

The Words That I Can't Say
Musings from "A Coffin For Starsky"
by Brit

Dobey drops the final bombshell on this whole stupid mess. *"You can stop looking. We've just located your third possible. Wedell's been dead four days. Heart attack."* Now we're out of chances, out of hope, and almost out of time. I leave his office because I can't stand the worry in the Captain's eyes. Our chances of finding whoever pumped me full of poison just went down the toilet. *And somebody flushed.*

Hutch follows me out and into the squad room. This squad room...*so much has happened here.* If only these walls could speak. Hutch and I were named partners in this room, given our gold detective shields here. Battles were lost and won in this room. Countless phone calls, late night bull sessions, endless cups of stale coffee. This crummy green room feels as much home to me as my own apartment. As comfortable as the Torino.

I slump down in my chair because I haven't got the strength to stand anymore. My guts are on fire and twisting so badly I can hardly draw a deep breath. How many million minutes have I spent here, Hutch next to me or across the desk? Only now I don't have a million minutes...

We're running out of time and I got to... I got to find a way to tell Hutch things that I've never gotten around to saying. The words that I can't say. It's not that I haven't wanted to. I just never found the right way to do it. "I love you" is too simple, it can't—*what?*—say everything I feel about him. *About us.* Shoot, people say "I love you" so often without meaning it, it's just three empty little words. It's kind of disposable, you know?

I'm no scholar. Crap, I barely made it out of high school because I didn't really have my head screwed on too straight back then. I'm not a stupid guy, but when it comes to this, it's just that there's so much of what I feel for my partner I can't get my hands around it. I just can't find the words to say it all.

But before I get a chance to speak we're interrupted by a lady with a cold from Crowley Pharmaceuticals, there to look at some mug shots. That's okay, because it gives me a chance to try and pull it together. I know I'm selfish, but I always figured we'd go out together in a blaze of glory. Kind of like Butch and Sundance.

I push away all the files and reports and crap that are right in front of me and start digging through my desk drawer. I don't know, maybe there's something in here that'll help, or something in here that I can give him that shows how much he means to me. Sometimes going through my desk is like Christmas: you never know what you'll find in there.

The first thing I pull out is a stuffed animal. It's this weird blue hairy thing. I'm not really sure what it's even supposed to be. Something between a llama and an ugly dog. It was kind of a joke between me and Hutch. Last summer we had taken Kiko to a carnival on the pier. Kiko's this kid Hutch "adopted"

in the Big Brother's program. Anyway, Hutch and I are pretty competitive, especially at the firing range. So when we're at this carnival we give the shoot-the-ducks game a try and he beats the crap out of my top score. I swear my rifle was rigged, but he wasn't having any of that and never let me live it down. Never missed a chance to put in a dig that he was the better shot. Carried that stupid looking llama-dog around for the rest of the day like he won a Nobel prize or Emmy award or something. He must of got tired of rubbing my nose in it when we left, because he tried to pawn the thing off on Kiko, but he wasn't having none of it. Kid's smarter than he looks even if he did take my partner as a "Big Brother." Besides, that cheap blue thing was plain old butt ugly.

A few days later we're called in on a 2-11 in progress at a convenience store. An overeager rookie from the black and white backup bursts in while Hutch and I are sneaking up to the front where the bad guys are. I'm at the side of the store furthest away from the action when I hear shots fired and all hell breaking loose. I come tearing down the end of the isle when I see a lookout we hadn't counted on getting a bead on the back of Hutch's head. Even if I holler a warning, it may be too late. I'm drawing breath to shout when I catch a glimpse of a different bad guy swing his gun in my direction.

I have no clue how I took care of business. All I can say is that I reacted. I called out for Hutch (he knows how to interpret my hollering his name) and I see him hit the floor, no questions asked. I twist and dive myself, hoping to get out of the way of the bullet the guy next to me insists on trying to part my scalp with. Before I hit the floor I get off a round off at the guy aiming at Blondie and manage to take him out. When I hit the floor it knocks the breath out of me, but I still roll away and nail the guy that tried to burn me.

The next morning's the ugly blue llama-dog is sitting on my desk. No comment from Blondie. No words passed between us. Didn't need none.

The llama-dog brings up memories, but it's not going to do it for me. There's other stuff in here—my Chinese coin choker, some odds and ends, pictures, but nothing seems right. I've got to get out the words that I just can't seem to say. Hutch offers me water, but I don't think I could even swallow it.

"You know, if this was a cowboy movie, I'd give you my boots." Seems kind of inane, but I don't know how else to start. Hutch knows I'm kidding, but he's not amused. The quips and jokes aren't funny anymore. I'm running out of time and I don't want to die without telling him how much he means to me. He knows, but I got to find the words. I've never said it out loud and I can't...I can't *not* tell him. The thought of leaving him behind without my saying the words out loud makes my heart hurt worse than the pain ripping through my guts.

I reach out my hand to him even though I can't bear to look him in the face because I don't want him to see the fear in my eyes and I can't stand to see the pain in his. Within a heartbeat his hand is in mine and I take the comfort that's offered there. He must know how terrified I am because there's no way I would reach out for him in the squad room like this under normal circumstances. But I don't care and I'm not ashamed of sitting there, holding onto my partner's hand for dear life. Because that's exactly what I'm holding onto him for. Being only a few hours from death doesn't leave a whole heck of a lot of room for embarrassment.

“You’re my pal, Hutch...” Hutch’s face changes as if what I’m saying hurts to hear. But I’ve got to tell him *now*, while I still can.

I’m interrupted again by the lady with the cold. Hutch starts to blow her off until he realizes that she may be our first real shot. Her revelation that Bellamy bought the materials to make a leg cast rekindles the hope that had died. I stagger out of the room with my partner and make it out to the Torino, though I don’t remember how, everything’s becoming fuzzy around the edges. Breathing’s getting harder too. I know that if this doesn’t pan out with Bellamy... I tried to find the words again, but every time Hutch would race around a corner or hit one of the million potholes that make up the streets in this city, the fire in my gut would use up all my concentration.

The trip up the stairs to Bellamy’s apartment is a blur. I fell more than once and know that my partner had to all but carry me up the last flight. Hutch leaves me there at Bellamy’s apartment. We both know I’d never keep up. But I can’t just stay there. There was something in the way Blondie looked at me when he raced out that made my gut twist worse. I know my gray matter’s turning into soup, but when Hutch gets real upset, he’ll do something rash....something that could get him killed. I turn to Bellamy’s woman.

“Has he got a gun?”

“Yes. He made me lie!”

“That’s terrific.”

Without backup, Hutch could be in some deep crap up on the roof. *Without backup....Hang on, Hutch. Maybe we’ll go out together yet.*

The final flight of stairs may have been the hardest thing I’d ever have to do. Each step was like climbing the Washington Monument carrying an elephant. When I finally made it up to the rooftop, all I could see was the fuzzy blob that must have been Bellamy creeping his way to where Hutch was crouched behind a skylight. There was no way Hutch could defend himself where he was at and there was no way he could take out Bellamy by winging him. It was all or nothing. Hutch knew the position he was in now. I didn’t want him to have to make that choice either. It was down to “me *or* thee” and I knew which way he’d choose.

Five shots. My vision was going and I could hardly breathe anymore. Swallowing wasn’t on my list of abilities either, but this was probably the most important draw of my life and I don’t want to blow it. Five shots. I knew one of them would find it’s mark.

As soon as Hutch saw Bellamy fall, he knew what had happened. He knew what I did. An incredulous look took over his face as he went over to see if Bellamy had survived. I think that changed to regret and something else as he came over and took my gun out of my hand before I dropped it. I’m starting to tremble because it’s taking too much effort to remain upright. My breath sounds noisy in my ears and I can’t seem to swallow at all. Hutch looks real tired when he leans against the wall next to me, and he doesn’t look me in the eye.

“Thanks, buddy. What’d you have to do that for? He was the only guy that knew.”

“It seemed to be a good idea at the time.”

But now I’ve run out—out of words, out of strength and probably out of time. Hutch catches me when my legs finally give out and I slide down the wall onto the rooftop.

The next thing I know I’m flat on my back again, but this time the blurry face hovering over me with a needle is the doctor, not Bellamy. *What a weird way to begin and end this nightmare.* I look around and see Hutch’s worried face waiting for a chance to talk to me. Even though the doctor keeps his voice low I still hear him tell Hutch that I’ve only got less than two hours left.

Two hours.... It would take so much more than that to tell him everything I feel, everything I want him to know. But I’ve run out of time. Shoot, I can’t hardly swallow, let alone manage more than a word or two now. The give us a minute before they haul me to ICU. Hutch finally leans down real close to me so only I can hear what he has to say.

“Hey buddy, I...I have to go now...” There’s a promise in his voice and on his face that he’ll be back before...before....

“S okay.” It’s all I can manage. *But God!* There’s so much left unsaid, so much I have to say to him. This wasn’t how it was supposed to end, in this cold, sterile emergency room, strangers standing by waiting for us to say our goodbyes. There’s so much I have to say! *I love you, Hutch. Your friendship has meant everything to me. I owe you so much. You’ve been the brother Nicky could never be. My life has been so much richer because of you. I thank God that you’ve been my friend. I’ll be waiting for you...*

All these words are rushing around in my head, ready to pour out of my mouth but my throat won’t work. I waited too long and won’t ever be able to say out loud those three words that needed to be said. Hutch’s eyes get all misty when he sees the anguish in my face. I’m doing everything I can not to break down crying right then and there. I force myself to stay calm and look at him hard—*Please! Please hear what’s in my heart!*

He knows. I can see it in his eyes, too. *He knows.*

The orderly puts a hand on his shoulder. It’s time for me to go. Our eyes meet again and I feel the bond of the promise that’s always been between us—*me and thee.* I never did find the words to tell him “I love you,” but I hope the choice I made tonight on the rooftop—*thee over me*—told him the words that I can’t say.

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