

Summary: Blindfold tag story: Starsky fears he's permanently damaged Hutch's trust in him after his dangerous prank.

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A Little Matter of Trust

by **K Hanna Korossy**

Maybe he needed to go see a doctor.

The headache had not been the usual stress type, throbbing with a dull ache that worsened as the day went on. This one was like a slice through his brain, radiating out from the still-sore lump on the side of his head. The blow had knocked him out the day before but only for a few minutes, and Hutch had refused to see a doctor then, especially as he'd felt okay that evening. Now, he wasn't so sure. Maybe he really had hurt something. His head seemed ever-increasingly on the verge of breaking apart as the day wore on. Hutch rubbed at his forehead and tried to concentrate on something, anything, different.

"Starsky, what time did we get to the Ashby scene?"

He didn't look up--the movement hurt--but he heard papers being shifted around. Then, quietly, "15:10." That was it.

Maybe they both needed to go on a vacation.

Surely it wasn't that simple? Both of them were tired, without question, but that didn't excuse the events of the past several days. They had gone away for a few days several times before when things just got to be too much and they needed time to talk and relax, to get far away from everything--and close to each other again. But this time. . .

Hutch went back to work, swallowing against the nausea that hit him once more. Nausea came with concussions, didn't it? His stomach had been protesting nearly as much as his head, a good excuse not to go down to have lunch with his partner. Hutch tried hard to concentrate on the paper before him, anything to distract him from the overwhelming desire to throw up yet again. And all the while, his head seemed to hurt worse and worse, the thoughts piling up on themselves like a physical weight as he discarded each one unfinished.

"Headache?"

The query was just as soft as before, but Hutch jumped at it, his hand falling away from where he'd been massaging the ache in his temple. "No," he quickly lied, looking up.

The dark eyes met him only for a moment before they slid away, but that was enough to see the guilt. And hurt.

Hutch knew it wouldn't have been simple, but if he'd been able to make the effort, he might have been able to take away that hurt with a quiet talk with his partner, some careful and heartfelt words. He just couldn't muster the desire to do so. Even if he would have strung together the right words, they wouldn't have been sincere, and Starsky probably would have seen right through them. That would be even worse than if he'd never opened his mouth. So he didn't.

Maybe he needed. . .

Hutch had no clue what.

Starsky was drowning. The guilt over his accidental shooting of Emily Harrison had set him adrift, miserable and guilt-ridden. With self-punishing martyrdom, he'd pushed away everyone, even Hutch, who was nearly aching to help him. But no matter how much he'd wanted to ignore the mooring line that was his partner, Starsky had known the blond was there and ready to haul him back if he became completely lost. It had been his one comfort and saving grace in the miserable days until Emily regained her sight.

Now, the line was there, his partner sitting within arm's reach across the desk, yet it felt like the anchor had been cut. And he'd been the one with the knife. He'd surely, deliberately severed the bridge between them, and now he was drowning.

Starsky continued to type away at the report, the rote details spilling out on automatic pilot as he continued to silently watch his partner out of the corner of his eye. The way the blond head was tilted, the lines of his body, the slow, slightly off movements were all familiar signs that Starsky could read as surely as if he'd felt them himself. Hutch was hurting, considerably. And he had no intention of sharing it with Starsky.

He had already tried to fool himself into thinking it was out of a desire to protect him that Hutch was being stoic, not wanting to cause him further pain or guilt...except that he couldn't believe it for a minute. That wasn't what he read in the other's posture, either. Starsky had lost the right to share in his partner's feelings, and he'd been shut out.

Why had he done it? He'd played initially with that question until he'd given it up as unanswerable. There was no reason, just a moment's stupidity. He refused to give in to the shame he felt at the memory of his own foolishness. Even shame was a reconciliation he didn't deserve. No, all he allowed himself was the luxury of worrying about the person who sat on the other side of the table from him, whom he cared about more than himself even if, God help him, he'd jeopardized the other's life so carelessly only the other day. The headache was growing worse, he

could tell, and it scared him to think that there was something more seriously wrong with Hutch than either of them had thought. But what right had he to worry over the consequences of what he himself had caused?

And, truthfully, was it really worry over Hutch's health that had him more frightened, or the potentially permanent damage he'd done to the man himself, and the trust, the connection between them? Starsky hadn't a clue.

The drive home was as miserable as the day had been. Considering that everything was fuzzy and slightly bobbing in his vision, Hutch thought he'd done a pretty good job of it. But feeling lousy was getting to be an understatement, and his confusion over his partner's behavior made the ill feeling increase tenfold.

All he'd wanted to do was help. So desperately wanting to ease Starsky's pain over the accidental shooting, he'd all but forced himself on his partner, his worry growing at each rebuff. He knew Starsky was hurting--of course he knew--but that didn't explain the rejection. They had always handled the tough times together; that was how they survived them. Finally, in utter frustration, he'd done the only thing he had left to do, going at the case with single-minded determination until he'd put it together, alone. He'd even proved, to his surprise, that Emily had not been the innocent bystander she seemed. That, and Emily's recovery, had finally given his partner back to him. It had been a pleasure to see Starsky cheery and playful the next day, so much so that Hutch had willingly played along.

And then Starsky had sent him headfirst down the stairs.

Thoughtlessness, to be sure. Of course Starsky hadn't meant to really hurt him. Hutch knew as much deep down, had seen as much in Starsky's terrified eyes when the blond had come to on Starsky's sofa. And he had forgiven Starsky, he truly had. He'd looked for anger in himself at his partner's actions and found none, no resentment, just, well, a little hurt. Maybe even a tiny bit of...mistrust.

They both knew it. He'd reassured Starsky the night before that all was okay, and he'd really thought it then. But Starsky's guilt still lay heavily between them, as did Hutch's continuing bewilderment over how Starsky could have done something like that. Hutch had struggled with the weight of the job lately, his own tiredness and disillusionment, and in all of it, Starsky's constancy was the one source of strength and comfort, often the one thing that kept him going. How could he reconcile that with what had happened the previous day? Even completely forgiven, it still ached dully when he thought about it. Yeah, only a few months before he'd pretended amnesia and trampled on Starsky's feelings, and he *knew* "impetuous" was Starsky's middle name. Still, this had been worse than mere carelessness, and that his partner could've even done such a thing. . . it hurt.

Earlier that day, they'd sat directly opposite each other, comparing notes and, as far as the world was concerned, working together. But it was the most un-together he could remember them being in some time.

The car was so cold; Hutch nudged the heat up another notch, regardless of the fact that it was already on high. He'd been cold all that day, cold and heartsick. What else could someone be when their best friend, their very soulmate, so lightly risked their life? He shivered at the thought, hunching miserably into his jacket against the chill.

Venice Place finally loomed reassuringly in front of him. Hutch found a parking spot close by, then struggled out of the car and into the building, up the stairs. He had to stop once when the whole staircase threatened to sway out from underneath him, then plodded on until he reached his door and fumbled the lock open. He was so tired--no, weary. Bone-weary. Bed sounded like the first good idea that day.

A stop to the bathroom for a glass of water ended up with him emptying the remaining contents of his stomach, which maybe wasn't such a bad thing. It made his head hurt unbelievably, but it also calmed the nausea, and the headache he was certain he could sleep off. He somehow found the energy to get to the kitchen to make some tea and toast for his turned stomach, then managed to pull his jacket, holster, and shoes off before he crawled into bed. Hutch curled up under the covers, trying to find escape from his thoughts and pain, both of body and spirit.

The Torino pulled up in front of the Westchester flat, and as Starsky got out, the first thing his eyes fell on were those miserable stairs. He stood and stared. Memory obligingly provided him a permanent record of every jolt and groan as his partner had tumbled down those stairs, to Starsky's very temporary amusement. It hadn't even seemed that funny at the time, but especially not seconds later when silence had followed. Starsky had suddenly realized what he'd done, what could've happened to Hutch, and frantically whipped the door open to see Hutch lying at the bottom of the stairs, blindfold askew, eyes closed and so still. . .

Tried to kill your best friend. He kept inflicting the self-loathing words on himself, wanting to punish himself, knowing it never would be enough. The physical danger he'd put Hutch in was unconscionable enough, but the consequences to the trust between them was in some ways worse. Trust strong enough to survive death, long enough to reach across any distance between them...and yet cracked by a simple fall, not able to stretch across one length of stairs. *Your fault, your fault.* Starsky knuckled his eyes and hurried upstairs as fast as he could.

Once inside, his eyes fell on the chair. Then the vacuum cleaner, still out from the day before. Everywhere reminders, as if he needed any. And no one to blame but himself. Anger suddenly rose at the thought, and he lashed out at the chair, picking it up and heaving it against the bookshelf across the room, deriving no satisfaction at all from the sight of all the books raining down. It was just more devastation. He had enough of that in his life.

What if Hutch dropped him as a partner because of this? It wasn't inconceivable, for trust was essential in their job. Starsky wouldn't blame him if he did, but as much as he'd faced the thought of an unwilling separation before, he was unprepared for a willing one. What if Hutch left like that?

Starsky curled into a corner of his sofa, a pillow pulled close to his chest, completely at a loss, completely lost. Once upon a time, just knowing Hutch was hurting would have been enough to

instantly send him over, ready to do anything within his power--and some things that weren't--in order to help. What he had no solution for was when he himself was the problem. What could he do then? Nothing. He'd done far too much already.

Why did it hurt so much more to be this alone now, than when he hadn't known what it was like to always have someone there?

Sleep came with difficulty and was full of feverish nonsense, lacking in rest. Hutch woke feeling worse than when he'd drifted off. The pain felt vaguely like sorrow, and it was hard to know anymore whether the ache in his heart fed the misery of his body or vice versa.

He stumbled out to the bathroom once more, grasping at furniture to keep his balance as he went, and this time the nausea drove him to his knees on the cold tile floor. Even when the attack was over, he couldn't muster the will to get up for some time. *Somethin's wrong... Head's killing me...nausea...sounds like a concussion. Maybe I should call...someone. Jace.*

Jace Broadhurst, their old friend and a doctor, didn't work in a hospital, but perhaps he could at least check Hutch out, make sure there wasn't some more serious injury lingering behind the symptoms. Maybe it was nothing and Starsky wouldn't even have to know. He felt bad enough already, and Hutch had no desire to add to his burden.

Slowly, he struggled to his feet, pushing off the toilet until he was more or less upright. The change of elevation made him lightheaded, but he ignored it, moving to the phone by memory more than sight. Luckily, he knew the number already.

Stringing together the words was more effort than getting to the phone, but he related the head injury and some of his symptoms, and Jace hadn't sounded that worried, if a little concerned. He agreed Hutch should come see him at his office, wondering if Starsky shouldn't drive him, until Hutch reassured him he was perfectly capable of driving himself. Jace didn't know the whys of how Hutch had hit his head, and the blond didn't want to drag Starsky through that again.

He had to sit down to put his shoes on, threatening to fall on his face otherwise, but the gun and jacket he left behind without a thought. Then down to the car, hanging on to the bannister all the way. He turned the LTD south toward El Segundo and Jace. It was a friend and help he could trust. Hutch refused to let himself think about the friend he had always trusted before. *Me & thee without thee leaves me alone, doesn't it?* Hutch concentrated instead on the increasingly difficult job of driving, turning the heat up high once more.

The sudden jerk was a disorienting shock, shoving his car forward with another abrupt jolt as the LTD rammed the car ahead of them.

Hutch sat dazed for a moment, trying to make sense of that. Then, slowly, he got out, catching his balance on the doorframe as the world again went into a slow spin, before focusing on the scene before him.

There was a car wedged up against the back bumper of the LTD, its furious driver already out and arguing with the driver behind him, whose Mustang also rested bumper-to-bumper with him. It had been a domino effect, pushing the irate driver's Impala into the LTD, which in turn was shoved into the Chevrolet in front of him. The Chevy's driver, a stately woman, had also gotten out and was hurrying back to the two arguing men to add her case, ignoring Hutch completely.

All the movement and noise threatened to make him gag again. Hutch dropped his head down to the roof of the car for a moment to regain his equilibrium. The cars had blurred into one confusing row, the drivers' arguments meaningless babble. He couldn't even remember why he'd been in such a hurry before, except for the vague notion that he'd been going to get help.

Dizzily, he raised his head and looked at the street around him. He knew this area. . . Westchester. He was in Westchester. *Starsky*. His partner was nearby. Starsky would help.

Carefully shutting the door behind him, heedless of the fact that the car was still running and the keys were in the ignition, Hutch set out to find his partner.

The ringing telephone startled him out of his cloying, heavy thoughts, and Starsky stared at it in surprise. He had no desire to talk to anyone, but then he remembered sitting in contemplation while he ignored another ringing, concerned telephone, knowing who was at the other end--

Starsky lunged for the opposite end of the sofa and caught up the receiver before it ended its second ring. "Hello?"

"Dave?"

That name alone was enough to deflate his hopes, but Starsky bit back the bitterness that automatically filled his thoughts. "Yeah? Who's this?"

"It's Jace." A laugh. "Did you forget me already? Dave, I'm hurt."

Starsky smiled unwillingly at that. "Nah, my mind's somewhere else. How's it goin'?"

"Can't complain. Claudia and I enjoyed having the two of you over last week; we'll have to do that again soon."

"Sounds good," Starsky answered automatically, heart sinking even lower at the thought. *The two of you*. Was it still?

Jace was going on. "But that's actually not why I'm calling now. Dave, is Ken there with you?"

Another stab, but also a little puzzlement. "Uh-uh, why? Somethin' wrong?"

His job-honed instincts immediately caught the slight hesitation. "Well, I'm not sure. Ken called an hour ago, said he felt lousy, had some nausea and a splitting headache. He told me he'd hit his head the day before and hadn't had it looked at. It sounded suspicious to me so I told him to

come in. He swore to me he was fit to drive, just not feeling well, but he still hasn't shown up. I was just wondering if he'd come by your place after all, to have you bring him like I suggested."

The blood had drained from Starsky's face as Jace talked, but the last sentence was the hardest blow of all. Apparently the chasm between them was even deeper than he'd thought. *'Course he didn't. Doesn't trust me not to do somethin' even worse. Not even if he's...in trouble?*

"I haven't seen 'im, Jace, but I'm gonna go out and look. You tried his place?"

"Yup, first thing I did."

"Okay." Starsky's mind was racing already, neatly boxing up emotions that would interfere with what he had to do. "I'll call ya as soon as I know something. Call the station and have them find me if he gets there or you hear anything, okay?"

"Sure, Dave. You...think he's in trouble? I thought maybe I shouldn't let him drive, but he really did sound all right..."

"S'okay, Jace. He gets stubborn like that. I bet he just stopped off for some medicine or somethin' on the way."

"Yeah. Well, I'll talk to you soon, one way or another."

"Okay. Thanks." Starsky was in motion before he'd hung up, pulling his shoes back on one-handed while dialing the phone. First order of business was asking a patrol car to drive by Venice Place and see if the Squash was there, then to put in an inquiry if there had been any reported incidences with an LTD. Those messages sent, he grabbed his jacket on the way out the door, already mentally following the route Hutch would have had to take to get from Venice to Jace's office in El Segundo.

He hadn't been in the car for two minutes before the report he'd been dreading came in. A four-car accident a few miles south of Venice, one of the cars being an LTD, driver missing. From what little information there was, the other three drivers had taken some time to realize the fourth wasn't there, and by the time it occurred to them to look, he was nowhere in sight. Starsky slapped the mars light on and sped off toward the site.

The scene that greeted his eyes would have been comical in a Laurel & Hardy movie. The cars were smashed into each other as if they were one long train, with a knot of drivers argued heatedly somewhere near the middle. Except the second car was very familiar and all-too-empty.

Starsky pulled up behind the black-and-white that had already reached the scene, and he hurried up impatiently to the group the cop was already trying to mediate, pulling his badge as he did. "Excuse me--"

He was wholly ignored, the three drivers arguing on as if he didn't exist. The anger and worry weren't too far down for Starsky to draw on.

"Would you all SHUT UP!" he barked.

That did it. Everyone turned to stare at him, going silent. Starsky flashed his badge.

"Did any of you see the driver of that car?" He pointed to the LTD.

A dignified woman of about 45 shook her head. "I saw him when I got out--tall and blond, I think--but then I don't know what happened to him." The other two just silently shook their heads.

Starsky chewed on his lip in frustration. "You mean t'tell me you all were in an accident and didn't happen t'notice if the guy you ran into was injured or wandering away?"

"Officer," the 30-something hippie drawled, "it wasn't like any of us were goin' that fast. I don't think anybody coulda gotten hurt. I guess he just got bored and split, man."

The other man, older and florid with anger, turned on him. "Nobody injured, huh? I wrenched my neck, I'm telling you, and I'm not going to pay for the doctor's bills. If you'd have kept your eyes on where you were going--"

The fight started up again, and the uniform stepped in once more to calm everyone down. Starsky made a face in disgust, giving up the idea of getting information from that group. He hurried back to the LTD instead, opening the door to find the keys in the ignition in the "on" position, even though the engine had idled to a stop. He retrieved the keys. The cars weren't badly damaged, indicating a slow impact, and there was no sign in the car of blood or any other cause to think his partner injured. But neither was there any clue as to where Hutch could have gone. Starsky banged the steering wheel in frustration before he backed out again and shut the door. *Hutch, where the heck are ya?* A scan of surrounding streets revealed nothing but some groups of curious onlookers.

"Sarge?"

Another uniform was next to him, and Starsky looked at him blankly for a moment before putting together what he had to do next. "I want this car towed to the station." He patted the LTD with unusual care. "Have Mitch at the garage fix it up, huh?"

"Sure, but--"

"I'll talk to Cap'n Dobe about the rest. You can check with him."

The man nodded hesitantly and walked off.

Starsky stood there a minute longer, staring down the street both ways. *Nausea and a splitting headache*, Jace's words still played in his head. *Hutch, why didn't you...* Moot point. He hadn't. But now something could be seriously wrong, and Starsky didn't know where to start looking.

Swallowing his fears once more, Starsky went to call his captain.

Starsky's place was like a homing signal, one Hutch headed for instinctively even though he wasn't consciously aware of exactly where he was and which way to turn. Maybe it wasn't even the place so much as what he knew was there. Help. Care. *Home*. As surely, if not more so, than his own place.

Exhaustion was creeping up on him, and he shivered constantly in the chilled autumn air. Something about all this didn't seem right; it occurred to him to wonder why he wasn't taking his car, or even why he was going to Starsky's in the first place, but then the explanations didn't seem to matter so much after a while. He needed help, so he was going to Starsky. Sidewalks that buckled under his feet and dancing street signs notwithstanding.

His stomach cramped again, reminding him of its state, and Hutch sagged for a moment against a streetlight, trying to squelch the upwelling nausea. In some alley on the way, he'd already lost what little there was left of the tea and toast, but it seemed to make no difference to his churning stomach. *Close now. Just a little longer*. He wrapped an arm around his aching middle and went on.

It never crossed his mind that Starsky wouldn't be home. When Hutch finally stood in front of the steps, seeing the place more-or-less clearly for the first time, the absence of the Torino suddenly hit him and he flinched. *Starsk, where are you?* With a tired groan, Hutch plodded up the stairs anyway. He had a key; he could at least wait inside for his partner. Starsky was bound to be back soon.

But when he finally slumped against the doorjamb and searched his pockets, no keys were to be found. Frustrated, he emptied every pocket, letting the change skitter away across the porch, but it wasn't there. With a long sigh, he finally sank down into the corner by the door. Fine, he'd wait there. If only he wasn't so cold, Hutch thought as he shook in the light breeze, huddling against his drawn knees for warmth. If only he didn't feel so sick to his stomach. He swallowed hard. If only his head didn't hurt so badly so he could think for a little bit. And if only Starsky would come home...

It was one of the most frustrating hours Starsky had ever spent. Dobby promised to put the word out to the local patrols to keep an eye out for Hutch, but there was only so much the captain could do. He'd advised Starsky to consider where his partner would go and why, and to then trace those possible routes. As if Starsky needed to be told that. So he continued his widening circles, peering into alleys and store windows, watching everything, it seemed, except the road. With no luck.

As hot as anger burned in him at himself, worry ate at him even more. This was not about him, about his feelings or what he might have destroyed in his own life, but about being there for Hutch because, if for no other reason, the blond deserved more. The thought of him wandering the city, hurt, was more than Starsky could bear.

Think. He's on his way to see Jace and he gets in a fender-bender. Can't move the car...where would he go? Probably not thinkin' clearly, but back home's a coupla miles away. Jace is even farther. Not gonna go shoppin' if he feels so lousy. What would—

The idea was suddenly so obvious, Starsky felt the fool for not having thought of it before. The accident was in Westchester, maybe a dozen blocks from his home. It clearly wasn't the first place Hutch thought to go for help, but now, injured and running on instinct? Could Starsky dare hope that things were not so damaged between them?

He turned back toward his street.

It was only minutes away, and he was nearly to his place before he saw it, the form curled up next to the door. Heart in his throat, he haphazardly parked the car and bounded up the steps.

"Hutch?"

The blond head came up, looking sick with the movement. Then Hutch clambered to his feet before Starsky could even reach out to help, careening a little as he hung on to the railing.

Starsky stared at him, assessing the flushed cheeks and funny eyes and unsteadiness. "Hutch?" he tried again, confusion deepening. "Hey, you okay? What're you doin' here?"

It must've come out harsher than he'd thought, because Hutch seemed to mentally catch himself, pulling back and looking around as if noticing for the first time where he was. He frowned. "I dunno," he muttered. "Left my car..." He took a step to the top of the staircase at the same moment, then abruptly swayed, dangerously close to the edge of the porch.

Starsky cursed and grabbed his partner by the waist, yanking him back to safety. "No ya don't, not this time," he growled.

Hutch didn't fight him. "Don't feel good," he mumbled, resting his head against his partner's shoulder.

"No kiddin'." Starsky's voice grew calmer, lulling. "It's okay. We're just gonna go inside and then I'll take care of everything, huh?" He pulled Hutch's right arm across his shoulder. "You gonna help me here?"

Hutch seemed to be trying, but his movements were uncoordinated, clumsy. The heat pouring off him was also unexpected. Concussions didn't come with fevers, did they?, Starsky thought anxiously, but he had no time to consider it. Propping up the heavy blond while he opened the door and maneuvered him inside took all his concentration.

Almost to the bedroom, Hutch suddenly stiffened, then doubled over with a groan. Starsky knew what that meant and detoured into the bathroom, thoroughly frightened as Hutch's stomach violently turned itself inside-out several times, bringing up hardly anything at all. "What did you get yourself into now, blintz," Starsky whispered, as he did his best to support the collapsed body of his partner, finally leaning the damp blond head back against his chest as he waited for Hutch to gasp some air back into his lungs. "It's okay, it's okay," he repeated over and over. "Easy. It's gonna be fine."

Hutch nodded wearily against his shirt.

A minute more, then Starsky cleaned him up as best he could and coaxed Hutch back onto his feet and the few steps more into the bedroom. Hutch sank down on the bed with a grateful sigh.

"Good," Starsky said. "See? Knew we could do it." He began to peel off dirty clothes. "Hey, where's your jacket? And your gun?"

Hutch stared at him a long moment through half-opened eyes before shrugging. "Think I...left 'em at home."

Starsky frowned at that but left it without comment. Socks and jeans followed shoes, then the foul-smelling shirt. Apparently Hutch's episode of sickness hadn't been the first. Starsky piled the blankets on, several of them all at once to try to ward off the chills that shook his partner and made him moan with their severity. "Head still hurt?" he asked quietly.

"Bad."

Starsky nodded. "When did you start getting sick? Hutch?" The blond's attention was fading.

"Uhh--" He closed his eyes, and Starsky was about to shake him when he sighed, "This morning."

Starsky made a face, but the shift in his voice gave away only his worry. "You've been feelin' like this all day and you never said anything?"

Hutch shook his head, then seemed to think better of that action. "Not this bad. Thought it would go away... Didn't want you t'worry."

Starsky winced. "Does anything else hurt?" he asked, more subdued. "How 'bout in the accident?"

"Accident?" Hutch opened his eyes again, looking fuzzily at Starsky. "Oh, yeah. Forgot. No, m'okay." His brow creased. "Think I left my car. . ."

"That's okay, it's taken care of," Starsky softly cut him off. "So it's just your stomach and your head?"

Hutch curled up tighter into the blankets as another shiver hit. "M c-cold."

Starsky retrieved another quilt from his closet and added that to the pile on the bed. He brushed the long blond hair off Hutch's forehead, then settled his hand there, his gaze warming as Hutch sighed and leaned against the cool palm, shutting his eyes. "You've got a fever," Starsky wasn't surprised to note. He hesitated. "I don't think this is just from hittin' your head yesterday, Hutch."

His partner didn't respond, already half-dozing in the warmth of the bed and the safety of the company.

Starsky shook his head, pulling the blankets a little higher. "I'll be right back, buddy," he said softly, leaving his hand a moment longer on the hot forehead before he reluctantly went to phone Jace and to fix some soup and juice. It looked like he was back on call.

He thought being warm and flat would help, but it only did so much. When the large wave of nausea swept over him, leaving him gasping, he felt worse than ever, ill and miserable. But he had help this time, steady arms supporting him as he was sick yet again. Having nothing to bring up was almost worse than having a full stomach, as he doubled over again and again to try to relieve the spasms in his middle. His head felt ready to detonate.

"Easy, Hutch. Breathe. Don't hold your breath."

Soothing hands rubbed his abdomen, held his forehead, kept him from falling face first into the basin in front of him. The cool fingers felt good on his forehead; the thought distracted him for a moment. Where was he? His every muscle felt abused, as if he'd been dragged to wherever he lay. *God, help.*

The paroxysm finally released him and he went limp, not an ounce of strength left in him. He felt tears on his cheeks, forced out by the contractions of his body, but those same gentle hands wiped his face, gave him water to rinse his mouth, made him drink some juice that stung his aching throat. And then they just held him.

His head hurt so badly. With a moan, he rested it against some nearby part of his partner. His vision was shot, but he knew it was Starsky. Despite everything, he felt safe, and only one person made him feel like that, like he didn't have to worry at all because everything would be taken care of.

The cool fingers were replaced by a cold, wet cloth, but they lingered in his hair. "Just rest now. I'll take care of ya." Hutch knew that. "Just breathe nice 'n easy for me." And he finally could. It helped that his middle was being massaged and almost all the cramps had died away. He just felt so tired, deflated like a used balloon, and about as useful.

"Here." Something chilly was pressed to his lips and he wearily opened his mouth. Ice chunks. They felt terrific, easing the nausea and soothing his abraded throat. "That's it, Hutch. Just relax. Everything's gonna be fine."

The voice was dying away along with the rest of the world, and he let it go with a sigh, knowing he was in good hands. Hands he trusted.

Hutch slept right through Jace's visit and examination, but the doctor had been able to confirm what Starsky had already suspected: Hutch's head was fine with no sign of concussion, but the headache had been just one symptom of a bad case of flu. There was little to be done for that besides basic care and making sure the patient didn't get dehydrated, but the diagnosis was still a

relief. At least, mostly. It didn't change for Starsky what he'd done the day before or what could have been the disastrous result.

The worst part that haunted his memory was the little bit of wariness he'd seen in his partner's eyes at work. It hadn't been complete betrayal, but even a sliver of mistrust was a glaringly wide crack in the smooth rock of their friendship. That expression had cut him deeply, but he deserved it, and there had been nothing he could do.

Yet there Hutch was, in his bed, willingly in his care, trusting him completely. When illness stripped away all rational thought, instinct had brought his partner to him. Apparently, the damage had not gone to the deepest parts of what was between them, which gave Starsky hope. Something in Hutch still had faith in him, and they could rebuild on that.

The waxy, flushed face constricted again, and Starsky reacted at once, grabbing the basin in one hand, partner in the other. He settled behind Hutch to anchor him through another fit of nausea, curling himself around the contracted body in support. "It's okay, I've got you," he whispered against the damp blond hair.

Released from the attack, Hutch crumpled against him, and Starsky switched back to cradling. The lean body in his arms was so depleted. Fever and the draining heaves had wilted his strength so that Hutch lay passive in his arms, unresistant to Starsky's manipulations. It worried Starsky, but Jace hadn't been much concerned, and his partner *was* healthy and mostly fit. It was no more than just a bad case of flu, Starsky reminded himself. And every once in a while there was a moment of awareness in the dazed blue eyes that told him Hutch knew where he was as well as that he was safe there. That faith warmed Starsky's chilled spirit.

That wasn't why he did what he did, though. Even when most brutally honest with himself, Starsky knew that much for certain. He wasn't in this because Hutch trusted him or because there was an injustice to make up for. Starsky rode out the attacks, cleaning up the mess, keeping up the gentle touches and words simply because he loved his friend. Love like that would survive even his stupidity, or Hutch at his most unlovable, or any other trial short of deliberate cruelty. And that last was one thing he could say with clear conscience that he'd never even considered, even in his most unthinking actions.

Hutch stirred feverishly, mumbling under his breath. Starsky mildly shushed him, again rubbing a wet towel over his face and that damnable mustache. *What're you hidin' behind that, huh, blondie?* The awful new haircut and clothes, too, for that matter. The recent changes both intrigued and worried him. He rubbed a single finger thoughtfully over the blond mustache, then turned his hand so that the knuckle caressed a flushed cheek. They didn't even touch as much anymore, let alone with the intimate familiarity they'd long shared, yet the struggle in his partner's face seemed to ease a little at the gentle contact.

With a sober smile, Starsky went back to his rubdown, this time easing Hutch forward into his arms to gain access to his upper back. The fever was rising, but at least the nausea seemed to be loosening its hold. Morning was long past; maybe the fall of night would bring a break in the spiking temperature that meant alternate chills and sweats. Hutch was so exhausted; he badly needed sleep deeper than the restless doze the fever allowed. But for now, Starsky would do

what he could. That had always seemed enough before. Perhaps even when it was a simple, heartfelt apology after a heinous blunder he'd not thought through. At least, he hoped it would be.

Starsky sighed, Hutch following suit against his shoulder. With another smile, softer this time, he resettled his patient on the bed, pushing back the shaggy blond hair to make room for the compress. After tucking in the blankets, he headed out into the kitchen for more juice.

That he wasn't in a hospital was an instant relief, but he wasn't in his own bed, either. There were soft stirrings next to him, then fingertips trailing down the side of his face, followed quickly by welcome coolness patted all over his face. He felt achy and foggy and tired beyond belief, but also comfortable, peaceful. And hot. Hutch pushed fretfully at the weighty warmth that pressed down on him.

Someone caught his hand. "Take it easy, Hutch. Leave the blankets alone--the fever just broke. I'll take 'em off in a little bit when you're not sweatin' so bad."

The last bit of strain in him faded at that voice, and he squinted his eyes open to see the speaker. "Starsk?" he croaked.

"Shh," came the soft reply. "Your throat's probably pretty raw from throwin' up and you need t'get your strength back. Can you drink some of this?" A hand lifted his head slowly enough that he didn't get dizzy, and he drank most of the glass of juice. "Good boy. Have you back on your feet and out on the streets in no time." Starsky smiled at him, sympathy not quite covering his concern.

Fever? Throwing up? Hutch had some vague memories, but his thoughts were blurred and hard to focus. How long had he been sick and how did he get to Starsky's?

"Don't think so much, partner," Starsky's gentle voice went on. "Go back to sleep. Trust me, please."

"Mmm," he agreed drowsily. Why wouldn't he? He curled into the hand that was still petting his hair and fell back into deep sleep.

Starsky was pulling the toast from the toaster when soft sounds behind made him turn and glower at the bedraggled form standing in the bedroom doorway.

"What're you doin' out of bed?" he grumbled, dropping the toast and crossing the living room to critically eye his patient.

"Had to go. Do you mind?" Hutch said archly, one eyebrow raised.

Starsky made a face at him but stepped aside, watching his partner hoist the blanket around him higher off the ground and wobble into the adjacent bathroom. Starsky stayed there, listening, as the toilet flushed and the sink ran. The door finally opened again to reveal a pale, unsteady Hutch. Starsky sighed. "C'mon, Mr. Independence. Jace says at least another day in bed before you can start runnin' around again." He slid under the arm Hutch had grasped the doorjamb with, shifting his partner's weight onto himself. "I've almost got lunch ready," he grunted as they slowly made their way back to the bedroom. "And then you've got an exciting afternoon of sleep ahead o' ya."

"That's all I've been doing for the last three days," Hutch protested half-heartedly, his breath already short from the exertion.

"Uh-huh. That's what you get for passing out on my doorstep." Starsky helped the blond back into bed with no small relief, settling the blanket again around him.

"Starsky, I didn't pass--"

"Course, you coulda always come inside, except you forgot your keys in the Squash when you left it runnin' in the middle of the street, isn't that right?"

Hutch blushed. "You're enjoying this, aren't you," he complained.

Starsky's good humor extinguished in the sudden chill that blew through him. "You really think that?" he asked quietly.

His partner frowned, catching the change but clearly confused as to the cause. "That you like bossing me around? Sure," he said gamely.

"Knowing you were wandering around the city, sick, and not being able to find ya? Seein' you hurt? Out of your head with fever?" *Sending you down a flight of stairs you coulda broken your neck on.* "You really think I enjoy gettin' the last laugh that way?" His voice was quietly level, halfway between defiance and apprehension as he stared at Hutch determinedly, waiting for an answer he dreaded.

Silence fell.

Hutch gaped at his partner, shocked speechless, but he had to admit it was a fair question. *What do you really think? No, what do you know?* For that was what it came down to. Either it had all been a tragically stupid joke, or else Starsky was not the man Hutch had given his trust, his life, his soul to. The former was painful and undeserved but, ultimately, forgivable. The latter meant losing everything he'd built a good chunk of his life on. Friendship meant trust, not having to worry about someone taking advantage of your faith and sending you blindfolded down a flight of stairs. But it also meant accepting weaknesses, the rough times, the fact that the one you loved was as human as you and forgave you in turn for your lapses. He stared at Starsky, watching despair creep into the dark blue eyes as the silence dragged on, knowing with certainty at that

moment that his partner had entertained far more self-reproaches and doubts about himself than Hutch ever could about him.

Did he trust Starsky? Yes. The answer was unequivocal. But as much as before?

Yes.

Even sick and mostly out of his head, he'd known as much. Now all he had to do was get Starsky to believe that, too.

Hutch sighed tiredly, too drained yet to do anything more than grab hold of Starsky's arm just as he was about to turn away in defeat. "Wait, just...it's not like that. You're my best friend. Not because I deserve it, 'cause God knows sometimes I don't. And you've had your less-than-shining moments, too." He almost smiled, but there was no answering smile in Starsky's eyes. Hutch's voice grew soft with sincerity. "Listen, I could name a half-dozen times you've risked everything for me, and another dozen that you've saved my life, but that still wouldn't be what this is about. Just like you lookin' after me the last coupla days wasn't about debts or duties, right?" A wary nod. "I trust you. I do, Starsk, because..." he searched for the right words, "...I know you. No matter what mistakes you make or stupid things you say, or I do, for that matter, that doesn't change things, does it?"

Starsky shook his head. "Hutch, you're gettin' all philosophical again on me..."

Hutch smiled fondly. His friend always was a black-and-white thinker. "All I'm sayin' is, nothing's changed. It...yeah, it hurt at first, okay? But haven't you had to get over some dumb stunts I've pulled? What happened hasn't changed my faith in you—I won't let it. Can you trust me enough to believe that?"

Starsky all but had his arms wrapped around himself, his body language was so defensive. "Even when I hurt you on purpose," he said bluntly.

Oh, Starsk, you've really been beating yourself up over this, haven't you. Patiently, tiredly, Hutch asked, "Did you? Were you really trying to hurt me, knock me out or worse?"

The sapphire eyes went even darker, and the answer was instantaneous, reflex. "No! Hutch, I'd never--"

"I know." *Finally standin' up for yourself—good.* "I know, I really do." He was so tired. His throat was protesting all the talking, too, but that didn't matter at all now. "And if you hadn't been so messed up about that thing with Emily, you'd know it, too."

Starsky was staring at him, searching his eyes for the truth. "I was so scared when I saw you lyin' there," he whispered. "Thought I'd killed ya.."

Hutch tightened his grip on Starsky's arm. "You know, it didn't even cross my mind when I was in trouble. All I could think was that if I got to you, you'd take care of everything." He shook the arm once. "Trust, Starsk. Not too many people I'd know I could go to who'd put up with me spilling my guts in their bed."

Starsky's mouth twitched at that. "I've seen you lookin' better," he agreed carefully.

Hutch shook his head with a groan. "Your turn next time," he rasped, his voice beginning to go hoarse.

"Deal," Starsky said solemnly, but his eyes were shining. "You gonna shut up and get some sleep now? I'll warm up the food again when you wake up."

That sounded heavenly. "Thanks, Starsk," he murmured, already slipping away.

A hand settled warmly on his shoulder. "Anytime, partner."

True for both of them. And on that comfortable thought, Hutch fell asleep.