

One Step at a Time

by Linda B

Hutch slipped the glass into the soapy water and washed it as he looked out the kitchen window onto the back deck. Starsky was still seated in the Adirondack chair where he'd retired after dinner. Apparently he was still napping. Hutch finished rinsing the last of the silverware and laid them in the dish rack to dry. Wiping off his hands on the kitchen towel, he opened the back screen door softly, so as not to disturb Starsky, and walked to the edge of the deck and leaned on the railing. He loved this time of night, watching the sun begin to set, hearing the water lap against the shore...and listening to his partner snore. Hutch turned to look at Starsky and smiled. Hearing that snoring brought him the greatest pleasure. Starsky, his head propped up by several pillows, and his legs covered by an afghan, was sound asleep. It seemed their time at the ocean had already been beneficial.

They had been in Cambria just over a week, and looking at Starsky and seeing him alive, even if not fully recovered, still managed to take Hutch's breath away. They had defied the odds, the medical naysayers. True, there was a long way to go, but they'd make it. He was convinced of it now. It was me and thee against Gunther—and *he* wasn't going to win.

Starsky stirred slightly and moaned. A scowl flickered across his face, and Hutch pulled away from the railing. Even in sleep, pain would not leave Starsky alone.

When Starsky's movement stopped and his eyes remained closed, Hutch returned to his resting spot, his eyes remaining on his friend's gaunt face and sunken eyes. They'd come so far, yet had such a long road to go.

As hard as it was to believe, it wasn't that long ago that he'd been at Starsky's bedside encouraging him to take his first steps.

At first, Starsky appeared eager to get out of the bed that had imprisoned him, but he paled as Hutch and the nurse helped him sit up. Sweat glistening on his forehead, Starsky slowly and painfully lowered his legs over the edge of the bed. He hesitated. "I don't think...I...I can do this."

"Yes you can, buddy. Just take your time. I'll be right at your side." Hutch glanced over Starsky's head at the chair where they were headed. It was only about a foot away, but to Starsky it probably seemed a million miles.

Nurse Henderson smiled encouragingly. "Just rest a second, take a deep breath, and when you're ready...."

Sensing Starsky's increasing fear, Hutch's fingers tightened on his upper arm and elbow. "Don't worry. I've got you and I won't let you fall." He held as much of Starsky's weight as possible as Starsky cautiously slid off the side of the bed. He could feel Starsky's trembling body begin to sway, and, afraid that Starsky would sink back to the bed, he whispered, "You can do it. Just take one step at a time, Starsk. One step."

Hutch frowned and instinctively took more of Starsky's weight, as Starsky barely slid his other foot ahead of him.

"One more step, Starsk."

Nurse Henderson maneuvered the chair closer with her foot. "Stand still now and we'll help you."

Together they assisted Starsky in shifting slightly and then helped him slowly settle into the chair. Another groan escaped from Starsky as he sank down, his face as white as a sheet.

Hutch knelt beside him. "You okay?"

"Just gimme a sec." Starsky's voice was barely audible as he leaned his head back onto the chair.

Hutch looked up at the nurse who was repositioning the IV pole. She nodded in agreement and mouthed silently, "He'll be okay."

Hutch wasn't convinced, and he carefully watched Starsky for any sign of distress.

"Bet you thought I was gonna fall flat on my face," Starsky said when he finally opened his eyes.

"Never."

A brief smile flickered across Starsky's face. "Well, I did."

Hutch returned the smile and reached to squeeze Starsky's hand. "The only time I have to pick you up off the floor is when you've had too much to drink."

"Looks like you're gonna have to wait a long time to do that again," Starsky said, looking at the various IV needles extending from his arms.

"That's okay. Alcohol's not good for you. Remember?"

"Says who?"

"Your mother."

Starsky's fragile smile disappeared as he winced and involuntarily reached for his side.



Hearing another sound from Starsky, Hutch stepped across the porch and sat down in the chair opposite him, wondering if the sleeping man was about ready to rejoin the living. When Starsky made no further moves, Hutch leaned back and looked out at the beach, watching a few lonely sea gulls walking along the sand, pecking here and there in hopes of finding something worth swallowing.

The beach house at Moonstone Beach had proven to be the perfect respite. Unbeknownst to Starsky and him, police officers from their precinct, from Bay City, and from around the country had collected money to help Starsky with his medical bills and his recovery. Since the Department covered most of Starsky's expenses, they decided to use the money to get away from the constant media attention, and Hutch had gone in search of a quiet place for Starsky to recover. The Dobeys had offered the use of their cabin, but remembering their encounter with a cult the last time they had gone up there fishing, Hutch politely turned down the offer. Besides, Starsky loved the peaceful and relaxing sound of the ocean waves. Taking the recommendation of several fellow officers to go to Cambria, a quiet tourist town several hours up Highway 1 from Bay City, he'd been able to locate this beach house at a reasonable rate. It had been a perfect choice. They were secluded, but it was a quick drive into the nearby town. That meant he didn't have to leave Starsky alone for long if they ever needed anything. He had tried to anticipate their every need, and, other than making a quick run for some milk and renewing one of Starsky's many prescriptions, he hadn't had to leave Starsky alone. Just to be on the safe side, he had immediately checked out the location of the nearest hospital upon their arrival.

At first, Starsky had remained in bed, resting and recuperating because the five-hour drive to the beach house had worn him out. But Hutch also knew he had to get Starsky up and moving. Starsky was resistant to the idea because of the anxiety and pain it caused him, but the doctors had given Hutch specific orders to get him up for short periods several times a day while extending that activity each day. Hutch had been reluctant at first, not wanting to pressure Starsky too much or cause him undo suffering.

The last couple of days, Starsky had finally joined him at the dinner table and even watched a few minutes of TV before returning to his room. Hutch had continued pressing him to come outside and enjoy the view and fresh air. Up until two nights ago, Starsky had quietly refused.

Hutch reached over and pulled the afghan farther up Starsky's chest. He couldn't afford to catch a cold. Already the lines in Starsky's face had softened and a little color had returned to his cheeks; however, his appetite was still severely lacking, despite the cooler full of food Edith and Huggy had prepared, frozen, and given them the morning they

headed out. Still, they had come so far. Hutch sighed as he remembered Starsky's first attempt at walking down the hospital hallway.

As the elevator door opened, Hutch stepped out and was amazed to see Starsky bracing himself against the doorframe, and a young petite nurse he hadn't met before standing by his side attempting to hold him up. In three steps, Hutch had reached his partner's side. He angrily looked at the nurse. "What's going on here?"

"Don't worry, Detective Hutchinson. The doctor ordered Mr. Starsky to walk up and down the hallway for some exercise and to build his strength—"

"Detective Starsky's not ready. You can see that—"

"That's what I keep tellin' her," Starsky whispered.

"Now, don't worry," the nurse said soothingly. "It's the best thing for him, and sooner or later he needs to get up and moving. Ready, Detective Starsky?"

Seeing that further delays were impossible, Starsky swallowed hard and nodded. Whether consciously or not, he stiffened his spine as much as medically possible.

"Take it one step at a time, Starsk. I'm right next to you." Hutch hesitantly gripped Starsky's arm, wanting to offer as much support as needed, but afraid to hurt him further.

They'd gone about five feet when Starsky said breathlessly, "I need to sit down. There's no way I'm gonna make it down this hallway. I think my legs are about to give out on me."

"We're only a couple steps from the waiting room," said the nurse. "You can sit down there and rest a bit before we head back."

"Head back?" Hutch was incredulous. "He isn't strong enough for this yet."

"Believe me, he is. You'll be amazed at how quickly he'll regain his strength." She looked up at Starsky. "Next time, I'm sure you'll be able to go even farther."

Starsky stared at her as if she had her head on backwards.

*"You **do** want to go home soon, don't you?" she asked, as they rounded the corner into the waiting area and she guided him to one of the chairs and helped him sit down.*

"Everyone's a comedian. Aren't they, Hutch?"

Hutch nodded. The entire staff at the hospital, except her apparently, knew how much Starsky and he wanted Starsky out of there. "She's right though, Starsk. The sooner we can get you more mobile, the sooner you can go home."

“Traitor.” Starsky glared at him, but for an instant there was a tiny twinkle in his eye at the thought of eventually going home.



Hutch blinked and turned his focus back to Starsky and was surprised to see two blue eyes staring back at him.

“You gonna sit there all night staring at me?” Starsky rubbed the palm of his hand across his face. “There somethin’ on my face?”

“No, I was trying to decide if I should wake you up or let you sleep the night away in that chair.” He watched Starsky look out across the grassy area just off the deck, past the sand out to the ocean stretching thousands of miles before him.

“Nice view, isn’t it?” asked Starsky.

Hutch followed his gaze and watched the sun begin to set on the horizon. “Yep.”

“You did a great job finding this place, Hutch. I really...I really appreciate it.”

“Thank Jim Nedloe. He made the suggestion. I guess he and his family come out to Cambria for vacations all the time. He made a few phone calls and found this place for us.”

Starsky nodded and closed his eyes again. Hutch thought he’d fallen asleep until Starsky said, “There’s nothing more relaxing than the sound of the ocean.”

“Except maybe walking along it. You feel up to taking a short walk on the beach?”

“I guess I’ve been lazy enough since we got here. Right?”

Hutch hesitated. He wanted Starsky up and around—it would be an indication that everything was returning to normal—but he also didn’t want to pressure him. Starsky had to do it in his own time. He still had a lot of healing to do, and it wasn’t all physical.

“Okay.” Starsky tossed the afghan off his leg. “Help me out of this chair I got myself into and we’ll head to the beach.”

On his feet instantly, Hutch stepped to Starsky’s side and helped him steady himself as he stood. Side by side they walked slowly to the end of the deck and stepped down onto the grassy area; they passed the barbecue grill and lawn chairs and headed onto the sand. Hutch kept an eye on the ground and a hand on Starsky’s elbow. He didn’t want any sudden dips in the ground to cause Starsky to fall.

When they reached the beach, Hutch tightened his grip, aware that walking on the sand might prove even more difficult for Starsky.

“I’m okay, Hutch.” Starsky stopped and caught his breath. “Just gimme a second.”

“We can head back if you want.”

“No, no. I’m okay. Besides, remember what you always say?” A crooked grin stole across Starsky’s face.

Hutch paused, trying his best to remember what he might have said, “No, what do I *always* say?”

“You keep reminding me to ‘take it one step at a time’.”

Starsky caught his eye and Hutch chuckled. “I guess I *have* said that a lot lately, haven’t I?”

“Yeah.” Suddenly Starsky’s smile disappeared. “It’s true, though, Hutch. They may be small steps, but we *will* make it.”

Hutch squeezed Starsky’s arm and looked at the ocean stretching before them. “I know, Starsk, I know.”

As they started walking again, Starsky asked, “Do you think we could borrow a metal detector from the precinct?”

“What do you want a metal detector for?”

“Oh, I was just thinking that we could use it when we walk along the beach. I’ve heard people find all kinds of strange things hidden in the sand.”

“Yeah? And what do you think you’d find?”

“You never know what could wash up onshore. Maybe some buried treasure like gold doubloons...people find jewelry all the time, Hutch. Maybe we could find enough jewelry and money that we won’t have to go to Bolivia and rob any banks.”

Starsky’s smile was infectious. Hutch threw back his head and laughed. The first real laugh he’d had in a very long time, and it felt so good. Starsky was back to dreaming up his get-rich-quick schemes which definitely meant he was getting better.

“Don’t laugh, Hutch. You never know...besides, we might just find a couple police badges that someone threw into the ocean.”

Hutch draped his arm across Starsky's shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. "Now who'd be crazy enough to do something like that?"



The End