

Unfinished Canvas

by Linda B.

“Hey, Joe,” Starsky called out to a fellow rookie as they passed on the stairs. His rotation schedule had him working in Records for the morning, and now he was headed down to the cafeteria for lunch. His time in Records had been interesting so far, as well as productive. He instinctively patted his shirt pocket to make sure the list containing the names and phone numbers of several of the girls he’d met was safe. Maybe he’d have an interesting weekend, after all.

“Hey, Dave, heard you took part in a drug raid while on patrol yesterday.”

Starsky pulled up short. “You bet. It just kinda happened. We were chasing a petty thief, and boom—we followed him into an apartment building just as the deal was goin’ down. The thief had no idea where he was leading us.”

“Lucky you. It’ll look good on your record.”

The sound of his stomach growling reminded Starsky where he was headed. “I guess I better get going.” Starsky patted Joe on the shoulder and continued his descent, softly whistling as he went. As he neared the bottom, he slowed down, an angry voice interrupting his thoughts of food.

“Hutchinson! You need to get your act together.”

Starsky slowed even further, recognizing the voice of Luke Huntley. Luke was a training officer—Ken Hutchinson’s training officer, in fact—and Ken, or Hutch, as Starsky had teasingly begun calling him, was his closest friend from the Academy. He felt guilty listening, but at the same time he braced himself, ready to jump to his friend’s defense.

“This is the third day this week you’ve come in late, Hutchinson, and you look like hell.” Luke’s voice was sharp and angry. “When are you going to understand that your life—and mine—depends on you being alert and ready to go each and every day?!”

Starsky took the last step, his anger rising. They may be rookies, but the middle of the hallway in a bustling police station wasn’t the place to get a dressing down. Especially when it was happening to his best friend.

As he turned the corner, Luke looked over Hutch’s shoulder and saw Starsky approaching. Starsky didn’t know if it was the look on his face or the fact that several people, including three fellow police officers, had passed the two and turned their eyes and ears in interest, but Luke’s voice softened. “It’s almost lunchtime. Go get some coffee and something to eat, then get back here and finish yesterday’s reports. I have a

court appearance and I'll be back in about an hour. I won't put you on report this time. But it's your last chance."

Hutch, busy studying his shoes and turning several shades of red, nodded. Luke left him standing there and headed toward the exit. Not even bothering to look up, Hutch slammed his hand into the wall. He remained there, bracing himself against the wall, a look of defeat written across his face.

Starsky, giving no indication that he'd heard any of the conversation, said, "Hey, I was just coming to look for you. Do you wanna have some lunch?"

There was no response.

"Hey? Anybody in there?"

A few seconds later, Hutch looked up and finally focused on him. "What did you say?"

At that moment, Starsky's stomach answered for him, and one side of Hutch's mouth twitched into a half smile. "I guess I got my answer."

"Yeah, c'mon." Starsky took a closer look at his friend, admitting to himself that Luke had been right in at least one respect. Hutch's face was drawn, with dark circles under his eyes. "You feelin' all right?"

Hutch straightened, anger edging his voice. "I'm just a little tired." Actually, he was *a lot* tired, but it wasn't anybody's business but his own.

About to respond that Hutch looked more than "a little tired," Starsky backed off, deciding to keep his opinions to himself for now. There might be an opportunity at lunch to find out why Huntley was on Hutch's back.

Reading concern in Starsky's eyes, Hutch's voice softened, "I'm not hungry, but I could use some coffee. It'll help me face the paperwork Luke left for me. I'm quickly discovering it's the one part of this job I hate." He lightly squeezed Starsky's shoulder. "C'mon, let's go feed your stomach."



Starsky was out on patrol with his training officer, and for once he was glad it was a quiet afternoon. It gave him time to think. It was already Wednesday, and he was no closer to determining what was bothering Hutch or what had happened. Whenever he brought up the subject, Hutch steered the conversation in another direction. Since they were spending most of their time on patrol with their training officers, there wasn't much time left over during the day to spend together. Most evenings were out of the question. If they weren't out on night patrol, Hutch spent the evenings with his wife, Vanessa. But from a couple of recent comments Hutch had made, even *that* seemed to be getting

difficult. Vanessa had landed a new job as an assistant manager at a prestigious art gallery and apparently was required to put in a lot of hours.

He and Hutch had found time for a quick cup of coffee that morning, and when Hutch had suggested the two of them go fishing on Saturday, Starsky jumped at the chance, despite the fact that fishing wasn't at the top of his list of fun activities. He had never found fishing particularly enjoyable after his dad died. Yet, recognizing that the diversion of being out in nature might give him the opportunity to get Hutch to talk about whatever was bothering him, he had agreed. From the strained look on his face that morning, Hutch unquestionably needed the distraction as well. Lately, his face seemed to carry a constant scowl, and the dark circles under his eyes continued to grow deeper.

The sudden swerve of the cruiser drew Starsky back to his surroundings. "What's up?"

"I recognized an 'old friend,' you might say, cut down this alley, and I plan on checking out what he's up to," said John Blaine, Starsky's training officer, as he slowed the cruiser to a crawl. "I hadn't heard that Lefty had been released from prison. Besides, this way..." Blaine winked at his young trainee. "...he'll remember the streets of Bay City aren't safe for him to operate on. I want to remind him that I'll be watching his every move."

Starsky leaned forward, eyes searching both sides of the alley. "I don't see anything or anybody. What's he look like?"

"He's about fifty-five, skinny, wearing a beat-up army jacket, and looks like he hasn't shaved in a few days. Oh, and he's missing his left arm from just above the elbow. Lost it in the war, I heard."

The cruiser slowed to a crawl and proceeded down the alley, but there was no sign of Lefty. "He apparently saw us and hightailed it out of here through one of these abandoned buildings," said John as they approached the end of the alley. He turned the cruiser onto the side street and headed back to the station. "Not to worry; Lefty will be back to his old tricks soon enough."

Starsky soon lost interest as his thoughts returned to Hutch and their upcoming fishing trip. He wanted to work out ahead of time just how to approach him. He wanted to offer his help but didn't want Hutch to feel like he was interfering.



The slam of the apartment door woke him, and Hutch's book dropped to the floor as he rather ungracefully struggled to sit up. He'd been studying a police manual on the sofa while he waited for Vanessa to come home, and didn't remember falling asleep.

Hutch glanced at his watch, surprised to see that it was after midnight. It was Friday morning already, and he had only a few hours to sleep before he would have to get up for work. “The showing must have gone well. You’re later than usual.”

Vanessa threw her coat over the back of the sofa, revealing a new black cocktail dress, kicked off her heels, and walked over to the kitchen counter to pour herself a glass of cabernet sauvignon.

Hutch couldn’t help admiring his wife. She looked stunning despite the late hour; her long black hair was pulled back with a small diamond-studded clip, and her grandmother’s diamond necklace graced her neck. She must have attracted as many glances at the art gallery as the artwork itself.

“So, how did it go?” Hutch asked, as she sat down next to him.

“A great success.” Vanessa leaned her head against the back of the couch and closed her eyes. “The artist sold a slew of paintings, and my boss was very pleased.”

“Great job.” Hutch hesitated a second before adding, “I don’t think I’ve seen that dress before; when did you get it?”

“I bought it this morning.”

“Van, you know we can’t afford—”

“Oh, don’t start in on me, Ken. It’s been a long day. I have a new job and it’s important that I look presentable. After all, I am representing the gallery.”

“Just last week, we discussed how we couldn’t afford any luxuries right now. I’m still on a rookie’s pay. Don’t forget, we just bought you a car, and we were more extravagant on that than we should have been.” Hutch remembered how they had searched for a car for days, as Van continued to choose fancier models than they could afford. They finally found a used car they both could agree on, though it was still more money than Hutch thought their budget could handle. Seeing how unhappy Van had been when he’d originally told her no, Hutch had done some quick figuring and decided if they tightened their belts on other things like food for a few months, Van’s paycheck would help make the budget stretch. He still remembered the day he’d taken her out of the apartment, blindfolded, and watched her face light up when she saw the car in the lot.

Vanessa abruptly stood. “I wouldn’t call this a luxury. I bought it on sale this morning and it was only a hundred dollars. I didn’t even buy any accessories to go with it. See...” She picked up the necklace and turned in Hutch’s direction. “I wore my grandmother’s necklace and my old black shoes, which, by the way, I am going to have to replace. I stood in them for six hours and they are killing my feet. I’ll need new ones, and a new formal, for Saturday.” Vanessa, kicking her shoes out of the way, sat down next to him, her body leaning invitingly against his, a manicured fingernail playfully running along

his cheek and lips. “By the way, I have to go to an exhibition on Saturday. It’s a black-tie affair, and I really need you to be my escort.”

Vanessa, claiming this was her dream job, had thrown herself wholeheartedly into its responsibilities, and Hutch hoped she’d be successful at it. Vanessa wasn’t known for sticking to anything for very long, but the demands of his new job had left her idle and lost, and he hoped this would prove to be the answer. Art had been her major in college, and in fact, they had first met at an art show at the University of Minnesota. He’d had several paintings on display, and he couldn’t help taking notice of anyone who spent extra time looking at his work. He was astonished, and a little embarrassed, when he noticed a strikingly gorgeous girl spending an inordinate amount of time looking at his paintings. His curiosity, and her beauty, got the better of him. After a brief conversation, during which she told him how much she admired his work and he discovered she was a fellow college student, she had reached over to slip her phone number into his shirt pocket. He had called her the next day and they had been together ever since.

Two months ago, she had come home ecstatic. While out shopping, Van had stopped to admire some work at a local art gallery. She had managed to strike up a conversation with the manager and, to her delight, discovered that they had an opening. He’d hired her on the spot. At first, Hutch had been a little annoyed that Van had taken the job without consulting him. They had agreed when they got married how important it was to discuss anything that would affect both their lives, whether it was as a couple or as individuals. But eventually, Hutch had found it impossible to resist Van’s enthusiasm. After a lengthy discussion, they had agreed that even though the demands of their jobs meant they would probably have to spend additional hours apart, they’d give it try. They had promised to respect each other’s commitments, planning to make an effort to find time for each other, as well as to pursue their individual interests.

He had planned to be fully supportive of her, but it wasn’t until after Van began working there that Hutch discovered how prestigious the Fleur-de-lis Gallery really was and that the demands were going to be even greater than they, or at least he, had envisioned. He was beginning to wonder if Vanessa had purposely misled him. This was the fifth event she wanted him to attend with her, and the month was only half gone. After the last one, they had gotten into a huge argument. He had repeatedly told her how much he disliked meeting all the “social climbers” and politicians that showed up at these black-tie events trying to impress others, and how he hated having to mingle and hold inane conversations with people he didn’t know or like. Painting for him had become a hobby—a way to relax, express what he couldn’t say in words—and he wasn’t interested in spending hour after hour discussing someone else’s paintings.

Hutch had tried to reason with Van—explaining that his job required his full attention, that he was required to study on his own time, that the additional demands she was making were beginning to put a strain on their marriage—but she had brushed him off.

Vanessa had immediately become involved in her job—maybe too extensively, Hutch was beginning to think. She was radiant when she’d come home, loving the attention and

activity at the gallery. He didn't want to deny her that, but despite his best intentions, he knew he was beginning to resent all the time these events took away from their time together and from his own down time. He had quickly discovered that training to be a police officer was far more stressful than he had ever imagined. He hated to admit it, but he was beginning to resent the extra pressure she was putting on him.

"Van, we've already discussed this..." Hutch watched her hand as it trailed down the front of his shirt, stopping to finger each button.

"I know I've been asking a lot, Ken," Van purred, "but this one's important."

"That's what you've told me every time."

"Raphael wants me to attend the showing at the Galleria Saturday morning."

Hutch gripped her hand, stopping its movement, "It isn't at the Fleur-de-lis Gallery, and your boss still wants you to attend?"

"He says all the right people are going to be there. He says it's important to be seen at other events around town. He says it's an important social event—"

"'He says.' That's all that comes out of your mouth lately." Hutch pulled away from her and stood up to get a beer from the refrigerator. "I don't know what you mean by 'all the right people,' but I'm sorry I can't join you this time. I've already made plans to go fishing. It's the first Saturday Starsky and I both have had off in a long time and our plans are set. You and I agreed when you took this job that we would make time for our own interests, even though we knew we'd have less time together."

"You can go fishing anytime. Just reschedule; Dave won't mind."

"I don't want to reschedule. I've been looking forward to some time outside of this sweltering city. You might love all the nightlife and live for the excitement it offers, but I'm beginning to experience the other side of that excitement—the crime, the poverty, the cruelty—and I need a break."

"Ken, I didn't know you wanted to go into acting; why, you sound positively theatrical. It was your idea to come to Bay City, and I agreed with you. We both wanted to try and establish ourselves away from our families. Now, it bothers you that it looks like I'll be more successful than you."

"Van, we've had this discussion numerous times already. I'm happy for you. I understand you have a job you enjoy and apparently are excellent at. You're meeting important people and it's exciting for you. But your job is *your* job. I have no need or desire to spend time with these people. Okay, I understand that once in a while I'll be called on to attend an event and I've done that, but I have no intention of attending every one with you." Hutch walked over and picked up the book he'd knocked to the floor.

“To be honest, I can’t keep up this pace. It’s like having two jobs. Being a cop is demanding, and my work is starting to be affected. Luke, my training officer, has already called me on the carpet because I keep reporting for work late. I’ve been at these events with you on the weekend and in the middle of the week. I’m dead tired all the time and I’m oversleeping. I don’t even hear the alarm anymore. One of these days, I’m going to make a mistake and someone’s going to get hurt. And I’ll be the one responsible.”

“Now you’re being melodramatic.” Vanessa took a sip of wine. “You don’t have to do anything but stand there and—”

“And be bored.”

Vanessa stood up. “Fine. I’ll find someone else to go with me.” She picked up her shoes and walked into the bedroom.



Saturday morning, Hutch slapped the alarm and buried his head under the pillow. Slowly coming to consciousness, he wondered how many times he’d already managed to try and silence it. It was the weekend, and for the first time in a month, he had the day off. Hutch instantly sat up and, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, tried to focus on the digits in front of him. Fishing—he was supposed to go fishing with Starsky this morning!

“Good morning, sleepyhead. Want some coffee?” Vanessa stood barelegged in the doorway, wearing one of his long-sleeved shirts and holding two mugs of delicious-smelling coffee. He wondered how long she’d been awake. It wasn’t like her to rise so early. On the mornings he managed to go for a run, he would usually find her still in bed on his return. What’s so special about today? Is she trying to make up after the argument we had last night? Van had spent most of Friday evening still trying to convince him to attend the opening at the Galleria. He had been tempted to give in just to stop the argument, but he couldn’t forget the conversation he’d had at lunch the day before with Starsky.

His friend had been like a kid in a candy store. He kept talking about how much he was looking forward to Saturday, even though he had to give up his one day to sleep late. Starsky had even gone out Thursday night and purchased special fishing gear, including a new tackle box, and had then dragged everything into the office to show him. Even the stares of their fellow police officers hadn’t discouraged his enthusiasm. Right then Hutch had decided, regardless of how much Van pleaded, he wasn’t giving in this time. That meant, of course, he and Van had gone to bed angry with each other.

Hutch sat up and ran his fingers through his hair before reaching out for one of the mugs. “Thanks, Van. Smells good.” He took a quick sip and, throwing the covers aside, stood up.

Vanessa moved closer, lightly rubbing a hand across his bare chest. “Sleep well, darling?”

“I did.” Hutch, glancing at the clock, realized that Starsky would be there to pick him up in less than thirty minutes. He sidestepped Van and headed toward the bathroom for his shower, mug in hand. “Starsky will be here soon. I’ve got to get ready.”

Vanessa followed him to the doorway. “Can’t you stay and go with me instead of with Dave, Ken? You can go fishing next weekend.”

“No, I promised him we were going today and I’m not breaking that promise. Besides, I’m scheduled to work next Saturday. We both need a diversion, and since he grew up in the city, I promised him I’d teach him a real appreciation for nature. He went out and bought all kinds of fishing equipment. I can’t disappoint him.”

“But it’s okay to disappoint me?”

“Van, we’ve discussed this for days and I’m not changing my mind. I’m going fishing. You already said you found someone else to go with you.”

“I did.” Vanessa took a sip of her coffee before adding, “Raphael is taking me.”

Hutch ignored her last statement as he stepped into the shower. She was trying to bait him, and he knew it.

Ten minutes later, he was dressed and pulling his fishing gear out of the back closet. Vanessa, sitting on the couch, watched as he set everything down near the front door.

“I’ll be home for dinner,” Hutch said. “We can eat the fish I catch.”

“Or buy on the way home,” Vanessa added nastily.

Hutch quickly glanced at her but chose to ignore both the comment and the tone. He reached into the closet and pulled out his parka. As he turned around, he was taken aback to find Vanessa standing immediately next to him. “Van—”

Vanessa reached up to brush away a few stray hairs on his forehead. “Have a good time.”

He might have believed she was being sincere if she hadn’t used such a sarcastic tone. Lightly grasping her wrist, Hutch looked Van in the eye. “I plan on it.”

Her eyes flashed and she extended her fingers, angrily running her long fingernails across Hutch’s cheek. The scratches extended from his cheekbone, leaving red bleeding welts.

Hutch instinctively dropped her hand as he stepped back and reached for his cheek. He stood there, shocked, unsure of what to say or do. He'd never experienced this side of Vanessa before. "Wha—?"

Vanessa turned on her heel. "Just go, Ken. Just go."

The door slammed. Hutch had left, leaving his fishing pole and gear still sitting on the floor.



Starsky found an empty parking spot around the corner from Hutch and Van's apartment. Getting out, he paused a moment to inspect the hood of his new car and frowned. Pulling up his t-shirt, he rubbed a spot until it disappeared, and the bright blue color shone as brightly as the day he'd driven it out of the used car lot. As he turned to leave, he cursed the bird that had violated his new car. He'd had it for only a week. He had dreamt long and hard in Vietnam about the car he'd buy one day—a bright, shiny red one with an extra powerful engine, one that would leave others in his wake and the girls noticing him. This car didn't exactly fulfill his dream, but it would get him around until he could save up enough money to buy the one he really wanted. It still deserved to be treated tenderly. What he really wanted to do was climb back into the car and head over to a carwash, but Hutch undoubtedly would be waiting. And considering they were spending the day "out in nature," his car would need a washing later anyway. So for now, he satisfied himself with rubbing off the spot, then he sauntered toward Hutch's to see if he was ready to go.

As Starsky rounded the corner, he saw Hutch exiting his apartment building. He waved and yelled Hutch's name and was surprised when Hutch didn't even look in his direction. Hutch's head remained down and he walked purposely toward his car. The hunch of his shoulders, the set of his jaw, and the slamming of his fist on anything nearby was a clear indication that something was wrong. Starsky watched as Hutch pulled open his car door, slid into the seat, and started up the car, never hearing his name.

Hutch backed out, barely missing the car parked behind him, and peeled out of the parking spot, leaving Starsky standing there. Starsky hesitated. Should he go after him, or would Hutch be angry if he followed?

He rushed back to his own car and immediately followed Hutch's heap onto the main street. He didn't know where Hutch was headed, but he wasn't going to lose him.



Hutch was surprised to find himself on Highway 1, headed up the coastline. He didn't remember driving there. It was almost an hour since he had left the apartment, and his anger at Vanessa was finally receding. He had been furious at her and her selfishness, but the longer he thought about it, maybe he was the one who had been unreasonable. After all, he was her husband, and maybe she had every right to expect him by her side.

He had always loved spending time with her and showing her off. He'd even taken pleasure in the jealous looks he'd receive from other men when he was at her side. But now, she seemed to expect it—no, *demand* it—and he was finding it harder and harder to please her. They'd been married for several years, and compromising had never been a problem. Of course, as he looked back on their compromises, he realized he had been the one who had most often given in, not the other way around. Van always seemed to persuade him into doing what she wanted. She knew how to apply the right amount of pressure, and pleasure, until he gave in. He had never realized how manipulative she was until today—and it was a side of her he did not like.



Starsky followed Hutch down the highway, always maintaining traffic between them, but close enough to keep the car in view. Just where Hutch was headed was still a mystery. He had the feeling their plans for fishing had long been forgotten, but he decided to bide his time and give Hutch a little space. Starsky glanced at his watch. They'd been on the road for almost two hours. He sighed. Eventually, Hutch would have to pull over, if only for gas.

Starsky straightened and leaned forward, instantly alert. Hutch was turning off the highway. Starsky slowly followed, first down the paved road and then several dirt ones. It was obvious Hutch was headed toward the ocean, but it wasn't an area Starsky was familiar with. Seeing Hutch's car parked beneath a clump of trees, he pulled in next to it. Exiting, Starsky scrutinized the area, trying to determine which direction Hutch was headed. Seeing a path almost hidden by the trees, Starsky headed toward it.



Hutch came through the clearing. The smell of the ocean air and the sight and sound of the waves filled his senses, relaxing him almost instantly. Finding a boulder to sit on, he watched the gulls walking along the shore, picking at the sand. While he loved the sights and sounds of the woods, he was beginning to understand why Starsky loved the ocean so much.

Starsky always—

Starsky! Hutch instantly stood and looked at his watch. Van had made him so angry that morning, he had entirely forgotten about Starsky and their fishing trip. How was he ever going to explain what happened? Since they'd met at the Police Academy, he and Dave Starsky had become fast friends. He couldn't explain why they were so drawn to each other, but they had settled into an easy friendship, one that Hutch had already come to value in many ways. He had noticed how Starsky always seemed to keep the other cadets at arm's length. He'd always been friendly enough with everyone, but for some reason, Starsky remained distant, keeping to himself. But somewhere along the way, Starsky had chosen to let him get close. Why, he wasn't sure, but Hutch was certain his life had grown richer because of it, and he was thankful. Now, he'd not only managed to anger

Van, but also Starsky. This would probably ruin their developing friendship. What was supposed to have been a fun, relaxing day had turned into a dismal one.

Hutch sank back down onto the rocks, burying his face in his hands. He'd made such a mess out of everything.

"Can't catch much fish that way."

Hutch's head jerked up. "Where'd you come from?"

"Well, I didn't see much point in going fishing by myself, and I thought it looked like a nice day to take a long drive." Starsky smiled to take the sting out of his words. "Mind if I sit?"

Hutch slid over. "I'm really sorry about this morning."

Starsky shrugged. "There'll be other times."

"But you bought all that fishing equipment, and you were so excited..."

"Yeah, I know. But I also know the truth."

"What's that?"

"That you really didn't want me to show you up."

"You're going to show *me*..." Hutch pointed at himself. "...up?"

"Yeah, by catching all the fish."

Hutch laughed. "You really can tell a whopper. I get it; no matter who caught the fish, yours would always be the biggest."

"You got it." Starsky laughed and then studied his hands, unsure how to begin, how much he should push. Ever since his father, a cop, had died in the line of duty, Starsky kept people at a distance. He didn't want them too involved in his life, or him in theirs—it was too painful. That was until now, until Hutch.

When he'd approached Hutch, Starsky was shocked to see several nasty scratches covered in dried blood on his cheek. It was obvious Hutch was hurting, both physically and emotionally. He didn't know how to help, where to start. He was afraid of pushing Hutch too far. He fumbled over his next words. "You wanna...wanna talk...about what happened?"

Hutch's eyes wandered back to the gulls on the beach. He was undecided about how much he wanted to tell Starsky. Was it really fair to talk about Van with Starsky?

Wasn't marriage a private thing between two individuals? Starsky and Van didn't really know each other very well, and he felt like he'd be divulging personal, private information. Maybe he'd be giving Starsky the wrong impression of Van. Then he wondered if it mattered at all what Starsky thought of Vanessa. But he knew it did. If he was truly honest with himself, these were the two most important people in his life right now. And he cared what they both thought. The question was how could he ever explain Vanessa to Starsky when *he* really didn't understand her anymore?

"Van and I had an argument this morning, only one of many it seems like lately, and I walked out, completely forgetting that we were going fishing."

"I told ya to forget about it."

"I can't. Ironically, Vanessa and I were fighting *about* me going fishing."

"Huh?"

"I know it doesn't make any sense." Hutch couldn't help laughing sarcastically; it all seemed sort of ludicrous now. "Simply put, I told you Van started a new job a couple months ago..." At Starsky's nod, Hutch continued, "...and it's starting to make a lot of demands on our time. She wanted me to put on a tux and go to another showing. I told her I was going fishing with you today and, well...she wasn't happy about it, so we had an argument." Hutch shrugged.

"We didn't have to go—"

"Yes, we did. We both needed the time off; besides, I promised you we'd go."

"Your wife is more important than fishing with me."

"I don't know what it is, Starsky, but her job seems to have created an all new Van. One I don't understand—one I'm not sure I like. She only seems to think of herself, her career. All we seem to do lately is fight about everything."

"New jobs create new stress. Look at us. Learning to be a cop is harder than we thought it would be, right? You ever give any thought to the idea that you're probably not the easiest person to live with, either, you big lug?" Starsky teased, trying to lighten Hutch's mood. He'd discovered that Hutch always seemed to think too much, to take things too much to heart—a dangerous thing for a cop, he was learning. It was too hard to separate yourself from the job, from the people you encountered every day.

"Oh, there's no doubt about that." Hutch laughed. "But being married seems to be getting harder all the time, not easier. I wonder how my parents have done it for so many years. Trying to balance a marriage with two jobs is hard."

“You’re both competitive, and maybe you’re competing against each other a little too much. I’ve never been married, but even when I was little, I can remember my parents having talks about stuff they didn’t include my brother and me in. They seemed to always be compromising about something. Maybe you have to give in a little more.”

“That’s just it. On the drive here, I was thinking about all the times I’ve given in, and it seems a little lopsided to me. I always feel like I’m giving in to what she wants, and she can’t bring herself to reciprocate. Somehow, our discussions always seem to turn into arguments.”

Starsky wasn’t sure how to reply. He didn’t want to pass judgment, but he certainly didn’t understand the way Vanessa was acting, any better than Hutch did. “Marriages always have their ups and downs.”

“Well, lately, mine seems to be headed in only one direction.”

Starsky laid his arm across Hutch’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Hutch; you’ll work it out.”

“Some days I wonder, Starsk; some days I wonder if it’s all worth it.” Hutch sighed and studied his hands again.

Suddenly, Starsky began searching his jacket pockets, but not locating what he’d hoped to find, he asked, “You got a handkerchief?”

Hutch didn’t bother to ask why Starsky needed it. Checking, he found one in his back pocket. He handed it to Starsky and then watched as Starsky headed to the water’s edge, bent down, and dipped it in.

On his return, Starsky handed it to Hutch. “There’s dried blood on your cheek. I’d wipe it off myself, but you’d probably slap my hand.”

Hutch chuckled as he reached up and touched his cheek. He held the wet handkerchief to it and winced. It had stopped stinging long ago—at least on the outside.

“You better wipe it off ’cause I can’t take you into a restaurant that way.”

“Restaurant?”

“I’m getting hungry.” Starsky rubbed his stomach. “How ’bout you? Before we head home, why don’t we catch a bite to eat? My treat. It’s too late to go fishing today.”

Hutch acknowledged he was feeling a little hungry now that some of his anger had subsided. Although, he still hadn’t come to any conclusions on how to resolve the problem with Van. He even began to wonder if he and Van could ever resolve it. They both had strong personalities; it was one of the things that had drawn him to her. So for now, he decided maybe Starsky was right, that he’d just have to be a little more

understanding and work at it a little harder. He'd disappointed his father once when he quit med school to enroll in the Police Academy, and he didn't want to disappoint him further by having his marriage break up.

"C'mon," urged Starsky. "Let's go find something to eat. We can talk about the day we'll be partners, and then we'll head back to the city." He glanced at his watch. "Maybe we can get you into a penguin suit long enough to satisfy Van."

Hutch stood and joined Starsky on the trail that led them back to their cars. Watching his friend's back, Hutch realized how fortunate he was to have Starsky in his life. He was just beginning to discover the real Starsky, the one he seemed to keep hidden from everyone else. He knew now that Starsky was someone he could share problems with, discuss things with—someone who didn't seem to judge him but, instead, accepted him for who he was, warts and all. It was a nice feeling.

As they reached their cars, Hutch asked, "Would you rather head back home and find some food when we get there?"

"The way my stomach is growling, I don't think I can last that long. Besides, in the town we passed through about ten minutes from here, there's a wonderful Italian restaurant. Just follow me." Starsky opened his car door. As he slid into the seat, he called out, "I ever tell you about the Italian restaurant my grandmother use to live over...?"



Please send comments to [Linda B.](#)