

Summary: An injured Hutch leaves Starsky temporarily partnerless... but not as far as he's concerned.

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Anybody's Partner

by **K Hanna Korossy**

"Hey, you sure that guy didn't hit you too hard? You still look funny to me."

Ken Hutchinson pulled his hand away from where he'd been rubbing his forehead and smirked at his partner. "You look funny to me, too, but I have enough manners not to talk about it."

"Ha, ha," was Dave Starsky's dry retort, but his gaze lingered on his partner a moment longer as they strode down the hall toward the squadroom. The punch Hutch had taken when they'd arrested the two street pushers that afternoon hadn't looked that bad, and Starsky wouldn't have thought twice about it if not for the suggestion of lingering pain in Hutch's pinched eyes and set jaw. If it wasn't the street punk's knock, Starsky would have bet good odds it was another of the headaches the blond had been getting the last few days. Normally, they cropp'd up when the workload got bad, but it had been an unusually calm week. Well, if other stresses were getting to the man, Starsky knew he'd hear about it soon enough, and he shrugged the worry off for the moment. "So, you wanna do Italian or Chinese for lunch?"

"How about good old cafeteria food?" Hutch suggested, reaching for the squadroom doors.

"Now I know you're sick."

Hutch rolled his eyes. "What I am is in trouble if I don't get caught up with some of that paperwork Dobey's been after us about."

Starsky matched his expression. "So what else is--"

"Starsky?"

They both turned at the new voice from down the hallway. Starsky frowned, trying to place it, before he caught sight of the speaker and his jaw dropped. "Danny?"

The speaker, a black man about their age with a friendly, mustachioed face and wearing a suit and tie, covered the last few feet of hallway between them with a wide grin. "Starsky, as I live and breathe. Haven't they thrown you out of the Department yet?"

Hutch leaned over to his partner to whisper, "You gonna close your mouth or are you trying to catch a fly?"

Starsky's jaw snapped shut, and he only spared his partner a scowl before stepping forward to vigorously shake the new arrival's hand. "Hey, the chief likes me. You were the one we were taking odds on your making it to retirement." His own grin felt sloppy and wide, but who cared? It wasn't often he ran into old buddies from his rookie days. Another long soaking in of the man who stood before him, and then Starsky half-turned, Danny's hand still in his own. "Hutch, this is--"

"I know, Danny Washington. I've heard a lot about you, some of it even good. I always wanted to meet one of you guys who had to put up with him while he was learning the ropes." One thumb hitched over Hutch's shoulder to indicate Starsky as he stepped back to allow Hutch access, the other firmly shook the man's hand.

"Not just put up with him, we nursed him along until he got his act together. Figured maybe he'd even turn into a good cop someday." Danny was still all smiles as he returned Hutch's handshake.

Starsky scowled at both of them, finally settling his mock ire on Danny. "*You* nursed *me* along? Who was it who almost ran over T.O. Malloy's foot that time, huh?"

"Yeah, well, who was the one who was flashing me pictures from that magazine behind his back so I wasn't paying attention, huh?"

Starsky couldn't help a grin. "Uh, we don't need to bother Hutch about that one. By the way," he went on smoothly before both men could protest the convenient change of subject, "this here's Ken Hutchinson, comedian-in-training and my partner." He nodded at the blond beside him.

"You have my sympathies," Danny said solemnly.

"I was just about to say the same thing," Hutch answered just as seriously.

"I knew getting you two clowns together was a bad idea." Starsky shook his head. "So, what're you doin' in our piece of LA, Danny?"

"I was at the courthouse testifying on a case, and the DA asked me to drop something off to a Captain Dobey. You know the guy?"

"Do we ever," Starsky answered. Hutch just made a face. "He's our boss. Right through that door." He pointed. "Say, you wanna have lunch with us after? We were just about to go down."

"Sure, we've got some catching up to do. Can you guys wait a minute?"

"Be right here," Starsky promised with a grin.

"Thanks." The detective disappeared into Dobey's office.

"Good guy, huh?" Hutch spoke up beside Starsky, still smiling.

"Terrific. Pulled me out of a few scrapes when we were rookies." He pulled his gaze away from Dobey's door and looked at his partner with new enthusiasm. "You're gonna love him. You sure you don't wanna go out to eat? We could go to that little place over on 45th..."

"Actually..." Hutch's hand wandered back to his forehead. "...I was gonna suggest you two go on without me. This headache isn't going away, and I really want to start on that paperwork."

Starsky had been able to tell the pain lingered, but the admission let on it was worse than he'd thought. Smile gone, he leaned closer. "Hey, maybe we should go down to Hollywood Pres and have them check you out? I think that guy got you harder than it looked."

Hutch shook his head. "It wasn't the guy. I think maybe I'm just coming down with something, and I want to take it easy. You go on."

That was the wrong thing to say. Starsky's heart sped up, mouth dry from the reminder of what "coming down with something" could mean. After almost losing his partner to the plague, the unseen dangers of the world scared Starsky nearly as much as the guns and knives. "Hutch--" It was all he got out, and even that was shaky.

His partner glanced at him, expression completely altering when he caught sight of Starsky's face. He hooked one of Starsky's arms. "Take it easy, Starsk, it's not like that. I'm okay now." Sarcastic just a moment before, now he was gentle and quiet, looking reassuringly at Starsky.

Right. Probably just a little bug, the kind you got 99.9% of the time. It was that .1% that was still able to scare Starsky out of his wits, however, just when he'd finally weaned himself off of hovering. So much for his tough-guy reputation. He took a deep breath and stared back at the blue eyes inches from his. They were crinkled with discomfort, but the pupils looked fine and there was no reason to believe his partner was playing down something serious. In fact, Hutch looked more worried about him than anything. How typical was that: Hutch was getting sick and he was apprehensive about how Starsky was taking it. Both their reputations would need some serious work at this rate. "You're sure?" Starsky couldn't help asking.

"I'm sure." Hutch's shoulder nudged his own. "Go have fun. I just want to hear the stories after."

"What stories?" Starsky gave him an amused look along with one last glance of concern. "Okay, but I'll be back to help you with the paperwork."

"The way you type, I hope it'll be a long lunch," Hutch called over his shoulder as he strode into the squadroom, passing Danny as he came out of Dobey's office.

"I miss something?" the man asked as he reached Starsky.

"Nothing important," Starsky muttered. But the nod he gave his partner was earnest, and Hutch's in return said his worry was noted and appreciated but unnecessary. Satisfied, Starsky gave his full attention to Washington and clapped a hand on the man's shoulder. "You ready for lunch? I'm starvin'." They matched pace with the ease of old friends as they set off down the hall toward the garage. "I know this place that makes the most incredible pizza..."

Driving in rush-hour traffic was on Starsky's list of least-favorite things to do, but Hutch had talked him into it with the argument that the tip he'd gotten wouldn't be good for long and the place was only about ten minutes from the station. On clear streets maybe; they'd already been sitting in the Torino nearly a half-hour. Plenty of time to notice an unusually quiet partner.

"You busy solvin' the mystery of life over there?" Starsky spoke up, not even bothering to glance at his passenger.

There was a stir next to him. "Nope, just trying to stay awake. You ever notice how bright those lights are in the squadroom? I thought I was gonna fall asleep on the typewriter."

Starsky snorted. "Musta had a big lunch."

A long pause. Then, reluctantly, "I skipped lunch."

Starsky looked over at the man beside him, taking note of the odd, folded-in angle of the lean body and the flush of his face. "Hey, you feelin' okay?"

Hutch sighed, the sound pure resignation. "Would you feel better if I said 'not really'?" He shifted on the seat almost gingerly. "My head's been hurting since this morning and now my back is getting into the act."

Neither symptom was exactly new to the blond, who dealt with stress at least as much physically as emotionally, but Starsky didn't point that out. "You wanna take off early? I can drop you at your place on the way."

"My place isn't on the way, you know that, and anyway in this traffic it'd probably be faster if I walked. I'm okay, Starsky, just a little under the weather. It's not a big deal."

"You're sure. 'Cause Dobey would understand if--"

"Would you just *drop* it?"

Silence. That wasn't exasperation; that was pure anger. Starsky pointedly concentrated on traffic, deciding whether he was worried, hurt, or mad. Then again, why choose? He could beat the rush and be all three at once.

A tired sigh. "Look, this isn't the plague. That was, what, two months ago?"

Six weeks, Starsky silently corrected, and that was just since the turning point, Hutch in the hospital ten more days after that.

"I'm okay now. This is just some little bug I picked up, probably from that nursery school we were at a few days ago."

They'd been talking to a witness, a daycare teacher. Or at least, Starsky had been talking to her. Hutch had been a lot happier entertaining the kids in the meantime. His partner tended to gravitate toward kids.

"I'll be fine." Hutch was still trying to make up every way short of apologizing. That Hutchinson pride hadn't wavered even when he'd been lying in the hospital, dying.

Starsky nodded shortly once, not wanting to continue down that path any longer.

A hand squeezed his shoulder. "Thanks."

There was the apology. Once pride got out of the way, both of them could relate too well to worrying about the other, and Hutch hadn't taken long to realize what side of hell Starsky had been on those two weeks in the hospital. Some things *had* changed since then.

But still, Starsky couldn't help but notice Hutch's hand was trembling, his grip a little clumsy. He would have laid odds it was warm, too, though his partner's jacket was too thick to feel that through. If it was the flu, it was setting in fast and hard, and the blond probably had no business being on the street.

Unfortunately, trying to tell him that would have been like talking to a lamppost. Except the lamppost would be easier to budge.

"You wanna be bad cop this time?"

Still contrite, but enthusiasm had crept into Hutch's voice, and the corner of Starsky's mouth turned up as surely as bait on a line. Even with misgivings, he'd always had a hard time resisting that tone. "You feelin' that lousy, huh?"

"Maybe I just enjoy the show."

There was definitely fatigue and effort running through the words, but that he was trying at all eased Starsky's concern. And it really was just a routine meet, in-and-out, no trouble. Hutch could sleep through it and it'd be fine. Starsky snorted softly. "Okay. I'll take point. But if you start feelin' worse, you tell me." He turned and gave Hutch a pointed look over his sunglasses.

"Scout's honor." Hutch dutifully gave him the salute, folding fingers awkwardly with his other hand until he had the right three up, and subsided just as quickly again into the bucket seat.

He didn't look well at all, Starsky thought glumly, returning his attention to the crawling traffic. Judith had said he'd be weak for a while, more susceptible to picking up stray bugs, but after a few weeks of holding his breath, Starsky had completely forgotten the lady doctor's admonitions and mostly forgotten to worry. The fact that he hadn't wanted to hear from her, though, was that being as sick as Hutch left a permanent mark: a slightly weakened immune system, tiring a fraction easier than in the past. Starsky hadn't noticed it in Hutch's performance on the job, but

the blond did seem to need a little more sleep and slept more deeply those last few weeks. Maybe getting sicker a little more often or getting hit harder by whatever virus was going around would also be part of it, too. Ultimately, it wasn't that serious a price to pay for surviving the plague that had killed a dozen others, not even enough to keep Hutch off the streets, and Starsky, for one, wasn't complaining.

But now was not the time to bring that up, Starsky figured with another glance at his partner, who was listlessly watching his side of the street. Maybe when he was back on his feet and the plague and being sick was just a distant memory.

Okay, so all they had to do was get through that afternoon, then he'd tuck his partner into bed, sit on him if needed to make him stay there, and everything would soon be peachy again. Feeling cheered already, Starsky spoke up again.

"Danny and I are getting together tonight."

"Who?"

Starsky's eyes narrowed a fraction. "Danny Washington? From this afternoon?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Sorry, I was thinking about something else." A beat, as if Hutch were searching for an expression of polite interest. "Did you ever ride together?"

Starsky shook his head. "He wasn't out of probation long enough to be a Training Officer, and 'bout the time I got off probation, he transferred to the Tenth, Vice, and I haven't seen him since. We had some good times together first, though."

"I remember the story about the pig."

Starsky cracked up at the reminder. "Yeah, that was Danny, all right. Good times." His grin faded. "He talked me out of quitting one time, too."

"Yeah?" Hutch shifted, sitting up a little higher and sounding interested.

Starsky shrugged one-shouldered. "One of my collars walked out of court free 'cause of some technical error, guy who'd killed his girlfriend. I wasn't so sure I wanted to wear a badge for a while after that."

"I didn't know."

Another shrug. "He just reminded me of all the arrests we'd gotten convictions on. Got me out of my self-pity and made me pay attention to some of the good things we were doing." There were a lot of great cops out there, and he'd been very fortunate to call some of them his friends.

"I'll have to thank him for that. God knows who I'd be stuck riding with if it weren't for him."

And one of them was his best friend. Starsky grinned at the windshield. "I love you, too, Blondie."

"We're just goin' to Alfredo's," Starsky said from the doorway, with the suspicion he was repeating himself. "I wrote the number down in the kitchen in case you need something."

Hutch gave him that very patient look of his that was exasperation in disguise as he wrapped the quilt tighter around himself. "I'll make sure I give them to the babysitter when she comes," he answered acridly. Cocooned in bed in his warmest blankets, he couldn't quite bring off the haughty tone.

Starsky frowned; that reminded him... "Hey, you want Huggy to come over for a while? I could call--"

"You do that, Starsky, and I'm asking Dobby for a new partner."

Starsky smothered a smile. "Okay, okay. You just..." His mirth faded. "You look like you're about t'pass out. Call me if it gets worse, okay?"

"What does?"

"Hutch," he growled. Then, realizing Hutch wasn't joking, he started back into the room. "What do you mean--?"

Hutch blinked. "You're gonna be late for your dinner." At Starsky's hesitation, he struggled almost comically to push himself up. "I'm thirty-four years old, Starsky. For God's sake, I think I can handle the flu."

The confusion and changes of mood were throwing him, but then, Hutch wasn't exactly a stoic when he was feeling lousy, and the more someone fussed over him, the louder he tended to get. "Fine," Starsky said uncertainly, then lowered his chin. "Look, you try watching someone go through what you did and not worry about 'em. I think I earned some credit there, pal."

Hutch grimaced, but didn't argue. They'd both gone through a lot in those two weeks. Starsky shook off the dark memory and impulsively winked instead at the man, drawing a grumbling, ireless, "Would you get out of here?" from his partner, along with a halfhearted wave.

"I'll stop by tomorrow," was all Starsky said, and with an amused and lingering look at the lump in the bed, withdrew from the apartment, locking the door behind him.

Hutch had grown progressively quieter, slower, and clumsier during their meet earlier that afternoon, leaving Starsky to handle it by himself. Upon their return to the station, Dobby had only needed to glance at him to declare him off duty. Which meant Starsky knocking off early, too. He was glad to get the invalid home and make sure he was warm and off his feet and stocked with his orange juice and wheat germ and other healthy junk. But Hutch was probably right that it was just the flu, and after a few days of coddling a grumpy partner, things would be back to normal and the plague and those days in the hospital that much further behind them.

Starsky nodded to himself as he got into the Torino and, with an instinctive final glance up at the dark windows of Venice Place, left to go meet another old friend.

"...I'm standin' there in nothing but this towel, yelling 'Freeze,' and Hutch's just put my clothes in the washing machine and started it."

Danny was laughing so hard, he was holding his side. "Talk about going in naked!" he sputtered.

"Yeah, well, that wasn't exactly part of the plan. He coulda just put the clothes in and not turned the machine on, but not my partner." Starsky shook his head with feigned mournfulness.

Danny chuckled, wiping his eyes, and took a bite of cooling pasta. "So you've been in Special Units three years now?"

"Four," Starsky corrected. The linguine the other detective was having was Starsky's favorite, but he'd opted that day for a lighter pasta with marinara. Somehow, his appetite was a little off, and he'd already decided firmly it was *not* due to worry. "We were in Robbery before then."

"But you and Hutch were already partners?"

"That's when we got together. We knew each other back at the Academy, kept in touch while we were rookies, and just figured we'd try working together." The marinara sauce was perfect, and Starsky found his appetite returning while he talked.

"I guess it worked out," Danny said and smiled.

The chunks of Italian bread were perfect to dip in the sauce, too. "Nobody believed it but Hutch and me, but here we are," Starsky said with his mouth half full.

"I read about you two in the paper a couple of times over the years." Danny was eating with a little more...poise, Starsky had noticed, reminiscent of his absent partner.

Starsky's eyebrow went up at the last comment, and he paused with fork raised. "Yeah?"

"Almost stopped by to see you after that shooting-- that sounded bad, man." Washington had stopped eating altogether. "But I was in the middle of a big case I couldn't drop, and by the time I was free, word was you were back on the job. How did that go down?"

Starsky shrugged, appetite waning again. "Little place a lot like this one, matter of fact. Hutch an' me went out for a late dinner, and turned out Vic Monte was supposed to be coming that same night and two hitmen were planning to drop him."

"And you got in the way."

A pull of the mouth. That evening wasn't his favorite subject. "It was a stupid mistake. I saw the gun on Hutch and, next thing I know, I was on the ground, bleeding."

"And Hutch was okay?"

That was a potentially loaded question, and Starsky studied his friend while he answered it. "Hutch wasn't shot, but it was on his head to get us all out of there alive. Somehow, he did it, even while he had to look out for me. He's the reason I'm still here, Danny."

Washington's hands went up. "Hey, I'm on your side. And his. I know firsthand how 'accident-prone' you are, so anybody who's put up with you and kept you alive and who you still tolerate has got to be a pretty stand-up guy. Just get the impression you two are friends, too, not just partners, and that's what I'm trying to figure out. Seems like he's about as different from you as, well, you and me, and you know how that worked out."

Starsky matched his grin. As great as he and Danny had gotten along, the one time they'd tried to work together, Danny filling in for Starsky's senior partner one week, they'd barely been on speaking terms by the time the week was up. Different styles, different temperaments, even different preferences for how to fill free moments, had added up to incontrovertible proof partnerships didn't just depend on personal liking.

So how had he and Hutch ended up together, when they hadn't had even that going for them on first glance? Try as Starsky had many times since then, he'd never been able to put his finger on it. They just worked, like two puzzle pieces that fit and made a picture together. Starsky wasn't one to look for the price tags on gifts and had given up trying to explain it.

But there was something he could say. Starsky swirled his bottle of beer for a long moment before taking a sip. "All I can tell you is, he's like the brother Nicky wasn't. He's always been there for me, even when I haven't been so easy to be around, and I'm a better cop and person with him. But that's not why I love the guy. I just do."

"Simple as that, huh?"

Starsky had never really thought that simple, but he tilted his bottle in acquiescence. "Simple as that."

"Well, all right. But I'm thinking you've changed, too, Starsky. Seems you're a little steadier than that high-strung rookie I used to know. If your partner's ever laid up or on assignment somewhere for a while, maybe we should give the temporary partnership thing a try again."

Starsky pursed his lips, considering that. "Sounds good to me if Dobey and your captain go for it. Next time Hutch's on vacation, I'll give ya a call."

"You do that. My captain wants to meet you, anyway. Told him that pig story a couple of times."

Starsky groaned. "And left out all the good parts, I bet. I've got a few stories for your cap'n, too. Remember that time we answered that B&E call and the lady was in the shower?"

Danny laughed again, dropping his spoonful of pasta for the third time that evening. "How could I forget that? And then she steps out of the shower and there we are..."

They weren't going to be done with dinner any time soon at that rate, and Starsky sat back to enjoy the company.

There was no call from Hutch that morning, which as far as Starsky was concerned was good news. The last thing he wanted was to be arguing with his sick and feverish partner that Hutch was not up to being on the streets in that condition. Dobey had already put him on sick roll until he was back on his feet, and Starsky fully intended to see the man stayed there as long as needed.

Still, Hutch had a bad habit of not worrying about things like food and medicine when he wasn't feeling well, and checking in on him shouldn't bother him too much, Starsky figured. At best, Hutch would be sleeping and Starsky could tiptoe in and out without waking him. At worst, he'd be shivering on the sofa or doing something stupid like suiting up to go jogging, and Starsky could knock a little sense into his head before going to work. A cop had to be prepared for all situations.

He was running late as he navigated morning traffic, but the dinner had gone until the restaurant closed, and then continued another two hours or so at Huggy's bar. When even The Pits had closed, they'd called it a night, but it was almost dawn before Starsky had staggered home and into bed for a few hours of sleep. It'd been worth it. His ribs were sore from laughing so much or so hard, and it was the first in a long time he'd gone care-free for a whole evening. Well, almost. Sympathy for his partner feeling miserable back in Venice had tempered Starsky's enjoyment a fraction, but all the arguments for self-sufficiency had finally started to sink in, and Starsky refused to worry about his grown, capable partner.

So it was only with a carton of juice and a fresh bottle of aspirin rather than the usual shopping bag full of stuff that Starsky maneuvered the door to the Venice apartment open and slipped quietly inside.

And instantly went on alert, good mood vanishing at the sight of the apartment. Only fear of drawing unwanted attention to himself made him hurriedly, quietly set aside the things he'd brought instead of dropping them where he stood, and Starsky pulled his gun in the same swift move.

The apartment was ransacked. Not destructively, Starsky immediately noted-- it wasn't vandalism-- but rather someone looking for something. Burglars usually weren't that messy, but then, burglars usually struck during the day, anyway, and were probably a best-case scenario at this point. No, this felt a lot more serious than that. And from the sounds of frantic movement in the bedroom, it wasn't over yet.

Starsky ghosted over toward the bedroom door, avoiding all the creaky spots of the floor from long experience. A quick peek into the bathroom as he went revealed it to be dark but empty and apparently untouched. Silently, he slid past it and flattened himself by the bedroom door.

He couldn't see the whole room from that vantage point, but the wedge of it he saw contained nothing but a familiar bare back, hunched over an open box on the bed and pawing through it with frenzied motion. Hutch was still in his pajama bottoms, apparently recently roused, but his

obvious state of mind sent Starsky's alarm higher. Had he just woken to his trashed place and was missing something important, or was someone holding a gun on him out of Starsky's line of sight?

There was only one way to handle it. Starsky pulled into a slight crouch, then sprang, landing in the middle of the open doorway and in a spot from which he could see the whole bedroom.

"Police, freeze!"

It was empty, no one there but his partner. Who'd jerked to a stop for a brief moment at the sound of his voice, then grabbed something off the bed and whirled to face him.

"Hutch, what the--?" Starsky began, then halted as the sight before him registered.

Hutch's cheeks were deeply flushed, the fever apparently worsened instead of improved, and his eyes looked wild and delirious. Even that, however, didn't explain the tight fear in his face as he stared at Starsky. And clenched a sharp letter opener in his left hand.

Starsky unobtrusively lowered his Smith & Wesson and dropped his voice into the register they usually used with strung-out addicts and scared kids. "Hutch? What's going on? Someone break in?"

"Who are you?"

If Starsky hadn't been a few feet away from his partner, he might not have believed the guttural voice or those words could have come from the blond. But they did, even as Hutch brandished the letter opener a little higher. Defensively against *him*.

This was getting worse all the time, and every worry from two months before returned with vehemence. Even in the worst throes of the plague's fever, Hutch had never turned on him or not known him. Starsky reached behind him with slow, discreet movements and let his gun fall, then shoved it with one foot under the credenza by the door. If there was some kind of struggle, he wanted it out of the picture. If there was some kind of struggle with *Hutch*; the idea filled him with disbelief.

And yet there they were, Starsky with his hands slightly raised, Hutch in defensive posture, holding a weapon on his best friend, weaving where he stood, squinting at Starsky or whoever he was hallucinating in Starsky's place, as if he couldn't quite make him out. Everything seemed to have gone wrong all at once.

"It's me, buddy. It's Starsky. I'm your partner, remember?"

His soothing tone only seemed to increase Hutch's agitation. "What's going on here? Where am I? What've you--" He broke off, crushing the heel of his free palm into his eyes with a pained grunt.

Where am I? He didn't know his own place, either? This was starting to seem more like amnesia than simple delirium. But how was that possible? Starsky didn't let on how truly frightened he

was becoming, just took advantage of the man's distraction to creep a little closer. "Head hurting, Hutch? Like yesterday, remember? You were feelin' sick and I brought you home and put you to bed. You remember?"

"No." There was a despair in that one word Starsky hadn't heard since Hutch had fought the heroin inflicted on him by Forest's men. He flinched, easing another foot closer, anxious to find out what was wrong and help fix it.

"It's okay. I bet it's just 'cause you're sick. We'll take you to the hospital, have the doc take a look at you, and everything's gonna be fine, Hutch."

The blond started at his name, but with surprise, no hint of recognition in his eyes as he pulled his hand away. Amnesia it was, then, and with it had come understandable paranoia. Taking in Starsky's proximity, Hutch raised the letter opener to fend him off again. "I don't want to hurt you," Hutch warned, voice cracking and wavering. The agitated eyes darted around the room as if looking for a way of escape around Starsky, but there was none. Nor did it seem he was seeing clearly, rubbing and scrunching his eyes. Yet another symptom to add to their mystery list, Starsky thought bleakly.

"You won't hurt me," he said softly. "You're my partner. You look after me. Remember? Just like I look after you. Let me help, Hutch. You're sick. Trust me."

Hutch gave him an anguished glance, needing help but clearly afraid. And then the decision was made for him. His eyes abruptly rolled back into his head and he collapsed without a sound.

Starsky leapt, able to at least save the blond head from hitting the floor, and gently pried loose from the hot fingers the letter opener Hutch had nearly fallen on. He was burning up, as hot as Starsky remembered the plague fever getting, but even that hadn't come with memory loss or vision problems. He couldn't dwell on that now, though. Working on an instinctive level, Starsky laid his partner out as comfortably as possible on the floor, reaching over to grab a blanket off the bed and covering the shivering form with it. Calling an ambulance was next, leaning heavily on the "officer down" part. Dobey would back him up on it, not that Starsky wouldn't have faced the wrath of all his superiors if it meant help for his partner.

"Just a bug, huh?" he muttered as he returned to his friend's side with a pillow and carefully lifted the blond head onto it. "When am I gonna stop listening to you and make you listen to me?"

Hutch's head rolled on the pillow, making fretful sounds that were not quite words. Starsky made a detour into the bathroom, coming back with a cold, wet washcloth, patting it over the flushed cheeks and neck, then draping it over Hutch's forehead and eyes. Basic first aid for something that didn't seem very basic. How many times had he been out of his league but stuck trying to help because of that man before him, the one who seemed to break all his rules? Starsky sighed, settling on his knees beside the body of his partner and clasping the restless hand that lay on top of the blanket in a one-sided handshake.

"Guess all that's not really important right now. You fight this, partner, get better, and then we'll talk."

Like they'd talked, long and deep, during Hutch's recovery from the plague. Not that any amount ever seemed enough to say all Starsky felt, all he had on his mind. But what he felt wasn't what really mattered. If Hutch never knew him again, as long as he recovered and was otherwise himself again, Starsky would be grateful.

But it would hurt, just like it had hurt seeing those eyes look at him so blankly and hopelessly.

Starsky heard the sound of running feet on the stairs and quickly shoved the letter opener under the bed, then smoothed the blond hair into place. "Just get better, buddy. We can work everything else out," he whispered, and then obediently moved aside for those who'd come to take his place.

Starsky leaned against the corner of the hallway, absently cataloging those who passed back and forth through the door of Hutch's treatment room. Maybe he was imagining it, but it seemed like more than the usual amount of nurses and doctors were congregating within, and that an awful lot of supplies and equipment had already disappeared into the room. It had to be getting crowded in there.

The large hand that descended onto his shoulder from behind gave him a start, almost making him spill his coffee. Starsky steadied the cup before turning to meet the worried expression of his boss.

"How is he, Dave?"

The use of his first name made his mouth quirk; Dobey had no idea how much he gave away of his own estimation of the situation by its use. "I don't know, Cap'n." He lifted the coffee cup in the general direction of the treatment room. "I don't think they know, either. I've already heard 'tumor,' 'stroke,' and about a half-dozen other lovely ideas, but Hutch doesn't seem to be fittin' any of 'em."

"He always does like to do things his way."

Starsky's smile was as feeble as the attempted joke. Everything seemed to be more of an effort since he'd arrived, from simple conversation, to drinking the coffee without spilling it on himself. Which was maybe why the cup was still mostly full of cooling liquid.

"Why aren't you in there with him?" came the next, unexpected question.

Starsky's gaze dropped, fatigue rushing in with irresistible force for a moment. "Hutch came to when we got here, told me to get out. I think he's scared of me." He closed his eyes, just for a moment.

The captain's voice was unexpectedly gentle. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Dobey in fatherly mode was throwing him, but Starsky used the kind tone as an anchor to collect his thoughts around. He made a face, straightening slightly against the brick wall. "Don't know,

Cap'n. Hutch wasn't feeling well yesterday-- you saw him-- but he wasn't that bad off. We both just figured it was the flu. Then I stopped in this morning, and it looked like he'd torn the place apart." Like a man looking for something, Starsky's earlier assessment returned to him. Perhaps looking for his past and name. He shook his head. "I don't know how long he'd been like that, but he didn't know who I was, threatened me with a letter opener. And that part's between you and me. Sir."

Dobey nodded like he'd expected nothing else. "And he hadn't hit his head or gotten some other injury you two hadn't seen fit to tell me about?"

"Guy punched him yesterday, but it wasn't hard, didn't even leave a bruise. This is somethin' else, Cap'n, something like..." Starsky stopped, staring into his coffee and then taking a deliberate gulp. Like everything else that morning, it was dreadful.

"Like the plague," the older man finished reluctantly. "Do you think that's it?"

"I don't know," Starsky said tiredly. "The doc didn't seem to think so, but I almost wish it was, you know? At least we know what that is and have an antidote to it."

Dobey nodded, then took a deep breath. "Have you called his parents?"

"Not 'til I know something. No sense in them worrying halfway across the country."

His boss nodded again. "Well, I'm going to go make some phone calls. You hang in there, Starsky."

He smiled again, if wanly, at the man he'd come to respect nearly as much as he did his partner. "What else am I gonna do, Cap'n?" he asked rhetorically.

Dobey shuffled off, and Starsky leaned against the wall again to watch the room in which the war was being waged for his best friend's life, and wait.

It was another hour before the doctor, a pleasant, competent looking middle-aged man, came out to join him. He pulled his cap off and scrunched it in his hands after introducing himself to Starsky. "Well, we've done a CT scan, ran some blood tests, and even did a spinal tap. We haven't gotten all the results back yet, but everything we've got so far is pointing to the same thing, a strain of encephalitis called Arbovirus Encephalitis."

Starsky's mouth went dry. That sounded bad.

"Now, it sounds worse than it is. This strain is one of the better ones to get, and the prognosis is usually very good for those who aren't very young or very old. But...I've read your partner's medical history, and his recent serious illness has probably left his immune system somewhat depressed. That might make this a more severe case. But I still anticipate a full recovery." He raised a hand to still Starsky's immediate questions. "I'm just saying it's not as sure a thing as I would normally predict, and I expect he might get worse before he gets better."

Starsky digested that, staring down the hall past the doctor, then meeting his eyes again. "So all this stuff, the not remembering and the fever and problems seeing, they're all part of this...virus?"

The doctor nodded. "They're all typical symptoms. Others include some loss of muscle control and coordination, confusion or personality changes, muscle aches, nausea, headaches, uh, tremors, even some sensory impairment and sensitivity to light."

"I thought it was just the flu," Starsky said numbly.

The doctor smiled sympathetically. "I'm not surprised. Encephalitis isn't the first thing we think of, either. But there have been a few cases of it in recent weeks around here, mostly from people who'd spent some time camping or hiking in the hills. This strain is transmitted through mosquito bites, not person-to-person. Has your partner been out in the woods recently?"

"Last weekend," Starsky murmured. "He went hiking, just for the day." Starsky hadn't liked the idea at all, but Hutch had insisted that was part of how he healed, and as refreshed and energetic as he'd looked upon his return, Starsky had grudgingly decided he'd been wrong. The lure of being able to say "I told you so" didn't hold its usual luster this time.

"That sounds about right. This is usually more an Eastern strain-- we don't see it a lot here, but apparently there's some outbreak of it around this area right now. Your partner was just unlucky enough to be one of the ones to find it. I'm guessing his compromised immune system played a part in that, too."

Starsky chewed his lip. "Doctor, is this gonna set him back? He was still getting over the plague, and, well, we're cops. We deal with messes and sick people all the time. If he's gonna be catching everything we come across--"

"I see your point." The doctor wrapped an arm around his clipboard. "I can't guarantee anything yet, Detective Starsky, you probably know that. But Detective Hutchinson was recovering from his illness, if slowly. This should set him back a little bit, and it wouldn't hurt if he took it easy and avoided obvious exposures for a while. But neither of these illnesses are permanently damaging to the immune system. He'll probably always have a little less stamina, hopefully unnoticeably less, but I don't foresee this as significantly interfering with his job or life."

For all his bravado about Hutch's survival being all that mattered, assurances of a return to normalcy made Starsky's head swim with relief. "Thanks, Doc," he said weakly.

"Please don't forget, Detective, we're not free and clear yet. There's no cure for encephalitis, only managing the symptoms. We've currently got your partner on an anti-inflammatory as well as a sedative and pain relievers, and we're going to try to get his fever down, too. But the worst of it will be over in the next day or two. Then, assuming he gets past that without complications, we'll start talking about what comes after."

Starsky nodded. It all still sounded good to him, even if the list of what needed doing was sobering. As far as he was concerned, though, this fight was no different than any other they'd fought through the years, on the streets or in the hospital. "Can I stay with him?"

The doctor hesitated. "Since Detective Hutchinson doesn't recognize you, I'm not sure your presence would do anything but antagonize him, Detective."

"Doc, Hutch may not remember me, but he *knows* me. And he needs somebody there whether he knows it or not. No cop feels safe without someone watching their back when they can't. Please. If he gets upset with me, I'll leave." That one was a white lie, but the doctor didn't need to know that.

The doctor nodded slowly. "All right. It wouldn't hurt if someone could stay with him, and we're too short-staffed to have someone there all the time. Besides, something tells me you've done this before."

Starsky didn't miss the wry look that accompanied that, but the doctor probably didn't catch his muttered response to the white-clad back as he followed the man down the hallway.

"You could say that."

Well, this was familiar. Hutch in the hospital, tossing with fever and delirium, mumbling words Starsky couldn't make out, and face twisted in pain both real and imagined. It was as if they were going in a circle, the same scene having played out two months before in that same hospital, and similarly a year or so before that as Hutch had gone through withdrawal from the heroin. And for Starsky, it was the same squeeze of the heart at not being able to stop it, the same helplessness of having to watch someone he loved suffer. He hadn't thought either of those times he could go through that again, and yet here he was. What else was there to do, leave? That was as impossible as not hurting. So Starsky blew out a long-held breath and leaned forward to do the little he could, yet again.

Even sedated, Hutch cringed at every touch, no-doubt sore and stiff. Starsky had given up trying to offer some comfort and stuck to the practical: coaxing bits of ice into Hutch's mouth, trying to cool him with compresses, and occasionally smoothing back the spiked blond hair. And talking.

"Hey, you got a private room this time. No more nurses peekin' in on you all day. Remember how much that bothered you?" Hutch had been in an observation room then, like some sort of human specimen. Oddly, the window had felt like an even more invasive barrier between Starsky and his quarantined partner then, allowing him to look but not touch.

Starsky smiled, sad at the memory. "Course, least we had Judith then. Now you're just stuck with me, and Annabel." Annabel was the day nurse, coming in every half-hour to check monitors, administer medication, and give him a gloomy look. Starsky leaned conspiratorially closer. "Good thing you can't see her, though, she looks like my mother."

Hutch's eyes fluttered, and he twitched and groaned, a deep sound of pain.

Starsky winced. The doctor had said that on top of everything else, the spinal tap would probably leave his back hurting worse, too. "Yeah, I didn't think that was too funny, either. Just tryin' to

get your mind off things. Mine, too. Seems like there's a lot of deja view piling up around here, you know?"

Hutch shuddered, opening his eyes to stare at Starsky for a long minute, squinting to try to bring him into focus, his eyes full of confusion. "Who...?" His lips kept moving, but that was all that came out.

Starsky crouched to eye-level. "It's gonna be okay, Hutch. You're sick, but you're in good hands and you're gonna be fine. I promise."

Hutch recoiled fractionally, too weak to go far but clearly spooked. "Go... 'way, don't know...you. Leave me alone."

"Well, I know you," Starsky said gently, "and I'm stayin' until I make sure you're okay. Then you can kick me out if you want."

At least it was mostly bewilderment and not fear in Hutch's eyes now. That had been one of the worst parts. "Don't want--" He coughed, then began to gag.

Luckily, that was one of the rarer symptoms, but Starsky was ready. He didn't know how they handled it when someone wasn't there all the time with a patient, but he'd already scouted out the bed pan under the bed and whipped it out when needed. They probably just changed the sheets a lot, but Hutch was so uncomfortable already, that would have been another unkindness. Better this way, even as Starsky wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Not much came out, though, solid foods only a memory now, and the dry heaving finally tapered off into coughing.

"Easy, boy." This time he did rub the ailing man's back, trying to distract him from his unhappy stomach. "Take it easy. It'll be better in a minute."

It was, only in that Hutch lapsed into one of his brief, frequent restless sleeps. It meant a few minutes relative rest for them both, anyway. Starsky took a deep breath, slumping momentarily in the chair, then propped a hand on his knee and pushed himself upright. He tottered into the bathroom to splash some water on his face. It was an old face that looked back at him from the mirror, lined and weary.

"You don't look so hot, yourself," he told it crossly. "Feelin' sorry for yourself when Hutch's in there fighting to..." Starsky's throat worked for a moment; he hadn't let himself dwell on the worst-case scenarios of the prognosis. You never accepted your partner could be dying, not even after the fact sometimes, and you definitely never took it lying down. But that didn't mean it didn't crawl into your gut and head and bones and privately shiver there in fear. Dying in a hospital bed from a virus he'd gotten from his beloved nature, not knowing Starsky at the end, or even that a friend was with him, nor wanting him there...it was no way to die.

Starsky shook his head. This was pointless. Fighting and railing against your fate were two different things, and the latter didn't help the former. He could rail after, when the battle was decided.

"Only reason you're in here feeling sorry for yourself is that blintz out there made you realize what you'd be missing if he left," Starsky chided the mirror. All the times Hutch had saved his life, they were the stories Starsky told other people. The truth was, Hutch had revived in him the reasons life was worth living.

Another handful of water, and this one he held for a moment against his tired eyes before letting it trickle away and pulling out a few paper towels. Starsky dried his face, then his hands, and tossed the wet towels. Reaching for the door, he added wryly to the mirror, "And if he finds out you were talking to yourself, he'll never let you forget it."

With that, he swung the door open and went back to his post.

The coffee apparently didn't taste any better warm. Starsky resisted the urge to spit out the sip he'd taken and leaned down to the pile of sugar packets sitting on the chair. He tore three open at once, dumping them into the cup and absently mixing it with a finger.

"Starsky?" The subdued voice made him raise his head and look at the approaching figure. He was so tired, it took a moment to figure out who he was seeing.

"Danny. What're you doin' here?"

"I heard about Hutch. How is he?"

Starsky gave half a shrug. "Hangin' in there. They'll probably know for sure tomorrow." The doctor had kicked him out briefly to look Hutch over, but Starsky knew what they'd find.

"He got sick, just like that?" Danny sat in the chair next to him, which forced him to look up to make eye contact. Starsky had gotten tired of chairs and sat on the back of one now, body propped against the waiting room wall, feet planted on the chair's seat next to a half-dozen more sugar packets.

"He was sick back in November, worse than this. He got the plague that was goin' around the city, remember?" Danny nodded. "Well, it made it easier for him to get sick this time. Seems he picked up some rare virus from a mosquito bite while he was hiking last week."

"Tough break," Danny said soberly.

Starsky snorted. He didn't even know the half of it. "Yeah."

The silence stretched, Danny apparently looking for something to say, Starsky too exhausted to care about making conversation. Priorities changed radically when someone you cared about was possibly dying. Starsky scrubbed his hand through his hair, then took another sip of the sweet coffee.

Danny shifted, looked up at him again.

"You thought about when you're coming back to work?"

Starsky blinked, frowned. Wasn't that part obvious? Even Dobby hadn't asked him that. "After he's out of the woods and gettin' better." Some sleep would have been good, too, but Starsky wasn't picky.

"I'm sure they'd call you and let you know if there was any change. Going in for a couple of hours might do you good, Starsky, get your mind off of all this."

If the words hadn't been so kindly offered, with genuine concern in his friend's face, Starsky wasn't sure his answer wouldn't have been physical and a lot less gentle. Instead, he stared at Danny with blank perplexity.

"I'm sure my boss would let me go for a couple of days if you wanted to try the temporary partner thing, just until Hutch got back on his feet. Maybe it would help, being with a friend."

"He's my partner," Starsky finally managed dumbly. Didn't that say it all?

"I know that," Danny said gently. "I'm not asking you to betray him or anything. Although, the two of you don't have the best record for staying out of trouble, and maybe one day you *should* consider trading off for someone else, see how that works. But for now, sitting here while he's sick isn't going to help any, either, just make your paycheck skinnier come payday. It's good that you two are close. It'll protect you on the streets to have someone you trust at your back. But that doesn't mean you have to be there for him 24/7, Starsky."

Starsky shook his head, not quite comprehending yet. Maybe looking at it another way... "What would you do if it was your partner? If you'd stopped by in the morning and he was out of his head?" Starsky asked, voice thick.

"Honestly? I probably wouldn't have stopped by in the first place," Danny said.

"Have you even had a partner?" Starsky asked incredulously. Was this man even his friend, someone he knew?

"Yeah, a couple. Good guys, every one of them, and I got to know each one like I'd grown up with him, and he'd know stuff about me I never even told Ginny. But at the end of the day, we went our separate ways. Partnership doesn't mean living in each other's back pocket, man."

Starsky stared at him a long minute, the reality of the distance Danny was offering finally dawning on his sluggish mind. And seeing the good intentions in his old friend's face, picturing for the first time a partnership that was bounded by shifts and different homes and separate lives. No sleeping on his partner's lumpy couch, or trying to make something that had a taste out of wheat germ and dried fruit, or not finding his favorite shirt because it was buried somewhere in his partner's laundry pile, or taking all his vacations solo. No hospital vigils, sleepless nights of worry, having his partner's medical information memorized, or talking to an old guy in the mirror. It sounded sane, reasonable, probably even healthy.

And terribly lonely.

The corner of Starsky's mouth turned up, tweaked by the epiphany that as much as he hated where he was at that moment, there was no other place in the world he'd rather be. He nudged his foot against Washington's leg, nodding to him. "I appreciate it, Danny. I know you're tryin' to help and I'm grateful. But that's not the way I-- we-- work. This is where I belong right now, not at the station or with a temporary partner. I already got a partner."

Danny pursed his lips, thought a moment, nodded, and then unexpectedly smiled. "Guess that's the fit you were talking about that you couldn't explain before, between you and him, huh?"

He hadn't thought about it before, but it made sense. "Guess it is," Starsky willingly agreed.

Danny stood, holding out a hand to Starsky. "No hard feelings?"

Starsky shook his head without hesitation, shifting the coffee cup to his left hand so he could shake with the right. "For tryin' to help? Uh-uh. It's not your fault you picked a lost cause."

His friend's face softened. "Yeah, well, you just remember I'm out there, and if you ever need anything, look me up." He sketched an informal salute to Starsky and walked away.

As long as it didn't involve off-duty hours or hand-holding of any sort, Starsky thought without resentment as he watched the detective go. Well, to each their own. Some of the other detective pairs he knew in the Ninth were almost as close as he and Hutch, while the rest were more like Danny, and the respective arrangements usually seemed to work. It wasn't what Starsky wanted out of life, though. Getting a best friend, brother, confidante, nurse, adviser, and listening ear along with a partner seemed a pretty unbeatable deal to him. Even with the occasional overnight vigil and constant-worry price tag, it was a bargain Starsky wouldn't have traded for anything.

Speaking of which, how much longer was the doc going to be in there with Hutch? Starsky turned his wrist to look at his watch, nearly spilling his coffee in the process. Good grief, he had to be more tired than even he realized. Well, with any luck, he could catnap while Hutch slept. Starsky drank the rest of the coffee in a few swallows, trying not to wince. A spoonful of sugar didn't do a whole lot to help that medicine go down.

The door opened, and Starsky laboriously climbed to his feet and went in.

The fever didn't break until nearly noon two days later.

Starsky's voice was down to a croak by then, gone after long hours of holding one-sided conversations with someone who was as apt to turn away from his voice as to listen to it. But as the fever claimed more and more of Hutch's strength, the fight had gone out of the blond, too. He wasn't aware enough to listen, much less react, but he grew quiet at the sound of Starsky's winding stories, lulled by the sound, or soothed by the thought of not being alone. The hand he'd also repeatedly pulled away from over the hours was now accepted, the warm fingers curled hesitantly around Starsky's cooler ones. Starsky hoped maybe there was some instinctive recognition of someone he trusted, even if Hutch's beset mind didn't consciously recognize him, but that was unfounded wishfulness and he knew it. This wasn't about him being there for his

partner because Hutch wanted it. Starsky was there because he was needed, whether Hutch knew it or not.

So when the feverish fretfulness peaked and then faded just as suddenly into dead calm, the sweat of a falling temperature starting to soak Hutch's hair and pillow, it was with almost as much exhaustion as relief that Starsky sank back into his chair and watched the nurses take over. They'd made it through this one together, too.

The nurses were smiling at him now, none of the grave shakes of the head as before, as they changed the bedclothes and Hutch's gown and cleaned him up. Starsky watched with dull eyes and tried to listen to the doctor, not quite willing to give in to sleep yet but losing the battle. There was a several-week recuperation ahead; he'd expected no less. A week more in the hospital, some help afterward: of course. Full recovery. That was the only part that really sunk in, and Starsky had made the doctor repeat it. Full recovery, no aftereffects likely. He'd been bracing himself for a verdict and instead had gotten a reprieve, and the worry lifted like a heavy fog around him. But it was only when the crowd finally dispersed from the room that Starsky heaved himself up on weak legs to take a look for himself.

There were the same signs of a recent battle with illness as there had been after the plague: the sunken eyes, the thinned face, the still-as-death sleep. But Hutch looked like the man he knew again, the face Starsky saw every day in the car next to him. Death no longer seemed to be lurking in the waxy skin and fevered dreams, and the restlessness and visible pain of earlier was gone from the lean body. This person he could believe would be on his feet before long, at his side on the streets again. And as his heart finally believed what his mind had known, Starsky smiled for the first time in what was certainly a lifetime.

"Good boy," he whispered, resting his hand briefly against a cool, slack jaw.

His own muscles were also starting to relax, letting go of hours of tension, and his legs were threatening not to hold him up much longer. Starsky reached over and heavily dragged his chair closer to the bedside, close enough that he could prop his feet up on the far end of the mattress next to Hutch's. And stretching himself out as comfortably as possible in the chair, he gave in graciously to sleep.

He woke to the feeling of falling, grabbing on to the arms of the chair as his feet hit the ground and he realized where he was.

Not falling. Right. Starsky rubbed at his gritty eyes. Hospital, Hutch, everything okay. His yawn threatened to crack his jaw. What a nightmare that had been.

Hutch still lay in nearly the same position as Starsky had last seen him. He usually slept better on his side than his back, but that didn't seem to be bothering him any now, head turned slightly toward Starsky, mouth ajar. The face only a mother-- and a partner-- could love, Starsky thought affectionately.

The IV bottle had been changed while he'd slept, as had the pitcher of water, now filled with a sea of melting small ice cubes. There was also a fruit basket set on the table, which, on closer inspection, was already missing one of its contents, a round imprint in the tissue paper marking the place. Looked like Dobey had been there, Starsky thought with a smile. No mention of the third shift now that Starsky was missing due to his sick partner. They really ought to offer sick days in pairs in the Department.

Of course, Danny wouldn't agree. Starsky sobered at the thought, leaning forward to rake some of the unruly blond hair from a forehead that thankfully no longer felt warm. Danny would have gone back to work, content to wait for word about whether he still had a partner or not. Or worse yet, wouldn't have even discovered how sick the man was until who knows how much later. By then, Hutch could have done God-only-knew-what in his feverish derangement, hurting himself or someone else, or disappearing altogether. Or he could have just collapsed, lying in his apartment until it occurred to someone to check on him, at which point it could have easily been too late. Was that the kind of partnership Danny advocated?

Local family would have made a difference; spouses or siblings or concerned parents might have stepped in where a partner didn't. A partner who didn't want to be friends off-duty would also have been a factor, and maybe that was part of why he and Danny hadn't clicked. But neither Starsky nor Hutch had close family nearby, and their many friends tended to be more of Danny's variety, fun to hang out with, reliable in a pinch, good, solid people. But most weren't the kind who would stop in to make sure he was okay after they'd been given the lecture about his being old enough to look after himself. Even fewer would have taken on an indefinite hospital stay, with a nauseated, delirious patient who tended to be nasty when awake and didn't recognize him. So why were the two of them so different?

Because Hutch had willingly sat through several such vigils with him, too, with nothing but concern and caring. Because he, too, tended to nag Starsky through every cold and flu, checking up on him, making him soup, loaning him his grandmother's thick homemade quilts. Because he'd stuck with Starsky when a madman was killing other cops in Starsky's name and the detective became a pariah in the Department. Because he'd called Starsky's mom to find out his favorite dish and then made it for him after the murder of his lady. Because they were each other's family, and that didn't end when the shift did, nor did either of them want it to.

"No--"

The horribly weak and battered voice yanked Starsky's attention back as surely as a twelve-piece marching band would have, and he was immediately on his feet, leaning over the head of the bed.

Hutch's eyes were closed but wincing, eyelashes trembling, trying to open. His face constricted, no doubt discovering the sore, shaky muscles the illness had left in its wake.

"It's okay, Hutch. Everything's fine now." Starsky picked up the hand lying on top of the covers and molded the limp fingers around his hand.

"Mmph." That brilliant insight was followed by eyes finally cracking open, staring blankly ahead.

The doctor had said some of the symptoms would probably linger for a while, including the vision problems and possibly the amnesia. Starsky tried not to hope for too much as he gently tilted his partner's chin toward him. "Hutch?"

Hutch blinked, the obvious effort to keep his eyes open making Starsky tired in empathy. But his brow wrinkled in frustration as Hutch's gaze inched past Starsky without seeing him.

Okay, so the eyes still needed some work. Starsky held the hand a little tighter, commanding attention. "You've been sick, but you're gonna be okay. You just need to get some rest. Your eyes are gonna be fine when you wake up, trust me."

Hutch's whole face was pinched now, straining against the limits he didn't understand. "I don't--"

Starsky immediately put his hand on the drawn forehead, smoothing out the lines of tension and covering Hutch's eyes at the same time. "Listen to me, buddy," he said calmly. "Everything's fine. You're safe. You've been sick, that's why things are still out of whack, but they're gonna get better, I promise."

Hutch's feeble struggle against his hand suddenly stilled. And then with disbelief and a touch of desperate hope, he whispered, "Starsk?"

A hundred pounds of fear and discouragement melted away at that one word, and Starsky swallowed once before answering. "Yeah, buddy, right here. I got ya." He hadn't said it before, not wanting to spook his partner with a promise from a stranger, but if Hutch recognized him, it was the strongest assurance Starsky could give.

"S it...plague?" Hutch's voice was breaking on every word, not ready yet for speech.

Starsky smiled a little. Ever the detective, his partner. He squeezed a little tighter, thrilled when Hutch's hand returned a fraction of the pressure in response. "It's not the plague, partner, you just got sick. It's a long story. I'll tell you the whole thing when you wake up again, okay? Right now I just need you to go back to sleep and heal. You're safe, I'm safe, and I'll be right here the whole time."

He could sense the struggle, the wanting to know. Hutch was not one to be happy until he knew exactly what was going on all the time and that he was in control of it. But finally he sighed, a bare exhalation, and gave in. "Kay." There was an added unspoken *for now*, but Starsky was well-aware what a capitulation this was. And what it said about his partner's trust in him as Hutch's breathing deepened and he fell back into sleep, having faith Starsky would take care of things.

There was no doubt now Hutch knew him and remembered their history. They could build anything else they needed on top of that.

And if this was an unusual partnership, Starsky decided as he rubbed his thumb over Hutch's still hand and watched over the sleeper, he pitied Danny and all the others who had the usual kind.

Starsky bent his head this way and that as he walked down the station hallway, trying to work the kinks out of his neck. Two nights in a hospital chair followed by a few short spurts of sleep grabbed in his cluttered bed, had not left his back or shoulders very happy, but they were the only parts of him that weren't. In fact, he kept spontaneously starting to hum all that morning, a habit usually more Hutch's than his own. Maybe they were rubbing off on each other; he'd even had the frightening urge that morning to take a sip of the homemade health shake Hutch had asked him to fix and bring in to the hospital for him. Starsky had soon taken care of *that* with a pit stop at his favorite burger place for two chili burgers with the works. Hutch had looked like he was going to have a relapse at the sight of them, which just put the icing on the cake for Starsky.

"Morning, Starsky."

Starsky turned at the greeting, ready to face yet another well-wisher inquiring about Hutch. He hadn't managed more than a few steps at a time since he'd arrived at Parker without another person passing on their congratulations at Hutch's recovery.

Danny Washington joined him out of a side hallway, smiling as he came up to Starsky. "I was just stopping by again and I heard about Hutch. I'm glad he's doing better."

Starsky grinned back, happiness too vast to be dimmed by anything or anyone just then. "Thanks, Danny. Doc says he can probably go home by the weekend."

"And you'll be there to pick him up when it's time."

He nodded. "That's right."

"What're you gonna do in the meantime, solo?"

Starsky faked a grimace, sidestepping the obvious question. "Dobey's got a desk-full of paperwork lined up for me. Between you and me, I think Hutch's the lucky one."

Washington shook his head. "Well, I'm glad it's working out for you two. But I think I'd burn out if I tried to do what you do."

Then he was probably doing it wrong, Starsky thought, but all he said was, "Danny, I'd've burned out by now if I didn't have him."

A nod, of acceptance if not comprehension. "I wish you two all the best, then. But remember, my offer still stands."

Starsky already knew they'd never work together again, but he gave his old friend a smile of thanks. "I'll remember that."

Danny clapped him on the shoulder and walked off.

Starsky stood a moment, watching him go. And then without a single regret, turned away and went into the squadroom.