

The Bond of the Prodigal Son
Musings from "Sweet Revenge"
by Brit

Muriel Hutchinson answered the phone on the second ring. She had been expecting the call, both pleased that her son was reaching out to her during this savage time in his life and remorseful that it took something as devastating as his partner's nearly fatal shooting to initiate his communication.

"Hello?" Her greeting was almost tremulous. "Ken?"

Richard Hutchinson entered the kitchen from the dining room, the newspaper he had been reading still held open by his right hand.

"Ken, honey, *what is it?* Is it David? *Did he—?*"

"Well, what is it?" the elder Hutchinson demanded. With a slight smile Muriel raised a finger, silently asking him to wait a moment more.

"Ken, honey, it's *okay*. Go ahead and cry. I understand how relieved you must be." Muriel clutched the receiver to her chest and turned to Richard. "David's awake."

"So he's *crying?*" The older man shook his head.

Muriel raised the phone back up to her ear. Muffled sobs were audible to both his parents. Muriel's voice was hushed. "Ken's just so overwhelmed. He's been through a lot, almost losing David and all." Mrs. Hutchinson turned her back on her husband and began to whisper comfort to her son.

A confused look flitted across Richard Hutchinson's face as he left the kitchen. A steadily growing unease once again nestled in the pit of his stomach at his son's blatant show of emotion. Such displays always left him uncomfortable, especially from men. But for some reason it bothered him even more when it came from his only son.

He returned to his study and eased back into his favorite chair. His left hip ached a bit with the recent change in weather, promising that the autumn rains would come soon. Distractedly the retired executive rubbed at a twinge in his thigh, a souvenir from the Korean War, and pondered his son's latest call. Not for the first time he wondered about the relationship between Ken and the dark-haired man. *Could it be....?* The very thought of his son being "*one of those*" made him nauseous. He had always been a sensitive child—artistic, bookish even—his mother's influence, really. But that didn't mean that he was....*No*. Not *his* son! But still.... If he were, could he accept *that?* Accept *him?*

Since Starsky's near-death episode, Ken had been in considerably more contact with his family, much to Muriel's happiness. Time and distance had not healed the rift between father and son though, and the younger Hutchinson made little connection with his Minnesota family except on holidays and special occasions. Now with his partner—and that word in and of itself left an acrid taste in Richard's mouth as he considered their relationship—seemingly at death's door, Ken had reached out to his mother for her quiet comfort. Was he looking at his son's overt emotion unreasonably?

Even as a child Ken was always a bit odd in Richard's opinion. Not in an obvious sense, but there always seemed to be something missing in the young man's countenance that made him seem incomplete, like a puzzle that's missing its last few pieces.

He could remember watching Ken as a boy and realizing that while he always seemed to be happy, there was a lingering wistfulness about him. Granted, there were really no children his own age to play with in their neighborhood, so Ken spent much of his after-school time with his mother in the music room or studying. Many times Richard would come home late from the office to find his son alone in the garden reading.

Many summers during the boy's youth were spent at his grandfather's farm. There Ken seemed truly content, but whether it was from time spent with the old man or the simplistic life on the large farm, Richard wasn't sure. But once the boy came home in the fall, the bouts of moodiness and restlessness returned. One summer Ken had befriended many of the children from the Mexican immigrant families that had come north for work on some of the neighboring farms, but Richard had quickly put an end to that. Summer camp was soon implemented in order to find a 'suitable' alternative for his son's companionship and use of free time. Ken made friends with Jack Mitchell one summer, shortly after his family moved into the area, and finally—*finally*—Richard Hutchinson's son had found an acceptable acquaintance.

High school brought alternatively busy times of social interaction for the young man and periods of isolation. It seemed that the younger Hutchinson craved a connection with friends, but was often times disappointed with the shallowness of the relationships and retreated into his own company. During these times it wasn't unusual to discover him idly picking out a melody at the piano or cradling his guitar on the garden bench.

Nothing the lonely young man tried seemed to fill the void—not girlfriends, sports, academic achievements, jobs—*nothing*. Richard dismissed it as a product of growing up in the 'hippie years' and that his son needing to 'find himself,' but the shadow of emptiness never dissipated even after Ken reached adulthood.

The chasm widened between father and son when the young man began attending campus protest rallies against the Vietnam War. Because of his studies in the medical field, Ken had been exempt for serving at this point in the conflict. The older Hutchinson fluctuated between embarrassment and rage toward his son's actions, and animated arguments became commonplace in their home.

Still, Richard didn't give his observation about his son's peculiarity much thought after Ken left home for college. It wasn't until his son unexpectedly changed career directions into law enforcement and was

ultimately partnered with David Starsky that the elder Hutchinson realized his son had somehow changed. The ‘missing piece’ of his life was no longer evident to his father, though he could never put a finger on what change had occurred to make his son ‘whole.’

The few visits out to California found a new confidence in the young man, as if he were completely at ease with himself for the first time in his life. Ken had always shown a trust in his abilities, which was paradoxical to the awkwardness that had often plagued him.

Over the past nine or so years Richard had found his son’s bond with Starsky unusual. At first it had simply seemed that Ken had found a good friend, much like the one he had had in poor Jack Mitchell. It wasn’t too many years after he and Starsky had been partnered as detectives that Ken had remarked off-handedly that ‘they were as close as two men could be.’ His father didn’t pursue the statement, even though he had found it odd. Richard could acknowledge that David was a good friend and counterpoint to his son, regardless of how he felt about their chosen profession. If only Ken would show a little initiative and take the Lieutenant’s exams. But lately....

Months back there had been some ugly business with the department. Not only had Ken quit, but his partner had as well. The reports of dissent within the department and his son’s disillusionment prompted an unexpected phone call from Ken and the news of his resignation. This brought considerable joy to his father. Perhaps finally, *finally* Ken would settle into a more reasonable and prosperous profession. But unfortunately, the two rejoined and it was almost business as usual—*almost*. There was more ugly business with some woman that the two ended up fighting over. That prompted another call from his prodigal son. The uneasy feeling the elder Hutchinson had in the pit of his stomach grew when he heard that Ken spent more time and effort in patching up the relationship with his ‘partner’ than pursuing the woman in question.

With a sigh the graying man snapped open his newspaper and returned to the article he had been reading when the phone rang. Tomorrow he would broach the subject of his son’s behavior with his racquetball partner Ted Williams, an industrial behavioralist that had recently joined the athletic club. Maybe he could shed some light on his son’s questionable attachment to the other detective. The twinge in his hip made the elder Hutchinson shift again in his chair. Ache or no, he would still play tomorrow. Once you set your course, you simply stuck with it.



Starsky’s room was cast in shades of amber by the setting sun’s light. Walter Cronkite delivered the evening news to watching America, but the detective had muted the volume to a near whisper. Starsky twisted his bed covers around his hand then let it unwind, only to repeat the motion again as he stared forlornly out the window. Unbeknownst to him, Hutch had paused in the doorway, drinking in the sight of his healing partner, the picture of perfect boredom. Hutch had hardly been able to contain his excitement throughout the day, and broke more than a few traffic laws in his hurry to get to the hospital, but the sight of his partner waiting for him brought him up short with the wonder of it all. *Thank you God, for another day.*

“Hey.” Hutch’s voice carried the warmth of his smile.

The face that turned to greet him with a grin of its own still looked drawn and haggard. Sharp cheekbones accentuated Starsky's thinning face and shadowed eyes, but the gaunt features lost some of their weariness with his smile.

"Hey, yourself."

"You're sitting up. That's great."

"Yeah, the doc's got me up for a few minutes twice now. Said we'll start doing it a bit more each day." Starsky cocked an eyebrow at his partner. "You just gonna stand there holding up the wall or are you gonna take a load off?" Starsky's eyebrow remained raised as his partner moved past his customary chair by the window and continued over to his bed, perching next to his legs. "What's up?"

Hutch gave his partner a smile that seemed to split his face in two. An uncustomary rambling poured excitedly out. "I got a surprise. Two actually, I think you'll like them. Well, I know you'll like *one*, I guess I'm not too sure about the other, but I *think* you'll like. I mean, I know you pretty well and all, and since you're getting better—"

"Hutch..."

"—I thought it wouldn't hurt. The surprise I mean. Well, the first surprise actually. Well, it shouldn't. That's why I was late, because of the first surprise. Well, actually, because of both surprises, but—"

"*Hutch...*" Came as a pitiful whine. "I'm dying here."

"What's wrong? Are you hurting?"

"No, but you're *killing* me! What the heck are you talking about?"

The blond took a steadying breath and his mischievous grin returned. "Okay, okay. Sorry, buddy. I've just been so excited, I couldn't hardly believe I kept this a secret so long...." A thought suddenly came to him. "Oh, shoot. Here, I better give you your *first* surprise before it gets cold."

Hutch reached into the space at his side between his jacket and shirt, and with a flourish presented his curious partner with one of Huggy's specials. Starsky's eyes widened as Hutch peeled away the wax paper wrapper to expose a 3/4 pound burger.

"Food! Real food!" Starsky snatched the gift away, hands all but trembling in anticipation.

"Shh! You want to get me thrown out of here?"

Hmmnggghhhhhh was Starsky's only response as the burger was crammed in as far as his mouth with allow. "Oh, *oh man*. Almost paradise."

“*Almost?* You know how hard it was to smuggle that monstrosity in here? The floor nurse kept sniffing at me on my way up here! What do you mean ‘*almost*’?”

“That was because of that sewer water you call aftershave.” Starsky lifted the bun up with a sigh before stuffing the sandwich back into his gaping maw. “Mo monyins er hepainyos....” fumbled out as he chewed.

“*Yeah, right!* There’s no way I’m feeding you onions and jalapeños after they stitched up your insides with baling wire! That kind of a gastrointestinal nightmare would finally finish you off for good and—” Hutch turned his head away with the realization of what he was saying. The enormity of the situation and the proximity of death were still too raw in his heart.

A familiar hand rested on his knee. “Hey, c’mon. I’m gonna be fine. You know what the docs said. It’s gonna be a long haul, but when has that ever stopped us?”

Hutch nodded and turned back to give his friend a gentle grin. How was it that he came to the hospital with the intent of cheering up his partner and he was the one receiving the pep talk? “You’re something else, you know that?”

Starsky snorted. “And then some, buddy. Here, you wanna share?” Starsky handed back the half-eaten burger.

“What’s the matter with it? Does it hurt to eat or—”

Starsky put up both hands to stop Hutch before he worried himself into another tirade. A yawn elongated his sentence. “No, no, no. Stop mother-hennin’. It was great, *really*. Even without *all* the fixings. I’m just full. Not as much room inside as there used to be.” A lopsided grin appeared. “Thanks Hutch. That’s the first *decent* food I’ve seen in over a month.”

Hutch gave his partner a curious look. Starsky’s voracious appetite was legendary, but having existed on nothing but liquids for the first few weeks of his hospital internment, then a graduation to semi-solids, had all but depleted his capacity. Hutch accepted the burger and finished it off quickly, not realizing how hungry he had been.

An amused look rested on Starsky’s features as he watched his partner wolf down the remnants of the burger. He pointed to the blond’s mustache at some errant mustard.

“When was the last time *you* ate?”

“I don’t know. Yesterday, I think. Now, about the other surprise—”

“Wait a minute. *Yesterday, you think?* Hutch—”

“Later, later. Now listen—”

Rolling his eyes at the thought of crazed blond partners, Starsky gave a long-suffering sigh and folded his hands in his lap with an expression of rapt attention, giving Hutch a caricature of hanging on his every word.

The sarcastic gesture wasn't wasted on Hutch, but he continued anyway. "I was thinking—"

"Did it hurt?"

"I was thinking—and *shut up, Starsk*—about when we're finally able to bust you out of here." Now he truly had Starsky's undivided attention. "The way the doctors see it, you're still going to need a lot of care when you're released. And probably the last thing you want is to have some stranger taking care of you—"

"Unless she's a knockout nurse who likes to give back rubs and feed her patients peeled grapes and—"

"—and we both know that's not going to happen, Gordo. So, here's what I've been thinking: you can move in with me."

"Move in? Really? But how are you gonna manage—"

"Just a minute, hear me out." Hutch had long since warmed up to the subject and sprung up off the bed. The rest came out in an excited rush. "Look. Dobey knows I won't work with anybody else. Period. There was no discussion. Even though we've got an air-tight case against Gunther, there's still a ton of follow-up to be done and a mountain of paperwork to boot, so we can nail him on a few other choice offenses. I worked it out with Dobey to be able to do most of this from my place—I don't have to be at the station all the time. We figure this is going to take anywhere from two to three months alone on top of depositions and court appearances. So, I can work from home for the most part and be there to help you out, and get you to therapy and your appointments. After the holidays, there's going to be some new training given to the uniforms on things like hostage procedure and negotiations. The Lieutenant's asked for me to take on training detail for the winter term and maybe spring, too. I'll be away at the academy more, but by then you should be up and around better. So it's all worked out, neat and tidy. What do you think?"

"I...I don't know what...I mean, it sounds great, but your place is kind of small, and what about my place? I mean—"

"Got it covered!" Hutch plopped himself back down on Starsky's bedside. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a photograph of a Spanish-style ranch house. The photo was worn from handling. Hutch excitedly thrust the picture into his partner's hands. "Take a look at this."

The house was small, but immaculately maintained. The well-groomed lawn was flanked by flowers and shrubs. "It's ours...I mean, it's *mine*, actually. But, what I mean is that I'm buying it."

"Really? You've been talking about buying a place for some time now. When did this happen?"

“A couple of days ago. You remember McAndrews from Juvie?”

“Yeah, he retired, what? Four years ago?”

“Right. But he got bored with retirement and went into real estate part-time for something to do. Well, I ran into him and we got to talking, and I mentioned that I wanted to seriously start looking for a house. He showed me this one. It was an older couple’s that just bought a condo. The decorating’s pretty dated—late 40’s and 50’s—but the roof’s good and the electric’s all updated. McAndrews took pity on me and offered it at a darn good price. I won’t be shelling out much more per month than what I’m already paying in rent.” Hutch took back the photo and began pointing out rooms. “It’s not too big, but still has two bedrooms, two baths and a small study. Big enough for the two of us while you get back on your feet.”

“Hutch, that’s....that’s terrific.” Starsky looked away from the photo and directly into his partner’s eyes. “Did you really want to buy this, or did you do this for me?”

Hutch’s face gentled. “Naw, buddy. I did this for *us*. When you get out of here you’re going to need me to be there with you and I....well, *I* need to be there with you.”

Starsky swallowed the lump that had lodged in his throat. He was moved by the offer, but didn’t want his partner to give up so much just to help him recuperate. “Okay, but what about my place? I know this is only a temporary arrangement, right? After awhile you’re going to get sick of waiting on me hand and foot. Besides, someday you’re going to get married and have fifteen or twenty little Hutchinsons—”

“*Fifteen or twenty?!?*”

“—running around and you won’t need old Uncle Starsky getting underfoot.”

“You’re a masochistic dirtball.” Hutch grumbled good-naturedly. “As far as your apartment goes, we’ve got that all worked out, too.”

“Who’s we?”

“Me and Dobey. While I’m reassigned to following the Gunther paper-trail and training the uniforms, the department’s bringing in a loaner from San Diego—Randy Johnston. He’ll only be at Metro for a couple of months, but rather than putting him up in a hotel for that long, he can stay at your place. Johnston does a lot of traveling and is sick of hotels, so he jumped at the idea. Everything’s been cleared with the department so it’s a go. If you say it’s okay, of course.”

“*Of course.*” Starsky chuckled.

“And around the beginning of January Dobson from Vice is getting married, but his and his fiancée’s leases are both up at the end of the year. Well, they want to build a new house, but would need a place to stay for four or five months while it’s being built. Dobson also thought subletting your place through the spring would be a perfect solution for them until they can move in to their new house. See, it all

works out perfectly. You move in with me, your rent's paid by somebody else so you don't lose your lease, and after a few months or so when you're ready to be on your own, you can move back in to your own place. If you want to. Or you can... or whatever. So...."

"So, you've got this all planned out, huh?"

Hutch's grin grew into a small self-pleased smile. "I told you before I'm the brains of this duo."

"Hmph." Starsky yawned and shifted his position on the bed. Tell-tale signs of fatigue and discomfort were beginning to show.

"Gee, control your enthusiasm, partner."

"It's not that, Hutch. I appreciate all you want to do...."

"But?"

"But...." Starsky shifted uncomfortably again.

"What is it? Is it the idea of somebody else living at your place? Or...or don't you want me to...if you'd rather have somebody else take care of you—"

Starsky's hand darted out to grab his partner's arm. "Hutch. *Stop it.* I'm just getting kinda stiff from sitting up so long."

"Do you want me to put the bed down? I can call the nurse, it's almost time for your meds anyway." The grip on his arm tightened, though Hutch noticed it was nowhere near the steely hold his partner had a few month's prior to the shooting.

"*Man!* You'd give my grandmother a run for the money in the fretting department. Hutch, I appreciate all you want to do, *all you've done.* I couldn't have come this far without you. I just...." Starsky sighed deeply. "I just don't want you giving up so much of your life to take care of me."

The words made Hutch's face grow completely still. The lack of expression couldn't quite mask the anguish that continued to simmer just below the surface of Hutch's emotions. "Starsk, I'd give up a lot more if it would have changed things."

Starsky could read the guilt that danced across his partner's face as clearly as if it were written there. Tight lines seemed to be permanently etched around somber eyes, and Hutch's shoulders were in a constant state of tension. The shooting had taken a huge toll on him as well. Starsky spoke softly, repeating the words that he had offered many times since that day.

"Hutch, *it wasn't your fault.* You couldn't have prevented this."

“No. But you didn’t have to stand and take it, either. You could have gotten down. But instead, you stood there to shield me from the shooters.”

“I told you before, it wasn’t like it was a conscious decision. It was just a—”

“—a reflex, I know. That’s just it, pal. You reacted without thinking. You put yourself *before me*, without thinking.”

“That’s...that’s what partners do.”

“Exactly.” Hutch waved the picture of the house. “That’s what partners do.”

With both men deep in thought, silence permeated the hospital room. The sun had set over the city and the shadows of twilight lingered across the bed.

Finally Starsky broke the silence. “So you’re gonna do all this because you feel guilty?”

“No, I’m going to do all this because you’re my best friend.”

“Hutch—”

“No, now you listen to me, Starsk. You and me, we’ve been together since...since forever. We’ve been through a lot of crap. A lot of it’s from the toilet we work in, some of it from our own doing. But no matter what, it’s always been you and me—”

“Me and thee.” echoed the soft reply.

“Starsk, we’ve never needed...I don’t know. Words, I guess. Never needed to say the things we just *knew*. But buddy, I’ve got to tell you....” Hutch’s voice cracked. “When I saw you go down...”

When Hutch didn’t continue, Starsky rested his hand on his partner’s arm. They had never really talked about ‘that day’ from Hutch’s perspective. “Hutch, you don’t have to do this. It’s okay. I know what you’re trying to say.”

“Buddy, I’ve got to do more than just try and say this.” Hutch took a moment to clear his throat. “When I saw you go down, I thought you were *dead*. All the other times—and there were too many of those—all those other times when you were hurt I still had hope. There was always something I could do to fix it. We always had a chance. But this time, I figured our luck had finally run out. And I knew that you stood and faced those shooters so I wouldn’t have to...because you loved me that much. And as I stood there watching you bleed to death before my eyes, all I could think of was that I couldn’t remember the last time I told you how much you meant to me.”

“I knew, Hutch. I’ve always known.”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t stand the thought of you...of you *leaving* without having heard me *say it*, Starsk. You know, I’ve lived my entire life without ever hearing my father say the words ‘I love you’ to me. *Never.*”

Starsky’s eyes grew wide at his friend’s revelation. *To not have your dad tell you he loves you.* He couldn’t imagine how that must have felt.

Hutch’s gaze moved to the window, where the sunset’s meager light struggled to illuminate the room. “I can remember being ten years old and wishing my relationship with my father was different. Wishing that it was like the relationship I saw other kids having with their dads—being able to talk to them, spending time with them. Knowing that their dads were pulling for them. My dad was just...well, when he *was* home, he was just *there*. Kind of a fixture in the house. I don’t know how else to explain it. When he was home, I was either underfoot or just annoyed him, so he’d always send me away. All I wanted was to be with him. And to know that he loved me.

My Sea Scouts troop had a father and son banquet one night. I must have been eight or nine. Once again, my father couldn’t make it. There was something going on at the office or something. So, my mom came, which was worse than going alone because she stood out like a beacon, signaling to all my friends that my dad was too busy to be with me. Or didn’t care. It wasn’t the first time this had happened. Wasn’t the last, either. Well, that particular night I was so overwhelmed by, I don’t know, the emptiness of our relationship, it was like grieving the loss of someone.

That night, I went downstairs into my father’s den. I thought maybe if I told him first how much he meant to me, he’d tell me the same thing. I would have given anything—*anything*—to hear him actually say that he loved me. So, I’m standing there with tears in my eyes and he hardly glances at me above his newspaper. I got on my knees next to his chair—*on my knees, Starsk*—and I gripped his arm to get his attention. He finally said something like, ‘Kenneth, what on earth is the matter with you, boy?’ And I just knelt there with these tears running down my face, and finally said, ‘I can’t remember the last time I told you that I loved you, Dad.’ And do you know what he said to me, Starsk?”

Starsky simply shook his head, hardly daring to breathe, afraid of what Richard Hutchinson’s response had been, mourning for the little boy that his partner once was.

Hutch’s voice barked off a laugh that sounded more like a sob. “He told me to *get a hold of myself and get up off the floor*. That was it. Oh, no, then he told me that I must be overly tired because it was late and that I should go back to bed. Then he said, *big boys don’t cry*. He never moved, never acknowledged what I said, *nothing*. I swore that would be the last time I would cry for that man... for my dad.

I still love him, Starsk, and I’m sure he’s loved me in his own way. We did have some good times together, but it all seemed so surface...so sterile. That relationship will never be what I wanted it to be. That’s something I’ve had to learn to accept. I don’t regret saying the words to him, or even crying because of it. I still don’t, even if he never tells me that he loves me. No matter what the relationship with my father was or will ever be—I know that *he* heard *me* say the words. I know that I did all I could to let him know that I had loved him.”

“Hutch, I can’t believe...I...I sorry, man. I’m really sorry.” Starsky’s hand trembled as he reached up to wipe away one of the tears that streaked his partner’s face. Hutch’s hand passed his partner’s to quickly brush away the evidence of his pain, then took hold of Starsky’s hand. Feeling the tremor there, Hutch looked up to see the distress evident in his friend’s eyes and the pallor of his skin. But he knew his partner’s pain was more than the result of his ongoing recovery. “You look like crap, buddy.”

Starsky’s responding laugh sounded tremulous as well. “Yeah, well you don’t look so great yourself, hotshot.”

“Starsk...” Hutch looked away again, tears coming unbidden, partly because of the hurt that still lingered from the old wound, partly because of his love for the friend that sat across from him.

“Hutch, I know you love me. You’ve said it before. You’re the best friend I got in the whole world.”

“Yeah, but things haven’t been easy between us lately. All that crap with Kira—”

“Ancient history. Buried and forgotten.”

“I know, Starsk. And I’ll never let something like that get in the way again. You’re too important to me. I don’t want you to ever doubt that again.”

“I know, Hutch, I know. You’re more of a brother to me than Nicky ever could be. Next to my dad, you’re the best man I’ve ever known. I’m proud to be your partner and I don’t know what I ever did to deserve you.” Starsky smiled through tears of his own. “I love you, man.”

“Me and thee.” Hutch answered like a pledge. The two men grinned gently at each other, the bond between them leaving no room for embarrassment or shame. This was a moment few friendships ever reached and had to be savored. A few months prior, the connection between them seemed to have been severed, perhaps beyond repair. But even in the midst of the hurt, the bond remained.

“So...” Hutch finally drawled, breaking the silence in the darkening room. “You moving in?”

“Was there ever any doubt? Hey, let me see that picture again.” Hutch dug the photo back out of his pocket and reached up over Starsky’s head to turn on the light over the bed.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m trying to see what the houses next door look like. See, I figure if I get one of these cute nurses to fall madly in love with me, she’ll beg me to marry her. Being the gracious guy I am, of course—”

“—of course.”

“—I’ll marry her and she’ll be my *love slave* and will cook for me and do my laundry and give me foot rubs and—”

“—and feed you peeled grapes—”

“Exactly! Well, we ain’t gonna shack up with you in the same house, so I figure we can buy one of the places next door to you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Hutch grinned at his partner’s nonsense. “Next door, huh?”

“Save on gas and phone bills.”

Hutch rolled his eyes and searched his mind for a retort when they were interrupted.

An older nurse who could have easily played defensive tackle for the L.A. Rams paused in the doorway. “Time for your shot, Detective Starsky.” She gave Hutch a stern look. “Visiting hours are over, Detective Hutchinson.”

Hutch stood and leaned down close to his partner. “Is she the one, buddy? I’m not so sure I’d want her peeling *my* grapes....”



The news that his son had bought a house pleased Richard Hutchinson, thinking that the young man was finally showing some responsibility, both socially and fiscally. The news that he and his partner were ‘moving in together’ as Muriel put it, only added fuel to the burning fire of concern. He might be of an older generation, but Richard knew the connotations of what *moving in together* meant, especially amongst those weirdos in California. He broached the subject with Dr. Williams the next day after a game of racquetball.

“So, you think that this purchase is their way of ‘setting up house’ together, Rich?” Dr. Williams wiped the sweat from his brow before slinging it across the back of his neck.

“I don’t know what else *to* think, Ted.” The blond threw his tennis shoes into the oak locker. Anger and tension coursed through his movements as he sat on the bench to remove his socks.

Dr. Williams leaned against his own locker and looked thoughtful. “Well, from what you’ve told me, some implications are there: his inability to have a stable and lasting relationship with a woman; what you term to be a rather excessive display of emotions; his inordinate dependence on his partner. Didn’t you say that even when your son visits he ends up calling his partner at least once or twice, even if he’s only visiting for a weekend?”

“Yes. It’s as if he can’t go two days without talking to him.”

“And he’s not seeing anyone?”

“Not hardly. He can’t seem to keep a woman around. You know that he divorced a perfectly fine young woman after he met his partner.”

“And well, there is...Rich, I hate to bring this point up. But one of the classic behavioral responses to having a dominant same-sex parent, or in perhaps in Ken’s case, having a *weak* relationship with his father, could prompt him to seek out...well, a male counterpoint to fill that void. Would it be safe to say your relationship with Ken wasn’t and isn’t all it could be?”

Richard Hutchinson ground out a *yes* from between his clenched teeth. “So, are you saying that his being gay could be a way of getting back at me?”

“No, probably not. More like his way of replacing you. Mm-hm. Were there any tragic or emotionally damaging incidents to Ken as a child? You know, abuse? Sexual molestation?”

“*No! Of course not!*”

“Easy there, Rich! I wasn’t implying that it came from you. Sometimes these things happen without a parent ever knowing about it. It’s often inflicted by a trusted adult, like a neighbor or relative. Did Ken spend any unsupervised time with a male adult that would have had such an opportunity?”

Richard thought for a moment. “Well, actually he did spend quite a few of his summers with his grandfather upstate. But I don’t think so. The old man was a bit of a loner, but he wasn’t a pervert. Ken did spend two or three summers at a boy’s camp.”

“Well, that’s a possibility then. Now, didn’t you say, too, that your son only seems to socialize on a regular basis with his partner and some other single male friend? A bar owner, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Some weirdo by the name of ‘Huggy.’ What kind of flaky name is that? It’s probably some queer bar, too.”

“Well, some people think that homosexuality is the result of a person’s genetic makeup. But that study was inconclusive. You know, I wonder if his being a police officer is a smoke screen.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve mentioned that your son has a tendency to get into quite a few scrapes on the job. It’s possible that he’s trying to cover his tracks by acting out. You know, over compensating by being ‘macho, and all. Maybe he thinks that if he’s aggressive enough, acting out machismo, no one will ever guess that he’s homosexual. That, or he’s trying to deny it by acting out in an overt, assertive, hostile manner.”

“Do you think so?”

“It’s another possibility. Do you see he and his friends...well, *touching* a lot? Or hugging? Holding hands? That kind of thing?”

Richard Hutchinson slammed his locker door in disgust at the idea. “Well, no. Not that I can remember. But they always seem to be close to one another—right next to each other. You know how everybody has their own comfort level of proximity to those next to them?”

“*Personal space.*”

“Right. With Ken and his friend, they’re...well, they’re always closer to each other than most, that’s all.”

“Hmm. Intimacy? Well, Rich. I can certainly see where you would think that he and his partner living together is simply the proverbial icing on the cake. But remember now, this is just my hypothesizing. I specialize in industrial behavioralism—how people work together and respond to stimuli, not abnormal psychology or human sexuality.”

“Sure, right. But it’s still psychology. Thanks for listening, Ted. And oh, thanks for promising to keep this on the *Q.T.* I can’t even begin to imagine what the rest of the guys here at the club would think if they knew that my son was a...well...*that way.*”

“I understand, Rich, don’t give it a second thought. Besides, he is still your son. You’re going to have to find a way to deal with your feelings and accept the facts of the situation.”

“Like *blazes* I’ll accept this! That boy has never listened to a word I’ve said. He didn’t want to follow in his old man’s footsteps to go into business, that’s fine. I could accept that because he was interested in medicine. It was his studying medicine in college that kept his butt out of the service, but I tell you Ted, it about killed me when I heard he was part of those government protest at the college. I was never so embarrassed. Wanted to help people, not hurt them, he said. Said that it was all big government and politics, not about fighting for freedom or protecting the oppressed. Fine. I didn’t like it, but I didn’t push it. But then he ran off half-cocked to play cops and robbers in Fruitland, throwing away what could have been a promising career in medicine and now *this*. I *can’t* accept it. I *won’t* accept it! That’s not how he was raised and I will not be embarrassed by him. Not again. He could be doing so much more with his life, making something of himself. But this...this alternative lifestyle B.S. I will *never* accept!”

Richard Hutchinson formulated a plan as he left the athletic club and headed home. He carefully masked his simmering anger as he explained to his wife that it was high time they went out and visited their son, especially with his recent purchase of the house and his partner’s hospitalization. Muriel was delighted at the prospect of a trip out west just as he expected, especially since he didn’t tell her the real reason for the visit.

It was time to straighten out the prodigal son once and for all.



Moving Starsky into the house had been an easier adjustment than either of them had anticipated. Just prior to his release from the hospital, Hutch and Huggy had gone over to Starsky’s apartment to clean in anticipation of its subletting and to retrieve some of his necessary and more personal items. The day after the wild fracas and drenching in the hospital, courtesy of their impromptu “release-from-the-

hospital” dinner party, Hutch had brought Starsky “home.” The two men settled into a quiet routine quickly, enjoying the time of healing for the both of them.

Starsky continued to regain his strength and mobility, though rotor fluidity with his left arm was slow in coming. Muscle had to be rebuilt in his shoulder, stomach and abdomen, as well as his redeveloping his general stamina. Throughout the first weeks of physical therapy Starsky was in constant agony, but never uttered a word of complaint to his partner. The silent suffering tore at Hutch’s heart, but he respected Starsky’s patient fortitude and tried not to hover. Instead, Hutch was inconspicuous in making sure a chair was nearby when Starsky began to tire or was always available to rub away the ache in overtaxed muscles.

With the amount of paperwork that tied him to the desk, Hutch had taken up jogging again to compensate for of time he spent off the street. In the past year, he had fallen away from his focus on his health and committed himself to getting back into a regular regime. It was natural to appoint himself as Starsky’s coach, conscience, and cheerleader for the in-home exercises. To regain dexterity Starsky’s therapy included a barrage of training he could do at home, one of which was “walking” his fingers up the wall and back down again—a boring process at best—but one that was proven to retrain his muscles. The daily routine took on a new level of tolerance when Hutch began to pop in favorite 8-tracks, encouraging Starsky to let his fingers move to the beat. The frustration of the exercises reached a tolerable level when moving to Latin disco. Hutch even learned to ignore his partner’s slaughtering of the Spanish language when he began singing along.

Traditionally, the paperwork and paper trails of a case were torturous for the two detectives, but during the first few months of the Starsky’s convalescence, it actually became another source of healing. For Hutch it was a chance to spend time with his partner and include him in legitimate police work. Hutch was grateful, too, for the opportunity to bounce things off the other to utilize the sharp mind that at times hid behind guileless eyes and a mop of curls. For Starsky, the work with his partner was a great distraction from the pain that plagued him and offered him the mental exercise he needed when the slower pace of his life seemed suffocating. Having his partner solicit his opinion and reasoning skills gave him a sense of satisfaction and self-worth, especially when he became disgusted with his current limitations.

Typical evenings together were a light supper for Hutch, a strict diet for Starsky to rebuild strength and gain weight, and a second slow walk around the new neighborhood. The two men were already getting to be fixtures in the quiet suburb, with most of the neighbors already aware of the civic heroes that had moved onto Topanga Boulevard. It was not unusual for the two detectives to be greeted by everyone they came in contact with during their evening exercise.

One particularly frustrating morning found Starsky aching and angry after his therapy session. Scar tissue and muscle damage was still limiting his range of motion, causing him not to be able to lift his arms comfortably past his shoulders. The flexibility he had experienced in the hospital fled when he was taken off morphine. His left arm and hand remained weak and clumsy. The therapist confided to Hutch that his partner’s motor skills were progressing as expected, but slower than Starsky had hoped for. The brunet sat in silence during the drive home, only answering his partner’s attempt at conversation with

grunts and monosyllabic answers. Once the two returned home, Starsky claimed he was tired and retreated to his bedroom to lie down for the rest of the morning.

Lunch was greeted with the same moody withdrawal and conversation between the two was limited. As Hutch finished drying the dishes inspiration came to him. Putting away the last plate, he disappeared into his bedroom for a few moments before returning to the living room where Starsky sat staring morosely at a game show.

“Let’s go, Gordo. Time for our daily constitutional.”

“Our *what?*”

“Our walk.” Hutch reached out a hand to help his partner up. “Let’s hit the sidewalk.”

“Not today, Hutch. I don’t feel like it.”

Mild concern graced Hutch’s face, though he deduced his partner’s reluctance stemmed more from an emotional ailment rather than a physical one.

“C’mon pal, how are you going to get better if you don’t do your therapy?” Hutch’s statement elicited a sour look from the man on the couch. It was, however, enough to motivate Starsky into taking the proffered hand up and easing to his feet. “Besides, I thought we could play a little catch this afternoon.” Starsky’s ragged baseball appeared in Hutch’s hand.

“You’re nuts!”

“Then I’m in good company. C’mon, Gordo.”



The park a few blocks from their house was predominantly deserted this time of day, with most of the children that frequented the playground still in school. A few young mothers and their toddlers played on the swings, but other than that, the two men had the park to themselves. Hutch led Starsky over to the single ball field and deposited him on the pitcher’s mound. Handing the smaller man his baseball, Hutch retreated to the home plate and assumed a catcher’s crouch.

“Okay, Ace. Show me what you got.”

Starsky gave his partner an almost angry look, then scanned the park in embarrassment. “Hutch, this is stupid. I don’t think...I probably can’t....” Anger at his limitations choked off his words.

Hutch’s features softened with sympathy. “Starsk I know that you probably can’t sail it over the plate like you used to. But let’s see what you can do and then we’ll go from there.”

Starsky stood silently, eyes glued to the ball he rolled awkwardly in his hands, his efforts clumsy. Hutch realized he was perhaps asking a bit much during this first attempt and changed tactics. Jogging back to his partner, he took the ball from Starsky's hand, then trotted a few more steps infield so that he stood only a few yards away.

"Here." Hutch launched a gentle underhand toss to his partner.

Reflexes caused Starsky to look up just in time and brought his hands up to catch the ball before it struck his chest. He looked at his partner with a small grin, surprising himself that he had caught it. Hutch expectantly raised his hands, encouraging his partner to return the throw. Starsky raised the ball over his left shoulder, but tightened muscles in his abdomen cramped, eliciting a gasp and the lowering of his arm.

"Easy, Starsk. Try it underhanded, first." Starsky's features still bore a look of disgust, but he brought his arm down and awkwardly launched the ball back at his partner. The ball went high and wide, almost short of its target, but Hutch lurched forward and snagged it before it hit the ground. Starsky's hostile look didn't deter the blond from grinning widely.

"My grandmother throws better than that." Starsky grouched.

"Ah, don't worry, pal. If any of the major league scouts come by, I'll just tell them that you're drunk." Hutch gently tossed the ball back to his partner. "Give me another one."

Starsky managed to catch the ball again, initially feeling a twinge from the unused muscles, but as the game progressed, his ligaments began to warm and loosen. Concentrating with each effort, Starsky's efforts became smoother and closer to their mark. A tendril of hope began to weave its way back into his confidence.

Not wanting to push Starsky too hard, Hutch called an end to the game after fifteen minutes. "C'mon, that's enough for one day. We've got to start headin' back. I promised Dobey I'd call him at 3:00 for an update."

Starsky nodded and launched the ball at his partner one last time, a satisfied smile gracing his features. The two men made their way home in silence, each lost in thought. Starsky paused outside the doorway.

"Hutch?"

"Yeah, Starsk?"

"Thanks."

Hutch smiled warmly and gripped his friend's shoulder. "You're welcome."



The call to Dobey occurred closer to 4:00, with only a few updates on the newest charges of extortion against James Gunther given. Hutch's diligent legwork had provided some much needed data for the Prosecuting Attorney to build the case that would go to court at the end of the month.

Starsky headed for the shower before dinner, leaving Hutch alone to contemplate the evening's meal. He was surprised to hear a car pull into their driveway at 4:30, having just hung up with the Captain. Their superior and friend had made it a habit of stopping by each evening on his way home from work to check up on Starsky's progress. Whoever the visitor was couldn't be Dobey yet.

As Hutch opened the front door he was shocked to see his parents climbing out of a rented Cadillac.

"Surprise!" Muriel called out as she shut the passenger door and moved toward her son, arms outstretched to embrace him.

The Hutch's jaw dropped as he crossed the sidewalk and stepped into his mother's arms. "Mom! Dad! What are you...? Why didn't you call?"

There was something to the glint in his father's eyes that sparked an uneasy feeling in Hutch. Richard's tone was sarcastic as he offered his hand. "It's good to see you too, son."

Hutch shook his head in embarrassment and accepted his father's grip. "I'm sorry, of course it's always great to see you. I'm just surprised. You've never just dropped in on me without calling, is all. It's not like Minnesota is around the corner."

Muriel had already moved to a better position in order to view the house. "Oh Ken, it's *adorable!*" Richard's cringe at the term *adorable* wasn't lost on his son, but Hutch didn't pursue it.

"Thanks mom, it's...well, it's *home.*" The genuine warmth in their son's voice evident. Hutch turned back to the rented car. "Are your bags here? You know you're welcome to stay with us. You can have my room."

"And where would *you* sleep?"

His father's voice held a hint of a *something* Hutch couldn't quite identify, and he looked at him in mild confusion at the tone of the question. "On the couch, of course. Look, why don't you come in? I'll give you the grand tour."

The sound of running water and Starsky's deep baritone from the shower greeted the trio as they entered the living room. "He'll be out in a bit. Let me show you around."

The tour of the small ranch took only a few moments, with promises to explore Hutch's garden after coffee when Starsky could join them. Hutch ushered his parents back into the living room and seated them on the couch. After putting the coffee on, he sat in the arm chair opposite them and uneasily crossed his legs. His mother seemed the same as always—happy to see him, warm and vibrant. But his

father has harder to read. The older Hutchinson was clearly agitated, his facial muscles growing increasingly tense, and Hutch could feel the storm brewing from deep in the pit of his stomach.

“Well,” Richard finally stated from between clenched teeth. “You’re probably wondering why we *really* came out here.”

Muriel’s head turned abruptly to face her husband, confusion marring her perfect features. “Richard?”

“Muriel, I didn’t want to get into this with you before we came out here, because I knew you’d try and talk me out of it. Look Ken, I’ll come right out and say what’s on my mind.” The older man leaned forward to stare his son straight in the eye. “*I know what you are and I am not happy about it.*”

Hutch was taken aback. A quick glance at his mother confirmed that she was as confused as he was. A familiar sense of dread and angst began roiling in his gut. *You know what I am? What the heck is that supposed to mean? The heroin...?* Neither Starsky nor Dobey had ever spoken to his parents of the forced addiction and he had certainly never mentioned it. *What a war that would have been!* Hutch rapidly searched his memory for other possibilities. “Dad, what...what are talking about? You know I’m *what?*”

Richard looked distinctly uncomfortable. “I know about you and your...*your ‘partner’.*”

Hutch ran his hands across his face and looked at his father expectantly. Richard shifted uncomfortably in his seat and slapped his hands on his knees.

“Alright, I come right out and say it. Ken, I know that you’re *gay!*”

“*What?!*” Hutch and Muriel’s voices exploded at the same time. Hutch shot out of his seat with fists clenched in hurt frustration.

Muriel’s mouth gaped for a moment before she could continue. “Richard, how on earth can you think such a thing?”

“Now you listen, Muriel. I’ve given this a lot of thought and it’s something we should have realized a long time ago. Isn’t that right Ken?”

“I don’t believe this!” Hutch raged. “How could you possibly think for even one minute that I was gay?” Angry energy put the younger man in motion as he paced furiously across the room. The livid and raw hurt that etched across his features was unbearable to look at. “Where on earth did you get the idea that I was gay?”

“All the signs are there—”

“All the *signs?* What does that mean?”

“Look, Ken—now that we know about it, we can get this taken care of. My friend Dr. Williams referred me to a very reputable clinic out here. We can get you the treatment you need without anyone even knowing about your...your *problem*—”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. You talked to someone about these delusions of yours? Who’s Dr. Williams?”

Muriel broke in. “Ted Williams? From the club?”

“Oh, great,” Hutch ground out. “You talked to some podiatrist at the health club?”

“No,” Hutch’s father surged to his feet. “Ted Williams is a psychologist. I told him all about your...your questionable behavior and he agrees with me that you have all the symptoms of being a homosexual.”

“*Symptoms*? Homosexuality isn’t the flu, dad, it’s—” Hutch’s face turned an even darker shade of red, burning with rage. “I can’t believe this. No, no—I *can* believe this. You know what’s even worse than you thinking that I’m gay? Do you? What’s worse is that instead of talking to me about it, you just come barging in here, deciding that your prodigal son has ‘questionable behaviors’ and how you’re going to fix it. Just like that! No discussion, no *nothing*! Ship your queer son off to the fruit farm before anybody knows about it so that *you’re* not embarrassed and a quick, ‘thank you, Dr. Freud’ for making him normal again. But, boy, that really shouldn’t surprise, me, now should it, *Dad*?” The last word was spit out like a curse. “What was it, Dad? What made you think I was gay? Hmm? What exactly were those ‘signs’ you saw? The fact that I’m not married? Divorced? Is it the art? The music? The way I dress? The way I wear my hair? My friends? My—” A light bulb went off in Hutch’s mind and his pacing ground to a halt. “That’s it, isn’t it? It’s my friendship with Starsky. It’s because he’s living here with me.”

“Yes! That’s it! You’re *living* with your...your ‘*partner*’!”

Hutch stopped and turned deadly eyes on his father. “Yes, partner. You say that like it’s a dirty word.”

“Look, ever since you hooked up with him, you’ve changed! You’ve—”

“Oh come on! That’s not the truth and you know it! You can’t blame him for how you look at me! You’ve *always* disapproved of me, Dad. Always! I never measured up to the expectations of the Hutchinson yard stick! You always thought I wasn’t ambitious enough, never smart enough, never determined enough. Do you know how many ways I tried all those years just to try and prove something to you? How many different ways I tried to get your attention? Well, you know something, I quit trying to live up to your idea of who I was supposed to be years ago!”

“Don’t I know it!”

“You don’t get it, do you? I don’t know why that doesn’t surprise me though. Why should I think that you would know me well enough to know that *I am not gay*?” The last words were spat out vehemently.

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic. I know you better than you think. You’ve always been different, Ken, different from all the other kids. So sensitive, so withdrawn. You’d rather be off by yourself reading or drawing or playing music while other boys were out playing sports—”

“Ken played sports, Richard!” Muriel interjected angrily.

“Yeah, but only because I made him.”

“That’s a load of crap, Dad! The arts, the classics, music doesn’t make somebody gay or even effeminate. That is probably one of the most absurd, asinine comments I have...where on earth are you getting these warped ideas?”

“Fine! What about your partner, huh? You two were always inseparable and now you’re *living together*. And neither of you can maintain a relationship with a woman! What about that?”

“*Women*? Of course we see women! But you have no clue what our jobs are like. The hours...the...the stress. How on earth can I maintain a relationship with a woman, let alone find the time and energy to meet a nice one—”

“You and Vanessa were happily married until you met your friend!”

“Vanessa and I *happy*? That’s one word I wouldn’t have used to describe that relationship.”

“Fine, the marriage didn’t work. But why aren’t you interested in other women?”

“How can you think that I’m not? I’m on dates all the time—”

“But nothing permanent! You can’t make one last.”

“Not for lack of trying! For crying out loud, Dad! What I do for a living is not a 9 to 5 job, its 24 - 7. I get called in the middle of the night or during my days off. It’s an unusual week when I don’t put in a couple of 14 hour days, and when a case is hot, it’s typical to work several days and nights straight until it breaks. What woman would put up with that?”

“Your partner does!”

“You’re out of line, Dad!”

The two men’s voices had long since escalated and overrode one another’s. Richard converged on his son until they were nearly toe-to-toe. “Look, I’ve had enough of this behavior! No son of mine is going to embarrass this family. We’re going to get you to a shrink—”

“And I’ve had just about enough—”

Both men were drawn up short by Muriel's explosive gasp. She had all but been forgotten during the heated confrontation until she caught sight of Starsky as he entered the room. The raised voices had initially been drowned out by the shower, but once Starsky had stepped out to dry off he caught wind of an argument, though he couldn't figure out who Hutch was fighting with or why.

Pulling on his sweat pants as quickly as his healing body would allow, Starsky had rushed into the bedroom without further getting dressed and drew his Beretta from his nightstand. He had no idea of who his partner was talking so heatedly with, but from the intensity of the voices, it was getting ugly, fast. For a fleeting moment, Starsky wondered if he was overreacting to think that someone would be so bold as to assault a cop in his living room, but then again, he didn't expect someone to try and take them out in a police parking lot either.

As he entered with his gun thrust unsteadily in front of him, Muriel gasped, and all the air seemed to be sucked from the living room. Richard, Muriel, and Hutch took in the sight of him in a heartbeat: the patchwork of puckered scars from the still-healing bullet wounds and surgery incisions; the pale skin against the all too-thin frame; the shaking hands that held the pistol, but menacing nonetheless. But it was the agony on Starsky's face as he forced his muscles to work beyond their strength and fluidity that elicited the gasp from Muriel.

"Hutch?" Starsky's face ran a gauntlet of concern, anger, and then finally embarrassment as he saw the disgust and pity on the faces of Hutch's parents. Starsky relaxed his stance with as much dignity as he could muster. "Sorry, I thought I heard...voices." He acknowledged his partner's parents with a polite and slightly abashed grin as he lowered his weapon. "Mr. Hutchinson. Muriel." Starsky's civility didn't quite reach his eyes, feeling the electric tension radiating off Hutch. He looked questioningly at his partner, his intent clear. "Hutch, is everything okay?"

Seeing Starsky's discomfort, Hutch unconsciously moved between his partner and his parents, shielding him from their gazes. He inconspicuously disarmed Starsky and gripped his right shoulder in acknowledgment of what the effort had cost. Warring feelings of anger, grief, and appreciation crossed his own features.

"Yeah, Starsk, it's okay. Sorry if you were worried. We...my parents...decided to pay a visit."

"That's...great. If you'll excuse me, I'll finish getting dressed." Starsky worked up a smile for Muriel, but paused to make eye contact with Hutch before leaving the room. Starsky's brows raised—*You okay?* Hutch's look sought to reassure him with gentled eyes—*Will be, I'll handle it. You alright?* Starsky nodded in response and left the room, his movements still stiff. The exit wounds' scars on his back continued to proclaim what he had survived, and what he had to overcome.

"My God," Richard swore under his breath. "How...that was all from the shooting?"

Hutch turned vehemently back to his father, Starsky's Beretta still clutched in his grip. "Yes. My partner survived five slugs to his chest and abdomen. His heart stopped. He was dead for over two minutes until they brought him back. You know all about bullet wounds, Dad. Doesn't that make him 'a real man' in your book? A *normal* man? Do you want to know what else? He stood and faced the

gunman when he could have hit the dirt. I yelled a warning to him. I told him to get down! He had time to take cover, but instead, he went for his gun. He spun around and faced the bullets because a millisecond before he saw me standing on the other side of the car. He saw that I wasn't safe! So he faced the gunmen, he took those bullets, to protect me. Me! His *partner*! And it wasn't the first time, either. When he was dying..." Hutch's voice cracked with the intensity of his emotion.

"When he dying from a poison that was sucking the life right out of him, he chose to give up the one chance that would save him because I was at risk. He chose death so that *I* could live. That's how much I mean to him. He's the best friend I ever had and the best man I ever known. That kind of partnership—that kind of friendship—bonds you to a person, don't you see? Yes, I love him. I'm not afraid to say it. But it's not how you think. It's not the way you're making it out to be. *I love him*. But I'm not *in love* with him." Hutch's tirade slowed to a defeated resolution. "I will never be the type of man you think I should be, Dad. But I'm also not the type of man you think I am. Heaven help me if I was." Hutch slowly walked to the door and opened it. "Goodbye. Mom, I'll call you soon. But right now, I think you both should go."

"Ken, wait." Richard stepped up to grab his son by the arm, hope and exasperation warring on his features. "You're *not* gay?"

Hutch ran both hands across his face. "No, Dad, I'm not. Never have been, never will be."

"I...I just don't understand—"

"Exactly, Dad. You never did and probably never will." Hutch dropped his hands from his face. "Please leave."

Muriel nodded silently, and gathered her purse and sweater. As she walked to the door, she paused and laid a trembling hand on her son's cheek. "I love you, Ken."

Hutch reached up for her hand and turned it, kissing the palm. "I love you, too, Mom."

Muriel turned and cast a glance back in the direction that Starsky had left. Her gaze then rested on her husband with something close to fury. Hutch knew there'd be hell to pay later at the hotel room. Richard picked up his overcoat from the back of the couch and paused, trying to find something to say to his son. Finally, accepting the futility of words right then, he walked out the door and didn't look back.

The creak of the Starsky's bedroom door opening caused Hutch to finally pull himself away from where he had been staring down the now empty street and shut the door. Starsky made his way to the couch and sat down. "You okay?"

"You heard, huh?"

"Old houses have paper-thin walls, remember? You okay?"

"Sure, sure. I'm just great." Hutch muttered sarcastically.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“No. I want to run.”

Starsky looked up sharply at his partner as he crossed the room. “What do—oh.” His unfinished question was answered by Hutch pulling on his track shoes. “You already ran once today.”

“Well, I’m going again. You gonna be okay here alone?” Hutch’s voice was sharper than he intended, but at the moment he couldn’t find the energy to temper it.

“I...sure. I’ll be okay.”

Hutch nodded curtly and stormed out the front door, slamming it shut behind him. Starsky caught a glimpse of his partner as he surged across the lawn and down the sidewalk. Starsky’s own anger continued to smolder, warring with the grief he felt for his best friend’s rapidly deteriorating relationship with his father.

Stiffly, Starsky pushed himself up off the couch and made his way toward the hall closet, where he remembered seeing Hutch put his suitcase. He would be gone before the other returned.



The ride back to the hotel was filled with a stony silence. The suite’s door had only shut when Muriel turned and lit into her husband. “Richard, what on earth possessed you?!”

“Now Muriel—”

“Don’t you dare patronize me with ‘now Muriel’! Of all the absolutely asinine things you have ever done in your lifetime, this was over the top!”

“Look, if you’d give me a moment to explain—”

“There’s nothing to explain, Richard. You were crystal clear back at Ken’s house. How could you? How could you hurt our son this way?”

Richard crossed to the small wet bar and poured himself a Scotch. “My intent was not to upset the boy, but if his feelings were hurt in the process, well...that was simply an unfortunate result of solving the problem.”

“Solving the problem? Richard, you arrogant fool, there was no problem! No, no, I take that back. There has always been a problem, but it wasn’t with Ken.”

The connotation was not lost on her husband. “Now, what is that supposed to mean?”

Muriel sighed. “Richard, sit down.”

Her husband crossed over to the bench nestled at the foot of the bed. For a moment the two sat silently, facing opposite angles in the room. Finally, Muriel spoke. “Richard, I love you. I always have and I always will. But I haven’t always liked you.”

Richard began to object, but was quickly cut off as she continued. “No, you need to hear me out. You’re a good man, a decent man. You’ve been a good husband and a good father. I haven’t always agreed with you. Many times I wouldn’t voice my opinions or my objections, though when it came to the children, I tried to bring things to your attention.

Honey, you have to have known that there were times when I was unhappy in our marriage, especially after the war. I missed you so much during those years and when you came home, well, you had changed. I just hoped that things would eventually get back to normal and they did for the most part. I had also hoped you’d remain the same tender and loving man I married. But when you came home, something had changed. I don’t know what it was, there was just something different about you.

I know that your leg wound changed you physically, but I think it changed you inside, too. Perhaps since you were facing physical limitations, you focused all your time and drive into succeeding in business. It was like you had to prove something to someone, perhaps to yourself. What you didn’t seem to grasp was that you didn’t have to prove anything to me. You became so distant then. At first, I thought it was me, that you didn’t love me anymore. But our life went on. The kids came along and that helped ease my...my loneliness. I tried not to show it, but the kids picked up on it—my missing you. The man you used to be. Especially Kenny. Somehow he could sense the distance between us. He felt my pain. Do you know that he used to have dreams of having to protect me?”

“Protect you from what?”

“From you. Not that he thought you were going to be violent or anything, it’s not that. He only knew that you had hurt me somehow. That you were cold, distant. Driven. Kenny sought to ease my pain...fill some void in my life.” Muriel emitted a short, harsh laugh. “Boy, I’ll bet Ted Williams would have a field day with that Freudian nuance. Richard, don’t you see, it’s no wonder Ken became a policeman. It was just an extension of who he’s always been, what he always was.”

“Muriel, I never knew—”

“No, your focus was elsewhere. You left me at home to raise the kids, keep the house. It was almost like I needed to be both a mother and father to them.”

“Now wait a minute—”

“No, *you* wait a minute. You need to hear this, Richard. There were occasions when you spent time with Ken. Good times, important ones. But they were few and far between. He needed to be with you, but you were too busy, had other priorities. As Ken got older, he tried to make friends that would stand in the gap. That’s why he always seemed so distant and melancholy to you. When you looked at your

son you expected to see a reflection of yourself—a miniature Richard Hutchinson. What you did see was that empty part of his life. The part without you in it.”

“I didn’t know. I... don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Don’t say anything. You’ve said enough for one day. Just *think* about it. And think about this, too. It’s perfectly understandable that he’s not married right now. First, he was devastated when he and Vanessa broke up. Our son really meant every word of those vows. They were an oath before God and man, and Ken is a man of his word, same as his father. Their divorce broke his heart and when he needed someone to help him through all of that, it was David who helped him pick up the pieces. And there have been other women in his life. Women he truly loved.”

“What others?”

Muriel turned and gave her husband a look mixed with anger and disappointment. “I’ve told you a number of times. Any time he’s written or called to tell us about his latest love, you just didn’t listen or didn’t find it important enough to remember. He might have married Gillian, I think.”

“She was the one who got murdered.”

“Yes. And there was Abbey. She left him because he was a cop. He loved her, but she was too frightened of what his job included, what he had to face every day. How do you think that made him feel? He was devastated. But he had David to lean on. And there were others. Jeannie. I don’t know all the details, David only filled me in on a little, but Ken was hurt because some of the things she was involved in. And then this whole Kira business....” Muriel sighed. “Your son isn’t married for lack of trying. Even after being hurt by these women, he hasn’t given up on love.”

“No, I guess not. But what about all those other things I’ve mentioned? What about him and David? Ted Williams seemed to think his being gay was possible.”

“Ted Williams is full of *crap*, Richard.”

“Muriel!”

“Oh, Richard. Let the man worry about his own Oedipal complex. His job is to get union workers and management to play nice together. As far as David and Ken go, they’re friends and partners. That’s it.”

The knock on the hotel suite’s door came as a surprise to the Hutchinsons, and filled them with both expectation and dread. Richard stood to answer the door, but was stopped by his wife’s hand on his sleeve. “This discussion is not over.”

Richard nodded and crossed to the door, anticipating an even greater confrontation with their son and his partner. Neither expected their visitor to be Harold Dobey.

“Harold? What...? What a surprise, please come in.” Richard moved away from the door to allow their guest into the suite.

“Richard, good to see you. Muriel, you’re looking as lovely as always.” The captain shook both their hands in turn.

Muriel stood and offered him a chair. “Harold, how nice of you to drop by. How did you know we were even in town?”

Richard joined his wife and sat back down on the bench seat. “Did Ken call you?”

“No. Actually I stopped by to see Starsky. I’ve been checking in on him ever since his shooting. It’s on my way home in fact. Hutch...Ken was out jogging, so Dave and I were talking....”

“And he told you about the fight and where we were staying.” Richard finished. “Was he mad?”

A smile tugged at the corners of the captain’s mouth. “You could say that. If he hadn’t been laid up like he was, he might have taken you out, Rich. Sorry, Muriel.”

A sad smile graced her features. “I wouldn’t have blamed him. Harold, pardon my manners. How is Edith? We haven’t seen her and the children in years. And can I get you something? A drink perhaps?”

“No, thank you, I’m fine. And Edith and the kids are terrific. Rosie’s in the first grade this next school year and Cal’s finishing up a summer baseball league. He’s playing first base this season.”

Richard anxiously stood up and crossed over to the room’s wet bar to pour himself another scotch. “So, tell me, Harold. What exactly does my son’s partner think you’re going to be able to do or say in all of this?”

The captain studied Richard for a moment before answering. “Nothing, actually. It was my idea to stop over here and visit. Have the two of you had dinner yet?”

When the Hutchinsons indicated that they hadn’t, the captain’s smile gained something neither of them could quite put pinpoint. “Good. Let’s go for a drive.”



It was well after dark when Hutch headed back to the small ranch house. The sweat from his run had long since dried, leaving his hair in slightly curled tendrils about his face. The anger left him quicker than he had anticipated, draining him of both emotion and energy, and leaving him feeling like a dry, empty husk. As he turned the final corner onto Topanga Boulevard, he was able to see the living room lights glowing warmly through the picture window. Unexpectedly, a flicker of contentment pushed away some of the lifelessness that had shrouded his heart since the encounter with his parents earlier that day.

Home. The thought of the safety and security the new house offered, coupled with the comfortable friendship of his partner lightened his step. He was surprised, however, to see the garage door open, its light straining to illuminate the driveway. Hutch quickened his pace. His surprise and concern increased when he found his partner sitting on the steps leading from the garage to the house, a small suitcase sprawled near the Torino.

“Starsky, *what on earth...?*”

Starsky’s breathing was rapid and his face had lost some of its color. His arms were firmly clenched across his ribs and a fine sheen of sweat covered his brow and upper lip.

“What are you doing out here? Are you all right? Starsk?”

Finally, Starsky nodded when Hutch knelt down in front of him and placed worried hands on his friend’s shoulders. A tired and resigned grin tugged at his mouth.

“I’m okay, just give me a sec. Muscles tightened up on me.”

“Not exactly the best time to be taking a trip, don’t you think?”

“Wise guy. Help me up, huh? My butt’s getting cold.”

Hutch gently supported his partner as best he could without adding to his pain and helped him back into the house. Starsky was quickly maneuvered to the couch and Hutch retrieved the heating pad and plugged it in. Starsky’s hands were shaking as he tried to unzip his windbreaker.

“Here, let me.” Hutch made short work of removing the jacket and wrapped the already warm pad around his partner’s midsection. “When was the last time you had your meds?”

“I don’t know. Maybe around lunch.”

Hutch got up quickly and crossed to the kitchen cabinets, spilling out Starsky’s evening dosage and pouring a glass of juice. He was immediately back to where his partner sat, head thrown back on the couch, his arms hugging the heating pad to his cramped abs. “Here.”

Watching his partner swallow the anti-inflammatories and pain relievers, a twinge of anger sparked colored Hutch’s tone. “Now, are you going to tell me what you were doing with a suitcase, headed for your car?”

“Look, Hutch, I just figured...well....”

“You *just figured* that things would be easier for me with my dad if you weren’t around here to give him the wrong impression, is that it?” The immediate realization dissolved Hutch’s anger. “Oh, Starsky, you idiot. What am I going to do with you? I don’t care what he thinks of me anymore.”

Starsky lifted his head up from the back of the couch. “Sure you do. Otherwise you wouldn’t have gotten so ticked.”

Hutch acknowledged the point with a nod. “Okay, it still bugs me some. But it’s not going to change who I am. Or who we are. So don’t go thinking that you don’t belong here, all right?”

“All right.”

“Heating pad helping?” Starsky nodded, his cramped muscles giving in to the relaxing heat. “What brought on the spasms? Doing too much?”

“That, and having to reach up onto the top shelf for the suitcase. I think that did me in.”

“You’re just not ready for the big leagues yet, pal.” Hutch stood and stretched. “I’m going to grab a quick shower. You okay for a bit?”

“Ain’t going’ nowhere.” Starsky groaned. “Hey, Hutch? You really okay with all of this? What your father said and all?”

“No, but what I am going to do? Once he has his mind set about something, that’s no talking to him. What about you? His little revelation included you, too.”

Starsky tried to conceal his disgust toward his partner’s father, but the emotion rolled off him like a wave. “I’m not going to lie and say it doesn’t tick me off royally.”

“I’m sorry, you know.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about. It’s just that...I can’t believe he thought we were like that. You don’t think other people think that we’re...?”

“No, no I don’t. I am sorry, partner. I know how you feel about...well, all of this.”

“Well, yeah. But I’m not going to freak out about it.”

“Good, it’s not worth it. I mean, we sorted through all this before with John Blaine’s case.”

The memory of Starsky’s mentor’s death brought a barrage of memories to both detectives. Starsky had spent his teen years living next door to the captain, who had nurtured him after the loss of his father and he was sent to California. The revelation that John Blaine was gay compelled the two detectives to confront the issue of homosexuality on the police force and work through their own perspectives on the subject.

“He’s was a good cop. Just because he was gay doesn’t mean he was a bad cop. I don’t know, I guess I still don’t understand it, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t a good person, you know?”

“Right, but that isn’t the same as being labeled it yourself. Sheesh, by my own father no less.”

“Maybe somebody took a picture of you and Huggy dancing together at The Green Parrot and sent it to him.”

Hutch shot his partner a chilling look, though he was grateful Starsky was comfortable enough with the whole episode with his father to joke about it. “Yeah, but I was dancing with *Huggy*, not you.”

“Whatever. At least if we *were* gay, everybody would know that you’ve got good taste.”

Hutch looked more than a little dumbfounded. “Starsky, you are mental.”

“The result of being around you too much. Look, like I said, I’m not going to freak out over this. He’s your dad—good, bad, or ugly. But I’ve got to tell you, I don’t know what burns my butt more—him thinking we were gay, or the crappy way he treats you in general.”

“We’ve never exactly had a Ward and Beaver Cleaver relationship, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. But it still grinds me.”

“I know.” Hutch turned to make his way to the shower, but paused at the doorway and turned back. “Thanks, pal.”

“For what?”

“For being on my side.”

“Where else would I be?”



The streets of Bay City, particularly the area locals referred to as ‘The Bay,’ were often disconcerting during the daytime. By night, it was nothing short of haunting, but not in the sense of a deadness. The communities that made up Metro’s beats were anything but stillborn, regardless of the time of the day. At 9:00 P.M. the neon that reflected off the pavement created a pulsating life all its own, as if the evil and degradation that at times ruled life there emerged from underneath the black top, scratching and clawing its way through the tarmac.

Richard and Muriel watched the nightlife through the safety of Captain Dobe’s car with horrific fascination. The hookers, hustlers, junkies, and general assortment that made up the community of night dwellers flew by in a panoramic film for its audience. Mile after endless mile the nightlife went on, occasionally broken up by the flashing lights of a patrol car or ambulance.

Almost fifteen minutes of silence permeated through the vehicle until finally the captain spoke. “This is where your son spends most of his days, and many of his nights.”

“Harold, if you drove us through this vision of Dante’s hell to scare us, you’ve done a good job.” Richard bit out. “I just don’t understand why. Why does he do this day in and day out?”

The captain looked in the rearview mirror to make eye contact with his guests in the back seat. “Your son makes a difference here. Each day he and his partner are out here, chipping away at it. You look out there and you see a lot of wasted human lives. You see the destruction caused by drugs and greed and the lowest forms of degradation. Ken looks out there and sees what the city could be, what the people could be—not what they are.”

Dobey shifted in his seat, his eyes returning to sweep the streets before him. Another moment of silence passed before Richard spoke again. “How can he hope to make a change? He’s only one person. How can one man make a difference against all of *this*?”

“No, there’s two men. There’s two fighting together, and two can make a difference, even if it’s only one person at a time. Then, there’s one more person pulled out of the sewer and so there’s three fighting the battle.” Dobby looked back at Richard again to get his attention. “Richard, you and I are old soldiers. I’m proud of the battles we lived to tell about. Try thinking of your son in that same light.”

“It’s not the same ,Harold.”

“Isn’t it? That son of yours is fighting a war, Richard, make no mistake about it. Yes, I know all about him protesting Vietnam and how you felt about that.” The captain raised his hand to cut off Richard’s protest. “But that’s all water under the bridge. This is a different war zone and he keeps going into battle day after day.”

Richard’s gaze returned thoughtfully to the streets outside as Dobby continued. “Do you have any idea how many arrests they’ve made? How many cases they’ve solved? You can’t even imagine the number of people’s lives your son and his partner have made a difference in. Actually, I’ve lost count years ago. I *can* tell you how many times they’ve been decorated in the line of duty. Five, Richard. *Five*. Most officers retire without ever receiving *one*.”

The car turned onto a less crowded street. “When you were fighting in Korea, did you get close with any of the men in your squadron there?”

Richard turned away from the window. “Of course.”

“I mean *really* close? Someone you would have given your life for?”

“Well, yes. Many men in combat form those kinds of bonds. It’s a horrific, intense time. You never knew when the enemy was going to strike. You did everything you could to save yourself and your buddies.” Richard shook his head at the memories, feeling them acutely even after the healing balm of time and distance.

Dobey nodded his head at memories of his own. “It meant everything in the world to have someone you could trust, knowing you had someone on your side, guarding your back.”

“Exactly.” The older Hutchinson shook his head in agreement. “Some of those guys—Wally, McPherson, Andrews—I would have done anything for them. It would be natural to become close to someone who had saved your life and that you were trying to keep alive as well.”

The sedan swung abruptly to the curb and was thrust into ‘Park.’ The captain swung around in his seat and gave Richard Hutchinson a triumphant look. “*Exactly.*”



Ever since Starsky had been brought home to recuperate, Sundays were spent leisurely running errands or doing non-strenuous projects around the small house or yard. On this one, silence ruled the small house, neither man bringing up the previous day’s events or conversations. The morning passed uneventfully and the two went out for their daily walk around the neighborhood. Lunch was taken care of and they settled in the living room to read the Sunday Press.

Hutch heard the car pull in and instantly recognized the low growl of a Cadillac. Throwing his partner a look, Hutch tossed his section of the paper on the couch next to Starsky, then made his way to the door before his parents arrived at the stoop.

“Mom. Dad.”

“Hello, sweetheart. May we come in for a moment? Your father has something he wants to say to you before we leave.” A glint of underlying anger tinged the normally complacent woman’s voice. *Still waters*, Hutch thought with a hint of pride and gratitude. *I’ll bet last night at the hotel was a party.* He stepped away from the door to allow his parents to pass. As they entered the room, Starsky dropped his feet from the coffee table and gathered up the newspaper.

“Hello, David.”

Starsky returned Muriel’s greeting with genuine friendliness, then turned a less than warm expression to Richard, whom he simply nodded to in acknowledgment.

“Would you like a seat?” Starsky offered. Hutch had already claimed a portion of the couch next to his partner. He had actually been sitting on the armchair across from the couch earlier, but changing his position obstinately made a point.

Richard claimed the vacant armchair after Muriel sat on Starsky’s left. After an awkward moment of silence, he finally cleared his throat. “Ken, you said I never understood you and never would. I...I want to understand. Please, help me understand.”

Hutch stared at his father, wondering how he could explain a life time in one brief conversation.

“Please, son.”

Hutch swung his gaze over to Starsky, who cocked his head, an inquiry—*Stay or go, it's your call*. The corners of Hutch's mouth lifted slightly, gratefully. He would have liked to have his partner nearby, but knew it would be less comfortable for his parents with Starsky in the room while they aired their dirty laundry. Hutch lifted his hands slightly and tilted his head to the bedroom—*Thank,s partner*. Starsky gave Hutch a knowing look as he stiffly lifted himself up off the couch—*If you need me...* In turn, Hutch offered him a nod of understanding.

The exchange wasn't lost on either of Hutch's parents, especially his father. The unspoken dialogue was distinctive, even if he didn't understand what was said—or not said—between the two men. The communication between his son and the other detective reminded him of something, but he couldn't place a finger on it, like the lyrics of some old forgotten song. “You don't need words.”

Hutch shook his head, still looking at the door Starsky had closed behind him, as if he could still feel his partner's comforting presence in the room. “Not always. When you're sneaking up on someone who would just as soon blow your head off as talk to you, you learn to communicate that way. It's natural that it would fall into the rest of our lives.”

“Your partner, he understands you.”

“Often better than I understand myself.”

“And...and that's something you think I have never done.” It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

Hutch turned to look at his father. “Have you? Did you ever try?”

“Now look, Ken—”

“No, you look, Dad. I'm tired. I'm tired of this game, and this will be the last time I play it. I've spent years of my life caring too much what you thought of me. As a kid I was always trying to earn your love, get your attention. I would have settled for your understanding. But I never succeeded and now I don't think I care any more.”

“Of course I loved you!”

The tension in the room escalated. Hutch studied his father's outraged face for a moment. Finally, he shook his head, a tinge of sorrow marring his features. “Do you realize that I'm 32 years old and that's the first time I've ever heard you say those words?”

Richard's mouth moved as if he were trying to speak, but no words came. Muriel turned her face to the hands clasped in her lap, hiding her own pain of loving such a man.

Hutch exhaled heavily before continuing. “When I left for college, I tried to earn your respect, but I never got that either. I spent 22 years of my life trying to make myself into the mold you sculpted for me. But I couldn’t do it. I was miserable. When I came out to California I became my own man. I made something of myself. Something I could be proud of. And somewhere in the back of mind I thought since I had finally figured out who I could be, maybe, just maybe, you’d like that man, too. But that didn’t happen either. So finally I just quit caring what you thought of me.”

“Until now.”

“No. No, not really. Though I’ll admit you threw me for a heckuva loop. All that crap I went through as a kid just kind of came rushing back at me is all.”

Richard’s face became stony. Muriel laid a hand on her husband’s. “What crap?” the older man ground out.

Hutch swung his gaze to his mother, his expression softening. “The both of you taught me some important things growing up. To be honest, to be kind, to stand up for what’s right and protect those who can’t stand up for themselves. I’ve always been grateful for the things you introduced me to—the education, art, music, literature.”

“You’ve never been without.” The elder Hutchinson interrupted. “You’ve wanted for nothing.”

“You’re right, there’s not been a *thing* that I’ve needed. But Dad, don’t you see that I wanted to share those things with you? And don’t you understand that they were just things? I wanted *you*. Some of the best memories I have are the ones where you found the time to be with me. Learning to ride my bike, teaching me to hunt, taking me for my test drive. I didn’t want things, I just needed you to be a part of my life.”

“I was part of your life! Sure, some times work would call me away, but I was there—”

“There in the same house, but not in my life. Don’t you see, Dad? I loved you. I wanted to be with you. Is that so hard to understand? I needed to know....” Hutch paused to draw a breath in order to steady himself. “I needed to know that you loved me, too. That you cared about me. That I was worth something to you.”

“Ken, how could you think that you didn’t?”

“How could I think that I did? I never heard it, Dad. And it’s not like we spent enough time together for me to see it.”

“Kenneth, I don’t see how—”

“You were a lonely boy, Ken.” Muriel’s quiet voice interrupted the two men’s escalating ones. “You and I had so much time together, but it wasn’t the same as having a father spend time with you. I know

that you felt like there was something wrong with you that your father didn't want to be around you, but I couldn't...I didn't know how to fix that.”

Hearing his mother put into words the hidden pain that had lived in the shadows of his heart for a lifetime almost brought tears to Hutch's eyes. He ducked his head and worked at consciously loosening the tightening band from around his chest.

Richard cleared his throat, nearly at a loss for words. “Son, I...how could you think that there was something wrong with you? You were the best and the brightest. We did everything we could to give you every advantage, every opportunity—”

“Everything but tell your son you loved him and made sure he knew it,” came Muriel's quiet reproach.

“He knew I loved him the same way you knew that—”

“1976.”

“What? Muriel, what are—”

“February 15th, 1976. That was the last time you told me you loved me. You had gotten called away to the office the day before when we were supposed to have a special Valentine's dinner. You didn't get home until 4:00 A.M. the next morning. You woke me up and told me that you were sorry and that you loved me. February 15th, 1976.”

“Muri, I...”

“No, you need to hear what Ken's—”

“Stop it. Just stop it.” Hutch's voice held no anger, only resignation. “This is going nowhere.”

Muriel rose quietly. “I'll be out in Ken's garden. Richard, *listen* to your son.”

As she walked quickly out of the room, Hutch ran an unsteady hand through his hair. “Look Dad, you wanted me to try and help you understand. I have no idea how to do that. All I can say is that growing up, you and I were never close. I had a need to know that you loved me and I never did. I always felt like there was something wrong with me that a man like you...I always thought that you were a giant, did you know that? You were this great war hero that I wanted so much to be like. And I tried, Dad. God knows I tried. I just wanted you to like me. I would have given anything for you to be my friend, to feel like you were on my side. I wanted to know that you accepted me even when I didn't succeed at something, or I wasn't the best, or the fastest, or the smartest.”

“I was just trying to make you the best you could be, Ken.”

“Maybe you were. And I did try harder because of it. But inside I just had this gnawing ache that I would never measure up for you. That I’d always be a disappointment. But even when I did win, even when I was the best, I never heard what I needed to hear.”

“That I loved you.”

“Yes. That you were proud of me. That what I did was good enough, that *I* was good enough.”

“Do you still...do you still feel that way?”

Hutch sighed and got up from the couch. He walked to the windows facing the west where streams from the setting sun caressed him and covered him with diffused light. “When I became a cop, I knew this was something I could do and be good at. Here I could make a difference in peoples’ lives. I was needed. I was *enough*. I’ve been a good cop and that’s been one of the most significant things in my life. But there’s something more has told me that I have value.”

Hutch turned away from the window and looked across the room to the shut bedroom door. “My friendship with Starsky has meant more to me than any gold medal or gold shield I could ever earn. Within the first year of knowing him he...he *validated* my life. Starsky saw me for who I was and accepted me, warts and all. He liked me just because I was me—nothing more, nothing less. I was enough just as I was.

He became the brother I never had, the friend...the friend I always longed for. He’s somebody I can trust implicitly, with everything—my back, my life, everything. He’d give up his life for mine in a heartbeat. And I’d do the same.”

“That’s the bond you two have...it’s unusual. I guess I just didn’t understand.”

“Dad, you’ll probably never understand it. I’m not so sure I do either. But it’s there and I can’t imagine my life without it...without him. I hope to God I never have to.”

“Your captain, Harold—he took your mother and me for a ride.”

“He did?”

“Yes. He showed us quite a bit of your territory. I guess you call it your ‘beat’.” The older man searched his mind for some connection, some understanding that he could reach out to his son with. “I guess I can see why you rely on each other so much. It’s quite a dangerous area.”

“It can be. That’s why we need to trust each other as much as we do. Maybe that’s what keeps us so in tune with each other. All I know is that I probably wouldn’t last long out there without him.”

“Ken, why on earth do you do this, then?”

“Because here—here with him—my life makes a difference. What I do can mean life or death for someone. It’s a helluva responsibility and an incredible privilege, and one I don’t take lightly. Yes, sometimes the pressure’s enormous. And sometimes the price is high. Much, much too high. But if we don’t do it, who will?”

“I...I felt the same way about being in the service. There are just some things that are worth fighting for.”

“Exactly, Dad.”

“Ken, I...I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I mistook your depending on David as something more than it was. I was wrong. And I was wrong to think that you were....it takes a brave man, someone with conviction to face what you do day in and day out. I can see by what you’re up against every day that you are fighting in a different type of war. And for that, I am proud of you.”

Hutch had to swallow past the tightening in his throat. “Thank you.”

“Ken, I...I don’t know what else to say. Talking about things like this has never been easy for me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for how you felt growing up. I’m sorry that I never told you out loud that I loved you. I do, you know. I love you. I hope you know that.”

“Thank you for saying it, Dad. I...thanks.”

Silence dominated the room for a moment as the two men measured one another through different eyes.

“So, where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll just have to take it as it comes. But first, maybe we should rescue mom from the back deck.”

The two men made their way through the kitchen and out the back patio door. Few words were spoken as they said their goodbyes, with promises made to call more frequently, even though Starsky’s crisis had past. Hutch walked his parents to their car and waved them off as they drove away. He paused in the driveway, hands tucked in his back pockets and watched the retreating car. A few minutes passed before he slowly made his way back inside. He wasn’t too surprised to see his partner waiting for him in the living room, but he hadn’t expected to see him dressed in his sweat pants and a t-shirt, holding out his Adidas for Hutch to put on for him.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s a nice night, I thought we could walk down to the park and play catch.”

“Starsk, it’s getting late. It’ll be dark soon.”

“So, we won’t stay long.”

Hutch's eyes narrowed as he looked at his partner, knowing there was an ulterior motive behind the sudden desire to throw around the baseball.

"Starsk, we don't have to, you know. We did a lot of talking. I'm fine."

"Since when? I think you're certifiable, but that's beside the point. C'mon, I want to play a little catch. Unless my slider's getting too much for your tired old body to squat down for?"

"That'll be the day, Gordo. Okay, fine. Sit down so I can get these smelly things on your feet before the smell knocks me out." Starsky obediently sat down on the couch and lifted his right foot a few inches off the floor. Hutch knelt quickly and slipped the shoe onto his partner's foot, then tied the laces.

"Hutch?"

"Hmm?" The blond grasped the left foot and inserted it into the tennis shoe.

"Thanks."

"It's no big deal, pal." Hutch replied, patting the shoe after he finished.

"I don't mean the shoes. I mean for what you said about me. About us."

"Oh. You heard that, huh? Listening at keyholes again, Sherlock?"

"Nope. Paper thin walls, remember?" Starsky grinned back. The smile became less mischievous and changed to one of contentment. "I love you too, Hutch."

"Same here, Starsk." Hutch gripped his partner's knee before standing and stretching. "All right, c'mon Ace, time's a'wasting. Let's see this incredible slider of yours."

"Hutch, this pitch'll be so fast, you won't be able to see it!"

"Dream on, DiMaggio."

"DiMaggio played center field."

"Shut up and let's go, Starsk."



Sunset found the two men sitting quietly next to one another on the deserted park's swings, gently rocking. Words were sporadic, a few questions asked, a few admissions shared. Starsky's third yawn prodded Hutch into action and he pulled himself out of the swing and offered a hand to his partner.

“C’mon, it’s time to head back.”

“What’s the matter, I wear you out?”

“In your dreams, old man. The mosquitoes were beginning to find me particularly interesting.”

“There’s no accounting for taste.” Starsky nodded, yawning again. Accepting Hutch’s proffered hand, he hauled himself to his feet. Healing muscles cramped after the exercise and prolonged stationary position, causing Starsky to stumble into his partner with a gasp and a curse.

“Easy, there, DiMaggio. You okay?” Hutch caught Starsky in an awkward embrace, then steadied him. He anxiously searched his partner’s face for signs of distress.

Starsky nodded and stretched his back and mid-section, but didn’t pull himself away from the steady hands that bore him up. “Just stiff.” Looking into Hutch’s worried face, he laughed gently and pulled him into a brief embrace, slapping him on the back. Starsky felt the bond between them as surely as he felt the cool evening breeze caress his face. Releasing his friend, Starsky steered his partner in the direction of Topanga Boulevard. “Let’s go home, partner.”

The last rays of the setting sun set the world in amber. The waning light cast a single shadow from the pair, bonding the two into one. Through the field the prodigal son headed home, his partner by his side.

“Home it is.”



~ Brit
9/00