightened, and forked some baked beans into his mouth. "Dr. Hutchinson has a real ring to it."

"You're putting the cart before the horse," Hutch sniped, but now there was a real smile on his face.

"What was that envelope you threw on the counter?" Starsky asked, finding his hunger. He went to work on the chicken leg.

"Medical school applications," Hutch mumbled, eating more cole slaw.

"Now who's up in the cart without tyin' on the horses?"

"Don't you mean bridling?"

"How should I know? The only horse I ever saw was under a fat, Irish New York cop in Central Park," Starsky countered, broadening his New York accent for effect. "I went to Rosie's rehearsal for the big competition in Washington D.C. this afternoon."

"Yeah?" Hutch gave a discrete belch, drinking more beer. "How'd they look?"

"All six of them were fantastic. They're definitely going to take the medal as a team. An' not one of 'em fell during their individual floor routines."

"That's going to be televised, right?"

"On ABC sports, the day after the competition, so it'll be old news by then." Starsky picked at the label on his bottle, then took a sip to bolster his courage. He was fully aware he might have a fight on his hands here. "I wanna fly to Washington with the team."

"What?" Hutch reared up from his plate, nearly dropping his laden fork, staring at Starsky as if he'd grown a second head. Starsky was momentarily amused by an entertaining vision of himself with twin heads, and one and a half legs.

"I wanna go, to support the team. Not like I got any other plans. You can come, too."

"Starsky..." Hutch sputtered, his mouth opening into an 'O'. He closed his lips, tightening them as if briefly waging an internal war before taking a deep breath.

"See?" Starsky grinned. "You finally learned it doesn't pay to argue with me."

"I thought we agreed you were going to take it easy around the house from now on," Hutch said just a trifle too primly. "After all the rigamarole with Schroeder."

"We didn't decide," Starsky stressed. "That's what you want. I can't just sit around."
"You did last fall."

"I had a broken leg last fall, I couldn't do anything." Starsky looked down, scrunching up his face, trying to express his innermost thoughts. "As much as it surprises me to say this, I'm freer now. Nothin's holding me back."

"This scares me," Hutch said honestly. He took a slow drink from his second beer.

"I know, Blintz." Starsky smiled and was rewarded when those Nordic blue eyes smiled back over the top of the bottle. "Hutch, sitting around twiddling my thumbs would be like I was just waitin' to die. I wanna live until I die--just like anybody else." He chuckled suddenly, remembering a long ago day at the amusement park. "I know Terry is just up there in heaven sayin' 'I told you so' to me. She drove me crazy that day, wanting to ride on the bumper cars with a bullet in her brain." A pain blossomed sharp and bright in his breastbone just for the space of a breath and then it was gone.

"Now, I know. I know."

"Aw, Starsk." Hutch blinked, his face almost crumbling but he swallowed with an audible gulp. He reached over, wrapping his hand around Starsky's and squeezed tightly as if hanging on for dear life. "Be hard to g-get good prices on the tickets. Aren't they leaving in a few days?"

"On Wednesday," Starsky agreed, his belly so churned up he could barely tolerate the smell of the chicken on his plate. He pushed it aside, taking a swig of beer, but the flavor was off, tasting like cat piss in his mouth. "The meet is on Friday."

"The 29th," Hutch confirmed, then blanched. "Oh, my God, today is your birthday! Starsky, I totally forgot, with studying for the test, and getting the midterms ready at the Academy and . . ."

"Hutch, it's okay."

"Why didn't you say anything this morning? Last week?"

"Didn't want you t'be distracted." Starsky hiccuped with the effort to keep the tears at bay. Why was this so hard, and what could make it easier? Hutch had given in with barely any fight at all, so why did Starsky feel scared? "Uh--Edith tol' me the plane isn't full. That two of the parents had to bow out 'cause of their work, or something. She needs more chaparones. So, we could get the same rate the team paid for the tickets. Don't know about the hotel. I wasn't plannin' on staying in the same room with a bunch of 14 year old girls."

"There are laws against that, you dirty old man," Hutch teased, and Starsky knew things were going to be all right. "You want to go to Washington, Starsk? We'll celebrate your birthday, old man. I'll go where ever you do, whenever . . ."

"Yeah?" Starsky grinned.

"But no bumper cars." Hutch released Starsky's hand, waving the Hutchinson pointer at his nose. "I have my limits."

"Y'know the girls are going to Disneyland the Saturday after they get back--there's always Space Mountain."

"Keep pushing, Icarus, you'll never get that boulder over the mountain."

"Sisyphus pushed the boulder, college boy. Icarus flew too close to the sun," Starsky corrected.

"Smart ass," Hutch pulled apart his chicken breast, separating the meat from the wishbone.
"You've been watching way too much educational TV."

"Mais oui, mon ami," Starsky said in French. "You gonna make a wish?"

"Huh?" Hutch munched distractedly on his chicken.

"The wishbone." Starsky snatched it off his plate, twirling the tiny 'V' around. "Make a wish with me, Hutch." He held out the bone, grasping one leg tightly, waiting for Hutch to follow suit. Why this suddenly seemed vitally important was beyond him, but his heart did a funny little jump when Hutch grabbed the opposite leg. Starsky closed his eyes, but there was no need to conjure up some special new desire. He had only one, the most important wish there was to live.

Each of them pulled until there was a sharp snap, the larger share of the bone breaking into Hutch's hand.

"You won!" Starsky announced, the tiny disappointment in his chest offset by the knowledge that Hutch had probably wished for exactly the same thing as he did.

"I wished you never got cancer," Hutch said quietly.

"You're not s'pposed to say it out loud."

"Happy birthday." Hutch leaned over and kissed him. "Eat your dinner, it's getting cold."

The sweet longing of the kiss still lingering on his lips, Starsky smiled sadly. "I'm having a hard time with the acceptance thing lately."

"I don't think I've gotten there yet," Hutch confessed.

"Sing me a song?" Starsky asked wistfully. "You hardly ever play the guitar anymore."

"What did you have in mind?"

"That Doris Day song. You sang it once with Abby, that time you guys did a duet at the police talent show."

"Que Sera, sera?" Hutch got up and retrieved the guitar from where it had lain forgotten for several months. "What made you think of that one, babe?"

"Th'other night, when I couldn't sleep, I watched the Hitchcock retrospective. All night--three movies. 'North by Northwest', 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' and 'Rear Window'." 

"No wonder you were so worn out. You need your sleep," Hutch chided, running his hand over the smooth varnish of the guitar. "Wake me up the next time. At least so I can watch the chase through the cornfield scene."

"I like the fight on Mt. Rushmore better." Starsky settled back in his chair, focusing on his beloved. He loved watching the play of the overhead lights on shining hair as Hutch bent over the neck of the instrument. After spending a few minutes tuning the strings, strumming and plucking at random, Hutch looked up at Starsky as if questioning whether he should start. One lock of hair fell over his forehead like the studious boy he must have been, practicing his music in the quiet of his own bedroom. Starsky felt such a wrenching loss at not having known that serious, beautiful child, and knowing that someday he would unwillingly abandon the kind hearted, talented man that child had become.
"Que sera, sera, whatever will be will be," Hutch sang in a clear tenor. "The future's not ours to see."

"Que sera, sera," Starsky finished, and began to cry. He clung to the arms that folded around him, the guitar bumping him in the hip, and succumbed to the sorrow once more. Knowing death was inevitable, and accepting that fact as unblemished truth had turned out to be harder than he expected.

Hutch was surprised how easily the impromptu vacation fell into place, and how quickly. Several quick phone calls to the airline, hotel, and lastly to the Dobey's fixed everything. He'd expected Dobey to balk, since up until then, Hutch had been slated to fill in as acting captain during the boss's absence. However, Dobey didn't even blink an eye at the request, and granted the days off without protest. Hutch strongly suspected some manipulation from Edith's corner on that score.

However the miracle had occurred, he didn't completely question it. Starsky had been so shaky emotionally since he'd announced his desire to go that Hutch would have gone to great lengths to cheer his partner up. If flying across the entire country to see a gymnastics show he could see for free in their own town was what it took to pull Starsky out of the doldrums, so be it.

The flight was long, stifling and boisterous with 6 teenaged girls, 9 parents, 3 younger siblings, plus Starsky and Hutch. The flight attendants hurried up and down the aisles bringing extra sodas, packs of playing cards, every People magazine they could muster, and an extra diaper for Aria's baby sister.

Starsky thrived on the chaotic excitement as if he were a battery that had needed a new charge. His eyes shone with blue fire, his skin was flushed, and he could barely sit still, grabbing every chance to tease, gossip and schmooze with the gang of people he'd taken as his extended family. Hutch sat back, content to let Starsky have his moment. They'd both needed this trip more than he'd realized.

It was not just a distraction, it was truly a departure from all the stress and depression of the last seven months.

Seven months. Hutch closed his eyes at the realization that it had been seven months since he'd found himself in hell. Just over half a year since their lives had changed irreversibly. But here, on the other side of the US, where spring was still the hope of crocuses poking their buds through winter hardened ground, where a snow flurry delayed the plane by an hour because of ice on the landing strip, here they could be different people, just for a few days. For Starsky's 40th birthday.

Sure, they both had to acknowledge that Starsky still had terminal cancer, and had carted along a bag full of prescription medications. They tended be circumspect with their relationship in front of their friends from Bay City, but mostly out of respect for the sensibility of the young girls, not to hide in any way. There was a weird sense of freedom, almost relief, at leaving St. Joseph's, Dr. Davies, and some painful memories behind.

The hotel where they were staying was not far from the most famous areas of the nation's capital, and Hutch had barely dropped the two suitcases on the floor of their room before Starsky was raring to go, ready to explore.

"Starsky, we just flew across the entire country, and had to get up at 4 am to do so. Aren't you tired?" Hutch groaned, still trying to ease the kinks out of his back and long legs from sitting for so long in the tightly packed jet.

"I had a nap," Starsky said dismissively. "Anyway, Hutch, look!" He yanked the sheers covering
the large plate glass window aside, revealing a stunning view of Washington, DC. The white dome of the capital building shone in the late afternoon sun like a perfect example of classic architecture, gleaming and elegant. "It's history, all laid out in front of us!"

"And it's five thirty in the evening. I'm sure the tours are all closed," Hutch answered, wishing he didn't sound quite so grumpy, but he was too tired to go walking around looking at national monuments right then. He still couldn't fathom how Starsky had any energy left.

"Huuutch," Starsky whined, then brightened, hopping over to his carryon to dig out a guidebook, Washington DC on $40 a day. Hutch had to smile, at least Starsky was trying to stay frugal on their impulsive trip. Starsky perched on the edge of the bed as if afraid to get too comfortable, and flipped a couple of pages. "Aha. The hotel is here on the corner of D Street and New Jersey, there's a great restaurant called Vittorio's across the street--pizza, lasagna, linguini with clams…" he glanced up at Hutch with those blue eyes shining like a million blue lasers, and Hutch was undone. Starsky had most probably known he could get Hutch to do anything with those eyes, and the mention of linguini with clams.

Hutch didn't even like linguini, with or without clams. It always reminded him of a time he nearly lost his partner, long before they'd been lovers. What if Starsky had died so many years ago? "I want tortellini in pesto sauce," Hutch capitulated.

"See?" Starsky grinned triumphantly. "Then the capital's barely two blocks over, Hutch. An evening stroll, maybe hold hands."

"Romantic," Hutch scoffed, but the idea appealed to him more than he could say. "But we take the wheelchair. You tire out, and you can't watch the girls perform on Friday."

Mutiny flitted across Starsky's features for half a second before he nodded. "Just one last thing before we go, I gotta use the john."

Hutch laughed until his sides hurt.
Two

Chapter Summary

Second half of CS Book Two. It helps to have read Crab Sandwiches first.

Crab Sandwiches, Book Two
By
Dawnwind

Part two of two

"See, I tol' you this was a good idea." Starsky tilted his head back against the handlebars of the wheelchair, his curls brushing the back of Hutch's hand in a way that made his groin ache.

"Sometimes you get them," Hutch agreed, too stuffed with Italian food to argue.

Their party had expanded from just the two of them to a table full of giggling girls and several parents. Not the whole troop, but enough to put a kibosh on any sort of romantic dinner Starsky and he might have had by themselves. He resolved to dip into that guidebook himself, to find a nice, quiet, out-of-the-way spot to celebrate Starsky's birthday. Just the two of them, without a passel of teenyboppers. Now he understood the lengths some parents had to go to in order to have time to themselves, and he'd only been around the girls for 12 hours so far. Luckily, the girls were more interested in exploring the premium movie channel in their hotel rooms than taking a moonlit walk down Constitution to view the capital in all its glory.

"And sometimes I do." He glanced around, but the only people nearby were throwing pennies into the reflecting pool. With a quick flick of the wrist he'd turned the wheelchair around the Garfield monument and bent down to capture Starsky's soft lips with his own. The air around them might have been cold, but Hutch felt a rush of heat flash through him that started at his mouth and tingled down to his cock. Starsky moaned, a sweet longing sound, and shifted his weight, leaning into the kiss with devotion. Hutch savored the taste of Starsky, mingled flavors of red wine, tomato sauce, and garlic pricking his taste buds to spice the kiss perfectly. It was with great regret that he pulled back from his lover just far enough to see Starsky's pupils dilated with lust, his eyelids heavy.

"Time t'go back to the room," Starsky whispered.

"What about the Capital building?"

"What Capital building?"

Hutch ran a finger down the long line of Starsky's cheekbone to his jaw, knowing they were already pushing their luck. Anyone could walk along and see them there, a cop, one of the parents they were traveling with, or worst of all, someone cruel and homophobic, out for the kicks of bashing gays.

"Love you, baby." He ruffled Starsky's curls one last time and headed the chair back to the hotel, never having gotten more than a glimpse of the famed structure where the bills and policies that
changed the nation were decided.

Their lovemaking was gentle, an ode to devotion and strength in the face of adversity. Hutch had never held Starsky so reverently, or felt so worshiped by his lover. They coupled holding hands, as if even their fingers were mated; palm to palm, wrists touching so that the beating of their arteries thudded as one. Hutch held his breath as he climaxed, shuddering with release, waiting for Starsky to follow him. His patience was rewarded, because Starsky came a few moments later, his seed spilling across Hutch's belly in a long spiral to match the one Hutch had made on Starsky's flat abdomen.

Lying there in the dark, listening to Starsky's breathing slow, Hutch was content. It was a transient mood, as so many were in these emotional times, but he concentrated on keeping the feeling alive inside him, trying to dissolve the essence of this contentedness into a compact form he could carry with him when the rougher days ahead hit. He almost chuckled at the thought of going to the store to buy a jar of contentedness in powder form, like instant coffee, and adding water. But nothing would replace the real Starsky by his side, smelling faintly of sweat, and the chocolate that had been on the pillows of their beds.

"Hutch?" Starsky said, and the sheets rustled as he turned toward him, nuzzling into Hutch's bare shoulder.

"Thought you were sleeping."

"Just thinking."

"Need a penny?" Hutch moved enough to be able to bury his fingers in the rich fullness of Starsky's hair. Not quite as long as Starsky used to wear it, but had still grown back vigorously curly.

Starsky exhaled, his breath warm on Hutch's skin, and he kissed Hutch's collarbone. "I wanna tell you why I was so...sad the other day, after you took the MCAT." His hand had been lying lax on Hutch's ribcage, but now he surfed up the curve of Hutch's chest to rest on his sternum. "I went to the hospital."

"I know, for therapy."

"Yeah, had PT, and worked with the pain specialist, went up to the unit..."

He trailed off for a long moment and Hutch realized that was where the melancholia had begun.

"Saw Saiisa."

"Mmm?" Hutch made tiny soothing circles on Starsky’s scalp, very aware of the warm hand spread across his chest, just over his beating heart.

"Farley's gone home, did I tell you that?"

The abrupt change in both subject and tone told Hutch they were getting nearer to the truth. He knew that Starsky kept up with his old friends at the Rose Tree Unit, although Starsky wasn't supposed to visit very often. Not only to protect his still somewhat fragile immune system, but mostly to protect those of the patients still on the floor. Although, Hutch hadn't let himself think about it until just then, flying across the country in a plane full of potential germ mongerers wasn't exactly the smartest thing to do. But, John Davies had actually encouraged them to go, so maybe Starsky was doing even better than Hutch hoped.

"Yes," he agreed. "I knew Farley was going home."
"The Colonel, too."

"Starsk, I think he went home two days after you did," Hutch reminded. "Did you see Mika and Gemma?"

"Mika was workin' the day shift, doing a double," Starsky said quietly. "There was a new little girl there with leukemia, everybody was busy, so I just went to Saiisa's office. She told me."

"Told you what?" Hutch asked, and his heart skipped a beat in anticipation. He felt the stuttering thud against the bones of Starsky's hand pressing on his chest.

"Jeremy died."

It was far too dark for Hutch to see Starsky's face, but he could feel the jerky movement of his Adam's apple against his shoulder as Starsky fought to keep his voice steady. "He got an infection--like I did that time, only the antibiotics didn't work."

"Aw, Starsk," Hutch whispered into his hair, kissing the top of his head. Starsky was trembling, but he wasn't crying the way he had a few days before. "That must have been really scary."

"We have the same kind of cancer, Hutch. In the same leg," Starsky gulped a breath like a swimmer coming up for air. "I just keep thinking that'll be me someday, but not quite yet. Just give me a little longer, huh?"

"You take as long as you want, Starsk."

"Yeah," Starsky said in a wistful tone. "So, I thought, I've got to do a couple things, go places, cram all that life in as fast as I can. Y'know I've never been to Washington, DC before?"

"You told me when you bought the guidebook, and when we booked the tickets, and when we got on the plane…" Hutch fought his tears, needing to be at least as successful as Starsky had, if not more so. He had to force himself to keep the conversation light.

"Asshole," Starsky said, and his voice was steadier now, the vulnerability covered over once again. "You're the one who was so excited about seein' the Hope Diamond, and all the Gemini rockets in the Smithsonian."

"That's right, and if we don't go to sleep, neither one of us will be in any shape to see anything. Say good night, George."

"G'night, Gracie," Starsky replied, curling so that his right leg butted up to Hutch's left one. His breathing evened out very quickly, light snores signaling that he'd finally dropped off.

Hutch stared up at the dark ceiling, almost afraid to let sleep come.

Please, God, if you're listening up there, give him a lot longer, huh?

It was cold but brilliantly sunny when the troop and their chaperones arrived at the Lincoln memorial. Kristianne's mother Diane, whom Starsky had long ago nicknamed the Commander, organized the girls into smaller groups walk up the parkway to explore the Smithsonian. Starsky and Hutch waited a few minutes for the crowd to scatter, waving goodbye to Rosie and Rainbow, who promised to buy Starsky a belated birthday present, and agreeing to meet back with them in a few hours. Starsky checked the guidebook, trying to choose which museum he wanted to check out first. The Air and Space or maybe Natural History?
"What about the Viet Nam memorial?" Hutch pointed across the plaza to the long, low black wall where people lingered quietly, reading the names.

"Uh--no," Starsky looked in that direction for a moment, before turning his head. When he'd first heard of the memorial going up, he'd been proud that Americans were finally acknowledging the men who had died in that hell of a war. He'd really wanted to come to pay tribute to his comrades who had fallen in the rice paddies and muggy forests, to say a special prayer for their lives and deaths.

Only now, with death hovering so closely beside him all the time, he couldn't. The thought of those young guys, yanked from their lives in the States and shoved roughly into a foreign land to fight a war they didn't fully understand, hurt more than he could say. It reopened wounds he hadn't even remembered having. There were so many recent deaths in his life right now, Jeremy, Marian, and even Daisy's twin, Flori, that he didn't want to dwell on older ones. "I…maybe later, huh?"

"Sure, Starsk." Hutch rubbed his back with a casual gesture. "Then I really do want to see the Hope Diamond."

"You're always going on about the capitalistic society, and people's preoccupation with conspicuous consumption, and the one thing you want to see is the biggest diamond in the world?" Starsky teased, glad Hutch had understood. He hated this wavery feeling inside him all the time, as if he could cry at the slightest provocation. That, and the sometimes sympathetic looks he saw on the faces of his friends before they schooled their expressions when they realized he saw them. Pity, and worry, and love wound around with fear.

Conversely, when people he encountered on the street would glance at his truncated leg and then blush, or look away in embarrassment, he felt angry that they couldn't handle something so real as amputation. It almost made him want to rise up and glare at them, show them he could stand and walk, and wasn't a cripple.

A veteran with long gray hair, wearing wrinkled fatigues and a cowboy hat, wheeled by towards the memorial, his lower leg prosthesis painted with like a red, white and blue flag. Starsky grinned and held up two fingers in the peace symbol. The grizzled fighter smiled back in solidarity, raising his fingers in a 'V', then changing it to the four fingered Vulcan 'Live long and Prosper'. Starsky practiced that all the way to the Smithsonian Institute, but couldn't quite coordinate his fingers.

"Face it, Starsky," Hutch laughed. "You'll never be a Vulcan."

"Bet I can put the nerve pinch on you." Starsky rolled his eyes. "C'mon, Rockefeller, find that diamond for me."

Several hours of touring the mind bogglingly eclectic collection housed in the nation's attic required a rest period to recuperate. Hutch had sore feet and Starsky's butt hurt from sitting for so long in what he called 'the damned baby stroller'. They met up with the gymnastic troop for lunch at a nearby McDonald's, where hamburgers and fries were the order of the day. Starsky found it amusing that only Hutch and Cait strayed from the herd by ordering the Chicken McNuggets.

"We're touring the White House before we have to practice our routines," Rosie declared, dragging French fries though catsup.

"Cap, you gonna shake hands with the president?" Starsky grinned at his boss, who looked surprisingly casual in a knit golf shirt and sports jacket.

"Well, Starsky, I thought I'd offer some advice on how to run the country, given the opportunity."
Dobey smoothed a hand down his rounded belly as if he were wearing his customary tie.

"I'd give the man a piece of my mind, but he probably wouldn't listen to me," Edith said archly.

Hutch stared at the woman as if he'd never seen her before. "Something struck a nerve, Edith?"

"Not in front of the children." She looked embarrassed by her outburst, and sucked hard on the straw in her chocolate shake. "Mr. Reagan is a fine man."

"I hear a but in there," Starsky said to Hutch but loud enough for her to hear.

"I just have some concern with his treatment of welfare recipients, and letting those unfortunates out of some…unnamed institutions without any treatment," Edith admitted, as if not really wanting to get into such a complicated discussion.

"Mother!" Rosie groaned. "We don't have to study civics until we're seniors."

"See?" Edith laughed. "To them it's just fun, not an up close examination of the working of the government."

"I want to meet Mrs. Reagan," Aria said. "She wears the most gorgeous clothes."

"Spoken like a true yuppie," her mother sighed, handing the squirming baby in her lap an arrowroot biscuit.

"Edith has been taking some college classes towards getting a B.A.," Dobey explained. "She's suddenly become very political."

"No suddenly about it, Harold," Edith said mildly, but she sat up straighter. "I marched with Dr. King many years ago."

"There's a man I would have liked to meet." Hutch wiped honey-mustard off his lip before dipping another nugget in the sauce.

"You want to come, David?" Samantha asked, waving a French fry in the general direction of Pennsylvania Avenue. "It's not far, and we get to see the oval office!"

"Hey…" Starsky started, the idea appealing to him.

"I was thinking of going back to the hotel for a rest," Hutch put in with finality.

"I want to meet Ronald Reagan!" Starsky countered petulantly.

Hutch stole one of Starsky's fries, chewing it before speaking. "You didn't even vote for him," he said dryly.

"Yeah, but he starred in Hellcats of the Navy!"

"So watch it on TV." Hutch arched an eyebrow and Starsky's heart lurched. Maybe a nap would be a good idea after all. Hutch definitely seemed to have something up his sleeve.

"I saw Bedtime for Bonzo," Rainbow agreed. "He looks so old now."

"Nancy is his second wife, he used to be married to Jane Wyman," her mother spoke up, beginning to ball up some of the paper hamburger wrappers and French fry bags to throw in the trash. The other mothers followed suit, picking up forgotten napkins, wiping away spilled cokes, and
generally doing what moms always had to do--keep the order. After the girls and their entourage had waved goodbye and trooped out, the small burger emporium seemed a whole lot quieter.

"You got plans for later, Blondie?" Starsky let Hutch finish his fries. He hadn't eaten fast food like this in a long time. He'd enjoyed every mouthful, but his stomach sometimes still had other ideas entirely. Half a burger and a handful of fries filled him up, although he managed to nurse the chocolate shake for quite a while. He wasn't about to let the frailties of his post-chemo body ruin this trip for him, and was determined to keep up with the group at all costs. If that meant curling up with Hutch on the hotel king sized bed for an hour or two, absolutely no hardships there. And, as Hutch as pointed out, it wasn't like he'd supported Ronald Reagan, anyway.

"Just you wait and see." Hutch grinned like the Cheshire cat all the way back to the hotel.

"Where are we going now?" Starsky watched the Maryland landscape go by, marveling at trees beginning to bud, and the occasional early daffodil. Back in California, spring had already hit, and many bulb flowers were already past their prime. The rain had slackened off to a trickle and there probably wouldn't be a significant downpour until October. Here, the ground was damp, brown turning to green, life returning after winter's hibernation. It was like regaining the spring he'd missed by being in the hospital; like he'd grabbed hold of just a bit of what he'd lost, just as he hit 40, officially middle aged. Not that 40 was his middle age, but hopefully it was Hutch's. He both liked and hated the thought of Hutch living to 80. Hutch, old and elegant, blond hair turned silvery, his long hands wrinkled and spare, but having lived 40 years without Starsky.

"A restaurant I read about." Hutch said casually, turning down a long winding road. "It's near Annapolis."

"Hutch?" Starsky began, then stopped, thinking he shouldn't continue.

"What?"

"Will you find somebody? Later? In a few years? So you won't be so alone?"

"Starsky." Hutch's voice hitched, and Starsky stared out the window, letting Hutch collect himself. He knew he'd thrown one hell of an emotional curve ball. "I won't be alone," Hutch said haltingly. "I'll be in medical school, or working so damned hard as an intern I won't have a single moment for dating."

"You'll nail those anatomy classes," Starsky said loyally, sneaking a peek at Hutch now that the air had cleared. Letting his eye linger on the curve of Hutch's ear and the way his hair curled just behind, where it lay on his neck.

"There are more than anatomy classes," Hutch groaned. "Chemistry and microbiology, learning the symptoms of all the diseases, multi organ failures, which drugs cure what...it's intimidating, Starsky."

"You've been reading too many college schedules. Just decide on one and apply!"

"But when it comes right down to it, it's not my choice. The school picks the best candidates, judging all their MCAT scores, and the admissions essay. Really competitive to get into medical school."

"Don't worry, Blondie." Starsky winked at him. "I guarantee you'll get in."
"You looked in your crystal ball, Madam Yram?"

Starsky waved his hands over an imaginary crystal ball in his lap, peering at the transparent depths with an exaggerated frown. "Virgo ex-detectives get priority at UCLA medical school."

"Good to know," Hutch said dryly, parking the car. "Here we are, birthday boy."

"The Crab Shack?" Starsky read the neon sign with a grin. "Hmm, what could they possibly serve here? Doesn't look like much of a shack." The building was big and old, with a slight list to one side as if hit with too many Atlantic storms, but built with a strength that had endured for decades. The clapboard sides were painted pale gray, with accompanying black doors and shutters. Yellow light spilling from the mullioned windows was warm and inviting, and he suddenly felt very hungry.

"Maryland is famous for its crab cakes." Hutch held up the guidebook with a wink of his own. "It's your birthday week, order the most expensive thing on the menu."

"Steak and Lobster?" Starsky teased, but he already knew he was going to have a crab cake. The sweet succulence of crab still held a special place in his heart, even if it hadn't magically cured him of cancer. In the same way he always wanted to clap extra hard when Tinker Bell's light was dimming in Peter Pan, Starsky held a shred of hope alive deep inside that maybe he hadn't believed hard enough in crab. Or eaten enough.

"Welcome to the Crab Shack, gentlemen," a tall, heavyset woman with black curls tumbling around her shoulders, greeted. "You got yourselves reservations?"

"Hutchinson, party of two." Hutch pointed to the name in her book. "By the window, so we can see the ocean, if possible."

"For you two, anything's possible." She laughed heartily, leading the way through the crowded room.

Settled in their places, Starsky neglected the menu in lieu of admiring his partner. Hutch looked as beautiful as he'd been the first time they'd ever met. Starsky remembered wondering how that blond, magazine-model pretty boy was going to withstand the rigors of the Academy. On the first day of their training, Hutch had stood out like a sore thumb with his suit and tie, and stilted manners. Starsky was embarrassed to admit he'd ridiculed Hutch that day, all the while trying to prove to himself that he wasn't drawn inexplicably to the man.

Eighteen years later, Hutch was still a light in the darkness, a beacon that Starsky clung to when things got rough. His hair might be sparser, but the blondness was still dazzling, at least the hostess certainly seemed to think so. And in a double-breasted blue suit with a red striped tie, Hutch looked like the preppy some people imagined him to be. Starsky loved knowing that Hutch was really nothing like a proper, perfect Ken doll. He'd seen Hutch radiate with anger in the heat of an arrest, come storming in to avenge a wrong, and still have the strength to pull Starsky into his arms and kiss away the pain of the world, all the while cleaning up after him when he'd puked all those long months. That was the man Ken Hutchinson was, all that and more, a multi-faceted human being who still enthralled Starsky to this day.

"Decided what you want to have?" Hutch's eyes met Starsky's over the edge of the enormous menu, and Starsky knew he was busted. Hutch knew he was being admired. "See anything you like?"
"Right in front of me," Starsky admitted. "But I was going for the crab cakes and garlic mashed potatoes before I got my dessert."

"Think you know what you're getting for dessert?" Hutch closed the menu with an amused smirk. The waiter glided over to take their orders, placing a basket of rosemary scented rolls and butter on the white table cloth.

"Tie goes good with that suit, babe." Starsky ignored the gibe. "You should wear that to Huggy and Daisy's wedding."

"When a guy goes out of his way to have the nurse buy his lover a tie for Christmas while he's lying in a hospital bed, I thought I should get some wear out of it. I like it."

"Mika has good taste." Starsky itched to slip a finger into the flawless Windsor knot just under Hutch's Adam's apple and slowly loosen that tie, then unbutton the tiny top button on his crisp white shirt and work down from there.

"You've got good taste," Hutch amended. He nodded when the waiter poured out glasses of spicy scented Chardonnay into long stemmed glasses. Raising one up, Hutch clinked the delicate crystal to the glass Starsky held. "To my love, happy birthday."

"You gonna get all gushy on me?" Starsky asked, thrilled by the adoration coming from Hutch.

"I wasn't sure we'd make it this far," Hutch said softly, taking Starsky's hand. "You scared me, Starsk, every minute you were in the hospital. There were days I had to force myself to walk into number 307, afraid you'd be dead."

He hadn't expected such a vulnerable confession, and yet he had. But either way, Starsky had a hard time breathing for a moment. He squeezed Hutch's hand in return, feeling the solid gold band on the fourth finger of his spouse's hand digging into his hand. It reminded of him of how much they'd conquered to get where they were. "I know." There was nothing else to say. "I ain't dead, yet."

"I know." Hutch blinked, sipping his wine with a shuddery sigh. "So, old man--forty. The big 4-0."

"Huh, like you don't have four decades lookin' you straight in th'eye," Starsky teased. "I wanna give you a party, Hutch. For your birthday." He caught the oh-so-brief sadness on Hutch's face, that fear that he wouldn't be around at the end of August. "A big blow out to end all blow outs."

"Starsky, you know I don't like those kind of parties," Hutch groaned.

"Be good for you, farm-boy." Starsky pulled Hutch's hand closer, kissing the gold ring that matched his own. "Get you to loosen up some."

"I'm loose." Hutch wiggled his fingers against Starsky's palm, but made a judge face, as if eyeing the prisoner before sentencing. "In fact, I'll dance with you right now."

"Yeah?" Starsky was exhilarated. Hutch never did something this brazen in Bay City. Travel really was broadening, and liberating. He ejected from his chair, wobbled, grabbed the edge of the table for support, and felt the blood completely drain from his head as the whole room spun and scrambled.

"Starsky?" Hutch's voice was pitched low and urgent, obviously trying to keep this from being noticed by the rest of the restaurant patrons.
"I'm..." Starsky heard himself saying from a long way off, "T'rrific." He took slow, deep breaths, and the dizziness abated, blood returning to his brain after a brief holiday elsewhere. He let Hutch settle him once again in the chair, and press a glass of water to his lips. Starsky swallowed automatically, but by then everything seemed back to normal.

"What happened?" Hutch asked quietly, still standing right next to him so that Starsky's head could rest on his belly.

"Just stood up too quick, Hutch, honest. It's nothing."

"Didn't look like nothing."

"Please, sit down," Starsky begged, not wanting this to ruin their romantic night. "I guess dancing wasn't such a hot idea, except that it was hot." He emphasized the last two words, relieved to see the tension disappear from Hutch's face. "I'd dance with you in a second, Prince Charming, but my jigging has seen better days."

"I dunno." Hutch took a fortifying drink of wine, following Starsky's example to keep the conversation light. "Peg leg pirate captains are usually good at jigs."

"Aye, me hearty lad." Starsky covered one eye with his hand for a makeshift patch and sneered his best Long John Silver sneer. "Swash me buckles and batten down the hatches, there's water on the poop deck."

"What exactly does that mean?" Hutch asked.

"You need to take a refresher course in pirate lingo. Gotta watch 'Treasure Island' again."

"A fate worse than death," Hutch joked as the waitress delivered the food to their table.

Starsky ate carefully, but as happened, there were days when his stomach still felt dicey, and he couldn't finish even a half of what he'd once been able to put away. The fear he sensed in Hutch was wrapped around him, too. He'd wanted to forget his frailties, be strong, whole, and healthy for a little while, but that wasn't to be. The cancer, however quiet it was at present, still followed him around everywhere.

He was cheered considerably when four waiters came out in silly sailor hats singing Happy Birthday and the buxom hostess brought over two slices of chocolate cake with about ten candles in each. Starsky almost loved the adorable look on Hutch's face as much as the uncharacteristically showy gesture. He pulled in a lungful of air and blew out the candles in one go, although his chest hurt afterwards. He didn't mention that, but went straight to work on the fudgy icing.

"You gonna have some?" Starsky asked, savoring the smooth, rich flavor.

"Not right now, I'm watching you," Hutch said smugly. "You've got chocolate on your bottom lip." He reached over, using his forefinger to wipe the smudge off, and then licked his finger very slowly with liberal tongue action.

"You're playing dirty," Starsky accused. Scooping up a generous fingerful right off the top of the cake, he deposited it into his mouth before leaning over to kiss Hutch. The mingling of chocolate and Hutch was delightful, and Starsky sucked every last drop of flavor out before sitting back satiated. "I could get used to this."

"You're old now, Father William," Hutch quoted Lewis Carroll with a toothy grin. "Ready to go to bed early?"
"Have to finish this cake, to keep up my strength." Starsky dug his fork in again, and managed two more bites before the expression on Hutch's face was too compelling to ignore.

The bill was paid, tip left behind in the mess of napkins and chocolatey plates, and Starsky followed Hutch out of the restaurant. He hadn't noticed the ocean just beyond the building when they'd first gone in. Now, the tangy scent of salt and seaweed called to him and he longed to walk on the beach with his lover. However, sand and crutches did not mix well.

Standing with their shoulders touching, Starsky and Hutch stared out at the dark Atlantic. A sickle of a moon was reflected perfectly in the inky waters, and a surprisingly goodly amount of stars were visible despite the light pollution from nearby cities. Starsky took in a long cleansing breath, enjoying the gorgeous view and the solitude. Beside him, he could feel Hutch's body expand and contract as he too pulled in a deep breath of fresh air. Small waves slapped against the shore in a syncopated, almost musical way that was soothing and enticing, entreating all comers to romantic walks in the damp sand. Starsky was reminded of the annoying meditation tapes Hutch had started collecting which featured chirping birds, babbling brooks, and shrieking whales. The sound of the ocean and the wind rustling the ivy covering one wall of the Crab Shack was real, and much nicer.

"Dance with me, now," Starsky whispered, not wanting to break the spell.

"To nature's music?" Hutch asked in an indulgent tone.

"To the music of us." Starsky pulled Hutch to him, letting the crutch fall away. Hutch would hold him up.

"You're an incurable romantic."

"Terminal," Starsky murmured, letting Hutch take the lead while he laid his cheek against Hutch's neck. "I'll never recover from this."

"Then it must be contagious."

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Hutch watched the gymnastics performance while keeping one eye on Starsky. Starsky was a light bulb that Hutch was afraid was going to burn out too soon. He was incandescent in a bright blue t-shirt with the words 'Cheerleader for the Bay City Girls gymnastics team' written across the front. There was a pom-pom tied to the bar of his crutch which he shook it from time to time, whispering words of encouragement. Not that the girls needed any.

All six girls were in peak performance mode. They blew away the competition, there was no comparison. It was obvious even before the judges announced the results that Bay City had the best all around gymnastic team in the country. Scouts for major advertising contracts, and also the Olympics, crowded around but Dobey didn't want this kind of thing to get out of hand. Leaving Aria's dad, who was a corporate lawyer, to hear the particulars, he hustled the girls out of there and over to the hotel for their own private celebration.

"I feel like a star." Rosie bounced on her toes, multitudes of miniature braids flipping around her head. "Didja see the man from the Olympics? He was taking notes during my floor routine. I wish Daddy let us at least talk to him!"

"You are a star," Starsky assured her, poking a cookie into her still open mouth. "But you got to slow down before you fall down."

Rosie did as instructed, standing still to eat the cookie.
"Seems like I've given you that advice," Hutch mused, laughing at the antics of Samantha and Cait who were trying to teach Rainbow's little brother how to cartwheel in the middle of the hotel's banquet room. Rainbow proved why she'd gotten a medal by flipping effortlessly around the perimeter, but her brother, Moon, wasn't quite up to her abilities. The rest of the group were all relaxing after the show with food, drinks, and good cheer. "And in the same way." He shoved a cookie into Starsky's mouth for emphasis.

"Hey!" Starsky sputtered, blowing out chocolate crumbs.

"I'll get you something to drink," Hutch said dryly, brushing the crumbs off his suit jacket. He really wanted to get Starsky up to bed, and not for some hanky-panky.

Starsky might not be willing to admit it, but he was tired. That he was sitting now, instead of up schmoozing with the girls or trying a one-legged cartwheel himself, proved it. That he'd only eaten half of the shrimps he'd piled on his plate from the buffet. The way he leaned his head on one hand. A causal pose, but not the active, vital way he used to do in the squadroom when they were mulling over a case, his fingers curled against his cheek, the pinkie sometimes sneaking between his lips. This was altogether different. This was fatigue, but artfully hidden.

Selecting a Seven-Up and a sparkling water off the drinks table, Hutch looked back at Starsky who was still talking with Rosie, their heads close together.

"So how does it feel to be the father of the next Nadia Commanche?" Hutch joked to his Captain.

"Oh, I'm worrying already," Dobey groaned good-naturedly. "What if she does want to go on?"

"I think she does."

"Money. Where will we get the money?" He shook his head. "But can you imagine? My little girl representing the USA in the '88 games in Seoul, and winning a medal? She's staggering, Hutchinson."

"That she is, Captain."

"You know, very soon I think we'll have to call each other by different names," Dobey said more soberly.

"Not planning on changing mine," Hutch said lightly, but a strange fear gripped his belly. As much as he'd already begun to think of himself as someone going to medical school, in fact none of that was certain. And the idea of stepping off into a new future was terrifying. He wanted both worlds, simultaneously.

"But you are planning on moving on. Before or after he…" Dobey stopped as if even he couldn't say the fearful words, but nodded toward Starsky across the room.

Letting out a deep exhalation, Hutch shrugged. "It's all up in the air, Captain. But I did take the MCAT the other day. An admissions test for medical school."

"Quite a first step, Hutch." Dobey sipped from his coke. "Made a decision on where to go?"

"I'd like UCLA, to stay near Bay City." Hutch couldn't believe he was saying this aloud, to any one but Starsky. It somehow made it all the more real. "I haven't even sent in the forms yet."

"Good school. Cal is doing well there," Dobey cleared his throat which Hutch recognized as a delaying tactic. "What have Starsky's doctors said?"
"No way to tell at this point. He tires easily, but he's doing better than any of them expected so far," Hutch answered, the cold of the Seven-Up can seeping into his hand. He wanted to put it down, maybe run from the room instead of talking about this particular subject. It was all he thought about these days.

"Keep us posted," Dobey said. "We're around to help, always."

"Thank you, Harold," Hutch tried the sound of the name on his tongue. It was strange to call that man by his given name, but when Hutch quit the force, he wouldn't have a captain anymore. And that would be just about the time he'd really need someone to guide him, too. He felt stronger knowing there were people such as the Dobeys in his corner.

Skirting around a gaggle of girls all giggling about who was cuter, Harrison Ford or Mel Gibson, Hutch headed back to his table. Just as he was close enough to hear conversation over the music playing in the background, he froze. Apparently the entire Dobey family had Starsky's health on their minds.

"You're going to die, aren't you, Uncle David?" Rosie asked in a plaintive voice.

Hutch pretended to watch Moon's improving efforts in cartwheeling, sipping from his bottle of water so that he wouldn't intrude on the discussion. Rosie only called Starsky 'Uncle' when she was really scared.

"Yes," Starsky replied.

"But I don't want you to," Rosie said sadly. "Why didn't the chemo cure you? My friend Marcie, at school, when she was like nine, she had leukemia, and had to have chemo, like you did. Her hair all fell out, too, same as yours, totally bald, but she's all better now. In remission."

"I don't know, Rosie, but some people apparently react differently to the drugs than others do."

Hutch wanted to hide instead of having to go on hearing this, but he stayed where he was, staring at Moon, who had now picked up Aria's baby sister Symphony and was dancing around with her.

"My doctor said I was kind of unique to get a kid's cancer in the first place," Starsky said frankly. "I guess only kids can survive it."

"When's it going to happen? When are you going to die?" Rosie asked. As Hutch turned to look at her, he could see the tears in her eyes.

"Maybe not for a while." Starsky smiled over at Hutch, beckoning him over. "I got stuff to do, still. But everybody dies, sweetie, it's just going to happen to me a little sooner than I expected."

"Cause God gave you a second chance?" Rosie wiped the tears away with a napkin that said, "You're the champions!" in big red letters. It smeared the mascara Edith had let her wear just for the special day.

"I got a big second chance when I was shot--something to be grateful for, that's for sure." Starsky grabbed the hand Hutch held out like a lifeline, squeezing tightly, and leaned down to give his favorite girl a kiss on the cheek. "Hey, when we get back home, you have to come over and see the kittens again. They've grown a lot. Pick out the one you want."

"Can I change his name?" Rosie asked with a sniff. "Cause I know which one I want. The little white one."
"You don't like the name Eeney?" Starsky reared back against Hutch's shoulder, playing wounded pride with comic skill.

"I don't like the name Eeney," Hutch said, giving him the soda.

"I want to name him Davey," Rosie said quietly.

"Oh, Rosie-o-day. That's a good name." Starsky gave her a tiny smile, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Hutch watched the parade of emotions that marched swiftly across his face. Starsky wasn't about to show how much that touched him, not macho Starsky in front of a pretty little girl.

"Rosie!" Kristianne yelled over the din. "We're posing for a picture for the newspaper. C'mon!"

"Go on, Rosie, don't want to miss that opportunity." Hutch gave her a gentle push. When she had scampered off he hugged Starsky closely. "You're exhausted."

"I'm okay." Starsky hunched his shoulders, warding off the mother henning.

"We have to be at the airport at six in the morning, which makes me exhausted." Hutch changed his tactics. "Come on, let's go upstairs before the herd of buffalo thunder down the hall."

"Is that any way to refer to the gold medal winning, nationally famous Bay City girl's gymnastics team?" Starsky countered, but poked around under the table for his crutch.

"You started it, yesterday morning when they all ran down for breakfast at the same time," Hutch reminded, pulling him to a stand. "Elevator or ten flights of stairs? Your choice."

"Then I choose the elevator," Starsky laughed, moving ahead of Hutch. He reached the elevator first and raised up the crutch to use the tip to poke at the call button. "Crutches, a million and one uses, Hutch, I keep telling you."

Jet lag hit Starsky hard, along with some nasty little virus that laid him low for the first few days after they returned to their white house on Dahlia Lane. When Starsky went straight to bed after they got home from the airport and could barely raise his head on Saturday morning, Hutch was frantic with worry. A trip to the hospital established that Starsky had a cold, which would make him feel awful, but probably do little else. Nonetheless, John Davies wanted daily reports of his vitals and close monitoring. That meant calling Sophie Saint Clare, who was only too happy to help out.

Hutch was not too happy to have to leave Starsky on Monday, but there were midterms coming up at the academy, and since he'd missed nearly a week of class prep, he felt woefully behind. Not to mention another meeting of the drug task force he was co-chairing at Parker Center.

"Hey, you'll be late if you don't leave soon." Starsky looked blearily at him, blowing his nose. His eyes were puffy, his nose red and drippy, and his top lip was chapped, but Hutch didn't care in the least. He leaned down to kiss the patient when Sophie went into the kitchen to heat some tea. "No, don't kiss me now, I got a colt."

"I kissed you yesterday, and the day before, and you had a cold then. What's the difference?" Hutch finished what he started, but left a chaste kiss on Starsky's forehead.

"Because t'day you're going in to work and that'll just spread the germs all over the place."
"Flying on planes is what spreads the germs all over the place," Hutch clucked, tucking the blankets up under Starsky's chin. "These days, a virus from Asia can be here in a matter of hours. It's astounding."

"I think I jus' got an ordinary American one. John said as long as it didn' turn inta pneumon…" Starsky broke off to sneeze explosively.

Hutch handed him a tissue. "I heard him." He leveled his forefinger at Starsky. "Don't get out of bed, eat and drink what Sophie makes for you, and get some rest."

"Can't I go to the bathroom?" Starsky pouted. "I hate using that bottle thing."

"Starsky! Yes, you can go to the bathroom." Hutch could already feel his blood pressure rising, and at 7:30 in the morning that was not a good thing. Maybe he did need to take a break from Starsky.

Sophie returned bearing a tray with a steaming pot of tea. "Echinacea," she pronounced in her lilting accent, putting the tray down on a nightstand. "Tres bien for when you have la grippe. It will help you get better."

"Sophie, take his temperature…"

"Every hour, I know, Monsieur Ken, d'accord." She poured two cups of tea, the smile lines around her eyes crinkling upward. "David and I will get along just fine. Unless you would like some tea before you go?"

Hutch cocked his head to check the time on the watch Starsky was wearing on his left wrist. "I'm late already. Starsky…"

"Hurry, Hutch!" Starsky shooed him out with another sneeze. "You don't want to be late for morning target practice."

Searching his pockets for keys to the car, Hutch headed through the living room, nearly tripping over a kitten in his haste. He could hear Starsky questioning Sophie on the supposed health benefits of Echinacea, and then his pleased surprise at the pleasant taste. Wishing he could stay home to sit by the fire with a cup of tea in his hand, Hutch closed the door behind him.

He missed Starsky acutely all day long. Class seemed tedious, but that could have been because nearly all the cadets were grumbly. Spring break was in another week, and Spring fever was upon them. Hutch called twice in the morning, Sophie reported that he was sleeping peacefully and Starsky's low-grade temp hovered around 99 to 100 degrees, just as it always had when he'd been on chemo.

How long ago that seemed, and yet it had only been two months, really. Two months since the end of January when Starsky put down his foot and declared himself a Cisplatin-free zone. That even though he had never reached the nirvana of remission, he wasn't willing to keep punishing his body in a quest for health. Hutch was surprised to realize that at some point along the way, he'd come to accept the inevitable. He still wasn't comfortable with Starsky's decision, he wished that they could have fought a little while longer, but on the other hand, that would have meant Starsky would still be on chemo. Or just coming off his second course. He'd have been weak, hairless, and still very sick, judging from what happened on the first two rounds.

They couldn't have gone to Washington D.C, couldn't have celebrated Starsky's birthday with a dance by the ocean, and couldn't have sat together on the floor naming kittens.

Driving his car from the academy to Parker Center, Hutch found himself stuck in traffic choking
back a bitter thickness that threatened to close off his windpipe and suffocate him. Tears blurred
his vision of the other vehicles, until he was afraid he'd break down right there on the freeway.

Taking the nearest off ramp, Hutch drove down a quiet road to a tree lined street and parked. What
was he going to do? There was no way he could lead a discussion on gang related violence and
drug wars in this condition. His heart was beating in a terrifying rhythm, out of normal phase and
nearly slamming right out of his chest. Not sure how to handle this, Hutch gripped the steering
wheel until he thought his fingers would break off, anger, fear, and anguish building up inside him
like a volcano about to erupt.

With a roar he screamed, loud, long, and throat ripping, slamming his fist on the ceiling of the
already battered car with enough force to rip the lining free. Gasping for breath, Hutch gave into
the tears, riding out the deluge until he was exhausted. Leaning back, he was surprised no one had
walked by to investigate this weird blond haired man screaming in his car. But the old street was
nearly deserted, many of the dilapidated houses slated for demolition. Now that he paid more
attention to street signs, Hutch realized he was just over the border of the area he and Starsky
always patrolled. Strange that in his unhinged state he'd driven himself to a familiar place to fall
apart in. A few blocks to the left was Huggy's bar and just streets past there was Daisy's bakery and
catering shop.

Looking down at his hands, Hutch realized he was shaking, and not just a little bit. He no longer
cared what anyone at Parker Center thought about him. He needed a break. Starsky had so little
time left, and Hutch wanted to spend as much of it with him as possible. The Academy classes
would continue until May, just over a month, but if he resigned from his duties at headquarters he
could be home by early afternoon on the days he taught and not have to work at all the rest of the
time.

When he felt sufficiently in control of his emotions, he restarted the engine, tucking the ripped
lining back along the edge of the window and turned the car to the left.

Pani Peducci was busy. Hutch parked at a meter just yards from the shop and sat watching several
customers emerging clutching hot loaves of bread, or with pink pasty boxes in hand. His mouth
watered, and he realized he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast.

Just approaching the bakery was heaven, the scent of yeasty bread and chocolatey cookies wafting
out, enticing passersby. Hutch pushed through the door, causing a bell to jingle merrily, and Daisy
saw him immediately.

She was busily wrapping up a box of cookies for a harried looking woman, but waved him over.
"Hutch! Happy Easter week! It's a madhouse here, but what can I get you?"

"When is Easter?" Hutch looked around, realizing he was totally out of the loop. The counter was
decorated with festive baskets stuffed with that strange green plastic grass so popular at Easter,
fluffy yellow chicks, pastel colored eggs, and multitudes of chocolate bunnies. Just the kind that
Starsky liked.

"I know you were on the other side of the continent for a week, but we're still on the same
calendar!" She laughed, rolling her eyes. "It's Sunday. Let me help these two customers, decide
what you want."

"Sure," Hutch said distractedly. He hadn't even paid attention to the holiday coming up. Not that
either he or Starsky were much on celebrating Easter. Starsky had never attended a Passover Seder
in the entire time Hutch had known him, for that matter.
But there was the matter of chocolate bunnies, which were a different thing all together. Totally necessary. While he was on the subject, weren't jellybeans part of the candy requirements? And pips? Was that the right name? Peeps? Absolutely revolting little pink and yellow colored marshmallow chicks that Starsky could eat like popcorn? Hutch remembered a boxful melting on the seat of his car a few years back, much to his annoyance, and Starsky's horror. Not because it had ruined the already rank upholstery of his beater, but that Starsky was out the culinary delight.

First things first, he needed a late lunch. Deciding on tuna salad on whole wheat with an Italian soda, Hutch waited in line while Daisy and Marie Saint Claire doled out cookies shaped like crosses, coconut Lamb cakes, and braided Challah. Just as Marie was slapping Hutch's sandwich together, a small woman with the pale pink skin and totally white hair of a true albino rushed in, apologizing profusely.

"So sorry I'm late, Daisy! There's a big accident on 100th Street and the traffic is horrible."

"No problem, Katie. Just tie on an apron and let me take a break." Daisy waved away the five dollar bill Hutch pushed at her. "On the house, Hutch. Just don't tell Huggy. He claims you still owe him a bar tab."

"I probably do." He stepped to the end of the counter to allow a family of stairstep children to pick out their favorite confections while their mother conveyed the orders to Marie. "But Starsky's is bigger."

"Katie, this is Hutch, a really good friend. Hutch, Katie Trajero, we're training her to replace me so I can actually go on a honeymoon."

"There's no replacing you, Daisy," Katie said sweetly, holding out a tiny, almost transparent hand. "Hi, Hutch."

"Nice to meet you." He nodded, realizing she must have extremely poor vision. Her glasses were Coke bottle thick, but she had a cheerful smile and easy, outgoing manner. "Are you helping with the cookie baking?"

"I'm more of a cashier sort of a girl, but I love to eat cookies." Katie laughed, patting her belly.

"C'mon, Hutch, take your sandwich into my grand closet office so I can get off my feet for ten." Daisy grabbed a poppy seed bagel and a small cup of vegetable cream cheese, leading the way past two women who were kneading bread dough on a huge marble slab in the rear of the shop. A fine layer of flour dusted the entire surface of the worktable.

"Just as a personal observation, but you look exhausted for someone who just came back from a vacation," Daisy said, kicking off her sneakers and getting cozy in a ratty old sofa. Her office was small and had no desk, but there was a filing cabinet overflowing with paperwork and some framed photos on the wall. One had Huggy holding a ribbon across the door of the bakery while Daisy used a pair of scissors to cut it in half. "Is Starsky worse?"

"Not in the way you mean." Hutch sat on the sofa, and took a long swallow of the fizzy green soda. "He got a cold from being on the plane. Doctor says he should be fine in a day or so."

"But it's wearing on you." Daisy nodded, suddenly concentrating on spreading the cream cheese very evenly over both halves of her bagel.

"Yeah." Hutch ate his sandwich in the awkward silence. He'd never spent that much time alone with Daisy, usually Huggy was with them. He knew a little about Flori, from Starsky, and that
Daisy certainly understood what he was going through, but he wasn't sure exactly what he needed today. Empathy? Or just support for the possibly disastrous change he wanted to make.

"Starsky told you about my brother, I guess," Daisy said quietly, taking a careful bite from her bagel. Hutch nodded. This had to be extra hard on her, reliving so much of a painful time when she should be concentrating on her own happiness. "I just want you to know that it's...there are no words to express any of it. Just be there, for both your sakes, as much as possible." She rubbed at her eye, possibly wiping away a stray tear, and finished one half of her lunch.

"That's pretty much the conclusion I came up with today, too. We had a great time in Washington," Hutch agreed. "I'm going to take a leave from the force."

Daisy looked up in surprise, then smiled. "That's good. And maybe you'll have more time for what I wanted to ask you about, anyway."

"There's more?" Hutch teased gently.

"Think I ask a guy into my plush office for a five dollar sandwich everyday?"
Daisy batted her eyelashes in an exaggerated fashion. "It's about the wedding."

"Starsky told me you wanted him to help with the décor. Are you sure that's such a good idea? His taste runs to bright colors--red and white..."

"I love bright colors," Daisy assured. "He and I are quite simpatico."

"Should I be worried?"

"No, Huggy's smitten with me and I'd never break the man's heart."

"And he likes bright colors, too. Match made in heaven."

"I think so." Daisy pointed to a corkboard covered with sketches. "See, blue for my bridesmaid, my sister Marigold. She always did look good in blue. And Huggy may be in green. A theme of sort of blue and green, kind of underwatery, mermaid sort of thing...with shimmery aquamarine table clothes and my wedding dress is pale, pale violet, since I've been married before, with a tight mermaid tail silhouette."

"Very pretty," Hutch said, although it looked a bit Vegas style for his taste. Starsky would definitely like it, though.

"It's--well." Daisy got up, fingering some swatches of fabric pinned to the drawings. "Huggy and I want to ask you guys a favor, but we weren't sure how to go about it with Starsky...if Starsky was up to it."

"I think Starsky wants to do everything that he can get away with." Hutch was surprised at his own words. He'd accepted Starsky's wishes more than he'd even realized, because he wanted to see Starsky out having fun, too. The recent past had been horrendous and the future was nebulous. More than anyone else, Starsky needed to live for the present.

"That's good." She nodded, clapping her hands together. "Really good. Maybe you guys could come by the Pits in a few days? So we could all talk?"

"Sounds like a plan," Hutch agreed. He was fairly certain that what Huggy wanted to talk to them about was being the best man. Although Huggy had cousins coming out his ears, Starsky had known him since the mid sixties, and probably counted as one of his older friends. Starsky would
enjoy the honor, as well.

Hutch spent another twenty minutes selecting cookies, chocolates, and other Easter themed delicacies for his partner, leaving with a hot cross bun to munch on in the car. What he really wanted to do was drive straight home and curl up in the bed with Starsky, but he felt that he owed Dobey an explanation, especially since he had basically skipped out on a taskforce meeting that he'd set up himself.

The metro squadroom was chaotic when he arrived. Three officers were dragging in a combative and dangerous couple who had apparently gone on a killing spree with various members of their family and nearly tried to take each other out, too. Half the detectives on the force had been pulled in to investigate the complicated case. Dobey was growling at poor Neiderhouser, the newest sergeant on the team.

"Give him a break, Captain," Hutch said softly. "He's been a full-fledged detective for what, ten days? And you were gone half of that. He hasn't had the time to fully assimilate all of your years of wisdom."

Neiderhouser gave Hutch a grateful look, but straightened his shoulders. "Captain Dobey, sir, the report will be on your desk ASAP, and not a moment sooner. And may I say, sir, that that tie goes well with your jacket?"

"You think so?" Dobey ran a hand down the length of his tie, fingering the small rocket depicted in launch sequence. "My wife got it for me at the Smithsonian."

"Same one Rosie bought for Starsky," Hutch added. "Captain, can I have a word?"

"You're late, Hutchinson!" Dobey roused as if he had just that minute noticed Hutch's tardiness. "In my office." Once they were seated, all pretense of anger left the Captain's face. "How's your partner?"

"Has a cold."

"So do about half of the girls."

"Captain," Hutch said, deciding just to blurt it out in one quick burst, like pulling a Band-Aid off. "I need…"

"You need to take some time off," Dobey interrupted him, handing over a form in triplicate. "I've already filled in your name and pay scale, just put in the dates."

"Captain…" Hutch stopped, then looked up at the kind man, almost afraid he would start bawling right in front of his boss. "Harold?"

"My mother died of breast cancer," he said quietly, picking up a pen to give to Hutch. "My father never forgave himself for going to work those last months. He wasn't there…in the end."

"H-how old were you?" Hutch asked, stunned by this unexpected intimate detail.

"I was in Korea. I wasn't there either." The dark eyes were rock steady, but Hutch could still hear the pain in his voice. "Don't let history repeat itself, this one time."

"No." Hutch signed the paper with a flourish, putting in the date April first as a starting point and leaving the termination date blank. Just seeing the word termination made his belly twist with dread, but he handed the emergency leave of absence form back to his friend with a strangely
lightened heart. "Thank you."

"Keep us up to date," Dobey said.

"You won't be able to get rid of us. Starsky can't go for a week without some of Edith's cookies or pie."

"That's good, then." Dobey stood, and in another amazing move on a day of amazing surprises from the man, pulled Hutch into his arms and hugged him.

"Lucy, I'm home," Hutch called out when he walked into his house. Kittens were skittering all over the living room rug, almost too fast to identify one from the other. One attacked his ankle with the needle sharp claws of a baby cat, and he scooped it up to peer sternly at the bundle of fluff. "L'Chaim, is that any way to greet the man who buys your tuna?"

The black kitten chirped and batted at his pointing finger, blue-green eyes wide.

"Good evening, Monsieur Ken," Sophie said from the kitchen.

"How's he doing, Sophie?" Hutch tucked L'Chaim under his arm, the kitten's warm, vibrating purr like a relaxing massage, and placed his bakery box on the kitchen counter.

"Tres bien, no fever since he took some aspirin at noon, he's just sneezing all the time. But he ate a good lunch." She turned the heat down on a covered pot on the stove. "I made a nice lamb ragout for your dinner, and we had quiche for lunch. David grated all the cheese."

"He's quite useful for those tedious chores." Hutch smiled, full of unexpected happiness. "Thank you so much for coming, Sophie. I really appreciate it. I'm going to be home more from now on, but we'll still need to see you around here as often as possible."

"D'accord. Of course." She laid a wrinkled hand on Hutch's cheek, her sweet face serene. Her inner peace permeated his soul, making him smile. His decision had been the right one. This is where he needed to be. "You go to David. I can see in your eyes how much you need to," Sophie said. "I'll let myself out. She bopped L'Chaim on the nose. "This one is a rascal. The other chatons are sweet, but this one is shredding the curtains in the dining room."

"Yep, takes after Starsky, incorrigible." Hutch carried L'Chaim into the bedroom, dropping the kitten onto the lump under the coverlet.

Starsky flipped the comforter off his face, his eyes like blueberry stars. He'd been lying in wait. "You don' look a thin' like Desi. D'you even play the bongos?"

"With that cold, you sound like him, Mr. Ricardo," Hutch leaned in for a kiss. Starsky was warm from being bundled up, so kissing him was like tasting muffins fresh from the oven or just baked cookies. He was delicious. He seemed much improved since the morning.

"Babaloo," Starsky said faintly, between kisses. "You're in a good mood."

"Quit my job."

"Huh?" Starsky reared up so quickly the kitten squeaked and jumped in exaggerated horror, all four limbs extended and his tiny back arched in perfect Halloween cat pose. His cry brought mama Pansy in, who scurried onto the bed and shepherded him away. "You quit the force?"
"It's only temporary, Starsky."

"Because of me?" Starsky demanded, his face set and hard.

"It would have happened eventually, if I got into medical school. And I'm not quitting the Academy in the middle of the semester. I'll see this class of cadets until they graduate, but I couldn't do both, Starsk. It was getting too difficult."

"Because of me."

This wasn't at all how he'd expected his homecoming to be, and Hutch didn't feel like he had to explain his actions to Starsky. Besides, Starsky wasn't being at all sympathetic. He looked ready for a fight, his shoulders hunched and eyes glittering angrily. What the fuck did he expect from Hutch anyway? Nobody around here was competing for the job as Supercop.

"Fine. You want me to say everything is coming down on me like a ton of bricks?" Hutch shouted, no longer wanting to be anywhere near his lover. He threw up his hands, stalking away from the bed in agitation.

Everything was suddenly too bright, too cheerful, and ordinary. He couldn't abide the usually comforting melange of his and Starsky's possessions. The tidal wave of emotions from earlier poured over the levy he'd erected and drowned him again. "You want to hear that I'm desperate when I'm away from you because I have to leave you when you're sick, and then when I do something that makes me feel like there's maybe some relief, just lightening the load a little bit, I come home and you blow up at me! I don't have to tell you that it's been hell, and right now I can't take it anymore. Okay?" Without even looking back at Starsky, Hutch walked out. He yanked open the front door and was halfway across the lawn before he gave one thought to the fact that he was leaving a one-legged man with terminal cancer and a cold alone.

For one second, Hutch faltered. To hell with that. Starsky wasn't a complete invalid, incapable of taking care of himself for one hour. He'd live. Meanwhile, Hutch needed a walk, and maybe a beer. He strode down the sidewalk so quickly the little girls from next door stared up at him with undisguised concern. It wasn't until he'd passed them by completely did he hear them resume their interrupted chanting "Eeney, meeny, miney, moe, catch a tiger by the toe..."

It reminded him of Starsky. The red bicycle with a white stripe left carelessly in the lawn of number 14 Dahlia Lane reminded him of Starsky. Even the advertisement on the side of a passing bus for Adidas sneakers reminded him of Starsky.

What was he going to do to make this right? Walking more slowly, Hutch headed for the mom and pop grocery that was exactly two blocks down and one block over from his house. He wouldn't be gone a half an hour. Was that long enough to give them both time to sort it out?

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Used to Hutch overprotecting him and even downright coddling him, Starsky couldn't believe the abrupt exit. He sat numbly in the middle of the rumpled bed, trying to play back the whole conversation to just the exact point where it had gone wrong. Maybe he shouldn't have reacted so strongly? But the announcement had been one of major proportions. How could Hutch just do that so cavalierly without so much as discussing it with him? Starsky hated feeling like he was no longer even a consideration in what Hutch did, and yet, he knew that wasn't at all true. The whole reason Hutch had quit was because of him, and that's exactly what he resented; that he was no longer anything but a burden, something to be cared for, who got in the way of other people's lives.
Starsky plucked at the sheets, listening for the door to open up and Hutch to come back through, apologizing profusely. It didn't happen. The house was thunderously quiet, not even a miow from one of the kittens.

Pushing back the covers, Starsky swung his legs over and sat with his right foot touching the floor. The left leg just cleared the edge of the bed, the truncated end like some forgotten loaf of bread. And it ached, just like he'd done too many squats after half a dozen sprints, the way they'd had to in the police academy so long ago. He'd always gotten a cramp after that. Only now there was nothing there to cramp up, just thin air. So why did his foot hurt?

Starsky pushed down on both his thighs, flexing his right foot and pretending the left one followed suit. This hadn't happened in a long time, maybe several weeks. During the trip to Washington he'd been exhausted all the time from being constantly on the go, but never once had his leg ached like this. Now, after a day in bed, what switched on the absent nerve endings?

There was nothing to be done about that except endure the cramp until it went away. A back massage might do the trick, but Hutch wasn't here.

Hesitantly, because of residual dizziness from the virus, Starsky secured his crutch and went into the living room. He wasn't used to being so completely alone, without any indication as to when Hutch might return. Usually, especially in that last month since his release from the hospital, whenever he had a few free hours between the multitude of medical and therapy appointments that constructed his day, people dropped by or called, bridging the gap between when Hutch's departure and when he would come home again.

Now, he felt strangely adrift. It wasn't that he was afraid to be by himself, far from it. There were days when he'd have paid quite a lot of money for just one quiet moment without being poked, prodded, and examined. Right now, he realized with a jolt, he was far more worried about Hutch's well-being.

Had Hutch taken a jacket? His car? Had he just blasted off into the late afternoon without any plan at all? On impulse, Starsky walked outside. The waning day was gorgeous, blue sky still inviting all to come out and soak in the warmth of the sun. Hutch's car was in the driveway, so he was on foot, most likely.

Starsky stood indecisively, wondering how worried he should be. Was this a walk around the block kind of funk or a drink himself into a stupor rage?

Starsky knew he needed to be proactive. If Hutch wasn't back in half an hour, he'd go looking for the blond idiot. Starting with the Pits and working his way down from there. Where else would Hutch go? Starsky was stunned to realize that since his diagnosis, he and Hutch no longer went out together just to hang. For all he knew, Hutch might have some new bar he frequented with his cadet students, or maybe even a new, unmentioned friend. As much as he recognized that as blatant paranoia, Starsky couldn't help but wonder what he'd missed while being sick, especially during January when there were whole blocks of days that he only vaguely recalled. Three months in the hospital really wiped out a guy's social life.

Going back in the house, Starsky downed a few aspirins for his headache and, hopefully, the ache in his invisible limb. He also needed to change. It wouldn't look quite right to walk into Huggy's wearing ratty sweatpants and a stained t-shirt. Starsky had never spent a whole lot of time thinking about his clothing, and knew that some people--namely Hutch--didn't consider his usual sartorial splendor of old jeans and a knit shirt elegance, but there was a difference between what he wore to bed and what he wore on the street. He liked feeling comfortable, that was all. To be truthful, he still felt pretty lousy. Just a little shaky on his foot, and with a nasty sinus headache. At least he
wasn't on chemo. There was always an optimistic approach to life to fall back on.

Perhaps, looking at this optimistically, they both needed a short time-out from one another. They'd been so close during the trip. Now, Hutch needed a breather. Starsky didn't blame him. God knows he'd love to get away from all this cancer shit, but that was his life for the unforeseeable future. So, he had to deal with it. Which meant deciding whether it was worth the complicated machinations of pining his empty pant leg up so that it didn't flap around when he walked, or letting it dangle. Hutch often helped there. Starsky left it alone, his head pounded too badly when he bent down to bother. All this crutching around was making him short of breath, too, but Starsky didn't feel up to rummaging around in the kitchen for the inhaler Davies had told him to use when he was wheezy. Finding Hutch was the first priority.

After locating keys for his car and locking the door, Starsky stood stolidly in front of the house watching Hutch walk down Dahlia from Merryvale. He had a bag under his arm and was moving quite slowly, contemplating the cracks in the sidewalk. Just at the edge of their lawn, Hutch looked up, eyebrows shooting up in surprise to see Starsky standing there waiting for him.

Starsky really didn't know what to say. Did he blurt out how much Hutch's leaving had scared him, or would that make him sound like a pathetic child? Should he berate Hutch for storming out without an explanation? "Did you get enough for both of us?" Starsky said at last, nodding at the open long necked bottle in Hutch's right hand.

Hutch simply paused long enough to extract a bottle from the bag and hand it to Starsky before going past him into the house.

Starsky held the icy bottle, then lifted it to his forehead, enjoying the smooth, cool glass against his hot skin. He wasn't really running much of a temperature, if any at all, but all the bluster and worry had warmed him up. The bottle wasn't much good for anything else but cooling him off until he got a church key, anyway.

"Do you want to eat out in the back?" Hutch asked neutrally, spooning stew from a crockpot into bowls as if he hadn't just gone out on a tear for the last half hour.

"Sure." Starsky snicked open his bottle with the opener, and knowing Hutch as he did, opened a second one for Hutch. "There any bread left?"

"Oh." Since he was already carrying two bowls and a beer bottle, Hutch used his elbow to point out the baked goods on the counter. "I bought some, baked this afternoon."

"Great!" Starsky said with forced enthusiasm, slotting the loaf and the butter dish into a basket. He'd found that if he used one crutch, he could carry a goodly amount of things in a basket or bag without compromising his own stability. The beer bottles went into the basket, along with napkins, and a last minute addition of a jar of pickles. The basket banged against his hip as he made his way outside, but Starsky was more concerned about sloshing the beer on the floor than whether he got a bruise.

Hutch had covered the wrought iron table with a jaunty red plastic cloth and placed the bowls across the table from one another, as far apart as physically possible, given the size of the table. Starsky doled out the contents of his basket, and sat down. He picked up the spoon, swirling it around in the rich broth, but didn't feel overly inclined to take a bite.

"You should eat," Hutch said after a very long, tedious silence. He hadn't touched very much of his own dinner, but had finished his first beer. "Can't afford to lose weight now."
"Are you going to leave, or just stick around because you feel obligated?"

"Damn you, Starsky," Hutch said almost too softly to hear.

"Didn't hear you, you wanna speak up?"

"I love you." Hutch sounded so mournful Starsky wanted to weep, but he held himself still, not sure whether he wanted to hear the answer to his question. "God, I love you so much it hurts inside all the time to know what's happening to you."

Starsky brought the beer to his lips to hide the trembling of his bottom lip. The beer tasted off somehow, and it burned his raw throat going down.

"I didn't even ask Dobey for the time off. He'd already filled out the paperwork."

"Why didn't you tell me ahead of time?" Starsky asked softly. He yearned to move closer to Hutch, but kept the distance for security. If he was losing his lover, he didn't want proximity to sway his resolve.

"I didn't know myself." Hutch ate a spoonful of stew, but there was no enjoyment on his face. He was just using the mechanics of feeding himself to stave off the conversation. "Were you planning on driving my car?"

Starsky looked up sharply from his slow buttering of an unwanted piece of bread, staring at Hutch. Oh, yeah, he was talking about Starsky's aborted search. Starsky gave a derisive snort. "I figured I'd tunnel out, go for help." He knew Hutch would recognize the old line.

Hutch smiled sadly, obviously remembering a long ago time when Starsky was shot.

"Besides, I was going to drive MY car, not yours."

"Mine was blocking yours in the driveway." Hutch moved his chair, the wrought iron giving a loud, raucous scrape on the stone of the patio when he pushed it around the table.

"I hadn't noticed." Starsky felt out of breath, confused. His head was stuffed up and it hurt, but only part of that was because of his cold. What was going on here? They were hardly answering each other's questions, not the essential ones anyway. But somehow, the tension in his chest was loosening. It was getting easier to breathe. When Hutch brushed the tops of his fingers across Starsky's hand resting on the table, in the guise of reaching for the bread, Starsky nearly jumped. "You getting fresh?" he asked noncommittally.

"Just wanted the bread." Hutch held it up, eyes deceptive, almost empty. "Starsky, do you want to drive your car?"

"Yeah, I guess I do."

"What about a trip up the coast?"

"What are we talking about here?"

"You and me. No..." Hutch turned his hand over, palm up. "No doctors, no cop talk, ignore the cancer as much as possible."

"We just took a vacation."

"With six teenaged girls, and nearly twice that many parents and little brothers and sisters. That
wasn't time alone, it was a circus."

"It was kinda fun." Starsky snaked his hand across the table to Hutch, and smiled gratefully when it was taken and squeezed. "We go up the coast, and I can drive?"

"About sums it up."

"Who are you and what did you do with Hutch?"

"I think he quit his job and doesn't know what to do with himself."

"You scared me."

"I'm at loose ends here, Starsk. I'm not sure what...happens from now on. There's no rule book, nocharted course."

"I always liked flying by the seat of my pants." Starsky bit his lip, rubbing his finger against Hutch's. "We just make it up as we go along."

"That's harder for me than it is for you."

"Just hold my hand and follow along. I ain't going all that fast," Starsky vowed, and melted into the kiss Hutch pressed against his lips.

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Hutch wanted to watch Starsky's every move, admire the way he draped one arm out the open window of the Mustang, the other holding the steering wheel with a firm but casual grip, as if he'd been driving all his life. Well, he had, except not since September. And not ever with only one leg. Luckily, the Mustang was an automatic, which didn't require the complicated two footed maneuvers a manual shift would, so the same foot for gas and braking was all that were necessary. Still, Hutch liked watching Starsky look so—for want of a better word—normal, healthy. The wind from the open window was blowing his curls around until they became animated beings, each one bouncing to a different beat. His whole head of hair going carnival in Rio. Starsky was rocking out, tapping a rhythm on the windowsill to the tune playing on the radio. Elvis Presley's Greatest Hits, Starsky's choice. Hutch had brought along an eclectic selection of cassettes for the tape player, and once the hound dog stopped being a fool in love and rocking around the jailhouse, Hutch planned on some poignant Country Western tunes by Sue Anne Granger.

He couldn't put his finger on it, but he and Starsky still felt out of kilter. They were hovering around each other, each afraid the other might go off in some indescribable way. They hadn't argued or had a blow up since his unplanned expedition to the grocery for beer, but he was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Maybe it wouldn't and they'd eventually just revolve back into their old comfortableness. The in-between times made him itchy, though.

Huggy had come through, big time. Before dropping the bombshell that he wanted them both to be his best men, he'd scored them the cabin of one of his innumerable cousins for a few days before Easter. So, here they were, tooling up Highway 1, which hugged the coast of California, headed for Big Sur. Already the scenery was less deserty and more wild than in the Los Angeles basin, and they were barely two hours out from Bay City. Santa Barbara was the goal for lunch, and it looked like they'd have plenty of time to fit in a walk along the beach, at this rate.

Hutch took his eyes off the rolling ocean on the left side of the car, focusing back on his partner, imagining the slender body suited in a Tuxedo, complete with cummerbund. Huggy had said that
the main reason he wanted his two best friends up next to him at the altar was because he figured it was the one and only time the two of them would get to stand up in a church, dressed to the nines, in front of all their friends. In other words, Huggy was willing to share his wedding with them, even if it was only a symbolic gesture.

Hutch had seen Starsky go pale, and covered the reaction by teasing Huggy that he didn't have the fortitude to stand up and get married without help. The evening had been one of celebration and merriment after that. Lots of toasting, and speechifying. Hutch had almost expected to have a hangover from the liberal pouring of champagne, but surprisingly he didn't.

Maybe it was the warmth of the April sunshine, or just sitting in the passenger seat beside Starsky, watching him drive; a miracle of no small proportions, even though Hutch would never mention that. Cancer and anything connected with it was on the forbidden topic list, if they could help tiptoeing around that particular elephant.

Starsky was in his element, in charge of the car, and singing loudly along with the King. Hutch joined in with Heartbreak Hotel, finding himself grinning like a madman. Starsky glanced over at him, eyes hidden behind Ray Bans, but grinning, too. Suddenly, there was nothing between them, and never had been. Hutch reached over, clamping a hand on Starsky's thigh.

"My dad used to call that 'a crow lighting on a log',' Starsky said, squirming just enough that his groin pressed against Hutch's wrist. "Only he'd do it a hell of a lot harder than you just did."

"He used to feel you up?"

"Nah. He just liked makin' us jump. Usta scare the crap out of me when I was little, then when I was older I'd be prepared when I got in the car next to him. He'd do it when I least expected it, and laugh like crazy. And he used to let me shift the gears."

"While he was driving?" Hutch asked, amazed. His father would never have been so informal in the car. There were always rules at their house. Rules for the dinner table, for meeting guests, and for how to act in public. It was fine to 'let your hair down' as his mother had called it, on a Saturday afternoon, maybe in the pool or on a hike. There had never been the easy spontaneity that Starsky's family apparently had. Hutch did remember his father getting frisky, almost silly, when riding horses or tossing a ball around in the backyard before Hutchinson family football games every summer in the huge backyard of his grandfather's farm; lots of Hutchisons all waiting for grilled chicken and salmon, working up an appetite with a game. But the subsequent football hadn't been just for fun, there had been a real competitive edge that sometimes spoiled the joy of the day for young Ken.

"Sure, when he was driving," Starsky said. "He'd take my hand like this." He guided Hutch's broad hand to the automatic gear shift between the seats, his slightly smaller one spread over the top, palm to the back of Hutch's hand. "And when we'd hit forty, he'd press in the pedal and let me move the gear shift."

Hutch felt the warmth of Starsky's hand up his arm and into his heart. "Don't try that here or you'll send us over the edge of the freeway."

"Spoilsport," Starsky chided. He pointed to the green freeway sign coming up. "Santa Barbara in five miles, where do you want to eat? And no grass seedlings or carrot juice for me."

"Starsky, when have I made you eat sprouts?"

"In 1976?"
"That was nine years ago."

"It was so traumatic I still remember," Starsky said with a straight face.

They found a wonderful place with a view of the ocean, and a covered outdoor eating area. Both ordered Margaritas and stuffed themselves with homemade tortilla chips and salsa. Hutch ordered a taco salad and Starsky went straight for the biggest, fattest burrito on the menu. When it arrived at the table he just looked at it with such lust Hutch burst into laughter.

"You'll never finish that one, amigo," Hutch teased. He wouldn't mind seeing Starsky eat even a half of it. Starsky had finally passed 130 pounds, but didn't seem to be able to put on much more weight. That was 15 pounds under his goal weight, and his appetite was still quite an iffy thing on a bad day. Luckily, this wasn't one of them.

"Then I'll have something for breakfast tomorrow. You said the cabin was out of the way, so we'll need to stock up." Starsky dug in, making happy sounds around his mouthful of beans, rice and beef. He smeared guacamole all over the next bite and popped it into his mouth.

"I brought enough to satisfy both of us," Hutch promised, thinking about the basket of chocolate eggs he'd hidden in the trunk. Hopefully, nothing would melt on the way up. "Even the rest of that chicken noodle soup Edith made."

"Just like my grandma's."

"You've got avocado on your bottom lip." Hutch reached over to wipe it off, his thumb tingling when he touched his lover. What a time to get turned on, in the middle of a crowded restaurant, and over such a silly little thing. He felt hot and then cold, his groin suddenly pounding with blood, and from the look on Starsky's face, he was feeling the same thing.

"You got enough cash to pay the bill?" Starsky asked huskily, almost panting.

"Credit card." Hutch dazedly pulled out the little plastic rectangle to get his hands off Starsky. That was harder than it should be, and he had to physically move his chair back from the table so he couldn't respond so easily to the heat pouring off Starsky's body.

Starsky's eyes were darkest midnight blue, even in the bright of day, and Hutch knew he was lost unless they could find some place--NOW--where they could alleviate a few major aches below the belt.

The waitress bounced over, all perky with oblivious cheer, presented the bill, and took away Hutch's credit card. She brought back a Styrofoam box for Starsky's unfinished burrito, and two red and white striped peppermints with the credit card slip. Starsky popped a candy into his mouth while Hutch signed for their meal, trying to ignore the slurping sounds Starsky was making. Would that he could make those sounds around Hutch's cock, and soon.

They made it out of the restaurant under their own power, standing on the edge of the beach with only one thing in mind. Starsky poked his crutch into the sand as if testing how far he could get going that way and looked imploringly up at Hutch. "Whadda you want to do? Cause I'm not squirming around in the backseat of the Mustang."

"What backseat?" Hutch shaded his eyes, looking over Starsky's shoulder at the coastline. "A hotel room?"

"Kinda obvious, don't you think?"
"What do you have in mind?" Hutch asked peevishly, his need now diminishing, but not enough to endure another couple hours on the road before he got relief.

"Hey." Starsky patted Hutch's belly with a barely there touch, designed not to inflame any further. "I can't walk too far on that sand, and I ain't lyin' back like Deborah Kerr to get sand up my butt. We're not kids, we can wait, can't we?"

"Come here." Hutch led him a few feet down a cement walkway bordering the beach until they came to a small structure, a combination equipment shack and restroom facilities by the look of it. Hutch gently pulled Starsky around one side, shaded by the overhang of the roof and a five foot retainer wall separating them from beach side parking. There was no one in view. Leaning in, Hutch gave into his passion, kissing Starsky with such lust that it left them both gasping for breath.

"You do that pretty good, but it never hurts to practice," Starsky said, molding his hand over the bulge in Hutch's jeans.

The second kiss was just as powerful and Hutch would have come right then and there, from a kiss, but he held himself firm. As Starsky had pointed out, they were adults, with the ability to put off pleasure until the proper time instead of giving into every lustful impulse at the first opportunity.

"Okay," Hutch conceded. "Next stop, the cabin."

"Next stop, a gas station." Starsky grinned fecklessly, as if the front of his cutoffs didn't display his wares with eye-popping splendor. "I don't want to run out of gas on the side of that long winding road."

"Need help with that?" Hutch had gotten himself under marginal control and could afford a certain smugness.

"Nah, I'm good." Starsky grimaced, adjusting himself and swung off with his crutch as if sex were the furthest thing from his mind.

Starsky would have enjoyed every single thing Hutch was doing to him except for the nagging pain in his left foot. Not that it had deterred them thus far, but it took away from the overall perfection of the afternoon. He wanted to be able to concentrate totally on Hutch's marvelous technique, and not be constantly distracted by a phantom cramp in his invisible leg. Once again pushing thoughts of the annoying ache to the back of his brain, Starsky arched up into Hutch's hand, grabbing a handful of smooth Hutchinson ass to hang on with.

They'd made it to the cabin in wonderful time, and hadn't even bothered to unpack the car. Both had dashed for the door, Starsky already shucking his t-shirt in preparation while Hutch fumbled with the keys. When he dropped them on the ground, necessitating a lengthy search with Hutch's arm stuck halfway under the wooden stairs, Starsky thought he'd burst with anticipation. But finally, finally, they'd made it inside. Barely taking a moment to notice the décor, Starsky headed for the nearest bedroom--there were two--and dropped his cutoffs to the floor. The look on Hutch's face when he came in, after a quick stop in the bathroom to wash spider webs and who knows what off his hands, was worth the wait.

Starsky had sat down on the bed so he was just the right height to undo the zipper of Hutch's pants and help his with his belt. He'd feigned surprise and wonder at the size of his lover's penis, toying with the heavy balls until Hutch hissed and jerked with need. Then Starsky had slurped up that long length of a cock, bringing Hutch to completion with satisfying speed.
Which brought him to his present situation, lying back on a blue, yellow, and green wedding ring quilt, with Hutch wrapped around him, enveloping him in love and kisses. Hutch had already given him a hand job that should have won him some sort of award, the Nobel prize for sex, maybe. Starsky chuckled, enjoying the slow progress of kisses down his concave belly. Hutch's hand wandered seemingly aimlessly down between Starsky's legs, bypassing his cock, and around the back to his anus.

Ahhh. Just the spot. And maybe just a little higher, where there was a hint of a dull ache, not sexual, but in need of a soothing hand. But Hutch didn't know that, because Starsky didn't tell him. He just went with the flow, breathing in with his eyes closed when Hutch rimmed his opening with a wet tongue. It felt so good, and so nasty. Starsky harkened back to his formative explorations into sex, in ninth grade with enthusiastic but inexperienced little girls. Kissing was wonderful, then. Petting was the ultimate, and penetration was still a mystery. The thought of putting a finger, a cock, and most especially a tongue, in the back door was just plain nasty. Now, he reveled in that nastiness, and smiled a little to know that pristine-looking Hutch got such a kick out of doing it to him.

"You ready?" Hutch said, his breath warm on Starsky's butt cheeks.

"Oh, yeah, put it where the sun don't shine, sailor man."

Hutch smoothed something cool and slick into Starsky, and adjusted him so that he lay on his right side with the shorter left leg resting on top of his other thigh. That gave Hutch easy access, and he used it handily, sliding in carefully, giving Starsky all the time he needed to adjust to any discomfort.

Reaching back, Starsky grabbed Hutch's hand, gasping when the rod inside him hit a tight spot and seemed unable to go further. This was one of those moments he adored, when he felt suspended, the sublime just beyond his fingertips but tangible. Just one more inch and he could reach out and touch it. Rolling his pelvis forward, Starsky sighed with utter relief when Hutch was all the way in, his balls gently slapping Starsky in the butt.

It should have been perfect, but when Hutch thrust in again, pressing his weight against Starsky's hips and thighs, it hurt, pure and simple. And not in any nice way that could be explained away as some weird sort of pleasurepain. This was bone deep and sharp, radiating up his spine. Hutch must have felt Starsky go tense and still, because he stopped, still sheathed but unmoving.

"Babe?" Hutch sounded just a little short of breath, and Starsky felt a pang of guilt for ruining the moment. He took a shuddery breath himself, and the strange pain resided almost completely, but now his foot was too achy to ignore. "Starsky?" Hutch said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, keep going," Starsky lied, wishing his body didn't betray him. His cock was lifeless, all signs of arousal gone.

"Tell me the truth." Hutch pulled out, gently rolling Starsky onto his back.

Starsky didn't want to look into that imploring gaze, because it hurt too much to see Hutch worried again. About him. Even here, barely hours after their escape from all the stress of their lives, the cancer and everything it brought with them, haunted him. "My foot hurts," he said. Not the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but enough to stop Hutch from obsessing over things.

"This one?" Hutch rubbed gently on the stump which sent odd little stuttering jolts of pins and needles up Starsky's thigh.
"Yeah, like usual. It's probably because of all that driving." He was glad of such a sensible and logical explanation to assuage Hutch's concern. "Not used to it anymore."

"How about a back rub?" Hutch asked tenderly, his hand going unerringly to the spot in just above Starsky's sacrum where he'd performed magic before. "Turn on your front."

"Always bossing me around," Starsky pretended to grumble, but a back rub sounded like a great idea. He exhaled, relaxing as totally as possible when Hutch put his big hands on the small of Starsky's back. Slow, rhythmic circles nearly lulled Starsky to sleep, but when Hutch hit that tiny place that always took away the phantom pain, Starsky felt terrific. Better than that, he was energized. "You give good rub, Hutchinson. Ever think of changing careers?"

"To masseuse? Now there's an idea." Hutch bestowed a kiss on his elbow. Starsky smiled at the silly indulgence. "You know they say that Scandinavians make the best massage therapists."

"Getting lofty aspirations, there?" Starsky raised up, his head propped on the arm Hutch has kissed to watch his partner. "You ain't no therapist, you're my personal love slave."

"What's the difference? I'm going to grab a shower before I unpack the car. Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"Hutch, I'm not an invalid."

"You were so sick enough on Monday you could barely get out of bed."

"This is Thursday. I can help unpack the car. Besides, I'm hungry now."

"You would be, for cold burrito." Hutch shuddered, heading for the shower.

Starsky laughed, sitting on the edge of the bed to find his clothes. His shorts were just inside the door and his t-shirt was probably still out on the front steps where he'd left it when Hutch dropped the keys. Retrieving his cutoffs, Starsky hopped over to the front door. The keys were still in the lock. Typical Hutch, who never could understand how people continually broke into the Venice Place apartment even though he made it easy for every criminal in Bay City by leaving his keys over the lintel.

The Styrofoam container was on the front seat, so Starsky cleared out the interior of the car, piling the detritus on the steps before going inside to warm up his snack. They'd left Santa Barbara at one o'clock, arriving at the cabin just after four. It was five now, but the sun was still high in the afternoon sky, promising a lovely, lingering evening. Maybe they could have a walk at twilight, holding hands. Starsky hummed Paul McCartney's *Silly Love Songs* to himself, indulging in a bit of gushy romanticism.

"Smells like a Mexican restaurant in here." Hutch came out of the bathroom, rubbing his pale hair into a wild disarray with a green towel.

"You wanna taste?" Starsky held out a forkful of rice and beans. "To keep up your strength."

Hutch closed his lips over the fork, murmuring his appreciation as he chewed. "Pretty good."

"More?" Starsky offered, picking out bits of meat for himself.

"I'm good."

"But I'm better."
"You're happier than you were a while ago, you want to talk about it?" Hutch disappeared back into the bedroom to get dressed, but reappeared moments later in the green t-shirt and khakis he'd worn on the drive.

"Isn't that what this whole sudden vacation was about, to get away from what was bothering us?" Starsky shrugged, spearing some more burrito.

"Yes, and to fatten you up, but it doesn't look like that will be a problem from what you're eating." Hutch finger combed his hair into some semblance of order without even looking in the mirror. "And I'll be the first one to admit it was me falling apart there, Starsk, but if you need to…"

"No." Starsky blithely dismissed all the weird little pains that were plaguing him and put his plate in the sink. "But I need a shower and some cleaner clothes, if you could haul that humungus suitcase out of the trunk?"

"Oh, yeah, you don't have to come with me. I can do it myself." Hutch's eyes widened as if he'd forgotten something important, and he dashed outside.

"I'll come, carry the groceries." Starsky trailed after him, arriving just in time to see Hutch pull out a large pink bag. "What's this?"

"Something for later."

"Aw, come on, Hutch, let me see." Starsky grabbed playfully at the bag, grinning when he caught a glimpse of a chocolate bunny ear. "You bought me Easter candy!"

"This is for Easter. Last time I looked, today was Thursday. You don't get any yet."

"Not even a jelly bean?"

"No jelly beans."

"Didja get Peeps?"

"Those things will rot your teeth, Starsky." Hutch carried the pink bag and the suitcase up the stairs, leaving Starsky with a bag full of fresh fruit and vegetables.

"You did get Peeps," Starsky said with assurance, quite touched that Hutch had gone to such lengths for him while on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Starsky could see the aftermath in the days since the walkabout. Hutch was on edge, his voice just a shade too brittle at times and the muscles of his shoulders tense with strain. Yet, he'd gone out of his way to buy candy. Starsky wanted to give something back to Hutch, something that would ease his lover's burdens in the months to come.

"Do you want to talk?" Starsky took the three steps carefully, balancing the bag of groceries in his right hand so that he could crutch with his left.

"Didn't we just go through this about five minutes ago?" Hutch sounded surprisingly irritated, especially after the teasing tones of seconds before.

"So, we both don't want to talk about what's staring us in the face and scaring the both of us half to dea…"

"Don't say that!" Hutch leveled his pointer finger at Starsky, then stopped with a look of horror. He took a deep breath, rubbing his breastbone like it hurt. "Starsky, maybe we do need to talk. But not
today, huh? Let today be silly and, I don't know, quiet. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah." Starsky could feel the same deep pain in his chest. Sorrow. Anguish. Dread. Mourning what they would lose when he died.

Not what they would lose, but what Hutch would lose, because Starsky would be gone. He'd grown used to knowing that he was going to--what was it Hamlet said--throw off this mortal coil first, before Hutch. But the knowledge still hurt. And death no longer really scared him. Probably hadn't since he'd taken a trip half way across the River Styx back in '79. What scared Starsky was leaving Hutch alone and unprepared. He wasn't sure yet how to resolve that.

"Take a shower, Starsk. I'm making meatloaf and mashed potatoes for dinner," Hutch said flatly.

"Can we take a walk before we eat?" Starsky had the odd notion that he and Hutch were two football fields apart instead of a few feet.

"I'd like that."

Hutch stretched out on the hammock swung in the back of the house, looking out over the rocky coast. Big Sur was breathtakingly beautiful, and for a boy raised in the Northwest, with its conical firs and densely forested woodlands, this almost austere, harsh landscape was strangely stirring. He marveled at the cypress trees twisted into bizarre shapes from the force of the winds. Trees that would normally grow straight up into perfect example of Christmas trees were gnarled and bent at 45 degree angles on the sharp rocky edge of the Pacific. The wind blew continuously, battering everything in its path. Sometimes at night the wind hammered mercilessly against the windowpanes as if trying to break into the house. Out over the restless ocean, seagulls floated on gusts of air, sometimes swooping down to snatch fish from the waves, their shrill cries the only things louder than the wind.

From his vantage point, Hutch could see only water, tree, rocks, and sky. No humans. No hustle and bustle. The police cadets were on Easter break, so there was nothing to worry about from that arena. Dobey wouldn't be calling, and Starsky was inside taking a nap. Everything was tranquil. Hutch wished with all his might that he could completely relax. It had been a great couple of days. Friday, he and Starsky had explored Los Padres National Forest and even done some hiking within Starsky's abilities. They brought a picnic and had taken playful pictures of each other wolfing down pickles and bananas. Today they'd gone into Monterey, and wandered around the John Steinbeck's wharf area before eating a great lunch. Starsky had crab, of course.

They had left that big discussion undiscussed. Ignored the cancer. Hutch recognized that was exactly why he couldn't relax. Because now that they'd both acknowledged that the elephant was standing in the living room, they had to do something about him. Otherwise, this unbearable limbo of being was going to stretch them out until one of them truly broke, and Hutch was very afraid it was going to be him.

"Hey." Starsky said softly from the sliding glass door.

"Thought you were asleep."

"I was." Starsky knuckled at his eye, leaning against the glass. He didn't have a crutch with him. "Now I'm not. I'm hungry."

Hutch wanted to say you're always hungry, but it wasn't true anymore. That, like much of the
stability of their old life, was gone, and he didn't know what would replace it. "I can make you a sandwich."

"I can make it. Still got some meatloaf in the fridge. And maybe I'll throw the leftover crabby patty on top."

"Ugh." Hutch sat up carefully in the hammock, taking care not to be tossed out on his butt.

"With a pickle, mustard, two slices of tomato, maybe some cheese," Starsky embellished.

"A Dagwood sandwich." Hutch wrinkled up his nose because he was supposed to. Starsky was doing this for his sake, to cause a reaction. He wanted to respond in the old way but it felt like stepping out onto thin ice. What would cause the fatal crack?

"And the piece dey resistance," Starsky said triumphantly, mispronouncing the French phrase deliberately. "A yellow Peep on the top."

"Be your death," Hutch joked and then caught himself, appalled at his slip. How could he have said that? His breath was so tight in his chest he grunted with the effort to breathe.

"Thank you." Starsky smiled at him, but it didn't help.

Hutch had never been overtly superstitious but the three words he'd uttered seemed like some sort of curse. A foretelling of the future, bald and unchangeable. "F-for what?" he gasped, letting out a pent up lungful of air.

"Easing up, Hutch, we both know I'm gonna die." Starsky held out a hand and grasped Hutch's, his fingers warm against Hutch's colder ones. "Saying it out loud ain't going to change anything."

"I wanted to preserve..." Hutch faltered, looking into those unfathomable eyes. Starsky's love rose up around him like a shield. "This. Us. Not talk about it. But we have to."

"Yeah. I been thinking." Starsky tugged his hand, pulling him inside by balancing one hand on the glass door. "C'mon. It's cold out there and I'll make you a boring sandwich. Tuna with mayo on whole wheat."

Hutch allowed himself to be led inside, cosseted and fed. A fire was made in the copper bellied stove and they curled up on the couch to feel the warmth. Starsky was pealing the glittery foil off small chocolate eggs and popping them in his mouth.

"I want to plan my funeral."

"Why?" Hutch asked, horrified. That was the last thing he'd expected Starsky to say.

"So you don't have to." Starsky dug his thumbnail into the chocolate to pry off a particularly stubborn bit of blue foil. "Saiisa came over on Wednesday when you went down to Metro to get your stuff."

Hutch nodded to indicate he was listening, his mouth too dry to speak. Saiisa was a sensible woman, he'd relied on her wisdom on any number of occasions.

"She told me to think about what I wanted. To gain some control over my life." Starsky laughed, short, sharp and ironic. "Only thing I can control."
"But…" Hutch stared dumbly at the fire, feeling completely out of control, himself. In his family, one didn't discuss these things, it was almost considered bad manners. When someone died, the lawyers and retainers dealt with all the arrangements. The most one might be expected to do was decide what suit the deceased should wear or whether to play Rock of Ages at the funeral. But discuss it ahead of time? "W-what did you have in mind?"

"Beatles songs," Starsky said. "So far, not much more than that. They got some surprisingly good songs for funerals, or at least memorials, did you ever notice?"

"No."

"Golden Slumbers--they used that one in that stinker movie the BeeGees were in, remember?"

Hutch was jolted by the odd memory. He'd been the one to think the movie was a stinker. Starsky had kind of liked the weird mix of Beatles tunes covered by other artists, Steve Martin antics, and psychedelic Alice Cooper visuals. "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band? Okay, Golden Slumbers did work well there, but for a proper funeral it's not very…religious."

"Where does it say that a funeral has to be religious?" Starsky rolled the foil up into a ball. "Too bad the kittens aren't here, this would be a good toy. If you don't like that song, how about The Long and Winding Road? Thought of that one on the way up."

"Leads me to your door…many times I've been alone, and many times I've cried…" Hutch half sang the words, marveling at Starsky's ability to find such love and pathos in the Lennon/McCartney songs. "In My Life," he said softly, the words slamming into him with a force that was tangible.

"Yeah. Sing it."

"Starsk, I can't sing at your funeral."

"I know." Starsky put his hand on Hutch's cheek, petting him gently, incredible love shining through his eyes. "Sing it now, for me."

Hutch closed his eyes, concentrating on the feel of Starsky's palm, warm and vital, against his skin. "There are places I remember, all my life, though some have changed. Some forever, not for better…" Starsky joined in, both their voices rough with emotion, but the bond was forged strongly once again, their need for each other caught in the words of the song. Hutch dropped out for a moment on the line "some are dead and some are living," but he caught up the tune once more for the second verse, and they were both together on the melody by the end. "I know I'll often think about them, but in my life I loved you more."

"In my life, I loved you more," Starsky echoed and finished with a kiss.

"I can't do this, Starsky," Hutch said mournfully, their faces so close together that their tears had intermingled.

"Yes you can." Starsky patted Hutch on the chest. "Cause I ain't leaving you here. I'll always be there. And Saiisa gave me some information on cemetery plots and stuff like that. Coffins. We pick all that stuff together, plan the food, then it won't be so hard, in the end. It'll be all done."

"You're acting like this is just planning a party. Music, hors d'oeuvres. Like Huggy and Daisy's wedding. It's not that simple! You'll be dead!" Hutch hiccuped, trying to get his breathing back to normal. "Where are you going to get the money, for one thing?"
"Cash in my retirement fund."

"That was for the future."

"This is my future." Starsky encircled Hutch with his arms, his short leg practically in Hutch's lap. "It's not easy, and I hate having to plan stuff in advance, you know that better'n anyone. But I decided a long time ago I wasn't gonna go through the rest of my life waiting to die. I want to live until then, and if this will make your life easier after I'm gone, then that's what I want."

"When did you grow up and start acting maturely?"

"I'm forty now, these things happen." Starsky shrugged philosophically. "You just wait until your birthday."

"Can you?"

"Gonna do my damned-est." Starsky grinned suddenly at him, hopping up. "C'mon, sing some more Beatles songs." He hummed Octopus' Garden, waggling his hips, then changed to a more suggestive bump and grind, half singing "Why don't we do it in the road?"

"That one isn't appropriate." Hutch found the black humor in the whole situation. It was sad, scary, and depressing. You either had to laugh or cry. He'd already cried, and wanted to laugh a lot more.

"How about I Wanna Hold Your Hand?"

"PS, I Love You." Hutch stood, catching Starsky around the waist, and swaying to the tune they both heard.

Having rediscovered the joy of driving, Starsky found he wanted to do it all the time. He had a reckless, wild restlessness, almost destructive in its force, and he had to constantly rein himself in. Not just because he really didn't actually have the energy to be on the go all day long, but also because he could see he was making Hutch crazy. Even after they'd driven home, fueled on chocolate bunnies and a cassette of Beatles tunes, Starsky wanted to go, do, be.

Instead, he had to maintain a low profile, take naps in the afternoon, consult with Daisy on the wedding preparations, and pretend that he wasn't jumping out of his skin. He wasn't even sure where all this was coming from. He'd long ago accepted his untimely end, hadn't he? So why this sudden nearly pathological need for the ultimate adrenaline rush? He'd driven fast and hard around the curves on Highway 1. He snuck out of the house when Hutch was at the academy, just to have some time to himself, without the constant specter of Hutch's protectiveness pillowing him. It was just a hike around the block but it gave him an exhilarating feeling of liberation.

He felt cut off from real life. He'd missed a whole season while back in the hospital, and now wanted to dig his fingers into the dirt, feel growth and new life. He drove to the garden store by himself, despite having promised Hutch that he wouldn't drive alone, and had a giddy sense of freedom like a school kid ditching the headmaster. It was wrong to deceive Hutch so, but damn, he couldn't take much more of all these people around, all the time. He had so many appointments the appointments were overlapping themselves. And in between times there were visitors determined to entertain Starsky, so that he didn't dwell on the big IT. The weird thing was, Starsky didn't really think that much about dying. He'd strangely gotten used to the idea. Sure, everyone died. And the doctors didn't have all the answers. They probably didn't really know when he might go any more
than he did. Starsky did feel strange little vibrations inside himself, fleeting impressions that something else might be going on, but he ignored them. Had to.

What use was it to mope about that pessimistic stuff, anyway? It didn't change anything. He bought plants with Hutch in mind. Red rose bushes, purple Echinacea seeds, pale green rosemary shoots, and mulch instead of breaking away to go parasailing, or maybe skiing like that Kennedy kid. Starsky knew Hutch had a picture of the one-legged Kennedy stuffed at the back of his drawer in their communal desk, like a talisman. And Starsky was considered the superstitious one.

He dug deeply into the earth, encountering wiggly pale worms and roly-poly bugs that rolled into tiny balls when he prodded them with his shovel. After planting his purchases, he chatted with Daisy on the upcoming nuptials, and then fell asleep in the shade of the porch with dirt still caked under his nails. That was oddly satisfying. Hutch kissed him awake later that afternoon, presenting him with bowls of wonton soup, spring rolls and a single orchid.

Starsky felt happy and wondered if he were completely sane anymore.

"I think it's a genetic thing," Starsky groused, looking at himself in the mirror. "Starsky men are not supposed to wear bow ties."

"This is a wedding, it's traditional!" Hutch called from the bathroom. Steam was billowing out of the door like a dry ice effect in a sci-fi movie, and Starsky almost expected to see Hutch come out transformed into some creature with latex appliances on his forehead.

"Who'd have thought Huggy would go traditional." Starsky tugged at the stubbornly crooked blue silk tie before deciding he was done with it. So it was crooked, what did it matter in the long run? It wasn't even his wedding. Except it was, in a weird way. The whole day felt special, vibrant and sparkling.

"As traditional as he can be, I suppose." Hutch emerged from the steam, his blond hair still wet, but already half dressed. And his bow tie was perfection, like some gigantic butterfly perched directly between the two wings of his collar. He wasn't, however, wearing pants, a suit jacket, or shoes. Just a pristine white shirt and blue silk tie.

"I've always liked your legs, but doncha think it's kind of risqué to go to a wedding like that?"

"Forgot to bring them into the bathroom." Hutch grabbed the clothes out of the garment bag provided by the tuxedo rental company and suited up. "How much time do we have, anyway?"

"If we leave in the next ten minutes, there will be just over one hour until the wedding, Mon Capitaine." Starsky saluted smartly, assessing Hutch now that he was completely dressed. "We look like twins." The gray formal jackets were set off quite nicely by the blue ties, but he thought they looked better on Hutch. Just the right blue for his eyes.

"We would if your tie was straight." Hutch twitched one end of the offending thing and voila, it was perfection.

Starsky stared at himself in the mirror for a moment longer. He didn't look half bad, especially now that his hair was just about pre-chemo length. If only he had the stamina to go for a whole day without the wheelchair. He had insisted on going up the aisle with the crutch, but Hutch had held firm that the wheelchair was coming with them to the reception.

"How'd you do that?"
"Cotillion."

"Isn't that when you have to escort the girls who didn't make the cheerleading squad to dance class?"

"Pretty much. We had to wear tuxedos and learn which fork to use for the salad." Hutch laughed. "They had cotillion at your school? I thought it was another one of those society things my mother always wanted me to attend. I was one of the escorts at the debutante ball, too, for Christine Mathieson."

"They had it, I didn't go." Starsky shouldered his crutch and they were ready. "So, how was Christine Mathieson?"

"Starsky, you're vulgar, do you know that?"

"You mean to tell me that Ken-the-stud didn't get under her crinolines?"

"Ken wasn't that much of a stud in high school."

"With the track letter and all?"

"She did like the track letter."

"And?" Starsky paused while Hutch locked the front door, shading his eyes. "Mail lady is here. She likes Ken-the-stud, y'know."

Hutch gave him a rueful grin. "Eleanor is a nice, married lady. Christine had her Wednesday panties on Saturday night, and I crushed her corsage when we made out in the broom closet behind the ballroom."

"Oh-ho! Now the story comes out." Starsky raised his crutch and poked Hutch in the rear. "Dog."

"You put yourself in a compromising position when you do that." Hutch reached around and grabbed the crutch tip, so that Starsky had to remain balanced on his right foot or risk falling and pulling both of them down. It would not do to get grass stains on their rented tuxedos. "Eleanor, how are you this morning!" Hutch called, releasing the crutch gently enough to let Starsky get it steady before striding out to greet the letter carrier.

"G'morning, Ken," she said. "You both look like you're going to a wedding."

"Got it in one, Eleanor." Starsky joined them. "Got any checks from Publisher's Clearing House? I want to win a million bucks."

"No, I tol' you, I was gonna keep those." She dimpled at him and handed over a stack of envelopes, local grocery circulars, and a gun catalogue. "Have a nice time!" she swung her huge leather bag back over her shoulder and strode up the street to the next house.

Not interested in bills and sales for cucumbers, Starsky opened the garage, started up his Mustang, and pulled it into the driveway. It still gave him the occasional shiver to look over to the other side of the two car garage and see the Torino up on blocks.

Although shot up badly in the firefight with Gunther's men, it had been well mended afterwards and Starsky had driven it for another year on the job, and a second year just as a personal car. But it always had strange little idiosyncrasies after the shooting, even with the loving care that Merle put into her. A lot like himself, Starsky had mused. When the wheels kept losing alignment for no
discernable reason, and the timing mechanism gave out more than once on the freeway, Hutch had told him that he had to decide whether he loved the car or Hutch more, because if Hutch had any say, the car was simply too dangerous and unreliable. Starsky didn't have to think about it for long, not really, and chose Hutch over the Torino. But he wouldn't sell the car, that was final. He'd already been using the Mustang on the job at the time, so the transition wasn't as hard as he'd expected.

"Hutch?" Starsky leaned out the window. Hutch hadn't moved from the edge of the lawn. He was still standing there with the mail under one arm, staring fixedly at a letter. "Did you get bad news?"

"I passed," Hutch said so softly Starsky could barely hear him.

"What?"

"I passed." Hutch ran over, holding the letter up. "The MCAT. I aced it."

"Ya-hoo!" Starsky did a modified touchdown dance right in the driver's seat. "You did it, you did it. Medical school here you come!"

"Starsky!" Hutch wailed. "I never expected to do it on the first try."

"I did." Starsky patted the passenger seat. "C'mon, get in. Now we got more than one thing to celebrate today, Doctor Hutchinson."

"We live together, you don't have to use my full title," Hutch joked weakly, still looking a little shell-shocked. "Just Doc will do."

The Long Beach Museum of Art looked spectacular in the brilliant April noonday sun. The brick building accented the green grass and the darker blue of the ocean beyond like a topaz jewel. Already there were streams of people walking up to the building dressed in bright, festive clothes. Starsky waited in the car while Hutch went around to the trunk to get the wheelchair. After wrestling the folded up contraption of chrome and rubber to the ground, Hutch managed to set it up properly, despite Starsky's giggles. He still wasn't completely down to earth after getting the news about the MCAT. That meant he had to seriously pursue medical school. Was this the right time, with his lover facing terminal cancer?

Not wanting Starsky to expend all his energy walking from the parking lot to the site of the wedding, Hutch stood firm until Starsky seated himself in the wheelchair and stowed the crutch behind like a sword sheathed on the saddle of a warrior horse.

There was a pink stretch limo parked along side the building, and Starsky recognized the driver. "Hey, Henry!" he hailed when Hutch had pushed him up close to the car.

"I ain't done nothing, officers," Henry held up both hands like he'd been caught with the goods.

"Not saying you did. You got yourself a steady job?" Starsky peered inside the limo with an admiring whistle.

"Huggy set this up, 'bout two months ago. I been clean and sober for 'long time, brothers. I'm a chauffeur now, got a cap an' everything."

"Keep up the good work, Henry," Hutch said, giving a little shove to get the chair over a patch of broken pavement where a tree root was growing up between the cracks.
"How come we didn't rate a ride in the limo?" Starsky swiveled around to check out the car from a different angle.

"A pink limousine, Starsky?" Hutch groaned, looking down at the curly head fondly. He was in love with everything today. It truly felt like it was his own wedding day, although he'd always counted the day he presented Starsky with a ring as their real anniversary. December 20th. He and Starsky had been not-so-legally married for more than four months now. He moved his hand a little on the handlebar of the wheelchair so that the sun glinted off his gold band. *From Here to Eternity*, however long that was. His heart stuttered a beat in protest of the sadness to come, and Hutch willed himself not to think of things like that. Today, on April 27th, Huggy and Daisy would make it official, with all their friends around to celebrate. This was their day.

"I'm too low, I can't see over all these people," Starsky complained. "Park the chariot somewhere and let me walk."

"How about here?" Hutch trundled the chair over the grass to a grouping of tables set with a view of the ocean. The décor, as Daisy had said, was all blue and green, with centerpieces of green orchids tied with blue ribbons at every table. It was far more tasteful than Hutch had expected.

"Good enough. Is there anything to eat yet?"

"Starsky, are you a bottomless pit? The food is Afterwards, at the reception." Hutch scanned the crowd of chatting people for Huggy, but he was nowhere to be seen. At one end of the wide lawn there was a small trellis set up with chairs on either side, obviously where the wedding would take place. Because of the museum's busy schedule, the rehearsal had been at the Pits, so it was exciting to see how the real thing looked.

"I'm going to find Huggy, you coming?"

Starsky had put on sunglasses against the intense sun and was still fiddling with his tie. He shrugged as if it made no difference, and shook his head. "No, I'll wait."

"You okay, Starsk?" That tight feeling of dread that he'd had the weekend Starsky was sick came on so fast Hutch was slightly dizzy. He hadn't expected this on such a bright and glorious day.

"Hutch." Starsky lowered the glasses, looking at Hutch over the top edge with those devastating, but exasperated blue eyes. "Just keeping cool. And there's soda over at the bar. You don't want me to get dehydrated before the main event, do ya?"

"This is not a boxing match," Hutch grumbled, but fetched a coke with a lightness of heart. Starsky was just being sensible. A rare occurrence, to be sure, but one Hutch had noticed more and more often. Maybe being 40 had mellowed him.

He glanced back at his partner before going into the darkness of the museum. Starsky was at his charming best, schmoozing with a redhead that Hutch vaguely recognized from the rehearsal dinner. Hutch never saw his lover as anything other than how Starsky had been a year ago. His hair was a mass of curls that framed his narrow face enough to hide the vestiges of cancer. The well-cut suit fit nicely, disguising the fact that Starsky was still about 15 pounds underweight, and from this angle, with the strong right leg in front of the left one, the amputation wasn't at all obvious. Hutch grinned foolishly, feeling silly for falling in love with his partner all over again in the space of an instant.

"Hey, Blondie," Huggy said, pounding Hutch heartily on the back. "You dress up good."

"Don't look too badly yourself." Hutch ran a finger down the deep blue satin lapel of Huggy's
"Are you nervous?"

"Man," Huggy drew the word out until it had four syllables. "The butterflies in my belly are doing the jitterbug."

"She's a wonderful woman, and you found a prize."

"I did at that." Huggy beamed widely, all his teeth very white against his dark skin. "How's Starsky doing this morning? He was in rare form last night."

"He's practically bouncing," Hutch said. "Thanks, Huggy."

"For what?" Huggy inspected himself in a mirror, running a careful hand over his recently shorn head. Tiny curls lay flat against his scalp like a perfect cap.

"All of this, including us."

"Hutch, you think I'd do anything else?" Huggy took a deep breath, and Hutch really saw how deeply Huggy had been affected by Starsky's illness. After barely managing to contain his own grief for so long, Hutch was finally able to see past himself to Huggy's pain. "You both are my family, man," Huggy said, pulling Hutch into a bear hug which embarrassed and comforted them both.

Outside, the sound of a band tuning up with Stairway to Heaven had drowned out the ambient chatter of the wedding guests. "You have a rock band?" Hutch asked, as they reassumed their manly decorum.

"Turkey and the Giblets."

"As in your old PI friend Turkey? I didn't know he could play."

"His fingers rival Liberace on the keyboard. Smooth. His brother Ed and sister-in-law Suzanne make up the Giblets."

"They play a lot of gigs at Thanksgiving?" Hutch deadpanned.

"You got the rings?" Huggy was suddenly obviously rattled, his long fingers flapping as he searched his jacket pockets.

"You never gave them to me."

"Oh, damn..." Huggy looked frantically around the room. "What did I do...?"

"Could this be what you're looking for?" Hutch picked up a jewelry box from the table right in front of them, and opened the lid. Two rings were nestled inside, both Indian puzzle rings made of gold. The smaller woman's band featured a row of tiny diamonds on the top most link of the ring.

"I can do this," Huggy said firmly. "I've run a bar since I was sixteen years old, how much harder can this be?"

"You were sixteen and working in a bar?" Hutch asked incredulously.

"Will you get out there, the music is starting!"

Hutch stepped out into the sunshine to the notes of Here, There, and Everywhere by the Beatles. He was struck at the weird synchronicity. Suddenly, he heard Beatles songs all the time, years after they had broken up as a band. He spotted Starsky walking carefully over the lawn on the words,
"Each one believing that love never dies..." and almost choked, but Starsky was beckoning him over with a splendidous smile, and Hutch went to his lover's arms.

"Huggy getting cold feet?" Starsky grinned his most mischievous.

"Never," Hutch scoffed, laughing, wrapped in the intoxicating love in Starsky's eyes. This was how it was meant to be. He and Starsky, together forever. This was the best he could, and would, ever remember.

One of Huggy's many relatives, dressed in the traditional garb of a minister, stepped into his place under the trellis, and encouraged the stragglers to find their seats as the band struck up the lovely notes of the Wedding March.

Huggy appeared beside Starsky and Hutch, almost as if he'd been summoned magically by the music, but he wasn't paying a bit of attention to his best men. Instead, all eyes in the entire assemblage were trained on the vision coming out of the museum. Marigold came first, wearing a lovely blue chiffon dress with accents of aquamarine. Behind her, Daisy walked on her father's arm, graceful as the mermaid she'd wanted to emulate, in a form-fitting dress of the palest lavender. The skirt was sprinkled with delicate sequins that caught the sunlight, playing rainbow games every time Daisy took a step and shifted the fabric of her gown.

Huggy seemed drawn to her as if she had magnets sewn all along the edge of her gown, his long body angled toward her even before she took her place at his side. Both of them simply looked at each other for a moment, caught up in the kind of love Hutch recognized. He felt Starsky wiggle fingers against his palm, and turned to grin at his partner.

"My friends, we have come together for the joining of our two friends, Horatio Bernard Brown and Daisy Buttercup Bouquet Peducci, but this is also a renewal of the love we all feel for one another, either romantic or just as friends. A wedding is a reminder for those of us lucky enough to be in a relationship to hold each other dear and close, for that is the most blessed gift we will ever receive." Pastor John Brown paused to look around, his glance lingering longest on Starsky and Hutch.

Hutch squeezed Starsky's hand as the minister continued, and under cover of the bridal couple saying their vows, the best men whispered theirs to one another.

Starsky leaned back in his chair, sipping his third glass of champagne. He squinted, watching Hutch attempt to dance with Marigold. He loved Hutch in all things, except for this one. The man couldn't dance. He flailed his arms around like a frog on a hotplate, nearly smacking Denise, Huggy's main waitress, in the eye. She laughed it off, but moved her dance partner a little further to the left.

Humming along with the band, Starsky was surprised that JD Turquet, who had been a lousy private eye, and an even worse real estate agent, was a pretty fine musician. Some people found their calling on the fourth or fifth ring. Their version of the Australian group Men at Work's "Land Down Under" had most of the wedding guests singing along with gusto.

The cake had been cut, the garter and bouquet thrown, and about six million pictures had been posed for and taken, but Starsky was in no mood to leave. This was bliss. He'd gotten the wedding ceremony he'd never expected. Most of the guests hadn't even noticed the secret union going on right in front of their eyes, but a couple of people had quietly come up and congratulated Starsky and Hutch during the reception. He kind of wished he'd invited his brother, just to have family
It had been so damn long since Starsky had enjoyed himself so much. Sure, he was tired, almost too exhausted to move, but it was a happy, contented fatigue. No aches today, no phantom pain. Early in the day, just after they'd arrived, he'd felt strangely short of breath, just for a while, especially when Daisy's father had smoked a cigar and the smoke had blown Starsky's way. But now, with all the smokers over in a conclave near the parking lot, and a great deal of food, cake, and wine under his belt, Starsky was feeling no pain whatsoever. He'd even gotten a turn around the dance floor with Daisy, who'd held him close for a moment and whispered a quiet prayer up to her brother. Starsky understood what an honor it was that she shared this moment with him, and had kissed her gravely on the cheek. She was dancing with her husband now, her dark eyes staring into his, and both of them laughing like fiends.

"It's love, Captain," Starsky whispered to himself.

"Hey." Hutch picked up Starsky's champagne, draining the glass and looking like Lancelot himself after a battle. His blond hair was sweaty and mussed across his forehead and his bow tie was untied, the ends curled around his open shirt collar. "The band is playing one last song, a slow one, before they fold up. Care for a dance?"

"With you?" Starsky tried to look coy, but judging from Hutch's giggles, it wasn't successful. "The Kermit the Frog impersonator?"

"You wound me, you really do." Hutch pulled Starsky to his foot and held him firmly when he swayed. "Had one too many?"

"Nah, it's the same effect you always have on me, Blintz." Starsky turned his face into Hutch's cheek, listening to the music. It was an old song, one Elvis had sung. "Wise men say…" Starsky sang into Hutch's ear. "Only fools rush in, but I can't help falling in love with you."

They leaned in to one another, locked in an embrace, their bodies barely moving but still dancing, nonetheless.

"Some things were meant to be…" Hutch sang back, never wanting the dance to end. As all things do, the music stopped, the band putting their instruments away. The catering staff was piling plates and carting away the last crumbs of wedding cake when two couples still lingered on the dance floor, swept up in their own internal melodies. Huggy and Daisy kissed, then turned and held out their hands to the other couple. Starsky and Hutch smiled, and linked arms, joining the newlyweds in celebration.

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"How many can you take?" Starsky asked slyly, using all his car salesman wiles to entice. "Two kittens and we throw in a free litter pan and a month's worth of cat chow."

"We already have two cats." Rainbow's mother Dion rolled her eyes. "But they were mine before she was born, so they're old. She wants her own. Just one."

"This one," Rainbow proclaimed. "He's the sweetest ever." She held up an adorable white cat with a vaguely Siamese cast to the eyes and face. Pale brownish areas on the shoulders and ears had formed since his emergence as a white kitten two months ago, Pansy's heritage showing up in only
one of the kittens.

"He's a she." Starsky stroked her head. "Meeny, although you're free to change the name. No extra charge."

"I like it. My Meeny." Rainbow nuzzled the squirming kitten while her mother kept Moon from chasing after the one remaining kitten, L'Chaim.

Starsky had made it his job to get rid of all the kittens now that they were old enough. Rosie had carted off her favorite white one, now renamed Davey, earlier in the week, and the little girls from next door, Shawna and Shawnique, had taken Miney, although they called him Shawn, which Starsky privately thought would make for mass confusion around the house. Daisy had swooped up Moe, surprisingly a girl despite her name, the moment she'd returned from her honeymoon in the Bahamas. All the kittens were spoken for except one.

After the Ben Victors left, loaded up with all the necessary supplies for kitten ownership, Starsky lay down on the couch, covering himself with his favorite ratty afghan. He'd grown very good at faking energy, but visits like this one exhausted him. He had to nap for two hours after being up for only one. It was getting worse and worse as the first days in May slid by. He couldn't put off an appointment with the oncologist any longer. He'd canceled two with John Davies already, because of the impromptu trip to Big Sur and then wedding preparations. John had been lenient, but had called that morning saying he wanted to run some more tests. When Starsky questioned why, the answer had been that it might give them more solutions on keeping him comfortable in the coming weeks.

The coming weeks. Starsky couldn't shake the feeling that things were coming to a head. Oh, probably not in days, or even weeks, but time was growing shorter, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. Not panic exactly, and certainly not fear, but the acceptance had waned just a little. He wanted longer. He wanted years, immeasurable time, not a date on a calendar that he could circle in red. This is the last day.

When he was up to it, he'd been on the phone a great deal, talking to all sorts of people. Not just coffin salesmen, who Starsky now classed as only one step above the sort of vulture sales people who coerced you into buying the top grade model appliances when you only wanted a refrigerator that kept food cold. He'd had to insist several times that he didn't want a copper coffin lined in exquisite brocade. Plain wood with white padding was just fine. He'd almost asked for a red coffin with a white stripe, but had gone with common sense on that one.

He settled as comfortably as possible into the cushions of the couch, feeling pointy kitty feet walk up the curve of his side and settle into his body. Pansy's purr was like a vibrator against his chest, very soothing. He drifted into a light doze, seeing Hutch walk in after a long day at medical school and he would pop up with streamers and confetti to shower over the newly graduated doctor.

"Wake up, sleepy head." Hutch nuzzled his ear.

"Hmm, is it morning?" Starsky pushed the afghan off, barely awake from his lovely dream.

"It's one in the afternoon. I brought you some falafel and hummus from the Moroccan place you like so much." Hutch plunked a bag on the coffee table, just to the right of the cavorting dolphins and began removing the contents. Delicious aromas wafted to Starsky's nose and he struggled to sit up without the jabbing back pain that had been plaguing him recently.

"Don't know how you did it, convincing me to try this stuff, but this is one vegetarian meal I can't get enough of." Starsky closed his eyes tightly once he'd gotten all the way into a sitting position,
breathing through the sharp pain. It faded away as it always did.

"Baby?" Hutch asked gently, his eyes sad.

"Give me lots of tahini sauce on my falafel balls."

"You leading me astray, Starsk?" Hutch poured sauce on his pita bread sandwich and passed it over. "The lewd things I could do with that…"

"Afternoon delight, Hutch." Starsky lowered his eyelashes seductively and took a bite of one fried falafel ball. "Mmmm."

"I'll get you for that!" Hutch threatened in a strangled voice, adjusting the crotch of his jeans before sitting down. "Now I've got all these visions of doing it in a silk tent with mysterious sheiks from the East."

"Sultans," Starsky corrected and reached over to wipe a trace of hummus off Hutch's upper lip. "I only do it with royalty myself."

"Good enough for me," Hutch kissed Starsky's fingers, then leaned forward to kiss him on the lips. "How was your morning?"

"One kitten left. Think I should take it down to the grocery with a "Free to the first good home" sign, or…"

"L'Chaim's left?" Hutch asked in a strange voice.

StarSky spotted the black fuzzball chasing the pink pompom that Rosie had given him around the floor while Pansy watched with rapt attention. Every once in a while she'd pounce, wrestling her baby to the floor before L'Chaim wriggled free and batted the pompom away again.

"I want to keep him."

"You never said." StarSky stopped with the remainder of his pita bread halfway to his mouth.

"I..." Hutch shrugged, scooping the kitten up. "I thought if one of the girls wanted him, I'd know where he was, but...I want to keep him." He tried feeding L'Chaim a morsel of pita, but the kitten looked affronted and hopped over his arm to the floor. "He reminds me of you."

"Won't have blue eyes forever," Starsky said softly to cover up the wash of emotion that nearly drowned him. L'Chaim had always been his favorite, as well.

"That's okay, I'll remember." Hutch blinked twice, but StarSky caught sight of the tiny tear that glistened for just an instant before it was whisked away by blond lashes.

"Uh." StarSky had to get them off this subject or they'd both be puddles on the floor. "John called. I got an appointment for tomorrow morning. You don't have any classes on Friday morning, do you?"

"No." Hutch took a long swallow of iced tea, his Adam's apple bobbing more so than usual for just one drink. "I can drive you over."


"StarSk, I'm coming."
"I knew you would." Starsky winked, proud that he made Hutch smile.

Starsky awakened slowly, waiting for his body to catalogue each ache and pain so he could decipher which one to defer to and which could be neglected. His back was definitely the winner—it usually was, being the biggest. The pain started at his coccyx, radiating up his spine to waist level. Made sitting up a bitch. Usually Hutch could be depended upon to show up at just the right moment to help maneuver him into a sitting position. Today was no exception. As if on cue, Hutch appeared in the doorway like he'd had his ear cocked for the first sounds of movement.

"Back hurt today?"

"Back gets the gold, but my leg comes in close for the silver, and it's not even really there!" Starsky complained as Hutch carefully levered him up so he was perched on the side of the bed. "If I can't even see my foot, I don't think it should hurt like this!"

"Well, in that case, I think you're going to really like what's on the breakfast menu this morning," Hutch said with a smirk.

"What is it? I'm not all that hungry."

"Ghost toasties and milk."

Starsky gave a startled gasp at the unexpected answer and let lose a string of giggles, bracing his aching back with one hand. "Hutch! That's the worst joke you've ever told in your entire life."

"I learned from the master himself," Hutch cackled with glee at his success.

Starsky's giggles ended in a sharp barking cough that rattled his rib cage. Hutch rubbed his back, waiting for Starsky to get his wind back. This was happening more and more frequently, especially in the morning or when Starsky did even moderate exercise.

"Want a shower this morning?" Hutch asked.

"Give me a couple minutes and I'll pull myself together." Starsky reached for the bottle of painkillers that lived in his bedside drawer. He didn't like having to resort to them but today he couldn't linger in bed until things got easier. He was due at the hospital at 9:45, and it was already 8 o'clock. He'd need the extra stamina the pills gave him to endure the endless needle sticks and scans the day held in store.

Hutch put a glass of water and another of orange juice by Starsky's elbow and went over to rummage through the bureau drawers. "You want a t-shirt or a plaid button down?"

"Since you're in plaid, I'll go for a tee. The one about lemonade." Starsky swallowed the pills with a grimace.

Hutch looked perplexed as he pulled out the shirt, and stared down at the optimist phrase about turning lemons into lemonade. His expression made Starsky want to turn away, but he didn't, bracing himself for what Hutch might say. He certainly didn't have to answer it, but he wanted to hear what fears his lover was harboring.

"Starsk, do you already know something? About what John's going to say?"

"You buttoned your shirt up wrong." Starsky pointed with all innocence. When Hutch frowned,
checking his reflection in the mirror, Starsky cracked up. "Made you look!"
"Juvenile."

"Don't forget, sonny-boy, I'm older than you." Starsky cackled in an old man's voice. He hooked an arm around his crutches, climbing to his foot. The bathroom was ten steps from the bed; he'd counted it on more than one occasion. With the combination of a warm shower and the drugs kicking in, he'd be hale and hearty in a short while. "I'll be out in ten minutes for those Ghost Toasties. Make sure they aren't soggy."

"I don't pour the milk until I see the whites of your eyes." Hutch kissed him before scooting the two cats out of the bathroom so Starsky could shower.

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Hutch was scared. All the terrible, unspeakable fears that had built up since the original diagnosis were back. In actual fact, they'd never left, he'd just gotten much better at ignoring them. Now, he felt weighed down with the gnawing, enervating fear. How was he going to get through this day? He didn't want to know what John Davies was going to say, and yet he did. If they postponed this appointment until next week would it change anything? If he convinced Starsky to restart chemo this very day, would that change anything? Or was there truly a book up in heaven with Starsky's name in the death column, an appointment with the Grim Reaper all ready set up?

He thought surely he would go out of his mind. How could he possibly be thinking about the future, looking at medical schools? Once Starsky . . . moved on, would he himself be able to move at all?

And yet, life progressed, just like it always had. He'd woken Starsky up in the morning just like he had countless times during their detective partnership. Starsky had always been the snugabed, way back to their academy days.

Hutch smiled, poised in the act of pulling down boxes of breakfast cereal, remembering the impossibly young Starsky running down the hall to class with his cadet uniform untucked and regulation black shoes untied. Hutch had won the appearance award, always keeping his uniform in tip top shape, and would have gotten the on time award, as well, if it hadn't been for his perpetually late roommate. Starsky had finally resorted to setting his alarm ten minutes ahead so that he'd have extra time. And then would fritter those precious minutes away by repeatedly hitting the snooze alarm.

That's what Hutch wanted now, a snooze alarm. When things got too heavy, when he couldn't face hearing more bad news about Starsky's cancer, and life was too complicated, just hit that snooze bar and cruise.

"What you smiling about, Hutch?" Starsky leaned against the door jam, lemon yellow t-shirt untucked.

"Academy days." Hutch sliced the rest of the strawberries and set the bowl on the table beside the cereal. "You know, I thought you were too young to qualify. Looked like a teenager."

"Yeah?" Starsky laughed. "Guess the whole Viet Nam thing didn't age me as much as I thought, huh? I thought you were some prissy farm boy with a rod up your butt."

"Do you have to resort to crass sex talk at the breakfast table?" Hutch groaned, amazed that they went on talking such trivial, normal stuff right before the visit to the oncologist. But they had to maintain regular habits, or he'd never be able to cope at all.
"You walked so ramrod straight."

"Don't any more." Hutch delighted in watching Starsky dig into his breakfast, but the burst of appetite didn't last long. He stopped eating long before the Starsky of a year ago would have. "You were a punk ass hoodlum kid."

"And proud of it." Starsky plunked his spoon into the milk at the bottom of his bowl hard enough to splash some out the sides onto the cuffs of Hutch's plaid shirt, and time moved forward inexorably.

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"The films we took this morning paint a pretty grim picture," Davies said soberly. He laced his fingers behind his back for a moment, the early afternoon sun coming through the window of his office highlighting his white lab coat.

The gleam almost made Starsky want to blink, but he couldn't turn his eyes away from the doctor. He wanted to read every nuance of the man's expression even before he heard the words. First impressions weren't encouraging.

"There's no easy way to say this. The cancer has metastasized, Starsky. We found tumors at the base of your spine and in your lungs."

Hutch gasped, but Starsky nodded, his knuckles pressed to his lower lip. "John, I know you don't like to quote the odds, but what's your best guess, time wise?" Starsky wasn't really all that surprised. The last couple of weeks he'd been aware of a tightness in his chest, that odd feeling that a big breath didn't quite fit into his lungs. And he couldn't even pinpoint when the ache in his back had progressed from a once in a while, the bedsprings must have poked me in the night, to a constant nagging annoyance. Strange what a person could get used to.

He searched out Hutch's face, wanting to reassure, but his lover was hunched down, one hand covering his eyes, already in mourning. Starsky couldn't have that, not now. They'd known all along he might not finish out 1985. They just had to readjust their priorities, deal with the sobering truth as best as they could.

Hutch gave a shaky sigh, dropping his hand heavily into his lap and Starsky reached over, grasping it tightly. United they could withstand anything.

"Starsky, there are so many variables. One person with x-rays and blood tests like yours would already be dead, and another could be given a few months to live and celebrate his birthday the following year. There's so much about cancer we don't understand right now." Davies gave an elaborate, almost Gallic shrug. "There are no absolutes. I will say, from my standpoint, that it doesn't look good. You're welcome to a second opinion, of course."

"We've always trusted yours, John," Hutch said weakly.

"Yeah, thanks for laying it out for us." Starsky nodded. He liked knowing the truth, as nebulous as it was at the present time.

"We need to start talking about contingencies--what to do if things get worse. I can give you the name of a hospice . . ." 

"I want to stay at home. No more hospital stays," Starsky insisted, and felt Hutch's grip tighten in his. "Sophie and Mick still come over, and they know the routines."
"That's good, then."

"And I already bought a casket."

"You have been thinking ahead."

"Don't want mushbrain here to have to do it all." Starsky finally caught Hutch's eye. Hutch was doing all he could to hold back tears, which gave him a stern, severe expression that might have scared off a lessor man. Not Starsky, who wanted to shout "I love you" right there in John's office, but he didn't because he could see in Hutch's bleak eyes that he knew.

"You may start having more difficulty breathing, so I can hook you up with a home health company that will supply a tank of oxygen." John walked around his desk, digging through some pamphlets and papers as if he were much more comfortable keeping this in the concrete of what to do and when to do it rather than discussing the abstract concepts of if and why. "I can also prescribe drugs for pain, but I would like you to consider a yoga class."

"Yoga?" Starsky nearly laughed, wondering how a one legged man could do some of those body contorting positions.

"Yoga," Hutch said as if he'd grabbed on to the last life preserver on the Marie Celeste.

"I was never into all that new age stuff like Hutch," Starsky said dismissively.

"Starsk, research has found that meditation and yoga greatly reduces pain, and gives an overall feeling of well being," Hutch put in excitedly.

"I see you're still keeping up with the current medical literature, Ken," Davies said dryly with a hint of a smile. "And this is a yoga class geared specifically for cancer survivors, Starsky. It's run by Saiisa Borunda, and family are encouraged to join in. So, Hutch could come, too."

"I'd like to." Hutch seemed revitalized, and Starsky wasn't exactly sure why. Surely he knew that this wasn't some magic bullet that would cure everything. "Starsk? Please? Just to see what it's like."

"Yeah, okay," Starsky said reluctantly. He imagined himself falling over while everyone else managed a tree pose flawlessly, and winced. How had this whole discussion turned so totally around? He was the one who'd come in--maybe not confident, but aware that his health was failing, and able to handle the information. Now he felt unbalanced, all because he couldn't control one little facet of his life. Well, more than one, but he'd planned on being the strong one, taking care of Hutch's grief without giving in to abject depression as he'd done in December and January. He glanced down at the slogan on his shirt and allowed himself to be cheered. Nothing to do but make sweet juice. "Maybe I can tone up, huh?" He joked. "Get back those washboard abs?"

"You never had washboard abs," Hutch retorted.

"You're memory's going, Hutchinson. Old age creeping up." Starsky took a deep, cleansing breath, sure that he could actually feel the tumors taking up residence in his lungs. "But not today, I'm beat."

It had been a hellish morning. He was certain the phelbotomist in the lab had taken about a quart of blood from his veins. Luckily some had been drawn out of his subclavian port, but there had also been the dreaded arterial blood gas, which always felt like someone sticking a horse needle half way up his arm and then twisting it violently. Then there had been x-rays and examinations by every one of his specialists, including the newest one, Dr. Kelly, a lung doctor. All Starsky wanted
to do was crawl into bed for the next two days and sleep.

"Which brings me to my next topic, your blood count is low. Platelets, red and white cells."

"Tell that to the vampires in the lab." Starsky rubbed at the bandage covering the bruise on his wrist.

"You need a transfusion." As if anticipating Starsky's reaction, John held up a hand to stop him from speaking. "It will make you feel a lot better. More energy and a boost to your immune system."

"When?" Hutch asked.

"I was thinking this afternoon, since you're already here."

"Spoil the day, why don't you," Starsky sneered.

"Do you have plans?"

Hoping Hutch would pipe up with something, Starsky shrugged. No, he didn't, but that wasn't the point. He simply didn't want to be a patient any longer. Not ever again. "No."

"They got a new VCR up in the Rose Tree Unit. You can pop in a movie, catch up with some of the nurses, and it will be over in an hour or so." John nodded, the decision final.

"What were you, activities director on a cruise in a former life?" Starsky got up, feeling the ache in his spine clear up to his shoulders. Maybe yoga wouldn't be a bad idea after all. He grimaced at Hutch, all but sticking his tongue out at him in a childish pique. "And you weren't much help, buddy."

"I was thinking of making reservations at Zodiac for dinner tonight." Hutch gave him a hug that nearly off balanced Starsky even further. "So we can have some quiet time together."

"I want the cancer table, I'm feeling crabby." Starsky couldn't maintain any sort of churlishness when enveloped in a hug.

"I did work as a camp counselor when I was 15, with my brother. We used to confuse the hell out of the campers because we looked so much alike," John said brightly, holding open his office door.

"You want a wheelchair up to Rose Tree?"

"I can walk." Starsky reasserted his dignity and stalked off to the elevator.

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"You comfortable?" Mika asked brightly, adjusting the level of a reclining chair next to an IV pole, obviously quite aware that Starsky was in a grumpy mood.

He shook his head, sulking.

"Ve haff vays off making you talk, Mr. Starsky," she faked a German SS guard accent so badly even Starsky couldn't keep a smile off his face. Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, Hutch was watching warily, but he smiled, too. "C'mon guys," Mika complained, getting out alcohol wipes. "This is my best material."

"Been watching too many old movies, Mika," Starsky grumbled.
"Which brings up the question, do you want a video on the pristine new VCR or the old reliable radio?"

"Sorry I took so long, lads." Gemma hurried into the room, an IV bag of deep red blood in her hand. "Blood bank was backed up with all the trauma surgeries going on."

"What happened?" Hutch asked.

"Multiple car pile up on the freeway." Gemma shook her head. "Four casualties and six came in through our ER. It was a mess."

"Damn," Starsky whispered. Just when he was about to wallow in his own misfortunes, he came smack up against someone who had it worse off than he did. As much as having cancer sucked, at least he had time to get used to his own mortality. And to give his friends time to grieve. Being alive and driving along one minute, and crunched against the side of some big rig two minutes later was a horrible way to go. "Hey, can't we get this show on the road? I got a date tonight." He wagged his eyebrows at Hutch, who blushed.

"You two never could keep it in your pants," Mika teased, double checking the information on the blood bag and the band on Starsky's wrist to prevent any errors. She quickly hooked the bag into the plastic tubing, fingerling the roller clamp until the red stuff was flowing at the right volume.

Starsky pushed up his yellow shirt to give her access to the port in his chest, and pretended to shiver when she wiped the rubber stopper with alcohol. The IV tubing was quickly attached to the subclavian site. Lastly, Mika took a set of vitals signs and noted the transfusion start time on her nurse's notes.

"Not much I can do hooked up to this contraption." Starsky tucked his shirt down, covering some of the tubing, which felt slightly cold against his skin. The blood had obviously just recently come out of the refrigerator. "Can you turn on the radio? To the oldies station."

"Don't you just adore all those songs from the fifties?" Gemma said to no one in particular, adjusting the radio dial until the pounding beat of a Phil Specter Wall of Sound tune came blaring out. "Well, this one isn't my favorite."

"Played that at my prom." Mika swayed her hips back and forth.

"Mika, you can't possibly be old enough to remember that one the first time around. I think they played it at my prom," Hutch protested.

"In my junior year, we had 'go as your favorite early '60s group' dance. I was Ronnie Specter with my hair up in a beehive 'do."

Starsky guffawed. "You have to bring me that picture sometime."

"As long as you bring me in one with your hair all slicked back in a duck tail." She popped the thermometer back in his mouth, cutting off his reply.

Vitals had to be taken multiple times during a transfusion to watch for any adverse reactions. Starsky knew that his favorite nurses were taking no chances with someone in such an advanced state of cancer, but it still made him feel more like a patient again. As much as he enjoyed joking around with Mika and Gemma, he wanted out as fast as possible. He spit the thermometer back into Mika's hand and she pretended to be disgusted by the wet end.

"Hutch, you don't have to hang around the whole time." Starsky focused on the opposite wall
which featured a poster of a kitten hanging from a rope by a single paw. He hated having Hutch watch all this stuff, seeing him vulnerable and weak.

"What else am I supposed to do?"

"I dunno, grade papers? Don't the cadets have finals coming up?"

"Starsky, it will take nearly as long to drive over to the academy and get their essays, and then come back as it will to finish this all up."

"Then could you go get me a coke? Eat something yourself? You look like you had bad news this morning."

Hutch opened his mouth, and shut it abruptly, taking the coded message as Starsky had intended. They both needed a few minutes to regroup.

"Don't worry, love, Mika will keep an eye on him." Gemma put a motherly arm around Hutch's shoulders. "I'm due for a break, meself. Care to share a ride in the lift?"

"Always with you, dear lady." Hutch walked out with her, with only a brief look back at Starsky.

"Leave me with all the work, do you!" Mika called out, teasing. Gemma waggled her fingers over her shoulder as the door closed.

Starsky felt the tension whoosh out. Hutch's understandable fears were weighing them both down.

"You had a hard morning, Starsky." Mika wrote on her notes, not looking at him, her voice stating fact, not questioning it.

"Yeah." He tried concentrating on lyrics of the next song. Instead of listening to the thoughts whirling around in his brain. Metastasized. Tumors in his spine and lungs. "Don't know much trigonometry, but I do know one and one is two..." A cute song but it had never been his favorites. "Nothing gets any easier."

"Sometimes I don't know how couples like you get through this stuff."

"Huh? You have to deal with it every day."

"And we make a lot of friends who...die." Mika finally looked over at him, her brown eyes suspiciously wet. "But, if it were my lover, I don't know what I'd do."

"Just hang on," Starsky said truthfully pointing to the valiant kitten.

"Sometimes this is a very hard place to work." Mika held up the thermometer again with a wicked little smile. "The rest of the time, I love my job."

"I'll bet you do," Starsky muttered around the glass tube.

On the radio, the Sam Cook song ended and the adorably squeaky voice of the afternoon DJ filled the room. Starsky was a big fan of Rocking Robin, and had often tuned into her show when he was at his lowest ebb. Somehow her voice always managed to cheer him up, even if just by millimeters.

"Hey, all you fans of cash, the KMBC Big Bucks contest started this week. Just one easy phone call, and you too can be the proud winner of One Thousand bucks! Once a day, every day, all this month! Call 555-7272 right now, and be the twelfth caller! Just know the song of the day."
"Mika!" Starsky pulled out the thermometer. "You have a phone?"

"Starsky, this one doesn't call out. It only works internally." She peered at the mercury. "And put that back, you weren't done yet. Do you even know the song of the day?"

Starsky tongued the thermometer again, planning to sit by the phone in the living room for the rest of the week with the radio on. He didn't know today's song, but he was going to find out tomorrow's. He was going to win that money.

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A group of third graders were warbling tunes about springtime in the cafeteria to an appreciative audience of parents and hospital patients. Hutch had now attended enough of these afternoon performances to see that hospital patients would clap for anything. The ones who were healthy or mobile enough to make it to the cafeteria to attend the show were so happy to get out of their rooms that they'd have given standing ovation to dancing fleas. Still, the children were adorable, especially a gap toothed red haired girl in the front row who kept swaying side to side with the beat, but Hutch felt absolutely drained, and would have preferred a quiet place without another soul.

"D'you feel like talking a bit, or do you want to be alone?" Gemma asked, selecting a cup of tea from the automatic dispenser.

"I think I need the quiet. I'm going to go out on the patio." Hutch punched the button for Starsky's Coke, and then decided on a cup of tea from the other machine for himself.

"Ken, there's no shame in a few tears." Gemma put a gentle hand on his arm and moved away, sipping her steaming brew. The children were bowing proudly after their last number, and she went over to congratulate them.

Hutch pocketed the Coke, and stood back watching, wishing he had it in him to be happy for the delighted children who were now giving out handmade Get Well cards to the patients. He felt sick at heart, and Gemma's words had nearly undammed the backload of pain he'd banked all morning. There was no getting out of it. Starsky would leave him, forever, in a possibly painful and debilitating way.

His hand trembling so badly that he could barely hold the cup of tea, Hutch walked slowly around the chattering group to the sanctuary of the patio. No one was out there, and the wind that had bent trees and blown trash around in the morning had died down, leaving the sky brightly blue and serene. He brought the tea to his lips, but couldn't drink, his throat spasming with the grief he didn't want to acknowledge. Finally, there was nothing more to do but let go.

With a growl, he savagely threw the Styrofoam cup against a planter, splattering the hot tea across the cement. Oddly, it made him feel a great deal better, and the tears backed off to wherever they kept themselves closeted most of the time. He wondered briefly if he should clean up the brown stain, but two pigeons had swooped down to investigate, and he kind of wished he'd bought a muffin or roll to feed them with.

He sat, simply existing as time passed. The overhead sun had moved just enough that the shadow of the building was now covering Hutch, and it was slightly too cool to sit comfortably out of doors. Starsky would probably be wondering where he was by now. With a lightened outlook on life, Hutch made his way back to the Rose Tree Unit.

Starsky was still sitting in the reclining chair, but the transfusion paraphernalia was all gone and he
was chatting with a pretty girl in a head scarf, who had a patch over one eye. Hutch blanked momentarily on her first name, but remembered she'd been one of the gang who'd brought down Schroeder and company.

Starsky grinned at something the girl said as Hutch came in, his eyes vibrant. It was amazing what a pint of blood did for him. He was positively glowing, his skin pink and radiant, giving no sign of someone with malignant tumors. Hutch wanted to throw his arms around him, but couldn't with the girl in the room. When Starsky turned his full gaze at his partner, the power of his sexual desire hit Hutch right between the eyes. Starsky's red blood cells weren't the only thing that had gotten a boost. The boy was in heat.

"Hutch, you remember Julia?" Starsky said. "She got a new glass eye last week. Looks good, huh?"

Then he remembered that Julia had recently lost a second eye to cancer, and was permanently blind. She turned towards him to show off the blue orb with a tentative smile. "You're beautiful, Julia," Hutch said honestly.

"I'm getting used to it," she said shyly. "I gotta get going. My mother promised to bring by some homework from school. I've been learning Braille."

"That's terrific. I'm real glad I got to see you, sweetheart." Starsky touched her hand as she stood up, gripping a white cane. "You get to go home this weekend?"

"Yes. I think we're going over to the mall." She bounced the cane on the floor idly. "It will be my first time--like this."

"Just remember, the heart sees what the eyes can't." Starsky kissed the hand he held tenderly. "I saw that on a greeting card and just knew someday I'd find just the right lady to say it to."

"Then my heart must be nearsighted, cause I keep tripping over things," Julia sighed with a faint smile. She walked with cautious grace to the door, tapping the cane on floor and furniture to guide her.

"God, I'm glad I didn't go blind." Starsky scrubbed at his face.

"Would that be worse than this?" Hutch asked curiously. He'd never considered that one cancer might be better than another. While survival rates and treatments had vastly improved since his maternal grandmother had died horribly of 'that female cancer', all malignancies were vicious creatures that robbed otherwise healthy people of their lives. He hated cancer with a passion.

"Worse than osteosarcoma?" Starsky snorted. "Yeah, I think so. Anything that takes away a sense is the worst. Or the personality, or . . ." He stood languidly, bracing himself on the edge of the chair. There was a slight melancholia about him, but his heavy lidded eyes signaled that Starsky had something other than a discussion of tumors on his mind. His hand floated downward, coming in contact, almost by accident, with the fly of Hutch's pants. "If I didn't have eyes, I couldn't see you, Hutch. If I didn't have a tongue, I couldn't kiss you like this." Starsky demonstrated, glomming onto Hutch with an ardor that spoke of desperation. His tongue darted out, catching Hutch's in a passionate struggle for supremacy.

Hutch was momentarily taken back, they were in a very public place. While all the nurses here knew about their relationship, it wasn't wise to flaunt it so openly. Even so, he couldn't resist the force of Starsky's need, and held onto him, deepening the kiss.
"Hutch," Starsky whispered, pushing against the solidity of his body like he wanted to merge with his lover. "Let's get out of here."

"I couldn't have said it better myself. Do you need to sign anything?"

"No, I just need . . . I wish we could do it right here in the treatment room." Starsky ducked his head, soft hair tickling Hutch's cheek. "Please? Quick?"

Uncertain how to cope with this sex-crazed but strangely pensive Starsky, Hutch bestowed a kiss on the abundance of curls and settled the crutch under his arm. "Can you walk with that boner in the front?"

Starsky tugged his shirt out from his jeans, hiding the evidence, and letting go of Hutch with a mournful sound. "Guess all the blood went there."

"Looks like it." Hutch was glad of the hip length coat he wore, and buttoned the lowest buttons. The soda can, still in his pocket, bumped him on the hip. "You still thirsty?"

"Not for what comes out of an aluminum can," Starsky said, walking so close to Hutch that their bodies kept touching, first an arm, then a thigh, then an arm again. They'd almost made it to the elevator without detection when Mika came out of a patient's room. "Hutch showed up, Mika. I'm out of here."

"Hope there's not a next time," she said gaily. "But if there is, remember the James Dean era picture!"

There were two others in the elevator, a small Asian woman with her arm in a sling and a lab tech carrying some vials to be tested. Hutch was so acutely aware of Starsky's sexual fire, and his own for that matter, that he couldn't believe it wasn't setting the other passengers aflame. He imagined pushing Starsky up against the floor buttons, pressing stop, and kissing him into next week while the Asian woman and the lab guy started grappling on the floor. Starsky's arm, pressed smoothly against Hutch's back from armpit to waist was like a electric current running straight to his cock. Just like on the drive to Big Sur, they'd picked the exact wrong time to be aroused.

The doors slid open on the second floor and both people got off. Immediately, Starsky plunged his hand into Hutch's, gripping it with a strength he hadn't had in a while.

"It's half an hour to the house, can you wait?" Hutch asked.

"What if this is the last time?" Starsky bit his bottom lip, his face so exquisite just then that Hutch could barely breathe. When had Starsky turned into something so inhumanly beautiful? Once they were out in the sunshine, the glow was more pronounced, not less. Starsky had a translucent quality that wasn't just from the infusion of rich blood.

Hutch had always preferred Starsky's more exotic, gypsy looks over his own Nordic features. He'd grown up with a city full of classically blond, blue eyed people. Starsky had been one of the first really ethnic looking people he'd ever met, aside from the few Blacks and infrequent Indians around Duluth. Starsky intrigued him from the first, those slightly tilted blue eyes with lashes so thick he appeared to be wearing mascara. The too sharp nose, and crooked smile, which on another might look mismatched, but on Starsky gave an appearance of mischievous appeal. Except, here, today, there was something else. Something that separated him from other mortals, an ethereal majesty so powerful Hutch couldn't bear it. He seemed to be transforming right before Hutch's eyes.
"It's not the last time, baby. Not today, not ever," Hutch vowed, his hand molding to Starsky's heated neck almost of its own volition. They couldn't stop touching each other, which made walking difficult because Hutch kept whacking his shin on the crutch.

Hutch drove well within the speed limit, but he felt like they were racing toward a finish line neither wanted to cross. Starsky's hand was on his the whole way, whether he gripped the gear or the steering wheel.

The garage was too full of discarded junk to fit all their cars, so Hutch usually parked in the driveway, but he flipped the button on the electronic opener so they could go in that way. The tarpaulin-covered Torino was crowded next to Starsky's Mustang. A chair with an exposed spring, the couch that had once graced Hutch's Venice Place apartment, and boxes of Christmas decorations all barred the way to the interior door. Starsky pulled Hutch onto the couch, holding him tightly as if afraid to let go. In truth, Hutch liked the warmth and security of those arms around him, but Starsky's trembling was another matter.

Tenderly, Hutch kissed his way along Starsky's arm to the shoulder, feeling the tremors subside. He reached Starsky's mouth, savoring the sweetness when his lover responded instantly, their bodies pressed against each other from groin to chest so that penises met and grew. Starsky surged against him, rubbing his jeans covered cock with increasingly frenzied movements against Hutch.

"Starsk!" Hutch ground out, realizing that he was going to come in his pants like a teenager going to home base. "Slow down."

"Can't!" Starsky cried out.

Hutch was glad he'd had the good sense to lower the garage door after they'd come in. Starsky jerked, his eyelids fluttering, and came, clinging to Hutch so that the resulting spasms sent him into orgasm as well.

Hutch pulled Starsky onto his lap, cradling his head against his shoulder, humming softly. He wasn't even sure what he was humming, but he was loath to end the moment.

"Thank you," Starsky said, muffled by cotton knit, kissing Hutch through his shirt.

"I could never say no to you." Hutch smiled indulgently. The news today had been astronomically awful, but right now, things didn't seem so bad.

"That's a lie, and you know it." Starsky shook his head so that curls tickled Hutch's neck. "You've said no to me dozens of times."

"Name one."

"I can't, I'm too comfortable. I don't know why we didn't bring this old couch into the house. It's nice."

"When we moved in, we had two of everything. Something had to go. I couldn't say no to your choices."

Starsky chuffed a laugh. "Maybe we should have a garage sale. Not sell this, but there's lots of other things we don't need anymore." He waved a hand around at the boxes. "That way we could squeeze all three cars into the garage."
"Sounds like a good idea."

"In one month. We both have to pitch in and toss out some old stuff."

"Deal. Now, you want to go into the house and take a shower? We have dinner reservations at seven thirty at the Zodiac."

"Oh, yeah." Starsky lolled his head back, grinning at Hutch from his almost upside down position. "Strange how the day worked out, huh?"

"Strange," Hutch agreed.

As usual, the eclectic restaurant was bustling with people, waiters rushing around with trays held high, customers pointing out their zodiac signs on the wall and exclaiming over their horoscope of the day, and hostesses dodging the busboys as they seated people.

Starsky caught sight of Huggy even before he and Hutch had made it to the Cancer table. The newlyweds were eating shrimp at the Pisces table.

"Hey, look what came up from under a rock," Starsky proclaimed. "Haven't seen much of the two of you lately." He elbowed Hutch jovially. "Whatcha think they've been doing, huh?"

"Probably the same thing we have," Hutch responded with a smirk.

"No, really?" Starsky affected a goggle-eyed expression that had Daisy giggling helplessly.

"You two may want to flaunt your love life all around town, but me and the missus been busy in more lucrative ways," Huggy said, trying to sound pompous, but his big grin gave him away.

"So, what have you been doing besides what every other newlywed does?"

"We're checking out the competition, seein' what our future customers would like to eat." Huggy hooked his thumbs under suspenders decorated with rainbow colored dancing bears.

"We finally found the perfect location for the new restaurant, Mama Bear's," Daisy said excitedly. Her hair documented their honeymoon in the Bahamas, dozens of tiny braids decorated with beads accenting her now sleek head. "It's down near the water, and we got it at a great price because the last owner had a fire that gutted the place."

"Which we don't mind, 'cause that way we can decorate it in out own inimitable style!" Huggy speared another shrimp.

"That's what got you in trouble in the first place." Hutch raised an eyebrow. "When does the demolition begin?"

"It already has. We've got my cousins, her cousins--half of everyone we know on the payroll right now to pull down the rafters." Huggy drank some wine to chase down his shrimp. "After that, it's a bonified contractor. Don't want my baby's place put up with shoddy workmanship."

"Very pale melon walls with yellow accents, and bright fuchsia as a grace color," Daisy put in. "I was with the decorator this morning. It's been crazy. We were only back from St. Thomas one day before everything happened all at once."

"When can we see the place?" Starsky asked.
"We'll be down to the studs in the walls by next week." Huggy waved the waiter over for the check. "Come with us on Tuesday morning for the walk-through and get a feel for the place."

"We're free. No plans right now." Starsky nodded, glancing over at Hutch. He didn't like the way Hutch's eyes, so teasing and happy, went still and dark.

"Did you get some news?" Daisy asked intuitively, clasping Starsky's hand.

He shrugged, this wasn't the time or place to go into things. Daisy probably suspected what he was going to say, anyway. "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated," Starsky quoted Mark Twain. "Doesn't look promising, though."

"I'm sorry," Daisy whispered. Huggy bent over his wallet to pull out some cash, but Starsky could see the set expression on his face, the joy of his new establishment gone.

"On the other hand, I want to throw Mr. 39-for-only-three-more-months a blow out bash for his 40th." Starsky towed Hutch back into the group, feeling him relax slightly at his touch. "So your place better be ready by August."

"I don't want a big party," Hutch protested weakly.

"Too bad, I want to give you one." Starsky gave him a mock glare, daring Hutch to deny him this one thing. He could see it all, Hutch coming into the gaily lit room, his handsome face split with the grin he wore so seldom now days, happy with their friends. "I just decided. A celebration. Don't you think we'll need one by that time?"

"Yeah." Hutch swallowed hard, his face pale.

"We better sit down." Starsky pointed at their green and silver Cancer themed table. "You look like you could use a drink."

"We'll give you a call Monday about the walk-through," Daisy said. "Huggy?"

"We'll give you the best party anyone ever had," Huggy vowed. "Sky's the limit for Blondie here. I'll even spring for imported champagne."

"Aw, you know Hutch, he'll drink anything fermented in a barrel." Starsky winked at his partner, still trying to pull Hutch out of the doldrums. "Don't go for any of that French stuff, buy California grapes. Keep it local."

"I've been studying up on this, for my wine list. California vintages are winning international awards, and amazingly Australian wines are showing up in several categories," Daisy started in but Huggy covered her mouth with his long fingered hand.

"Enough, woman," Huggy chided. "They don't need to know all our secrets." Daisy giggled, biting down on his thumb to be released. Hutch held out her coat for her, giving her a friendly buss on the cheek.

Huggy turned to Starsky, and spoke softly enough so that Hutch and Daisy couldn't hear. "You never did know when to stop fighting. I ain't ever gonna host your wake, you got that?"

"I got it." Starsky bopped him on the arm.

A slender girl with a long blond braid came up as the Browns left. She wore a blue dress with mermaids swimming all around the bottom of the skirt, and Lucite teardrop earrings bobbing from
her lobes. "I'm your waitress, Aquarius. Should I give you two a few minutes to get seated and look at the menu, or do you know what you want?"

"We want two bottles of Dos Eqqus, and two shots of rye," Starsky ordered. The girl smiled, trotting off to get the drinks.

"I don't." Hutch shook his head violently. "The beer yes, the…"

"You join the temperance movement, Carrie Nation? C'mon, siddown," Starsky snarled in his best New York gangster voice. "I'm in the mood for shooters, and it's been way over six hours since I had any painkillers."

"You need to kill some pain?" Hutch asked dully.

"I think you do." Starsky gently knuckled him under the chin, a familiar gesture but not one that would immediately get them fingered as gays. "I'm not advocating liquor for everything, but once in a while, it works pretty good."

"Yeah." Hutch tossed back the shot of whiskey the moment the waitress delivered it. He coughed, clearing his throat, and ordered a blackened catfish with grilled vegetables.

"I want a small pizza with shrimp, crab meat, mozzarella and onions." Starsky handed her the menus unopened. Both he and Hutch went here often enough to know the fare.

"That sounds revolting." Hutch swallowed some beer.

"It's not." Starsky drank down his whiskey in one swallow, savoring the hot, smoky burn in the back of his throat and down his esophagus. He didn't usually like whiskey, but it seemed appropriate for their mood, and besides, it was warming. He'd taken enough courses on the dangers of drinking and alcohol to know that hard liquor wasn't really warming, and it dulled the mind, but it made him feel warmer. He got cold so easily, even on a mild evening like this, and was glad of the fire in the restaurant's fireplace. The mild buzz the drink gave was welcomed, and he dipped into the breadbasket with a mellower state of being.

"I have to go over some paperwork for the academy," Hutch said as if he'd just remembered. "Exams coming up in two weeks, and then I don't have to work anymore."

"I was pissed as hell that you didn't talk to me ahead of time about that, but now I'm glad." Starsky handed the buttered bread over to Hutch. "Eat this."

"Starsky, I have a huge meal coming soon. I don't need to load up on carbohydrates."

"Did you eat any lunch?"

"Did you?" Hutch countered.

"Mika gave me a Popsicle and graham crackers, the snack of hospital patients."

Hutch gave him a sour look, but bit down on the bread. "This tastes good."

"See? We do for each other," Starsky said with satisfaction. He cupped his hand as if he were holding a round ball and tipped it slightly one way and then the other. "Oh, Magic Eight Ball, what will my future be?" He scrutinized his palm, scrunching up his face knowing that Hutch was watching him with a sad little smile. "Hmm, it says uncertain." He tipped his hand again, miming the actions to shake up the imaginary fortuneteller toy. "So, will I win a lot of money soon?" He
grinned, holding his hand up to Hutch. "It says yes."

"And will you always have love in your life?" Hutch asked softly, pretending to take the ball. "It says yes."

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Life continued, day after day, as Starsky had known it would. He didn't entirely believe that he would die soon. And what did soon mean anyway? Sooner or later? Not today. All of the above. He decided it wasn't worth thinking constantly about and took each day as it came, another gift to be savored. He was surprisingly happy, banishing dour thoughts to those dark hours of the night when sleep didn't come, and he worried about Hutch's future.

With Hutch working less often, they had more time to spend together, and the yoga class turned out to be just the thing. Starsky hadn't expected that he'd enjoy sitting on a mat with what he assumed would be bald headed, chemo-wasted people waiting to die. He was therefore surprised to find that nearly all the participants were like much like himself. A casual acquaintance might not even notice the small signs that nearly half the class had cancer, but another survivor would notice the IV scars on the hands, the lop-sidedness of two women's breasts when they wore thin comfortable clothes for class, and the well made wig on another woman. Most of the class was made up of women, but there were a few men that came, too.

Sitting next to Hutch, with his short leg crossed over the full length one, in a modified lotus position, Starsky let calmness take hold as he breathed in and out. It was amazingly peaceful, yet working through what yoga poses he could manage also strengthened his muscles, and he found that he had much more stamina than he'd had in a long time.

The change in Hutch was obvious, too. Hutch had always enjoyed the more meditative arts, and Starsky realized that he hadn't seen his partner sit amongst the potted plants in simple reflection in eons. This was exactly what Hutch needed, and he often emerged from class clear-eyed and happy, which made Starsky very happy.

On a sunny Wednesday, Starsky scrunched down on the sofa, idly watching Pansy and L'Chaim scuffle on the floor. He'd listened faithfully to the radio every weekday now for ten days. The month was half over and he hadn't won yet. There hadn't been a winning caller in two days, and the prize money had increased to $1500. Just what he could use to bankroll the party for Hutch, and have some left over.

In truth, he'd felt like crap warmed over all day, his back achy and chest tight. He was hoping he would feel better by the time Hutch got home, but it was doubtful. He hadn't felt this awful in a long time, and wondered if he was coming down with something. Still, John Davies had said there would be good days and bad days, this being one of the bad ones. He grimaced when Pansy jumped up onto his belly just as the song, *Mama told me there'd be Days like This*, started playing.

"You're the mama around here." He reached out to scratch behind her ears, and she butted against his hand, purring loudly. "You miss the other kids? Good thing Hutch kept Chaimie around, huh?" He was just biding his time, waiting for the song of the day contest to be announced, and trying to goad himself into working in the vegetable garden. So far it hadn't worked, and the good smells coming from the kitchen weren't helping.

Sophie was making quiche for dinner, crab meat and asparagus, which once upon a time Starsky would have thought sounded vile, but he'd changed his mind the first time she served the cheesy pie.
Hutch was off at the academy supervising exams for the soon to be graduating cadets. Starsky laughed to himself, remembering that heady time—he’d been sure Hutch would ace the written portion of the test, and that he would pass the shooting range and obstacle course, but not the written. That both of them excelled in all areas had been exhilarating, and they’d gone out together and gotten bombed afterwards. Hutch’s wife had had a fit.

Focused on his memories, Starsky almost missed his opportunity to call, but heard Rocking Robin’s excited announcement just in time to grab the phone. Listening to the ringing on the other end was gut-wrenching but finally someone picked up. "KMBC, you're the twelfth caller." He recognized Robin’s voice right away. "Do you know the song of the day?"


"That is correct!" Robin gushed. "You win $1500. What's your name?"

"Dave Starsky." He laughed, thrilled. "That's terrific! I've been calling every day."

"From work or home?"

"Home." Starsky supplied, not interested in going into why he no longer had a job. "I really wanted to win that money."

"You're fifteen hundred dollars richer, Dave Starsky! And who has the best oldies and gives you the most cash?" Robin chortled merrily.

"KMBC." Starsky knew the score, the caller always had to give the call letters, and probably most of this little bit of on-air banter would be played for the next few days to promote the contest. He gave her his home address and phone number, and was just about to hang up when a thought occurred to him. "Can I make a request?"

"Sure, Dave, since you're the winner of the day."

Starsky could hear that they were off the air now, because California Girls was playing in the background. "You're the one, by Orleans. For Hutch."

"It'll be on in the next half hour," Robin assured.

"Could you play it sometime after two instead?" Starsky mentally calculated when Hutch might leave work and how long his drive time might be.

"Sure thing, it's entered on the log. Congratulations again."

"Thanks!" Very proud of himself, Starsky dialed the number of Hutch's office at the academy. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. How are you feeling? I can be home by about two thirty."

"What station do you listen to lately?" Starsky asked, trying to sound innocent.

"NPR--talk radio."

"Tune into Bay City 101.5, KMBC after two, for a change," Starsky said mysteriously.

"Starsk! You won!" Hutch could barely get the front door open fast enough. He'd dropped the keys
trying to unlock the door and his sweaty hand slipped on the knob, but he finally made it inside without injuring himself. Starsky popped up from where he was lying on the couch, disturbing both cats that had been sleeping on the backrest. "Baby, you're a rich man," Hutch sang, playing air guitar.

"Yep. How does it feel to know a real thousandaire, Mr. Hutchinson?" Starsky asked like an on-the-street reporter, using his fist as a mock microphone to shove under Hutch's chin.

"I'm humbled." Hutch kissed Starsky's lips. "And proud. And thanks for the song. One of my favorites."

"Me, too." Starsky gathered up the afghan to give Hutch a place to sit. "So, finals done? All bubbles on the answer sheets blacked in with a number two pencil."

"Yes." Hutch felt Starsky's forehead then let his hand trail down his cheek to curve around his jaw. He kissed him again. "You doing okay? Looks like you spent all day on the couch."

"Just, y'know . . ." Starsky shrugged off his frailties. "You got plans? Cause I can lay you odds you could sleep with a certain thousandaire tonight, if you played your cards right."

Hutch laughed, light-hearted and happy. Things had been so good lately, he could almost dismiss the whole terminal illness thing as a scary story the doctors were telling them to keep Starsky in line. He knew it was real, but ignoring the future was getting easier and easier to do. "What cards are we talking about? Poker, blackjack, or gin? Because I'm pretty good at…"

The phone interrupted their banter, but Hutch could hear Sophie picking up in the kitchen, so he didn't get up.

"M'sieur Ken, it's for you." Sophie came out with her bag, inclining her head to the phone. "David, before I go, I must take your vital signs one more time for La Directrice of the home health agency, as she says I must. Rules, rules."

"Humph," Starsky grumped when she poked a thermometer in his mouth and then prepared a syringe for flushing his IV port with heparin.

"Ken Hutchinson," Hutch said into the phone, still paying more attention to Starsky. He was glad to let Sophie do the IV care, something he never enjoyed. Funny for someone who dreamed of becoming a doctor, but procedures like that one, and even giving Starsky pain meds, made him nervous. Good thing there were nurses.

"Ken, it's Katrinka Hicks. We have some new details in the Vinnie Schroeder case, and there's going to be another hearing very soon."

That jolted him out of his sunny mood. Katrinka was the assistant D. A. assigned to Schroeder's case. "I thought Starsky gave all the statements you needed for the hostage situation at the hospital."

"Yes, but this is about the other charges. Schroeder has always been able to play the system. He knows this stuff like a jailhouse lawyer. We'd already agreed to reduce the murder one on Emerald Hsieh to assault and manslaughter last year because he gave up several of his co-horts but even after skipping out on his bail, he still wants to play plea bargain. There are a slew of new charges stemming from the arrest and the hostage situation, too. As it is, he'll have more than one trial to deal with all these charges, but he's definitely going to avoid the death penalty by being co-
operative."

"Fuck," Hutch said so vehemently that Starsky looked straight at him, their eyes locking. That brought some of the tumultuous rage in Hutch's belly down to a manageable level, and he took a stabilizing breath. "Trying to kill Starsky more than once isn't good enough for them? Fuck."

"Hutch," Starsky said calmly.

"You already knew the original assault on Dave wasn't considered a strong case against Schroeder," Katrinka said reproachfully. "You've been incredibly helpful on this, especially bringing the drug trafficking to light, and bringing him in. The public doesn't like the husband of a popular supervisor getting gunned down in a seedy hotel."

"What about his charges?" Hutch asked, remembering the ugly scene with Cam Yin sprawled out in the hall bleeding.

"The D.A. is taking extenuating circumstances into account there, but he's still going to have to do some jail time for the shooting."

"Damn shame."

"I can't condone what he did, but I'm sure glad he's not part of my case load. Schroeder's already got enough paperwork to fill a warehouse." She blew out a noisy breath that made an explosive sound over the phone. "How is Dave doing? Is he up for this? We can record some of his testimony, like we did before, but he'll need to be present at the hearing, at least for a short time."

"I don't think I'm up for this," Hutch growled, trying to ground himself for what he considered another onslaught. He watched Sophie pack up her things before leaving, and Starsky picked up L'Chaim to settle him in his lap. The kitten squirmed and attacked a fold in the afghan. "When do you want to meet with us?"

"Is Thursday the 16th good? At ten thirty? I can have everything ready for us to go over all the paperwork. The hearing is tentatively set for the 21st."

"We'll be there," Hutch agreed.

"Good. I want to center on the arrest at the hotel, the drugs you found, and go over the hospital statements--everything that happened after he jumped bail. Unfortunately, I'm not sure we can renig on reducing murder one to manslaughter after the fact, but if we can get him on enough other things, he'll still be in prison for a good long while."

"I want life, with no chance of parole for good behavior," Hutch snarled, hanging up. He'd been in such a good mood previously, but now he felt as crotchety as an old bear in mid-winter.

"What?" Starsky asked.

"You don't want to know."

"Could be right, but I know I'm still considered the star witness in just about everything Schroeder's got going, so fill me in."

Hutch did, after getting beers for the both of them.

"S'probably a good thing they're trying to get this thing to trial sooner rather than later," Starsky said soberly.
"I don't want you to have to be dealing with this in . . ." Hutch choked off, his throat spasming. He took a long drink of beer. "What could be the last months," he whispered.

"Yeah, me, too." Starsky scratched at the label on the bottle, pulling up a goodly portion with his thumbnail. "But it's kinda out of our hands." He ripped off the top half of the label and rolled it in a ball. "But on the bright side, with you outta work and me just sitting around, it gives us something to do between yoga classes."

Hutch laughed. He really didn't want to, but it struck him as absurdly funny. "How do you do that?"

"What?" Starsky played dumb but Hutch could see a gleam in his eye that he'd caught his partner.

"Find the silver lining to everything?"

"It's a gift." Starsky grinned recklessly. "Remember the end of 'Life of Brian'?" He stuck his arms out as if he were nailed to a cross beam, singing in a horrible British accent. "Always look on the bright side of life, de dum, de dum..."

"Don't know the words?"

"That's the way it's written!"

"You don't know the words, admit it."

"I do!"

"Do not." Hutch knew he wasn't getting the last word on this one, but he enjoyed the argument.

"Hutch, are you ready yet?" Starsky called impatiently. He'd been waiting for ten minutes already and Hutch only had to change the shirt that had been splattered with orange juice after breakfast. "We're going to be late for the hearing, and Katrinka's gonna be pissed!"

"I'm coming." Hutch finally emerged from the bedroom, resplendent in a blue suit and white Oxford shirt.

"Now I am," Starsky said faintly, rubbing on the surprising erection that had blossomed at the sight of his lover. Too bad there wasn't time for that sort of thing. He slipped both Canadian crutches over his forearms and stood. He'd had to go back to two crutches lately, because of increasing weakness that left him breathless and exhausted at the most inopportune times. Just safer to bring crutches and wheelchair everywhere they went. "I'm going out the door now!" he announced, just in case Hutch found some other reason to delay them, and twisted the doorknob.

Nick Starsky was standing on the mat, his hand poised over the bell. He seemed startled that the door opened before he'd even had time to ring, and stared at his older brother in amazement.

"Hell, Davey, what happened to you?"

"Nicky!" Starsky pulled him into a fierce hug, stunned to see him. "You didn't tell us you were coming!" He tried frantically to recall if he'd even known the date of Nicky's parole. "Hutch, look, Nicky's here!"

He pulled his brother by the arm, dragging him into the house. Hutch didn't say a word, he just
grabbed the suitcase off the front step and carried it over to the couch.

"I heard you were doing better--from Aunt Rose." Nicky patted Starsky awkwardly on the back as if he weren't sure what was the right thing to do. "But you look terrible. I thought you were off all those drugs and shit."

"Uh." Starsky shot a look at Hutch, well aware of his partner's opinion of Nick. It didn't sound like Nick had been keeping up with the latest news even if he had spoken to Rose. "I am, sort of. Listen, we're late for a court appointment."

"Oh, man!" Nick all but pouted. "I'm only here for a couple of days, can't you put it off?"

"If you'd called ahead of time, we might have arranged something," Hutch said, sounding strained. "As it is, this takes precedence. It's a case we've been working on for a long time."

"I thought you weren't working anymore, Davey," Nicky said.

"Hey," Starsky soothed, looking back and forth between his partner and his brother. The tension that had fouled the air the moment Hutch saw Nick was thick enough to see. It made him edgy and out of sorts. Of all days for Nick to show up! Hutch was still glad to see his younger brother. It had been years, and he truly did want to touch bases with those closest to him. "Hey, we'll be out by mid-afternoon at the latest." He twisted his house key off the keyring and handed it over to Nick. "Stay. Make yourself at home, put your stuff in the unused room on the right. There's food in the fridge--my friend Rosie and I made chocolate chip cookies the other day. Watch baseball on TV. We'll bring home pizza or something for dinner. How's that sound?"

"Sure, okay." Nick shrugged. He ruffled his short curls. "I'm beat after the flight. I wanna talk to you later, huh?"

"Sure, sure!" Starsky said brightly.

Hutch was already waiting at the front door, looking impatient, with a slight frown on his face. "We've got two cats, a Siamese and a littler black one. Try not to let them out," was all he said before they left.

"You're mad," Starsky stated once they were driving on the freeway.

"Not at you." Hutch pulled the visor down against the sun glaring into his eyes.

"I know you think Nicky only comes when he needs something, but come on, Hutch ..." Starsky didn't have to finish the sentence. Hutch deflated like an old balloon.

"Starsky, he's called, what, twice in the last six months?"

"Three--I think."

"Once while you were in surgery! I'd told him the time, he could have called before or after."

"There's a time difference, maybe he forgot. And in prison, they don't always get the phone when they want it," Starsky said in defense, although he wasn't quite sure why.

Nick wasn't the most attentive brother in the world, but then, he never had been. Various other relatives, most especially Rose, who lived quite near, and a few cousins, had been calling regularly
to ask about his health. Rose was doing very poorly, so she hadn't ever been able to come to visit. She was suffering from congestive heart failure and was confined to a bed, but her frequent gossipy phone calls brightened up any day. Her husband Al had died nearly five years earlier from a massive heart attack, and Starsky still missed going over to their house for the occasional Sunday afternoon supper. They'd been his mainstay as a teen, and he regarded them as second parents.

Getting old sucked. He no longer had a mother or a favorite uncle, and was racing his favorite aunt for who died first. Left with a ne'er-do-well brother who hadn't even bothered to give them the exact date of his release from prison. "I'm not completely stupid. I know Nick can be a schmuck."

"You said it, I didn't," Hutch said dryly. "Good thing our guns are locked up."

"He can't carry a gun, and you know it," Starsky said, feeling peevish. "Part of his parole. He just came for a visit, and I want to see him."

"I know, Star. I just . . . worry that he could hurt you again."

"Nah, I'm tough."

"You're a sucker for your brother's line, every time." Hutch took his hand, as if apologizing for saying anything mean. "You have your testimony ready?"

"Gonna put Schroeder away for the rest of his natural born days," Starsky promised.

The day was long, hot, and boring, punctuated with short bursts of such intensity Starsky began to wonder if his heart was up for this anymore. He couldn't help the cold sweat that dripped down his spine when he was up on the witness stand, describing the stand off in the Rose Tree Unit.

Vinnie Schroeder sat at the defense's table the entire time staring straight at him with a look of such evil menace Starsky finally turned just enough that he could keep Hutch in his view instead of the felon. It wasn't so much that he was scared of Schroeder, more that he was unnerved. He no longer had the physical stamina needed to take Schroeder on in a fair fight, even with a crutch in hand, should Schroeder break out and come after them. Starsky had always relied on his ability to fight hard and dirty to defend himself and his loved ones. He'd die if Schroeder went after Hutch in retaliation. The man had to be put away for life--there was no other recourse.

Arguments between the lawyers took up large chunks of time, but Starsky's only enjoyment during the entire process was watching Hutch take the stand and describe his own involvement in Schroeder's arrest. He liked seeing Hutch up there, strong, forthright and brave, unaffected by Schroeder's malevolent presence.

The hearing was adjourned at three thirty with the proviso that both Starsky and Hutch might be called back for more testimony at another date. Starsky was disappointed that the whole thing hadn't been wrapped up in one day, and moped about it most of the way home.

"Hey, we need to stop and get a pizza." He remembered just as the huge sign for Romano's Pizza came into sight. He always got a big laugh out of the round plastic smiling pizza face revolving high over the turquoise roofed restaurant.

"I like Round Table better, they have that nice vegetarian one," Hutch said.

"Vegetarian pizza is an insult to thousands of years of Italians laboring over hot brick ovens with thick slabs of dough covered in mounds of tomato sauce, mozzarella and pepperoni."
"You're going to give yourself a coronary, you know that." Hutch turned the car into the parking lot of Romano's with a sigh.

"Just you wait, Hutch. Some day they'll discover that pizza really is a health food. It's got all the food groups--bread, tomatoes, meat, and dairy." The crutches clanked together as Starsky struggled to get out of the car, but Hutch made no move to help him. Starsky appreciated that. After his disheartening realization that he could no longer fight someone like Schroeder, it was comforting to know that Hutch didn't regard him as completely disabled. He straightened his jacket once he was on his feet, his chest so tight he could feel a cough coming on, and had to brace himself against the car when it hit.

"The four food groups, and enough grease to slick down Elvis's hair," Hutch said dryly.

Starsky cleared his throat, breathing raggedly after the cough. He could feel Hutch's eyes on him. He was worried, but Starsky ignored that. "Okay, we'll do it your way. No pepperoni, are you satisfied?"

"Moderately." Hutch nodded, holding open the door to the pizzeria. "What other toppings do you propose, Pizza King?"

Flashing him a smile that took the worry right off Hutch's face, Starsky pointed to the menu posted above the cashier. "Mushrooms, black olives, and grilled chicken. Does that reduce the whole grease load?"

"Very nicely." Hutch grinned back at him and Starsky had a strong urge to kiss him right there in front of the pimply-faced cashier who took their order. "Mushrooms, black olives, and grilled chicken. Does that reduce the whole grease load?"

Pansy was waiting in the driveway, chirping anxiously when Hutch swung out of the car. "I told Nick not to let the cats out," he groused. "Pansy was pregnant the last time that happened."

"Call the vet to get her fixed," Starsky said reasonably, scooping her up. "Where's your baby, Pansy?" He nuzzled against her tawny fur, feeling the rumble of her purr in his jaw. He had to let her down to walk, though. She slid in and out between his leg and the crutches like a silky snake.

"L'Chaim's too small to be out on his own." Hutch maneuvered the large pizza box around so he could lock the car doors and stomped up the front walk, calling out for his cat. Starsky thought this was going to be a long couple of days if Hutch stayed like this the entire length of Nick's visit. Just as he opened the front door, a small black blur streaked past him and bounded into the house.

"That cat knows when there's good food around." Starsky tossed his crutches on the couch, looking around. Nicky's presence was visible. There were beer cans on the dolphin coffee table, an untidy pile of newspapers on the floor, and a trail of potato chips crushed into the carpet from the couch to the living room. Or vice versa, it was hard to tell on an initial inspection. "Nick!" Starsky bellowed, watching Hutch go into the kitchen with the pizza.

"Hey!" Nick came out of the bathroom with his shirt unbuttoned and his hair still wet from a shower. He pulled small portable radio earphones out of his ears, and it was obvious he'd just been shaving. "Didn't hear you guys come in. I called up a couple of old buddies, was just about to leave to go meet up with them. You wanna come with?" He stared pointedly at his brother's single leg before raising his eyes to meet Starsky's.

"No, I'm beat. We got a pizza, though." Starsky pulled off his tie and jacket. "I thought you wanted
to talk about something important?"

"Yeah, listen." Nick buttoned up his shirt, tucking it into his slacks. "I've been having a hard time finding a job since getting out of the joint. Aunt Rose told me you won some money, so I was wondering . . . ."

"NO," Hutch roared from the kitchen.

"It's my money!" Starsky retorted, feeling a rush of adrenaline burn off his fatigue. He'd always planned to give the bulk of the winnings to Hutch for medical school but he resented having Hutch dictate what he should say to his own brother. He wasn't a complete moron; he'd suspected Nicky had a motive like this from the very first. Nicky always did.

"That's right, it's yours." Hutch gestured with the pizza cutter he was still held. Starsky wanted to tell him to put it down, that it gave the whole situation a strangely Monty Pythonesque quality, but he didn't. "And Nick has no right to think you won't need it simply because you're going to die soon."

There are some things that stop a discussion cold. That was one of them. Nick gaped at Hutch for several long seconds until Hutch turned around and walked back into the kitchen. Starsky had to force himself to take in a breath, his peripheral vision darkening for just a second.

"Aunt Rose didn't say you were dying," Nick said quietly.

"You don't read my letters?" Starsky asked rhetorically, since it was quite obvious he didn't. "A couple weeks ago the doctors said the cancer had spread, it's all over . . . ."

"You look bad, kinda skinny with your leg. . . but you don't look bald and stuff like people in those sad movies," Nick protested weakly, looking absurdly like he was going to cry. He covered that quickly, rubbing his nose.

"Chemo makes your hair fall out, not cancer." Starsky sat on the couch, once again surprised at how many people confused that fact. He'd heard it numerous times since his diagnosis. "I was bald, last winter."

"As a cue ball," Hutch joked, coming out with plates of pizza. He gave one to Starsky and sat down next to him on the couch, much closer than Nick who had perched on the armrest as if he were about to take flight.

"So, you can't loan me any money?" Nick said flatly, looking like he'd been hit between the eyes.

Starsky had to admire his tenacity. Get the shock of your life, but still stick to the point. "I can give you . . . ." Starsky felt Hutch's elbow in his ribs. It might have just been because Hutch chose that moment to pick up his slice of pizza, but he suspected otherwise. He did a couple of mental calculations. "Two hundred. I have expenses, too, since I'm out of work."

"Two hundred? That won't cover . . . ."

"Where'd you get the ticket to come out here, Nick?" Hutch asked in a remarkably pleasant voice. "Who did you con to get it? You could have stayed in New York and used the equivalent of the plane fare to pay rent on some room at the Y for a couple of months. Or was there a reason you had to leave New York in a hurry, without telling us you were coming? Not that it's not great to see you."

"Fuck off, Hutchinson," Nick sneered. "Davey's always loaned me cash whenever I needed it, huh,
"You want the two hundred, you answer his questions, bro." Starsky put down his plate, his belly too churned up to eat. "Because I'm kind of curious. Does your parole officer know you left the state?"

"I got the name of somebody to report to," Nick said petulantly. He spread his hands, looking at Starsky and Hutch as if he'd been sent to the principal. "Okay, so I got into a game of craps. I mean, no big deal, huh? I swear the dice were rigged, because I lost big time. I'd done the ass-wipe job the parole officer set me up with, construction, and had a legit paycheck, but . . . after the game I didn't have enough to pay the rent on my place. It was just a rat hole, anyway. I figured family would help me out." He stuffed his hands into his pants pockets, his eyes flat and cold when he looked at Hutch. "But I guess some people put a bug into my brother's ear, and turned him against me. I can't even rely on family anymore. And just so's you know, cousin Angela gave me the ticket. She's a whadda ya call it, stewardess. She gets free rides. So, no money from that corner, Hutch."

"You shouldn't have been gambling in the first place," Starsky said. He'd never enjoyed being the sensible one, especially where Nick was concerned. He wanted to be the loving older brother, but the long distance separation during their teen years had robbed him of any close relationship with Nick, no matter how much he wanted one. Nick would never be the brother Hutch had been to him, before sex came into it. And Nick's unrepentant punk attitude would never mature. He seemed determined to remain a shiftless teenager for the rest of his life, living in the shadow of violent crime, skating along in the gray area of cons, gambling, and money laundering. "I can give you two hundred. Take it or leave it."

"I gotta meet some people." Nick grabbed up his sports coat, stuffing his arms into the sleeves. "I'll be back before . . . midnight."

"Don't let the cats out this time." Hutch swallowed some beer, and dropped a piece of chicken on the floor for L'Chaim.

"That little black one is vicious; attacked my ankle and left marks." Nick pulled up his sock to show three parallel red scratches. L'Chaim munched his chicken, looking unconcerned.

"He does that." Hutch didn't look particularly concerned either.

"Should have a vicious cat like that put down."

"Nick," Starsky warned. "L'Chaim's a kitten."

"Just giving my opinion. Oh, and some chick named Karen called, for Hutch." He gave a dirty chuckle. "And I thought you two didn't like girls anymore. She said she was coming out, next week, I think." He vanished out the door without so much as a backward wave.

"Starsky . . ."

"I know." Starsky sighed, totally exhausted now. He'd give his brother the money, no matter how little Nick deserved it, but he also planned to put in a few well-placed calls to police connections in New York City, to find out if there were any outstanding charges against Nicholas Marvin Starsky. "What about Karen? Did you know she was coming?"

"God, when it rains, it pours!" Hutch threw up his hands. "She mentioned something about looking into plane fares for a vacation once school let out, but I forgot."
"Nick will probably be gone by then. I don't think he plans to stay very long." Starsky lay back against the cushions, letting Pansy walk up his thighs to his belly. Her paws dug into his abdomen, making his tummy growl.

"Starsk, you should eat." Hutch pinched the bridge of his nose. "What's the time difference between here and Duluth?"

"You lived there, don't you remember?"

"Not with this headache. Two hours?"

"Maybe." Starsky shrugged, rubbing Pansy's ears.

"Eat." Hutch held a slice of cooling pizza to Starsky's mouth, waiting until he took a bite. "See how easy that is?"

"I don't want you and Nick at each other's throats, but I'm not tellin' him to leave, either, Hutch."

"I know. He's got some gall, asking for your money like that. No sensitivity."

"It's all for you anyway," Starsky pushed Pansy far enough off his lap so that he could sit up and take a few more bites of pizza.

"What?"

"I just want to finish paying for... the funeral stuff. The rest was for you, for medical school."

"Starsky! I can't take your money!" Hutch actually gasped as if the very thought hurt.

"I gave everything to you in the will."

"I-I know, but I figured you wouldn't have very much left. I know what your disability pay is."

"One thousand ain't much, Hutch. Probably less now, if I give Nick two hundred."

"You shouldn't."

"Yeah." Starsky grinned ruefully. "But I will. Like he said, he's family."

"He wouldn't give you the shirt off his back."

"Aw, you just don't like him. Nick's deeper than you think, Hutch." Starsky shoved the last of the pizza into his mouth, talking as he chewed. "Not much deeper, but still. You'd help out Karen."

"Karen does not repeatedly shoot herself in the foot." Hutch gathered up their plates, walking back into the kitchen. "I'll give her a call. It'll be fun to see her."

"Let's take her to Disneyland!"

Hutch started to speak, but stopped, drawing into himself in a way that always made Starsky sad. He could see Hutch's anguish so easily at times like this. Hutch still had so much fear--that every day might be Starsky's last. Would a day at the happiest place on Earth be fun, or a collection of memories of the worst that could happen. Starsky couldn't predict these things any better than Hutch could, but he refused to stop to consider them.

"C'mon, Hutch, it'll be fun. You can wear my mouse ears, and I'll stay in the wheelchair the whole
time. Gets me to the front of the line faster, anyway."

"Yeah. It'd be fun." Hutch said with a ghost of a smile, which slid into devilishness. "Nick can come, too. Think he'll stick around for that?"

"Only if Ol'Walt opens Las Vegas Land right next to Fantasyland." Starsky tossed a sofa pillow at him.

"Las Vegas is Fantasyland, Starsk."

"Yeah." Starsky remembered fedoras, two-toned shoes, double-breasted suits, and a winning streak that wouldn't end. "We had fun, huh?"

"We had fun." Hutch came back, and sat down next to him, enclosing Starsky in a hug. It felt warm, safe, and so wonderful Starsky didn't want it to end. "You're going to wait up for Nick until he gets home, aren't you?"

"You can read my mind now?"

"I always could." Hutch rapped his knuckles gently against Starsky's forehead. "Wrap up in the afghan, take a pain killer for your back, and try to nap until he comes in. You're not as young as you used to be . . ."

"And you worry," Starsky finished. He nodded, and kissed Hutch's collarbone before being released. Times like this were so bittersweet, it made him uncomfortable, and yet he yearned for them until the next time. He flicked on the TV remote, burrowing into the couch to catch the end of Jeopardy before the evening news. Pansy nestled right up against his hip, the left one that was hurting more and more, especially after hours sitting in the hard courtroom chairs.

Starsky listened with half an ear to Hutch's conversation with his sister. It sounded like her new boyfriend Rolf had become a steady, and she was excited about moving up a grade with her class to teach fifth graders instead of fourth in the new school year. Karen definitely was going more places than Nick.

"Good news, Karen's not coming for two weeks, the day after elementary school lets out." Hutch said, hanging up. "She's in love, and Rolf has some family out here, too."

"She's talked about Rolf before, hasn't she? He has a boat." Starsky ignored a news report on unrest in the Middle East, more interested in family gossip.

"She's mentioned him. I think it's a rowboat, for fishing. He teaches the sixth grade."

"Oh, ho, a wedding in their future, you think?" Starsky chortled. "Coming out to meet the family. He must have met your dad already, since they live in the same city."

"Apparently Dad wasn't too thrilled with the idea of two teachers together, since even combined, their income is so low, but he likes Rolf."

"Rolf what?"

"Von Buchau."

"Oh, fantastic, he sounds like a . . ."
"Starsky, it's a perfectly fine German name." Hutch shook a long finger at him, but his eyes were laughing. "I've got some work to do. Do you want anything before I'm mired in bills and paperwork?"

"Ice cream?" Starsky tried to sound plaintive and weak, but his laughter ruined it. Hutch brought him a bowl of mint chip with a swirl of chocolate sauce and dollop of whipped cream on the top anyway. That was love for you.

Starsky drifted in and out of the Tuesday night line-up, watching half of A-Team, and sleeping completely through whatever came after that, finally awake just as the jazzy theme for Remington Steele began. He liked the light-hearted mystery series, especially when Pierce Brosnan and Stephanie Zimbalist bantered like a couple from an old thirties movie.

Hutch worked on medical school applications, grumbling under his breath when he came out for his own bowl of ice cream. Starsky didn't dare offer any suggestions on what schools to apply to; the subject was still too raw for Hutch. He had to fumble through this one on his own.

Nick finally arrived just after Carson had finished his monologue and was introducing the blond lady from the San Diego zoo. She'd brought along a lemur and two small monkeys who were climbing on Johnny's head. Starsky laughed when one peed on the notes on Johnny's desk, and heard the front door lock snick open.

"Hey, you have a fight with Hutch? He make you sleep on the couch?" Nick slurred. He sounded drunk.

"No, if we fight I usually make him sleep on the couch." Starsky eased himself up, but his back was aching badly now, and a cough rasped in his throat. He should have taken those painkillers as Hutch said.

"You okay?" Nick asked in alarm.

"This is normal, Nicky," Starsky assured him. "Could you get that bottle of pills on the drainboard? Beside the sink?"

Nick came back with the bottle and a glass of water, watching Starsky take two. "It's always this bad?"

"I should have gotten up and moved around. I got too stiff." Starsky closed his eyes against the ache as he sat up, propping his back with pillows. Damned inconvenient time to look weak, when he wanted a serious talk with his brother.

"Davey, I--I really didn't know things had gotten this bad." Nick again perched on the couch armrest, gesturing at Starsky's afghan covered leg. "I thought they could cure cancer these days."

"Sometimes they can, and sometimes they can't." Starsky played with the fringe on the afghan. It brought up so many half buried emotions to have to talk about this again to someone who hadn't been on the entire roller coaster ride of treatments. "I stopped the whole chemo thing on the second course. I couldn't take being sick every damn minute of my life, so here we are. Doctors aren't fortunetellers, they can't predict when I might go any better than I can."

"But you're dying."

"That I am." Starsky made a face at his brother, raising his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth in the Stan Laurel way that used to make Nick giggle when they were very small. L'Chaim jumped up into his lap, batting at the fringe Starsky was holding in his hand. Tiny needle sharp claws raked
his palm and he yelped, giving the kitten a bop on the head just as Pansy would have.

"You really like cats, man? They're such a chick thing. Guys like dogs, but I guess now that..."

"Nick!" Starsky groaned before he uttered such a stereotypical comment about two men who lived together. "Dogs are cool, but cats are fighters. You ever see a kitten go into attack mode, even on somebody three times their size?"

"Yeah, this morning." Nick pulled up his pants leg again.

Starsky laughed, clearing his throat when a tiny pain in his chest seemed to linger too long afterwards. "See what I mean? Cats are tough, street smart. I like a fighter." He ruffled the fringe and L'Chaim pounced again.

"Then why did you give up?"

"Is that how you see it?"

"Can't see it any other way, man. You said you stopped the chemo stuff, which could have made you well."

"Could have." Starsky nodded, nonetheless stung that his brother would see him as a quitter. "Basically, it would have only prolonged the inevitable, and I'd have been sick as a dog the whole time. Sometimes you have to pick your battles. I surrendered in the war I was never going to win in favor of fighting for enough time to spend with my friends and family while I was feeling good."

"You don't look like you're feeling good."

"Good days and bad days. This was a so-so one. The stuff in court sucked, and we'll probably have to go back, but hey, I got to see you." He looked up into the very familiar, if somewhat older, face of his closest living blood relative. "For whatever reasons you came, Nicky, I'm glad you did."

"I really do need the money," Nick said defensively.

"I'm sure you do. I'm sure you think that no one has ever had it as rough as you 'cause you were in prison, and you have to work at a crummy construction job. Which apparently you've lost since you came out here without telling them."

"Hey! I was railroaded and..."

"Nicky, look around you. There ain't no free rides except the one around the sun every 24 hours. I can give you two hundred, that's it. I got problems, too."

"Yeah, you only got one leg. How come you don't have one of those plastic jobs with bionics and shit to walk around on?"

"One and a half," Starsky repeated his lame joke. "The prosthetic was a pain in the ass, literally. I can get around just fine without it. Not like I'm going to be walking a beat any longer."

"You miss that?" Nick asked, and this time his interest sounded genuine. He slid down the armrest onto the cushions, lounging against the backrest with his legs spread. "I couldn't hack being a cop. All those regulations."

"The rules and regulations could get in the way, but they had their purpose," Starsky said, amazed that he of all people would say that. He'd never met a regulation he didn't try to at least bend like a
willow branch. "And yeah, I miss riding in the car with Hutch, cruising our beat, getting to know the people on the street."

"Rousting the drunks and drug dealers--and leaving those guys just trying to make a living alone?" Nick flashed a grin.

"One of those guys being you?" Starsky asked. He'd never tried to pry into Nick's motives for doing what he did, but it still irked him that they could be on such opposite sides of the law. "You broke the law, Nick. You did your time. Get on with things. It's going to happen over and over again if you don't."

"You're beginning to sound like Ma." He stared at Starsky, speculation in his eyes.

"You break the law again, you're back in the slammer, it's as simple as that. You gotta change."

"So I heard."

"So who'd you go out with tonight? What friends do you have in Bay City? Guys you met through Stryker?"

"No! These were friends of some friends in New York. You know, connections. They knew about this job."

"Connected friends? Oh, that's just great, Nick!" Starsky shoved the afghan off, wishing he could pace around like he used to, get rid of some of this rage that talking to Nick brought out. He kicked the coffee table leg instead, earning a stubbed toe for his troubles. "What the hell are you getting mixed up in something like that again? What is it this time? Drugs, or just some innocent money laundering?"

"You think every damn thing I'm involved in is bogus? This was legit. It's one of those corporations where you lecture people on how to double their profits, earn money fast."

"Oh, like that's not illegal!"

"This is strictly on the up and up, I swear, Davey. I have to go to a bunch of training sessions, but then I'd be traveling all the time, lecturing in every state. It sounds fantastic. . ."

"What's going on out here?" Hutch came out, rubbing his eyes against the bright lights of the living room.

"Hey." Starsky waved his hand in apology. "Sorry we woke you. Just talking."

Hutch looked blearily between the Starsky brothers before catching his lover's eye. "You coming to bed soon?"

"Soon," Starsky agreed. "Get some sleep, Hutch. I'm coming."

"He's got you on a chain," Nick snorted after Hutch had stumbled back into the bedroom.

Starsky heard the toilet flush and the box springs creak when Hutch crawled back into bed.

"Go to hell," Starsky said irritably.

"Davey, did he . . . . force you into this stuff? I mean, like in the joint, there are butches and their little fishes . . ."
Starsky drew in a shocked breath, never really having thought about what might have happened to Nick behind bars. Nick was shorter and more fine-boned than he was. Even with weight training, Nick would never have been able to fight off some big, determined inmate with a boner. He had the Starsky gift of gab, but that could only get a person so far in the prison shower. "What happened, Nick?"

"Nothing that didn't happen to half a hundred other guys in stir," Nick said evasively. "But I'd never do that willingly. Getting off some of the pressure, I understand that. A guy has to, or he'll explode. But, living that way permanently. It's gotta warp you."

"Hutch wouldn't--couldn't--have forced me the way you're insinuating," Starsky hissed, more angry than he had been about Nick's business prospects. He kept his voice pitched low, knowing Hutch was probably still awake in the bedroom and able to hear a great deal of the conversation. "We lived in each other's pocket long before we ever thought about love, or sex. We were brothers in a way you'll never understand. Then after I got shot, stuff changed. It had been for a long time, but the shooting was a big wake up call."

Nick had such a look of disbelief that Starsky realized he'd never convince him that what he and Hutch had was consummate love and not jailhouse rape. But he had to state his case, or as Nick so aptly put it, explode.

"You ever been in love?"

"You call that love? With him?"

"I asked you." Starsky turned away from his brother's disdain, focusing on a cluster of framed photographs jammed together on the top of a bookcase. He and Hutch standing on the roof of the Torino, arms linked around each other, laughing. He and Hutch smiling, holding their badges just after they'd been reinstated onto the force only weeks before his shooting. So many moments of their lives captured forever on film. So that nothing would ever be forgotten. The newest picture had been taken at the wedding. Huggy and Daisy, and he and Hutch, standing near the melting dolphin ice sculpture. "Have you ever really been in love?"

"No, I don't think so," Nicky admitted. He'd gotten up off the couch, sitting in the opposite chair, closing himself off from Starsky.

"Then I'm sorry for you. Because love is the most fantastic things in the entire universe."

Nick hunched his shoulders, remote as the Arctic Sea. "I thought--for a while--maybe Jennifer Connolly. You remember the Connolly brothers? We went to school with them?"

Starsky vaguely recalled five red haired boys, their ages ranging between he and Nick's. He couldn't picture a girl.

"She and me." Nick shrugged, examining his fingernails. "For a couple of years, but then I knocked her up. Thought we could get married, but . . ." He paused, looking stricken. "She didn't want it."

"That's awful."

"Who wants a kid, anyway? I ended up in the slammer, who'da taken care of him?" But his face was so sorrowful; Starsky knew that had been Nick's one glimpse at love.

"That's how it feels, bro. The highs and the lows. When everything you do is tied up in that other person, and you want it that way. When you think about them when they're not around, and even
though you saw that person the day before, you got so much to talk about." He pressed his hand
against his side, hoping to stifle a cough that hovered deep in his chest. "That's how it was with me
and Hutch, even before. Then after I got shot, I couldn't bear it anymore. I almost died, and we
weren't bein' honest with each other."

"Honest?"

"We'd loved each other for years, but because of some dumb ideas that guys can't feel like that, we
never went any further." Starsky stopped, not sure how he could explain it. That primal sense of
completion the first time Hutch had held him and kissed him. That what they were doing was
absolutely right, and to hell with society conventions. "There was never any force, Nick."

An uncomfortable silence spread out between them, and after an interminable length of time
Starsky finally folded up the afghan, draping it over the back of the couch. He was more than
sleepy, and after this revealing discussion with his brother, just wanted to curl up next to Hutch and
dream.

"I guess I'll get going in the morning," Nick said in a husky voice when Starsky was halfway
across the living room. "Can you give me cash? Cause I don't have a bank out here."

"Sure." Starsky tightened his hands around the struts of the crutches, more sorry than he could
imagine. "Go visit Aunt Rose, will you? She doesn't get out much."

"Planned on it. Got the address in my jacket."

Starsky wanted to look back, wanted to say something that would change things, but he knew there
was nothing that could change. He and Nick had never been close, for all that he'd wished it so.
They'd separated far too early and headed down different paths right from the get-go. Somehow,
the friendship of John Blaine and Uncle Al, who'd steered him through his teenage years, and the
awful influence of Viet Nam had given Starsky a powerful sense of right and wrong which had
served him well on the police force. That, and Hutch's steady presence had made him the man he
was today.

For Nick, things had been totally different, and there were many aspects of his life that Starsky
knew nothing about. He'd been raised by a mother who was, for all intents and purposes, a
secretary for the mob. Oh, it wasn't said out loud. She'd gotten the job shortly before Starsky was
shipped west. She'd been proud of her abilities, answering phones and typing out letters for D&D
trucking. A legit company jointly owned by Joe Durniak and Tony D'Onofrio. Just two guys
making an honest living moving freight. Starsky hadn't ever asked if his mother knew the what was
going on in the back room, he hadn't wanted to, it scared him that much. She was loyal to her
bosses, refusing to get another job because they'd been good to her. So, it wasn't all that unusual
that Rachel's son Nicholas would take a gopher job at D&D while he was in high school. Running
errands, doing odd jobs for the boss. It had skewed his ideals, given him a different view on the
world.

Starsky remembered being in 'Nam the first time he heard that Nick was arrested. For numbers
running. After that, it had been a long slippery slope into prison. Every time Nick Starsky got in
trouble, he was bailed out by a family member, and he'd promise to mend his ways. Every time,
over and over, like a broken record, until Starsky had had to lie to himself. Convince himself that
the brother of a cop wasn't a petty criminal.

Nick had been nurtured by the mob, there was no other way to put it. Within that sort of a circle,
homosexuality was looked down upon as an aberration. Men could be buddies, even blood
brothers, but never lovers. It wasn't done. Not ever.
He had to face the truth that he and Nick would never see eye to eye. But at least, he had seen his brother before he died, and that was the important thing.

"Nick." Starsky paused in the archway to the back hall, aware that Nick was still sitting in the armchair. Pansy brushed by, butting her head against his leg, marking him with her scent. "You're my brother, and I love you."

"Love you, too," Nick said gruffly.

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Starsky let himself mope around after Nick left. The whole visit had left a bad taste in him mouth that couldn't be washed away with a strong gargle. He felt like he'd let Nick down in some indefinable way, long ago. If he'd never left the East Coast back in 1958, would things be different? Of course they would have--everything would have changed. That was the problem with 'what ifs'. Like the old saying that the flap of a butterfly's wings in South America could affect the weather in the Arctic, one little change made everything different.

If Rachel Starsky hadn't sent her son to summer with her sister Rose, he'd have never met his uncle Al, and learned how to adjust a carburetor. He'd have never decided to stay and attend the local high school because the girl down the street, Angela Darlene of the 38 D cup in the ninth grade, was going there.

Starsky would have gone back to New York, hung around with his thuggish gang of friends and turned into . . . Nick. So, close and yet so far. Because of Angela Darlene he'd met the Blaine kids, John Jr. and Michael. John Senior was a cop, and had the respect of all the kids in the neighborhood. When Starsky wasn't at his aunt's house, he was at the Blaines', absorbing the wonderful closeness of an intact family, and thriving. His mother visited almost every summer, because her bosses gave her an extensive vacation, with pay. Starsky had never thought much about it then. He hadn't understood the many ways the mob held on to its own, with perks and generous bonuses. He'd just been happy to see his mother and brother. He hadn't really probed into just what his father might have done to have Joe Durniak pay for his funeral after the shooting. Just exactly why Joseph Starsky had been killed.

Those revelations had come slowly, along with his disillusionments over the Viet Nam War. He'd enlisted to help his country, and found an unfathomable war fraught with chaos and contempt. He was spit upon when he arrived back on US soil by protesters. He'd driven taxis and worked as a mechanic for Al before deciding to use what the government had taught him and become a cop. After all, he already knew how to shoot a gun and subdue a prisoner. Piece of cake. On the first day of the academy, he met Ken Hutchinson. His future.

So, if he'd never come west.

If Hutch had never come west.

Didn't bear thinking about any longer. He couldn't go back and change what he and Nicky were to each other, there was too much history there. He had Hutch, for good and forever. Was it an even exchange? No. Love always weighed the balance in its favor.

Starsky wiped a dirty hand across his sweaty forehead, wondering where he'd left his hat. This was happening a lot lately. He'd go out into his little vegetable plot, begin weeding, and lose time. Not a great length of time, but enough to know he'd been sitting in the sun too long and should go in with only a few weeds pulled to show for his efforts.
He'd slide into memories, both good and bad, and forget that he only had half a leg, or to be technical, more like one third. He could forget the pains in his back and his chest, and recall the glory days when he and Hutch were the ones to watch. The other detectives in the squadroom knew that if Starsky and Hutch were on the case, it got solved.

He and Hutch, together in the Torino, the mars light flashing weirdly off Hutch's fair hair as the car roared through the streets in pursuit of some felon. Good times.

They'd even brought down the last felon of Starsky's police career, Vinnie Schroeder. A second day of testimonies had finished off their participation, and it was four more days before the Grand Jury brought back a decision that Schroeder should be tried on all charges, up to and including murder one for Emerald Hsieh.

Starsky and Hutch had celebrated by sending boxes of candy to the Rose Tree Unit, and hosting a little get together in the hospital cafeteria. Farley had flirted with Julia, The Colonel brought a lady friend, Megan tap danced, and Calliope introduced her new boyfriend Lurch, who played in a punk rock band. The party had been perfect, closure for those who admitted the crisis still woke them up at nights. Vinnie Schroeder might not have been convicted yet--his multiple trials wouldn't begin for some time, but the outcome looked rosy.

Starsky smiled to himself, digging his hands into rich dirt, finding underground vegetables by touch.

"You forget your hat again?" Hutch shaded his eyes, leaning against the sliding glass door. "All the literature says that too much sun damages the skin. You probably didn't even use the sunscreen I bought you."

"I get lectures enough from my doctor." Starsky held up a handful of potatoes. "We'd be in like Flynn if we lived in Ireland a hundred years ago. The potatoes are growing like weeds."

"Been reading historical novels?" Hutch bent down to sift the dirt through his fingers, pulling out a couple of dandelions in the process. "The brave O'Reilly battling the bank for his little plot of County Cork, and the love of Bridget O'Donahue."

"You make it sound like I'm reading Sophie's Harlequins behind her back," Starsky started to laugh, hating that his chest hurt all the worse because of something that felt so good. "Just because I like a little romance with my history."

"Hey, far be it from me to mock your reading habits." Hutch tossed a clod of dirt at him. "All I do is read medical journals."

"My husband, the doctor," Starsky gave a melodramatic sigh like a heroine in an old time movie. He got to his knee before a wave of dizziness made him grab for the little wire fence he and Mick had installed to keep the raccoons out. His vision swam and telescoped, the expanse of lawn rippling like the bay on a windy day. The wire bit into his fingers, but if he let go he would have nose-dived right into the rosemary.

"Starsk?" Hutch repeated for what Starsky realized must be the third or fourth time.

"M'okay," Starsky exhaled slowly, willing the grass to obey the laws of physics and stay flat. His head felt too light, like a balloon floating on top of his shoulders and he didn't trust his balance one bit.

"I'll get the wheelchair, just stay there." Hutch disappeared into the house, coming out promptly
with the damned stroller.

Starsky didn't feel up to complaining about being wheeled around like a two year old, and let himself be guided into the seat and propelled back into the house.

"How bad is it?" Hutch asked, laying his palm on Starsky's forehead. "You're really flushed and hot."

"I was out in the sun, Hutch," Starsky swiped his hand away with irritation. "I'll take a nap, get some rest. What time is it, anyway?"

"Just after one. Did you get some lunch?"

"Mick made sandwiches, but he had to leave early today, remember?"

"Did you eat one?"

"Yes." Starsky leaned on the arm of the chair, covering his eyes with splayed fingers, hoping Hutch didn't notice that he couldn't stand to watch the room jigging up and down. He'd never been quite so dizzy for quite so long. Usually this kind of thing went away almost immediately.

"What kind?" Hutch held out a glass of water.

"Uh--tuna fish, on whole wheat." Starsky drank some of the water. As long as Hutch didn't poke in the trash, he was safe. He really had eaten some of the sandwich, just not all of it. "I'm gonna lie down." He set the glass on an endtable and placed his hands on the wheelchair wheels. The archway to the hall seemed to waver as if a high wind were blowing through the house. It made him queasy and the last thing he wanted to do was throw up. That brought up too many nasty memories of chemo. But admitting to Hutch how bad he was right then was not exactly optimal either. Hutch would just cart him off to the hospital.

"I can turn down the bed." Hutch hovered just behind him, ready to help but aware that Starsky didn't want to be coddled.

"It's hot enough, I don't need covers. Just give me an hour, huh? Maybe we can go out later for ice cream? I'll drive."

"Sure." Hutch sighed, but didn't crowd.

For that Starsky was grateful, because he wasn't sure how much longer he could hide how badly he was feeling. The fact that this innervating weakness was happening more often didn't make it any easier to accept, for either of them. The dizziness was a new and unwelcome addition.

Pushing off very carefully, Starsky was pleased that he made it through the moving target without crashing into the doorjamb, and into his bedroom. Mission accomplished.

Even lying on the bed wasn't as peaceful as Starsky would have wanted. He closed his eyes but the swirling sensation persisted until he was afraid to move so much as his eyeballs. Every single muscle twitch increased the vertigo, and sleep didn't come despite his fatigue. Clutching at the coverlet to quell the feeling that he was about to pitch right off a completely flat surface, Starsky tried the breathing techniques they were learning in yoga class. Inhale slowly, filling the body with air, then exhale, ridding the body of strain. In and out.

In and out. Slowly and carefully relaxing all the muscles and organs in his body, the tension leaving until only his stomach was clenched and tight. He wasn't going to throw up, not today.
“All I need is black been soup and you to make it for me.”

Hutch’s melodic voice drifted in from the living room, accompanied by the guitar, and singing one of his old favorites. Starsky exhaled, the knots in his belly loosening.

“Be my love and love will stay, and wear your ribbons for me.”

Starsky finally dropped off into sleep with the sound of his lover singing to him.

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Hutch scanned the crowd of passengers getting off the plane from Duluth, looking for a blond couple. It seemed like the entire population of Minnesota had been on the plane, and he let his rampant anxiety get to him. Maybe Karen and Rolf had missed their flight? No, they certainly would have called if they had. He worried about everything lately, it had become a constant in his out of control life. If there wasn't anything real to worry about, he invented things, such as the imaginary problem of missing a flight. If they had, they'd easily find a later one. No big deal, really.

Exhaling deeply, Hutch pressed his palm into his tired eyes. He'd gotten up early this morning to get Starsky to his appointment, and then drive through heavy traffic to get to the airport on time. It had been a hard couple of days, and he was hoping that this visit would bring some fun back into his life. He needed the distraction.

"Ken!" Karen waved, running toward him, towing a good-looking guy with wire-framed glasses behind her. Hutch couldn't believe he hadn't seen her first, and laughed aloud when she threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"Let me get a look at you." Hutch held her at arm's length for a moment before giving her another hug. Karen was three years younger than he was. In fact, their birthdays were only days apart, his in August and hers in September, but she looked years younger than 36. Her straight, pale blond hair was held back with a blue band that matched the Hutchinson eyes, and tiny diamonds sparkled in her ears, two on each side.

She had a trim figure, and while shorter than Hutch, was tall for a woman, especially in the high-heeled sandals she wore. "You're still the prettiest one in the family."

"Sweet-talker." Karen grinned at the compliment, beckoning a slightly plump man forward. "Ken, this is Rolf." The way she said her fiancé’s name spoke volumes about their love and Hutch wondered if he ever said Starsky's name in such a heartfelt tone. "Rolf Von Buchau, my brother Ken Hutchinson."

Hutch shook the firm hand, liking Rolf immediately. The man had an open, friendly smile, and didn't shirk from his girlfriend's brother's scrutiny.

"Nice to meet you, Ken. I've heard all the childhood stories I'll bet you wished were hidden under the rug."

"Karen!" Hutch gave his sister's long hair a tug. "You didn't tell him about the time you and Jack going skinny-dipping in the pool when you were supposed to be babysitting me and Janie Elkins, and we doused ourselves with Mom's perfume and lipstick."

"And sugared the steak, and served baked potatoes that had been in the oven for about ten minutes." Karen elbowed him in the ribs, her blue eyes merry. "Dad told him that one! I did let slip about you and Jack going skinny-dipping in the pool when you were supposed to be babysitting me and Janie Elkins, and we doused ourselves with Mom's perfume and lipstick."
"We weren't skinny-dipping, we were practicing our life saving techniques," Hutch said loftily.

"In the nude, so Christine Mathieson and Sally Abrams, who were sunbathing next door, could see you," Karen teased.

Hutch laughed aloud. He hadn't thought about his carefree teenaged years in forever. It felt good to reminisce about things that had nothing to do with murder, shootings, or pain.

With a luck Hutch never managed when he was waiting for his own luggage, Karen and Rolf's bags were the first ones out on the conveyor belt and they made it back to the parking lot in good time.

"This is my first time in Los Angeles." Rolf looked around with keen interest when they were driving down the freeway. "I haven't seen a movie star yet."

"I haven't seen one in years," Hutch said. "But I do know Steve Hanson."

"That cowboy?"

"Starsky and Hutch had small parts in his movie McCoy's Last Stand, but Hutch's big scene got cut. You can sort of see him in one of the fight scenes." Karen leaned over from the back seat to poke her brother. "Say your line."

"Karen." Hutch rolled his eyes, looking ahead for the correct off-ramp.

"C'mon, Hutch, say it. If you don't, I'll get Starsky to." Karen laughed. "He does a wicked imitation. Where is he, anyway?"

"Starsky had to go into the hospital this morning," Hutch said, the weird floating anxiety back with such abruptness he had to swallow the urge to blurt out how worried he'd been.

"Is he worse?" Karen asked softly with a catch in her voice.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rolf added.

"No, not really, anyway." Hutch looked right so that he could merge into the lane taking them to the off-ramp. "His body doesn't make enough red blood cells anymore, so every once in a while he has to go in for what he calls a tune-up. They adjust his pain meds and give him a transfusion. He always feels a lot better afterwards . . ."

"Why do I hear a but there?" Karen rubbed his shoulder in sympathy.

"The transfusions don't last very long anymore. He's up one day and down the next. He really wanted to come meet you at the airport." Hutch drove into the hospital driveway and parked the car. "But I reminded him that he'd need the extra energy if he wanted to last out the day in Disneyland."

"I definitely want to go to Disneyland." Karen climbed out, brushing the wrinkles out of her blue slacks.

"Heck, my parents promised me they'd take me in 1960, but we never made it." Rolf donned sunglasses against the bright afternoon sun. "I've waited 25 years to ride the Matterhorn."

"Starsky will be glad to join you. I stay on terra firma," Hutch said. He looked up at the windows of the third floor, the Rose Tree Unit. In those horrible months when Starsky was up there,
vomiting up his guts from the chemo, and sweating out fever after fever, Hutch had forced himself
to sublimate the terror that gripped him every time he walked into the lobby. Now, when visits to
St. Joseph's were few and far between, he broke out in a sweat just pressing the button for the
elevator. This place had such fearful memories. Each time he wondered if this was the last visit,
forever. Would he go upstairs and find John Davies pulling a sheet up over Starsky's still body?

"Listen, Karen, Starsky's improved a lot since he was really sick, but . . ."

"Ken, my friend Laura had breast cancer." Karen nodded, but her hand was clenched in Rolf's. "I
know, honey. It's all right." She looked up at Hutch, tears brimming in blue eyes that were so like
his, just for a moment. She blinked and the tears vanished. "How are you holding up?"

"Me? I'm just glad he's alive. And that you're here, and his brother left." Hutch barked a sharp
laugh, not bothering to explain any more. There would be plenty of time later to fill Karen in on
how Nick had tried to fleece his elderly aunt out of her social security check. "Here we are."

"Hi, Hutch!" Calliope waved a rainbow, all ten fingernails painted a different color. Her chiffon
dress had wide arcs of rainbows from collar to hem but amazingly, her hair was a normal, natural-
looking shade of brown.

Hutch introduced Karen and Rolf all around, and it took them quite a while to make it down the
hall to Starsky's room. Both Gemma and Mika had the day off, so Starsky's nurse du jour was Ester
Hawkins. She had her hands full with bags of chemo for some other cancer survivor. "Hutch, you
just go on and collect David. He's been waiting for you, and seems a mite impatient to see your
sister and her handsome beau." She grinned at Rolf, before walking off to her patient.

"Everyone here is so friendly," Karen remarked. "And it doesn't look like your average hospital
wing."

"It's not. This place is becomes your home away from home. Most of the people with cancer stay
for weeks, or even months like Starsky did. The nurses and doctors are like family," Hutch said,
glancing at the pleasant waiting room where he had spent so many hours waiting to hear word
about Starsky's treatments or warming up something to eat while Starsky slept. In truth, he hated it
here, now more than ever. "Starsky's favorite nurse, Mika, isn't here, but she's been with him from
the very first day he had chemo."

"Hey, I don't want to intrude on a family thing." Rolf stopped pushing his glasses up his nose in
what Hutch had already noticed must be a nervous habit.

"Hey," Karen said softly, turning her face into his shoulder as if drawing strength from him.

"Don't even thing about getting out of this one, pal." Hutch shook a finger. "Starsky doesn't have a
younger sister, he's been wanting to do the 'grill the boyfriend' bit for a week now. Just prepare
your answers in essay form."

Rolf laughed and the tension was broken. Starsky's yell did the rest. "I've been waiting for hours,
Hutch!" He hopped off the reclining chair, grabbing Karen in a hug before she had a chance to say
hello. "Welcome to California."

"Starsky, I'm so happy to see you!" Karen returned the hug, albeit more gently.

"Hutch really needs to have his sister around," Starsky whispered in her ear. He kept one hand
around her shoulder and extended a hand to her fiancé. "And you must be Rolf."

Hutch hung back, letting the others get acquainted, just happy to feast on the sight of his lover. As
always after a transfusion, Starsky looked hale, pink cheeked, and happy. He was wearing a shirt with the logo "Play rugby, give blood" in red across the front and only a keen observer would notice the little bump on the upper right where the subclavian port hid under the fabric. Hutch felt incredibly blessed just then, especially when Starsky's bright blue eyes sought him out from across the room. This was his family, and he was loved.

They toured Rolf around for several hours, showing him the local sights and historical attractions. The Dodger Stadium right next to the police academy made the biggest impression, and Hutch promised to take Rolf to the next game playing there.

"I used to wish we'd had classes during baseball season," Starsky said, putting on his seatbelt for the last leg of the tour. "So I could watch 'em play, but we went there in the fall."

"He looked so handsome in his cadet uniform," Karen gushed.

"Me?" Hutch asked, starting up the car. He was beginning to feel like a chauffeur, but he enjoyed showing off some of his favorite places in the area. St. Joseph's just hadn't been one of them.

"No, Starsky! You sent Mom and Dad a picture of the two of you." She was blushing. "I kept it under my pillow."

"I never knew you had a crush on me." Starsky laughed.

"Should I consider him the competition?" Rolf asked with a gleam in his eyes.

"I was twenty, between boyfriends. I seriously thought about coming west to go to college, but my parents would have had a fit after Ken did it."

"And got a divorce. I don't know which they considered worse. They always liked Vanessa." Hutch glanced into the back seat while the car idled at a stoplight.

"Dad did, Mom didn't," Karen said.

"Really?"

"Really. Mom thought she was trashy for one of Duluth's oldest families."

"Learn something new every day," Hutch said in wonderment.

"Hey," Starsky said to change the subject. "Our friends have a new restaurant. It just opened up this week. Want to try it?"

Mama Bear's was a delight. Karen loved the décor, and got along great with Daisy while the men argued over who would pick up the check. Even Huggy got into the act, although he never refused to take their money, he just kept adding his unnecessary two cents into the fray. In the end, Karen took charge, and slapped her credit card into Huggy's waiting hand. He gave them the friend's discount, and drinks on the house.

It was late evening by the time they got back to the house and all were tired. Hutch had prepared the guest bedroom ahead of time, so no one stayed up for any longer than it took to get ready for bed and say good night.

Starsky was already asleep when Hutch crawled into bed. He curled up against the slender body, feeling the jut of Starsky's pelvis and vertebrae against his chest. Still far too skinny.
Starsky had been on all afternoon through the carousel ride on the Santa Monica pier, the walk through the funky Venice shops, and drive up Mulholland to show off the view of the city below. He'd never once complained about pain or fatigue, but Hutch knew a pint of blood didn't cure things. Starsky's healthy appearance was a disguise and he could only maintain it for so long. Tomorrow he'd pay for the activity by staying in bed. As long as it kept him alive, that was all Hutch cared about.

As long as it kept him alive.

"Hey, Tiger, you awake?"

"Hmmm." Starsky cleared his throat, trying to rise completely out of sleep. It was harder than he expected, and he blinked several times before Hutch's face came completely into focus. "Now I am."

"We're all leaving. Sophie just arrived, and she brought you some croissants."

"Tell Karen I'm sorry I couldn't make it..." Starsky lay back on the pillow, conscious only of the warm weight of Hutch's hand on his cheek and the smooth cotton of the pillowcase against his ear. He wanted to get up, he really did, but the energy just wasn't there yet. Not at this un-Godly hour. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Nine-forty five," Hutch brushed a kiss across Starsky's upper lip and started to draw away but Starsky grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him back. The next kiss carried a certain heat that could have easily been stoked into a fire given half a chance. "Hold that thought," Hutch said with approval, tapping Starsky's mouth with his forefinger. "And we can carry on in that vein this evening."

"What about Karen and Rolf? Cause I don't wanna make 'em feel left out." Starsky finally roused himself enough to sit up, his back reminding him that any fast movements were potentially hazardous and should be avoided at all costs. As if deciding to join the party, a cramp rolled up his leg fast and sharp, only to ease off just when Starsky was about to scream.

Hutch was pulling on a lightweight jacket and didn't seem to notice. "They've got plans of their own. A buddy of Rolf's from college works for some movie studio, and I think he's giving them a backstage tour."

"Hey, didn't you tell me he had relatives out here?"

"His parents are dead, but his younger brother Gunner owns a vineyard up in the Napa Valley."

"Nice." Starsky looked Hutch up and down, taking in the pressed cream-colored slacks and the Izod shirt with narrow blue and navy stripes. "You're really going golfing?"

"Rolf enjoys the sport--and I used to be a good player, once upon a time. Daisy and Karen are going shopping at that big new mall with the Nordstrom's, and we'll all meet for lunch."

"Last time you golfed, we were on that voodoo island." Starsky cleared his throat again, but the morning cough that plagued him pushed its way out with a vengeance. "Beware of any alligator filled water traps."

"Cover your mouth when you say that, Papa Theodore." Hutch lingered, looking over at Starsky with such longing, Starsky felt a resulting stirring in his groin.
"Get out of here!" Starsky insisted before he was lost in those eyes.

As Hutch left, Starsky could hear him giving Sophie last minute instructions, and joking with his sister. He followed the sound of that beloved voice across the living room, almost mourning the loss when then the front door closed behind Karen, Rolf and Hutch.

*God! What that man did to him.* Starsky slid a hand into his boxers, grasping onto his penis with a sigh of amazement. He was totally hard, just from Hutch's look and the sound of his voice. As long as Sophie stayed in the kitchen for a short time longer, he might get some use out of this present Hutch had left him.

It felt decadent, almost sinful, to be masturbating like this. He stroked himself slowly at first, but with a delicious friction that increased his respiratory rate until he was panting. If he coughed again, Sophie would come running, and he didn't want that. Clamping his lips tightly, Starsky pushed back against the pillows, a vision of Hutch plastered on his closed eyelids. Hutch, standing in a shaft of sunlight, his hair a halo blaze around his head, shoulders broad and firm, abdomen tanned and strong, and his cock, perfection.

Forgetting all his petty aches, Starsky gave in to his passion and came, tiny shivers of joy skittering over his body. He lay back, gasping, which turned into coughing, which hurt, but he didn't care, because he hadn't had a solitary moment like that in . . . There hadn't been a time. Not that he could remember, anyway. Weird just how Hutch could arouse him so easily. The only problem was if Starsky couldn't get it up a second time when Hutch returned. Was that possible? His staying power was erratic, but he'd noticed that every time he got blood, he got horny. Did the transfusion really have some wonderful erotic power? He'd have to test out his theory tonight, which meant that he really did need to get plenty of rest before then.

Sophie poked her head in shortly afterwards, concerned about his breathing rate and coughing, but Starsky convinced her that a couple of puffs on his inhaler and a steamy hot shower would fix him right up.

Yes, he was just fine, great in fact.

Yes, he'd like croissants with boysenberry jam for breakfast. With a side of painkillers and peppermint tea.

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"I love looking at all these pictures. They tell so much about people." Karen picked up the silver framed photo of Starsky and Hutch wearing matching tuxedos next to Huggy and Daisy.

Starsky was of the opinion that he looked like a geek because of the bow tie, but Hutch had told him he looked like a stud, and the matter was closed.

Karen inhaled with a tiny smile of happiness. "You got married, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Starsky shrugged, embarrassed that they hadn't told her, or even invited her.

"Then congratulations are in order. We should have champagne." She reverently placed the picture back amongst the others.

"Thank you. I thought Hutch told you."

"He told me you were in a wedding, not that it was yours."
"Not ours, exactly. It was kind of a surprise. A secret, I guess. Huggy and Daisy wanted us to share their day with them, even though Hutch and me got rings back at Christmas time."

"That I knew about." She picked up a few more pictures, including one of the few Starsky had allowed taken of him while he was in the hospital. Hutch was perched on the bed with his arm around Starsky so that the fingers of their left hands were interlocked, the gold rings touching. Mika had taken it just after Chanukah, when Starsky's hair had started to grow back and he wasn't on chemo yet. "Ken asked me about settings and stuff. About what to say to our dad."

"You didn't tell him, did you?" Starsky asked in alarm. Richard Hutchinson had always been polite, if stiff and formal around him, but neither he nor Hutch had any illusions about what the man would think about their union. "I don't want to start any tensions this late in the game."

"No, he doesn't know. At least I don't think so."

"What about you?" Starsky asked curiously. He'd always enjoyed Karen's company. She was intelligent, good-hearted and funny, very much like her older brother, but with that occasional sternness that was apparently a genetic trait in the Hutchinson family.

"Starsky, I sent you the dishes from my first non-marriage, remember? Nobody ever had to tell me about you two." She sat down on the couch beside him, to his left, and patted his truncated thigh. For once, Starsky didn't feel at all self-conscious about it or concerned about reactions to his amputation. Karen accepted him totally, just like Hutch did. "I think you and Hutch were made for each other, and that doesn't happen very often in life."

"Yeah."

"And you're incredibly brave to be able to recognize it in each other. Not everyone could."

Starsky covered her hand with his own, curious about what she had said. "You and Rolf seem really happy."

"We are." Karen grinned, pointing out the sliding glass door to where Hutch and Rolf were grilling steaks on a barbecue. "He fits me, I think. But it wasn't love at first sight, or anything. I had to make myself see something in him, on the first date. He's sensible, and safe. I always wanted the bad boys, wild boys with dark hair and leather jackets who drove fast cars."

"Me?"

"I did keep your picture under my pillow."

"Y'know, I mighta gone out with you in those days, if you hadn't been Hutch's sister."

"And I would have said yes. You went to my wedding to Eddie. He was all bad boy."

"I thought your mother would bust a gut sitting up there at the main table when he told that story about meeting you in a bar and drinking tequila shots to score a date with you."

"Those were the good old, bad old days," Karen agreed, rolling her eyes. "Mom hated him. Dad only tolerated him because he had loads of inherited money."

"Sounds like you and Hutch both picked spouses to piss your parents off."

"There could be some truth in that." She held two fingers up with barely an inch between them. "A little. But Ken picked the girl my parents should have liked, and I picked the boy I knew they'd
"Now it's the other way around," Starsky said softly, watching the chefs fuss over the meat. The hearty smell of cooked beef was wafting in from the yard, and he was getting very hungry.

"No, not ever. If my dad is too blind to see how good you are for Ken, it's his loss. Not ever yours."

"I'm just . . . worried," Starsky confessed. "I can feel it inside myself, Karen. There's not a whole lot of time left. I'm worried what will happen to Hutch when he's . . . alone."

"Starsky, he won't have you in the flesh, but he'll never be alone." Karen gave him a sisterly kiss on the cheek and Starsky wished he'd shaved. His cheek was whiskery. "Your spirit will reside in his heart for all time, of that I'm sure. And I won't let him get lost in the grief."

"Thank you," Starsky said sincerely. He didn't know what he had done right to find the Hutchinsons, but they were a special breed, and he was proud to be a part of the clan.

"You need a shave." Karen used her thumb to wipe the lipstick off his cheek, her blue eyes twinkling. "Daisy convinced me to buy a new shade of lipstick and it really leaves a mark."

"Kissing other men, are you?" Rolf carried the platter of perfectly grilled steaks in and placed it on the dolphin table. He pointed to his own cheek. "Plant one right here, woman."

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't," Karen said coyly. "What do I get in return?"

"The love of a hard working man, who made sure your steak was medium well done even though the rest of us wanted rare."

"How could I resist?" Karen fluttered her hand in the air, and bussed her man on the mouth instead of the cheek. She laughed when he ended up with a perfect pink lip print on his larger lips. "Why do I get the urge to watch Rocky Horror Picture Show now?"

"Let's do the Time Warp again!" Starsky stood up, waggling his hips when Karen sang the refrain.

"Put your hands on your hips and your knees in tight! Do the pelvic thrust, it really drives 'em insane!" She grabbed Rolf and danced him around in a circle until they were both giggling.

Hutch made his entrance with the grilled corn on the cob, and Starsky sang, "Take a jump to the left . . ."

"And a jump to the right . . ." Hutch finished shaking a foil wrapped cob like a maraca, and they all chorused "Let's do the Time Warp again!"

The mood was merry as they completed the preparations for the meal. Starsky grabbed up his crutches to find plates and cutlery. It seemed weirdly fitting to use the white china with the gold trim that Karen had gifted them, and he laboriously transferred the plates out of the china cabinet and onto the table. By the time he had finished with the place settings, Hutch had brought the food over, and Karen tossed a green salad. The aroma of garlic bread permeated the room and Starsky rescued it just in time before it turned into garlic bread briquettes. They were having an early dinner before Rolf and Karen met with the assistant director for a new Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, to watch a night shooting.

"You have a great sister," Starsky said once their houseguests were gone.
"I do." Hutch collapsed onto the couch, drawing the afghan over them. "I haven't golfed in way too long. I'm worn out."

"And sunburned." Starsky pressed Hutch's overly pink nose. "What were you telling me just the other day about sun screen?"

"Hey, it's all part of the package. Shirts with little alligators or polo ponies, golf clubs, and a pink nose."

Starsky kissed him gently on the burn, with many more kisses for all the other parts of his face. Hutch returned the favor, kissing Starsky first on the lips and then on each eyelid. Their romancing was languid and easy, something so familiar and yet special that it didn't need to be rushed. They savored every touch, every remembered body part as the kisses continued. Starsky had melted into Hutch because it was becoming too hard to kiss and breathe simultaneously, letting Hutch continue kissing down his torso, lovingly caressing each inch of skin.

The feel of those soft lips pressed against his flesh was so sweet, it sent him back to their first night when they had admitted their love and then found themselves not quite sure how to go about having sex with another man. Hutch had untied the terry cloth robe Starsky was wearing, and knelt, bestowing a kiss on the ugliest of the recently healed scars on Starsky's chest. It had been as if that kiss knit something deep inside that Starsky hadn't realized needed to be restored. He'd thought he loved Hutch truly, but with that kiss his love had multiplied one hundred fold, and they'd spent the rest of the night curled together, learning what it was to love each other. Sex hadn't ever entered into it that first night. Starsky had been fragile and Hutch more careful than any man could ever be. It wasn't until Starsky had put his foot down a few days later that Hutch even consented to frottage and hand jobs. He'd been cautious about hurting Starsky then, and he was obviously still being cautious.

"Hey," Starsky slipped his fingers through Hutch's pale hair, giving the strands the tiniest of tugs. "What gives?"

"You don't like my technique?" Hutch had his head in Starsky's lap, licking at his belly button. It tickled.

"I love your technique, just wondered if we were going to do anything else?"

"You up for it?"

"You have to ask? It must be stuck half way up your ear."

Hutch grinned, coming up on his elbows to peer at the erection in Starsky's jeans. "I wondered what was pressing on my eardrum."

"That's ear wax." Starsky wiggled so that his cock would regain the attention it so richly deserved. He wouldn't even admit it aloud, but he was tired--and he'd done very little all day. But after his solo performance in the morning, he wanted sex with Hutch in the worst way. A joining, a manifestation of their love to keep him going.

"Hmm, I think this merits some investigation." Hutch looped the waistband button out of Starsky's jeans and pulled down the zipper. "Little Davey looks happy to see me."

"Y'know he gets lonely." Starsky tugged at Hutch's upper arms, urging him back up on the couch. "C'mon, let your friend come out and play."

"Like this?" Hutch divested himself of his pants, and then sprawled back on the sofa with one long
leg stretched the full length so that his toes rapped on Starsky's groin, and the other foot hung down to graze the carpet. He looked more than ready to play, his penis jutting up, thick and hard.

Untangling himself from the foot in his lap, Starsky crawled on his hands and knee toward Hutch, until their bodies were aligned, cocks rubbing deliciously together. The sensation of those two strong shafts brushing back and forth sent shivers up Starsky's spine, his whole body starting to tremble in anticipation.

Below him, Hutch was breathing heavily, his big hands holding onto Starsky's arms as if he could never let go. Starsky latched onto Hutch's mouth, feeling his partner's breath fill him as their sweat slicked bodies moved faster and faster. Starsky felt Hutch's orgasm as if it were his own, the shuddering vibrations like the champagne bubbles after the cork has been popped. Hutch's exuberant shout of completion brought on Starsky's climax, and he sank onto his lover's body, thoroughly spent.

"That's much better than crab," Starsky said when he could speak again.

"Huh?" Hutch interlaced his fingers behind Starsky's neck, keeping him there.

"Remember I thought maybe if I visualized it hard enough, crab would make everything better?" Starsky kissed the chest so close to his cheek.

"Yeah."

"I was wrong. Shoulda put my money on sex all along."

Hutch decided on the long drive from Dahlia Lane to Anaheim that the only way he was going to survive a day in Disneyland with Starsky was to forget the past, ignore the future, and live absolutely for the present. The fact that Starsky was in a wheelchair could be explained in so many ways, it had nothing to do with a diagnosis of cancer. In fact, they saw a teenager in a wheelchair, missing both feet, just as they walked up to the ticket booth. The tinkly sound of Mickey music was already starting to weave its magical spell and the boy, wearing a "Rock the Night Away with Mickey Mouse" t-shirt waved at his fellow wheelchair compatriot as his parents and older brother guided him away.

Starsky waved back with a grin. Hutch found, with surprise, that he didn't have the least interest in why the boy might be missing his feet. It was just a fact of life.

Karen and Rolf wanted to do and try everything in the park. They posed with Mickey Mouse in front of the Hall of Presidents, and immediately went into the first millinery shop on the street to purchase bride and groom mouse ears. The slight wind made the little veil on the crown of Karen's chapeau billow out like a sail on the open sea.

From then on, there was no stopping the four of them. They explored each of the lands, starting with Adventureland and going counterclockwise. Starsky shook his head minutely at the Swiss Family Treehouse, the location of their first kiss in Disneyland last October, and Hutch understood intuitively. He didn't want to alter the perfection of last time.

Starsky's eyes lit with anticipation at entrance to the Pirates of the Caribbean and he sang along to the music as they waited for their turn in one of the low-slung boats. As Starsky had predicted, the wheelchair got them in front of the line in no time, and they ran into Caleb, boy they'd seen at the ticket counter. He joined his family in the boat ahead of the Starsky/Hutchinson/Von Buchau craft.
As their boat traveled along on its mechanized track past the huge ships belching cannon fire at one another, Hutch felt a warm hand slide into his. "Exciting, isn't it?"

"With you." Hutch nodded, drinking in the joy in those eyes. In the gloom of the ride, he couldn't see how astonishingly blue Starsky's eyes were, but the simulated fire and explosions were reflected there, giving him a weirdly crazed look. Hutch shuddered, and Starsky brought up one hand as if he were going to whisper something in Hutch's ear, and kissed him on the hard curve of his jaw.

"Yo ho, yo ho. A pirate's life for me!" chorused the soundtrack, and no one gasped or pointed out two men kissing in front of the pirates ransacking the island village.

Hutch thought he'd associate the boisterous pirate song with Starsky's kisses for the rest of his life.

They feasted on French dip sandwiches for lunch, took in the Golden Horseshoe Review with its can-can dancing saloon girls and corny jokes, and rode on the monorail high up over the park. Whenever it was his turn to choose a ride, Hutch found himself steering towards the sedate, and slow, to give himself time to relish each moment with Starsky.

Starsky, of course, went for the exact opposite, as if flaunting his good time in the face of his illness, one last hurrah before the final round-up. He and Rolf paired up on the Matterhorn, leaving the Hutchinson siblings on solid ground for five minutes.

"You watch him every second," Karen observed, adjusting her bridal ears for the umpteenth time. "Like you're afraid you won't see him again." She leaned her head against her brother's shoulder and he slipped an arm around her. "He's not going to last the summer, is he?"

"Is it that obvious?" The minute she'd asked, his throat had tightened up so that he wasn't even sure he could speak without breaking down. The last thing he wanted to do was bawl in front of the Matterhorn with half the world passing by.

"That you love him? Yes." She shaded her eyes, looking up at the white, artificial mountain and pointed out Starsky and Rolf whizzing by in their little sled. "That he's so sick? Not really. He's so happy today, when the two of you look at each other you light up. I'm not sure I even look at Rolf that way."

"You do," Hutch assured her. "Starsky's throwing me a birthday party." He gulped, afraid to even voice his anguish. It was difficult to get any words out, standing there in the bright sunlight, with children laughing, and a lively polka from Snow White playing on the sound system. He'd vowed that he wouldn't think about any of this, but Karen would go and bring it up. "In August. He'll still be alive in August."

"Good," Karen said.

Then the ride was over and Rolf was helping Starsky climb back into his wheelchair. Hutch watched them, feeling like he was on the wrong side of a telescope. Starsky looked tiny sitting there, describing the ride to Karen with animated gestures that illustrated the swooping rush of the sled down roller coaster track.

"Hey, Hutch!" Starsky called, and Hutch forcibly brought himself back to the present. This was June, August was months away, and very far in the future. "Karen and Rolf want to go on Small World, but I've had my fill of big-eyed singing dolls. Want to get some ice cream?" Starsky licked his lips. "With chocolate sprinkles."
"Sure." And everything was right again. Starsky was smiling at him but his eyes saw right through Hutch. Starsky understood the internal battles he was waging, because Starsky was in the heat of the fray himself. Just like soldiers in the field, they pretended that the enemy wasn't standing in their midst and continued on, laughing and joking because that was the only way to survive.

Hutch liked the Carnation ice cream parlor with its white metal chairs and red striped wallpaper. It represented a simpler time when dating was sharing two straws in one soda, and holding hands under a gibbous moon. There had been a place back in Duluth like this, and he was suddenly sad that it had closed when he was in high school before he could take Starsky there for a sundae. What would it have been like to have known Starsky in high school? Maybe go dutch on a soda, and talk about midterms. They wouldn't have been lovers, that was for certain. He'd never even heard of two guys doing it back then. Or if he had, it was discussed with derision and revulsion, a distortion of the pure love that only a man and woman could share.

So, no, he didn't want to revisit that past. Here in the now he had love, and happiness, and ice cream. That was all that he needed.

"You want a napkin?" Starsky wiped something sticky off Hutch's upper lip. "You're such a slob."

"Speak for yourself." Hutch pointed to a round drop of chocolate right in the center of Mickey Mouse's forehead on the front of Starsky's shirt.

"Are you okay, Hutch?"

"We're in Disneyland. Of course I'm okay."

"I think you'd prefer to be on some deserted island, with a rum drink, and palm trees swaying in the breeze."

"That sounds great. When do we leave?" He could see the white sand, hear the soft roar of the waves coming into shore, and feel the heat of the tropical sun. It was the visualization Starsky used to use just after the Gunther shooting, when he was trying to leave all pain aside and relax. That was their personal code to each other, to loosen up and take it easy. "You'd better be there, too."

"I'll never leave you, Hutch."

"Yes, you will."

"Nah." Starsky ate a spoonful of melting ice cream. "I'm going to haunt you all the rest of your life, just like those ghosts that sit with you in the Haunted Mansion cars. I'll be right next to you all the time."

"Karen said just about the same thing about you, except without the Haunted Mansion embellishments."

"That you can't get rid of me so easily?" Starsky grinned, and winked.

"Don't die," Hutch said in a tiny voice, sure that he would never make it alone without this incredible man by his side.

"Don't you die," Starsky said fiercely, grabbing his hand. The noisy restaurant faded into insignificance. They could have been alone on that island for all notice Hutch took of his surroundings. There was nothing to see, to feel, to love, but Starsky.

"Don't let this break you down, Hutch. I know how bad it's gonna be, I got a little of that when you
were so sick with the plague. It tears you up inside. But you got to live, understand me? You got to live for both of us, and get that doctor degree. You promise me?” When Hutch didn't answer, because the tears in his throat were choking him, Starsky tightened his grip on their clasped hands. "You promise me?"

"I promise."

The lovebirds flew North two days later to visit the vineyards of Napa, and it wasn't a moment too soon for Starsky. He'd enjoyed their visit immensely, Karen and Rolf made a great couple, and they were fun to pal around with, but Starsky was beyond exhausted. It was sobering to realize that even after being topped up with rich, red blood cells he didn't have the stamina of an asthmatic sixty year old.

He could feel Hutch watching him, feel Hutch looking for signs of his failing health, and wanted to hide them at all costs. That was exhausting, too, and there was no reason to do it except pride. Starsky just didn't want to appear weak in front of his friends. As it was, Hutch was most often the sole witness to his illness, and Starsky hated putting his best friend and lover in the position of caretaker. They had both had their share of nursing the other back to health during their heyday as cops, but this was different. This was permanent.

The fact of the matter was, Starsky was tired of everything; tired of being the invalid, tired of having to consider his health every time he wanted to enjoy himself. Disneyland had been great fun, but he'd ignored every sign that his body had thrown at him and, just like the last time, paid for it dearly. It wasn't fair that fun came with such a price, and as a result, he was surly to those around him. If Hutch was kind, Starsky wanted to throw something at him. If Hutch was in a foul mood, Starsky's was fouler. They circled one another like combatants who hadn't taken the first swing yet.

"Let Sophie do that," Starsky said when Hutch brought out the supplies to flush his IV port with heparin. This had to be done every eight hours to keep the IV patent, but he didn't like it. He didn't like the two Morphine tablets sitting on the table beside his neglected breakfast. He didn't like giving in that easily.

"You want it to clot off?" Hutch irritably pushed his hand away, flipped up Starsky's shirt, and cleaned off the little rubber port sutured into his chest with an alcohol wipe. "Take the damned pills. You've been hurting for over an hour, anyone can see it, Starsky."

"Get away, Hutch!" Starsky pushed back with all his strength, which wasn't very much at that point, since he had been in considerable pain for most of the morning. Actually, far longer than the hour Hutch had mentioned. "You don't even have the decency to ask first, before pulling off my clothes?"

"Do you want this, or not?" Hutch snatched up the morphine with a savage grunt. "Because, you know what? I've just about had it this morning. You shuffle out, won't eat, won't take care of yourself . . . God, I wish I had somewhere to go right now because I'd like to get away from here."

"You're the one who quit his job," Starsky ground out through teeth gritted against the pain in his back. If he could have gotten up and walked right then, he would have. Right out the front door. Good thing Karen and Rolf had decided not to swing back through Southern California before flying back to Duluth, because Starsky wasn't sure they'd survive the mine fields that had suddenly cropped up all through the house on Dahlia Lane. Their houseguests had been gone less than a week and all scale war had broken out in their absence.
It was as if without relatives around to deflect their frustrations with each other, and the specter of illness, Starsky and Hutch could no longer talk. Hutch had begun to resent his increased burden, and Starsky equally resented being that burden. Each little procedure that Hutch had to do to keep Starsky going through the day, each household chore that fell more and more on Hutch's shoulders rankled. The tender scene at the ice cream parlor seemed like a half-dreamed fairy tale rather than a reaffirming of their bond.

Hutch put the Morphine back into the bottle, tidied up the medical supplies, and tucked them back into the shoebox marked *Starsky's stuff* with the short, jerky movements of a robot completing a programmed routine.

Starsky sat, pretending his back didn't feel like there was a knife sticking out midway between his lungs and his tailbone. It hurt to breathe, but a great deal of that pain was of his own making. He knew he was pushing Hutch away, just as he had in the very beginning last September, but there were whole chunks of time where he didn't know how to do anything else. He wanted to curl up and shut out the world one moment, and just as abruptly, wanted Hutch wrapped around his body the next. If it was making him crazy, what was it doing to Hutch? The Hutch who slipped junkies an extra twenty for food, knowing full well it would be shot straight into a vein. The Hutch who had wanted to fill a former girlfriend's room with red balloons to give turn fantasy into reality. That Hutch was bleeding from the heart he wore on the outside of his skin.

After pouring himself two fingers of Kentucky sipping whiskey from the bottle they kept in their china cabinet for guests, Hutch sat down heavily in the armchair. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and Hutch was drinking the hard stuff. Usually, the only thing either of them indulged in was beer unless there was a party going on. This was definitely out of the realm of any party Starsky ever wanted to attend. The pungent smell of whiskey permeated the room and he wrinkled his nose, slightly nauseated. He really should have eaten the toast Hutch made for him.

Was it possible that just the fumes could cause drunkenness by osmosis? Starsky was beginning to feel slightly irrational without a single drop in his system. The thought that Hutch was drinking and the sun wasn't even past the yardarm was very distracting.

Just exactly what was a yardarm, anyway? And why wait until the sun was that high to imbibe? He didn't begrudge Hutch the liquid painkiller in the slightest, just watched in fascination as the liquor disappeared into that tight-lipped mouth, the Adam's apple in the long throat moving up and down as Hutch swallowed. The room was otherwise silent except for the sound of the glass tumbler hitting the dolphin table with a hard clank. Even the two cats had made themselves scarce.

"Sometimes, I lay in bed at night and think that if I had dragged you to the doctor that first time I felt the lump behind your knee-- a year ago, for Christ's sake, Starsky! A year ago, because it was before my birthday, I think." Hutch took a breath, his guilt palpable. "If I had insisted . . .would that have changed things?" He touched the empty glass, dabbing at a stray trickle of whiskey on the side. "I have long ago resigned myself that I cannot save the world--or even David Starsky from the fates, but would one month have mattered?" His mouth was twisted into an ugly line, and he ground the flat of his hand into his forehead in a manner that indicated that Hutch had one doozy of a headache. "So, I convince myself that if . . .If the surgeons had taken your leg then. Chemoed the cancer cells out of your body right away, you'd be in remission right now. Clean slate, on the way to the five year cure statistic."

"Hutch," Starsky started, not sure what he wanted to say, but just to stop this distorted version of his life from continuing.

"And you would hate me." Brittle pain lanced his words with honesty. Starsky couldn't deny a thing.
"You'd have left me because I forced you into something you didn't want--denied you that little nugget of hope you held onto last fall that maybe, just maybe if they didn't take your leg, you could get back on the force."

Starsky ardently wished there was still enough whiskey in that bottle to wash away the sorrow in his heart. His back didn't hurt as much as his soul did.

Hutch poured himself another splash, downed it, and then upended the bottle one last time. As if able to read Starsky's thoughts, Hutch handed the sticky glass over, his hand shaking just enough to make tiny wavelets in the whiskey.

"You don't want morphine, take this."

"I would never hate you." Starsky accepted the glass, but just held it, staring into the empathetic depths, wondering if he could discern the future there. Nothing else made any sense. He couldn't drink the stuff, it would have simply come back up a half hour later and he'd feel even more shitty in the aftermath. Peppermint tea, or fennel, those might stay down, but he wasn't even sure about that. He wasn't sure about anything.

"This disease is inside me, Hutch, but it's eating us both alive, and I don't know how to fix things. You think I don't wanna change things? I've laid awake, too. God's probably had just about all he can take from one puny ex-cop in Los Angeles. I bargain, and I beg, and I . . . visualize those fucking cancer cells out of me, picking out each one like they was lice and I'm the exterminator."

He set the glass on the table, but his hand was shaking more than Hutch's had and the heavy tumbler slipped, smashing on the floor so that the heavy scent of whiskey fumigated the whole house. Starsky gagged, not sure he could get his rebellious stomach under control. "Nothing worked, did it?"

"No." Hutch got up to go into the kitchen, but stood unmoving, his hands limp at his sides. "I wanted to save you, Starsk. That's why I do this stuff--giving you the drugs and learning everything the nurses do, so that I can save you."

"I never expected you to save me, Hutch. That's not your job."

"Then what is it? Can you tell me that, huh? Because I'm confused here."

"You can be the doctor to somebody else. Save them." Starsky stood on a none-too-steady leg, holding tightly to the back of the couch for support, and Hutch was surrounding him, hugging him, part of him. "Just love me."

Sophie knocked, calling out gaily in her French accent, and opened the door with her own key, coming upon the two of them with a slight gasp. "David, Monsieur Ken, are you all right?" she asked in concern.

"Yeah, I think so," Starsky said softly, wiping away the tears that wet his face. Hutch was heavy against him, but they were both still standing. How much longer, Starsky wasn't sure, because he was barely propping Hutch up now. His back felt like it was made of balsa wood and beginning to splinter right down the middle. "Could you make some tea? A pot and something sweet, maybe? And then I need some morphine."

"D'accord." She nodded, all nurse. Without asking, she helped ease an unresisting Hutch onto the couch. Starsky dropped instantly, tired beyond anything he'd experienced before. Sophie whisked the afghan around them both, and had her list of tasks completed in minutes.
Starsky closed his eyes when the morphine spread through him, like a sweet gift of relief from the hurt. He often wondered if this was how Hutch had felt when he'd been on the heroin, but hadn't had the courage to ask. All the reading he'd done just after Hutch's forced addiction reported that medical needs, and what the books called recreational uses, were not only fundamentally different, but psychologically different. He knew he was most probably hooked on morphine. He was needing it daily now, and had been using it sporadically since his diagnosis. But he didn't crave it when the dose wore off, he just hurt worse. At every appointment, John Davies told him that relief of pain was of the utmost importance for Starsky to continue daily living, but the niggling fact that he was now chained to the drug-cousin of the horse that had once kept Hutch enslaved was galling.

"Hutch?" Starsky whispered after Sophie had delivered the tea and an entire box of Oreos. Hutch had lain curled on his side against the sofa cushions for the last five minutes without any indication that he was amongst the living. "You in there?"

"I'm sorry." Hutch said, grimacing before he opened his eyes, hunching his shoulders and rotating his neck to get out the kinks. He looked over at Starsky with such sadness and embarrassment, the exhaustion turning his normally crystal blue eyes a pale, murky gray.

"For what?" Starsky found that if he moved very slowly, he could pour tea and stir in sugar without a twinge.

"Flaking out on you. I shouldn't have done it."

"You need to get away." Starsky raised the cup to his lips, the savory scent of fennel bracing. It was too hot to drink, so he just let the steam waft around his head.

Hutch very nearly poured tea over his hand, hissing when a few hot drops touched his skin. "Get away? That's impossible."

"You have a car. How is it impossible?"

"Because . . ." Hutch stared at him as if he were insane, and slurped up some tea. He struggled for a moment with his thoughts, as if throwing out the first emotional reasons for much more rational ones. "You need me. I can't possibly leave, not right now."

Because he was afraid that death was imminent, Starsky understood that, even if it wasn't voiced. "Well then, I'm gonna call either Nick or Karen to come back, 'cause things have gotten really tense since everybody left."

"Not Nick," Hutch said, the left corner of his mouth rising in what almost looked like a smile. Starsky had missed that smile. "I could put my foot down and insist."

The other side of Hutch's mouth raised, just a tiny bit. He blew over the top of his tea and took a sip. "Would that be the right foot or the invisible left one?"

"What good would stomping an invisible foot do?" Starsky was so happy to have them teasing one another he could have kept it up all day. "Which brings up the philosophical question, if you stomp your foot in the woods and there's nobody around, does it make a sound?"

"You'd hear it."

"Huh?" Starsky ate two Oreos in a row, not even bothering to unscrew the cookies to get to the creamy center first. The tea had soothed his belly and he was hungry now. Frequently, morphine left him even more nauseated, but today there was just wonderful relief.
"If you stomped your foot in the woods, you'd be there, so you would hear it."

"Spoilsport."

"Starsh, I can't leave you in a lurch, there's too much to do."

"Sophie and Mick would come every day. You could get away for a while, to some deserted island."

"And what would I do off in NeverNeverland?"

"Relax. I dunno, read a book." Starsky touched him, feeling the rock hard muscles in his shoulders. He wasn't sure how much longer either of them were going to hold out. The cancer was taking too much away.

"Time for that later," Hutch said, his eyes shuttered and pensive. He took a cookie, removed the top layer, and held out the creamy center to Starsky. "I never liked the lard."

"The best part." Starsky scraped his teeth across the crisp chocolate cookie, the nearness of Hutch's hand holding the cookie to his mouth a soothing balm for his soul. The sugary sweet almost-oily taste of the cream coated his mouth, and he had to take a drink of tea to wash it down. "Please, Hutch, think about it? Three days alone, when have you had that lately?"

"When you were in the hospital for three months. I was alone then," Hutch said, and the matter was closed.

Gripping the pillowcase, Starsky bit down hard on his bottom lip, trying not to wake Hutch, but it was no use. A fierce, monstrous pain ripped into his spine, almost severing him in half. He couldn't move from the weight of it holding him against the mattress. Screams piled up under his tongue, invisible but thick enough to fill his mouth, begging for release. He couldn't help crying out, ashamed that he was so weak, and embarrassed that he had to wake Hutch because he couldn't lift his arms up high enough to get the bottle of pills lying so close by on the nightstand.

Hutch woke instantly. Starsky wasn't surprised, just saddened that he'd interrupted another night's sleep. He barely acknowledged his partner turning on the light, and rubbing his back because every time the mattress jostled him, every tiny press of Hutch's hand on his skin, brought more agony.

Two capsules, sips of water, and then waiting the dragging, endless minutes for them to take effect.

Aware that Hutch must be wanting some sign that things were progressing, getting better, Starsky made an attempt at sitting up. Claws sank into his backbone, slitting the flesh off his back and plucking out each vertebrae separately before placing them in backwards, upside down, and any way but the way they should fit.

It hurt so bad Starsky could barely feel the press of Hutch's hand on his hip, holding him close. When he could focus, Starsky looked up, just able to locate Hutch's face through the red(gray) haze, and he shook his head desperately, not wanting what was coming next. He could sense the panic in Hutch, could smell the stink of it in the hot, dry air but couldn't change the outcome. This was the worst it had been, and required the big guns.

"Ssh," Hutch crooned, lying Starsky onto his right side. In the little parts of him that didn't hurt, Starsky anticipated what usually came when he was in this position. The slippery glide of a finger down the swell of his buttocks and then the sharp, almost pain of penetration, the joyful swell as
his body accepted Hutch in. But no, what came instead was all the more terrible and sweeter than even that could be.

Hutch depressed the plunger of the syringe, injecting the morphine straight into the subclavian port, releasing the languid sleep of poppies. Starsky succumbed, even though he didn't want to. He wanted to apologize for scaring Hutch, for ending up like this. The drug unmoored him, sending him drifting away to another shore where no one waited for him, and he wept with sadness.

Someone was crying.

Starsky listened, trying to identify the person weeping, but he didn't recognize the voice. Instead he moved, very cautiously and slowly, waiting for the monster to finish dismantling his spine. Every movement seemed laboriously slow, like swimming through a pool of molasses, and it took Starsky some time to understand that he hadn't really moved at all, just thought about it. But nothing hurt that way.

The crying had ended, replaced by an overly loud commercial for the Pillsbury Doughboy's latest breakfast rolls.

Starsky rubbed his eyes, opening them to see a woman proclaiming her whites to be the whitest whites.

Huggy Bear was sitting on the end of the bed eating potato chips, his burgundy slacks so close a color to the crumpled bedspread that Starsky couldn't quite distinguish one from the other. The bag of chips crinkled and cracked like static in the air.

"What're you watching?" Starsky asked. His voice worked. He felt like he was stuffed with cotton, dopey and half drunk from all the drugs he'd taken earlier. Right at this glorious moment, his back didn't hurt one iota, and that was such a wondrous thing that he laughed. The sound echoed against the windowpanes and bounced back at him.

"So you woke up." Huggy turned around, jostling the bed a little. Starsky tensed, his back muscles clenching up, but the resulting cramp was so minor he relaxed, freed from the morning's attacker.

"Had to eventually." Starsky didn't want to catalogue his aches and pains, so he looked back at the TV. The colors were off, everyone looking remarkably too red and smeary. "What movie is this?"

"Brian's Song."

"Kind of ironic under the circumstances, don't you think?"

The actor playing Gale Sayers jogged around a Weirdly sloped football field looking like he might pitch forward at any moment from the angle, while a bridge of poignant, anguished music swelled before the next scene.

"Not really. You ain't no Italian football player, and Blondie sure as heck ain't a legendary running back for the Chicago Bears," Huggy snorted. "On the other hand, you do have curly hair and like pizza."

"And I got cancer," Starsky said bluntly. He hadn't had pizza in a long time. If he weren't nauseated as hell from the morphine, pizza would have sounded good. Just like old times.

"That, too." Huggy sat watching the movie, apparently not up to his usual give and take. Time walked across the bed, dappled in afternoon sun.
Starsky found the screen too bright. Coming in on the middle, the story was too hard to follow, even though he'd seen it before. He closed his eyes, trying to decide if he could chance a glass of water on his dicey stomach. "Where's Hutch?"

"Star-sky." Putting an accent on the downbeat, Huggy transformed the name into a jazz piece, sharp and terse. "Remember, he had errands today. I'm your Huggy of all work until Mrs. Saint Claire can make it in. She called to say she was running late."

"I slept through the phone ringing?" Starsky peered blearily at the clock. He couldn't remember when the pain had grabbed hold, but all of the morning had passed. It was nearly one.

"You slept through me comin', Hutch going, your unholy terror of a misnamed cat knockin' a glass on to the kitchen floor, and the garbage truck rumbling through here like this was a remake of *Apocalypse Now*, and Martin Sheen just got picked up by platoon of Hueys."

"Wrong movie," Starsky groused.

"You want any of the fine cuisine my wife sent over? She made you crab cream soup, special."

"Oh, no." Starsky felt the spasm in his throat, but thwarted his body's urge to hurl. Hardly a trade off when he was too sick to enjoy the absence of pain. "You gonna to watch the whole movie?"

"It's almost over."

"You know how it ends."

"Yeah, but it's the journey that's important, Starsky." Huggy's voice meandered in and out of Starsky's consciousness like ribbons of sound. Sometimes he could almost see the words printed up on the ceiling, spelling out truths. "Two guys, friends to the end. It's a classic."

Starsky didn't want to see Brian Piccolo die again. He dreamed the movie ended differently after countless reruns. At long last, the two actors just refused to play out the death scene one more time. They pushed back the pizza boxes, donned their football helmets and went out to play ball.

Hutch let Huggy out, saying good-by in a voice that he hoped sounded normal. All day he'd had to wear a façade, pretending that nothing was out of the ordinary as he went about his errands. Starsky was not dying. Hutch hadn't run out on his lover because he was too scared to be there when he passed on.

What a coward. He should have stayed. To hell with filing teaching plans for next semester and delivering papers to the lawyers. All this could have waited another day when Starsky didn't need him so much.

What a day for Sophie to have come down with a case of bad luck herself. She'd called twice, first when she managed to get off the freeway after a big rig jack knifed and stopped traffic cold for two hours, and then after the car accident she got into trying to take surface streets to get to Dahlia. So, Huggy had stayed the afternoon.

Hutch sat down on the edge of the bed watching Starsky sleep. He remembered after the Gunther shooting when he'd do this for hours, afraid to look away in case Starsky stopped cold in between one inhalation and the next. How much longer? Had this morning been an omen of things to come?

Starsky gave a soft sigh, his mobile face flickering to life as he surfaced out of sleep, and opened
his eyes. Hutch looked at him gravely, then reached out to push stray curls off Starsky's sweaty forehead. "You look hot."

"No fever, doc. Just too many covers." Starsky pushed at the bedclothes, but didn't have much success in moving them away until Hutch stood and flipped the coverlet to the end of the bed. "Thirsty." Starsky looked around for some water.

"I'm not surprised. You've been asleep all day." Hutch provided a cup of water from the bathroom sink. "How's your back?

"Average." Starsky drained the cup and held it up for seconds.

Wavering on a thin line between being delighted that Starsky was so alert, and being totally aware that Starsky would lie through his teeth to keep him from worrying, Hutch got the water. What exactly did average mean? He knew that Starsky lived with a certain level of pain every day, but the morning had been on a whole different plane. Average probably meant it hurt, but he could move, so no more discussion unless it becomes a problem.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke up the first time."

Starsky emptied the cup and set it on the nightstand. "I don't remember waking up."

"Huggy was watching a movie, said you talked to him."

"Brian's Song," Starsky said in an odd voice. "I thought I dreamed that."

"I ran out on you."

"Hutch." Starsky caught his arm, and Hutch almost wanted to pull away, avoid his lover's touch. He didn't deserve kindness, the way he'd acted. "I don't expect you to wait on me hand and foot."

"Starsky, I gave you enough drugs to drop an elephant, and I bolted!" Hutch did try to pull away, but Starsky hung on, using both hands for strength. "The IV stuff on top of the pills, I could have killed you." His voice was harsh, ragged. "And I couldn't even bear to watch what might happen. I…just left."

"Huggy was here," Starsky said placidly.

"I got to the academy and sat there in the car, feeling you." He turned their hands around and opened his fist, Starsky's hands below his, supporting him. Hutch reversed the positions, scooping his palm under one of Starsky's, to fit their two hands together. "I could feel you like this, and I remembered my grandmother."

"Hutchinson or Livingston?"

"Livingston," Hutch answered, swallowing the tears that threatened. The morning's hell had passed, everything was all right now. So why did he still feel like he could crack into a thousand pieces?

"What did Grandma Livingston have to say?" Starsky quirked a smile, both of their hands separating just enough to be near but not touching.

"Grandmother, we always had to use the formal address." Hutch ran a finger down Starsky's palm, eliciting the reflex to curl the fingers in. "Whenever she'd leave after a visit she'd do that, and quote Isaiah."
"Oh, good, one of the prophets my people recognize."

"I will not forget you…I have carved you on the palm of my hand."

Starsky nodded. No words were required.

"You need a vacation," Starsky said. He buttered his breakfast toast carefully, covering all surface area of the bread. With the capricious nature of his unhealthy body, he felt fine. The month was drawing to a close but June was busting out all over, as the song said. He wanted to go outside, breathe the air, and feel sun on the top of his head. However, the situation with Hutch had reached critical mass, and something needed to be done. Today.

"We've gone over this a thousand times, Starsky. I can't leave." Hutch rustled the newspaper, holding it up between them like a barrier.

"What if I told you to go somewhere else for three days? That I need a vacation?"

Hutch seemed to deflate, all opposition sucked out of him. "What if . . .?"

"I'm not going to die, Hutch."

"How do you know?" he asked with such anguish Starsky wrapped his arms around him.

"Because, I promise." Starsky smoothed Hutch's pale hair, finger combing it into place. "Call me six times a day, but Hutch, you gotta go before you self destruct. Mick will be here in an hour. It won't take you that long to pack two pair of boxers, a clean shirt, and a novel."

"That might be what you'd pack, but I like more variety in my clothing." Hutch swallowed, rubbing his forehead. Starsky was fairly sure he'd had that same headache for days, if not weeks. "How about tomorrow? Or the first day in July? That's a Monday--good way to start the week. I could plan things better."

"And this is a Tuesday in late June and you need to go today," Starsky insisted. "No thinking about it, no plans, just get in the car and drive. Leave all this shit behind." He ate some of his toast, watching Hutch's fear of the unknown skitter across his face.

Hutch drank some coffee and folded the paper, looking thoughtful. He frowned, then sighed, his eyebrows arching in toward his nose like Mr. Spock's.

"You think too much already, you big lug," Starsky commented.

"Just drive?"

"You can even take the Mustang, as long as you put the high octane gas in the tank and not that cheap stuff from the independent gas stations."

"I'll drive my car," Hutch said, his eyes going up to the clock. "It's nine."

"And in one hour I want you gone. Out of the house, young man, or your mother and I will have to disown you, and then where would you be?"

"John Kerouac."

"Huh?" Starsky thought briefly of pouring himself a cup of the fragrant coffee, but knew his belly
would never approve. Just one more thing he missed of his old life. Coming into the squadroom in the morning, having a cup of that horrible brewed all night long coffee before he and Hutch went out on a call.

"On the Road? Traveling across America. It's a classic of the '50s, Starsk."

"Was that a movie with Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson?"

"You heathen." Hutch affectionately cuffed the back of his head. Very gently.

Starsky wanted the old ways when they could scuffle, hit one another upside the head like the Three Stooges, and nothing ever hurt, because it was all in fun. Now even fun had to be tempered with caution.

He just put up one hand, showing Hutch his upraised middle finger. Of course he had read Kerouac's classic novel, a long time ago, and strangely, he could suddenly picture himself sitting in the shade of a tent, hunched over the book with a cigarette in his hand.

Viet Nam. The Red Cross had come through with a bad rock band, and a couple of vapid dancing girls in really short shorts with fringe on their bras. The guys had hooted and hollered in appreciation of the girls shaking their fringe in time to the music. No one could hear the songs, the girls' soprano voices almost drowned out by a combination of the drummer's heavy downbeat and the sound of distant mortar fire, but the dancing was fine.

It had been hot, the humid sunlight beating down on their bare heads, but no one minded because there were girls to look at. Afterwards, the donut dollies had handed out candy bars and books for the troops. He'd gotten one he'd read before, and traded it to a buddy for On The Road. Had read it all in one slow Sunday afternoon, smoking and drinking nasty Vietnamese beer.

Why had he remembered that? It was like bits and pieces of his life kept surfacing lately, bringing up the past when it was all he could do to deal with the present.

"What are you thinking about?" Hutch asked, clearing away the breakfast dishes.

"That book. It's over in one of those bookcases, by the window. I've had it forever."

Hutch found it quickly, tucked between the Guinness Book of World Records for 1983 and The Godfather by Mario Puzo. "Can I take it? The cover is really tattered."

"Doesn't matter." Starsky shrugged, and remembered the feel of that book when it was stuffed into the back pocket of his fatigue pants as he'd walked to the mess tent to get a burger for dinner. He shook his head hard. No sense getting lost in those memories. "That way, if you forget it at some hotel room, there's no big loss."

Hutch took a deep breath, his eyes suspiciously bright. He was looking over at Starsky with such infinite sadness, and then he too gave a tiny shake of his head as if to banish the grief they could both feel. "I'll take Godfather too, just in case."

"Just in case."

Starsky watched a rerun of The Ghost and Mrs. Muir, listening to sounds of Hutch banging around in their bedroom. Hutch needed the time off, that was a given. That neither of them wanted him to leave was another thing entirely. The stress was pressing in on them so hard Starsky was surprised they didn't sport matching imprints from the giant waffle iron that squeezed down with every single breath. Something had to change, or they wouldn't survive the fall out. Hutch taking a
vacation was the easiest solution.

Going off to a desert island in the Grand Caymans sounded good, too, but Starsky recognized that flying a few thousand miles away might not be in his best interest, and besides it was so hard to walk on the sand with crutches. This was the only solution.

Just after Mick arrived, Hutch came out with a backpack. Starsky was astonished after all the bumping and dropping of things he'd heard, that Hutch had packed everything in a backpack. Either he had lied about wanting variety in his wardrobe for the next few days, or he was going to be wearing lots of wrinkled shirts and slacks.

"Mick, I'm going away for a couple of days," Hutch said in a voice that Starsky could swear was some other person's. Oh, it sounded just like Hutch in every way, and Mick didn't seem to notice any difference. But Starsky could hear the telltale waver, the slight break in his tone when he said away. "Up the coast, I'll call later with a number."

"Sure, man, sounds like a great way to relax." Mick shook Hutch's hand, holding the door open so he could juggle his backpack and a small sack of food outside.

"That's what I need, to relax," Starsky could hear Hutch saying but he didn't look up, just waved good-bye pretending he was engrossed in the silly antics of a New England ghost.

"See you on Friday, Starsk!"

Then Hutch was gone and Mick was calling the nursing registry to make sure there was a night coverage nurse who could come on short notice. Starsky knew that if there wasn't, he had any number of friends who could come instead. Or maybe he'd stay alone.

Now there was a strange thought. Staying alone, like an adult instead of some invalid incapable of taking a leak by himself. He resolved that even if Mick found a nurse, he would send the person home. He took a breath, feeling the air fill his lungs and coughed, thinking about being alone.

Would it take he or Hutch longer to get used to the idea?

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The first fifty miles were the hardest. Not just because he hit traffic and it was bumper to bumper from the Bay City on-ramp all the way past the city of Torrance, but because each and every turn-off that Hutch passed represented another opportunity to turn around and head back home. Each time he drove resolutely past another off-ramp, Hutch tensed, feeling guilty for his freedom. There was no reason for it; Starsky had told him to go. Basically ordered him out of the house. He should be happy, even carefree, without plans or restrictions, no schedule of meds and daily procedures to follow. Taking a breath to clear his exhaust-filled lungs, he willed himself to loosen up.

He was alone.

Amazingly, somewhere along between Thousand Oaks and Ventura Beach, his shoulders came down just a little bit, and he could sense a tiny change. When he took another breath, pulling in big gulps of sea scented air, it was with a lighter heart.

He cut over from the 405 to the 1, hugging the coastline, the ocean on one side and distant hills on the other. By Santa Barbara, he had turned on the radio and was singing along with the Eagles. He hit Solvang, and stopped, wandering around between picturesque houses built in the Danish style mandated by the city council to maintain the Scandinavian feel. He wound up under a tree in a pretty park eating a pastry filled with almond paste. He'd barely thought on the whole drive, and
now the enormity of leaving Starsky filled him with remorse. But weirdly, he wasn't sorry. For the first time in days, maybe weeks, he felt like he could breathe without a constricting band around his chest.

He sat quietly for a long time, just observing the tourists meandering through the quaint shops, and smelling the delectable scents coming from the nearby bakery. He let his mind go blank again, just existing in his own body. Oddly, he had the strongest sense of Starsky sitting by his side, his head pillowed on Hutch's shoulder, curly hair tickling Hutch's ear.

Is this what Starsky had meant when he'd said he would haunt Hutch forever, sitting beside him like the runaway ghosts at Disneyland. That he would feel his presence strongly, even when they were separated? It was amazingly comforting--even though he knew full well that Starsky was alive back in the city, probably sitting on the couch with the afghan wrapped around him, watching a pineapple speaking French on educational TV. With Pansy in his lap.

Hutch jumped up, walking resolutely over to a phone booth on the edge of the park's green lawn. He put his hand on the telephone, his palm molding around the cold plastic receiver. Starsky had said he could call whenever he wanted to, but was it a good idea? He'd been gone five hours, maybe six. Should he let more time go by? Force himself to enjoy the solitude, or go crazy thinking about what Starsky was doing? Had Mick made sure he'd eaten lunch? Had he taken the pain meds, or hidden them under the couch cushions, as he often did?

Dialing the familiar number, Hutch could feel his heartrate double. Why was he so nervous? Nothing was wrong, and yet his fear response was on overdrive. All the terrors of the past year reminding him that something was indeed very wrong. He inhaled through his teeth, counting one, two, three rings. The answering machine would kick on after the fourth. Where was Starsky? Had something happened?

"Hello!"

Starsky's breathless voice sent a shiver through Hutch and he leaned against the glass of the phone booth in relief. He'd worked himself up over nothing at all. "Hello, yourself."

"Hutch!" Starsky sounded happy to hear from him, very alive, very vibrant. Hutch could almost convince himself that there was no cancer or terminal diagnosis, Starsky sounded so healthy.

"I'm in Solvang, just checking in. How is everything going?"

"I was out in the yard. Aphids on the rose bush, but Mick went to the garden shop to buy some ladybugs. We can release 'em at sunset, and they'll eat all the aphids."

"Mick left you alone?"

"Hutch." Starsky just said his name, but it was enough. He was being too overprotective, and smothering. "Anyway, he just came back. Wanna talk to him?" There was a dollop of sarcasm on the end there, just enough to know Starsky was on to him, but it was all right.

Hutch could hear the gruff, deep rumble of Mick's voice telling Starsky something about the ladybugs, he couldn't quite make out the entire thing. "Dummy," he said affectionately, genuinely happy just to be talking to his best friend. "I can't decide whether to get a hotel room here for the night or go on up the coast."

"Solvang is great!" Starsky said. "Y'know they have that antique book store there, and those great bakeries. Can you get me a Napoleon Hat cookie?"
"Already ate one, Starsk. Besides, it would be stale if I bought it today."

"You have no consideration for my feelings," Starsky pouted audibly, laughing. "Buy it before you leave! You must fit right in with all those blonds there."

"Mostly tourists here, Starsky, but it does look like the pictures my grandmother used to show me of her home town."

"Livingston or Hutchinson?"

Hutch laughed aloud. Ever the detective, Starsky always wanted to know the specifics. "Hutchinson--or actually Johansen. She was originally from Denmark, but moved to Minnesota as a teenager and met my grandfather. Married at seventeen."

"Like my Grandma Polasky," Starsky agreed. Hutch fed more coins into the slot on the front of the payphone. "Same thing, came here from Poland and met my grandpa who just got here, too."

"You ever wish you could go back to your roots?" Hutch looked out over the town, his eyes blurring the obvious signs of American tourism, and focusing on the details that made the pretty city uniquely Scandinavian. The gingerbread decoration on the peaked roofs, the blue and white dishes sold in almost every shop, and the profusion of bright flowers growing in flower boxes. There was even a statue of the Little Mermaid.

"Yeah," Starsky said softly, with just a hint of regret. "You ever think about past lives?"

"Starsky, that's a bunch of bull. Those hypnotists deprive gullible people of their money because they're convinced they were once Napoleon or Hannibal. Have you ever noticed that no one is just a simple farmer tilling the land?"

"How do you know it's not true? You ever been hypnotized?"

"Only by you," Hutch said, and almost regretted the unabashedly romantic sentiment the moment it came out of his mouth, but Starsky chuckled deep and low, and it went straight to Hutch's cock.

"You're getting sleepy . . . sleepy . . ." Starsky intoned in a mystical voice, but switched back to his usual one. "I mean, what if you'd been--what'd you say, tilling the land in Sweden and I was there in Poland herding cows. Do you think we would have gotten together?"

"I can't see you herding cows."

"Okay, milking goats!"

"Can't picture that either." Hutch stretched the phone cord out and sat at the base of the booth, content to be having the silly, loving and incredibly revitalizing conversation with Starsky. They hadn't talked like this in weeks, and once he'd used up all the loose change in his pocket, he was stunned to discover that they chatted for more than an hour. Hanging up finally, he checked into a hotel, feeling the shape of Starsky's hand in his the entire time.

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Starsky knew he'd get three kinds of hell from Hutch, and probably from Sophie too, for having spent the previous night alone, but he'd wanted the solitude. He'd felt fine the entire day, and the phone call from Hutch had been a fun distraction.

He and Mick had released the ladybugs at a quarter to eight, slitting the top of the little net bags. At
first the bugs were lethargic, just crawling around on the mesh, flexing their tiny wings. Several walked up his arm, but they were so tiny he could barely feel their miniature feet against his skin. He coaxed one onto his thumbnail, singing the childhood verse under his breath because he didn't want Mick to hear him. "Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home, your house is on fire and your children will burn."

Mick must have heard anyway, because he glanced over at Starsky with a smile before going into the house when the front doorbell rang.

Tentatively, the beetles had launched into the setting sun, whirling around the yard in a swarm, amazing creatures wrought so tiny they seemed like pieces of pretty jewelry. He'd sat watching the tiny red and black insects flit from plant to plant until they merged with the twilight, and he couldn't distinguish them any longer in the gloom.

As the sun disappeared completely, the air cooled only slightly, enveloping him in a lovely blanket of softness scented with freshly cut grass and rose petals. He'd let the new nurse, a stern faced Phillipino woman with a distinctly unpleasant curl to her lips, take his vitals and fix some chicken soup for dinner, and then dismissed her. She'd protested, of course, but he was the client and what the client said, goes.

She'd left and he'd sat until quite late in the backyard with Pansy and L'Chaim winding around his leg, asking to be fed. Unlike the barely there tickle of ladybug feet, Starsky could sense Hutch next to him so strongly that he was sure that if he turned his head quickly enough, the big blond would be transported back from Solvang as if he's borrowed the Transporter beam off the Starship Enterprise.

This morning was another matter. There was none of the flesh tearing pain he'd woken up to the week before, but he felt achy and tired, despite having slept well. His chest was as tight as the surface of a snare drum and he sucked in his Albuteral inhaler greedily, hoping to relieve some of the pressure. There were times he was certain he could point to the exact places where the tumors were lodged inside his lungs, and this was one of them. Oh, well, nothing to be done about it. The drug helped a little and the steam from a cup of peppermint tea helped, too. The rest was a waiting game.

When the phone rang, Starsky almost hoped it was Sophie saying she was delayed. He kind of liked the comfortable silence of the house to himself. It was Huggy, telling him not to eat any breakfast, he was coming over with fresh croissants, and he had something important to tell him.

Starsky didn't want any breakfast, so waiting for Huggy's arrival wasn't difficult. He had a shower and a shave, staring at his too slender face for far longer than he might have if Hutch was around needing to use the bathroom, too. He never seemed to put any weight on, and skipping meals wasn't helping any, but his appetite waxed and waned in no discernable pattern. He certainly wasn't the right sex to blame it on the phases of the moon or the time of the month. It was simply his body slowing down, and that was sobering.

Huggy burst in, all bright colors and fast talk. It took Starsky a moment or two to catch up, he'd been so used to the quiet.

"Man, where is everybody? Where's you own personal sun god?" Huggy laid out a smorgasbord out on the dining room table, a polyglot of international foods.

"Hutch went on a vacation," Starsky said, helping himself to a croissant mostly because he knew it was expected of him. There was also a poppy seed roll like his Aunt Chava used to make, an apple strudel, and amazingly, a plate of Danish Napoleon hat cookies arrayed on the table. "I thought you
were just bringing croissants."

"I thought there'd be more people here." Huggy tucked the pink bakery box under the table. "Where's the comely Mrs. Saint Claire?"

"Not here yet." Starsky switched his interest to the tricorn shaped cookie, biting off the tasty corners of the hat before indulging in the almond paste filled center. This is what his stomach had been holding out for.

"Let me get this straight, Kemosabe. You spent the night alone, after what happened last week?" Huggy's voice rose in incredulous indignation.

"It's okay, Hug." Starsky took a swig of his tea and grimaced. Unfortunately, the peppermint didn't mesh well with almond paste, and he wanted another cookie. "Could you make up some coffee?"

"Way ahead of you, my man." Huggy brought out a thermos from his Mary Poppins-like carryall, and poured two cups of the steaming brew. "Daisy is expanding into whole new realms--international cuisine, and specially brewed ambrosia of the gods."

"It's coffee and a donut, only fancier." Starsky ate another Napoleon Hat with renewed appetite. The coffee was great, too, with a subtle flavor of vanilla, but he had to be careful with the stuff. His belly was known to rebel with no warning whatsoever.

"*Au contraire, mon ami.*" Huggy grinned rakishly. "How'd you like that? It's French, goes with the ambiance, doncha think?"

"I speak French," Starsky agreed. How little, he didn't have to admit. "But you'd have to be talking Danish to go with what I'm eating."

"Ugh--just don't like them things." Huggy spread a generous dollop of ginger preserves on his croissant and took a bite. "Now, let the old Bear get this straight. Hutch went on a vacation, and left you on your lonesome?"

"Hey, Sophie's here!" Starsky said brightly when the front door swung open. He didn't want to have to defend his own reasons for wanting some alone time.

Getting Sophie settled with some pastries, having his vitals checked, and IV port flushed with heparin took up enough time for Huggy forget his original line of questioning.

"Huggy, didn't you have something important to tell me?" Starsky asked when the breakfast foods had been wrapped up in cellophane and Sophie was loading the dishwasher.

"Oh, yeah, man, where has my head been lately?" Huggy smacked himself on the side of his head, causing the tiny gold hoop in his ear to gyrate wildly. "We got to change the date of Hutch's birthday soiree, there are extenuating circumstances."

"Like what?"

"A restaurateur's convention. Since we've opened the new place, I want to be in on the latest and the greatest, which means mingling with the bigwigs of the biz, don't you dig? So no can do on the weekend of August 24th. The missus and I will be in Las Vegas."

Starsky regarded his friend for a long moment. It was very possible that Huggy was trying to rearrange things because he didn't think Starsky would be up to a party two months from now. There were days when Starsky wasn't sure he'd have the stamina to party at that late date. "Huggy,
are you jiving me?"

"Would I do a thing like that to you, one of my oldest compadres?" Huggy pressed a dramatic hand against his chest, all wounded sincerity.

"You have, on more than one occasion."

"No, this is on the up and up--look, read the fine print for yourself." Huggy produced a glossy brochure advertising the West Coast Restaurateur's 35th annual convention. It was on the same weekend slated for Hutch's party, even though his actual birthday was a few days later. Starsky flipped through the bright pictures of past attendees sampling the finest in beef, salads, and especially dessert confections. It looked like a lot of fun.

"Okay, so when can we do the spread for Hutch?"

"I was thinking . . . unless you have major objections," Huggy paused, waiting to be cut off but Starsky waved away any imaginary objections. "July 27."

"A month from now? It's not even the right month!"

"Booked up, my man. A wedding reception the first week in August, a retirement dinner the second--we're a happening place."

"I guess." Starsky said reluctantly, but secretly he had to admit he was relieved. He hadn't wanted to turn up at Hutch's 40th barely able to stand on his own two feet. July probably was better for all concerned, even though he had the distinct impression Huggy had only signed up for the convention to have a legitimate reason for changing the dates.

"Hey, I just had a thought." He grinned, stifling an errant cough that came out of nowhere. His chest had loosened up, but he still felt wheezy and slightly short of breath. More annoying than anything else, nothing he couldn't live with. "Hutch still thinks the party's at the end of August--so don't tell him we changed it. This will be terrific, he'll be really surprised."

"Then don't let Daisy get near him, bro. The woman can't keep a secret to save her life."

"She can when it's important," Starsky said, recalling the day she'd brought him cookies, and told him about her dead twin brother. "Where is your talented wife, anyway? Those Napoleon Hats were something else. The ones Hutch is bringing back from Solvang won't even compare."

"She's kinda off color today," Huggy replied evasively.

"What color is she?"

"Kinda green."

"What's wrong?" Starsky's disease meter went off the scale. Her brother had had cancer, maybe she'd also succumbed?

"Listen, this is for your ears only, you get me? She finds out I told you, I'm in the dog house for sure, right next to ol'Snoopy." Huggy rolled his eyes, but grinned proudly. "She's got a bun in the oven."

"She's pregnant?" Starsky laughed, relieved that there was a joyous reason for Daisy's apparent nausea. "When's the baby due?"
"January 27. Exactly ten months after our wedding. Am I the man, or am I the man?"

"You're the man," Starsky bonked elbows, fists and then high fived the ebullient man. "That's fantastic, Huggy. I can't wait to . . ." Starsky stopped, all the air in his lungs whooshing out in a great rush. He probably would never see little baby Brown, unless something akin to a miracle occurred. The stricken look on Huggy's face made him feel even worse. He'd ruined a wonderful moment. "Hey, it's still fantastic, man. I'm really happy for you."

"Yeah." Huggy blinked hurriedly, slapping Starsky on the back hard enough to make him gasp. "It's something else. I don't even know myself yet." He donned a pair of sunglasses, in the house, hiding behind their darkened lenses. "I wish you could see the kid, man," he said very soberly, preparing to leave. "Shit."

The sentiment was totally appropriate, and Starsky wanted to add a few more choice epithets of his own. Mostly, he didn't want Huggy to leave on that note. "Wait--I need to pay you for the food for the party. I won some money." He stood carefully, hopping the short distance to the cluttered desk he shared with Hutch.

"Blondie told me, but the whole thing is on the house. I'd throw Hutch a bash on his fortieth, anyway."

"Then think of it as finally paying off my bar tab after all these years." Starsky quickly wrote out a check for five hundred dollars, the last of the radio contest money. Two hundred to Nick, eight hundred for Hutch, and it was all used up. Sort of like his life.

Huggy was shaking his head when Starsky thrust the check at him. "Listen, I lost a bunch of receipts in a sudden grease fire just before tax time. Think your's went up in smoke."

"Take it, Horatio." Starsky used the dreaded first name to make a point. "You're a father now, gotta keep the kid in shoes."

"No, it's the little woman who likes the shoes. If the kid is anything like his old man, he'll be at the track betting before he's a year."

"What if it's a girl?"

"A girl?" Huggy paused, struck dumb by the notion. "Nah, not going to happen."

"Fifty-fifty odds."

"See, I told you this kid was a betting man. You on for a little wager?" Huggy held out a long brown hand, low and flat.

"Sure." Starsky slid his paler hand down Huggy's, slick and smooth. "How do you find out?"

"Those ultrasound things, and the amnios, there are lots'a ways," Huggy boasted as if he knew the first thing about the subject, which Starsky suspected he did not. "What kinda money we talking here?"

"Five hundred." Starsky stuffed the check into the pocket of Huggy's purple velour sweat suit. "It's a girl, I'm telling you."

"You're on. But my first kid is a boy."
Hutch brought home a backpack full of dirty clothes, bags of cookies, a case of wine from a small winery just past Solvang, and a cold. He wasn't quite sure where he'd picked it up, and didn't consider it a bargain at any price. Especially one day later when Starsky landed in the emergency room attached to a plastic nasal cannula delivering 100 percent oxygen. Even with the assist, he was breathing like the calliope at a traveling circus, all wheezes and squeaks.

"How long have you been having trouble breathing, Starsky?" John Davies asked, writing out a sheet of orders for the hovering nurse. She checked the little oxygen saturation light on the end of Starsky's finger one more time before hurrying out to deliver the order to the pharmacy. "Your oxygen sats are dismal."

Hutch looked up at the saturation monitor screen for the dozenth time since they'd arrived in the cramped, hot examination cubicle. Normal healthy adults had saturations of 99 to 100. Starsky's were wavering between 92 and 93. Not horrible, but not normal either. His own nose was so raw he didn't want to have to sneeze one more time since that would force him to have to wipe the sore end, and all the cold medicine he'd been taking left his head feeling like it was stuffed with cotton.

"Just a couple of days, John," Starsky answered in a breathy, high-pitched voice that in no way resembled his usual deep, melodious tones. If he could have, Hutch would have reversed time back four days and never gone on the damned vacation. Sure, reading a novel under a tree had been totally restorative, but he'd exchange being stressed out and sleep deprived for rested but responsible for the cold that landed Starsky back in the hospital, any day of the week.

"Define a couple," John said.

Hutch was glad he was here. In fact, he'd demanded the oncologist's presence after a wet behind the ears first year resident had proclaimed that Starsky had a cold, and should take chicken soup, as if terminal metastasized cancer had no bearing on the subject whatsoever.

"A couple." Starsky shrugged. "More than one, less than several."

"So that would be..." John asked skeptically.

"Three." Starsky coughed tightly, as if his throat were squeezed shut and only emitting small particles of air in and out at a time. "Maybe four. Since about the day Hutch left."

"Why didn't you tell me!" Hutch roared.

"You want to keep it down?" John admonished.

"Cause." Starsky took a cautiously deep breath, his face finally beginning to pink up from the oxygen flow. "You would have come back early."

"Yes, I would have," Hutch agreed, so steamed he couldn't see straight. It was entirely too hot in the tiny room. "Damn it, Starsky."

"I was okay," Starsky said lamely.

"And I gave you my cold." Hutch wanted to smack something, preferably himself, but he sat on the too small metal stool because storming around was making his head ache. Just as well he sat down because the nurse returned with a large manila envelope and a plastic baggie full of inhalers and pills, again filling the space with too many people.
"It's not just the virus." John slipped two x-ray films out of the envelope and slapped them up onto the viewing screen. "The tumors in the left lung are really beginning to impinge on the alveoli." Hutch peered over the doctor's shoulder, interested in all that he could learn before medical school. Reading x-rays was a valuable skill, even though he hated understanding the true severity of Starsky's disease. "Did you ever have the home health agency send out some tanks of oxygen? Because I think you're going to be needing them when you're released from the hospital."

"Not staying," Starsky said bluntly.

"Starsky!" Hutch objected. Of all the pig-headed ideas.

"Starsky, your O2 sats are marginal. According to the CBC, your platelets are once again dipping into critical numbers, and your hemoglobin is low."

"I just had a transfusion," Starsky argued petulantly.

His breathing was still far too labored in Hutch's opinion. Frankly, for someone who hadn't even registered for anatomy 101 yet, he thought he had a pretty good grasp of normal breathing patterns.

"You had a transfusion over three weeks ago, and you need a fill up," John reminded. "Frankly, with your health, it would be against my medical advice for you to check out now. You do need to be on oxygen, and that's not a debatable point."

"Anyone ever tell you that you sound like a broken record?" Starsky sneezed several times in a row and the numbers on the monitor dropped briefly into the 80s before he took a ragged breath.

Not liking the look on Starsky's face whatsoever, Hutch felt like he'd been pushed up against a brick wall. He knew Starsky's opinion--no more hospital stays at all. On the other hand, he understood what John was saying. "What about staying the afternoon for a transfusion, like last time, with some extra breathing treatments while I call the agency to deliver a big green tank?" he proposed.

"I'll concede to that." John put a stethoscope to Starsky's heaving chest and frowned slightly. Starsky frowned back, but there was a weary acceptance in his eyes. Hutch didn't know whether to be happy about winning the round, or sad that he'd had to force the issue. A cold, a damned garden-variety cold, was pushing Starsky one foot closer to the grave.

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"Hutch, it's not your fault," Starsky said when he'd been stowed into the car with a bag full of aerosol medications and a portable oxygen tank.

"I infected you, how is it not my fault?" Hutch's face was set and angry. He negotiated the LTD out of the hospital parking lot like the hounds of hell were after him.

Starsky braced one hand on the dash, amused in spite of himself at Hutch's show of temper. Usually Hutch was so aware of his 'precious' cargo in the car that he drove like an old geezer about to lose his license. If Starsky hadn't felt so crappy, he'd have laughed. As usual, the transfusion had alleviated the physical exhaustion and muddle-headedness he coped with most days. However, that wasn't much of an improvement when what John had termed rhinovirus caused him to sneeze, wheeze, and snort like an untuned engine.

"You heard John. Got tumors the size of moon rocks in my chest." He looked over at Hutch in time to see him furtively wipe tears out of his eye, and felt like he'd been kicked in the guts. "Hutch, if I
gotta die, I want to do it at home."
"I know."
"Huggy, Sophie, Mick, any of them could have just as easily brought a cold along."
"But none of them did."
"So you're Typhoid Ken, and nothing's any good any more?"
"Starsk," Hutch sighed, pulling up to a stop sign. "You hungry?"

Starsky really wished he were. He wanted to be hungry much more often than he was. He wanted to be normal, but that wasn't ever going to happen. He wanted the enjoyment of food, as he used to have, instead of this constant feeling that he should be eating, even when he wasn't all that interested anymore. "Sure," he said instead.

"There's a new Japanese place up ahead. I saw the grand opening sign the other day . . . maybe some sushi?" Except Hutch sounded anything but enthused by the prospect of sushi. He was so dispirited Starsky wanted to send him off on another vacation, but he knew how well that would go over.

"Hutch, you like sushi. I don't."

"You eat it." Hutch went through the intersection, watching the curb for a vacant parking space.
Starsky saw one on the other side of a dented Volvo and Hutch slid the car in like a hand fitting into a glove. "Not the fishy ones."

"Tempura?" Hutch suggested.

"Now you're talking." Starsky grinned because talking about food was actually improving his appetite. "I'll even eat vegetables if they're fried."

"Teriyaki chicken, those little cups of wasabe . . ."

"That will help clear up your sinuses." Starsky opened the door, and there it was. Ichi Ban, fine Japanese food. Hutch had scored a parking space right in front of the place, just like Starsky used to do. "Can we use the chopsticks like light sabers? I can be Darth Vader and wheeze all over the place, and you can be Luke Skywalker." That made Hutch grin when he unfolded the wheelchair out of the trunk.

"I'm not your son, Darth."

"Just remember that wise Jedi saying when you're in a place like this." Starsky sat down, tucking his portable oxygen tank down next to him, and craned his head back to see Hutch looking down at him, his blue eyes tender.

"What's that, Yoda?"


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July was hot, for endless days. His life slowed to a crawl, Starsky wished he could hibernate, but the heat made it hard to sleep. He'd doze on the couch with the sound on the TV turned down low
because Hutch was boning up on all his newly purchased medical books. He'd bought a Taber's medical dictionary, Gray's Anatomy, a medical spelling book, and stacks of books on every sort of disease process. His determination gave Starsky a sense of pride when everything else seemed to be going down the drain.

The days he hurt were the hardest, when the morphine was the only thing that helped. Weirdly, his body had become so used to the increasingly larger doses prescribed for someone in his condition that he was no longer sleepy or nauseated after an injection. Morphine was now his crutch, a replacement for the aluminum ones that leaned unused in one corner of the bedroom. He didn't have enough strength to walk most days. He hardly had the strength to do anything except stare listlessly at the TV.

He and Hutch did watch the Live Aid on Pay-Per-View, rocking out to Madonna and Bob Geldorf, although Ron Wood and Keith Richards were more their generation. That seemed like the only fun activity of the month. Hutch got them both Live Aid T-shirts, and provided barbecued chicken, popcorn, and beer for the concert. He sang loudly to all the songs he recognized. Starsky lay against Hutch the entire evening, losing himself in the music. For one night, he could remember that there were people starving in Africa, people who had it far worse than he, and feel fortunate. He had a home, medical care, and most of all, Hutch.

Above all, Hutch.

On the days when all he wanted to do was curl up and die because his back hurt so badly, Hutch was there. On the days that Starsky felt like sitting in the shade of the eucalyptus tree in their back yard and watch the cats cavort on the lawn, Hutch was there beside him, coaxing him to eat, and kissing him. He was so thankful that Hutch never lost any desire for him. Starsky craved the physical in those long, hot hours. He couldn't provide much, but he craved sex.

"Hutch, I wanna make love." Starsky reached out in the gloom, touching the pale shape of Hutch's face. By late evening the heat had abated some, so that they could lie on their bed together, with the lights turned off and the windows open, without sweating profusely.

"Stark," Hutch said softly, sadly.

"Here." Starsky gently placed one hand on Hutch's smooth, muscled chest, trailing his finger down from the pectorals to the belly button. "It won't be much, I just want to give you something."

"You give me everything."

"Not enough," Starsky whispered, feeling the arousal in his soul. He hadn't had an erection in a long time, but that didn't diminish his need. Hutch was part of him, just as he was part of Hutch. Sex wasn't the most important element of their relationship, but it had always been a big part, since that first night in '79 when Hutch had climbed into Starsky's hospital bed, and they'd both known the truth. They hadn't acted on it just then, but the arousal had awakened, and never gone away since.

Hutch was responding under Starsky's light touch. His nipples had hardened into little pebbles, and his cock was growing, curling up to meet the hand that teased the hair surrounding its base.

"Starsky . . ." Hutch breathed, his hips moving in time to Starsky's slow massage. "This isn't a good idea."

"It's the best idea, Blintz." Starsky took a deep breath, and kissed him, ignoring the tiny flares of pain up and down his spine when he turned, his shorter leg almost straddling Hutch's longer ones. "Just let me give you this."
"Yeah," Hutch acquiesced, taking Starsky into his arms. There was no sadness here, no cancer, no pain except the one of longing and desire.

Starsky thought that if his days ended just then, he would have been satisfied. The sublime carried them through, and all Starsky had to do was reach down to grasp Hutch's organ, rubbing his palm against the surface to make Hutch come. Semen coated both their bellies, and Starsky could pretend he'd orgasmed, too, because in his dreams, he had.

He slept well that night. First time in weeks.

"You can't be serious!" Hutch's angry voice roused Starsky out of sleep, and he peered blearily at the TV to figure out what time it was. Bright sun was pouring through the windows, and on the screen, the Irish Ryan family was discussing whatever problems had cropped up in their soap opera world. After 11 am, then.

Starsky had been awake most of the night with the chronic pain in his back, and only slipped off to sleep because he'd come out on the couch to watch the 6am farm reports. Roosters, the going price of corn, and comparisons of one brand of tractor over another always put him right to sleep. He probably could have gotten in another hour or two, except for the loud conversation Hutch was having. The noise was coming from the bedroom, so he'd apparently tried to stay out of Starsky's earshot, but the decibel level kept rising and with it, Hutch's wrath.

"Hutch? What's going on?" Starsky got himself into a more or less vertical position and was trying to decide if he could stand without crashing into the coffee table when Hutch slammed down the phone and stomped out of the bedroom, storm clouds gathering above his head like Wyle E. Coyote on a tear.

"Gunther," Hutch said with such vehemence that Starsky sat back down, winded.

"They're going to have a parole hearing next week."

"Why? He's in for 30 years to life." Starsky's anger blossomed just as quickly as Hutch's. James Marshall Gunther was not a man either of them could discuss with any modicum of rationality. The shooting had left such a scar on their lives than he still generated hatred six years later.

"He has pancreatic cancer, they're only giving him a few weeks to live, and the compassionate thing would be to allow him out." Hutch smacked at the back of the couch, causing L'Chaim to arch his back in alarm and snarl.

"Since he wouldn't recognize the word compassion if he looked it up in the dictionary, then, no," Starsky said. "Are we going?"

"We sure the hell are." Hutch made a few other choice comments under his breath, in both English and Spanish, which on any other day would have amused Starsky greatly. Today, the news was too stark, too emotional to brush aside with a joke. "At least I am, you . . ."

"Hutch, this isn't debatable. You go, I go. He doesn't get out on parole." Starsky stabbed at the off button on the remote, cutting off the Ryans in mid sentence. "Sure it'll tire me out, but you can't protect me any more."

"You never let me, even when I want to." Hutch had softened, his shoulders slumped, burdened by Gunther's re-emergence into their lives. "This isn't how I envisioned our time together, having to battle the courts about Schroeder and Gunther, all this crap . . ."
"So, what did you come up with in that fertile imagination of yours?" Starsky was glad of something else to talk about.

Gunther should have been a non-subject in their household, but his specter still haunted them. The trial had been horrendous, coming two years after the shooting. After countless delays and even a venue change, Gunther's lawyers had managed what most had deemed impossible, gotten most of the lesser chargers dismissed and plea bargained many of the weightier cases down. There was no conspiracy to commit murder anywhere on the list of charges, a fact which had made Hutch crazy. Starsky had testified about their investigation into Gunther's global enterprises for days. Hutch had moved the jury to tears with his rendition of the day of Starsky's shooting, but in the end, the prosecution didn't consider the outcome a total win. Yes, Gunther had gotten prison time, thirty years to life for his list of heinous deeds, but he'd covered himself too well to be directly linked to Starsky's near assassination. No one could find records of him hiring the two gunmen. For that matter, the two gunmen were never found, period.

"If you had your druthers, what would we be doing today?"

"Druthers?" Hutch asked bemused.

Starsky could still see the fears that Hutch carried around with him from that long ago day in May. Starsky remembered nothing of the shooting, for which he was glad, and very little of the morning beforehand, which grieved him, but Hutch remembered every second. Each detail--all sights, sounds, and even smells had been seared indelibly into his memory. For long nights after Starsky was out of the hospital, he didn't know which one of them suffered more, he from his healing wounds, or Hutch from the nightmares of the dreadful event. Starsky had heard the shooting described so often he could recite the facts with ease, but he never felt the fear except when Hutch woke from a dream, crying, and calling "Starsky, get down!" in that terrorized voice.

"I'd be cruising down PCH, in the Torino, to that little burrito stand in Laguna Beach. Remember it? We took two stewardesses one day and one of 'em got sick? Starsky laughed to himself, feeling more than seeing Hutch's hand slip around his shoulders. Hutch laid his head on the back of the couch, so close that his breath warmed Starsky's cheek. "So the other one--Kathy?"

"Kathleen. That time it was Jennifer and Kathleen."

"Kathleen, took her back to their hotel in a cab and we just stayed there, on the beach, eating burritos when the sun went down." Starsky turned just enough to see himself reflected in Hutch's light eyes. "If I'd been brave, I woulda kissed you right then."

"Yeah." Hutch nodded, closing his eyes wearily. "All those years, Starsky. I used to think we'd wasted them, dating girls when we could have been together."

"Not wasted when I was with the best friend I ever had."

"No question. I think we had to go through what we did . . . with Gunther, but even the Plague and all that other shit, to lead us to each other. Maybe getting together any earlier would have been too soon, before our brains caught up with our hearts."

"You romantic." Starsky elbowed him gently in the ribs and lay back, feeling Hutch's quiet even breathing against his chest. For now, that was the most important thing of all.

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The parole hearing was scheduled for July 25, which gave Starsky some moments of quiet panic, since he'd hoped for a sedate week to rest up before Hutch's surprise party. It was already difficult to squeeze in phone calls to the Browns to discuss details without Hutch overhearing. But everything was in readiness for the big day, and Starsky was determined to be able to enjoy himself, despite having to go to court two days beforehand. Maybe they'd have something extra to celebrate.

Seeing Gunther in the flesh was a shock. The once virile man with pristine white hair and expensive Italian suits was stooped and drawn, leaning on a cane. Starsky straightened in the wheelchair, wishing he still could get around reliably with crutches. The tension in the air crackled like sparks from a downed power line. Hutch could have carved been out of granite when the lawyer escorting Gunther walked in. Starsky was very aware of his own breathing, maintaining an outward calm that didn't match his inner turmoil. He couldn't shake the feeling that the unadorned meeting room used for the parole hearing was the OK Corral. He and Gunther faced off, in a battle of the cancers.

Gunther's lawyer gave a good show--his client was a model prisoner, helped in the prison library even with his fatal diagnosis, and even cleaned the toilets when it was his turn. Gunther sat like a shriveled up toad, the malevolence that permeated his very core still shockingly evident in the way his blue eyes glowered at his accusers. Starsky laid a hand on Hutch's leg, under cover of the table, when Hutch stood to speak.

"You use your client's health as a bartering point to win a get out of jail free card as if we were playing a real-life version of Monopoly. No mention is made of the countless lives he forfeited when he wielded power like a demi-God from Mt. Olympus. There's no post-script about the drugs he sold, the people who suffered, and most importantly, the man he ordered killed--my partner."

Hutch's never wavered, his voice strong and proud.

Only Starsky knew how much it cost him to keep his anger in check, and not leap across the table to throttle the old man. Hutch had relived every moment of the shooting the night before until the both of them just lay awake in their bed, holding hands.

Hutch stood, pointing a stiff finger not just at Gunther, but at his lawyer, too. "You want to use the health card? James Marshall Gunther has only a few months to live. Well, you know what? I can match your bet, and raise you--Starsky died for a few minutes after the shooting that James Marshall Gunther ordered, but he survived, only now he has cancer. And yes, he only has a short time to live, but he doesn't wave it over his head like a flag. You want sympathy, get a greeting card. Because murdering, manipulative, filthy scum like James Marshall Gunther deserve to rot in prison."

"Sergeant Hutchinson!" Nancy Carole, the head of the parole board, spoke sharply, looking over her half glasses at him. Starsky wanted to applaud his champion, but he kept silent, following the dictates of the hearing. "This is not the place for name calling and derisive language. You've had your say. Mr. Gunther, do you have anything to say in your own behalf?"

Looking up directly into the eyes of the man who nearly killed him, Starsky felt a chill run straight down his spine. Gunther's eyes were like those of a reptile, something cold and unfeeling, for all his failing health. He was the most evil man Starsky had ever faced, and he'd known many a vicious killer, but none that dispatched lives with such complete lack of remorse.

"I am an old man and only want to spend my remaining days free to feel the sun on my shoulders in the afternoon," Gunther said with an almost convincing tremor.

Starsky started to jump up, shout out the names of those who had died because of Gunther. Lionel
Rigger, and Bates, the man Hutch had told him about, sitting dead in Gunther's office with tea spilled down his pants leg, but he stopped himself. The expressions on Mrs. Carole and the other committee members' faces were enough. They weren't swayed by crocodile tears and a pitiful manner; they had his criminal files in front of them.

There was more discussion, primarily about whether to admit Gunther to St. Joseph's prison ward for more extensive tests, but the end was strangely anti-climactic. Parole was denied.

Starsky had expected to be overjoyed at the news. Hutch was. He pumped his arm like a quarterback after the winning touchdown and hugged Starsky. The lawyers nodded with satisfaction, murmuring that with any luck the old goat would kick the bucket before they had to go through this again.

Sitting in the wheelchair, a few feet away from where Hutch talked with the lawyers, very conscious of the oxygen tank at his side, Starsky had the odd sensation that he was slowly disappearing from the room. He'd had this feeling once or twice recently, that he was watching life from behind a big window.

He'd been so angry about the parole hearing last week, but now, watching Gunther limp away with his guards on either side, Starsky was weirdly detached as if none of this mattered anymore. Gunther still scared him, but he didn't want to have to waste energy thinking about him. He was so tired. Starsky wanted to be surrounded by his friends and loved ones, enveloped in their goodness. He was pulling away from life, and he realized with a jolt that he would die soon. Not in the next few days, but very soon, and the thought, while frightening, had a certain welcome relief.

Very aware again of the air moving in and out of his lungs, Starsky looked up to see Hutch smiling at him and saying something about going home. Yes, that was exactly where he wanted to be. Lying curled up on the bed all afternoon with Hutch at his side. How long would that perfection last? Would he be able to finish out the month of July? Make it all the way through August? He seriously doubted he had that many days left in him. Holding that secret deep in his heart, Starsky nodded at whatever Hutch was saying.

What would Hutch do when he was all alone?

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Hutch leaned his head back, enjoying the feeling of wind whipping his blond hair around as the convertible sped down the highway. Starsky had ordered him to take the afternoon off. Ever since the little vacation that had brought a cold virus into their house, Hutch had been even more reluctant to leave Starsky. It was obvious, even to the untrained eye, that Starsky was failing, far faster than Hutch had ever dreamed. Comparing the Starsky from the end of June to the Starsky at the end of July was like seeing two different people. Not just his physical appearance, but little things like a quietude, a sense of calmness that Starsky hadn't had in his impetuous youth.

Hutch was scared of letting go, but he'd allowed Huggy to coax him out of the house. Starsky kept insisting, and it was only for a few hours, just a bit of fun. Starsky had Sophie and Daisy with him, leaving Hutch in the company of the effervescent Huggy Bear.

"I thought you might enjoy a round of golf, my good man," Huggy said in the affected accent of an Oxford educated Englishman. "Got the clubs, the shoes with the tassels, the whole nine yards."

"Why do I get the impression that you and Starsky have something cooked up?" Hutch asked, turning his face to the sun.
"Au contraire, Blondie. This is just two amigos getting out for some well deserved rest." Huggy steered the sleek pale blue ragtop into the parking lot of a well known golf course. "The perks of restaurant ownership. Got a guest pass here from a satisfied customer."

"Very nice." Hutch had always wanted to go to the prestigious place, but the green fees were too expensive for a cop's pay. "I still think Starsky's got something up his sleeve. He was too anxious to get me out of the house."

"Eighteen holes of golf will get that notion right out of your head," Huggy assured.

Knocking tiny white balls into small holes in the company of a friend, out in the fresh air, was exactly what Hutch needed. He laughed, played golf rather badly, losing to Huggy's surprisingly good game, and only thought about Starsky every single time he teed off. Starsky had a strange fondness for golf. His swing absolutely stunk, but he adored driving the little cart over rolling hills, making silly comments about the duffer's clothes, and thrashing about in the sand traps looking for balls. Maybe he could bring Starsky back, push him over the course, and hit a couple, just for the heck of it.

"Starsky would have liked that 16th hole." Huggy sucked lazily on a straw, the last of his coke disappearing with a loud slurp. Their guest privileges included a drink at the bar, traditionally called the Nineteenth hole. The place was filled with sunburned golfers discussing their games over drinks. "The way the green curved all the way down and to the left, with the pond in the middle."

"He can't hit worth a damn," Hutch laughed. "He would have ended up dredging the water for his ball, more than likely."

"Wearing those plaid shorts. The ones he wore in Jamaica, remember?"

Hutch nodded, staring out at the perfectly kept greens interspersed with jaunty flags indicating where the holes were. It was peaceful here, serene, and he wanted to bottle up that feeling and preserve it for the next few months. "Thanks, Huggy, for all this."

"The day is still young. Let's pick up some grub from Mama Bear's and bring it back to your house. Daisy's still not quite herself yet, and cooking makes her queasy."

"I never knew morning sickness could last all day long."

"All night, all day--turned my princess into a bear for sure. Doctor says it should abate soon as she gets past the first trimester." Huggy glanced at his watch with a comically pained expression. "Which should be in an hour or two."

"That's right!" Hutch grinned; he hadn't given much thought to the date. "It's your three month anniversary. Get some champagne, too."

"Hey, I no longer celebrate anything without champagne. The woman insists." Huggy stood, his lanky frame clad in a dazzling array of colors. Pink Izod shirt, pale green slacks with a snazzy dark green belt, tan shoes with the requisite tassels, and a tam of purple, green, and black plaid atop his curly dark hair.

Hutch had seen Huggy in far more outlandish outfits in the past, and next to a few of the other club members, he looked downright sedate. There was an older gentleman a few tables away who appeared to be auditioning for the part of an eggplant in the club talent show. Hutch put down a tip just as a busboy came over to whisk their glasses away, eyeing a woman in an abbreviated blue
skirt and pink and blue striped shirt walk down the slope to the first hole. Once upon a time, he would have taken the opportunity to follow her, maybe make a date. Now, all he could think about was Starsky in those plaid shorts he wore in Jamaica.

"Hutch, you coming?" Huggy asked.

"On my way!"

The drive back was quieter, both men tired from their exercise, and Hutch didn't think much past deciding what to select from the fare at Mama Bear's. Huggy suggested the newest entrée, babyback ribs, but Hutch had seafood in mind. Maybe some salmon for him and some crab to entice Starsky? Starsky didn't eat much lately, much like back when he'd been on chemo, but he always ate a little crab when offered. Soft shell or the local stuff, that was the question. On the other hand, it was July-- what was that rule about only eating crab in a month with an R in it?

Still thinking more of what to have for dinner than anything else, Hutch followed Huggy up to the front door. The bright pink neon sign that could usually be seen for several blocks in every direction was turned off. "Hug, the place looks dark. You think there was a power failure?"

"Nah, Daisy been experimenting with ambi-ance," Huggy said, stressing the third syllable. "Dimmers, little candles. Next she'll be wanting one of those revolving lights like they have in discos."

"Disco is dead, or haven't you heard . . ." Hutch walked through the door and stopped short. The place was completely empty.

In the next second, there was light, sound, and movement as the whole place erupted with people shouting "Surprise!" Streamers were flying, balloons popping up from behind the chairs they were tied to, and Starsky was standing right in the midst of all their friends, holding out his hands.

Hutch barely noticed anything else. Starsky was standing, something he hadn't done in days, maybe weeks. He didn't remember taking the few steps to gather his lover into his arms and kiss him. A roar of approval over the public display rose up around them, but neither Starsky nor Hutch were paying all that much attention.

"Hey, babe, what's all this?" Hutch murmured into Starsky's ear.

"You're forty. One month early!" Starsky laughed. "And you'd better lower me down into the chair, or I'm gonna fall over. Didn't want to eat until you got here."

"Idiot," Hutch said with affection, helping Starsky sit down and making sure the oxygen tubing was securely in place. "But I thought the party was in August."

"Surprised you, huh?" Starsky glowed with happiness, his narrow face nearly split in two from the grin. "Tell you later, just go over there and get me something t'eat. I'm starving. I think there are some of those melon wrapped in bacon things you like."

Despite all his good intentions, it took Hutch nearly twenty minutes to make it to the buffet table. Every one of his friends came up to wish him happy birthday and press a gift or a drink into his hands. The Dobeys were there, along with the entire award winning Bay City girl's gymnastics team, half the police force, and many of the cadets-turned-officers Hutch had taught at the academy. Daisy signaled that she was bringing a plate over to Starsky when Hutch was caught up in a conversation with Minnie. When he finally loaded up a plate for himself and brought it back to the table where Starsky was stationed, he found Starsky chatting with Mika and Gemma from St.
"Happy Birthday, Ken!" Mika greeted, munching on a chicken wing. "He finally surprised you! David used to tell me that he could never give you a party, because you hated being surprised."

"I do, but this is something else. And since he switched the dates, I never expected a thing." Hutch glanced over at his partner's plate. For all that Starsky had said he was starving, there was little evidence that he'd done more than nibble on the treats. As expected, the crab on toast points was nearly gone, but the mini pizzas were congealing and the Dolmas were untouched. Hutch ate his own in two bites, having worked up an appetite chatting with people.

It was one of those nights to remember--the atmosphere of happiness from everyone in the room, the mischievous glimmer in Starsky's eyes that Hutch had almost thought gone, the pride on Captain Dobey's face when his daughter performed her floor routine between the pushed back chairs and tables, and the laughter when Hutch opened up the gifts and found a chocolate pistol, an ant farm (from Starsky of course) and a child's doctor kit. To practice his future skills.

There was cake, and champagne--which Daisy's doctor had apparently allowed her half a glass--and dancing. Hutch, never all that light on his feet in the first place, sat it out, one arm around Starsky. Starsky had two bright spots of pink on his cheeks, and had indulged in half a glass of champagne himself. Since Hutch was reasonably sure Starsky had also used morphine for the back pain that never completely went away, he worried about respiratory depression and all the other scary side-effects detailed in his medical books.

Starsky laughed off his concern, pointing out the two nurses in attendance, dancing to the rocking beat of Turkey and the Giblets. At one point, he even convinced Hutch that the birthday boy was required to take one tour around the dance floor. Feeling giddy with the combination of bubbly French wine and laughter, Hutch twirled Starsky's chair around to the steady clapping of their audience.

Like Cinderella's ball, the party began to wind down as the clock struck midnight. The gymnasts, who had flipped and twirled their way around the room countless times, were drooping on their parents' arms. Many of Hutch's former students bowed out early, citing either late night shifts or early morning ones. Fellow detectives from Metro made the same excuses, saying their goodbyes, and reaching over Starsky slumbering on the table to shake Hutch's hand.

"Happy birthday, dear," Edith Dobey said, giving Hutch a kiss on the cheek. "We'll have a small party next month, to celebrate the actual day."

"Sounds good, Edith," Hutch agreed. His heart skipped a beat from a sudden fear, but he didn't let it show on his face. The thought he'd been keeping at bay all night finally slipped through the happy times. Would Starsky be alive on August 28th?

"He looks so thin. How is he doing?" Edith getting patted Starsky's shoulder.

"He's tired all the time, and sleeps a lot." Hutch hedged on how much to say. Edith visited Starsky often enough to know that things were winding down, but he was just superstitious enough not to want to say so out loud. "We're getting by."

"I know you are. Tell him I said goodbye."

"He's awake," Starsky said with a giant yawn. "G'night, Edith. Thanks for all your help."

"You ready to go, Rip Van Winkle?" Hutch stuffed the last of his gifts into a large garbage bag
Daisy had given him. There was quite a load, for which he was surprised. For some reason he hadn't expected to get presents for his 40th. His father would have said the beginning of middle age was a time for taking stock and acting more maturely, not beginning medical school with a red plastic thermometer and toy stethoscope. So much for his father's recommendations. He'd take Starsky's advice to follow his heart any day of the week.

"I didn't sleep that long," Starsky protested.

"No, then your beard must have turned white in the last hour," Hutch teased, the light heartedness of the party still with him. He could push away the scariness of Starsky's situation when they were out with friends much more easily than when they were alone, at home.

Starsky actually touched his chin to check, and Hutch laughed aloud.

"Hey, you party animals." Daisy came in from the kitchen, rubbing her still flat belly. "It's past the witching hour and all the vampires are out, shouldn't you get on home?"

"Just leaving." Hutch hugged her, kissing the top of her ornate braids. "This was fantastic. Thank you."

"I didn't do a thing. I've been off my feet half the time, but your friend there could have a career organizing things. He managed everything despite the date change."

"Just took a couple of phone calls. Turkey needed the rent money," Starsky said, but Hutch could see through the modest pride to the exhaustion Starsky was only barely hiding.

"C'mon, you look dead on your feet," Hutch said without thinking, and Daisy gave a tiny gasp, but covered it quickly. He felt heat rise up his cheeks and grimaced. Starsky was gazing at him with a sweet, sad little grin and nodded at him, their eyes locked. No further words needed to be said. Starsky had done all this for love, even if it was the last thing he might ever do, and Hutch was humbled. He leaned down to kiss Starsky on the lips before wheeling him out into the night.

Looking back, Hutch always considered that night the beginning of the end. Each day after the party, he would stop whatever he was doing to reflect if this moment was the last time Starsky ever looked at a sunset, or sat with the cat in his lap, or kissed Hutch on the mouth.

"Did he leave yet?" Starsky eased himself up in bed, moving slowly to accommodate for the lancing pain that shoved against his spine whenever he twisted or turned too quickly.

Hutch had gone out to do errands--just the bank, the pet food store, and a few other odds and ends. Things their friends usually divvied up to help out, but Starsky knew Hutch needed time alone. There were days when the house was oppressive, like a claustrophobic box they both wanted to escape. Those days Hutch would announce, with obvious guilt, that he needed to go shopping. Starsky often felt as much relief as Hutch did in getting away, knowing that his partner would have some free time where he wasn't confronted with death looming in every corner.

"I 'eard the car driving out only a moment ago," Sophie agreed. She made quick work of her nursing duties, settling Starsky back on a fresh pillowcase.

"Can you get me the folder out of my drawer?" Starsky directed her to bring over a bulging binder and some fresh sheets of lined paper. His on-going project was nearly complete. There were just a few additions to be made before he was finished. He tired so quickly that it had taken longer than expected to gather all the pieces, but he was more than satisfied. Taking a few moments to collect
his thoughts, addled as they were by the pain meds, he wrote twelve words and nodded.

Adding a dollop of chocolate sauce to the cookie dough ice cream, Hutch absently licked the ice cream scoop. When he was a child, ice cream was the special treat only allowed at birthday parties and tonsillectomies. In fact, his health conscious mother had pretty much banned sweets all together from their home, so that he'd never really acquired much of a sweet tooth. Since meeting his partner, Starsky's great delight in all things gustatory had opened Hutch's eyes to the world of junk food, and a sneaking enjoyment of snacking. He still preferred to eat a much healthier diet, but ice cream was awfully tasty on a hot day.

Hopefully, Starsky would think so, too. Ice cream had turned into a staple at their house. It was easy to eat, packed with calcium and calories, and Starsky could usually be persuaded to eat some.

Starsky's interest in food had pretty much ceased to be. He went all day on a few bites of cheese or chocolate milk, his current favorite beverage. At first, Hutch had vied Sophie for kitchen space, trying to whip up something his partner would consume, but his zeal had waned as the days passed.

"It's not uncommon for terminal patients to lose any feeling of hunger as their bodies begin to slow down," John Davies said quietly. "It's a natural process." Making that rarity for a modern doctor, the house call, John had appeared at the front door, with a book on medical trivia for Starsky. He examined his patient quickly, wrote a few new orders for the nurses, and sat down to chat, accepting a bowl of ice cream with a grin.

"This is terrific!" Starsky enthused about the book, taking a bite of his already melting sundae. "Hutch, didja know that in the 1870s doctors didn't have to study any science courses at all t'get into medical school?" He paused to catch his breath, almost panting from the long sentence. "And didn't have to see patients or do autopsies."

"I think I'd had better luck getting into one of those universities than the ones I'm applying to now," Hutch grumbled good-naturedly, but his eyes were only on Starsky. He could have blown away in a stiff wind, and his long jawline, always angular, was like the sharp edged blade of a sword. But as always, there was a sense of wonder shining from his eyes, and he flipped the pages of the book with rapt interest, pausing now and then to read some interesting tidbit. All too soon, his energy was spent and he fell asleep, the book open to a picture of a six-legged calf.

"Don't sell yourself short, Ken," John said, also looking over at Starsky. "The knowledge you bring from your career as a cop, as well as the last year dealing with the medical community, is invaluable. That'll put you way ahead of some twenty one year old used to being the smart fish in his little pond."

"John, I'm beginning to think I'm insane to believe I can do this," Hutch confessed. "I'm forty years old. Four years of medical school--if I get in, three years of residency . . .with 36 hour shifts . . .I'll be an old man competing with teenagers."

"Don't forget the two years of fellowship if you want to specialize--unless of course, you want to be a surgeon. Then it's a whole different ballpark." John smirked. "Tell me, as a cop, have you delivered a baby? Held a dying man? Used checked table cloths as bandages to stop the bleeding from a gunshot wound?"

"Starsky told you, huh?" Hutch raised his eyebrows. He'd accomplished more, and seen more, than he'd ever realized. It was amazingly gratifying.
"How many of those teenagers have that kind of experience? You've flushed IV ports, given meds, coaxing a finicky patient to eat . . . Ken, I'm sure you were a good cop, but you'll make one hell of a doctor."

"The voice of experience?" Hutch had that overwhelming feeling that he didn't deserve such praise when John raised his glass of iced tea in a silent toast. He gulped back the tears that threatened at the oddest times, and toasted his friend in return.

"The voice of someone who's had to muddle through with lunk-head interns who didn't know one orifice of the body from another." John gave a long-suffering sigh. He stood, packing his stethoscope and prescription pad back into a black backpack. "I'm due back at the office for a new patient this afternoon. These are always the hardest."

"Yeah, I hear you," Hutch agreed, seeing him out. He shivered, remembering the dark, terrifying days when Starsky had been laid up in the hospital with a broken leg waiting for the results of the biopsy on the tumor just below his knee. Hutch had thought nothing would scare him more than finding out Starsky had cancer. Now he knew differently.

He heard a yawn coming from the recesses of the couch and leaned over to kiss Starsky gently on the nose.

"Ah, man, did I fall asleep on John?" Starsky rubbed at the place Hutch had kissed, breathing hard for someone lying down. "That tickles. I fell asleep when Rosie and Samantha came over yesterday, and haven't seen the end of a TV show in weeks."

"I guess we're just not stimulating enough for you." Hutch hopped one leg over the couch and slid down next to Starsky so that they ended up scrunched together, tangled in the afghan. He pulled Starsky against him, feeling Starsky's bony elbows and hip jut hard against his slightly more padded body. With all the stress, he didn't eat enough himself, but at least he had muscle. Starsky was stripped down like a prisoner in a concentration camp surviving on nothing but determination and grit. Blue veins shone through his nearly transparent skin like freeways on a map. Hutch compared his own lightly tanned arm to Starsky's. Light and darker reversed, for the first time in their lives. "You need another transfusion."

"That's what John said when you were in the kitchen." Starsky shrugged, his shoulder digging into Hutch's side. "I told him don't bother."

"Starsky!"

"What's the point, Hutch? It's a waste of time of time." He picked up the trivia book, flipping the pages until the print blurred together. "I'm beginning to think I'm a vampire, pale as the moon, and in need of fresh blood."

"If you bite me while I'm sleeping, I may have to stake you through the heart." Hutch laughed when Starsky turned his head just enough to scrape his teeth along Hutch's neck.

"You already did, the day we met." Starsky murmured, kissing him on the side of the jaw. Hutch moved into the kiss, catching Starsky's mouth with his own. But they both knew it wouldn't go any further than that. Starsky simply no longer had the stamina for anything active. Their lives had closed down to a very small area. Cuddling on the couch, or cuddling in their big bed. Two rooms with just enough space for the both of them.

Starsky's chest was heaving with the effort to breathe after the short exchange, and Hutch reached over to turn up the flow on the ever present oxygen tank, checking to see that the cannula was
securely in Starsky's nose. He thought he spied a few stray tears decorating the impossibly long curly dark lashes before Starsky passed a weary hand over his face. "Hutch, I made something for you."

"Yeah?" He tucked Starsky against his chest, resting his chin on the still abundant curls.

"Sophie put it in the top drawer of the desk, but don't read it right now," Starsky cautioned. "Wait until . . . you know."

"Aw, Starks . . ." Hutch breathed out, wondering how a stake had lanced his heart without him noticing. He was the one blinking away tears this time and was glad Starsky was faced away from him so he wouldn't see.

"You promise?"

"I promise," Hutch agreed.

"Read me something funny." Starsky held up the trivia book.

"Let's see," Hutch skimmed through a few items, finding them much more engrossing than he'd expected.

"Hutch!"

"Oh, sorry, just reading up on the Spanish Flu of 1918. Killed more people worldwide than any war, ever."

"That's not too funny."

Death, it was on both of their minds too much of the time. Hutch shook his head, turning to a different section. "Here we go. The medical word for that sound in your belly that used to wake me up on long stakeouts is borborygmus."

"Bor-bor?" Starsky waggled his tongue. "Ties my tongue up in knots. Y'know I'm on heavy duty meds, you gotta be nice to me."

"Say it with me," Hutch sang the word up the scale, starting with C. "Bor-bo-ryg-mus."

"Sing something I know," Starsky said, the rasp of his breathing a constant background noise underscoring everything they did anymore.

"I can't think of anything," Hutch said truthfully. His brain was full of white noise to cover up the fear. Nothing came to mind except maybe Laredo, and he didn't want to sing about beautiful dead cowboys.

"Who knows . . ." Starsky took in a deep breath with a wince, and continued to sing. "How long I've loved you . . . You know . . ." He coughed, his voice giving out but Hutch caught up the plaintive tune.

"You know I love you still," Hutch sang. "Will I wait a lonely lifetime? If you want me to . . ."

"I will." Starsky whispered, and tucked his head against Hutch's shoulder, his heart hammering against Hutch's chest like a wild bird caught in a cage.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
Singing was all that kept him going some nights. Hutch reached back into his memory banks, pulling out golden oldies that he hadn't sung since high school and college. He'd strum his guitar, the words once sung by John Denver, Buddy Holly, Joan Baez, and, of course, The Beatles weaving their magic in the darkened bedroom. Night after night, Starsky asked to be sung to sleep, only to wake up with the moon streaming in their room to cling to Hutch.

Hutch got a clock radio for those times when he was too sleepy to sing, and they'd lie awake listening to Mozart, Gershwin, and Jim Croce until Starsky fell asleep again. Sometimes, Hutch just held him, waiting for the sun to rise. Each time he opened his eyes, surprised he'd fallen asleep, he gave thanks that Starsky was still alive. He'd get up, push himself through the day, and sing Starsky to sleep again another night. There was not much else he could do. Starsky was too weak to sit up, just breathing using up every ounce of energy. He'd sleep on and off most of the day, but often had a short period in the early evening when he was almost his old self, teasing Hutch with a wicked glint in his eye.

The nurses were now in their home around the clock, taking care of Starsky's medical needs so that Hutch could deal with the emotional ones. They both pretended to be brave, pretended that these days weren't precious gifts that Hutch would remember for ever. They played games of denial and evasion, with Starsky wrapped in Hutch's arms for safekeeping.

Starsky was always cold. Mid-August, with the temperatures reaching 90, Hutch would be sweating with the duvet and afghan piled over them, but Starsky was cold. That, more than anything else, signaled to him that Starsky was moving away from this life, and he wept in the bathroom, then put on a brave face when he came out.

"What'er you in the mood for tonight?" Hutch climbed up on the bed, his neck still wet where he'd splashed water on his face.

"Monopoly," Starsky said with his breathy, barely there voice.

"You're the race car and I'll be the top hat." Hutch arranged the pieces on the board, wondering if they'd even make it around the circuit once before Starsky fell asleep again. He had to think harder than usual to come up with the banter required for their game, probably because of sleep deprivation. "I'll race you to Park Place."

"Just throw . . ." Starsky pushed the dice over with the tip of his index finger. "I been studying . . ." He inhaled deeply. "One thousand ways to win Monopoly lately."

"Starsky, you've had that book since . . ." Hutch didn't want to say since Terri died, so he amended his words at the last second. "Since the mid seventies. You've never won yet." He tossed a six and moved his top hat that number of spaces.

"Have, too." Starsky dropped the dice and got a four. Hutch moved the race car along for him.

"Playing with Rosie, sure." The game continued for a few more moves in silence before Starsky got enough breath to speak again. Hutch reflected, in the half of his brain not concentrating on the game, how much he hated the hulking green oxygen tank. It was easier to focus his hate on something that concrete rather than railing against the fates.

"You just don't . . ." Starsky picked up a Chance card. "Get out of jail free." He hitched another breath and waited through a spasm of pain that screwed up his face. "You don't understand my strategies."

"Face it, Starsk," Hutch plunked a hotel on his property. "No one does."
Mick, who had taken to staying the night, knocked before coming in with bowls of ice cream. He checked Starsky's IV morphine drip with quiet assurance, watching their game. "I like the old fashioned boot the best, always reminds me of the shoes my grandfather used to wear. Be careful of landing on that space, Starsky, the rent will kill you."

"I'm on a roll," Starsky chuckled, moving his race car two spaces with careful precision. Hutch pretended not to notice how much that little activity took out of him. "But you can get in line . . " He closed his eyes, summoning strength. "For the next game."

"A Monopoly marathon, all right," Mick agreed, meeting Hutch's eyes over the top of the patient's head. Hutch didn't want to acknowledge the nurse's sadness, but he nodded silently.

The whole game took on a surreal quality. Playing in the bed with the comforter and duvet heaped around them, the half-eaten ice cream melting in the blue bowls, multicolored Monopoly money scattered around like oddly shaped confetti. Starsky won, reaching Park Place with enough cash to buy a hotel. Hutch was sure his loss was because he was so completely distracted that he made some stupid mistakes. He certainly hadn't let Starsky win, not intentionally, anyway.

Starsky was elated, lying back on his pillow with a smug expression of triumph. Hutch couldn't help himself, he leaned over and kissed his partner, stroking his dry, delicate cheek affectionately. "The studying must have paid off, huh?"

"Nah, I've been talkin' to Terri lately."

Hutch literally felt his heart skip a beat and then struggle to regain a steady rhythm. "Terri?"

"Yeah, she's been really close." Starsky heaved a breath like a swimmer who'd taken in too much water, gesturing vaguely at the window. "Y'know, I think dying people have an advantage at games."

As usual, a bit confused by one of Starsky's classic non-sequitors, Hutch could only weakly ask why.

"Did I tell you about my Grandma?"

"The one who lived over an Italian restaurant?" Hutch had to force himself not to scream at this bizarre conversation. Instead, he began to tidy up the Monopoly pieces, piling the bills into neat stacks.

"Yeah." Starsky smiled dreamily, almost as if he could see her, too. Maybe he could. If he had been talking to a woman dead for nearly ten years, maybe he could see a woman who had gone through the pearly gates in the early fifties, as well. "Was really sick. She kept slipping in and out of a coma." He paused, poking at the nasal cannula which had come out of his nose. "She was a Scrabble champ, even though she only finished the eighth grade."

"And English was her second language," Hutch added, since he knew that detail. Magda Polasky Starsky had been born in Poland, in the 1880s.

"Yeah," Starsky whispered, obviously determined to finish his story. "Nobody could beat her. So when she came out of a coma this one time, Uncle …uh…" he faltered, his lips bluish from talking so long.

"Starsk?" Hutch gripped his hand, Starsky's cold fingers wrapping around his.

"Uncle Schlomo thought he could win this time."
"Yeah?" Hutch blinked at the tears that blurred his vision, not even sure why he was crying.

"But she got him--an X on a triple letter square. Ax." Starsky laughed soundlessly, then his eyes widened in a sudden epiphany. "Hutch, I'm gonna die."

Laughing because it was either that or bawl even harder, Hutch let the race car and the top hat slide into the sheets, pulling Starsky into his arms. "Because you beat me in Monopoly? Not tonight, sweetheart."

"Sing something happy."

It was the same request Starsky had made every night that week, and usually Hutch obliged with Jailhouse Rock or The Ballad of the Red Baron. Tonight he didn't even have to think about his choice. "You're still the one that can make me smile. We're still having fun, and you're still the one. . ."

When Mick came in next to check on his patient, Hutch was humming a classic lullaby, Starsky's noisy breathing the harmony to Hutch's melody.

Hutch came awake slowly, a crick in his neck from lying in an awkward position the entire night. He'd hadn't slept so soundly in days. Reaching over to shift Starsky off his arm, Hutch froze, his heart suddenly pounding with fear. There was no sound of raspy breathing. The room was almost unnaturally quiet.

"No, baby, no!" Hutch pushed Starsky onto his back, all the CPR training the police department drummed into them yearly surfacing exactly when needed. He'd done this once before to Starsky--on the roof of that scum Bellamy's apartment, when Starsky nearly succumbed to that terrible poison. He could do it again. "Mick!" he bellowed, giving a quick breath into Starsky's mouth.

Two breaths, then five compressions, and another two breaths.

"Mick left, Monsieur Ken, it's . . ." Sophie ran into the room, grabbing his arm. "Stop!"

"He's not breathing. We have to get him to the hospital!" Hutch insisted between compressions. He couldn't look at Starsky's pale face, couldn't think beyond the comforting sequence of breaths and chest compressions.

"You know David did not want this!" Sophie cried. "You know he didn't want to godans l'hospital!"

"But . . ." Hutch's frantic actions slowed and then stopped. He left his hands on his lover's chest, desperate to feel some inhalation or tiny indication of life. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Sophie stroked Starsky's pale brow, her eyes brimming with tears. "He's at peace."

"When?" Hutch demanded, jumping up to grab the nurse's notes off the nightstand. "When? How long? How could I sleep next to him . . .? He's still warm!"

"Not long, I think, cherie," Sophie smoothed the duvet, spilling the leftover Monopoly money onto the floor. "Mick departed at seven aujourd'hui--this morning. David was still with us then. You see the notation?"

Hutch gulped a sob, but refused to give it freedom, trying to read Mick's neat handwriting. He
needed to be calm, level headed, Starsky would have wanted that. There is was, written in black; 0700, heartrate 45, respirations 8. "What time is it, now?"

"Just half past seven." Sophie gave him a hug.

He could feel her grief. He didn't want anyone else's, and he didn't want his own. This wasn't right. He couldn't have played Monopoly the night before with Starsky and then find him gone in the morning. They had so much left to say.

"Ken?" Sophie asked softly, and the use of his first name without the formal French title in front caught his attention. "I'm going to call a few people on David's list--to prepare, d'accord? Will you be all right?"

All right? There wasn't a word in the English language for what he was feeling right now, but Hutch nodded mutely, sitting down on the side of the bed. He took Starsky's limp hand, gazing into his beloved's face. Starsky looked serene, as Sophie had said, at peace. No more cancer, no more pain. It should have been enough to ease Hutch's anguish. He should have been prepared for this, but there was a raw ache inside him as if his heart had been ripped out.

"Why, Starsky?" Hutch whispered. "You said you'd be there for my birthday--you promised me." He didn't cry, didn't mourn, he just waited for an answer. None came, and Hutch could barely stand the quiet. Starsky always talked--even these last days when it was hard for him to breathe and speak at the same time. He'd filled Hutch's life with trivia, with tall tales of dubious veracity, with love. That couldn't be over, not yet. "You didn't say good-bye."

Hutch kissed Starsky's face, touched his hair, his eyelashes, and his lips. All the same, and yet so very different. Starsky had left the building. He tucked Starsky in very carefully, making sure he would stay warm under the duvet, because Starsky was so very cold lately. Guilt caught at his throat and he laid his hand on Starsky's cheek, still sure he could feel some warmth there. "I'm not blaming you, baby. I know you tried so hard--harder than anyone ever could. Just wait for me, huh? Wait for me, because someday we'll be riding in the Torino again. I promise."

"M'sieur Ken?" Sophie wiped tears off her cheeks with a lacy handkerchief. "Huggy Bear will be coming soon. He can help you."

"I . . . " Hutch looked over at Starsky, not knowing what to do next. Starsky had made all the plans, arranged for the coffin, funeral home, and all those sordid details Hutch hadn't wanted to hear. "I don't know what to do."

Sophie nodded. "Just a moment." She left and came back with a blue binder, holding it out like an offering. "David left something for you."

Hutch stared at the binder, the memory of Starsky's voice so strong he was sure his lover had spoken. "Hutch, I made something for you . . . but don't read it right now. Wait until . . . you know."

"I don't know if I can," Hutch admitted, suddenly terrified to see what was in the innocuous book.

"Take it, and listen to your heart," Sophie said quietly. "Listen to David. He is with the angels now."

Hutch almost smiled at that, imagining Starsky cavorting with angels up in the clouds. Pansy butted her head against his ankle, swiveling around his legs as L'Chaim leapt effortlessly from the carpet into his lap. Buffeted by their comforting presence, Hutch held the book, looking at Starsky.
How was he going to survive without his guiding star? All those times when his own tendency to get depressed about the worst aspects of their job, Starsky had been there to buoy him up. He was adrift without an anchor.

Starsky would want him to stay strong, to keep on moving forward, but to what? His future seemed opaque--was he destined to remain teaching at the academy? Go into some lieutenant level job at Metro, or go to medical school? He couldn't make these decisions without Starsky.

Pansy meowed mournfully, jumping up on the bed to look at her master with confusion. "Don't worry," Hutch said aloud, not quite sure who exactly he was talking to. "Starsky, I won't leave you alone. I can't remember what it's called--sitting by the . . ." He couldn't bring himself to call Starsky a body, or even dead, but magically, as if Starsky had told him, the word popped into his head. "Sitting Shiva, that's it. I'll stay with you, sit Shiva for as long as it takes." That felt right, and he nodded, feeling like he was held together with duct tape and bailing wire and if he moved too quickly, he'd fall to bits.

So he sat, very still, L'Chaim curled in his lap. After a while, he took Starsky's hand and sang to him. He never thought about the songs, just sang what felt right, and then he could breathe again.

"Hutch?" Huggy asked hesitantly.

Hutch had a weird deja-vu of Huggy arriving at the hospital the day after Starsky was shot in'79, in a bright orange jump suit. Strange what one remembered. Huggy had been out of state, and hadn't gotten in until after surgery was over, when Hutch was so far gone he was sure he would have died if Starsky had. That some umbilical cord of sorts had yoked them together into two people who operated as one. A little of that feeling persisted. He was afraid to leave Starsky's side. Afraid to live when his lover, best friend, and brother was dead.

Huggy had helped him hold onto hope once upon a time. What could he do now that there was no more hope left?

"Aw, man, I'm sorry," Huggy said in a strangled voice, his long fingers gripping Hutch's shoulder just a little too tightly.

Pansy meowed urgently again, as if nobody was taking her seriously. She knew. She understood Starsky was gone.

"When?" Huggy moved toward the bed, but didn't touch Starsky, just stood with his head bowed and long fingers moving restlessly as if he couldn't quite keep still.

"Only a little while ago," Hutch said, and was surprised at how normal he sounded. "Just before I woke up, I think."

"S'probably what made you wake up," Huggy declared. "What can I do? I'm there for you, man, all the way."

"This." Hutch held up the binder. He couldn't open it. He was a coward.

Huggy hefted the book, flipping through the contents. "I never knew my boy to be so organized. It's all here--funeral arrangements, a will . . ."

"He did it for me," Hutch said tonelessly. "So I wouldn't have to."

"Then I think you should read this." Huggy unclipped the binder rings and removed a single sheet of paper.
For a second the words swarm on the page, but Hutch blinked and they came into focus. He only had to read them once, after that they were tattooed on his heart forever. "Hutch, you know my heart. There's nothing else to say. I love you."

Water erupted from the ground level sprinkler heads with a groaning whoosh that proved just how long it had been since Hutch had watered the lawn. L'Chaim, who had been sniffing around the edge of the overgrown grass, jumped back in horror, his back arched. Hutch almost smiled at that. He sat down against the front door, watching the sun make rainbows in the water droplets. Now L'Chaim was trying to catch the flashes of violet-indigo-blue and scarlet-orange decorating each blade of grass, leaping and twirling to escape the water and still pat at the colors. Hutch did finally smile at that, soaking the late September sun into his bones, feeling like a bear that had come out of hibernation.

He'd basically sleepwalked through the end of August and most of September, doing what he was told to do, going through the motions, just a shell with a gaping black hole in his center. He had almost no memory of the funeral, except for someone singing "In My Life" while standing next to the coffin. He didn't even know who sang the song, but the words hit him so hard he'd put his head down on his knees to keep from passing out. Harold Dobey and Karen kept patting him and telling him to let it out, he didn't have to be brave. But he hadn't cried. Not one tear. Hadn't cried at all, not ever. There'd been too much crying in the last year, Hutch felt drained dry.

He still expected to see Starsky every moment, would turn his head to respond to something his lover said that was unheard by anyone else. When watching TV or reading the newspaper, he kept wanting to point out a beautiful actress or an interesting article to Starsky, and would be surprised not to find him sitting at the table eating a slice of disreputable day-old pizza. At night, he was afraid to move in the bed because then the true realization that Starsky wasn't there would sink in. He half wanted to sell the house to get away from the ghosts, and yet was afraid he'd forget some aspect of their lives if he did.

Starsky's death still took his breath away, and he ached with loss. His very cells mourned. But slowly, the blackness was lifting off his soul. Yesterday, he'd laughed at a goofy card Karen sent in the mail, and today--well, today something seemed to have shifted. He wasn't sure why, but he could sense a tiny fragment of joy returning.

L'Chaim got totally soaked going after a butterfly in the petunias and yowled with indignation. Pansy made an odd chirping sound that Hutch would have sworn sounded like she was laughing at her son. When he turned to look straight at her, she was nonchalantly licking a front paw as if nothing had happened.

Sitting here was peaceful, and he needed the respite. He should be grading papers, or going over the syllabus to pick out questions for the test coming up but he just sat, thinking. He'd gone back to teaching at the academy even though every one of his friends said take more time. Take time for what? Sitting around the house just fueled his depression. He needed structure, and focus even more so without Starsky. Something to fill his days and tire him out so he didn't dream so much. The good dreams were wonderful, he and Starsky cruising their beat in the Torino. Starsky looking young--even younger than when they'd first partnered, with two sound legs. That was the good dream. The bad ones featured any number of times Starsky had been shot--the bullets exploding in his body, taking him away from Hutch over and over. Those dreams came more often and left him shivering in the night. But he never cried.

He'd had a good dream the night before. Just Starsky walking along. He wasn't sure where Starsky
was coming from, or going to, but Starsky had smiled at him, waving at him with a quizzical expression. He'd held out a envelope and disappeared. Hutch had wakened murmuring his lover's name, and for once, he hadn't quite felt so alone.

The pleasant feeling had persisted all morning. He'd eaten a hearty breakfast, an omelet, sausage, and toast. He'd forgotten how good such a meal could be, and couldn't even remember when was the last time he'd eaten that much. Starsky would have loved it and asked for seconds--maybe even poured maple syrup on the sausage. But that was a long time ago. Until recently, he'd eaten only when Starsky wanted to eat--and that wasn't often. He hadn't even noticed how much weight he'd lost until Huggy helped him dress for the funeral and his pants wouldn't even stay up.

That was in the past. He had to keep moving forward or he'd never move at all.

"You know my heart, there's nothing else to say. I love you."

That sentence resonated in his brain at least once an hour, every day. It was his lodestone when there was nothing else left. It kept him moving forward. Starsky would not have wanted him to stagnate.

Speaking of which, having watered the grass, he realized he should have cut the danged stuff first. It was nearly over his ankles and sprinkled with jaunty yellow dandelion heads. Good thing there wasn't a neighborhood group who passed judgement on those sorts of things, like on the Dobey's street, or he would have gotten some sort of fine. The roses had gone to rose hips and the Cala lilies were definitely not in bloom any more. What would Starsky think about this mess? When they'd first met, he'd laughed about Hutch's interest in all things green, but Starsky had come around, even naming his plants, and learning to enjoy digging in the dirt. Hutch thought about the bedraggled vegetable garden in the back yard, and pushed back grading papers for another few hours. He wanted to dig in the dirt.

"G'morning, Ken!" Eleanor, the mail lady walked up the sidewalk, a big wad of mail in her hand. "You haven't been emptying the box, there's no space left here. Can you take this lot?"

"Sorry." Hutch ducked through the sprinklers, only getting a little wet, and scooped out the accumulation of mail. Days worth. Probably bills and such that he should have paid weeks ago. He had to get his life on back on the track. The trouble was, half the bills still came in Starsky's name. He hadn't closed Starsky's bank account or his credit cards, so just seeing his love's name could jolt him into a depression for hours, if not days. Not anymore. Moving forward, that was his mantra.

"You know my heart, there's nothing else to say. I love you."

"And today's." Eleanor added several more envelopes to the load in Hutch's arms, tapping one on top. "From UCLA, looks important."

"Thanks." Juggling the mound to make it to the house, Hutch couldn't quite fathom why he'd be getting mail from the university. It wasn't until he'd dumped the load onto the dining room table that he remembered sending off the medical school forms. So long ago, just before things went all to hell. Probably a reject letter, anyway. He was far too old to be considering such a career move. What the hell had he been thinking?

Still, what would it hurt to open the letter?

He inhaled slowly, running a finger under the flap of the envelope, unaccountably nervous. In his dream, Starsky had handed him a buff colored envelope. Just like this one.
Hutch unfolded the letter, scanning the typed note. "Your application for UCLA school of medicine has been received by this department. Your MCAT scores were in the acceptable range for admission. Please come for a pre-screening interview on October 14th, 1985 at 2pm."

The letter was signed Evelyn A. Starsky, dean of Medical School admissions.

Then Hutch cried.

Yeah, there's a long road before us
And it's a hard road, indeed.
But darlin', I vow
We'll get through somehow
Wherever the trail may lead.

Can't tell you when we'll be there,
It may take all our lives
We're headin' for that great unknown.
We'll soon be walkin' free there,
But 'til that day arrives,
At least we won't be travellin' alone . . . song by Alan Menken and Glenn Slater

FIN

Always remember, and never forget, that Starsky and Hutch live on in our hearts. This is just one story of their lives, there are many others. Keep reading.

Thank you.
Dawn

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