

Earning the Right?

By Linda B.

I was sitting at my desk quietly trying to study when this big ruckus began out in the hallway. Finally annoyed enough to take a look, I set my criminology book down and walked to the door. I poked my head out and that was my first mistake.

“Hey, Blondie, c’mon.” An arm was waving at me from the end of the hall. I recognized the frantic waving as coming from David Starsky. A fellow police cadet and someone I’ve only just begun to know. We sat on the bench next to each other today in the gym, and even had a few go-rounds in defense class. My first impressions of David Starsky had been of a show-off and hot-head. I’d already seen him lose his temper on several occasions, and I’d vowed to steer clear of him. He just didn’t seem like anyone I’d have much in common with; though I have to admit, after today’s class my opinion of him was raised up a notch. He certainly was a wiry fellow and his face and eyes were filled with such determination, no matter the size of his opponent, that I found myself drawn to him, and I cheered him on.

Now, he was standing in the hall, balancing a huge bowl of popcorn and a six-pack of beer, waving at me. And for some reason unbeknownst to me, I decided to follow him and the loud noises emanating from his room. I think my gut was trying to tell me this was going to be my second mistake, but I ignored it.

I headed toward the room at the end of the hall. As I got closer, the noise got louder. I looked inside and was surprised to see not only David Starsky but also four other cadets. A card table had been set up in the middle, and everyone was pulling over their chairs while the radio was blaring.

“Hey, Ken.” Tony Miller waved me in. “There’s room for one more. Grab a chair.”

I stood awkwardly at the door, wishing I’d never left my room, but at the same time, wanting to be included. Ever since my arrival at the Academy, I’d pretty much kept to myself. It’s not that I’m anti-social, it’s just that I feel this intense need to study all the time--because of the fear that I’m going to fail. My fellow classmates would probably laugh at that, since they see my name in the top third of every class, but what they don’t know is that my father would like nothing better than for me to fail. He never wanted me to quit school and become a policeman. I was here to prove I was right and he was wrong, and that didn’t leave much time for socializing.

“Yeah, Hutchinson. Pull up a chair. We’re just about to deal the first hand.” Charlie Laney looked up as he shuffled the deck of cards and motioned for me to join them.

I moved into the room, drawn by the camaraderie I felt there. Heck, why not join in a little fun for once? What harm could it do?

I grabbed one of the folding chairs against the wall, opened it up and set it near one of the corners of the table.

“There’s some beer and snacks on the desk,” Charlie offered with a wave of his hand. He and Starsky were roommates, and, as I glanced around the small room, I noticed one side was messy and unorganized, while the other was neatly arranged. David Starsky was standing at the desk dipping some chips and talking with his hands at the same time. I chuckled and shook my head. It appeared he was wearing more of the dip than he was eating. Looking at the animated brunet, I wondered what the odds were that his was the messy, unorganized one.

I walked over to the desk and reached around him for a beer.

“What’s up, Hutch?” Starsky said, as he reached for another handful of chips. “Good thing you gave up on studyin’. It’s Friday night and that’s all you’ve been doin’ all week. Ya need to get that blond noggin of yours out from behind those books. Everybody needs a break. I already told Charlie if you weren’t coming I was gonna drag you from your room...”

Hutch...where’d that come from? Nobody calls me that. Well, nobody but my best friend, Jack. And he’s back home in Duluth, not in this room. Where did this Starsky fellow get off calling me Hutch?

I turned to make an angry retort, but Starsky had already left and was moving toward the card table. Jack was my best friend, had been for years. Sure, it may have been a few years since we’d seen each other, but we’d hung out together all through high school. No one, not even a girl, could separate us. We did everything together. Only now he was in med school, and here I was studying to be a street cop. Ironic, isn’t it? Dad always said he loved Jack. Sometimes I thought he loved him more than me. The two of them were certainly more alike than Dad and I were.

“Hutch?”

There it is again. He keeps calling me Hutch. I could feel the anger welling up inside. *He’s got no right. He’s acting like we’re friends or something.* Thoughts of Duluth began filling my head, reminding me of home and what I had left behind: Jack and the great times we had together, my Mom and the smell of apple pies baking in the oven, galloping horses across the ranch, visiting with Grandpa. *Get a grip, Hutchinson. What’s in a name? Just ‘cause your best friend is the only one you ever let use it. This guy doesn’t know what it means to you. He doesn’t know much of anything.*

I knew I was being irrational and had no right to get upset, but I didn’t care. *Just try calling me Hutch again, Curly. Only my best friend has earned the right to call me that, and I don’t think you stand much chance of earning that title.*

“Hurry up, Hutchinson, we’re ready to go,” Tony called out, interrupting my thoughts.

I reached for a bottle of beer and went over to join the guys sitting at the table.

“Somethin’ wrong?” Starsky asked, actually watching me as though he really cared. He paused as he turned the chair next to me around before sitting down. “You looked at me kind of funny over there.”

I shrugged. This was neither the time nor place to talk about it.

Tony began dealing the poker hand and, as I picked up the cards he dealt me, I watched Starsky straddle his chair. He reached out a hand and ever so briefly touched my shoulder, grinning that lopsided grin of his. “Your bet, Hutch.”

Despite my best intentions, I found myself drawn to those warm, welcoming eyes of his. He was looking at me so deliberately that it was almost as if he could see into my soul.

“Hutch?”

Hearing that name again brought me back to reality and the start of the game. Pretending to ponder my cards before tossing in any money, I watched him stuff some more potato chips in his mouth and decided two could play this game. If he could shorten my name, I could do the same; so I tossed a buck on the table and retorted, “C’mon, Starsk, we don’t have all night.”

After all, what’s in a name?

And you never know, maybe one day he'd earn the right.

The End

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