



A Matter of Doubt

by

Mary Kleinsmith

Summary: While Starsky is recovering from the hit at the Italian restaurant, Hutch is paired with a temporary partner. When violence strikes again, Hutch is left with a crisis in faith of his own abilities to not just serve but to protect.

Notes: In Memory of [Officer Skip McDougal, Buffalo PD](#).

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"Man, I can't wait to get out of this thing," David Starsky muttered as he repositioned the sling over his arm. Wearing the stupid thing was bad enough, but he was finding it difficult to work around it while performing the desk duty he hated so much yet was restricted to temporarily. He'd told them over and over again that he was fine, but they just wouldn't listen.

"It won't be too long now, Starsk," Hutch, one of the "they," remarked, coming up unnoticed behind his friend. "It's been a month since the shooting. Hell, maybe the day you get it off, I'll take you out to dinner at an Italian restaurant!"

"Please, Hutch, don't say 'Italian restaurant.' I don't think I'll want to go to one for a long time!"

"I know you better than that, partner. The first time you get a whiff of pizza or lasagna, you'll be in there before you even think about it."

Starsky smiled, cheered by his best friend's presence. "We'll see. But even if I *do* go in one, I know I'll be jumpy. And it better not be one that serves champagne, because if one cork pops, I'll totally lose it!"

Hutch chuckled, enjoying seeing his friend feeling better. He'd been more scared than he was willing to admit when he thought Starsky might die in that dirty back room of the Italian restaurant that was his partner's latest discovery.

Just then, the sound of the squadroom's swinging doors drew their attention, and they turned to see Jake Sutherland coming toward them. Jake had been Hutch's temporary partner for three weeks already, the newly promoted detective learning all he could from the veteran. Starsky and Hutch both marveled at the man; he looked barely old enough to be out of high school, let alone a detective on the police force. They'd decided after first meeting him that a lot of it came from the shock of curly red hair and the more than abundant quantity of freckles the man had.

"Hey, Jake!" Starsky greeted him. Despite the kid's youth, Starsky liked him. He wasn't about to let just anybody watch his best friend's back while he was on restricted duty, but this man he trusted. "You been takin' care of this big lug of mine?"

"Yours? Gee, Starsky, I thought he was mine," Jake grinned wickedly, causing the brunet to break out into laughter.

"Now, now, boys," Hutch said, trying to muster a smug look but falling short, "there's enough of me to go around." Jake and Starsky rolled their eyes at each other as Starsky reached over and pushed Hutch's precariously balanced posterior from the corner of his desk, sending the blond crashing unceremoniously to the floor.

The entire room broke into laughter at Hutch's expense, but it died out quickly when his very still form remained on the floor. Only Starsky and Jake kept laughing, going on awhile before they realized that Hutch hadn't gotten up.

"Hey, Hutch. I was just kiddin'. No reason to get upset..." Starsky waited for his partner's characteristic chuckle, but it didn't come. The brunet's smile faded and concern shadowed his eyes when his partner remained on the floor. "C'mon, Hutch..."

The figure moved slightly, and Jake knelt down next to him, putting an ear to Hutch's slightly-moving lips. Starsky couldn't hear what the blond whispered from where he was, but Jake turned a concerned face to him before he could ask. "He wants you," Jake said seriously.

He got up so Starsky could take his place. The brunet put a gentle hand on Hutch's head as he leaned in close. "Where's it hurt, partner? Don't worry...we'll get ya some help..." The lips moved again, silently, so Starsky moved in even closer. "What is it, buddy?"

Unexpectedly, the blond head turned in his hand, clear blue eyes focusing on Starsky. "April fool, partner!" Hutch laughed as he scrambled to his feet. Soon Jake, and then the rest of the squadroom, were laughing even more at the joke.

Starsky blushed bright red, embarrassed at having forgotten the date. After *last year's* joke, he'd sworn not to become prey to his partner's sense of humor again. *Well, what's good for the goose is good for the gander.*

Doing his best to feign anger, Starsky stood ramrod straight. "Hutch, how could you do that t'me?" he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Hey, Dave," Jake said, trying to stop laughing. "It was just a joke."

"Well, maybe it was just one joke too many," Starsky said, trying to sound like he wasn't going to forgive the blond quite so easily. He could tell that confused Hutch. They played jokes on each other all the time, and Hutch was obviously puzzling over why this time was so different.

"I'm sorry, Starsk," he said sincerely. "I'm really sorry!"

"You and your stupid jokes, Hutchinson!" Starsky stormed. "Do you realize how scared everybody was? Hell, do you realize how scared *I* was?! I thought I'd hurt you! I didn't deserve that, *buddy!*"

Looking totally miserable, Hutch tried again. "I'm sorry, Starsky. What else do you want me to say? It was just a joke; I was tryin' to make you laugh!"

"Well, it didn't work!" Starsky growled back at the blond.

"Would it make you feel better if I told you I bruised my shoulder going down?" Hutch offered, his voice taking on a pleading tone, giving Starsky a satisfaction he hadn't expected. "I'm really, really sorry, Starsk," the blond said again.

"No, you're not," Starsky responded, showing a hint of a smile, figuring it was time to let his partner off the hook. "But believe me, you will be. Oh, and one more thing..."

"What?" Hutch asked, not missing the change in Starsky's tone.

"April fool to you too!" the brunet laughed, enjoying turning the tables. This time, it was at Hutch's expense that the squadroom roared.

"One of these days, I'm gonna get you for that!" Hutch laughed, admitting that he'd been fooled. "Uhhh...Jake, let's go. I think we'd better get out on patrol before he thinks of some other way to exact his revenge." Hutch smiled and led the young man toward the doors, tossing a casual "See ya later" over his shoulder.

Starsky wasn't sure what all the commotion was, he just knew that the hallways were suddenly a flurry of activity and he could hear Dobey's phone ringing repeatedly. Maybe it was just his imagination that everything seemed to be going crazy. Unable to take the suspense any longer, Starsky pushed himself to his feet with his good arm and went to the door, flagging down one rushing officer as she flew by.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Report just came in, Sir. Officer-involved shooting." She recognized him and his rank and used the appropriate term of respect.

"Who is it?" he asked, feeling a sudden tremor in his stomach.

"We don't know yet. I'm sorry, Sir." She rushed along her way when he didn't answer. He let the door swing shut behind him and headed for Dobey's office, hoping the captain would know what was happening.

The captain's office door was open a fraction, and Starsky pushed on it as he listened to the uninformative words Dobey was speaking into the phone. Standing at semi-attention in front of the desk, Starsky waited for him to finish.

"What's going on?"

"There's been a shooting," Dobey said at the same moment; Starsky hadn't really needed to ask. "I don't have the details, but Jake and Hutch were involved."

"Where are they?" Starsky asked, his voice trembling slightly. "I've gotta get there."

"It's out in ----- C'mon, I'll drive us both." The captain grabbed his coat and followed Starsky out the door.

As they arrived on the scene, the first thing that struck Starsky was the commotion. Lights flashed, sirens screamed, and voices called one over the other. The one voice he most wanted to hear, though, was absent.

"Hutch! Where's Hutch?!" he kept repeating, racing between vehicles. As fast as he was running, he stopped on a dime when he rounded the fender of Hutch's beat-up car and nearly stepped on a body near the driver's door, its face and upper body covered with an oil-stained blanket that Starsky recognized. "Oh, my God..."

His mind instantly registered the location of the body, and the thought of how Hutch was the only person who would be driving the LTD. He wanted to draw closer, to be with his partner, even in death, but something froze his blood and his muscles, and nothing his mind could tell him was compelling enough to move him toward the body. "Oh, partner..." he repeated again and again, the catch in his voice becoming more pronounced with each syllable until he could finally not go on at all.

Dobey caught up to him finally, squeezing his shoulder gently, supportingly, as the captain knelt beside the body himself. Starsky couldn't bear to watch, couldn't stand to see his partner's lifeless body, and turned away as he fought the tears. Drawing back the blanket that Hutch kept in his back seat for mechanical emergencies, Dobey gasped in surprise. Starsky heard the sound, but didn't react until it was followed by an urgent "Starsky!"

Turning back, the brunet scrubbed his eyes until he could focus on the freckled face Dobey had uncovered. "Jake!" he muttered sadly, then repeated, "Aw, Jake," as he touched the cheek for a moment. "But if Jake..." he began, seeming to lose track of what he was saying. Then, "Where's Hutch?"

He didn't need to ask again, for even through all the noise, he finally recognized his partner's unsteady voice. "Where's Jake? I saw him go down...I've gotta call Starsky..."

The brunet left Dobey's side and let his ears lead him to Hutch. "Oh, no..." The blond was sitting on the ground, a blanket draped around his shoulders as he rocked back and forth, shivering. His movement was making it nearly impossible for the medic to work on the leg that he was bent over. As Starsky drew closer, he could see the blood pooled on the pavement beneath the limb, compelling him to walk a little faster.

"Hutch?" he asked gently, kneeling beside his partner.

"Starsk," Hutch responded quietly between chattering teeth. He looked weak and a little confused, but grateful for his partner's timely arrival.

"What happened, buddy? C'mon, talk t'me." Not getting a response, Starsky turned to the medic. "What's wrong with him?"

"He'll be okay, don't worry. He took a round in the lower leg just above the ankle, and he lost a lot of blood so he's in shock. We'll get him to the hospital, and the docs will patch him up before ya know it."

"How can I help?" Starsky asked, switching from kneeling to sitting on the pavement, getting as close to his trembling partner as possible.

"You're doing it. Just try to keep him calm; it seems to be working already." Starsky hadn't noticed that the shaking had diminished considerably since he'd sat down.

"Hey, buddy," Starsky said, putting his good arm around Hutch's shoulders. "We're gonna have you fixed up before you even know it. Just take it easy."

But the blond's eyes were vacant, shocked, as he turned to Starsky. "Why isn't the paramedic working on Jake? He must be terrified; he told me last week that he'd never been involved in a shooting before."

Starsky realized that Hutch, while improving, was obviously still not totally with them if he didn't realize that Jake had been killed. Police officers' voices from all around talked about the slain detective, several swearing that they would get the shooter at any cost. Some of them were on their own time, just arriving after going off duty. As they talked, Starsky watched the medic start an IV on Hutch and put a needle full of what he suspected was painkiller into it.

"Hutch, buddy, the medics couldn't help him. I'm sorry, but he's dead." His mind flashed on the bullet wound in the young man's chest. "If it helps any, it was quick."

The blue eyes were glazed as the injured man turned and looked into Starsky's darker blue ones. "He's dead? And I'm not?"

"Yeah, buddy."

"Why?" Hutch asked, suddenly looking very young and very confused. Starsky chalked it up to the pain medication's taking affect.

"It doesn't matter," Starsky said soothingly as he used his good arm to help the paramedic, lifting Hutch onto the gurney while being extra careful not to jostle the injured leg. He'd seen a lot of wounds before, and he knew that this one wasn't bad. Once Hutch was settled into the ambulance, Starsky let the relief wash over him like a tidal wave. He climbed up beside the blond, the medics not objecting. As they pulled away from the scene, Starsky could see the

department photographer through the rear window, taking snapshots of what was left of the smiling, laughing Jake in anticipation of his being moved into the back of the coroner's wagon.

"He's going to be okay." Even though the words were basically a confirmation of what they'd felt all along, coming from the doctor they were gratefully accepted.

"Thank heavens!" Dobey responded from his seat next to Starsky. He'd been at Starsky's side since finishing up at the crime scene, filling him in on what he'd discovered had actually happened: a harmless call to investigate a suspicious person roaming the neighborhood turned deadly when, while getting out of the car, the person pulled a gun from nowhere and opened up on the men. There was no warning, and no way of knowing that the young man would turn so violent so quickly.

"How is he? Can I see 'im?" Starsky finally managed.

"He's okay. We had to give him some blood, remove the bullet and stitch up the wound, then watch over him until he came out of shock, which just happened a few minutes ago. He's got some recuperation time ahead of him, but he should be as good as new within a couple of months." The doctor herself seemed relieved to be able to deliver the good news.

"What room is he in?" Starsky asked, as if he didn't realize that she hadn't given him permission to visit his partner. He was part way down the hall before she apparently decided that it could only help her patient to have him there and called the room number to him before he picked up his pace and raced around the corner.

"He seems to care very much," she said to Dobey as her eyes stayed focused on where he'd disappeared.

"Yes, he does. Do you see that sling?" He waited for her nod. "Hutch was just as frantic when their roles were reversed. I know you weren't sure about letting him visit, but I can tell you positively that you just did the best thing for your patient." He could see that she still seemed worried, though. "What's wrong? Is there something you didn't tell Starsky about Hutch?"

"No, nothing medical. Tell me, is Officer Hutchinson always so withdrawn?"

"Withdrawn?"

"Yes, he's hardly said a word since coming out of the anesthetic; he looks pretty miserable. I'm hoping his partner can help that."

"Well, if anybody can, it'll be Dave. They're the closest friends I've ever seen." Dobey paused, thinking for a moment. "My guess is that he's reacting to the fact that the other officer - his temporary partner - was killed by the same man who shot Hutch."

"He was killed?" she repeated. "Damn. I'm afraid this could be more than your typical gunshot-wound trauma. Do you think Officer Hutchinson would agree to seeing somebody?"

"Somebody? You mean a therapist." It wasn't a question. "Department regulations say he has to, but it won't necessarily accomplish anything. He knows procedure too well, and I'm sure he'll convince the police shrink that he's fine. Unfortunately, Hutch has a hard time admitting he needs help, even when he does. Usually, Starsky's the only help he needs...and that he never has to ask for."

"So how do we get through to him?" the doctor asked, looking for a recommendation from a man who apparently knew her patient well.

"My best judgment says to let it go. Either he'll work through it himself or Starsky will bring him around." There was no doubt at all in the captain's voice.

"You sound so certain."

"I am."

If Dobey could have seen through Starsky's eyes, he might have believed otherwise. The brunet himself, though he cared for Hutch more than he could voice, would also cut him more slack. He was determinedly cheerful as he peeked around the door to see his partner sitting up in his bed with his leg propped on a pillow as he stared out the window.

"Hey, buddy!" He walked in without waiting for Hutch to answer, plopping in the bedside chair. "Hey, you don't look so bad!" Starsky's smile was more forced than sincere. Knowing that his partner was safe while another friend was dead was definitely not the way he would have preferred it to go down. Yet, if one of them had to die... Starsky immediately felt guilty at the thought, remembering how fond both he and Hutch had grown of the young man.

"I want a phone," Hutch said vaguely, without preamble, and when his eyes met Starsky's, his partner saw they were glazed from sedatives and pain killers.

"The doc says you have to rest, partner." Starsky's voice was unusually low and level.

"I will, but not until I talk to Kim." It was the first mention all day of Jake's wife of a mere three years. Starsky hated the idea of having to face her himself, the only thing worse being looking into the face of their two-year-old son.

"It's okay, partner. Just sleep. Dobey sent an officer over to be with her. Sally Hagen, remember? She's only been out of the academy a year, but she's real sensitive. She'll stay there 'til her mother comes over..." He trailed off, his words seemingly not inciting a reaction from Hutch. Without speaking this time, Starsky laid a gentle hand on Hutch's leg.

"I need to call her," the blond stated, his jaw set stubbornly, daring Starsky to fight him on this one. The words were ground out between tightly clenched teeth, and for once, Starsky couldn't read whether his partner was hurting, angry, or nervous. *Maybe because it's all three?*

"Okay, so you're gonna call her," Starsky sighed, resigned. "It's gonna take the hospital staff a while to get the phone turned on in here. Why don't you just get some rest until then." Hutch looked doubtfully at him, his expression a combination of the drugs' effects and the blond's rebellion. Starsky tried to look as though he wasn't trying to pull the wool over his friend's eyes, even though he was. "I promise, I'll wake you as soon as you can call."

Hutch nodded once, seeming to find it difficult to raise his head once and impossible to raise it again for a second nod. His resistance deteriorated quickly as he was dragged toward unconsciousness. Grimacing, he let his eyes slide shut, Starsky's hand still resting on his own.

"It'll feel better when you wake up, buddy," Starsky said sympathetically.

"Mmm hmmmm," Hutch managed before the clouds overtook him and bore him to a warm, safe place.

"Don't worry, partner," Starsky whispered to the sleeping man, brushing aside a lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead. "Everything'll be okay."

Starsky stayed at his side the entire night, staying awake with the help of a never-ending series of cups of coffee brought by the obviously smitten nursing staff. The sun was just starting to peek over the window sill when Hutch's lashes finally fluttered again. He only woke up for a moment, but Starsky jumped up beside him immediately.

"Why?" was all Hutch whispered as he tried to focus on his best friend.

"Why what?" Starsky asked back, seeing Hutch's groggy concern.

"Why..." he managed again, and then an even slower, "why couldn't I..." as he drifted back to sleep again. Starsky wasn't quite sure if he'd heard Hutch's last word, more an exhalation than anything, but he thought it might have been "save 'm."

"Why couldn't I ...save him..." Starsky repeated, stringing the words together. "Why couldn't he save Jake?" he said, adding the question to his voice. "Oh, damn," the brunet whispered, realizing. Hutch must be feeling guilty for not being able to save his young partner. It would be natural, however inaccurate it may be. "It's not your fault, buddy," his voice cracked as he again brushed the stray lock of hair from the prominent crease between the brows. "Please, please understand that."

Hutch turned his face away in his sleep, moving without disturbing the damaged leg or the IV.

Hutch's physical condition improved rapidly, but though his body healed, his spirit didn't seem to. He spoke of his feelings as little as possible to anyone, even Starsky, but functioned acceptably otherwise, even going so far as to insist on attending Jake's funeral three days later. The doctors, Dobey, and even Starsky tried to discourage him, knowing that it would be more painful than he was able to handle, but Hutch was adamant, telling them all that if they didn't

help him go, he'd get up and go anyway. He knew he needed it, even more than he needed to rest his injured leg.

"C'mon, Hutch! You can't really be serious about this," Starsky said, standing as close as he thought he could get away with as his partner tried to get out of bed. The brunet was wearing his rarely-seen dress uniform to honor Jake at his funeral, and had begrudgingly brought Hutch's with him, too, which the blond was intent on struggling into. The dress shirt had been a piece of cake, but Hutch knew that it would be a miracle if he was able to put on his pants, and it didn't look like Starsky had any intention of helping him.

"I'm goin', Starsk. Now either I get these on, or I go without 'em." He shook the pants for effect. When Starsky didn't move, he delivered his final ultimatum. "You help me, *partner*, or I'm gonna call Dobey and get myself reassigned as soon as I'm back on duty."

Starsky knew it was an empty threat but also that Hutch truly believed it at the moment. Before he had to react, though, the doctor came in, an orderly trailing behind him. Starsky's relief was plain.

"Officer Hutchinson," the doctor said before Starsky could speak, "I understand you're insistence on leaving the hospital for this funeral, but I can't approve of your going. If you plan to check yourself out anyway, I'm going to request two things. First of all, that you come back *here* after it's over and let me check that leg wound again. It's still not healed enough for a general release. And secondly, that you take a wheelchair, not crutches."

"A wheelchair?" Hutch exclaimed. "I don't need one of those things! Crutches will be okay."

"Take the chair, will ya, partner?" Starsky suggested, realizing that Hutch was going to the funeral despite all he could do. "It'll be for the best, and we don't have time to argue about it. Now are you going to let me help you with those pants or is the orderly here gonna do it?"

Resigned to the doctor's restrictions, Hutch agreed to Starsky's help over the large man in white's. Both hospital staff left as Hutch scooted to the edge of the bed and let his legs hang over the side.

"Okay, Blondie, let's see what we can do about this," Starsky said unnecessarily as he approached Hutch with the dress slacks to his uniform. Hutch was in obvious pain when his friend gently pulled the cloth over the wound site, but he gritted his teeth and didn't say anything, perhaps for fear that Starsky would decide to stop helping him or, worse yet, that he'd report it to the doctor, who would give him pain medicine that would make him too out-of-it for the funeral. He'd told Starsky before that he *owed* it to Jake to be there, no matter what it took.

The wheelchair was humiliating, and getting into it caused more pain, but it didn't take long for him to get settled, his leg stretched out in a raised support in front of him. "Didn't you bring my other shoe?" he asked, realizing that his left foot bore a sock but no shoe.

"No, I didn't bother," Starsky replied, starting to push the chair. "I knew, whether I convinced you to stay here or not, you wouldn't be on that foot." He continued guiding Hutch's rolling chariot out to the Torino.

Once inside the car, though, Hutch fell back into his silent mode, staring straight ahead with eyes that Starsky could only describe as pained. The brunet tried to take his partner's mind off whatever was racing through it. "Hey, I almost forgot to tell ya!" he started with forced cheerfulness. "Remember that new clerk down in records? You know, the redhead? She had so much pity for me the other day, what with the sling and all, she finally agreed to go out with me."

Hutch's eyes turned, studying him and his bare arm as if seeing the brunet for the first time. "Where *is* your sling?"

"Doc says I don't need it any more. Still twinges now and then, but it's healed for the most part."

Hutch felt himself wince, more at the thought of his partner's injury than the pain in his leg, and was relieved when he realized that Starsky was concentrating on the road and hadn't seen. He might be able to fool the hospital staff into not stopping them from going to Jake's funeral, but if Starsky suspected that he was hurting, he'd have Hutch back in his room so fast his head would spin. Still, the blond would rather Starsky suspect physical pain than what Hutch was really feeling.

Who's gonna be next? First Starsky gets hurt and I can't protect him. Now Jake gets shot down in the street and I can't do a damn thing about that, either. Why couldn't I stop them? Starsky's okay, sure, but what about the next time? And Jake won't have a next time at all. What in the hell am I going to say to Kim? 'I'm sorry I couldn't keep your husband from being killed?' She'd really appreciate that.

Suddenly, Hutch started having visions of having to say the same things to Starsky's mother as he was going to say to Jake's wife, and it hurt him in a place inside that he couldn't precisely define. He knew for a fact that he wouldn't be able to stand it if that happened, his chest feeling constricted at the mere thought.

If Starsky hadn't known better, he'd have sworn his partner was shrinking. By the time they arrived at the church, it seemed like the 6'1" frame had been reduced to a fraction of that size. Hutch remained silently nestled in the seat while Starsky struggled to get the wheelchair out of the trunk.

"C'mon, partner," he said softly, waiting beside the chair. "They're not gonna hold up the ceremony all day for us."

Hutch lifted his face to meet Starsky's eyes, and the brunet flinched at the pain he saw there. "Starsk..." Hutch choked out, "I don't know if I can..."

"Just say the word, buddy, and we're out of here. Nobody's gonna blame you for not being here, considerin' what you've been through." He started to pull the chair away when Hutch grabbed it.

"No. I have responsibilities. I've never ducked one and I'm not going to start now." Hutch swallowed hard but his eyes shone. "I was there when he died; now I'm going to be there when everybody says good-bye to him."

"Are you sure?" Starsky asked, trying to ignore the burning in his own eyes. Hutch nodded as he pulled the chair closer, and it was only another minute or so before the blond was settled into the wheelchair.

"Ready?" Starsky asked, wiping sweating palms on his uniform slacks. Hutch swallowed again before nodding, as though not trusting himself to speak.

Watching Hutch throughout Jake's funeral was one of the hardest things Starsky had ever had to do. The blond started out with his jaw set, determined to be the picture of professionalism, but that deteriorated from the moment he set eyes on Kim and her young son. The woman cried openly, her little boy looking on with huge, confused eyes. He wasn't old enough to truly understand but he felt the emotions of everyone around him.

Starsky was trying to be supportive of his partner, but the vision of the widow and her son sent a steel spike right through him. The little boy had inherited his curly hair from his father, but the color came from his mother, whose straight hair was rich and dark. It was just a little too close to a young Davey Starsky and his mother, suffered a similar fate over twenty years before. Starsky swallowed hard, trying to listen to what the minister was saying and to his partner's breathing, but the memories of Michael Starsky's funeral were just too strong. The lump in his throat choked him and he swallowed repeatedly to try to push it down.

By the time Jake's older brother stood to deliver the eulogy, there were tears on Hutch's face as well as his own. The blond sat oblivious to them, lost in some sort of fog. Yet he was aware enough to flinch each time Jake's name was mentioned. Starsky watched, aware of his own tears but knowing that they were providing a necessary cleansing. Jake had been a good man, he deserved to have every person in the city mourning him, as far as Starsky was concerned. He wondered what was going through Hutch's mind but just didn't have the energy to investigate it himself.

In the chapel full of people, Hutch felt like he was totally alone. Sure, there were bodies there, moving, speaking, and crying, and Starsky beside him, crying as well. He felt that he should be helping, comforting his partner as he had so many other times when he was in pain. He couldn't do it, though. Starsky knew him far too well; he'd figure out easily what was on the blond's mind should Hutch allow himself to even lay a comforting hand on his partner's arm. Starsky would feel it in him just as clearly as if he'd spoken aloud.

This could just as easily be Starsky's funeral. That could be Rachel sitting where Kim is, suffering just like that, with her brother Joshua beside her for support. I wonder if they'd blame me, say I didn't back up Starsky well enough. I've come so close to losing him before...

Hutch's tears were suddenly streaming even harder, and Starsky heard him sob from time to time. *They must've gotten even closer than I knew*, he thought, a little jealous and a little guilty at feeling jealous.

The trip from the church to the car was especially hard on both men. Starsky pushed the wheelchair, leaving him little defense except for his voice to fend off the newspaper and TV

photographers pressing in on them. Starsky instantly regretted their presence; they thought they were honoring the deceased officer, so how could anybody fault them?

Hutch was still weeping, covering his face so it wouldn't be captured by the cameras, but Starsky felt it just as sure as if they were his own tears. He couldn't hear the sobs until the Torino's doors finally shut out the microphones and cameras, and yet Hutch still covered his face with both hands as he wept. Hutch seemed to be mourning more than just Jake, Starsky had pretty much concluded, but what?

Starsky couldn't read the thoughts going through Hutch's mind, thoughts that the blond couldn't stand to stay partners with his best friend. Oh, sure. Starsky would resist for awhile. But Hutch wouldn't let it dissuade him. The one thing he'd always been sure of was that he was good at his job. Maybe even one of the best, he'd thought egotistically not six months ago. Ready to take on the world with only a handgun and a good partner at his side. Now he wasn't so sure. What if he lost that partner? Could he handle it alone?

He had to stop before it came to that. Starsky had made it through that business in the Italian Restaurant, but they may not be so fortunate next time. The only answer was to remove himself from the picture before he lost Starsky in a much more deadly way. *I don't know if I can stand to see him every day without being his partner.* But where would he go? The silent tears came harder at the decision he believed was ahead of him. Minnesota was out of the question - there were only unanswerable questions and undeserved pity from his family there. No, he needed to be by himself, to figure out what to do with himself for the rest of his life. Being a cop somewhere else was unthinkable, which meant a career in some other field.

It would have been an understatement to say that Starsky was beginning to really worry about his friend. Never, in all the years he'd known him, had he been this inconsolable. All the jokes and stories, reliving of fond memories and high points of Jake's life, couldn't coax even a ghost of a smile from Hutch. Starsky wished he could take him home, to a place of warmth and comfort instead of the cold sterility of the hospital, but he knew it was best for the blond to go back. He looked pale and exhausted, but Starsky couldn't decide if it was from Hutch's mood or the physical drain he'd put on his body since they'd headed for the funeral.

By the time they pulled in Memorial's driveway, the tears had bled away to a resounding silence. They'd always had silences between them, but they were never uncomfortable like this one was. "C'mon, buddy. Let's get you back inside." Starsky helped Hutch into the wheelchair after he'd retrieved it from the trunk. "How's the leg?" he asked, not necessarily expecting much of an answer but hoping anyway.

"It hurts," Hutch said simply, wincing as they gently lowered the limb onto the foot support of the chair. The hospital corridors seemed fairly deserted and both men were relieved to feel free to make their way back to Hutch's room undisturbed. The woman at the nurses' station on Hutch's floor took note of their return but said nothing. Apparently, the doctor had spoken to the staff, though, because the room was cleaned, made up, and awaiting the patient's return. A somewhat more modest-than-usual hospital gown - closed up the back to the base of the shoulder blades - awaited on the bed, and a small cup of medication sat on the bedside table.

"Can you do this on you own?" Starsky asked after transferring Hutch to the bed and disposing of the chair. Hutch, looking beaten as he'd never seen him, remained silent. "Hutch?" Starsky asked again, squeezing the blond's shoulder.

Hutch raised his eyes to meet his partner's and Starsky immediately realized that, regardless of what else was going on, *he* wasn't ready to leave *Hutch* yet. "Okay, buddy. Let's get you changed and back in bed."

Starsky started at the top buttons of Hutch's shirt and, after a moment, Hutch began from the bottom. His hands fell slackly at his side in exhaustion as the brunet slide the cloth off his shoulders and down his arms, tossing the discarded garment onto a nearby chair. It was quickly followed by the blond's white undershirt. "Here, put this on." Starsky handed him the hospital gown, waiting until Hutch took it with slightly quivering hands, then bent to take care of the socks and shoe, being extra gentle to avoid jarring the injured leg. The relief was clear in his eyes when he stood and saw that Hutch had indeed managed to get the gown over his head and arms, although it was still untied.

"Can you do the pants?"

"I think I'm gonna need some help," Hutch said, rising on his one good leg. "Just keep me from fallin' over until I can get these undone, okay?" Starsky nodded, holding him by the ribcage while he unzipped his trousers and dropped them to the floor, then sitting him back on the bed. Once his feet were off the floor, the pants dropped the rest of the way off, and Starsky retrieved them and put them with the shirt. He could tell Hutch hated having to have the help, while appreciating it all the same, but he was glad to be able to provide it. Given time to think, his mind went back time and again to the vision of Kim and her son at the funeral, again dredging up memories of his own father's death.

"I think they probably want you to take these," Starsky said, handing Hutch the small cup after he'd pulled up the blanket. "Hold on and I'll get ya some water." Starsky headed for the bathroom with the empty water pitcher. Once the pills were consumed, instead of leaving as Hutch expected him to, he dropped into the chair with no intention of moving. "What d'ya suppose good is on tonight?" Starsky asked in a soft voice as he reached for the television remote.

Soon, the Dodgers game was droning on and on, it and the pills lulling Hutch into a sound sleep which Starsky was sure he desperately needed. Maybe tomorrow, with the funeral over and his leg getting better all the time, Hutch's mood would improve. The brunet was really starting to worry about his partner's frame of mind; he hadn't seen him this bad since the tremendous shame the blond had had to deal with after the heroin incident. *Like he could've helped that*, he thought to himself. Both incidents were totally out of Hutch's ability to control, and yet he somehow thought that he *should* have been able to control them.

Starsky hadn't realized he'd been watching Hutch sleep instead of the game until the announcer screamed that it was over. He didn't even know what the score was, he thought, as he rose to look down at the troubled expression Hutch wore even in sleep. He wondered briefly how long this particular spell would last. Regardless, he was willing to wait.

Three days later when Hutch was released for good from the hospital, his mood was a little better. Still, he stubbornly refused to open up to the departmental therapist, although he sensed that the doctor knew all was not yet well. Hutch wasn't about to admit how upset he was over the shooting and his injury, nor was he going to talk to the shrink about the doubts he was having. *Can I even do this job anymore? Or will I be a detriment to Starsky and everybody else because I'm so scared of losing someone I care about?*

Hutch could see he was succeeding in keeping Starsky from identifying what was going on in his head. If he were to admit his doubts, or that he was considering leaving the department, Starsky would just try to talk him out of it. How could he explain that it wasn't the police system he was questioning, but his very own ability to do the job he was being paid to do without smothering his partner with protectiveness. And if he couldn't do the job anymore? He loved Starsky like the brother he'd never had. Could he entrust Starsky with a new partner?

Hutch recuperated further at his home, traveling into the hospital twice a week for the physical therapy that was necessary to bring him back to full strength. And he began the arduous duty of trying to make a final decision about what to do, writing out the pros and cons in order to bring some form of organization to his chaotic thought. Wherever he went and whatever he did, he'd have to be certain that there wasn't somebody depending on him for their safety.

Starsky arrived early to take Hutch to his final physical therapy session, smiling mischievously as he thought about the surprise picnic lunch that Huggy had packed for them and that now sat hidden in the Torino's trunk. Knocking on the wooden door and getting no answer, Starsky came into the cottage anyway using the spare key Hutch kept over the lintel. The sound of water greeted him. "Hey, Hutch!"

"In here, Starsk!" the blond shouted over the shower. "You're early. I'll be out in a few minutes. Get something to drink if you want."

"Okay!" Starsky responded, but instead of going to the refrigerator, he went into Hutch's bedroom area, specifically to his dresser. If his surprise was going to work, he'd need a few of Hutch's things to do it. He went through it, drawer by drawer, until he found the item he was searching for, laying it on the dresser top while he rearranged the clothes inside to cover his pilfering.

Once the drawer was shut, he reached again for the item, needing to stow it somehow so Hutch wouldn't see. As he took it, though, a folded sheet of paper came with it and fell to the floor. Starsky picked it up quickly lest Hutch emerge from the shower and see, but couldn't help seeing his own name showing backwards through the paper.

From the moment he began, he knew he shouldn't be reading that particular sheet of paper. It was clearly not intended for anyone's eyes but Hutch's. The thoughts in it rambled, stream-of-consciousness writing, but it was clear enough what the blond was doing. "Damn," Starsky muttered with a sudden lump in his throat. *God! He's scared to death that I'm gonna get killed like Jake, and he's thinkin' about quitting.* He knew he couldn't confront Hutch on it now; he'd have to wait until he revealed his plan, giving him a chance to come to the right conclusion on his own. Perhaps it was only a fleeting thought on his part, Starsky thought, not something he

was seriously considering. But could Starsky take the chance? Now that he knew what was going through Hutch's head, maybe, just maybe, he could change his partner's mind before it was even totally made up - before something was put into action that could not be reversed. And the surprise he'd put together was the perfect way to do it.

When he heard the water shut off, Starsky quickly refolded the paper, shoving it back in the drawer and slipping the item of clothing into his belt in back under the jacket where Hutch couldn't see. This *had* to work, that was all there was to it. Starsky knew he was strong, that he would go on with his life and career without his best friend, but he didn't *want* to, and sure as hell was going to do whatever he could to keep that possibility from becoming a reality.

"Hey, last session!" he said to Hutch, forcing a smile as the blond emerged from the bathroom with an orange towel draped around his hips. Without his clothes, he seemed thinner than he had been, and Starsky felt for sure that he hadn't been eating the way he should.

"Yeah, thank God," Hutch responded, seeming happy to see the treatments end but otherwise still in a less-than-ideal frame of mind. The conversation fell to more mundane things as he dressed in the sweats and T-shirt appropriate for a physical therapy session.

Starsky'd tried to put what he'd read out of his mind, but sitting in the waiting area while Hutch had his therapy, there wasn't much else he *could* think of. His throat was getting tighter with each moment, trying to figure out what he'd do without his blond partner, should it come to that.

He'd just have to keep him from leaving. Maybe Starsky would even use his own cuffs on him! The brunet shook his head, knowing that that wasn't the answer. *But what is? Do I just let him go off rather than facing his fear about this? No. Somebody's got to make him understand that we're both just that much safer because we're so close, and that I'm not goin' anywhere.*

Put like that, the solution seemed easy, but he knew that was misleading. He'd start today, right after the therapy session. Starsky pushed the matter from his mind again, hesitating a moment before standing up and opening his eyes to the still-empty waiting area, squaring his shoulders like David facing the giant. He just *had* to do it. And he would, even if he had to call in Dobey, Huggy, Minnie, the department shrink and every single person in the precinct to do it. He wouldn't let go so easily.

The session went perfectly, and Hutch was given, if not a perfect bill of health, at least one certifying him 95 percent healed. The last five percent was up to time and Hutch, Starsky thought as he watched his partner's careful steps to the Torino. His mind relaxed a little with the knowledge that the stitches were out, therapy was over, and the experience was behind them. *Hopefully...*

"Hey, where we goin'?" Hutch asked as Starsky put on his turn signal and veered off at an exit. This wasn't the way to Hutch's cottage, nor Starsky's apartment.

"It's a surprise," Starsky answered, forcing a smile he hoped he'd be able to hold on to. "A celebratory lunch, prepared 'specially for you for finishing your physical therapy."

"Starsky, you're not dragging me to some new taco joint you discovered, are you?" Hutch looked dubious but the curiosity was also evident in his face. It was the purest positive emotion Starsky had seen from him since the shooting.

"No, not this time. I said just for you, and I *meant* just for you. Now shut up and enjoy the ride; we'll be there in about fifteen minutes.

"There" turned out to be a beautiful stretch of beach that took Hutch's breath away. There were no houses as far as the eye could see, and the only road visible was the dirt path Starsky had driven down to get there. "I thought we were going to get something to eat?" the blond questioned, appreciating the peacefulness but puzzled all the same.

"We are," Starsky responded, flipping open the trunk and pulling out a large blanket. "Here, spread this out." The blanket hit Hutch in the chest and his arms instinctively closed around it as he saw his partner levering a large ice chest from the car. "Huggy fixed everything to my specifications."

"Oh, so we *are* having tacos!" Hutch smiled. He knew better, just by the excitement in Starsky's face.

The brunet laughed and Hutch realized how long it had been since he'd heard that sound. Not all day, that was for sure. After laying out the blanket, Starsky set down the cooler, going back for another picnic basket and a small duffel bag.

The cooler and basket were emptied of their contents, treating Hutch to delicious smells and sights. Included were an antipasto salad, egg salad sandwiches, slices of ham and cheese and a few other treats that all qualified as his idea of healthy food. There were tidbits for Starsky's delight, too, among them a plate full of frosted brownies and a bag of potato chips.

"Huggy sure knows us," Hutch grinned, taking a big bite and forgetting his insecurities for the moment. "So what's in the bag?" He nodded at the duffel sitting by Starsky's hip.

"Part two of our celebration," Starsky said as he slid the zipper and pulled a towel from the bag, followed by his own brightly colored trunks. "A peaceful swim in the warm waters of the Pacific." Hutch looked uncertain. "Don't worry, I have yours too." Starsky produced a second towel and Hutch's own trunks, purloined from his dresser.

"How did you get those?" Hutch laughed aloud, feeling better than he had in weeks. His partner certainly *was* a special person. Dark thoughts of losing Starsky flashed through his mind, but he pushed them away, wanting to enjoy this time with his partner. He may not have many like it left.

"I swiped 'em," Starsky laughed, answering the already forgotten question as he threw the trunks at Hutch. "C'mon, Blondie. Let's take a swim."

"That's a great idea, but where are we gonna change?" Hutch questioned. "There isn't a house for miles and your car is too small to even think about it."

"Use your head, partner. There isn't a soul for miles and miles here. What are you hidin' from? In case you haven't realized it, I'm the only one here, and I've already seen what ya got!"

Shaking his head with laughter, Hutch stood and began to strip down, neatly folding the clothes as he took them off. Starsky did likewise, and soon they were both neck-deep in sparkling blue waves under azure skies.

The water was refreshing, calm and gentle. Starsky swam on the surface, going farther and farther out, while Hutch tried relying solely on his kicking in order to exercise his injured leg. The ocean had always held a fascination for him, the gentle life there so very different from the way humans conducted their lives.

Leave it to Starsky to find just the thing he needed to heal his soul, or at least come damn close. He glanced over to where he'd last seen his partner, smiling as he caught sight of the bobbing brown curls, moving constantly to keep his head above the surface. It was about thirty feet deep where he was, and Starsky was about twenty feet farther out, where it appeared to be even deeper.

Hutch blinked his eyes and looked again toward Starsky, but somehow his partner had disappeared. Had he headed back toward shore? A close scrutiny of the water's surface as far as the eye could see merited no sign of him.

Moving on pure instinct, Hutch propelled himself through the water, racing with every ounce of strength in his lean, athletic body to get toward where his best friend had last been.

Arriving at the point he thought Starsky last was, he caught sight of the very last of the brown curls going under the water.

Starsky couldn't believe that, after all they'd been through, he was going to die this way. He felt shock, and distress, but no sense of peace at the prospect of dying. He couldn't leave Hutch. But his shoulder had cramped up and was no longer cooperating in keeping him above the surface; he wasn't even sure he could move it at all. He was so concerned about helping Hutch with his injuries that he'd forgotten just how newly recovered he himself was.

Just as Starsky resigned himself to the fact that here, in this peaceful part of the ocean, he was going to be taken from the world, a strong, solid grip fastened on him. Starsky fought it, struggling against the forced hold before realizing it was pulling him back to the sun and sky and fresh air.

Starsky gasped a lung full of air and coughed more than once as he looked around at his partner. He'd taken in surprisingly little water and was unhurt, thanks to Hutch. The blond was still holding him above the water, gagging slightly on the water he himself had inhaled during his rescue of Starsky.

"Hutch, are you okay?" Starsky asked, holding him by the shoulders while both their coughing let up.

"Am *I* okay? Are you nuts? You're the one who almost just drowned!"

Starsky grinned tightly, trying to keep Hutch from seeing the shivers as the adrenaline rushed through his system. "Yeah, I guess we're both okay," he answered through his clenched teeth. This one had been just a little too close. "I think I've had enough swimming for today. What d'ya say?"

Hutch nodded, still breathing heavily. "What happened out there?"

"I guess I might've been ready to swim, but my shoulder didn't agree."

"Is it okay now?" Hutch asked as he reached for the shoulder, massaging it gently. "Can you make it to shore?"

"Yeah, I think so. That sure helps," he added, nodding at his partner's treatment of the joint.

Hutch began taking graceful strokes heading for shore, keeping pace with an obviously shaken Starsky's slower pace. To think that he came so close to losing his best friend... And he realized that, no matter what, he didn't want to lose that friend.

Both men crawled onto the beach, flopping onto their backs as soon as they were clear of the water. Starsky stared at the clouds as Hutch shut his eyes, waiting for their hearts to move from their throats back to where they belonged. When they had, Hutch sat up, staring down at his partner. His face was just a dark shadow to Starsky, a shadow backed by bright sunlight and blue skies; any threat they'd felt when the danger was near was replaced with a peaceful stillness.

"You saved my skin, you know that?" Starsky's tone was conversational, belying the intensity in the sapphire eyes. "If you hadn't pulled me back up, I would've been drowned."

"I should have known you weren't ready for this. We shouldn't have gone in."

"I'm just grateful you *did*, buddy. Because if you hadn't, I still would have gone in. I come swimming here a lot when I want some peace and quiet. You being here saved my life." It occurred to Starsky that it was time to push the issue. "Just like what you did in that restaurant saved my life, too." He saw Hutch visibly flinch at that, and pushed on. "Look, Hutch, I don't have to be psychic to know that you've been feeling scared about what happened to Jake and to me, too, thinkin' that it'll happen again and this time I won't be as lucky as I was this time. Don't you see that by being ourselves, we can make our own luck? We can't read the bad guys' minds but we can be sure we *both* survive by getting past our fear and being the best damn cops in the department. Heck, you already *are* the best." He smiled as he added, "except me, of course."

Hutch didn't share his smile. "But what if what happened with Jake happens again, and this time it's you?"

"Hutch, you dummy," Starsky said affectionately as he sat up. "What happened with Jake you couldn't have predicted. And as for the restaurant, in case you've forgotten, you *saved* my butt. If you hadn't handled it with such a cool head, they probably would have shot me again just to get me out of the way. You kept me alive, partner. After doing absolutely nothing to instigate the situation." Starsky laid a supportive arm around Hutch's shoulders. "You didn't just do a good job that night. You did an *incredible* job, above and beyond the call of duty, as they say. So get off your case, Hutch. Give yourself a break. Nothin's gonna happen to me on the streets, just like nothing happened here today."

Hutch smiled at him, the weight he'd been carrying no longer feeling so heavy in light of his friend's words. "Instigate the situation', huh? You been listening to those self-help tapes again?" Their mood relaxed and their chuckles died away as Hutch whispered a content, "Thanks, partner." Starsky's words had helped more than he believed possible; he probably should have talked to him a long time ago.

"Any time, Hutch. Any time..." They sat for a few more minutes in silence as the sun made its way toward the horizon. After changing back into their clothes, they cleaned up the picnic remnants and stored them in the Torino's trunk, heading back toward the city. Starsky could literally *feel* the improvement in Hutch's mood, and actually thought he might burst with joy when the blond began to sing along with the oldies station on the radio.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Starsky asked from the driver's seat.

"Yeah, I am," Hutch responded. "My mind wasn't exactly on saying good-bye that day." He exchanged looks with Starsky before opening the door and getting out. It seemed appropriate that it was slightly drizzling, and Hutch opened an umbrella to protect them both from the elements. He hadn't needed to ask Starsky to come along; he would be there, as he always was.

It took a few minutes to make their way across the peaceful setting to the spot they sought. And there, amid the brightest flowers, was the final resting place of one of the best cops they'd ever known. Standing, staring at the stone, doubt reasserted itself slightly. "Do you think he blames me?" Hutch asked quietly.

"Hutch," Starsky began, his tone tolerant and patient, "we both knew Jake better than that."

"You sure?" Hutch asked again. And then, as they stood in that solemn and sacred place, the sun shone. The clouds parted, and a bright ray shown down on the stone before them, creating a rainbow in the sky above. Hutch was awestruck, but Starsky smiled.

"Does that answer your question?" he said rhetorically as he draped an arm around his partner's shoulders and took the umbrella with the other. Something seemed very *right* in the world, despite the loss of Jake. Something that would remain right, just so long as they had each other.

The End