

Summary: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" -- John Milton, Paradise Lost

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A Heaven of Hell

by **K Hanna Korossy**

Hutch waited a half-hour before calling. That should have given his perpetually late partner time to get to the airport to pick him up, he figured, or to send someone else in his place if Starsky had gotten tied up with something. That happened about half the time he was supposed to give Hutch a ride--Huggy or another cop, or once even Dobby himself showing up in Starsky's place because work had intervened. But half an hour was excessive even for Starsky. Hutch heaved an aggrieved sigh as he dragged his carry-on and two suitcases over to the nearest payphone and dug into his pocket for a dime.

He'd been looking forward to seeing Starsky, too. His partner had been disappointed not to be making the trip with him, the two of them having originally signed up together for the officer exchange with the Seattle PD. But after spraining his foot on their last case, Starsky had encouraged him to go alone and Hutch had finally conceded. He hadn't regretted it, finding both the city and the ideas he'd picked up from its department very interesting, but he'd missed Starsky and had a lot to fill his partner in on.

Starsky's phone rang and rang without answer, to Hutch's little surprise. It wasn't like Starsky to forget altogether, and Hutch hadn't really expected to find him sitting idly at home. Most likely he'd been distracted with work and that was where Hutch tried next, asking for his partner when an officer came on the line.

"Dobby," a tense voice growled into his ear a moment later.

Hutch's eyebrows rose. For some reason they'd connected him to his boss instead. "Cap'n, it's Hutch. I was looking for Starsky--he was supposed to pick me up."

"Hutch?" There was surprise in Dobby's voice, but no welcome. "Are you at the airport?"

Hutch frowned, a tickle of something not quite right brushing the back of his neck. "Yeah--just came in. Starsky had the schedule and was supposed to pick me up--do you know where he is?"

It wasn't a pause so much as a hesitation that followed, and if anybody knew Harold Dobey, they knew he was not a hesitant man.

Hutch's voice instantly sharpened with worry. "What's wrong? Where's Starsky? Is he--?"

"Take it easy, Hutchinson, your partner's fine," Dobey soothed, and he sounded like he meant it. Hutch couldn't quite ease off full alert, though, hearing the sizeable unspoken "but." He held his breath as the captain continued. "But he's in the hospital. I'm going to send a squad car to get you and I'll meet you there, all right? Where are you?"

Hutch ignored the question. "Cap'n, I want to know what happened. What's wrong with Starsky?"

"Not now," was Dobey's firm answer. "Starsky's not in danger--I'd tell you if he was. But it's more complicated than that, Hutch. I'll fill you in at the hospital."

Hutch's foot was already tapping, the stiff phone cord wound tightly around one fist. He hated the idea of not having all the details right away, and he already was knotted with worry despite Dobey's assurances, but he also respected his boss's judgment. "Fine, but I don't want to wait. I'll take a cab. What hospital?"

"Hollywood Presbyterian."

It would take a while to get there, Hutch figured, but even more significantly, that was one of the nearest hospitals to the station. Starsky had either been on the streets or at the station when something had gone wrong. His jaw tight, Hutch answered, "I'm leaving now."

"All right. Try not to worry, Hutch."

Hutch almost snorted in response, but that wouldn't have been polite so he restricted himself to a terse "yeah" and hung up the phone. Two minutes later, he and his luggage were piled into a taxi heading north.

Not worry--sure. It was only his partner--his best friend--who was in the hospital for God-knew-what reason. Dobey had said Starsky wasn't in danger, but any reassurance that he was okay, that he'd just hurt his foot again or been knocked down or something else easily fixable was also conspicuously absent. And what the heck was "complicated" supposed to mean? Either Starsky was all right or he wasn't.

Unless...he wasn't in danger of dying, but there was something else permanently, awfully wrong.

Hutch stopped breathing. That had to be it; no wonder Dobey had been reluctant to discuss it over the phone. He'd wanted to sit down and break the news gently. Hutch curled forward on the car seat, suddenly feeling ill. How could that be possible? Starsky had been a little tired and on edge but all right when Hutch had last talked to him, what...three days ago, he realized suddenly. It hadn't seemed that long, but that had been Monday and now it was Thursday. Anything could have happened in three days. People took sick and died in less than that. Hutch took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, and shoved a trembling hand through his hair.

No, Dobby had said it wasn't life-threatening. Unless he'd been trying to coddle Hutch there, too, but the Hutch didn't believe that. So Starsky would live.

The worry that stiffened his muscles eased. That was what ultimately mattered, right? Anything else, no matter what it was, was either fixable or they'd deal with it. Even, Hutch swallowed hard, paralysis or some other handicap, they'd handle it. It was who the man was that mattered, not what he could do, and Hutch would take what he could get.

Still, the rest of the too-long trip was as difficult as any hospital waiting room vigil Hutch had ever held. The taxi had barely stopped in front of the hospital before he crushed a wad of bills into the driver's hand and flew out the door.

He left his bags with the first nurse he could find, who took charge of them kindly enough when he told her who he was. The cab driver might not have understood his hurry, but within the hospital he was with "family" now, cops as much one of the staff as firefighters and the hospital staff were. The nurse quickly directed Hutch to one station, where they sent him upstairs to another, and finally to the ninth floor: Oncology/Psychiatry. The two choices left him feeling short of air and almost panicked by the time he got off the elevator and saw the reassuring form of his captain sitting on a chair in the floor lobby.

Dobby caught sight of him at the same moment and levered himself up off the chair to meet him.

"Cap'n, where--?"

"You can see him in a minute--I've already cleared it with the doctor. But I want to talk to you first." Even as Hutch opened his mouth to protest that he was darn well going to see his partner immediately, Dobby's voice had already risen to override him. "In a minute, Hutchinson-- Starsky's not going anywhere. You need to know what happened so you know what to say to him, don't you?"

Unfortunately, that sounded reasonable, and at least threw him the extra bone that Starsky was conscious. Hutch backed down just enough to let himself be led into a smaller, partitioned-off corner of the room, but no amount of Dobby's encouraging would make him take a seat. Instead, he faced his boss squarely, feet planted, and in a tone that would not allow itself to be ignored, said flatly, "Tell me."

Dobby didn't sit, either, but he gave a sigh that seemed to deflate his body a little. He looked older, the weight of his responsibility all but visible on his shoulders. "Hutch...ever since you left, Starsky's been acting...different. Snapping at people for no reason, edgy." Dobby's mouth curled into a brief, humorless smile. "Like his usual behavior, only worse. At first, we thought it was just being laid up and you being gone, and as the day wore on he would calm down a little, even apologize to people, but something was still wrong. I tried to talk to him about it, and all I got was a slammed door." Dobby grimaced. "I almost put him on report for insubordination. Maybe I should have..." he trailed off, rubbing his close-cropped hair troubledly.

Hutch waited impatiently for him to continue. Starsky always got irritable when he was laid up, and it wouldn't have helped that Hutch hadn't been there to diffuse some of his bad mood, but Starsky was a big boy and could look after himself even with a bum leg. Besides, Dobby had

seen both of them in bad times, too, and wasn't easily put off by Starsky's occasional tantrums. They were practically inevitable in a high-pressure job like theirs. Which meant...what?

Dobey caught himself, met Hutch's eyes again. "Your partner attacked Remington in the squadroom yesterday morning."

Hutch blinked. Of all the things he'd been bracing himself for, that hadn't been one of them.

"From what I understand, Carl just asked him a question and Starsky jumped on him. Blackened Remington's eye. It took two other detectives to pull your partner off him."

Hutch's mouth moved for a moment before sound came out. Assault--Dobey hadn't called it that, but that was what the detective was hearing. Starsky had assaulted someone? "Th-there has to be a mistake," Hutch stammered. "Starsky might have a temper, but he doesn't go around s-slugging people." This had to be some kind of bizarre trick. Starsky was in the hospital because he'd hurt someone? Maybe Remington had hit back and injured Starsky. That had to be it.

Dobey was shaking his head as if he knew what Hutch was thinking. "They couldn't calm him down--we had to restrain him. He was crazy, almost like he was high, but they ran all the tests on him and there's nothing in his blood." The big man's voice fell. "They finally admitted him into the Psych Ward for forty-eight hours observation."

It took a second for that to sink in. Then Hutch's jaw dropped, worry exploding into anxious, unbridled outrage. "They WHAT?"

Dobey put up a hand to calm him. "Hutch--"

He pointed toward the hall, unwilling to be placated or redirected anymore. "I want to see him, *now*."

The captain really didn't have a choice. "Third door down the hall, on the right," he said reluctantly.

Hutch barely heard the end of it, already gone.

The Psych Ward. It was a sick joke, all right. He was gone for a week, and Starsky ended up under psychiatric observation.

All Hutch's own teasing about his partner's mental state came rushing back to haunt him. When it came down to it, despite all the severe ups and downs of their job, Starsky was one of the sanest, most stable people Hutch had ever met. Heck, his partner kept *him* balanced sometimes when Hutch threatened to lose it. But no matter how solid a person was, being stuck in the hospital's version of Cabrillo, no back-up this time... Starsky's shakiness not that long before when they'd been undercover in Cabrillo, the state asylum, was still fresh in Hutch's mind, and that had been knowing it was all an act and that his partner was there to pull him out of his helpless undercover role at any time. It was horrifying to imagine what Starsky was going through now.

It didn't take long to find out.

The third door turned out to be the entrance of a large wardroom. Hutch stopped his headlong rush just inside the door, taking in the scene and hoping with sick despair that he was in the wrong place.

Near him, an oversized man sat on the side of his bed, talking to himself in complete oblivion to his surroundings. Just beyond him, a girl sat cross-legged on an identical bed, carefully pulling one strand after another out of the end of her ragged sleeve. Next to her lay a middle-aged woman, her blank eyes staring widely at the ceiling, unblinking, reminding Hutch eerily of insane Tommy Marlowe. Similarly rocking, motionless, or vaguely preoccupied residents of the ward filled the beds that lined both sides of the long room. And in the last one on the left, in the back corner, lay one very still figure with dark curly hair.

Hutch's throat bobbed with the real fear he was swallowing. He unfroze and stiffly strode down the path in the middle of the ward to that last bed and the patient on it who didn't belong.

By the time he was close, Hutch had seen enough to bring anger back into the hurricane mix of fear and worry in his stomach. The restraints that tightly circled all four limbs and crossed the chest of the bed's occupant. The thin gown that provided little privacy and seemed far too cold for the chilly room, but it was the only covering. Closed eyes that might have given the impression of sleep except that they were squeezed desperately shut. In fact, nothing was relaxed in the pale face. Hutch could read his partner's feelings with one look as clearly as if they'd been written down for him, and the rage and grief gave way all at once to a gentle concern, the drive to fix what was very wrong with that picture.

He took the last few halting steps to stand beside the bed and bent low, next to its head.
"Starsk?"

Starsky's eyes snapped open to stare at him. They kept no secrets, not from him, and Hutch winced down deep at the mix of fear, anger, confusion, and--God help him--shame he saw in the red-shot blue eyes. Relief flooded into them now, relief just at his being there, but it only increased Hutch's dismay as he saw his partner's throat work to keep all the emotions in check. For all he knew, Starsky could have been lying there since the day before wondering if he really was crazy, if they'd ever let him leave, any one of a hundred other nightmares Hutch could too vividly imagine.

Hutch's voice thickened as he reached out to pet those matted curls. "You gonna say something?" he almost smiled. "I came as soon as I could, and I'm not leaving without you, I promise. There's no way you're staying here." There had really been no decision to make about that at all.

Starsky swallowed again, then finally, gruffly said, "Hutch?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

Starsky's eyes darted to the ceiling, and his teeth were clenched so hard, Hutch could see the outlined muscles of his jaw. He wouldn't have blamed his partner one bit if he had broken down

right then and there. But Starsky was also one of the toughest people he knew, and as easy as it could be to hurt him sometimes, he didn't break too easily.

Hutch was counting on that.

"Took your time getting here," Starsky muttered, apparently trying for light but instead sounding accusatory and off-balance.

Hutch's face softened as he slid his hand down to rub gently at the base of the curl-covered skull. They hadn't even given Starsky a pillow and the position he was in looked awfully uncomfortable. Not to mention the fact that he'd spent the night in a place filled with sounds Hutch was working to block out, totally helpless to protect himself. A glance showed red marks on the nearest wrist, where Starsky had unsuccessfully pulled against the padded restraints. Hutch fought his rage down. They should have called him the day before, or let him talk to Starsky, or...or kept this travesty from happening in the first place. But he managed a smile and answered, "Oh, you know, took an early morning trip down to Tijuana, then had lunch with the mayor after I got in..."

Starsky was still staring at the tiled ceiling, Adam's apple bobbing, and Hutch couldn't keep up the banter. Enough was enough. Angry and sad at once, he turned to the nearest wrist buckle and quickly unfastened it, then leaned over his partner to get at the other. That one also freed, he started on the one crossing Starsky's chest.

Starsky took a long, shuddering breath, the intense blue gaze returning to his partner. "Hutch?"

Momentarily abandoning the buckle, Hutch leaned close to the dark hair again. "What's going on, buddy?"

"You better be real."

The curt words made Hutch unexpectedly smile. His partner was definitely still there. "Real as ever, Starsk. I don't think even your warped imagination's enough to make me up."

"They think I'm crazy," Starsky said abruptly, gaze almost but not quite flinching away from Hutch as he spoke.

Hutch's face tightened; the lack of movement even of Starsky's freed limbs suddenly made sense. His voice went soft. "Oh, Starsk, you're no crazier than I am, you and I both know that." That at least he could say for certain, and Hutch said it with all the reassurance he felt.

"I tried to kill Rem."

"I've been tempted to do that a few times, myself." Hutch's slight smile disappeared and he rested a hand on Starsky's shoulder, shaking his head. "Listen to me, partner: you're *not* crazy. A lot of things could be going on here and we'll figure it out, I promise, but that doesn't mean you're crazy. You may have some weird tastes, but I trust your sanity more than anyone else's out there, and people don't just lose their marbles overnight. We'll work it out, trust me." The last he said with a quiet intensity that he hoped made as much an impression as the words did.

Apparently, it did. Starsky searched his face for a long moment, then finally nodded, the frantic look in his eyes relaxing. He managed a threadbare smile. "Anyone ever tell you you've got a way with words?"

Hutch's mouth turned up as he returned to the stiff leather belt crossing his partner's chest with new determination. "Sometimes. But I--"

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?!"

Hutch looked up at the new voice, but spared the approaching attendant only a poisonous glare before returning his attention to freeing his partner. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm getting him out of here," he said tersely.

"You can't do that!" The man, about Hutch's height but with Starsky's solid build, had almost reached the foot of Starsky's bed, one arm already out to intercept Hutch. "Who do you think you--?"

The buckle undone, Hutch spun on him, stopping the man in his tracks with one look. "I'm his partner, that's who I am, and I'm not leaving without him."

"You can't do that! He's here for observation."

Hutch pointed at Starsky. "Have there been charges filed against him? Has he been arrested? Is there a warrant? A judicial order to keep him here for observation?"

The man's bravado was sloughing off under Hutch's rapid-fire questions. "No...uh, no, but that doesn't mean--"

He was in the hapless attendant's face, his finger now inches from the man's widened eyes. "Yes, it does. What kind of a place are you running here, anyway? You think you can just lock up anyone you feel like? I want to talk to whatever idiot doctor ordered this later, but right now, if you don't get me his clothes and belongings in the next thirty seconds, I'm going to turn you and this whole place inside-out to find them, is that clear?" He slashed his hand through the air in front of the attendant, encompassing the whole room.

The man wasn't completely cowed, but he was temporarily convinced. With a rebellious look, he pulled out a ring of keys and headed silently to the row of lockers that lined the back wall.

Hutch promptly forgot him, attacking the ankle restraints with the momentum of his anger. Starsky's right ankle was wrapped in a now-slightly ragged elastic bandage, but was no less tightly secured. The additional bit of inhumanity made Hutch seethe inside, but he only allowed himself to sound determined when he spoke. "I'll have you out of here in a minute, partner."

"I see Seattle couldn't do...anything about your manners." The attendant's arrival had shaken Starsky up again briefly, but he was recovering his equilibrium much quicker now, Hutch was relieved to notice. And finally moving, one arm cautiously reaching over to rub the other. A chill shuddered through him, and as Hutch's fingers brushed icy bare feet he could well see why. One more thing he held against the hospital and its staff.

“I’ve been around you too long,” Hutch easily shot back. The final belt, the one around the injured leg, gingerly released, he returned to the head of the bed. “You ready to get out of here?”

Starsky shivered once more, squeezing his eyes briefly shut before opening them to stare somewhere past Hutch. “Sure.”

Hutch offered a hand, taking note of every tremor and wince as Starsky eased himself up. They probably hadn’t even given him his pain pills for his sprained ankle. Well, that was the least of Hutch’s complaints, and one of the easiest to fix. As tired as Starsky looked as he sat, slouched, on the edge of the bed, he’d be asleep as soon as he reached his own warm bed, sore ankle or not. Hutch rather doubted his partner had gotten any rest the night before.

The attendant returned, thrusting a bag at Hutch. “I’m going to have to report this,” he said flatly.

“You do that. I’ll be making a few reports of my own. Oh, and I need a pair of crutches for him.”

The man gave him another disgruntled look but left the room.

The clothing turned out to be of little use; they’d apparently been sliced through for quick removal in the emergency room, as if Starsky had been brought in on the verge of death. Hutch shook his head, trying not to think of the ramifications of Starsky being so worked up that they thought he was having some sort of reaction or drug-induced hysteria. He hadn’t allowed himself to worry yet about what had happened in the week he was gone or whether it would happen again, not yet. There’d be time enough for that later, after he got Starsky out of that place and somewhere private where his partner could find his balance again. You didn’t start trying to fix things while damage was still being done.

A single worn blue Adidas was at the bottom of the bag, along with Starsky’s personal effects and holster. They’d probably given the Smith & Wesson to Dobey, but Hutch didn’t much care right then. He pulled out the shoe, placing it next to Starsky on the bed. “Well, it’s something. Can you put it on, or you want some help?”

But Starsky was squirming a little where he sat, and he gave Hutch a defiant glance even as his face flushed with embarrassment. “I gotta go first,” he muttered.

Hutch didn’t let his wince show. They hadn’t even given his partner that much courtesy--oh, yes, he’d definitely be exchanging some words with someone. Later. “Sure,” Hutch said, deliberately casual, glancing around the room. “Looks like it’s over there. You wanna take this with you?” He pointed to the Adidas.

Starsky’s only answer was to take the shoe in one hand and stiffly limp to the single doorway across the room. Any offer of help just then would have been refused, Hutch knew. Even rattled, Starsky was a proud man, and after what he’d just been through, a little autonomy would help. But Hutch couldn’t help notice the wide berth his partner gave the one bed he passed on the way, nor the gaze that resolutely refused to shift left or right to take in any more of the room than was necessary. Breathing out the deepest of his concern, Hutch crossed the ward with the bag of Starsky’s belongings in hand, and leaned against the wall beside the bathroom door to wait.

The door at the other end of the room opened again, and a doctor hurried inside, followed by the same harried attendant as before, now carrying a pair of crutches, and an equally huffy Dobey. Hutch didn't even bother to straighten, just eyed the trio warily as they approached.

The doctor was already glancing around the room. "Where is he?"

"In the bathroom," Hutch answered coldly. "You know, Doctor, even in lock-up we give our prisoners access to the facilities."

"Hutchinson--" Dobey growled.

The doctor, a tall man with steely hair, lifted his chin. "Mr. Starsky was receiving the best of care. We look after our patients here, Detective, and don't stand for visitors barging in and taking over."

That stiffened Hutch's spine. "Starsky's not your patient and never should have been. Unless he's been declared legally incompetent, he has a right to go home if he wants to."

"When Mr. Starsky was brought in, he was delusional and violent, and--"

"I just had a talk with him, and he's no more delusional than you are, *Doctor*, maybe even less so. If anything's wrong with him, it's from spending the night tied up like some animal in this nuthouse you stuck him in! So unless you're prepared to prove to a judge that there's some reason my partner should be incarcerated in your hospital, I suggest you let us leave in peace."

The doctor had about an inch on Hutch but couldn't stare down one furious detective. Hutch's smugness vanished, however, as the door rattled behind him and an obviously uncomfortable Starsky appeared.

The doctor stepped closer before Hutch could stop him, his manner suddenly concerned. "Mr. Starsky, are you all right?"

Hutch didn't need to catch his partner's minute flinch to know that the doctor's presence wasn't welcome, and he planted himself bodily between the two. Starsky's hand gave his arm a half-hearted tug from behind to tell him to back off, but Hutch'd had just about enough of the whole situation. His eyes slicing through the doctor, he addressed himself to Dobey. "Captain, we're going to Starsky's place if you need us."

He snatched the crutches away from the unprotesting attendant, handing them to Starsky, who balanced himself on them, eyes glued to his partner. Hutch gave him a ghost of a wink and smile, then shoved impassively past the doctor and Dobey, clearing a path for the injured man. Starsky followed, ignoring the three others as if they weren't even there.

Nearly at the door, Hutch shrugged out of his jacket and dropped it on his partner's shoulders for the sake of both warmth and modesty. As he opened the door to usher Starsky through, he gave the speechless trio behind them one last angry glare, catching the outrage on two of the men's faces and the hint of smugness on the third's, and walked out of the room after his partner.

Starsky's attire drew more than a few stares on the way down, but he didn't seem to notice and Hutch didn't care. Starsky's agitated momentum began to slow as pain and fatigue caught up with him, but Hutch just hooked a hand under one of his arms and took a little of the weight. His stashed luggage would have to wait. He could always call Dobby and ask to have a uniform drop it by. It wasn't all that important, and Hutch didn't want to delay their departure for that; he doubted they could get out of there soon enough for either of them. Starsky was ready to crash--physically, emotionally, or both--and Hutch wanted to get him home before that happened.

Two minutes later, they were in a cab heading for Westchester, Starsky pulled into the farthest corner of the seat from Hutch, already dozing. Hutch sat and watched over him. The situation was finally beginning to sink in, and he let himself think for the first time about what could have caused his partner's erratic behavior and whether they could really fix it as he'd promised Starsky they would. None of it made any *sense*. Starsky, violent and delusional? No one knew him better than Hutch, and he'd never seen Starsky behave like that, not even during his considerable explosions of temper, nor did there seem to be any sign of psychosis now. Hutch would have almost thought they'd been mistaken if not for the shame and self-doubt he'd seen in his friend's eyes. The shame could have been for the inhumanities forced on him, but the self-doubt...Hutch had rarely seen anything rattle Starsky's confidence that much. This was formidable, whatever it was.

The cab took a sharp turn and Starsky grimaced as his foot was jostled. Hutch frowned; he'd forgotten about that. He leaned down and carefully lifted the bandaged limb, propping it up on his thigh. Starsky opened one eye to give him a groggy look, and Hutch just nodded. *You're okay. I'm not going anywhere.* Starsky promptly went back to sleep.

Well, at least he still had Starsky's trust, and that had always been their starting point for fixing any problem. He'd have to rely on it now, too. They'd figure this out--he'd promised Starsky as much.

Hutch just wished he could have told his stomach that, his insides clenched with tension all the way to Westchester.

It wasn't the first time he'd brought home a still-mending and out-of-sorts Starsky from the hospital, and it probably wouldn't be the last. There were some significant differences this time, though, Hutch couldn't help but think. He didn't usually pull his partner out of the hospital over the doctor's protests, not even sure that Starsky was all right and wouldn't relapse. Starsky was normally too tired to do much of anything besides sleep for a while, and when he was up, he was his usual mix of grouchy and grateful that only Starsky could manage to pull off. Hutch would have far preferred that to this withdrawn version of his partner he'd just ferried home. But most importantly, the emotional damage didn't usually outweigh the physical, leaving Hutch uncertain about how to proceed now. Starsky's sprained foot was almost inconsequential this time. Hutch had already made him take some of his pills and then sent him off to shower, something Starsky seemed almost eager to do. But the clouds in his eyes showed too clearly where he was really hurting, where the worst injuries lay.

So now, as Hutch fixed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and tea with the sound of the shower in the background, he was treading on new ground with only his knowledge of Starsky as his guide. Once he would have thought that was enough to tackle anything. Now...Dobey's expression and the doctor's words lingered in his mind. "Violent and delusional." That wasn't the Starsky he knew, nor one he knew how to deal with. What could he do if it happened again? Maybe it was something physical like a...a drug they hadn't picked up with their initial tests, or even--Hutch swallowed--a tumor? They could change people's personality so even their closest friends couldn't recognize them. Maybe he should have left Starsky there for more tests...

No. Hutch slammed the jelly jar down on the counter hard enough that grape jelly splattered out. No, there was no way he could have or should have left Starsky there. They weren't treating him or even doing tests, they just had him tied down like a pinned butterfly. "Treatment" like that could drive a man insane if he wasn't already, and Hutch wouldn't have been able to live with the idea of leaving Starsky to it. No, whatever this was, they'd deal with it themselves. Who better to observe his partner, anyway, than someone who knew his every expression and gesture and would immediately recognize if something were off?

Besides Starsky's missing self-assurance and vitality.

Hutch fixed a smile on his face as a slightly wilted figure appeared in the bathroom doorway wearing a robe, steam seeping out behind him. A hot shower. That usually meant trying to wash away something that refused to be cleansed, but Hutch filed that bit away for later. Now, he set the knife and bread back on the counter and came out into the living room. "Hey, you're looking better. Want some lunch? I made peanut butter and jelly, though how you can eat that stuff..."

Starsky shrugged disinterestedly. "I'm not hungry." He turned to limp heavily back to the bedroom, the bandage gone off his ankle.

"Let me fix your leg and then we'll talk about it, okay?" Hutch detoured into the bathroom first, getting the extra roll of elastic wrap out of his partner's medicine cabinet before heading into the bedroom. There he waited until Starsky had buttoned a plaid shirt over the jeans he'd already pulled on, before nudging him to sit on the edge of the bed. As Hutch began to wind the elastic around the swollen foot, he almost made a comment about the choice of clothing, but bit his tongue. It wasn't exactly sleepwear, but Starsky could be most ornery about allowing himself as much sleep as he needed. Besides, after having been trapped in a bed for how many hours, Hutch couldn't really blame him for not being anxious to return to one.

At least the foot was looking better, and Starsky wasn't wincing as Hutch gently manipulated it. Good, the painkillers were taking effect and maybe that would help Starsky relax, too. Rest wouldn't cure everything, not by a long shot, but it could only help.

The elastic wound to its end, Hutch attached the clips that held it in place and looked up at his partner with a smile. "All done. You wanna rethink that sandwich now? I even used grape jelly."

"I said I'm not hungry," Starsky said testily, startled out of whatever thoughts by Hutch's question, and he gave his partner an annoyed look as he pulled his foot away. "I wanna watch some TV." And without waiting for a reaction, he limped past Hutch, out into the living room.

Hutch paused there for a moment, crouched beside the bed, thinking, then took a breath and followed his partner out of the bedroom. "You should eat something, at least. I bet you haven't had anything since yesterday morning." Somehow he doubted the hospital had bothered serving regular meals, and just how did one eat with their hands restrained, anyway? "If you don't want the sandwich, I could make--"

Starsky wheeled on him so abruptly that Hutch dropped the rest of the sentence. "*Look.* I appreciate you springin' me, but I don't need a babysitter, okay? I just wanna watch some TV and pretend this didn't happen, is that all right with you?"

Hutch softened. Now this was more like the Starsky he knew, not taking things lying down. This one he knew how to respond to. "Okay, okay." He put up his hands placatingly. "I'm just worried about you, that's all. Pretending it didn't happen won't make it go away, you know," he said gently.

Normally, admitting he was worried was enough to deflate his partner even in mid-rage, to finally get him talking.

Normally. Hutch had just forgotten that things weren't very normal right then. Starsky completely ignored the unspoken plea, and Hutch himself, limping stiffly past his partner and back into the bedroom, the door slamming shut behind him with a bang. A moment later, Hutch heard the bedroom TV go on, the volume turned up extra loud so Hutch couldn't miss it.

He shook his head and returned to the kitchen to put away the unwanted food.

Starsky's clock chimed 4:00 before Hutch looked up from the book he was reading. Hours of relative peace had given him time to sort through what had happened since he'd returned. There was a lot to think about.

Dobey had said something was bugging Starsky, but that didn't seem so unreasonable with an aching foot that was slowing him down and no partner around to vent to. And Starsky was such an active person, a handicap was all the harder to tolerate. The attack on Remington was harder to explain, but then, Hutch didn't know the circumstances. Starsky had a not-inconsiderable temper when roused, and who was to say Remington hadn't said something stupid to ignite it? Jumping him still seemed extreme...but then, so did putting someone in the Psych ward for doing so.

Although, the captain had said it had taken two men to restrain Starsky...

Hutch shook his head just as quickly. That had to be an exaggeration. Blackening an eye was one thing, but no way would his partner have actually tried to seriously harm a fellow officer. Hutch refused to believe it.

As for Starsky's behavior since returning home, spending a sleepless night where he had, the way he had, would have been enough to upset any reasonable person. Starsky had every right to

be moody and cross. Hutch would have been more worried if his partner had seemed perfectly unruffled.

It all made sense and could be explained if he tried. So what was still bothering him?

He set the book down and stood, stretching his back for a moment while he glared at the forbiddingly closed door. This was silly--he'd seen Starsky this upset before. Walking on eggshells around him wouldn't do either of them any favors. Hutch strode over to the door and then hesitated, pressing his ear against it. The TV was blaring as loudly as ever from within, but there was no other audible sound in the room. A game show seemed to be on, one of Starsky's least favorite kinds of programs. Hutch decided to take a chance. He turned the knob soundlessly and eased the door half-open.

Starsky lay stretched out on the bed on his back, fast asleep. Well, that could only be good. Maybe sleep was all he needed. There had been enough pills missing from the bottle to indicate Starsky had been taking his pain medicine, but the foot was still bound to be uncomfortable and had probably kept him up some. Especially given Starsky's predilection for late nights. Fatigue and not feeling well and desk duty without a partner around to liven it would make even Mother Theresa cranky.

Hutch left the door half-open and retrieved Starsky's medicine and a glass of juice, then crept inside the bedroom. At least he could make sure Starsky didn't wake in pain, which was bound to help his partner's mood. Turning off the TV as he rounded the bed, Hutch almost smiled when the abrupt silence didn't even stir Starsky. His partner rarely did things halfway, including sleep.

He managed to waken the sleeper sufficiently to take the pill and drink the juice, and then Starsky turned onto his side and slept on. Hutch stayed long enough to stick a pillow under the injured foot to elevate it, then tiptoed back out of the room.

Now that was more like it. Starsky hadn't woken completely, but he'd seemed to know Hutch and had given him a drowsy smile and muttered a half-asleep "thanks" before falling back to sleep. Whatever the storm had been, it had apparently passed. Hutch kept finding new explanations. Perhaps the foot had been worse than any of them had expected. Nobody knew Starsky the way Hutch did, and they'd just overreacted. The way they had still made him wince, but it was over now. All Starsky needed was sleep and a little looking after, and he'd be fine.

Nodding to himself with satisfaction, Hutch went to call Dobey and fill their boss in.

Four more hours crept around the face of the clock. Hutch had finished the book and cleaned the kitchen in that time, and was just beginning to consider waking Starsky for his pills and dinner when the bedroom doorknob rattled clumsily. Due to sleepiness, no doubt, for it took a few more seconds to turn properly and the door to open, revealing a tousled Starsky.

Hutch's eyebrow rose as he watched the usual waking routine, the broad yawn and a rub of the disarrayed curls and heavily stubbled face, all while blinking heavily. Starsky finally knuckled his eyes and then glanced around the room, his gaze coming to rest on Hutch.

Hutch rubbed his hands dry on the dishtowel he held and then rounded the kitchen counter, already giving his partner a friendly smile. “Well, if it isn’t Rip Van Winkle. I don’t know whether to cook up breakfast or dinner for you.”

Starsky gave him an odd look. “What’re you doin’ here?”

Hutch’s stride barely faltered, a brief flutter of worry passing through him. “I came home with you, remember? I hung around. Hey, you hungry?” he changed gears, sweeping a hand back to the kitchen. “I figured, forget the peanut butter and jelly, maybe we should order a pizza. We can get it half with anchovies if you want, but--”

“I don’t want a pizza.”

“We could also get Chinese from that place you like in Marina del Rey?”

His answer was only a disgruntled mutter as Starsky disappeared back into the bedroom.

Hutch shivered once. Despite his denial, something was obviously still wrong. He followed Starsky into the bedroom and found him sitting on the edge of the bed, intently going through the night table drawers. “What’re you looking for?”

“My--it was right here. You seen it?” Starsky barely spared him a look.

Hutch crouched down across from his friend, just below Starsky’s eye level, watching the man in front of him closely. All of his self-reassurances were splintering right before him, with Starsky’s frenetic motion and dark, confused eyes. It wasn’t the anger Dobey had described, but it might as well have been for its alienness to Hutch.

He finally moved, reaching out a hand to still Starsky’s search. “I don’t know what you’re looking for, buddy. Why don’t you tell me so I can help you find it?”

Starsky jerked back as if Hutch’s hand held a knife, anger flaring in the midnight blue eyes. “Whaddaya think you’re doin’?! Leave me alone-- I didn’t ask you --” He stopped in mid-sentence and shot to his feet, already limping out the door back into the living room.

Hutch swallowed and bolted after him, fear for his partner as real as any he’d felt on the streets making his throat suddenly dry. He’d fooled himself into thinking Starsky was fine, that everyone else had been wrong, but if he knew anything at that point, it was that Starsky was not fine. But there wasn’t time to call anyone for help now, not with Starsky getting more and more worked up.

Starsky was headed determinedly for the front door, whether to leave or throw his friend out, Hutch didn’t know. He called after his partner. “Starsk, wait.”

“*What?*” Starsky growled back over his shoulder.

“Would you please talk to me?”

Starsky reached the entryway, limping more heavily with each step, and stopped close to the front doorway, whipping back around to face Hutch. "I'm sick of this. I'm sick of *you*. Get out." He pointed to the door.

Hutch took an involuntary step back, floored by the sudden reaction, the look and tone that his partner even at his worst had never used with him. If he'd been a bad guy out on the street, this was the point he would have started to get scared. And he was, so much it made his head pound, but not for himself. Hutch's words conveyed the feeling. "Starsky, tell me what's going on."

"What's goin' on is that I want you out." Starsky's eyes were a dangerous hue, and there was almost...hatred in his face.

And Hutch knew suddenly what Dobe had meant, why his boss had reluctantly let them lock Starsky up in that place. This Starsky was a stranger to him, and quite possibly capable of everything the captain had claimed. It was unbelievable how quickly things had deteriorated. "Starsk--" he started softly, taking another step, only a few paces separating them now.

"*Get out.*" The words burned with fury. Then, before Hutch recovered from his shock, Starsky was moving the last few feet to the door, probably to open it and bodily usher his partner out.

Hutch was still fooling himself.

He saw Starsky's back-up Beretta hanging in its holster by the door a split-second before Starsky reached for it, already knowing he'd be too late to react, and that he'd been seriously, perhaps fatally, mistaken in figuring he could handle what was wrong with his partner.

And then Starsky was pointing the gun at him, falling unconsciously into shooting stance.

Hutch swallowed. His fear was full-blown terror now. Looking down a gun barrel would make anyone weak-kneed, but if Starsky shot him, he'd hurt himself at least as badly as his partner.

Hutch's hands were spread wide now, unthreatening, and he didn't move, barely breathed. "What're you doing, Starsky?" was all he gently said.

"I told you to get out."

The anger didn't seem so volatile now, and Hutch dared to slide a step closer. The gun never wavered, the safety off, his partner's finger hovering near the trigger. An accident was as likely at that moment as a deliberate shooting, and Hutch was careful to make no sudden moves. "Or what, you'll shoot me? Is that what you want, buddy?"

"Y'always think you have the answers," Starsky snarled, but the thin chill of his voice had melted a little.

Hutch shook his head with a hint of a sad smile. He'd never wished he had solutions more than he did at that minute. "I haven't got all the answers, Starsk, but I do know you." He took another slow, small step. "You've saved my life--how many times? I can't even count anymore. I trust you with my life--you'd never hurt me."

The gun briefly wavered before steadying. “Why don’t you take off?” There was almost a note of pleading in Starsky’s voice now.

Hutch just shook his head, his voice soft, almost tender as he moved a little closer. “I’m not leaving you here, partner. I said I’d help you figure this out, remember? I’m worried about you.”

“Hutch...” More anguish now than anger. Hutch was too close now for Starsky to miss, even though the Beretta was visibly wobbling.

“You don’t want to do this. I know you. Something’s screwing with your thinking, Starsk--that’s what’s doing this, not you. You wouldn’t hurt me, I know that. I trust you.”

The invisible tug-of-war lasted a long silent minute longer, Starsky’s irrational anger fighting against Hutch’s steady, gentle pull. And then, with a groan, Starsky gave in, releasing the gun into Hutch’s outstretched hand. He pulled away immediately after, sliding down against the wall beside the door, arms and legs pulled up against his chest as if he might burst otherwise.

Hutch flicked the safety back on with one finger and replaced the gun in its holster with a deep breath of relief. Then, his gaze softening as he looked at the figure huddled on the floor, he eased himself down onto the floor next to Starsky. His partner’s face was buried in his arms and he was trembling, an aftershock Hutch was tempted to give into himself. Instead, he dropped an arm around Starsky’s shoulders.

Starsky immediately pulled away, the movement one of shame rather than hostility this time. “Don’t,” came the shaky, muffled plea, the angry tone also gone.

Hutch ignored the request, determinedly staying close despite Starsky’s resistance. “I told you, you’re not gonna hurt me,” he said quietly. Starsky’s shoulders were as unyielding as a corpse’s in full rigor mortis. “You okay?” Hutch asked, more to get him talking than to get an answer he already knew.

A pause, then, “Besides the fact that I almost shot ya? Sure,” was Starsky’s bitter answer.

“It’s not your fault,” Hutch soothed.

“My hand holdin’ the gun.”

Hutch smiled a fraction. “Yeah, but you weren’t giving the orders.”

“S no excuse. I could’ve shot...killed...”

“No, you couldn’t have.”

Starsky lifted reddened eyes to stare at him. “The gun’s loaded, Hutch.”

Hutch shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. I mean *you* couldn’t’ve done it. Something’s messin’ with your thinking, but even so, partner, the decision was yours and I trust you, even if I’m gonna have to do that for both of us for a while.”

“How do you know it won’t happen again? I don’t think I can--” Whatever the unfinished thought was, it was potent. The earlier wild confusion, abated since Starsky had surrendered the gun, flared again in his eyes, and he struggled to climb to his feet.

Hutch held on harder, reaching over with his other hand to keep Starsky down. He didn’t think either of them could stand a repeat of the scene from minutes before. “Easy, take it easy,” he mollified. “Where’re you going?”

Starsky slowed, frowning at him, then slumped back down, rubbing his eyes wearily. “I don’t know.”

“Then just stay here for a minute, huh? I think we could both use a break.”

The curls shook slowly. “How come you’re still here”? I just tried to *kill* you, Hutch.”

“You held a gun on me,” Hutch said kindly. “There’s a difference.”

“Didn’t feel like it,” Starsky muttered.

Hutch almost smiled again. “How you feel’s probably as mixed up right now as what’s inside your head, partner.”

Starsky stared at him a moment. The disorientation was just a shadow in his eyes now, an edge of bewilderment, and the fury had changed into remorse and a little bit of fear. Those rigid shoulders also finally started to loosen. Starsky gave a faint snort. “You’re a pushover, you know that?” he asked unsteadily.

“Yeah, well, don’t you forget it,” Hutch answered, briefly tightening his hold. Normalcy, so impossibly distant only minutes before, lurked almost close enough to reach.

Starsky wasn’t fighting anymore, leaning tiredly against him, the dark-curved head propped against Hutch’s shoulder. “Maybe they’re right, maybe I really am goin’ crazy,” he spoke up in all seriousness after a minute.

“You ever met a mental case who knew he was crazy, Starsky?” Hutch asked in return, just as evenly.

Starsky digested that. “Maybe there’s different kinds of crazy.”

Hutch resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Sometimes Starsky just tried too hard. “Sure,” he agreed. “Anyone who likes chili tacos is definitely one of ’em. But rational people don’t suddenly turn violent, not without a cause,” he added earnestly.

A pause. “You callin’ me rational?”

What a twisted conversation this was turning out to be, and Hutch loved every word of it. “If you quote me on that, I’ll deny it.”

That earned an actual, if strained, chuckle, and then they both fell silent. Hutch raised his arm to rest along Starsky's shoulder and the back of his neck, offering additional support.

Another bolt of tension ran through the body next to him, and Starsky gave him a disconcerted look. "You didn't wanna lock me up again?"

Hutch winced, reminded too abruptly that something was still seriously wrong, and grieved by the thought. "I got you out of the hospital, remember? Why would I want to lock you up again?"

Starsky's face creased with the anguish of his uncertainty. "I dunno...Hutch--"

Hutch sighed. "It's okay, you're just a little confused right now. We'll sort it out. Just trust me." He gave Starsky a gentle squeeze, his fingers curling around Starsky's shoulders with determined reassurance.

It was as if he'd said the magic word. Starsky shut his eyes and turned his face in to Hutch's arm. It was an expression of trust, from someone for whom that seemed to be very difficult at the moment. Hutch didn't have to wonder what was going on his partner's head--he could see it in the white-knuckled grip Starsky had on his shirt, fighting the demons inside him and trying to hang on to what was real.

At least he seemed to know who was on his side now. Hutch didn't say a word, just sat there and held on, his hand trailing up and down Starsky's arm in what he hoped was comfort.

But how did you make someone feel better who'd just almost done the one act he would never have thought himself capable of? And how did you tell him that it didn't change a thing?

Hutch pursed his lips, thinking.

"Starsk, you ever hear of Milton?"

Starsky stirred. "You mean Sticky Miltie? Sure. I think he's workin' over in the Seventh now, though." His voice was slow, thick and hoarse, but steadier.

Hutch swallowed a grin. "No, I'm not talking about Miltie. John Milton, an English poet in the 1600s. He wrote a couple of famous works called *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*."

"Okay." Implicit in that one word was Starsky's obvious wondering if Hutch had also lost his mind, as well as the willingness to humor his partner's strange change of topic. It was one of the things Hutch loved about the man.

"I was just thinking about one of the quotes from *Paradise Lost* that I learned in school: 'The mind is its own place and in itself, Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.'"

Starsky half-turned to peer at him incredulously. "You feelin' okay?"

“Starsk, all that means is that things are what we make of them. You can have it all and still make a ‘Hell of Heaven’ if you don’t appreciate it. Or, no matter how low things get, with the right frame of mind, you can make a ‘Heaven of Hell’.”

A long silence. Starsky didn’t move, and Hutch couldn’t see his face from where he sat. Then, finally, a long, shuddering exhalation. “Milton, huh?” Starsky said softly. Something had changed ever so slightly in his voice.

“Yup.”

“You think he had a partner?”

Hutch’s mouth curved into a smile. “Well, he had an assistant, another poet named Marvell.”

“Marvel--you’re kiddin’.”

“Nope.”

“Figures,” Starsky muttered, earning a short laugh from his partner. But that different quality was still there, and Hutch finally put his finger on it. Acceptance.

Starsky took a deep breath, and his body relaxed by degrees against Hutch’s shoulder and side. A calm quiet descended this time, and Hutch felt it slowly sink in. Maybe they hadn’t really solved anything, but he still had the feeling they’d just made some kind of progress.

Now all they had to do was figure out what was wrong before one of them ended up shooting the other.

The shadows through the front windows grew long while they sat there.

Hutch wasn’t in a hurry to move. Despite the crisis, or maybe in part because of it, Starsky had finally worn down completely and had drifted into sleep in the crook of Hutch’s shoulder. The trust ran deep, even after their little scene. Hutch had depended on it to get through to his partner, but if he’d been someone else...as much as he hated to admit it, the results might have been less positive. The Starsky he’d faced down had been acting almost without thought, ruled by something other than himself. Something they had to identify before Starsky ended up back in that looney bin. Then he really would be destroyed.

Hutch leaned his head back against the wall, more tired than he should have been in early evening. Starsky barely stirred, nestled against him in an unconscious reaction to feeling safe. Hutch knew that feeling, having huddled against his partner a few times out in the streets, exhausted and hurting, knowing Starsky would take care of things, of him. It was part of the solid wall of partnership, knowing it was there to protect your back in the best of times, and to lean on and shelter you at the worst. The question was, what was Starsky seeking safety from this time?

How could you protect your partner if you didn't see the enemy?

Hutch sighed and shifted. They couldn't sit there all night; Starsky seemed to need the sleep but in a comfortable bed, not sitting on the floor. As wrung out as Starsky had been after his explosion, Hutch figured he wouldn't get much of a fight over moving to softer quarters.

He gave the cheek near his shoulder a soft pat. "Starsky? Time to wake up."

The dark head started up, giving him a sleep bewildered look. "Huh?"

"Time for bed. You wanna get up?" He shrugged his shoulder a few times to nudge Starsky more awake.

"Yeah," was the slurred response, but Starsky didn't move.

Hutch sighed again, long-sufferingly this time, and slowly pushed himself up on half-asleep legs. "Come on, Sleeping Beauty. Your bedroom awaits."

That earned a semi-intelligent "Mmm," and he helped his clumsy, sleepy partner to his feet and into the bedroom.

A wince as Starsky put weight on his bad foot reminded Hutch that there were other concerns. "You keep going straight ahead and I'll grab your pills and lunch, okay?" Well, make that dinner, but he doubted Starsky would care much.

Another mumble, and Starsky stumbled on while Hutch returned to the kitchen. The earlier sandwiches were wrapped up on the counter and Hutch put them out on a plate again. Pouring a glass of milk to go with them, he picked up the pill bottle next and shook two of the pale pink tablets into his hand.

And froze.

A week. Starsky had been on the pills a week, almost as long as his behavior had been altered. Was it possible...?

Hutch stilled a shiver as he dumped the pills back in the bottle and put the cap firmly back on before grabbing the sandwich and milk. He stopped hurriedly in the bathroom for the bottle of aspirin and then headed into the bedroom.

"Starsk, I have an--"

Starsky was sprawled diagonally across the bed on top of the covers, lightly snoring.

Hutch made a sound of exasperation and set the food and medicine down on the dresser before approaching the bed. Starsky was already barefoot and God knew Hutch had no desire to manhandle a dozing Starsky out of his clothes and into pajamas, but he did manage to pull the blankets out from underneath the limp body and wrestle Starsky into a more comfortable position

before covering him. Well, apparently the sandwich would have to wait again. And Hutch's very tenuous bit of hope.

It was time to be a detective.

Quietly closing the bedroom door behind him, Hutch impatiently wrapped up the sandwich, stowed the milk, and, with some reservation, hid Starsky's Beretta. Then, with nervous hands, he sat down to place a long call to Jace Broadhurst, an old doctor friend of both partners, followed by a somewhat shorter and more hopeful call to Captain Dobey.

It was completely dark outside by the time he was finished, and Hutch was exhausted but managed to hunt up a bowl of cereal for himself. It was one of the few things in Starsky's cupboards that he deemed edible, but it was no coincidence his partner had a box of Hutch's favorite cereal on hand. With a slight smile, he took the bowl out onto the front porch, sitting on the top step to eat it and breathe in the night air.

He had an answer. It wasn't definitely the right one, but it made sense, all of it, and Hutch liked the odds. It looked like he wouldn't be breaking his promise to his partner, after all. It would have been the first one either of them had made to the other and not kept. Which was just one of the reasons why this had been so important.

With quiet satisfaction, Hutch took the empty bowl back into the kitchen and then pulled out the bedding for another night on Starsky's sofa.

Starsky stared at him with wide eyes. "What?" he spluttered.

Hutch held up the bottle in his hand. "It's the pills, Starsk. Or at least, I'm pretty sure it is. We can't confirm it without a few days observation, but it all fits--your being fine in the hospital while you were off the medication, then having trouble again once you started back on it. Dobey even said you were better as the day went on--the pills wore off and I bet you didn't take any more at work."

Starsky just kept staring at him, and Hutch wondered how much of the explanation he'd even caught. "You mean to tell me that the pills the doctor gave me for my foot caused all of this?" he finally asked.

Hutch had waited until Starsky'd had his first morning cup of coffee and was semi-coherent before breaking the news to him. The lingering confusion and clouded look from the day before were completely gone and Starsky seemed back to normal to Hutch's experienced eye, but it looked like his partner was still having trouble digesting what he was hearing.

Hutch nodded in answer to the question, unsuccessfully trying to quell a grin.

"I called Jace last night. He says the drug's side effects can include psychosis, such as paranoia, delusions and hallucinations, and violent behavior." Hutch grew serious. "Looks like it could have been a lot worse, buddy."

“And they give this stuff to sick people to make ’em feel better?” Starsky asked disbelievingly.

“The side effects are really rare. Jace says it’s a common prescription for pain and he’s never heard of anyone else having a reaction like yours, but it’s in the PDR--the *Physician’s Desk Reference*--so it was possible. Guess you were one of the lucky ones.”

Starsky had subsided back into his seat at the kitchen table, but he still looked shell-shocked, his eyes troubled. Hutch leaned closer, growing concerned. Somehow he’d thought Starsky would be as happy to figure out the cause as he’d been.

“Starsk?”

He got a dazed glance, and then Starsky was staring past him. “So I gave Rem a black eye and drew on you because of a lousy pill the doctor gave me, all nice and legal,” he finally muttered.

Definitely not the reaction Hutch had been expecting. “Nobody knew, Starsky. It was stupid and shouldn’t have happened, but nobody could’ve known. It won’t even affect your record, except your medical record. We’ll have to be a lot more careful with anything else the doctor gives you in the future--”

“Doesn’t it matter that I almost killed ya because of a stupid *pill*?” Starsky cut him off. He suddenly grabbed the bottle from Hutch’s hand and flung it savagely across the room. The top shot off and pink tablets bounced into every corner. Starsky just stood staring at them, face red and chest heaving with anger.

Or fear. It was frightening to realize everything you knew about yourself was so easily changed. Just one small tablet, one syringe of heroin...Hutch knew that feeling too well, just as much at the whim once of what he couldn’t control as Starsky had been, even though his violation had been cruelly deliberate. He rarely talked about it with Starsky, and never with anyone else.

But a very few things were more important than unburying those memories.

“Starsky,” he said softly, “you think I’d have been any different if I’d had a gun when I was going through withdrawal?”

He watched the anger fade, leaving only the fear behind. “That’s different,” Starsky insisted, subdued.

“Yeah, with me we knew what was happening and that it’d be over soon. All you had to go on this time was that suddenly you were losing control, no explanation. That’s a lot different. But it’s still body chemistry, Starsk. It’s human.” Hutch shrugged. He’d beaten himself up over it for a while until he’d realized the same thing.

Starsky stared at him a long minute, sharply, weighing Hutch’s words. “And it’s not gonna happen again?” he finally asked.

Hutch immediately shook his head. “The drug’s out of your system now and there aren’t any long-term effects. You’ll have to switch to aspirin now for your foot, but...”

“Where’s my back-up?”

Starsky meant the Beretta, and the question as a test, seeing how much Hutch believed his own words and trusted his partner. Hutch answered without hesitation. “In the bathroom, under the sink.”

He passed. Starsky’s posture loosened, expression still disturbed, but then, you didn’t process something like that right away. Hutch figured at least a couple of days, and that fit in nicely with the required observation time. Starsky finally gave an aborted laugh. “So just like that, it’s over, doesn’t matter.”

Hutch shook his head. “I didn’t say that.” At Starsky’s sharp, wary glance, he continued, “Of course it matters--nobody expects you to act like nothing happened or not to get angry. Go ahead and be angry, or upset, you deserve to. I just don’t want you to feel guilty over what you couldn’t control, or worrying about it happening again.”

“If anything, I’d think *you’d* worry about it happening again. You were the one the gun was pointed at,” Starsky said dryly.

Hutch’s mouth softened into a smile. “I know who I trust. When it came down to it, buddy, you proved me right.”

Starsky didn’t say anything, picking up his mug for a long swallow of coffee instead. But there was a revived warmth in the blue eyes that met Hutch’s over the rim.

The doubts faded more each day, for the both of them. The first 24 hours had been spent mostly in front of the television, Starsky instructing his partner on the history of the Cartwright family, which Charlie’s Angel was which, and offering running criticism on the methods of Quincy, M.E. For Hutch, watching TV all day would have normally been a choice reserved only for extreme illness or cruel torture, but how could he deny that rediscovered enthusiasm when it kept requesting, “Just one more show”?

The second day, Starsky was willing to venture out, though only to Jace’s office for a check-up and, when everything checked out, to an appropriately celebratory lunch of dripping double cheeseburgers and salty french fries. They’d taken the food home with them, Starsky not wanting to be out long, but he’d laughed at the look on Hutch’s face when the blond pulled the grease-soaked packages out of the bag. Hutch had missed that. He didn’t even regret the subsequent obstruction of his arteries so much.

By the third day, Dobby had cleared them to return to duty the following morning, based on Jace’s and Hutch’s reports. There were still moments when Hutch caught his partner staring at the Beretta, or at him, eyes serious. His partner was an expert at bouncing back, but some things you just didn’t forget. But the spark was back.

And already Hutch was beginning to wonder why he’d missed it.

Starsky stood before him, grinning. “So we got one more day of doin’ anything we want?”

Hutch was instantly wary. Maybe subdued wasn’t such a bad thing, after all. “Why, what do you have in mind?”

“The beach,” Starsky said instantly. “Bikini-watching, foot-long hotdogs, the works. And you can tell me how Seattle went.” He glanced around at the walls around them. “I’m sick of bein’ cooped up.” And a harsh memory flickered briefly in his face.

Hutch hurried to head that off. “Beach, huh? Okay, but if we come back on duty with a tan, you get to explain to Dobby what you were doing on paid medical leave.”

Starsky was cleaning up breakfast remains faster than Hutch had ever seen him. “Fine. You’re the one who burns, anyway, Blue Eyes.”

“Oh, yeah? Who was it who came back from San Diego looking like a broiled lobster? And you can’t go swimming with that foot, Starsky.”

Starsky was just grinning as he headed into the bedroom to change.

“I’m not eating any hotdogs, either,” Hutch called after him. He had to draw the line somewhere, or Starsky would walk all over him. “You know what they put in those things?”

Starsky’s answer, called out from the depths of his closet, was the last thing Hutch expected to hear. “Hey, write down that quote from that, uh, Milton, okay? I like it.”

Hutch stopped his wipe-down of the counter to stare after his partner. Three days later, and with everything that had happened, Starsky remembered that? His slow smile grew. Heaven wasn’t just in what you made of things, it was also in who you made it with.

Grinning with the sheer joy of the day, Hutch went to get ready for the beach.