



Ages of a Day

by

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Ages of a Day

For two of my most treasured inspirations: Marion, and Kaye (KAM)

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Flower-gathering

Robert Frost

*I left you in the morning,
And in the morning glow
You walked a way beside me
To make me sad to go.
Do you know me in the gloaming,
Gaunt and dusty gray with roaming?
Are you dumb because you know me not,
Or dumb because you know?*

*All for me? And not a question
For the faded flowers gay
That could take me from beside you
For the ages of a day?
They are yours, and be the measure
Of their worth for you to treasure,
The measure of the little while
That I've been long away.*

(from "A Boy's Will" — 1913)

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June, 1956.

Kenny put up his hand to block the glare as the cab rolled into the bright sunshine, emerging from a long tree-lined lane. Through squinted eyes he watched as several boys and their parents busied themselves with unloading sleeping bags and suitcases from trunks of cars. Mothers attempted to hug their sons who bobbed and weaved and complained, fathers checked watches, and siblings made faces at their brothers through dusty car windows.

Further up the drive, a beat-up yellow school bus disgorged several whooping boys clad in yellow t-shirts, while two young men attempted to corral them all into one area to pull their luggage from the bus' belly. One dark-haired boy wearing a Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap carried a bat over his shoulder in one hand while with the other playfully shoved a friend around. Both laughed at something the baseball boy said out of the side of his mouth and Kenny felt ashamed at the tiniest, smallest bit of jealousy and loneliness that poked at him.

He knew no one here. His father wasn't driving this car, and while his mother had fussed a bit at his leaving, she was back in Duluth, presumably carrying on with her daily committee meetings and lunches. Instead, Kenny had been told that at twelve years of age it was time to start acting like a man and start traveling alone, then had been put on a train to New York State, and finally had been picked up by a hired driver at the station to be brought here.

The cab stopped behind the bus and Kenny followed the driver out and around to the trunk where his own gear had been stashed. Brand new sleeping bag and suitcase, along with a fresh box of stationery and postcards—his mother did hope he would write.

A short, balding man, also in a yellow shirt with the camp name emblazoned across it, along with a tired smile and a clipboard came up to them. “Hi, I’m Mac, and I’m the camp director. Who do we have here today?”

Kenny put his hand out, as he’d been taught. “Kenneth Hutchinson, sir. I’m very p-leased to meet you.”

Mac laughed as they shook hands. “You’re a polite one. Nice to see that once in a while. Most of these boys,” he waved his clipboard back toward the group around the bus, “they’re smart enough and all, but they’re still learning their manners. Good kids, though.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” Kenny replied, glancing nervously at the rowdy crowd, now carrying their gear and heading off in smaller groups towards the various cabins beyond the main hall.

Mac stabbed a finger at his clipboard. “Here you are. Blue Skies Cabin. Let’s get you up there.” He turned to the cabbie. “Do I need to give you anything?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Kenny reached for his new wallet and pulled out some money. “Six dollars, is that right, sir?”

The cabbie nodded and solemnly shook Kenny’s hand. “You have fun, now. I enjoyed driving you up here.”

Kenny thanked the driver, picked up his sleeping bag and suitcase and followed Mac up a path to a set of cabins circling a grassy area and a campfire pit. His was one of the nearest cabins. Steps led up to a covered porch, and on the front wall a mural had been painted—blue sky with puffy white clouds. As Kenny came closer, he could see that the clouds had been touched up with white paint. Leftover marks of crude words still showed through in places, and that made him feel uncomfortable, as if the malicious ghosts of previous campers were hiding around the corner, waiting to jump at him.

Inside were five sets of bunk beds, plus one single bed, already made up for the cabin counselor, all pushed up against scarred walls, carved with names and dates and initials of campers long gone. Kenny recognized some of the boys inside as ones from the bus earlier, including the dark-haired one with the baseball bat, who was currently sitting on the bottom bunk in the set against the back corner of the room. His gear was already neatly stowed under the bed, and against the wall stood his bat.

Baseball cards flipped fast through his fingers as the boy apparently was looking for something specific. “Found it!” he suddenly crowed, leaping to his feet and promptly knocking Kenny flat on his behind.

“David!” Mac scolded, reaching to help Kenny up. “Still haven’t figured out how to look before you leap, eh?”

“Sorry, Mac. Hey, sorry, Blondie. You all right?”

Kenny stood carefully, brushing the back of his shorts of any dust that might have collected there, wincing at the nickname suddenly bestowed upon him by this strange boy. “Y-yes.”

“David Starsky, this is Kenneth Hutchinson. It’s his first year, so help him out, eh?” Mac asked with a friendly wink.

David’s face split into a wide grin. “Sure thing, Mac! I’ll be right back. Jimmy, I got it, I told you! See?”

Mac pointed at the bottom bunk next to David's. "Ken, looks like this is the last one still open. Just put your sleeping bag out on the mattress there, and stow your things under the bed. Fred's already put his stuff under the foot, so you get the head end. Lunch is at one o'clock—there'll be a bell, and the guys here will help you out with it all. Did you get a camp shirt yet?"

"Yes, sir. Five of them, in my suitcase."

"Well, put one on. You're one of us now." Mac grinned and left.

"Thank you," Kenny replied, and set to work.

Just as he was pulling the bright yellow shirt over his head, David came bounding back. "Hiya. Sorry about before. Jimmy didn't believe I had this rookie card." He waved it around before carefully sliding it back in with the others. "You play ball?"

Kenny shook his head. "No."

"We'll teach ya. It's great." David flopped face down on his bed, and as Kenny pushed his bag away and sat down on the edge of his own bed, he noticed that the heads of both his bunk and David's were only a few inches apart. His bed was pushed into the corner and David's bunk sat at a ninety-degree angle to it.

"Where're you from?" David asked.

"Duluth."

"Duluth, huh? Where's that?"

"M-Minnesota."

"M-m-m-m-minnesooooota!" Another boy, heavier and shorter than Kenny but apparently not intimidated by that fact, leaned in close. "You always talk in baby-talk?"

"Shaddup, Joey." David kicked out with his foot. "Still hiding the chocolate bars in your pillow case?"

"No!" Joey shot back defensively, but Kenny noticed Joey's eyes darting to a bunk across the room. "I didn't bring none this year."

"Sure ya didn't, Joey. Go bug someone else, I'm talking to Kenny boy here."

"Aaron's supposed to be in this cabin, not him."

"Aaron's lucky to be here at all, dimwit, and that he's not in this cabin ain't nothing Kenny had to do with. Now get, willya?"

Joey did, but not without a last glare at Kenny.

"Don't mind him. He's got ants in his pants. And chocolate in his pillowcase. If he gives ya too much crap, we'll raid it." David grinned and Kenny found himself shyly grinning back.

From the doorway the sound of a bell ringing floated through.

"Lunchtime!" David announced. "Come on, kiddo, or the salami sandwiches will be gone. They always go first."

"S-salami?"

“Sure, salami. What do you like on a sandwich?”

Kenny hurried after David, jostling in with the crowd as all the cabins emptied and their occupants streamed to the main building. He thought of the midday meals usually served at home—perfect meals of meat and vegetable and soup. “Well, not salami...”

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“Excuse me, Detective. I need to replace the bottle there.”

Hutch, attention pulled from his ruminations, smiled faintly at the nurse, stood and moved his chair. “So what’s for lunch today, Grace?”

She turned the bottle over in her hand, peering at the label. “Looks like a nice hearty meal of grilled ham and cheese sandwiches and tomato slices, with a large glass of milk on the side and a pear for dessert, all topped with this wonderful sauce called D10.”

Hutch chuckled. “What, no salami? You know it’s his favorite.”

As she attached the new IV bottle to the tubing, she smiled down at the man in the bed. “I’m not surprised.” She efficiently undertook her routine of pulse checking and respirator monitoring, making notations in the chart at the end of the bed, then replaced Hutch’s chair and waved him back into it.

Hutch laid a gentle hand on Starsky’s blanketed leg before resuming his tale. “And then after lunch, you showed me the dock.”

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Kenny swung his feet as they dangled off the dock and looked longingly at the lake. Sunshine glittered on tiny ripples, and the rising heat made the water seem most inviting for a swim. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. “So what’s the deal with Aaron, then?” he asked, watching as David’s tongue licked his thumb clean of melting chocolate, lately raided from Joey’s stash.

“You know there’s a girls’ camp, across the lake there?” From his reclined position, he waved at a cove some distance away, and Kenny shaded his eyes, picking out what looked to be another white dock similar to the one they were currently perched on. “We have a party once every summer with ‘em. Supposed to be teaching us how to dance and stuff and be ‘proper young men’.” He put one hand over his heart as he said it. “Well, Aaron took himself over there one night last year after the dance.”

He paused and scratched through the short curls under his hat, then squinted up at Kenny. “See, Aaron was just thirteen last year, and some of the older guys got it in their heads that Aaron was queer because he hardly danced at all and wanted to just sit on the boys’ side. It was just teasing, is all, but I guess he figured if he made a point of being with a girl, the guys would leave off picking on him. So, that night after the dance, he snuck out of his cabin and got to the girls’ camp. He got all the way into one of their cabins and was trying to wake up this one girl—I forget her name now—when the counselor woke up and shrieked at him. We could hear the screaming clear over here; woke us all up!”

Kenny knew his eyes were wide, hung up on one word. “Queer?”

David grinned saucily. “Yeah. You know—boys who like other boys instead of girls.”

“Oh.” Kenny felt himself blush and he looked away. “W-what happened then?”

David shrugged, getting to his feet and putting a hand out to pull Kenny up with him. “Lotsa rumors, mostly. Everything from touching her tit to getting naked and crawling into bed with her. Personally, I think he fell through the window and that was all. Anyway, he got sent home early. I didn’t figure he’d be back. His father must have done some fast talking to Mac or something.”

“How old are you?” Kenny asked, suddenly curious.

“Thirteen. Birthday’s in March. What about you?”

“Twelve, but my birthday’s in August.”

“Duluth, huh?” David smiled, and at that moment, Kenny realized that David’s eyes were a rich, deep blue, an interesting contrast to his dark hair and skin tone, and his own light blue eyes.

“Yes. You?”

David pointed at his cap. “Brooklyn.”

“Family?”

“Gotta younger brother. He’s only eight and ain’t old enough to come here yet. You?”

“I have an older sister who’s seventeen. And what does your father do?”

Starsky’s eyes twinkled, enjoying the question game. “Cop. Yours?”

“My father is a company president.”

David whistled. “You loaded? What’re you doing here? There’s gotta be fancier places than this closer to Duluth.”

Kenny felt himself flush again. “My grandfather believed it’d be good for me to get away, visit another part of the country. He said that otherwise, it would be another long summer home alone with the gardener and the housekeeper. My mother is very busy with her volunteer work and is gone all day. Grandfather thought I needed some time with kids my age, having some fun, and my parents agreed.”

He looked past David, recalling the intense voices of his father and grandfather as they argued in the den, heedless of the boy eavesdropping outside the door.

“Fine, Dad. You think he should, fine. But YOU find the place and YOU make the arrangements. And I won’t be taking him. I’m not going to actively participate in sending him out to mix with God knows who, God knows where.”

“Kenny. Kenny. Hutchinson. Hey, Hutch.”

Kenny jerked back to the present. “I beg your pardon?”

David frowned. “I asked ya about your grandpa. Where’d you go?”

Kenny wondered if he’d ever not blush around David. “Oh...just thinking.”

David cocked his head to one side. “Well, I’m just thinking that I’m thirsty as heck. Let’s go back to the mess hall and see if they’ve filled up the soda machines yet. You got a dime?”

“Yes. I’ll buy.”

“Yeah? Terrific!”

They hauled themselves up from the dock and began the trek back. David slung his arm around Kenny’s shoulders. “Even though ya talk kinda funny, I think we got the beginning of a beautiful friendship here, pal.”

“Because I’ve got a spare dime?” Kenny asked, finding that he couldn’t keep the grin off his face at David’s casual closeness. “And I do not talk ‘funny’. How do I talk funny?”

David laughed. “Not that you have a dime, but that you’re willing to share it with me. I owe ya. And ya do talk funny. All formal and perfect. But I like it, I like it.”

Kenny tentatively raised his own arm and rested it across David’s shoulders as they strolled back to camp. This feels nice, he thought. I’ve got a friend, and sounds like things get interesting around here. Yes, this place just might be as fun as Granddad said it would be, after all.

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“That night, the guys razzed me, the new guy. Made fun of my stutter, but you never did. You stood by me from the very first, Starsk.” He leaned close to the pale face, any faint color further leached by the white sheets. “That night, you watched me over the end of your bed, to be sure I knew you were there, and that you had my back. Even then, Starsk. Even then. You hardly knew me...God, I was so grateful and...it was like...you could look right inside my mind, know what I was thinking, understood me, made sure I was happy...safe...”

He stood angrily then, crossing the room to the bright, sunny window and stopping just short of pounding his fist through the glass and into the core of the sun, to put it out, make it as dark as Hutch’s life without the bright flame of Starsky in it.

“I owed you, and I failed. I let you get hurt. It should have been ME.” He did pound the frame this time, one solid, cracking, shuddering thud.

He winced, knowing Grace would appear after that thunderous sound. “Everything all right?”

He ran his uninjured hand through his hair while clutching the other against his stomach, and looked at her with what he hoped was a placating grin. “Yeah. Yeah. Sorry.”

“Need me to look at your hand?” He shook his head, hoping he looked penitent enough about the action to make her forget his violence. She drew her gaze from him to his partner, then back again. “Keep talking, Ken. It can’t hurt. Not like the building studs can.” She gave a pointed look at his fist, and he released his fingers from their constriction.

“Keep talking,” he muttered as she left. “Keep fucking talking.”

He slipped off his jacket and hung it from the chair, pressed his shoes off with his toes. Climbed cautiously onto the bed, arranging arms and legs with care on the narrow space between the lax body and the open drop to the floor. He pulled the blanket up over them both; his injured hand he tucked under the very edge of the pillow and laid his head there, and the other took up Starsky’s cool one.

“It was so damned cold every morning.”

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After a restless night in a strange bed, Kenny awoke before anyone else and lay curled and shivering in his sleeping bag, listening to the various noises the ten other males made. He'd never roomed with anyone before, except for the occasional sleepover at an approved friend's house, but the combined bodily noises of several boys at once, along with birds chirping loudly outside, made for a very different morning than he was used to.

"You cold?" Kenny jumped slightly at the whisper, frowning at David, who was peering with one eye over his pillow.

"You st-startled me," he whispered back.

"Sorry. Want to bring your bag over here? I'm cold, too, and it's too early to get up yet."

Kenny swung his legs, still encased in the bag, over the edge of the mattress and onto the floor, then shuffled the short distance to David's bed. David sat up in his bag and twisted around to lean his back against the wall. Kenny slid himself and his bag up to sit beside him.

"Unzip yours and I'll unzip mine, and we can share some of the warmth, huh?"

Kenny's hand shook as he pulled his bag's zipper, matching David's example, and as soon as they were open enough David slid over to press his bare shoulder against Kenny's and tug the open edges of their bags together across their bodies. "It's really cold this morning. It'll get better later on in the summer, but the first couple of weeks are always chilly."

Cold fingers wrapped around Kenny's wrist, and he turned his hand to grasp David's. "Warmer now?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I don't like the cold much."

Kenny smothered a laugh so as not to inadvertently awake any of their cabinmates. "You'd probably not enjoy Minnesota very much. We have snow every winter, but it's fun. We go ice skating, and skiing, and sledding. We play ice hockey, too."

"Hey, it snows in New York, too, you know."

"Not like in Minnesota, I bet. Huge drifts, and the trees get coated with it, and the first time it snows every year, it looks like...like..."

"Sounds like a cold Disneyland or something."

Kenny grinned. "Yeah. Like that. Or a Christmas card picture."

"I wouldn't really know. I'm Jewish. And the snow gets dirty. And I get cold."

Kenny pressed closer, putting his arm around David's shivering shoulders. "When does everyone else wake up?"

"Seven." He bared his left wrist for a moment, leaning toward the window to read his watch by the early-morning light. "It's barely six-thirty now."

Kenny pulled on David's arm. "Nice watch."

“My pop gave it to me at my Bar Mitzvah.” The pride in David’s voice made Kenny feel a little envious. He had a watch, given to him for a birthday, but he didn’t have a feeling of pride in the receiving of it that David seemed to have. For him, it was just a watch, something that he needed to be responsible for and use just as responsibly, for being on time for school and dinner and piano lessons. But for David, it seemed a prize.

They sat quietly for a few minutes. Kenny felt himself dozing off, warm and snug against his friend.

A horn sounded outside. Reveille.

David jumped and Kenny jolted awake. “Get up, hurry,” David hissed. Kenny scrambled and dragged his sleeping bag back to his bunk before the rest of the cabin’s members had fully awakened. David grinned at him over the bunk, and Kenny found himself smiling back. It felt as if they had a secret, just for themselves, and in that knowledge he felt a little proud, and not a little warm at the open affection David offered in his expression.

“G’morning,” David said.

“Good morning.”

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Hutch jerked awake, catching himself before he fell to the floor. The sun had long gone down, judging by the dark sky out the window, and Madge, the night nurse, was checking Starsky’s vitals.

“I’m sorry, Detective. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“s okay, Madge. I should probably go home, huh?” He carefully peeled the cover back and swung his legs around to the side, hanging his head low. The knuckles of his right hand throbbed as it dangled between his knees.

A gentle touch on that hand drew his eyes open, having not realized they’d closed. Madge carefully bathed and bandaged the injuries, and her tenderness and care brought the exhausted and heartsick man nearly to tears.

“I brought something for you,” she said quietly as she applied the last bit of tape. She nodded her head toward the corner of the room, where a folded rollaway bed waited in the shadows. “It’s got to be more comfortable for you than perching like a bird on a window ledge.”

His eyes did fill then, for he knew, quite well, that hospital policy dictated limited contact for patients in ICU. Starsky was afforded a secluded, private room because of the notoriety of his assassination attempt, but the rules weren’t any different—except, it seemed, in Hutch’s case. The nurses had gone to bat for him, arguing the well being of not only Detective David Starsky by having his partner with him as he had been for the last eight years, but for his partner, as well, for the understanding in their faces told Hutch they could read his heart, even if Starsky had shielded himself from its truth for so long.

“Madge, you’re beautiful.” He cupped her face with his healthy hand and kissed her cheek.

Even in the muted light, he could see her blush. “Save it for him, cowboy.” She went to get the bed and together they set it up. Tucked inside were a set of blue scrubs. “Go shower and change into these,” she instructed, pointing at the private bath. “You’ll feel better.”

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Anthony roused them towards the showers, and Kenny had his first experience being naked with other boys. He followed David's lead, paying attention to cleaning himself and meeting David's eyes to talk, but truth be told, he did sneak a few glances around, curious.

Breakfast was a quick matter. Once food had been placed on their trays, David and Kenny found places at a table in the far corner of the room, near the back window. The morning sun through the windows dazzled their eyes as the early mist began to burn off and reveal the grounds.

Kenny took a second glance outside when a movement caught his eye. Someone emerged from the copse of trees located near the river at the edge of the meadow. The glare prevented him from positively identifying who it was, but a quick glance around the noisy mess hall seemed to confirm his suspicion.

"David," he said, his voice low to keep it from carrying. "I think Aaron's out there."

"Huh?" David leaned across Kenny to look, shorn curls brushing Kenny's chin. "What the...damn," he said, returning to attack his eggs. "If Mac finds out, he's a goner for sure."

"Where do you think he went?" Kenny mumbled over his fork of food. "The girls again?"

David lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Dunno, but he shouldn't have been wherever he was." He nudged Kenny then, pointing with his chin as Aaron slid in the side door and made a beeline for the kitchen, snagging a tub of dirty dishes on the way.

Joey clattered his tray to the table next to them. "Hey, Davey. What're you signing up for this year?"

"The usual—baseball. My pop told me to do swimming this year, and he kinda meant it, so swimming, I guess. BB gun target shooting, too, I think. What about you, Kenny?"

Kenny had just taken a bite, and hurried to choke it down. "I thought I might go for the three day hike and camping trip. That's over this weekend, right?"

David stared back at him. "You're gonna do that? You're crazy, Hutchinson!"

Kenny blinked. "Wh-why am I crazy? I love camping."

"W-w-w-w-whyyyyyy," Joey mocked. "OW!"

"Knock it off, Joey, I ain't tellin' ya again."

"Piss off!" Joey got to his feet and yanked his tray from the table, toppling his milk carton into his eggs. He stalked to the table behind them, and Kenny could feel the heated glare on the back of his neck.

"Don't mind him. He's just a little jealous. He knows I don't put up with crap, and he ain't liking that I like you, you know?" David leaned close, pressing his shoulder to Kenny's. "Now that camping trip. There's bears out there."

Kenny grinned. "Great!"

David's eyes grew wide. "Aintcha afraid you'll get eaten?"

"No. Bears only come after you if you provoke them."

“Huh. Well, I ain’t risking my neck at not ‘provoking’ a bear. And I like having real toilets and four walls and a bed.”

David laughed. “My grandfather used to take me camping every summer, until last year. He had a heart attack and my father put his foot down about him going again. I think that’s why he was so very insistent to have me come here this year.”

“Sounds like a great guy. I never knew my grandfathers.”

Kenny was quiet for a moment, lost in the memory of fishing in the cold early light of morning and stargazing during pitch-black nights. “He is. I need to write to him. And my mother.”

“Yeah, I need to write to Ma, too. I learned my lesson the first year; she made a long-distance call just to check to make sure I actually got here, since I didn’t write at all the first week. Mothers.”

They laughed as they stood to carry their dishes back to the kitchen area, where two boys in blue shirts were rinsing and stacking the dirty dishes next to a gigantic sink. Another blue-shirted boy was busy washing dishes furiously, crashing them together, his speed risking the plates.

“Aaron! Don’t you go breaking my dishes just because you can’t follow the rules. Shape up, mister, or we’ll find you more to do while you’re in disgrace.” Millie the cook wagged her finger at Aaron, but he said nothing, just returned to the dishes with much less noise.

“Sounds like he was late, huh?” David whispered in Kenny’s ear, sending a ripple of goose bumps down his arm.

Kenny nodded. “‘In disgrace’?” he asked.

David took Kenny’s elbow and pulled him toward the outside door. “See, everyone pulls KP duty at least once during the season, but if you’re getting into trouble, the first thing they punish you with is KP. Those guys,” he jerked a thumb back at the three boys, “they got in trouble at the end of last year, so they got to pull the lucky first three days this year. The blue shirts show they’re ‘in disgrace’, as Millie says,” he mimicked.

“Have you ever been ‘in disgrace’?”

David jumped over the two steps leading to the ground and landed with a thud. Kenny followed, and David grinned widely. “Nah. Not yet, anyway.”

“What’s next?” Kenny asked. “Besides writing to our moms.”

They raced to the main cabin, where the day’s activities were posted on a big sheet of butcher paper and written in Magic Marker. The boys perused the list, ranging from hiking to badminton, when David leaned close. “Hey, Hutch. Look.”

Kenny felt himself grow warm at the chummy shortening of his name. “What?”

David gestured with his hand, as if not wanting to point out exactly what he was seeing. “Scavenger hunt,” he muttered. “Teams of two. We could check in the woods for where Aaron was, maybe.”

Kenny nodded once, keeping the conversation between the two of them. David quickly grabbed one of the markers and scribbled “Starsky & Hutchinson” in the allotted space. “There. Now for the rest of the day…” He went on to drop his own name under “Baseball” and “Swimming lessons”.

Kenny opted for baseball as well, at David's urging, and found the three-day hike at the end of the list. "I signed up for baseball. You going to do this with me?"

David cringed slightly, and glanced around him. Again he leaned in. "You'll stick with me the whole time?"

Kenny put his hand on the back of David's neck and squeezed. "Yeah. Trust me." Inwardly he smiled at his own use of the slang 'yeah'.

David blew a breath and slowly added his name after Kenny's on the list. "I can't believe I'm doing this. But," he added as they moved away from the main cabin and back to their own for letter writing materials, "I think I'd miss ya, Hutch."

Kenny didn't care if the world saw him blush just then.

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After swimming lessons, at which Kenny observed sympathetically while David flailed miserably in the water, fifteen teams gathered at the fire circle to receive their scavenger hunt instructions before they were set loose. Counselors would be patrolling the grounds to keep an eye out on the teams as they searched for the items on their lists.

David perused the one they'd been handed while everyone else clamored around them. "Camp postcard. Forked stick. Cherry blossoms. Location of nest (don't disturb the nest itself). Bear shit."

"Huh?" Kenny's head snapped closer. "What?"

"Kidding," David said, chuckling. "'sides, I'm sure we'll find plenty of it over the weekend." He groaned. "I can't believe I let you talk me into that."

"It'll be fun, Starsky. You'll see." David's head came up from reading the list when he heard his name. Kenny felt tingles right down to his toes at the crooked grin he received.

"I like it, I like it. Gettin' you loosened up. We're gonna go far, pal, we're gonna go far."

"Okay, fellas, a quick team count here to be sure everyone's got their partner and a list," called Bob, a new counselor that year. "Starsky and Hutchinson—Starsky?" he asked, looking at Kenny.

"I'm Starsky. He's Hutch," David replied, jerking his thumb between them.

"Right. Holloway and Johnson? Carpenter and Williams?" Bob moved away, checking off the teams.

"None o' those names sound as good together as ours, partner," Starsky said, clapping Hutch on the shoulder. "You okay with me making yours short like that?"

"Y-yep." Best thing ever, Kenny thought. I like being Hutch.

"Then let's go, partner."

With a quick glance around to see where everyone else was scattering, they made their way to the copse of trees from which Kenny had seen Aaron emerging that morning.

"Look." Hutch pointed where the small area of trees ended and then the larger, deeper wooded area began. "It's like a path has been kicked through the brush there, like someone didn't stick to the main trail."

They followed it, out of the copse and into the woods. “We’re not supposed to be in here,” Hutch reminded Starsky, as he yanked his shoelace from a vine that had tried to capture it.

“Cover me and keep an eye out for Bob, then, huh?” Starsky circled the base of a large tree, ducking down behind it. “Gotcha!”

“What?” Hutch craned his neck around the tree, ostensibly still keeping watch.

“Cigarettes, stuck in a hole here. Wait...”

“What?”

Starsky, with raised eyebrows, handed over the pack of cigarettes to Hutch as he slowly produced a brown bottle. Jack Daniels, the label proclaimed. Starsky pulled off the cap and took a sniff.

“Yep. My dad has some; I know what it smells like.” He passed it to Hutch, who also took a cautious whiff. He nodded reverently and handed it back to Starsky.

“My father has a bar full of liquor. Think this is where Aaron was this morning?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I’ll bet he wasn’t in his bunk all night. Look—cigarette butts. Lipstick on one, too.” Starsky bent to pick it up, nearly hidden under a pile of leaves.

“One of the girls from the other camp?”

Starsky nodded. “Probably. Town’s too far away. Could have been any of the older guys, really, but Aaron sure seems like the main suspect.” He moved to put the bottle back when the sound of crunching footsteps announced that their disappearance from the grounds had been noted.

“Hold it right there. Starsky, Hutchinson—hand that over. Now.”

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“Hand it over.” Hutch rolled his eyes at the bad pun and thrust his hand at Grace, wincing as she unwrapped, medicated, and began to rewrap his hand.

As she worked he looked beyond her to Starsky. Nothing had changed. The machines continued their monotonous beeping and Starsky still lay still as death.

No. Don’t even think like that, Hutchinson! Suddenly impatient with Grace, he yanked his hand from hers before she was quite done and stalked around the room, bandage unraveling and flaring out behind him like a misplaced kite tail.

“Detective!” Her tone was no nonsense and not a little like Dobby’s bark. “I know you’re worried, and I know you’re upset, but you come right back here this minute and sit yourself down. I’m not finished with you.”

He gestured helplessly at Starsky.

“Grace, he’s just lying there. He doesn’t move, he doesn’t react, he just....beeps! All these machines, beeping at him, for him, telling us everything about him except when—or IF!—he’ll wake up! I need him to wake up, Grace. I need him—I-I just need him. God, Starsk.”

He deflated like a balloon and sat heavily in his chair again. He barely noticed Grace finishing the bandaging job until she placed her palm against his cheek. He turned to her, and murmured, “I’m being punished, aren’t I? Punished for loving him. Punished for failing to keep him safe.”

“No,” she answered softly. “No. I think it’s love that’s keeping him fighting. Don’t do this to yourself. It’s no disgrace to love.”

~~*

Hutch had never been in trouble outside of home before in his life, and here he was, day two at camp, and already ‘in disgrace’. Bob had caught them red-handed, holding cigarettes and booze, and that was all that was needed.

They sat together on a bench covered with peeling paint that was built into the wall on the porch outside of Mac’s office. Starsky exuded justified confidence, while a nervous Hutch tried simply to sit up straight. In fact, he was shaking like a leaf. He thought of his grandfather, and how disappointed he’d be in the boy he’d sent to camp. He was sure his father would have something to say about it all, and imagined punishments stretching from now until he graduated high school.

Campers with their hunt lists wandered by, occasionally stopping to stare, for no one sat on that bench unless they were about to get a good talking to. Whispers of Mac’s wooden paddle being used on the boys floated on the warm breeze to their ears, and Hutch squirmed.

“Is it true?” he whispered. “Does Mac do that?”

Starsky shook his head. “Nah. I’ve never heard of anyone gettin’ paddled. I think it’s just a threat to keep us in line. But my pop...” Starsky winced and drew a deep breath in through his nose. “He’s not gonna be happy if he hears about this.”

“Mine either,” Hutch murmured morosely.

“We could tell Mac we saw Aaron.”

“But if no one knew he was gone, then it’s just our word against his.”

Long minutes passed and both boys shifted restlessly. Hutch thought of the paddle, and how once, and only once in his life, had he ever been punished that way. His father, determined to make a point of teaching an unforgettable lesson, had taken ten year old Kenny to his study, made him drop his pants and lean over the arm of his father’s red leather desk chair. He’d then pulled his belt from his trousers, folded the ends into his hand, and whipped his young son with five solid cracks that sent Kenny’s sister, who had defended him to no avail, to her room in frightened tears.

Kenny’s crime had been to leave his bicycle—a very expensive bicycle, his father pointed out—dropped in the driveway where the gardener, not seeing it just out of sight around a flowering bush, had backed the lawn tractor over it, destroying both the front wheel and handlebars of the bike and the whirring blade of the mower, and scaring old Mr. Mason nearly to death with the noise the incident created.

Katherine had tried to tell her father that Kenny had only dropped it there because she’d called for help, having been trying to get her new kitten out of a tree where it had been yowling for over an hour, unable to get itself down again. However, Richard Hutchinson had not felt that a cat up a tree was justification enough to leave a bike lying on its side, forgotten.

Hutch felt his palms begin to sweat, and he rubbed them up and down the fabric of his shorts to dry them. "Your father whips you?" he asked shakily.

"Yeah, usually 'cause I sassed my Ma. Once it was because I came home an hour late and Ma was nearly in hysterics, sure I was dead in a gutter somewhere. But he only does it when he really thinks we need it," he added, bumping his shoulder into Hutch's. "He's usually right. What about yours?"

"Once," Hutch whispered. Closing his eyes and letting his head fall back against the wall. He felt Starsky's curious gaze, but he didn't have it in him to share the details. Not now.

The door next to them opened. "Come in, boys," Mac said gruffly, and once they passed through the entry, he shut it firmly behind them again and locked it.

"Have a seat."

"I'd rather stand, Mac," Starsky announced, politely but firmly. Hutch, halfway to sitting already, straightened back up.

"So will I." He was surprised and pleased to hear that his voice sounded strong, and without stuttering, for once.

Mac looked them both up and down appraisingly before moving behind his desk.

"David, you've never been in trouble with me before, beyond normal boyish rough-and-tumbles. But this time..." Mac shook his head. "This time, you're really in it deep. And Kenny, I'm really surprised at you. I didn't expect this, not at all."

"Mac, let us explain," Starsky began, but Mac put up his hand to stop his words.

"Bob found you with cigarettes and whiskey, in your hands."

"It's not ours, Mac."

"Then whose?"

Hutch and Starsky glanced at each other, and Hutch shrugged. "We don't know for sure."

Mac frowned. "Boys, what were you doing that far into the woods when you know it's outside of the designated boundaries?"

Again they shared a silent gaze, and said nothing.

"You found the booze and tobacco."

"Yeah."

"Yes, sir."

"You knew it was there, that's why you went out of bounds."

"No, Mac."

"David. Don't lie to me. Not after all these years."

Hutch could feel the anger building inside Starsky. "I'm not lying."

“Kenny? Why were you there?”

He glanced at David, who lifted his shoulder slightly. The truth, then?

“We thought we saw someone come out of the woods this morning and we wanted to see where they came from,” Hutch finally said, slowly.

“Who?”

“Well...it looked like one of the older boys.”

“Who?”

“Aaron Michaels,” Starsky said through gritted teeth.

“And why didn’t you come to me with this? Why go looking on your own?”

“Rat out a fellow camper? His word against ours? C’mon, Mac, you know we can’t do that and keep any sort of cred out here.”

“David, it’s my responsibility to handle problems like these, not yours, and you both were found with alcohol and cigarettes.” He opened a drawer of his desk, removed something, then stood and sighed. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had to do this, and I’m sorry I have to now.”

Hutch felt his hands grow clammy at the sight of the wooden paddle. Thick handled and worn of most of its polish, it promised another lesson to be learned.

“Both of you. Hands on the desk, legs back and spread.”

His heart pounding so loud he was sure Starsky could hear it, Hutch shakily obeyed, mirroring Starsky’s stance against the desk. Their hands touched at the sides, and their feet, too, and Hutch took a bit of solidarity and comfort from it.

“Mac, can I say one thing first?” Starsky asked, looking back over his shoulder.

“What is it?”

“Hutch here, he was just followin’ me. He didn’t know better. Beat me all you want. Don’t whip him. Please.”

“The heck I didn’t, Starsk!” Hutch snapped his head around, and surprised himself with his vehemence. “I knew the rules. I crossed over the line. And I’m sorry, Mac. I’ll take my punishment just like Starsky.”

“Yes, you will. And you can both forget about the camping weekend. You’re on restriction.”

Four solid swats each later, two red-faced, wincing boys wrapped their arms around each other’s shoulders and made their way slowly to Millie’s kitchen, ignoring those who stared and pointed and whispered, to collect the disgraceful blue shirts and to report for KP duty for the next week, lunch and dinner.

~~*

Madge had made him take a light sleeping pill that night, which he protested, but when she had put a hand on his rollaway and arched her eyebrow, he arched his right back and swallowed the pill dry.

And yet morning came too soon, or too slowly, depending on how he looked at it. Even with the pill, he'd been restless, and the constant report by sound of the various machines tracking Starsky's responses proved both an annoyance and a reassurance.

His vivid dreams were filled with snatches of past cases, hard chases down dirty alleys and the horror in a rape victim's eyes, the stinking scent of filthy hotel rooms housing the dregs of humanity, and the wide-eyed fear baring itself naked on the faces of small children too young to understand what was happening around them.

But throughout every dream, there was also a constant presence, just as it had always been in real life on the job—that one person who backed him up and stood beside him, who knew him best, knew what he was thinking, what a single look across the expanse of a rooftop meant and followed in kind, who could later rub his neck and pour cheap beer down his throat and tell him, "It's not so bad. We did good. We're making the world a better place every day, Hutch."

Waking up pained his heart, for that blessed presence was, for the moment, lost to him, lost in its own world, unknowingly attached to the life it represented by tubes and needles and once, electric paddles shocking him.

And if Hutch wanted to get soapier, that presence was also connected to life by Hutch's own determination that it would remain so, that running through Memorial and throwing open doors would announce his own presence strongly enough that Starsky's wouldn't dare leave, wouldn't dare go and allow him to face the world and the rest of his own existence without the living, breathing touchstone he'd relied upon for over twenty years.

"I'll be here for you, Starsk. Always have. Always will. Just wake up. Please."

~~*

That week passed by quickly, and, Hutch thought, maybe too quickly, for he found he looked forward to the times he and Starsky were working together. They made a good team in the kitchen. They seemed to instinctively know what the other was going to do, and how, and when, and even Millie commented that she'd never seen such hardworking blue-shirts. They continued happily on with the rest of the camp experience—swimming, boating, baseball, hiking, campfires. Aaron seemed to know nothing of their betrayal to Mac, and that was just fine with Kenny.

They appropriated their blue-shirt time to speak in intimacies, and without reservation, sharing bits about their home lives, school, interests, family. Hutch shyly told Starsky that while he'd been taking piano lessons for several years, he had saved up allowance money and bought an old used guitar, teaching himself to play it using books and the occasional bit of input from the music store proprietor. Starsky told him of his ambition to be a cop, like his dad.

On their last day, while working after lunch, Starsky expressed an embarrassed relief that he hadn't had to go on the camping trip, to which Hutch hooted and playfully accused him of talking Hutch into breaking the rules just to get out of it. "I'm taking you one of the days, Starsk. You can count on it."

"Sure ya will. Sure ya will. When the bears are all gone."

"What, you want to be a cop, and are afraid of a little old bear?"

"Hey! Bears don't rob banks. They eat people!" He shuddered, and aimed the spray hose at his friend. "Freeze! Hands over your head!"

Laughing, Hutch raised his hands. “C’mon, Starsk! Those people might have guns and will shoot back at you! Then what?”

Starsky lowered the hose quickly, and his face grew suddenly serious. “Then I’ll need a partner. Someone to back me up.” He spoke so simply, so sure as he looked straight into Hutch’s eyes, that Hutch felt captured in the idea he knew Starsky had formed before he’d said anything more. Before he could open his own mouth to respond in any sort of way, Mac came in, his eyes terribly sad, and he drew a very deep breath before speaking.

“David...David, I need to talk with you. Please come with me.”

Hutch reached out and took the hose from Starsky’s suddenly limp hand. “I’ll finish up. I’ll see you back at the cabin.” Starsky’s expression had shifted from serious to scared. Something in the way Mac was speaking did not bode well with Hutch.

“Did I do something wrong again?”

“No, David. It’s...” he paused, and glanced at Hutch. “David, I got a call from your uncle. Come with me.”

He took the bewildered boy’s arm and steered him out the door, Hutch watching after them both helplessly. A quiver of anxiety shivered through him, dread sinking deep into his belly. He turned back to the sink and clumsily but quickly finished the dishes, his mind on Starsky the entire time.

~~*

Hutch waited on the porch of their cabin, alternately sitting on the steps or standing, leaning against a post, watching for Starsky across the grounds at Mac’s office. The tenor of Mac’s voice, the caring with which he’d spoken to Starsky meant that the news could not possibly be good. His uncle had called—not his mom or his dad. Hutch suspected someone had been hurt, or fell ill. Maybe Nick, Starsky’s little brother?

Someone exited the building—another camper in yellow. As he ran across the compound and up to Hutch, he recognized him as Scott. They’d played baseball together for the past week. “Kenny, Mac wants you.” He started to go, and then turned back. “Davey’s looking pretty upset about something.”

“Thanks, Scotty.” Hutch jumped from the porch and ran as fast as he could, sliding to a stop at Mac’s door. He caught his breath before knocking softly on the door.

“Come in, Ken,” he heard Mac call, and he opened the door to see Starsky, curled in a chair. His knees were drawn up tightly against his chest and his forehead rested on them. He didn’t look up.

“Ken, David’s been given some pretty rough news to hear, and he asked for you, if you’re willing, to sit with him awhile.”

Hutch nodded, suddenly scared. Mac patted his shoulder and left them alone.

He pulled another chair over and sat right in front of Starsky. His friend hadn’t moved a muscle or made a sound, but Hutch could feel the anguish pouring off him in waves. He reached out tentatively and rested his hand on Starsky’s shoe, gently grasping his ankle. “Buddy, what happened?” he asked softly.

Starsky’s body shuddered, but he didn’t answer, and Hutch waited patiently, squeezing Starsky’s foot now and then as if to remind Starsky he was there.

The sounds of daily activity filtered through the window. Boys calling for each other, shouts and laughter, whistles by counselors, cheers after the crack of a bat. It was after the swell of sound after a home run hit that Starsky finally drew himself out of his self-imposed exile and raised his head.

Tracks of tears shone like silver against the sunburned cheeks, and the haunted blue eyes glowed dully behind the dampness. "Hutch..." he murmured, focusing finally on his friend. "My pop...my pop...he's dead."

"Oh god. Oh, god, Starsk." Hutch couldn't think of anything more to say, but he held the sad gaze until Starsky's face crumpled.

"My pop...what am I gonna do without him, Hutch? What's my ma gonna do? Huh?" Starsky whispered, before dropping his head back down to his knees.

Hutch grasped a trembling wrist. "You'll be all right, Starsk. It'll be all right. I'm right here." Starsky's other hand slid over until it rested on Hutch's.

The sun slid across the floor, dust motes dancing in its rays, heedless of the loss in the room.

~~*

When Mac returned, Starsky pulled himself together enough to grind the heels of his hands into his eyes, and Hutch discreetly passed him his handkerchief. Mac filled them both in on what would happen next. Starsky's uncle would arrive before lunchtime the next day to pick up his nephew and bring him home to his family. Mac offered Starsky the spare room in his cabin, usually reserved for the occasional guest to the camp, if he would rather not be in his usual cabin that night. Starsky, after allowing Hutch to sit beside him and put his arm around his shoulders, accepted the offer and asked if Hutch could stay with him, as well.

"Sure, if Ken wants to, of course, David. Anything you need. Why don't you go collect your things now, while the cabin's empty. Ken, would you help him?"

Hutch kept his arm in contact with Starsky during the long, slow walk back to the cabin. A few curious glances were tossed their way, but Starsky seemed to take no notice of them. Once inside, Hutch reached under Starsky's bed and pulled out his duffel bag. Most things were already in there, but Starsky added the few things from his bed, folded up his sleeping bag and tucked his bat under his arm. As Hutch gathered his own gear for the night, Starsky stepped to the center of the room and slowly looked around.

The lowering sun slanted through the window. Dust motes rose lazily from the floor, floating in currents around Starsky's legs. Errant sunbeams wove themselves through the curls that were quickly on their way to needing trimming. Hutch stood behind him, hands on his shoulders, lost in wishing he could help.

"I ain't ever gonna be back here again, Hutch. I know it. Help me remember." Starsky drew his pocketknife from his back pocket.

"I gotta leave my mark."

"Where?" Hutch asked softly.

"Here." Starsky dropped his things where he stood and walked straight for the corner where their beds nearly met. "On the wall. Here." His hand shook as he tried to open the blade, and Hutch gently reached over and opened it for him.

"What are you going say?"

Starsky didn't answer, but knelt and began carving carefully into the wall, halfway between the sill and the floor. Starsky & Hutch, 1956.

Hutch smiled a sad smile, missing Starsky already. In the privacy of the room, Starsky turned to Hutch, wrapped his arms around him, and they hugged, tightly.

"Let's go, partner." Hutch hoisted Starsky's duffel over his shoulder, and together they headed back to Mac's cabin.

~~*

Anxiety twisted his gut. He stood beside the bed, Starsky's badge in his hand. Over and over his thumb stroked as if he could carve the engraved number "82" that meant "David Michael Starsky" to the Bay City Police Department, and "partner to Kenneth Hutchinson" to himself into his skin.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his own badge case, pulling the shiny metal away from the leather and dropping the case onto the rollaway. He hefted both badges, one in each hand, gauging their weight, their load, their price, paid in bullets and blood, tears, sweat and sleepless nights. He pressed their silver faces together, enclosed between his palms, squeezing until the stickpins that normally held them in their cases threatened to break his skin and attach themselves there.

The need to be close grew greater. He tucked the badges beneath Starsky's pillow, then climbed in himself, nuzzling Starsky's hair with his nose, wrapping an arm cautiously around his middle, mindful of bandages and tubes.

He felt himself grow calmer with each breath, and began to whisper into Starsky's ear more about that horrible day, so long ago.

~~*

Millie brought them both dinner that night, and gave Starsky a motherly hug of her own. "Poor boy. Your mama's going to need you now, you know. You be brave, and you be strong for her. Take care of that little brother. And Kenny, you take care of Davey here."

"Yes, ma'am," Starsky replied. "I promise, I will."

"I will," Kenny echoed.

Millie sighed, stroked Starsky's cheek, and left, her eyes wet.

They sat cross-legged on one of the two beds, trays in laps. Hutch ate listlessly, while Starsky only poked with his fork, pushing the food around the plate.

"Not hungry?" Hutch asked.

Starsky shook his head, grimacing. "Nah. Kinda feel like if I eat, I'll just throw it up again."

Outside, they could hear campers beginning to gather for campfire circle. Chatter and laughter dropped to silence as Mac presented the news to them that David would be leaving, and why.

Starsky had positioned himself beside the window so that he could see out without necessarily being seen. Firelight flickered in his eyes, and light and shadows traded places across his face. Hutch felt deeply the

sadness, the dread, and the hollowness he knew his friend was feeling, as surely as if it were his own pain without stopping to wonder why.

And it seemed rather unfair. All week as they spent their enforced, but happy, time together, Starsky had been talking about his dad, and all his extended family, in terms couched in love and respect and downright joy. Comparing it to his own life, Hutch found himself to be a little envious of that closeness. He wondered how he'd truly feel if his father died suddenly, and just as quickly berated himself for even considering a moment like that. Of course he'd be upset—so would his mother, and his sister. They were a family, even if their lives differed vastly from the Starsky family version of home life. But he also thought he might be a bit more upset if it were his grandfather. He shook himself of that thought and settled with Starsky at the window.

Music began; the song choices all thoughtful or sad in lyric and sound—a childlike offering of memorial, best as children knew how. Starsky and Hutch sat silently, listening, and once, Starsky reached out and put his hand on Hutch's ankle, as if to remind himself that he wasn't alone. In turn, Hutch grasped the skinny wrist and held it firmly, and knew that this was a moment he wasn't ever going to forget. The wood smoke, the darkness of the night, the brilliance of the stars. Taps, played mournfully and softly, the muted shuffle of boys returning to their cabins, and finally, the creak and snap of the latch on Mac's door.

Starsky hadn't moved, didn't move, even when a soft rap sounded. "Boys? Do you need anything?" Hutch squeezed Starsky's wrist for his attention, but Starsky just shook his head slightly, once.

"No, Mac, we're fine. Thanks," he called back softly. He let Starsky go and carefully pulled his foot away and stood, unfolding his sleeping bag and spreading it out on the other bed. "Want me to lay out yours, Starsk?" he asked, and Starsky stood and leaned against the wall, staring at his shoes while Hutch laid the bag out, unzipping it and folding it back, punching the pillow into submission and laying it carefully there.

He moved to stand before his friend, setting gentle hands on his shoulders, and realized that not since he was very small had he touched another person as much as he had Starsky this week, and especially this day. The thought didn't bother him; rather, it pleased him to be able to offer comfort to someone who so readily accepted it, had accepted his nearness, his nervous stuttering, and his friendship nearly from the moment they had met.

"Come and lay down, Starsk. It'll be ok."

Starsky drew a deep breath and let it out, allowing his body to be turned toward the bed. He pushed off his shoes, slid down his shorts, and pulled the blue shirt over his head, dropping it into Hutch's hand. Watching Starsky standing there in his underwear, Hutch had the odd thought he looked like a very little boy instead of the teenager he was. Then Starsky slid into his bag, turning on to his side to watch Hutch as he readied for bed.

"Anyone ever die, Hutch? In your family, I mean?"

Hutch pulled off his own shirt, dropping it on the end of the bed and rolling into his own bag. "My grandmother. I was pretty little, though. I remember white flowers and my mom crying. It was her mom. My other grandfather died when my mom was young, though, and my dad's mom died just before I was born. I only really know my granddad Hutchinson now."

"You hang out with him much?"

Hutch nodded. "Yeah. He's the one who likes me to play and run and go camping. I'm here because of him."

“I’ll have to thank him someday,” Starsky said softly.

“For what?”

“You being here. And...um...thanks for being here with me tonight.”

“Sure, Starsk. We’re pals.”

“Like Lone Ranger and Tonto?”

“Laurel and Hardy?” Hutch countered.

“Batman and Robin?”

“Holmes and Watson?”

“Bonnie and Clyde?”

Hutch snickered.

“Me and Thee,” Starsky said softly.

“Me and Thee?”

“Yeah. You and me. Partners.”

Yes. “I—I’ve never had a friend like you. We kind of clicked, didn’t we?”

Starsky burrowed down into his bag, pulling it up around his ears. “Yeah, we did. You ever put together a puzzle, and there’s those two pieces that look so different, the pattern is different, that you don’t think they’d go together, but they do? That’s like you and me.” He stopped and drew a breath. “I’m sorry I can’t stay. I wish I could.”

“Me too. But...yeah. Hey, we can write, though, right?”

“Yeah, sure. I’m not sure how great of a writer I am, but I bet I can manage a postcard here and there.”

“I’ll be sure to give you my address in the morning.” Hutch yawned.

“Me, too. Partner.” Starsky’s voice dropped off drowsily.

Hutch lay awake a while longer, pleased that Starsky felt secure enough with him to sleep, and awed by the responsibility he felt to watch over him. He gazed out the window over Starsky’s bed. The stars blazed like diamonds in the black sky, and just as Hutch felt his eyes begin to droop, a star fell.

“I wish...” he began, and then stopped. He’d wish for Starsky’s dad to be alive, and no matter how hard he wished that, it wouldn’t come true.

Instead, he wished that he and David Starsky would be friends forever.

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A small noise awakened him, and he lay perfectly still, eyes wide open as if they would help his ears hear in the dark, waiting for the sound again.

When it came, he whispered, “Starsky? You all right?”

Another quiet sniff and Hutch was out of his bed and sitting on Starsky’s. “Aw, pal.” His hand ran what he hoped felt like a soothing stroke across the quivering back, as Starsky lay prone, hiding his head in his pillow. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Starsky snuffled a bit, and turned his head. “Sorry. ‘M not such a crybaby, really.”

“You’re no crybaby. Look, it’s just me. I’m not going to tell anyone. Cry all you want. It’s your pop, Starsk. Cry.”

And Starsky did, great wracking sobs that shook the bed, and Hutch found himself sitting with his back against the wall, Starsky’s head and pillow in his lap, petting and soothing and waiting for the storm to pass. He wiped not a few of his own tears away, too, for in the loneliness of late night, just himself and a bereft Starsky, imagining the loss of one of his own family became far too easy to do, and his friend’s pure grief lent credence to the pain it caused. And of course, he wept for Starsky as the boy lay shuddering and sniffing in Hutch’s young arms.

Eventually, Starsky’s outpouring of grief calmed and Hutch was touched to realize that his friend had fallen asleep. Gently he shifted both Starsky and his pillow off his lap and onto the bed. Unwilling to leave him alone again, he unzipped the sleeping bag to its end and carefully tugged it out from under Starsky. He pulled it across them both, and tucking one arm under the pillow they shared, he draped the other across Starsky’s shoulders. He gazed at the shadowed face, drying tracks of tears glinting in the starlight. Sleep overtook him quickly, lulled to it by Starsky’s even breathing and the warmth of being so close to another person.

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Blissfully warm, cozy and cocooned. Beautiful, comfortable darkness. He sighed luxuriously.

“Hutch?” A whisper tickled his ear, and he jerked fully awake, blinking.

“Huh? What?”

Starsky laughed softly. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle ya. I thought maybe you’d want to go back to your own bed before Mac wakes us up.”

“Oh.” He looked around and over at his cold bed. “Yeah. But I’m warm here.” He yawned and settled in deeper into Starsky’s pillow. “Is it okay if I stay here? We could get up before he comes around. He’s not going to just walk in, is he?”

“Nah, probably not. ‘Sides, what’s he gonna do, send us home?” Starsky settled back down.

“Thanks...for...last night.”

Hutch sent a gentle mock-punch to Starsky’s jaw. “Anytime.” The crooked, watery grin he received almost made up for the twisting in his gut that reminded him that Starsky would be leaving today to face a devastated family and a funeral. “I wish you didn’t have to go.”

“Not more than me.” Starsky turned over and stared up to the ceiling. “My ma is gonna be a wreck. And Nicky, I don’t know what I’m gonna do with him. He’s really the crybaby in the family.”

“It’ll all work out, Starsk.”

Starsky was quiet for several minutes, but Hutch could feel the thoughts churning through his friend's head. He waited patiently and had dozed off, enjoying the closeness while they had it, when Starsky spoke again.

"I just found ya, Hutch, and now I gotta give you up."

"What? You're not giving me up, Starsk. I'm not giving you up."

"It won't be the same."

"No, but it's no different than it would have been at the end of camp. I've got, what, ten more days? It's ok. I'll write you from here if you want."

"Would you do that?" Starsky's eyes were wide and hopeful in their gaze.

"Well, yeah. Why not?"

Starsky looked like he might start crying again, but he swallowed hard instead and turned his eyes back to the ceiling. "I'll let ya know what goes down later. Write to you at home?"

"Yep. Postcards or letters or whatever works for you."

Starsky rolled back to his side suddenly, throwing his arm over Hutch. He pressed their foreheads together, and whispered, "Promise you won't forget me."

"I promise I won't forget you." His arm slid around Starsky's back.

"I'm scared."

"I'm right here."

The world narrowed to the tiny room, their tiny space. Their breath mingled and quiet tears fell. The sun crept over the windowsill and peeked through the parted curtains, dropping sunbeams across their faces, heralding the morning.

Starsky crawled reluctantly out of the bed, grabbing and pulling on the blue shirt from yesterday. He picked up Hutch's and tossed it to him. "Mac'll be knockin' soon, I think."

Hutch lifted the shirt by its collar and peered at the label. "This one's yours, Starsk."

Starsky looked down at the shirt he was wearing. "Oh." He started to undress again, but Hutch stopped him. "It's ok. You keep that one. I'll keep this one."

"You sure?"

Hutch grinned. "Yep. I've got something of yours, you've got something of mine."

Starsky chuckled. "Sounds like we're dating or somethin'." He winked, and Hutch laughed.

"You wish, Starsk." Starsky only grinned.

They were both laughing by the time Mac knocked and told them to come out for breakfast.

~~*

They ate together, and far too soon for Hutch's comfort a car containing a Starsky uncle rolled into camp. Everyone gathered around to say goodbye, and with one last shoulder bump between them, Hutch stepped back from the car and led the rest of the boys in running behind it, waving and shouting farewells through the dust cloud. Just before the car entered the tree-lined drive, a dark, curly head popped out the window and gave a last long wave before the shadows swallowed them up.

Long after the other boys had gone on to their activities for the day, Hutch still stood in the driveway, hands stuffed in his pockets as he stared down the lane, as if wishing hard enough could make Mr. Starsky turn around and bring David back. At Millie's gentle call, he finally walked away.

Hutch did his chores on autopilot, barely responding to anyone who approached him. He did the dishes efficiently but without the cheerful whistle he usually blew. He noted how the slightly smaller shirt sleeves clung to his biceps and how, in a way, it felt like a hug. A hug from Starsky.

I'm such a mushball, he thought. But I really do miss him. I don't know when I'll ever see him again. Damn, we were good together.

Excused from the kitchen by an understanding Millie, Hutch went to his cabin, collected writing materials, and set out to the dock where he and Starsky had sat eating chocolate that first day. He began with a brief note to his mother, relating, much like the first time he'd written, the things he was doing and the food he'd eaten, adding a quick reference to Starsky's loss at the end, and that he loved her.

Then, he pulled out a postcard. Carefully he copied the address written in Starsky's left-handed scrawl into the proper space, and then set it all down in his stationery box. The sunlight glittered on the water, sparkles and glints that dazzled his eyes. After some moments, he took up his pen again.

"Dear Starsk,

I hope you and your family are all right. It's boring here without you. I wish we could go swimming again. I still have more to teach you.

Always remember Me and Thee. Write to me when you can.

Love, Hutch."

Ten days later, after long nights and cold mornings staring at the empty bed next to his, Kenny arrived home with a too-small blue shirt, a sunburned nose, and a polite request to be called "Ken".

A letter with a New York postmark was waiting for him.

~~*

Hutch butted the hospital room door open. "You're not going to believe what I found, Starsk," Hutch crowed. "And not only did I find mine, but I found yours!"

He upended a paper bag onto the bed, thudding Starsky's blanket-covered legs with four bundles of envelopes and postcards, yellowing and torn, tied together with bits of string.

"God, Starsky, I haven't looked at these in forever. Do you remember writing these? Look at the stamps—damn, three cents! Three cents, can you believe it?"

The giddiness felt good. He felt light and buoyant on a tide of nostalgia. If he wanted to imagine it, he could almost hear the heart monitor speed up just a touch. Starsky, listening from within the coma.

He poked through Starsky's packets until he found that first postcard he'd sent him from camp. Setting it carefully aside, he located the first letter Starsky had written to him.

Childish handwriting on both sent him backwards in time, back home and missing Starsky. He took a moment to crawl onto the bed next to his comatose partner, then began reading the missives aloud.

~~*

The trip home had been long, and his thoughts had constantly strayed to Starsky. A small part of him worried that now there was distance and time between them that Starsky would forget about him, be busy with other things in the wake of his father's death, would change his mind and any priorities that he'd thought would include Hutch would shift to something else.

Hutch would lean his back on train seat, remember that Starsky had once mentioned his love of trains, and picture his friend's face. Blue eyes that shone in the sunlight they spent their days in; glowing with pride when Hutch hit the ball far out into left field; teasing when water from the kitchen sink soaked Hutch's shorts; dark with sadness that last day together. Being handed the letter by his mother felt like a prize for managing the rest of the camp time alone and getting home safely, although in the presence of his mother, he would never admit to the thrill he felt.

Hutch emptied his bag, took a shower, ate ravenously, and collapsed into bed with Starsky's letter in hand. Sleep overtook him within minutes, letter left unread.

He found it wedged between his cheek and his pillow the next morning, all scratchy corners and crinkling paper. He blinked at his bedside clock, disbelieving how long he had slept.

He sat up against the headboard and held the letter in his hand. A New York postmark, and Starsky's distinctive scrawl.

As he carefully pulled the flap open, he was suddenly and strongly reminded of their cold mornings together, huddled close on one bunk or the other, talking quietly.

He truly missed Starsky, he realized, with a pang he'd never felt before for anyone else.

Dear Hutch,

Sending this to your house like you said to do, so I hope you get it.

Pop's funeral was earlier today. I guess it was yesterday now. It's two in the morning and I can't sleep. Thought of you and figured I'd write.

The NYPD does their guys grand. A whole lot of them marched down the street and they were all wearing black bands on their arms. The rabbi didn't say much, but then I wasn't really listening. Nicky cried the whole time, and so did Ma. I didn't cry then. Aunt Rose says I'm the man of the house now, so I guess a man doesn't do crying.

I didn't want to be there. I kept thinking of camp and the kitchen and you. We had a good time, huh? I hope we get to see each other again some day. You're pretty cool, even if you do use fancy talking. Smart ass. Pretend I socked you in the arm.

Guess I'd better try to go to sleep again. Nicky cried himself to sleep. I wish Pop were here. I wish you were here. It'd be a lot easier if I had you to pal around with right now.

Can I tell you a secret? There's no one here I can talk to. No one to trust; the crap that went down over Pop's death makes it pretty clear. So who do I trust? You. Shit, I'm crying right now. I miss him, Hutch, and it hurts real bad, like someone's stabbing me in the heart with a sharp knife. It's not cold in the mornings here in the city, but it feels cold. I didn't count on our morning talks to be over so soon. Wish you were here to get me warm again.

Thanks for being there with me when they told me at camp. You made it a lot easier.

Write back so I know you got this.

Love,

Starsk

Hutch rubbed at his cheek, where he could feel the envelope had left its mark. His fingers moved to his eyes, to wipe the few tears there.

“Kenny! Is this what they taught you at that camp, to be lazy like this? You should be out helping your grandfather right now. Kenny!”

“Coming, Father,” he called through the door.

“It's cold here, too,” he whispered to the letter in his hand.

~~*

July 10

Dear Starsk,

I made it home in one piece. I still have your shirt. Do you still have mine?

Granddad was happy to see me again, and I told him all about you. Well, not everything. I chose to leave out the punishment we shared. He sends his condolences to you about your father.

I miss our morning talks, and working in the kitchen together. We really do make a great team.

Me & Thee forever,

Hutch

~~*

August 2

Dear Hutch,

Glad you got home ok. Ma figured out the blue shirt, but she just hugged me. I didn't get in trouble again. I guess she figures losing my pop was enough for me to handle.

Tell your granddad thanks for me.

Nicky's still crying every day. Joe Durniak, some guy Pop busted once, turned up at the door, saying Pop was a good guy and that he'd been the one to make sure the funeral was paid for. He makes my stomach get all tight and it hurts and I can't eat.

I heard my ma talking to Uncle Al, the one who picked me up at camp. Sounds like they're gonna move to California. My family's all leaving me, Hutch.

One good thing outta all this is that Cheryl Polanski has come by a few times. We go out walking around the block and she took my hand to hold it. It was nice. You got any girls there?

It's almost your birthday, but you'll always be younger than me. Happy birthday. M&T

Love,

Starsk

~*~

August 31

Dear Starsk,

Thanks for the birthday wishes. Turning thirteen ended up being a bust. My father didn't get home in time for dinner, and we waited and waited for him. Granddad got angry and Mother got upset. In the end, I didn't get any cake until the next day. I did get some money, though, and I'm going to get myself a tape recorder. Have you got one? If you do, I'll record myself playing some music for you, if you want to hear.

There is a girl in my class who likes me, but she's away in Switzerland for the summer. Her name is Diane. She should be home next week. I hope you and Cheryl have a good time.

Write back soon,

M&T

Love,

Hutch

~*~

September 15

Dear Hutch,

I hope you're liking school. Ma forwarded your letter. As you can tell from the address, I'm not in New York anymore. Ma got scared about some gang members that talked to me, and she made me go to California with Uncle Al and Aunt Rose. I'm a little mad at her, because I didn't want to leave her and Nicky alone. I'm supposed to be the man of the house now, but she said no, and made me go.

California's a lot different than New York. I like the beach, though. I still don't really go swimming much. Need you to teach me some more.

School's not great. I talk funny and I'm Jewish. Real winner here.

Aunt Rose can't cook worth shit, and I think I'm gonna starve.

I asked Uncle Al about a tape recorder, and he said he thought he might be able to borrow one. Send me a tape. I wanna hear you play. Do you sing, too? I don't think I ever asked.

How's Diane? Cheryl kissed me before I left, like a goodbye present.

Here's the new address again. Write back.

M&T.

Love,

Starsk

~*~

September 24

Dear Starsk,

I was a bit surprised when I saw the postmark from California. It must have been really hard to leave New York. I hope you're liking California better now. Is it true it's warm there all the time? What's school like? School's doing fine here, same old stuff. My grades aren't making my father mad or anything, so that's good.

Sorry about Aunt Rose's cooking. I told Hilda about your food situation and she baked you some cookies. See also enclosed in the box a tape of me playing my guitar and singing. Be honest and tell me what you think.

That's pretty nice about Cheryl kissing you. Diane and I haven't done that yet, but we hold hands and go walking.

Enjoy the cookies,

M&T

Hutch

~*~

October 8

Dear Hutch,

The cookies were great! Please tell Hilda thank you. Rescued me from some hungry nights when I couldn't eat what Aunt Rose cooked. She does make some great wonton soup, though. Maybe she shoulda been from China instead of New York.

Anyway, I'm learning to cook so I don't starve. The scary thing is, Aunt Rose is teaching me. Still, I'm better at it than she is. Can you imagine what Millie would think if she saw me making food instead of just eating it? Uncle Al is appreciating it, too. At least, he says he does.

Your guitar tape was really great. Uncle Al heard me playing it so much, he got me a tape player of my own. Said it was a 'welcome to California and being a good sport about it' gift. Anyway, your tape was really good. I want to hear more. Are you trying any of the rock music? Did you see Elvis

Presley on the Ed Sullivan show? My Uncle Al just got a television set last month and that was one of the first things we got to see. Makes me want to dance.

School is ok. Met a guy I've been hanging out with. His name is Jeremiah Horatio Brown, but he hates that. Calls himself Huggy Bear instead. Says the ladies prefer that. He's fourteen, what ladies? He's still a cool cat, though. Did I mention he was colored? I'll let you figure out what the kids here think of him and me.

Huggy says the weather does get colder in the winter, but it's nothing like it is for you in Minnesota or me in New York. Says a jacket is still needed. I never knew that about southern California. See? I'm learning something.

Stay out of trouble.

M&T

Love,

Starsky

~*~

January 2, 1957

Dear Starsk,

Sorry it's been so long since I wrote last. Things got a little crazy around here right around Halloween. My grandfather died. My mom is a real wreck about it because she really liked him, and my father got really quiet. He never really acted like he was sad or anything, more like he was mad. There was stuff about a will and some sort of trust fund meant for me. I heard my parents arguing about it a week after he died, along with my dad's two brothers and his sister.

Starsky, all I could think of was that my granddad was gone. How could they be fighting at a time like that? I thought of you and wished you were here because I really wished I could talk to you about it all.

He was the best friend I ever had, next to you. Am I still your best friend? It's ok if you're not, but I'd like to know just so I know how to think about it. Huggy Bear sounds interesting. Do you talk to him about me and our time at camp?

Thanksgiving and Christmas weren't very good. We still had the big dinners here at the house, which felt weird because my granddad wasn't here to carve the turkey. My dad did it instead. There were all sorts of conversations happening in the den. I'd put my ear up by the door and I heard my name a few times. My uncles act like they're mad at me, and then they pat me on the back and ask me to get them a drink. My aunt just looks sad all the time and talks to me like I'm a grownup now. I'm confused by it all.

I did get a new bike for Christmas, though. I didn't think I would, but I think my mom told my dad that I'd learned my lesson and that a bike was what I needed.

It's blue and faster than my old one. I really like it, and believe me, I know where it is at all times. No one's going to run over this one. When it gets warmer, Diane and I want to ride our bikes together and have a picnic.

Speaking of running, I forgot to tell you I'd joined the cross-country running team at school in the fall. Now that it's winter we're not running. Remember I told you about the snow we get here? Are you getting snow in Bay City? I want to think you're not. Anyway, in the spring the track and field events start up and I'll join the track team. I really like to run. Makes my head feel good and I sleep really well at night.

Hope you're having a happy new year. I've sent another tape. This one is of me playing some Christmas music. I know you're Jewish but I figured you wouldn't mind.

Sorry again for the long time between letters. Write back soon.

M&T (I hope)

Love,

Hutch

~*~

Jan 15

Hey HUTCH! Damn, it was good to get your letter. I was getting worried about ya.

Of course you're still my best friend. Huggy is a great guy, but he's not M&T, you know?

Sorry about your granddad. That's really rough. Glad you got a new bike though, that's got to be nice.

I got hooked up with a girl named Susan. She's got blonde hair and blue eyes—a lot like yours, really, if you were a girl. She says her family comes from Sweden and that she likes my curly hair. Where is your family from? Anyway, she kissed me the first time, but we've done a lot of kissing since.

School's getting better. I have some more friends now. They like hearing about New York and they're impressed about my dad. I'm still just mad and I miss him. Anyway, I like English class best. Weird, huh? But I like reading the books. We're reading "Huckleberry Finn" right now. Some of the kids don't get it, but I get the idea of not being liked just because of how you were born. Sometimes I'd like to get a raft and drift down a river, away from stupid people like that. If I had a raft and a river, would you ride with me?

Your tape was great. I might be Jewish, but I love Christmas. Aunt Rose isn't Jewish so we did both this year. Uncle Al gave me a bike for Hannukah. She's red and white. I love it. He's also been having me help him down at the car lot he's been managing. I work with the mechanics and help fix the cars. I can't wait until I'm old enough to drive.

Gotta do my homework, answering questions about Huck. I'm getting good grades on this, which makes my Ma proud when I write to her. That's a good thing. Nicky is still a little snot, I think.

Write back sooner than you did the last time, pal! Miss ya.

M&T always, man.

Love,

Starsk

~~*

February 2

Dear Starsk,

Found out why my uncles were fighting. My grandfather's will left most everything to me. His house, his land, his money. I'm not old enough to have it all yet, so I have to wait until I'm twenty-one. He made my dad the trustee, which means that he gets to control it for now. Fortunately, my granddad was really specific about how things could be handled. I have to be consulted about everything for my father to do anything as far as things like investments. I can't do anything, make any final decisions, but I do get to state my opinion. Also, I get a monthly allowance and when I'm ready for college, I'm to pay for it with this fund. There's way more than enough, too. The first thing we have to discuss is what to do with the house, since he's not there to live in it anymore. I can see it from my bedroom window, and right now that's a little weird, knowing he's not there.

My uncles and aunt and my dad are angry because they thought he'd leave everything to them. He did leave them each some money, and my cousins, too, but I got most of everything. I wish I could talk to my granddad and ask him why, because I'm really confused by it all. Maybe I'll go walk through the house and think about it.

Anyway, how did you like "Huckleberry Finn"? I hadn't read it at school yet but I found it at the library and read it. I liked it, too. And yes, if you had a raft and a river, I'd ride with you. We're partners, right? And right now, with all the angry things happening here, I wish we could be on that raft right now, pal. I'm glad I can write to you.

Diane and I split up. She just didn't want to be my girlfriend anymore, said I was nice and all but she just didn't love me. I was a little upset for a while, but now I don't care. Hope you and Susan are doing better than me. Oh, and because you asked, both sides of my family are Norwegian. My mother's last name was Austad.

Congratulations on the bike. Sounds like a great Christmas.

Your birthday is next month, but I don't think you ever told me the actual date. If I miss it, Happy Birthday, Starsk. Hope you have a great one.

Write soon.

M&T

Love,

Hutch

~~*

Hutch pulled his jacket on over the blue t-shirt that was rapidly becoming too small for him, dropped the letter into the mailbox, and meandered to his grandfather's house, echoing and empty now but for a few pieces of the larger and heavier furniture that hadn't yet been sold off and the proceeds added to his inheritance.

Two items he had claimed for himself: the brass bed that stood in a spare bedroom, and a steamer trunk that Kenny had spent many a rainy afternoon exploring with his grandfather, carefully reading old newspaper articles and gazing at photographs mounted on cards of his grandparents as a young couple, dressed in long Victorian gowns and bowler hats. The bed had been his whenever he stayed over, and he treasured the nights when they would sit together on the old quilt, watching the sky, learning the constellations and talking about the things that Kenny found most important. His grandfather had been a good listener.

Wish you were here now, Hutch thought, stroking the brass rails. *Of course, if you were, none of this would be happening anyway.*

He thought of Starsky and how now they had both suffered a family loss. With a rush, the memory of his friend crying in his arms struck him, and he realized he'd not shed a tear for his grandfather—it had all been too much, too tense, too many hysterical women and angry men.

He felt it, like a bubble rising in a bottle of pop, pushing up through his chest and fighting its way out. A choked sob spilled, then another, and before he knew it, Kenny had fallen across his bed, clutching at the pillow as his tears soaked it, thinking of his grandfather's smile, the sound of his voice. How freely he had hugged his grandson, taught him about the birds and the bees, real and metaphoric, and had always, always been there for him, no matter what Kenny might need.

Later he rested, staring out the window, his thoughts straying back to his friend. He used the bottom of his shirt to wipe his face, and smiled remembering wearing their blue shirts together.

Do you still have mine? He wondered.

~~*

A week later, he surprised his mother by asking her to take him shopping next time she went to town. At the young men's store, she steered him toward nice Oxford shirts, believing he was choosing ones for himself. He amused himself by puzzling her with purchasing two identical shirts. He arranged to have one sent to Starsky's address in California, and enclosed a note.

Dear Starsk,

Your camp shirt has officially become too small for me to wear, much to my mother's relief. I figure that my shirt is probably heading that way for you by now. I think it's funny that you're older, but I'm a little bigger. Or, at least I was. Maybe I'm not.

At any rate, I am sending you a new blue shirt, and I have one just like it. Maybe you can impress Susan with it; she'll probably say something about it matching the color of your eyes.

Happy birthday.

Write soon,

M&T

Hutch

~~*

Work began to take priority as jumbled pieces of evidence began to fall together. Hutch reluctantly left his comatose partner alone for longer and longer stretches while he traversed the legal roads of investigation, trying to solve the whys and wherefores of the hit.

The violent intensity of his interactions with Jenny Brown and the thugs in the parking garage still shook him at unexpected moments. While Starsky did live, Hutch still felt the separation keenly: cut off, lonely, and missing a vital piece of himself, that piece that reflected back at him through dark blue eyes that could read him, so deeply into his soul. It didn't take much time apart for Hutch to begin to feel that helplessness and stark fear of loss that had gripped him that horrible day, sitting in a chair, watching through a window as a precious life ebbed away.

He relied upon Starsky to be the buffer when such anger took him, to absorb the excess negative energy and dissipate it, to be the voice of reason and clarity and to whap him upside the head when his own mind screamed at the inanity and unfairness that permeated his work. Without him there to help pinpoint the clues and their importance in Starsky's shooting, Hutch felt wildly distracted. The harder he tried to focus his energies, the more he wanted to be back in that hospital room, curled up next to Starsky and hiding from the world.

The fake orderly in the hospital, attempting to finish Starsky for good. The men in the parking garage, ready to take Hutch out with a knife.

Jenny Brown.

Paid hit.

And that horrible, horrible memory of Dobby's voice, telling Hutch he'd better get down there.

Down there he'd gone, with no memory of the trip. By the time he'd arrived, wild-eyed and out of breath, Starsky's heart beat once more, and Hutch thanked any deity above for blessing him with the benefit of not having to hear that stark monotone from that monitor himself. He had enough images and experiences to fill his nightmares without it.

Hutch shook his head as he entered the quiet hospital room. Through Huggy's helpful, if ill-gotten, assistance with a piece of paper listing the phone calls for the lawyer that had sprung Ms. Brown, Hutch now knew that Gunther Industries was involved.

Gunther. James Gunther.

The horror of Lionel Rigger's sacrifice seeped through him like water through sand, weighing him down, washing bits and pieces of his sense of being away.

"I don't know what to do, Starsk."

~*~

May, 1961.

Graduation was upon him, the expectations of his parents so far met. Hutch wore the gold honor sash with his black robe proudly, and as class president spoke eloquently about the importance of family and friends in one's efforts at achieving the best one can be in the pursuit of their education. In his speech, he thanked his parents for not allowing him to skate by with "good enough" but rather encouraged him to do his absolute best; his late grandfather for instilling in him a respect for beauty in nature and in words and music; his teachers, of course, with a special nod to his choir leader; and as a last affectionate gesture, his friend David, for although he hadn't seen him in nearly five years, his quiet support of Hutch's dreams and wants and desires had kept Hutch focused on achieving them.

Starsky hung on his mind the rest of the afternoon, as if he stood just behind and to the right of him, unseen by everyone else but Hutch, who felt as if Starsky were resting a hand on his shoulder the entire time.

Back in his room, ostensibly preparing for the graduation party his parents were holding at the house for his class of over one hundred students, he quietly closed his door and locked it, then pulled the latest few letters from Starsky from small lockbox he'd begun using to keep them once their discussions became intimate and explicit.

Starsky had started it, at the end of a rambling letter listing a rather boring sequence of events of the month before his seventeenth birthday. The letter had puzzled Hutch at first, because Starsky wasn't one to talk about changing the tires on his uncle's car and mowing the lawn, or detailing every play made in his latest high school baseball game. Once he reached the end, though, he realized that all that had gone before was Starsky's way of screwing up enough courage to ask Hutch the question that had been weighing on his mind.

One last thing before I send this off, and it's a real, honest, Me and Thee question, because I want to know if you'd be willing to talk about sex. I have some things I'm thinking a lot about, and I thought maybe you wouldn't mind being the one I talked with. I don't want to make you uncomfortable or anything. Just let me know. OK?

M&T

Starsk

Of course, Hutch had written back immediately, detailing his own boring daily routine, and finally answering the big question at the end.

As to your question: of course. If you don't mind my talking to you, too.

And so it had begun—more than a year's worth of letters, confessing their explorations, dreams, and objects of lust, secure in the trust they had in each other, relieved to have someone to talk it over with without shame or fear, beyond anyone finding the explicit writings.

The noisy party preparations downstairs faded into the background as Hutch reread through all the sexy letters, beginning with talks of wet dreams, girls with big tits and almond eyes, and how far Starsky had gone with each girl once the coveted driver's license had been obtained, culminating in the most recent dream confession that sent his hand to his zipper, to release his own burgeoning erection.

I started dreaming of a guy, Hutch. I dreamt I was messing around with another guy. I woke up with the hardest hard-on I've ever had.

Am I queer?

A rap on his door sent him nearly tumbling off the edge of his bed.

“Ken? Ken, dear, your friends and their families are arriving. I need you to come down now. Ken?”

“Yes, Mom. I-I'll be right down. Just putting some things away.”

He blew out a cleansing breath and rearranged himself in his pants. Resolving to finish what he'd started once he got to bed that night, he locked the letters away and headed to the bathroom to wash his hands.

~~*

Two weeks later, Little Audrey, as he affectionately called the sweet, blue-eyed brunette, due to his height and her sincere lack of it, perched sideways on his lap as he leaned against a tree, a plaid blanket beneath them both. Six other couples ranged around them, lounging on the grassy bank, together enjoying another of

the many weekend nights on the lakeshore they'd spent since graduation, celebrating last flings before college and work beckoned them into adulthood.

Empty bottles of wine and toasting forks, sticky with melted marshmallow, leaned against the small boulders that encircled their campfire, and Audrey bent to the task of unbuttoning his shirt and stroking his chest, all the while making sure that not a single molecule of sugar or fermented grape remained in Hutch's mouth.

He drew his hands slowly up and down her back, thrusting his tongue against hers, the wet sounds of necking around him feeding his excitement in concert with the alcohol humming in his veins. Her hands cupped his face as she kissed him, and then with a soft moan, she lifted her head and pulled his down to press against her breasts.

As he breathed in the scent of her, he drew one shaking hand around to rest against one breast as he nuzzled the other through her thin blouse.

"Kiss them, Ken. Please, oh, please, kiss them," she whispered into his hair, turning her body and hiking her skirt so that her legs straddled his, and he eagerly leaned to place his mouth over her nipple, hardened and poking out against the fabric. Fuzzily he thought of the others around him and tried to focus for a moment on the fact that they were not alone, but a quick glance with one open eye proved that each couple were lost in their own private world, and even now, Jack Mitchell was carrying a blanket and half-carrying his girl Stephanie further into the trees for a more private encounter.

He moved to suck on the other nipple, the material soaking under the assault, and he moved to slide his hand beneath her shirt. She squirmed in his lap, unbuttoning her blouse and reaching behind her to unhook her bra, and as it slid forward, he leaned back to watch as she pulled one arm free of her top and bra strap, and then the other, tugging the sleeves back over her shoulders, as if to offer a touch of privacy to their intimate encounter by shrouding his face with the fabric.

But he didn't return to press his lips against the freed breasts immediately, instead allowing himself a moment to gaze upon female beauty. Her creamy skin was lit only by moonlight and flickering flame-shadows, and looked so warm and inviting that he gave back in to the impulse, sure that this night was going to end with the pleasure of the ultimate result of such sensual touches. Rubbers he'd hidden within his wallet for the past year would be used, purchased at a pharmacy in a town where no one knew him and carried with the hope of one day putting them to their task.

He'd put one on, once, after reading one of Starsky's recent letters where he'd detailed, excruciatingly, how he'd pinned a girl named Darlene to the back seat of his uncle's Buick. The reading of the letter had turned Hutch on so that he'd put one of his rubbers on as practice, and then jerked off, envisioning Starsky and Darlene in the close confines of a darkened car. It didn't feel as nice against his sensitive cock as his own hand did, but he could feel enough.

Audrey fingered his erection through his shorts, causing him to jump slightly and dive back between her breasts. Just then, a small wave of water licked the shore, and the wet, smacking sound it made brought a memory immediately to mind of camp, and Starsky in the dim light of their shared early mornings, rumped and sleepy and warm, and suddenly he found himself imagining Starsky touching his cock, Starsky's nipple eagerly tongued.

It was a very near thing, but he managed to keep himself from creaming his shorts then and there. Shocked at himself, he abruptly picked Audrey up and put her on her feet as he stood, closing her blouse over her breasts.

“I-I’m sorry,” he stammered, then turned and walked towards the water, running one hand through his hair as he struggled to calm himself.

He hadn’t even seen Starsky in years, but for a small collection of photographs he’d acquired over time, sent in letters. It upset him to think of his friend at the tender age of thirteen in this context, and desperately put Starsky’s baseball team and graduation photos in its place.

Small hands reached around his waist and a cheek pressed against his back. “Ken, are you all right?”

“Y-yep.” He forced a smile onto his face and turned back towards her. “I’m sorry. A little too much wine, I think. Would you mind if I took you home?”

The disappointment in her eyes showed, even through the darkness, but she patted his cheek. “Sure, Ken.”

~~*

June 12, 1961

Dear Starsk,

Tonight I was with Audrey, and Jack and Stephanie, and a few other couples, each doing our own thing and getting heavy with it, when suddenly I needed to come home. Audrey is just a bit put out at me right now, because we were definitely heading for ‘it’.

Starsk—when you said you dreamt of a guy—who was it?

Was it me?

I need to know. Because tonight—it was you. Only I wasn’t dreaming. Your face slipped in right when she touched me there.

Does that make ME queer?

M&T

Love,

Hutch

~~*

June 15, 1961

Dear Hutch,

Yep. It was you.

So you didn’t dream of me, but you thought of me while with a girl? I’m not sure what I feel about that. Not angry, just...weird.

I do know I feel a little scared about the whole thing. I’m not scared of you, so don’t worry that blond head of yours. I’m just having to think it all out.

M&T

Starsk

~~*

June 25, 1961

Dear Starsk,

Yeah, I thought of you. I know we've been pretty detailed in past letters about the things we've done with our girlfriends, but I'm not sure how much you want to hear about this. You'll have to tell me.

I know that suddenly, I've been looking at other guys a bit differently, but none of them have...well...they don't compare with you. I'm not interested in them. I like girls. But you won't get out of my head. Hell, I've not even gone all the way with a girl yet, and here I am, thinking of you.

I'm so afraid of scaring you away, Starsk. I love that we can be so open and honest with each other, but I don't want to scare you, either. Please help me figure out where we stand. I wish I could talk to you in person, because waiting for the mail has become excruciating.

So, are you ready for college?

M&T

Love,

Hutch

~~*

June 30, 1961

Dear Hutch,

We stand like we have always stood—you're my best friend. Miles don't matter, and neither do sexy thoughts. I'm kinda flattered you think of me, really. Kinda gets my pride going a little to know that I can turn you on. Heh. I hope maybe you feel the same way, because you ain't leaving my head, either, and yeah, you know I made it with Roxanne last year, and a few times since. But no guys. They never even turn my head.

College? Looks like it ain't happening right away for me. My grades weren't as good as yours, you know, and I'm not really getting any acceptance letters except to community college. Football and baseball stats were good, but my grades just weren't enough. I hate tests, and that's where it all went sour.

I'm not really sure what I want to do yet, anyway. Looking into the army first, maybe using the G.I. Bill to pay for school afterwards.

What about you, you all ready for UofM?

M&T

Love,

Starsk

~~*

July 20, 1961

Dear Starsk,

Sorry for the delay in writing back. Reading your letter, I could feel my face get red. Yeah, I feel a little proud that I make you hot.

God, I can't believe I just wrote that. I can't imagine ever telling anyone else about this, no one at all. Just you. Thanks for that, pal, for being one person I can completely trust. (You are keeping the letters somewhere safe, right? Haha)

Army, huh? How long you figure for, the four year stint? In looking at your graduation picture, I can see you in uniform, and you look pretty damned good. When would you be heading out? I hope I haven't missed you. I trust you'd write to me even from basic training and let me know where you are.

As to college for me...well, that's kind of why I hadn't written sooner.

I want to see you, Starsk. Maybe the fantasy you will break out of my head if I see the real you. You know it's been five years since camp. I'm almost eighteen, and I'm so ready to get out of Minnesota. So, my father and I have been having some pretty severe arguments regarding school. He wants me to start at UofM and then go on to graduate school at some Ivy League place further east.

I want to go to UCLA.

I won. I told him that Granddad left me money to use for college, and that I wanted that college to be UCLA. I showed him the coursework offered and how it still fit in with his plan for me to go to business school. I told him I was sick of Minnesota winters and for just once, I wanted to have a winter where snow shoveling wasn't part of the package and I could just worry about studying. That made him at least think about it.

My mother had to help talk him into it in the end, even though she doesn't want me to go that far away. But I need to break clean—and I want to see you.

I'll be flying there in a month—I'm to report August 30. I hope you're still around then. I need to get a car once I'm there—think your uncle could hook me up? And do you think I could stay with you, or them if you'll already be gone?

One more favor: do you think you could get me at the airport? Here's my flight information. Let me know.

M&T

Love,

Hutch

~~*

July 24, 1961

Dear Hutch,

Hell, yes. I'll be there. I have to report August 31.

Your flight comes in the 23rd. We'll have a week!

M&T, together again!

Love,

Starsk

~~*

Two flights with a connection between them had left Hutch feeling tired and out of sorts by the time they were still an hour away from LAX. His long legs had not enjoyed their confinement behind another seat, but both times Hutch had asked for a seat in the back row deliberately, as far away from his fellow passengers as he could get. He had no desire to carry on polite conversation, and he was grateful for a window and a seatmate who had no fear of flying. Within moments of takeoff from Duluth, the older man had draped his newspaper over his face and fallen asleep, leaving Hutch to his contemplation of the world from high above it, and the second flight had left him with a mercifully empty seat beside him. He dropped the paper he'd grabbed in Duluth onto it and leaned his forehead against the window.

It wasn't his first plane trip. He had flown with his parents before, to Seattle and to Mexico, and once to Norway for a family event. However, it was his first trip to California, and his first flight alone. His father had said a gruff goodbye at home, his sister had called the night before, and his mother took him to the airport, although he wouldn't let her accompany him to the gate.

Knowing that Starsky should be waiting for him at the other end sent a shuddering thrill through him that raised goosebumps every time he thought of the boy he'd not seen in over five years. So different from that train ride, when he didn't have a clue who he might meet in New York State.

Anxiety gripped him, the same stomach-churning anxiety that had kept him awake for too many nights over the past month, especially after breaking up with Audrey. He had enjoyed her company and hadn't wanted to hurt her, but her reaction made it clear that she had hoped for a longer-term commitment, with white dresses and church bells. He relived that awful evening over and over in the darkness of the wee hours, which also made for a perfect breeding ground for fears that Starsky wouldn't be the same Starsky who'd waved goodbye from his uncle's car window, that the letters he'd written were just his way of keeping up pretenses.

And then he'd shake himself, and reassert his belief in the boy who'd hugged him so tightly before they'd parted. They'd simply shared too much between them, over years and miles and the consistency of the US Postal Service.

That they'd admitted to each other their shared fantasies invariably sent his hand to his dick, picturing it as Starsky's hand, until the release of orgasm relaxed him enough to finally sleep, only to wake up too early the following morning after dreams filled with boyish images of his friend.

He picked up running in the mornings, missing the endorphin high he'd achieve while on the track team in school, using it as an excuse to wear himself out. He played his guitar endlessly while hanging with his friends in the afternoons, and took Audrey out in the evenings.

The rubbers were finally put to use when Hutch gave in to his fantasy and turned the tiny girl in his arms into a facsimile of his friend, hoping he never uttered Starsky's name during urgent thrusting. He did focus

on Audrey best he could, to be sure she was enjoying herself, and she was not shy in directing him to the places and encouraging the techniques that gave her the best pleasure.

Lying together in his grandfather's barn on an old quilt, cozy in the afterglow, he'd stroke her arm and cuddle her closely, all the while wondering what Starsky would feel like, pressed up against him. Would Starsky like it? Would Hutch end up turned off by it? Why didn't he think these thoughts about Jack or Tony or any of his other friends, all of whom he'd seen in the buff in the high school locker rooms?

Why only Starsky?

Maybe it was because of the distance between them, milewise. Easy to fantasize about someone he didn't really know—oh, he knew him, knew what Starsky would share with him, see him in photographs, and once, heard his voice on a tape when Starsky thought to send him one. But he'd not had a direct interaction with him since camp. Didn't know how he walked or talked or interpreted things. So much had happened to Starsky—his father dying, the move to LA and all that had entailed. It was enough to change anyone. Maybe meeting in person wouldn't be the happy event he'd hoped it would be.

And then he'd think about their early mornings in their cabin, leaning on each other, cuddling under shared sleeping bags, and all his worries would disappear. Of course they'd be good together. They couldn't help but be good together.

A change in the rumble of the plane broke through his musings, and the light for seatbelts lit. "We are making our approach to LAX. Please fasten your seatbelts and return your tray tables and seats to their locked and upright positions. The weather in LA is a hot 93 degrees and sunny, so enjoy the air conditioning of the plane while you can. We hope you have enjoyed your flight, and whether you are visiting or returning home, welcome to Los Angeles."

He felt himself break out into a sweat. In just a few minutes, he'd see Starsky again.

"Don't like landings?" The stewardess startled him, and when she offered a trash bag for him to drop in the newspaper he'd been shredding unknowingly, he laughed weakly.

"N-no, I-I'm fine."

She patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. Everything will be all right. Is someone meeting you?"

He nodded. "Y-yes."

"Someone special, I think, yes? Someone you've not seen in a while?"

"Uh...yeah. Yes, actually." Please don't ask me for a name, please, please...

She took in his shaking hands and sweat-beaded forehead, and nodded knowingly. "She'll be happy to see you. Don't you worry." She patted his shoulder as she moved on up the aisle.

If you only knew, he thought.

The ground hurtled towards him, and with a gentle bump, he was in LA.

He waited until everyone else had filled the aisle before he slid out from his seat and pulled his duffle from the overhead bin, hoping that being the final person to leave the plane would give him time to bring his heart rate under control.

The tarmac was blazingly hot, even for late afternoon, and he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket to mop away the sweat. The terminal door waited, a promise of cool air inside.

And Starsky.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust from the brightness of the California sun to the dimmer interior, and as he blinked furiously, a dark figure stepped up to him. His vision cleared, and deep blue eyes pinned him like a butterfly.

“St-Starsky?”

“Who else?” The blazing grin was nearly as bright as the sunshine he’d just come in from, and he blinked again. “God, Hutch, it’s good to see you.” He made a small gesture with his hands, a tiny beckoning.

The years melted away as they reached for each other, duffle falling onto Hutch’s feet as arms grasped arms. “Aw, what the hell,” Starsky said, and Hutch stumbled forward into a crushing, back pounding hug. As he returned the pressure, he breathed in the scent of Starsky, the familiarity of it rushing back to him, with the memory of another hug in a lonely cabin between two boys. He closed his eyes to the other airport patrons brushing past them, not wanting to even entertain the idea that someone might look at two young men in an embrace askance, for this was too precious, and too soothing to the ache of separation that he’d not even realized he’d been carrying in his heart all this time.

“Starsk. Starsk.”

“Yeah, buddy. Right here. Right here.”

When they finally separated, Starsky seemed to not be able to keep from smiling. “Ya know ya haven’t said anything but my name since ya got here?” he ribbed.

“Starsk. God. You haven’t changed.” Which wasn’t exactly true. As he looked his friend up and down, he noted that Starsky had caught up with him in height, his shoulders wider and legs stronger, with a hint of scattered chest hair peeking through his shirt, unbuttoned at the top in likely deference to the heat. Hutch swallowed the impulse to touch it.

“We’re both older, but I think that’s it. All that blondness is gonna fit right in here in California, lots better than I ever did.” Starsky took him by the elbow and steered him toward luggage claim. “You hungry?”

As if on cue, Hutch’s stomach growled. “Yep. Only...no orange cheese sandwiches, ok?”

Starsky threw his head back and laughed.

~~*

They drove to a neighborhood not very far from LAX that had seen better days, Hutch thought, what with the bare front yards growing weeds in tufts and houses that needed paint in a pretty bad way.

Starsky pulled the Buick into the broken driveway of one such house, three stories tall and a handful of people sitting in the shade of the drooping porch.

“This is where Huggy lives,” Starsky explained, as they climbed out of the car. “Left Bay City and his daddy’s house and got himself this apartment the day after he graduated. One of his aunts owns this place, but he’s got to pay the rent. I don’t ask how he does that, because I ain’t ever heard him talk about any job.” He gripped Hutch behind the neck and smiled. “He’s real anxious to meet ya, though; he’s even doing some barbecue in the back yard for us.”

A tall, skinny Negro man burst through the front door, shooting at some of the folks on the porch. “Starsky, I was beginning to think you got lost. Is this our fine new friend here?”

“Huggy Bear Brown, I’d like for you to meet one Kenneth Hutchinson.”

Hutch’s experience with Negroes had been limited to waiters at the country club. Huggy had a wide, wide mouth, sharp features, and extremely warm and friendly eyes. He stuck out his hand and Huggy shook it fiercely.

“It’s a fine, fine pleasure to meet you finally. My man Starsky here talks about you all the time, so much I feel I already know you! You ARE a blond brother, aintcha? Well, don’t just stand out here, come on in, come on in. I got some fine chicken cooking on the barbecue.” Huggy interrupted himself long enough to stretch one skinny arm in front of him to snag a boy who looked to be about twelve and trying to dash in the door ahead of them. “These here are all my cousins, but they know that tonight’s food is for a private party—just Starsky and Hutchinson and The Bear.”

The cousins gave Hutch faint waves as they passed by them on the porch, and Huggy ushered them through the front door.

The house was dark and sparsely furnished. Huggy led them upstairs, two flights to the very top floor, where a single door led them to the attic.

“Welcome to the Bear’s Lair. Make yourselves at home.” African themed art hung on the walls, and a large bed took up nearly an entire wall. A small table with four mismatched chairs sat before a tiny kitchenette, and a lumpy sofa took up another wall, an old sea chest sitting in front of it. A dusty guitar leaned against the wall in the corner behind the bed.

“Bathroom’s back down the stairs, so if you find yourself too plastered to maneuver them, piss in that milk bottle over there and empty once you’re back on your land legs, you dig?”

“We dig, Hug.” Starsky grinned at Hutch. “Huggy’s taking off for Jamaica later tonight. You and I, we’re gonna hang out here for the week, right, Hug?”

“Here?” Hutch asked, surprised. Starsky had told him not to worry about where to stay, and he’d assumed he’d be at Aunt Rosie and Uncle Al’s place.

“Yep. I didn’t want to haveta share you too much this week. Want ya all to myself. Besides,” Starsky leaned in close, “I don’t want you to suffer through Aunt Rose’s cookin’.”

“And the cousins will leave you alone. They know better than to breach the Bear’s private boudoir.”

“We’ll get your suitcase when we come back up, Hutch. And Hug—man, I can smell that meat from clear up here!”

“Damn—hope it ain’t burning. Come on down, brothers, I just gotta grab my beans.”

The backyard didn’t look much better than the front, but a large tree extended its leafed branches across the grass, providing for a significant amount of shade. Several chairs ranged in a rough circle around a big kettle barbecue, from which a fragrant smoke snaked out.

“Beer’s in that ice cooler over there, help yourselves,” Huggy pointed, and he set the pot of beans on a rickety table near the barbecue, taking up a plate and lifting the lid from the hot cooker.

Hutch's mouth instantly watered as the flavorful scent of chicken hit his nose. His stomach rumbled again, drawing even Huggy's attention.

He heard Starsky chuckle and then cold, wet glass pressed against the back of his neck. Jumping at first from the shock, he then leaned into it, drawing another chuckle.

"Drink it. Works better that way."

Hutch took the bottle, which Starsky had already opened for him, and sucked it down. A pleasant alcoholic buzzed washed over him almost immediately as the beer hit his empty system.

He realized then that he'd hardly said a word since he'd arrived. The car ride over had been filled with Starsky's chatter as he waved at points of interest and indicated the best places for hamburgers. Hutch had soaked it all in, floating on the joy of seeing and hearing Starsky again, and Starsky hadn't seemed to mind, not with the pats on the knee and shoulder and his relaxed arm on the back of the seat. Hutch had found himself watching Starsky's profile more than the panorama outside, relearning the boy.

He thought again about what Starsky had said, about them sharing Huggy's place for the week, and felt a rush of anticipation.

Time alone with Starsky. This would be when they figured it out.

He felt himself gently pushed into one of the chairs. The bottle in his hand was taken and replaced with a fresh one, then Starsky crouched before him, one hand on Hutch's knee for balance.

"You okay?" Starsky looked a little nervous, but still with that crooked grin, and Hutch reassured him with a pat on the hand.

"I'm great, Starsk. Happy to be here with you." He was rewarded with a full smile, followed by a heaping plate of chicken and beans, topped with a fork stabbing into the breast meat, presented by Huggy.

"Welcome to Los An-hee-lees, my white brother. Eat up and tell me all about those ten thousand lakes."

~~*

Lulled into a doze by alcohol, a full stomach, and the lilting cadence of Starsky and Huggy talking quietly, and lounging with outstretched legs in his chair, Hutch's eyes popped open when he felt his crossed feet shaken.

"Hey, pal. Let's get you up to the room. You're wiped out."

He sat up and glanced around him. Huggy was gone, and the sun had long since sent itself to bed. "Sorry. Guess the trip and time change caught up with me."

"Not a problem, not at all. Huggy's already left for his trip—Jamaica, can you believe it? Says his Aunt Minnie sent for him, her favorite nephew. Something else about voodoo stuff—I don't know. He's got quite the family, that's for sure. Anyway, I already got your suitcase out of the car and put it upstairs. You ready to go up?"

Hutch heard the slight nervous quaver in Starsky's voice, and felt an answering quiver in his stomach. "Yep."

Starsky reached for, then seemed to reconsider, then grabbed for Hutch's hand and pulled him out of his chair, not letting go once Hutch was standing. Instead he walked backwards, tugging Hutch along, until they

reached the back porch, when Starsky stopped Hutch's forward motion by placing his other hand on Hutch's chest.

"Hutch—I don't have to stay with you if you don't want me to. I'll tell ya right here, right now—you're like an itch I want to scratch. I can't stop thinking about ya, about how I dreamt about ya. Been dreamin' about ya since, too. But if you—you know, don't..."

Hutch stopped Starsky's words with his fingers, resting against the nervous mouth. "Starsk. I-I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since that l-letter. Every night. I want you to scratch that itch. I w-want to scratch, too." He let his fingers stroke lightly against Starsky's lips, back and forth, feeling his heart pounding so hard against Starsky's hand on his chest that it must surely burst before they ever got upstairs. "Does Huggy know? About—about those letters?"

Starsky spoke against Hutch's quivering fingers. "No. He might guess, given there's only one bed up there, but I didn't tell him anything. Shit, Hutch. Keep touching me like that and I'm gonna..."

"Up, then." Hutch turned Starsky around and gave him a small shove between the shoulder blades, then slid his hand up to grip his shoulder as they moved into the house and up the stairs.

Starsky had done more than simply bring up the suitcase. He'd also lit a few candles, and the record player's turntable was spinning, a stack of 45s waiting to drop. The bed had been turned down, pillows fluffed and ready.

"Sheets are clean and everything." Starsky's voice shook a little, and Hutch felt an overwhelming desire to reassure him.

"It's beautiful, Starsk. You do this for your girls, too?" he teased, and was rewarded with a blush evident even in candle flame and nighttime city lights.

"Nah. Never had a place to do it like this." Starsky flipped the switch on the record player, and Elvis began to croon "Love Me Tender." He moved to the kitchenette. "You want another beer?"

"Sure." Hutch moved to one of the chairs around the table, and sat to remove his shoes. "Damn it. Got a knot."

Starsky set two beer bottles on the table and knelt before him, pushing his shaking, nervous fingers away from the twisted shoelace. "I got it." The knot was easily conquered, Hutch's shoe just as easily removed. Without looking up, Starsky moved to the second shoe, and peeled away the socks as well.

"Probably stink, huh?"

"Nah. Not really."

"Starsky—why do you think we both have an itch to scratch when it comes to each other?"

Starsky slowly raised his head. "I don't know. Been thinking about it. All I can come up with is—trust. I know I can tell you things that I wouldn't dream of tellin' anyone else. Huggy's the closest friend I got here and he don't know everythin'. I never even told him about how you took care of me after Pop died." He placed shaking hands on Hutch's thighs and rubbed them carefully up and down. "It's like—like we got some sort of cosmic connection, ya know? Even after five years and a thousand miles, I just want to be near you, touch you. And I think of those mornings at camp..." He turned his head away for a moment, as if looking into Hutch's eyes was too much to bear. "Hutch, I know we were pretty young, but even then...even then, I needed to touch you. Wanted to touch you more than the ways we did."

Hutch nodded in agreement. "I know." He shifted in the chair, spreading his knees so his feet bracketed Starsky's kneeling body, and placing his own hands on top of Starsky's. His crotch tightened, and his voice cracked and dropped to a whisper. "How did you want to touch me? Show me."

His mind whirled. I'm not quite eighteen years old, and I'm about to let a guy touch me in ways that only one girl has ever done. Am I queer? Are we queer? What's going to happen to us?

All those worried thoughts disappeared at the first tentative stroke of fingers against his chest. He leaned back a bit to allow Starsky's hands to unbutton, dropping his arms to the side, and laughed shakily. "Do you realize we're both wearing blue shirts?"

"I noticed," Starsky whispered. "I'm so tight in my pants I might 'disgrace' myself right here." He spread the flaps of the shirt apart, having unbuttoned as far as he could before the shirttails disappeared into the waistband of Hutch's slacks.

Hutch gasped as Starsky's hands palmed his bared chest. His cock pulsed.

"You're so smooth here. Oh, god, Hutch." Starsky's face hovered close, blue eyes dark with passion boring their gaze into his own. Hutch thrust his chest forward, gratified when it caused Starsky's hands to move along his skin, causing one finger to graze a nipple.

He reached for Starsky's shirt, mimicked the motions his friend had taken, until they were mirror images, two halves of the same whole, hands on heaving chests, sweat trickling down temples.

Hutch was vaguely aware of the records dropping on the player, but he couldn't focus on the music. His heart beat loudly in his ears, fighting for space with the sound of Starsky's harsh breathing and his own rough breaths.

"Knees are gettin' sore down here," Starsky rumbled, the timbre of his voice so low and tortured that Hutch felt every word as if they branded him. Starsky stood and pulled Hutch to his feet. They came together then, pressing close in an embrace full of more than simple affection.

Beyond Starsky stood the bed, white sheets cool and promising. Hutch's gaze fell upon it and he began to walk Starsky backwards towards it.

"Your knees won't mind a mattress, will they?" he rasped into Starsky's ear, and the body in his arms shuddered. A slight shake of Starsky's head said all he needed to hear, and together they moved, one excruciating step at a time until Starsky suddenly fell across it, pulling Hutch down with him.

Instinct and lust took over then. Hutch's head dipped to taste the sweetly curved lips that surged to meet his, every nighttime fantasy spooling through his brain as he let the dreams come to life. Starsky's strong hands moved across his back, pulling his shirt from his pants. Hot fingers dragged fiery paths along his spine, up and down. That, combined with the burning heat of Starsky's mouth, his tongue writing filthy words of lust against his own, his crotch thrusting up obscenely, brought Hutch immediately to the bare edge of the cliff.

He pulled back, rearing up on his knees, gasping for air. Starsky flailed his arms in nothing for a moment.

"Hutch? Did I do something wrong?" Starsky asked, panting, his eyes wide with questions.

"God, no. No. A little too right, maybe," Hutch answered, reaching down to pet his cock once with a gentling stroke. "Starsk, I-I really don't want to come in my pants."

Their laughter broke the tension, bringing them giggling like the twelve- and thirteen-year-olds they had been to collapse on the bed, side by side. Hutch clasped Starsky's hand until the giddy tremors had quieted, and then shifted to lean up on his elbow.

"Let's get undressed, huh?" he asked, and Starsky's grin lit the room. They sat up and reached for each other once again, by unspoken accord stripping each other until finally they sat, naked and warm, Starsky leaning against the headboard, legs resting across Hutch's crossed ones, feet past Hutch's hips.

Starsky pulled his heels against Hutch's back, urging him a little closer. "Wanna look at you."

Hutch leaned back, planting his hands firmly behind him on the quilt, opening himself up to scrutiny. "I'm all yours."

"Yeah, you are," Starsky breathed, and Hutch swore he felt his skin warm beneath the roving gaze that seemed to take and examine every molecule that made up Hutch's body. Somewhere in a little corner of his mind, he wondered at how freely he gave himself to Starsky, to touch and examine, when he'd all but hidden himself from Audrey—just a few gropes in the darkness, pulling clothes on while still wrapped in a blanket. Never once had he stood naked before her, and yet here, with Starsky, naked felt good and free and right, and they hadn't even consummated a thing yet.

"Hutch, you're gorgeous. You make me feel like the luckiest guy ever. None of my girlfriends ever let me just look—they rushed me through and then got their clothes back on, if I ever got them all off at all. This feels good."

Hutch grinned. "I was just thinking the same thing."

"I'm gonna touch you."

Hutch's cock jumped. "Okay."

With a fingertip, Starsky drew an agonizingly slow path, beginning with a light, feathery line from Hutch's forehead and down his nose, then stroked his palm up Hutch's left cheek. From there, his fingers slid into Hutch's hair for a moment, then slipped down his neck, hand drawing forward again to rub the thumb roughly across Hutch's chin until he had a gentle grip around Hutch's throat. Hutch swallowed, felt his Adam's apple press against the center of Starsky's palm, and then felt his head being tipped sideways, exposing his neck to the lips that plundered for treasure there. "Oh, god," Hutch muttered, helpless under the tender assault. "Oh, god."

"Wanted to taste these two moles here since we were kids," Starsky whispered briefly, then returned, his tongue tip tracing wet circles around the beauty marks.

"Th-that long, huh?" Hutch stuttered.

"Uh-huh. Does that make me queer?"

"O-only if it makes me queer, too," he answered breathlessly, and his fingers twitched against the quilt, anxious to join in the touching.

"I used to look at you in the showers. Really I was just comparing you to me, wondering how your body was changing, like mine was. But I never forgot, and then I'd dream about ya, and wondered if you'd changed some more."

"And have I?"

“Oh, yeah.”

Starsky pulled back then, staring at Hutch’s chest. “And I’d wonder, do his nipples get hard like mine do when I’m thinking about sex?” He reached with both hands, pressing a gentle thumb to each little nub. “Does having them touched turn you on like it does to me?”

“Y-yes,” Hutch breathed, closing his eyes even as his head fell back, lost in the high-pitched sensations that Starsky’s manipulations caused. Each little stroke resulted in a responding throb in his cock.

“What if I did this?” Hutch felt Starsky shift against him, then his left nipple was enclosed in hot wet, warmth, Starsky’s mouth working gently, tongue flicking.

Hutch thrust forward, trying to press deeper into Starsky’s mouth. He felt as if he were on fire, welcoming the flames that licked around him.

He heard a moan, realized it was his own voice, and gasped when Starsky released him.

The candle on the bedside table guttered in the cool breeze that suddenly swelled and pushed through the window, and Hutch felt his own skin soothed by the cooling air. He drew in a deep, shaky breath, trying to re-center himself, to focus on his partner.

For partner he was now, Hutch realized. Bound by trust, affection, and boyish love, they were partners in exploring this crazy time called “growing up.”

Army and college bound, young men, sorting things out, making their marks before jumping to the next phase.

And a mark he was determined to make. With a lunge, he pushed Starsky back against the headboard, attacking his mouth with a fervor that tasted almost like desperation. He pulled back momentarily, sucked in a calming breath, then dove back in, gentling the pressure and allowing himself to examine and explore every nook and cranny of Starsky’s mouth.

Warm hands stroked his shoulders and his back, pulling him so close that he wished he could crawl inside and live in Starsky’s skin, his body, and as they kissed, he shifted until he felt his rigid cock bump against Starsky’s.

They both reared back in surprise then, for the electricity that shocked its way through Hutch at that touch seemed to have struck Starsky as well.

They panted in unison, and Hutch wondered if the look on his own face painted a picture of how far gone he was as Starsky’s seemed to.

The record player fell silent. The breeze dropped, the curtains closed down over the window, and one candle on the far side of the room winked out.

The world stood still for those few, brief moments, and then Hutch, determined to learn everything there was to learn tonight, carefully closed his hand around both their cocks, sliding them together.

Starsky’s eyes seemed to go out of focus and his head fell back with a thunk against the wall.

“You okay?” Hutch asked, not letting go.

“Yeah. Better’n okay. Don’t stop.”

“I need to straighten out my legs. Can you move with me?”

Together they grunted and shifted until they'd planted themselves right in the center of the bed, small noises of pleasure squeaking out of them both as Hutch's hand tweaked and twisted during their manipulations.

“There's a part a' me that can't believe we're doing this,” Starsky murmured, pressing his forehead against Hutch's. “And another, bigger part, that says, don't stop now.”

“Not stopping. You ready?”

Starsky tipped his chin down and pressed a quick kiss to Hutch's trembling lips. “Yep. Do it.”

“Keep talking, Starsk. Tell me what you feel.”

“You're killing me... you want me to think right now? Fucking bastard...” Starsky groaned when Hutch chuckled. “Feel—I feel like I'm flying really high, and it's intense, like a really high note on a piano, and I'm gonna crash, but the crash ain't gonna hurt, it's gonna feel really good, and you're gonna be there to catch me...”

While Starsky babbled, Hutch pumped, slowly at first, dragging his hand up until he nearly lost his grip, then swiftly down, and then with an agonizingly slow rise again. Starsky's left hand fumbled and then rested atop Hutch's, adding to the squeeze, guiding the grip.

Hutch wished he had a way to take a picture of them right now, and tried hard to build one in his head. Starsky's legs draped across his, knees bent for them both, foreheads pressed and working their hands in tandem.

Starsky seemed to know just how to twist at the top of the pump, and Hutch instinctively brushed fingertips against Starsky's balls on the drive down. Starsky began to do the same to Hutch, and the agonizing eternity seemed no more than a few seconds when Hutch choked and gasped, spilling himself over their hands.

“Oh, god.” Starsky sounded choked himself, and with three more rapid pumps that about sent Hutch into the stratosphere of sensation, Starsky added his own warm jets of semen to Hutch's spill.

As if on cue, they both fell backwards, gasping for air.

“Fuck me,” Starsky finally harshed out.

“Next time,” Hutch muttered, and they both laughed weakly.

“C'mere, ya big lug,” Starsky said, disentangling their legs as he reached for one of the shirts on the floor. He wiped his hands, then wiped at Hutch's before belatedly pulling the quilt back. “I gotta lie down. Room's hot, but the wind's makin' me cold with all this sweat dryin' on me.”

They fit together beneath the quilt as easily as they had fit together under a sleeping bag.

“Remember that last night at camp? You fell asleep in my lap, and I didn't want to leave you alone again. You were so exhausted, you never made a sound when I pulled you around and got you under the bag with me, and you slept right against me.”

“I remember waking up and watching you for a while,” Starsky answered, tucking his head into Hutch's shoulder. “Wanted to kiss you.”

“You did?” Hutch asked, surprised. “Really?”

Starsky nodded, yawning. “Took good care of me. Did I say thank you?”

Hutch squeezed his partner. “I’m sure you did. Hey, none of Huggy’s cousins would come knocking up here, would they?”

Starsky looked up. “Did we lock the door?”

“I didn’t—did you?”

“Nope.” With a grunt and a sigh, Starsky tossed the covers back and locked the door. He diverted to the table, snagging the forgotten bottles of beer, and blew out the rest of the candles.

Lit only by city lights glowing through the window, his body shimmered as it came closer to the bed.

“You’re beautiful,” Hutch said, reaching out to touch, to be sure Starsky wasn’t just a vision in the night.

“Hutch.” Starsky set the bottles on the side table, and took Hutch’s face in his hands.

The kiss was slow and long, drawing on every feeling, every dream and fantasy they’d shared, until Hutch needed more, needed to touch and taste and feel once more.

He pulled Starsky back into the bed, covering them both, and wrapped arms and legs around the warm body. This time the lovemaking was sweet and slow, all frottage and tongues, until they both came again, spilling hot essence between them.

“I could fall in love with you,” Starsky murmured. “Don’t let me fall in love with you.”

“Why not?” Hutch whispered. “What are you afraid of?”

Starsky raised sad eyes to him. “Them. Out there. What they’d say. Do. Separate us again.”

“We’re not out there, Starsk. We’re right here. We have a week, right? Don’t worry about out there. Let’s just be us, in here, while we can.”

“I’m not queer, Hutch. Ya gotta understand—I like girls. But you—you fit in me somehow. I never look at other guys and think of them the way I think of you. You’re exactly the way I dreamed you’d be. I know we got a connection, something special, that only you and I can understand. Five years apart didn’t change anything. But they wouldn’t be able—they can’t tell the difference, can’t understand how I feel about you.”

Hutch kissed Starsky, once, twice, then deeply.

“Stay with me here. Love me here, now, while we have the chance. This is ours, partner. Ours.”

~~*

“Stay with me here, Starsk.” In the middle of the night, Starsky’s heart monitor had begun to sound an irregular beat, waking Hutch and bringing two nurses rushing into the room.

He’d developed a fever. His body tried to compensate, which had sent his heart rate and blood pressure out of their regular zone.

A doctor arrived, gave instructions to the nurses, and wrote something on the chart before injecting the IV line with something.

An addition of an antibiotic to Starsky's IV pole began to work its magic, but Hutch did not sleep again, instead sitting in a chair beside the overheated body, wiping Starsky's face with a cool, damp cloth.

"Stay with me. We're not done yet. Don't let him, win, Starsk. He'll never understand what we've got, he only wants to destroy us. Don't let him do, it, partner. This is ours. No one's going to take it away from us, not while we're both still breathing."

He dipped the cloth into the bowl of water again, wringing it until he thought he might tear it, then reapplied it to Starsky's cheeks, careful to avoid the respirator tube.

"We didn't let anyone in that week, did we? In the house or out, we were totally into each other, and we didn't take too much care in hiding it."

~~*

The rest of the week passed too quickly. They left the house long enough for Starsky to bring Hutch to meet Aunt Rosie and Uncle Al, turn down dinner, claiming prior plans ("What she won't know, won't hurt her," Starsky soothed as Hutch guiltily swallowed down a most excellent homemade clam chowder from a stand on the docks), haul Hutch to Al's car lot to pick out a car ("You've got to be kidding me, Hutch. That hunk o' junk?"), hit the grocery store to stockpile Huggy's kitchen ("No chips in bed, Starsk. I mean it. Where's the yogurt?"), and a final stop at the drugstore for Vaseline ("You ready for this?").

They made love morning, noon and night, as if to stockpile the memories to feed on later. Hutch couldn't get enough of David Starsky, and the closer the end of the week came, the more despondent he became. Starsky would walk up behind him where he was staring out the window over Huggy's back yard, put his arms around his waist, and remind him, "Stay with me. We don't have to be out there yet, remember?"

Two nights before Hutch was to report to UCLA for class registration, Starsky insisted they hit the town.

"You're eighteen now, Hutch. You're legal to get into a bar, have a drink," Starsky reminded him. He'd nearly forgotten—they'd had plenty of booze and sex in their hideaway, and he hadn't considered the new status his age would afford him. "Besides, I got you something to wear, and I wanna see you in it."

He handed Hutch a box, unwrapped but tied with a bow. He pulled the bow free and set it aside, murmuring, "I know what to do with you later," eliciting a flush from Starsky at the promise, and pulled from the depths of white tissue paper a silk shirt.

The color brought the word "sapphire" to Hutch's mind. The fabric felt cool and delightful against his skin.

"Turn around, Starsk," he said suddenly, standing and letting the box fall to the floor. "I want to put it on."

"Like I've never seen you naked, Farm Boy?"

"Turn around."

"Okay," Starsky said with a smirk, and leaned out the window, relating all he saw while waiting for permission to turn back.

Hutch pulled his suitcase out from under the bed, rifling through it until he found his a pair of white slacks and one of the handful of ties he'd thrown in at his mother's insistence. The tie was nearly the same shade of blue, only a touch darker, and the contrast was just enough.

He dressed quickly, glancing up at Starsky now and then to be sure he was sticking to the window gazing. Grabbing his comb, he fixed his hair, and then finally summoned Starsky back.

The look on Starsky's face told him everything he wanted to know, yet still he asked. "How do I look?"

After a long, long perusal, during which Hutch felt himself break out into a sweat under the lustful gaze, Starsky stepped up to him wrapped a hand around his neck, and brought their lips together. "Disgraceful," he whispered against Hutch's mouth. "Utterly disgraceful."

Hutch crushed Starsky against him, taking control and driving his tongue deeply into his mouth, kissing the man breathless before releasing him.

"More of that later," Hutch said. "Get dressed yourself. Blue for you, too, Starsk. And if we're going out on the town, then let's get a move on before I change my mind and throw you down on the bed right now."

Four hours and countless mixed drinks later, Hutch stumbled up the stairs, leaning on a much less drunken Starsky. "Someone's gotta stay somewhat sober," he'd said, when Hutch asked him why he was only having beer. "It's your birthday. Drink up."

Hutch's tie had been the first thing to go, after the second drink. Starsky had folded it carefully and tucked it into his pocket, then unbuttoned the top two buttons of Hutch's shirt. Hutch had felt reckless and daring, offering Starsky the same unbuttoning service, and at one point had pulled Starsky into a giant bear hug in front of the rest of the bar patrons. But being the man's birthday, and obviously drunk, no one thought anything of the gesture but to make some laughing remarks that would have set Hutch's fists flying had he been sober.

He'd caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror over the bar and had liked what he saw. Starsky's hand around his arm. His hair slightly mussed, a joyful grin on his face, shirt casually open at the neck. He looked the way he wanted to feel all the time. High and free and loved by Starsky.

But back at Huggy's, his elation faded as he realized that after tomorrow night, he would be at college and Starsky would be in the Army.

"Starsk?"

"Yeah, pal?" Starsky was in the process of getting undressed, grabbing a toothbrush before he headed downstairs to the shared bathroom. "You need help getting back down the stairs?"

"Uh. Yeah." It wasn't what he meant to say, but his head felt weighted down and too clogged for thoughts. For a brief moment, he fought back the urge to cry.

Starsky helped Hutch all the way to the bathroom, supervised the tasks there, including putting the toothpaste on the toothbrush, and then guided him back to their room. He pushed Hutch down on the bed and carefully began to peel away the white slacks, stained now with spilled alcohol and the drippings from a taco Starsky had insisted he eat, leaving Hutch only in his half-unbuttoned shirt and underwear. Hutch believed no one could be more beautiful than Starsky, taking care of him so well. He grasped Starsky's wrist.

"Starsk. I'm drunk."

"No shit. What gave you that idea?" Starsky chuckled, caressing Hutch's hand.

"I want you to—to—Starsk?"

“Want me to what, Hutch?”

“Get the Vaseline.”

Starsky laughed. “You are drunk.”

“I’m relaxed. You could get up there easy.”

Starsky goggled at him. “You want me—up your ass?”

“Yes. Happy Birthday to me.” He smiled up at his partner, grabbing his arm and pulling him down onto the bed. “I want to talk dirty to you. I want you to fuck me.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck me.”

“You realize how much you’re turning me on right now?”

Hutch reached down to grope the now familiar hard length. “Yep.”

“Hutch.” Starsky’s fingers found their way to Hutch’s sapphire blue shirt, grazing the skin as he finished undoing the fastenings, spreading the fabric wide. He opened his own shirt and then lay atop Hutch, pressing their bare chests together, twining his hands into Hutch’s hair. “Ya know I’m loving ya right now, love being with ya, but I don’t want to do that.”

“Why not?” Hutch whispered, leaning up to brush his lips across Starsky’s. “I want you to.”

“I know ya do. I let you buy the stuff, didn’t I? But I also know you’re too drunk. It’s not how I want that time to go.”

“Starsk…” Hutch began, but was silenced by Starsky mouth taking his, massaging tenderly and flicking the inside of Hutch’s lips with his tongue. He groaned, his own tongue eagerly reaching, tasting whisky and beer and tacos and that flavor so perfectly Starsky that if he could make it into a seasoning and top every morsel of food he ever ate again with it, he would.

The alcoholic buzz crashed brazenly with the sexual one, and his blood felt like it was on fire. He thrust his pelvis up once, pushing his cock against Starsky’s, growling in frustration at the lack of contact. Starsky reared up, gasping, dove his hand into Hutch’s underwear to free his cock, then freed his own.

The sheer naughtiness factor at them both getting their rocks off while partially clothed inflamed Hutch further, and he shouted Starsky’s name out loud when Starsky lined their cocks up together. He dropped his knees wide, to open himself up to his partner as much as he could. The friction of the underwear against Hutch’s balls, the slow, sweet slide of hot cocks together, and Starsky’s tightening grip on Hutch’s hair as he plundered his mouth yet again all melded together into a burning fireball, heading for imminent destruction.

The world went blazingly white, then brilliantly red, and then finally settled into the deep, dark blue of Starsky’s eyes as he gazed down at him, breath hot on his face.

“You know how beautiful you are when you come? And loud?”

“Your fault for making me that hot. Shit. Think we woke anyone up?”

“Nah. They’ll just think we’re still celebratin’.”

Hutch snorted a laugh. “We are. God, Starsk. Help me move.”

Gingerly they shifted to strip the rest of their clothes off. Hutch brought his blue shirt to his face and inhaled deeply.

“What are you doing?” Starsky asked, laughing.

“Making a scent and touch memory,” Hutch answered, sniffing again. “You and me and sex with a silk shirt.”

Starsky laughed out loud. “You’re weird, you know that?”

The wiped themselves off with their underwear, and crawled under the covers. Hutch pulled his lover close, entwining their legs and wishing they never had to separate.

“Happy birthday, Hutch.”

“Love you.”

Starsky tensed against him briefly, then placed a sleepy kiss on his lips. “Love ya too, ya mushball. Go to sleep.”

“Starsk?”

“Mm?”

“I still want...”

Starsky sighed and nuzzled under Hutch’s chin. “I know ya do. I’m just not ready yet, that’s all. I don’t think you are, either. But when I am—it’s you, babe. All the way. Just hang in there for me, okay? Me and Thee? Okay?”

~~*

Starsky rode with Hutch to the college campus, claiming he needed to check out the female student population. “Gotta make sure there’s plenty of blue-eyed blondes for you to match up with, Blondie.”

“What, no blue-eyed brunettes? Jealous already?”

Starsky mock-punched him in the shoulder. “I’m your one and only fella, schweetheart.”

“Bogey, huh?”

“Yeah, you like?”

“Doesn’t sound a thing like him.”

“Spoilsport.”

The campus was indeed filled with pretty girls. Starsky carried Hutch’s suitcase up to the dorm room, where the steamer trunk shipped from Minnesota already waited.

“Looks like you’re first. Wonder what your roomie will be like.”

“You know who I wish were my roommate.”

“I know. Hey—training is only a few weeks. I’ll be back here before you know it.”

“For how long? And then where’ll you be going?” Hutch kept his face averted as he unpacked his things. It was taking all he had to keep himself under control, and he sounded distant, cold, even to himself.

“Nine weeks. Hey, do you know what your address is for here? I’ll write ya.”

“Yeah.” Hutch grabbed the packet of papers he’d been handed at the registration tables, and copied something down on a sheet of notebook paper. “Don’t lose it.”

“Cross my heart.” Starsky took it from him and began to fold it. Hutch watched the paper in the nimble fingers grow smaller and smaller, feeling as if he were growing smaller, too.

“Hey. Hey. I’d slide you into my pocket, if I could. You know that.” He looked back at the dorm room door, then crossed the room to close it, locking the latch. “C’mere.”

They met in the middle, embracing in a hold so tight that Hutch could almost feel as if they were melding together, truly becoming a part of each other. Starsky trembled in his arms briefly, before giving one last squeeze and a hearty pound on the back. Hutch pulled back at the signal, but didn’t let go.

One last kiss he bestowed upon his partner, one last taste. Starsky returned it with enthusiasm, and when the finally broke apart, he grinned. “You’d think we weren’t ever going to see each other again, the way you kiss,” he said. “Nine weeks, Hutch. I’ll come back here and we’ll paint the town.”

“Promise?”

Starsky nodded once. “Promise.”

The doorknob rattled, and then someone pounded on the door. “Hey! Anyone in there? Who locked the door?”

Starsky and Hutch reached the door together, fumbling it open. A skinny, freckled boy, with glasses sliding off his nose stood there with two suitcases and a pile of papers that were already spilling onto the floor.

“This is my room. One of you my roommate?”

“I-I am,” Hutch admitted, sticking out his hand. “I’m Ken.” The boy looked him up and down, and then sized up Starsky. “Who are you, then?”

“I’m just a friend. Sorry about the door—girlie magazines, you know. Didn’t want the wrong eyes to see,” he whispered conspiratorially, winking. “I’ll see ya around, Hutch.”

“Yeah. See ya.”

And with that Starsky walked quickly away. Hutch stepped into the hallway to watch him go, but Starsky never looked back.

~~*

September 2, 1961

Dear Hutch,

I made it. My hair is almost non-existent, they cut it so short, and my clothes are beyond boring, but I'm here. Mess hall has plenty of food, even if it does try to rival Aunt Rosie's cooking. Wait. It's not that bad. Truth.

I'm in a bunkhouse with twenty other guys—it's kinda like camp all over again, only no one's got any chocolate hidden in their pillowcases. Some of these guys are just kids here, acting like they're grownups. They ain't gonna make it, I can tell.

When I got here, everything started happening right away. Before I hardly knew it, my hair was cut, I had a training uniform, and I was learning the right way to shine my boots.

I'm loving it, Hutch. I really am. They're taking us out on a long hike tomorrow, with full gear. Like I said, I expect at least ten of these guys ain't gonna make it.

Hope college is going well for you. Write me when you can.

M&T

Starsky

~*~

September 6, 1961

Dear Starsky,

School's fine. Gregory—he's the roommate—is nice enough, I guess, but a bit of a prick sometimes. After you left, he proceeded to lecture me about the evils of pornography and that if he ever saw me with any, he'd report me to the dean.

Exciting, huh?

At least so far we don't have any classes together. My business courses don't match up with his physics courses. Seriously, I should have been roomed with Colby, who's in the room across from ours. His roommate is another science major, while Colby's going in for law. His coursework looks interesting, I have to say. We've been having lunch together, and he says he's got a date lined up for me for next Friday. All he'll tell me is that she's got dark hair and green eyes. Sorry, no blonde, but at least her eyes aren't blue. Haha.

Hope you made your hike all right. You were always in really great shape, so I bet you did the best job.

Let me know how things are going,

M&T

Love,

Hutch.

~*~

September 12, 1961

Dear Hutch,

I'm gonna call you on the 15th at 8pm. Be by the phone, ok? I'll only have five minutes.

Starsk

~~*

The jangling of the phone jerked Hutch to attention. He leapt to his feet and grabbed the receiver before it rang a second time. "Starsk?"

"Hey Hutch! Sitting on top of it, huh?"

Hutch kicked at the book by his foot. "Yeah, pretty much. What's up? Five minutes, that's it?"

"Yeah, that's all we get, once a week. Last week I called my aunt. This week, it's you, you lucky dog."

Hutch felt himself flush at the affection he could hear, but the next words he heard drained the blood from his face.

"Hutch, I—hey, man, I don't want you to get the wrong idea, but your letters—man, nothing is much private here. You gotta be careful about the things you say in 'em."

"Starsky, what's wrong? What did I say?"

He could hear a patient sigh through the line. "You mentioned your date and how she was dark haired but not blue eyed. You know how close that points a finger at me if anyone gets a hold of that? How many guys look like me, dark hair, blue eyes? And you can't sign it "Love, Hutch". It's just not gonna fly in this man's army, buddy."

"Oh." Of course. He kicked himself mentally. Was he trying to get Starsky kicked out, or beaten up? "Sure, Starsk, I understand. I'm sorry. I won't do it again." He drew in a shaky breath. "For a minute I thought you were going to tell me not to write to you at all."

"Never gonna happen. But hey! I want to know about this chick you're seeing. Tell me all about her, okay? I wanna know. I'm cut off until training's over, so I gotta live through your girls and dates. Hey, my time is almost up. Look, I'll write you tomorrow and tell you what else is happening around here, okay? Who do we trust, Hutch?"

"Me and thee, Starsk."

"Damn straight. I'll see you later."

"Bye."

Back in his room, thankfully alone as Gregory was off with his lab partner concocting some experiment in the science wing, Hutch dropped to the bed, replaying the sound of Starsky's voice in his head.

Wanted to know about the girl. Living through his girls.

It was Starsky's way of saying to play the game society wanted them to play. Date girls, lots of them, play the field, be the college stud.

He was right. To not play the game invited too much inspection, and to write to Starsky like a lover, no matter how casually, risked an early discharge for his partner.

He got up again, locked the door, and unzipped his pants, stroking his flaccid member to hardness.

“Fine, Starsky. I’ll play the game. Except when I’m alone. Then it’s you. All you.”

~~*

September 16, 1961

Hutch,

Things are heating up around here. Rumor has it that a few of us are going to be picked for some special training. Things over in Vietnam are getting a bit sticky, and so some of us are heading over there. I think I’ll be one of those guys.

Nothing’s permanent yet, and hell, I’ve only been here two weeks, but I’m at the top of everything. Guess I’m good at this stuff, and I suck at school. Go figure.

More later when I know it.

Starsky

~~*

Post office silence reigned. Hutch replied to Starsky’s last letter, describing his date with the girl named Nancy, but that was the last he’d heard from his lover. As the weeks grew longer, and the basic training time came closer to its end, Hutch’s concern blossomed into worry. He called Huggy every week, but their friend claimed no news at his end, either.

Nancy Vanessa Carlson had turned out to be good company, and after their first date they began to see each other nearly every day. Her conversations were sharp and witty, and Hutch believed her to be flat-out gorgeous, and began calling her Vanessa when he found her hot and enticing, and Nancy when she was being sweet and charming. Her darkness contrasted beautifully with his fair good looks, and they drew admiring and jealous glances from other coeds as they walked the school grounds together, Hutch’s arm around her waist. Silently he compared her with Starsky, and sometimes tried to pretend that her dark hair was shorter and curlier, but he never let Vanessa even begin to guess that he fantasized about his male lover while he was with her.

They shared a few classes and so saved seats for each other, studied for hours together, and dated on the weekends, but for now, Hutch was content to kiss and pet during the times they spent alone. Vanessa not-so-subtly urged him towards more, but Hutch chose to affect the choirboy persona to keep both of them dressed for now. It was during the nights when, once Gregory began to snore, masturbation served Hutch’s needs well enough, and it was an easy thing to picture Starsky touching him as he stroked his cock towards orgasmic eruption, his voice smothered by his fist.

Midway through November, he skipped his afternoon classes and avoided Vanessa, instead driving his beat-up Ford to Al Starsky’s lot, hoping that maybe Al and Rosie had heard from their nephew and could help put his mind at ease. But Uncle Al expressed the same worry.

“He hasn’t contacted us in weeks, Ken,” Al admitted, shoving his hands into his rear pockets and kicking at one of Hutch’s tires. “His ma is worried, Rosie’s worried, and now you, too. I don’t know what’s going on.

If he were sick or hurt, the Army'd tell us, right? I think he listed us as next of kin along with his ma, but none of us have heard a thing."

"I think they would, Mr. Starsky. David said something to me in his last letter about some special training. Did he mention anything like that to you?"

Al shook his head. "Nope. Maybe that's what it is, then. Something secret and they've got him under wraps. He's a smart kid."

"I'm sure that's all it is. Let me know if you hear from him, would you? Here's my number." Hutch wrote it on the back of one of Al's business cards, and Al carefully placed it in his pocket.

His hands are a lot like Starsky's, Hutch thought, then shook one of them. "Goodbye, Mr. Starsky."

"Hey, Ken," Al called out as Hutch turned to walk away. "You know, you're welcome to call me Uncle Al, too. Rosie and I, we know how close you are with David."

Hutch smiled. "Thanks, Uncle Al. I'd like that. I'd like that very much." Al came to him and patted his shoulder.

"You drive safely, now."

"I will. Thanks."

~~*

Four weeks later, Hutch reveled in the fact that Gregory had gone home for the holidays. He'd opted to stay in the dorm—his parents were flying out to New York, of all places, but Hutch felt he'd be better off staying close to the one phone number Starsky had for him. He stretched out on his bed with a book from his class reading list for literature, and had just about dozed off when he heard the hallway pay phone ring.

"Ken? Phone's for you." Colby stuck his head in Hutch's door, jolting him further. "I think it's your friend Dave."

Hutch dropped his book to the floor, not caring that it fell face down, folding pages and twisting the spine.

"Starsky?" he practically shouted into the receiver. "That you?"

"Hey, Hutch! How ya doin'?"

"How am I doing? How am I doing? Where the hell are you?"

"I'm still at the camp. I'm gonna be shipped out, Hutch."

"What? Where? What about your furlough?"

"Not gettin' one, pal. I'm on a special detail for a colonel, and we're shipping out to Hawaii and then Vietnam in the morning."

"Vietnam?" Hutch's heart sank. "Special detail?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna be a glorified guard, really, but they're telling me they have other plans for me a bit later. I don't know when I'll be home again."

At that, Hutch closed his eyes. All the anticipation he'd been building up to see Starsky again went up like dry tinder, burning his heart and leaving a scorching mark that he didn't believe would ever heal.

"Anyway, Hutch, I really wanted to talk to you before I left. I'm sorry I can't get there to see ya first."

Hutch leaned back against the wall and slid down to the floor, cradling the phone against his shoulder. He waved a curious Colby away and guarded the mouthpiece with his hand. "Vietnam, Starsk. Aren't things starting to get a little worrisome over there?"

"Yeah. More than you know, and more than I can tell ya. Hey, they're going to promote me to sergeant within the month, how's that, huh? Hey, Hutch. I wanted—wanted to say—you know."

Hutch covered his eyes with his other hand. He was not going to cry, dammit, though his heart was twisting so hard he thought it might just tear in two.

"Hutch, you still there?"

"Yeah," he choked out, then drew in a deep breath. "Me and thee, buddy. Don't ever forget it."

"Never will. Never could. I'm sorry, Hutch."

"Don't be. I understand."

"Love ya."

Hutch glanced towards Colby's door, but he had kindly shut it behind him. "Love ya, too," he whispered. "Starsky. Be careful."

"You know it. I'll write as soon as I can. Hang in there for me."

"Always."

"See ya."

"Yeah. See ya." The phone crackled once, and then went dead.

He dropped the phone from a suddenly limp hand and sat there, legs splayed out, staring at the black receiver in his lap for a long, long time.

~~*

He attempted to bury the lonely pain by spending every moment he could with Vanessa, whose family lived in Bay City. The new year came, and while her parents were off at a party, Vanessa and Hutch celebrated the arrival of 1962 with their first shared sex in the intimacy of her childhood bedroom, surrounded by fashion designs pinned to the wall and stuffed animals that she'd not yet given up. Huggy had innocently offered his place to Hutch while he was on his many trips away, but Hutch had turned him down, not willing to ever bring a feminine memory into the room where he and Starsky had learned each others' bodies so well.

A cold early February rain chased its way down his neck and into the collar of his coat as he ran across the grounds to the community building housing the student mail. His room-numbered mailbox held five items—three for Gregory, two for himself.

One was a card from his mother, likely with the monthly check she sent to cover the costs of his entertainment and any incidentals, and an airmail letter from overseas.

His heart leapt at the sight of the familiar left-handed scrawl. Anticipation fueled his feet as he ran back to his dorm, where he was relieved to find that Gregory wasn't in their room.

He dropped his roommate's mail onto his desk and then shed his coat, tossing his head to lessen the water in his hair so as not to drip upon the prized letter.

He settled on the bed and carefully slid one finger beneath the flap.

A photograph fluttered out as he pulled the folded pages from their envelope, and he snatched it up, eager for a glimpse of the friend and lover he'd been missing.

The lopsided grin hadn't changed. Even though the picture was in black and white, he could feel the warmth from blue eyes that said "Starsky". The man stood at parade rest, uniform crisp and new, and his sleeve displayed sergeant stripes. He looked undeniably happy.

Hutch set the photo carefully down in his lap and opened the letter.

January 23, 1962

Hutch,

Happy New Year! I hope 1962 came in with a bang for you. My new year started before yours did, I think, with the time zones.

So right now I'm just like I thought I would be, a glorified guard. I can't tell you much else because all my letters (and yours too, be warned) go through the censors first. I can tell you, I'm in Vietnam, and it never gets cold here. And people think California never sees cold temperatures. Haha.

Still, I got my promotion and am in charge of a few men, mainly making sure someone's on guard duty at all times. The colonel likes me and bounces thoughts off me all the time. Says I have a good head for ferreting out the details of things. Who would have thought that about me, huh?

You still seeing Vanessa? There are a few girls here, all sweet and Vietnamese. It's easy to be drawn to them, they're so easy to please and are so eager to please. I promise to be careful, though. No breaking of hearts.

Again, I'm really sorry that we couldn't get together before I shipped out. I missed all the holidays. I hope they were still good for you. Did you go home at all or stay at school? How's Huggy? I'll drop him and Aunt Rosie a note, too.

I honestly don't know when I'll get stateside again, but I'll write as often as I can. Write back using this address and cross your fingers that I'll get it. I should. Just don't be surprised if you don't hear from me right away.

Man, camp and Me and Thee seem a long time ago, and a long ways away. Write soon.

Starsk

~~*

When Hutch stopped to count them up, he realized that he and Starsky had spent a total of fifteen days together over the last six years. When he thought of Starsky with one of the little Vietnamese girls he'd alluded to, he felt cold inside, lost and perhaps, if he examined it in the wee hours of the night, a little jealous.

No other letters arrived, although Hutch sent several, hoping for a response.

Hutch spent that first summer after his freshman year at home with his parents, and Vanessa came to stay for two weeks. His mother began making noises to Ken about what a nice girl she was, how bright and lovely, and how nice they looked together. His father occasionally complained about the fact that Hutch wasn't at UofM, but otherwise gruffly approved of the grades Hutch was earning at UCLA and he, too, seemed rather enthusiastic about Ken's choice of girlfriend.

She had her own room in the house, but they often spent lazy afternoons in the brass bed at Hutch's grandfather's house, which still sat empty and waiting for Hutch to turn twenty-one and decide what to do with it. For now his father simply paid the taxes on it from the trust fund earnings and let the house itself alone. Hutch found solace in the old place, especially after Vanessa left with a promise to see him again when school started.

More than once he wished his grandfather were there, for he felt as though he could have shared his secret with him, if no one else.

Summer went by quickly as he spent his time working the community pool as a lifeguard and partying with his friends, and yet slowly as day after day went by without a letter from overseas.

The flight back out to LAX didn't carry the same anxiousness his first flight had, for he knew Starsky wouldn't be waiting for him. Instead of Starsky's dark curly hair and smiling blue eyes, he was met by his Vanessa, with long dark hair and flashing green eyes. The more he missed Starsky, the more attention he paid Vanessa until they had become virtually inseparable.

He celebrated his nineteenth birthday by opting to rent an apartment off campus with John Colby and Eric Westheimer, and he had his brass bed and steamer trunk shipped out ahead of time. He had left Vanessa his car for the summer but she happily relinquished the keys to him at the airport, allowing him to drive them both to his new home.

Three bedrooms and one bathroom, a tiny kitchen and a smaller living room that spilled out to a generous front porch seemed like room enough for them. The first thing Hutch did after getting his things put away in the room he'd claimed as his own was write a letter to Starsky.

Vanessa draped herself over his shoulders as he wrote, and he covered the paper with his hand.

"To your friend Starsky again?"

"Yeah. Letting him know the new address."

"Ken, don't take this the wrong way, but...when was the last time you got a letter from him?"

Hutch put his pen down and turned to her. "February," he admitted.

"Seven months, Ken."

He nodded. "He told me in that letter, though, that it might be awhile before I heard from him again. And I know that if—if something had happened to him, his family would have told me. Uncle Al would have called."

“You call him Uncle Al?”

Hutch shrugged. “He asked me to, as much as Starsky talked about me. I should give them a call, just to see.”

“As much as you talk about him, Ken, he must mean a lot to you.”

He tensed, for a moment sure she could see into his heart and know the truth. “Yes, he does. He’s my best friend, best one I ever had.”

“Well, I just think that a best friend would make a bigger effort to be in touch, is all. Finish up your letter. John is hoping you’ll play your guitar, since you brought it this time.”

Stung at the remark about Starsky, Hutch fumbled the pen back into his fingers. “Sure. I’ll be out in just a few.”

Vanessa left and Hutch bent to his task.

September 1, 1962

Starsky,

I think by now you’ve got to know that I’m getting worried about you. I haven’t heard from you since February, and it’s killing me to not know how you are. Are you safe? Are you well?

I moved into an apartment with John and Eric this year. Here’s the address, if you are able to write back.

I miss you, buddy. Don’t forget, it’s Me and Thee, and Me is needing to hear from Thee pretty damned soon.

Hutch

~~*

September gave way to October, which rolled into November with still no word from Starsky, and Hutch attacked his studies until he fell asleep over his books, except for the nights Vanessa stayed with him, and then he ravenously attacked her instead, for losing himself in the high of sexual fulfillment at least allowed him to recall the week when Starsky had taken him to those heights.

One blustery afternoon in early November, Vanessa ran up the sidewalk to meet him at the door just as he was returning from class.

“Where were you, Van? I took notes you can share, but you missed the lecture.”

“I know, Ken. I-I had an appointment.”

“For what?” he asked, unlocking the door and taking off his coat. He turned to help her with hers when the look on her face stopped him cold. “Nancy? Are you all right?” He guided her to the couch and gently eased them down, wrapping his arms around her to warm her as the tears began to fall.

“Ken, I-I don’t know how to tell you. I...we...oh, Ken, I’m pregnant.”

Hutch’s world fell out from under him, heart sinking with all the implications that one phrase afforded.

“Wh-what? Pregnant? But...but how?” he stammered, his heart pounding. “We took precautions! We—”

“I know we did. The doctor said that condoms sometimes just don’t work. There could have been a hole in one or something.”

“But...you missed a period and didn’t know?”

“I’ve never been one of those regular women, Ken. I thought it was just me, stress over school. I honestly didn’t consider it until now. I never even got sick!”

“Well—well, how far along are you?”

“Three months. I’m due in June. Oh, Ken, what are we going to do?”

“Marry her, Hutch.”

Hutch’s head snapped around at the sound of the unexpected voice and he stood, blinking stupidly in surprise. “Starsky?”

Starsky smiled weakly. “Yeah. Thought I’d surprise you. I think Nancy there one-upped me, though.”

“What are you doing here? Why didn’t you write? Starsky!” He gave up the questioning and strode to the door, pulled Starsky the rest of the way in, shut the door behind him with a kick, and then gave himself up to the arms that opened for him.

The hug was brief and manly, and Hutch felt disoriented when Starsky all too soon pushed him away.

“Sorry I didn’t write, I couldn’t. I’ll tell you what I can later, but—” he gestured to Vanessa, tear-streaked and shaking, with a lonely, hurt expression on her face. “—I think you better finish up with your girl there first.” He started to say something else, but then seemed to change his mind, and Hutch realized he was heading back for the door. “I’ll go to Aunt Rosie’s. You call me there when you get a minute, okay?”

“Wait! Wait, Starsk, don’t go. Uh...just, can you wait in my room for me instead?” Hutch asked.

“Nah. Call me. I’m here through Thanksgiving.” He tipped his cap at Vanessa and quickly left, shutting the door firmly behind him.

“Figures, he would finally show up today of all days,” Vanessa wept. “Ken, what are we going to do?”

Torn between two lovers, he looked at his pregnant girlfriend, then back at the door where Starsky had so briefly stood.

Responsibility’s weight took hold, and he sat back down beside her and pulled her into his arms. “Ah, Nance. I don’t know. What do you want to do? Do you—do you want to keep it?”

She looked at him in horror, pulling away. “Of course I do! I just—I just—what do you want?”

For a brief moment, an image of what his child could look like flashed into his mind. Vanessa’s hair, his eyes. A dark, blue-eyed familiar. His heart twisted.

Starsky’s suggestion rang in his ears. And though it felt like he was locking his lover away in a dungeon forever, and despite the fact that he’d never, ever told Vanessa he was in love with her, still he said just what Starsky had said.

“We could get married.”

Van looked at him, sniffing. “Is that supposed to be a proposal?”

“No—yes—no! I don’t know. I just want to know what you want.”

“I don’t know what I want, Ken. All I know is that I’m scared and angry and worried. Take me home. All the way home, to my parents, please.”

“Your parents?”

“Yes. Right now I just want my mother. Ken, please, just take me there.”

He swallowed. “Are you going to tell her?”

She gave him a cold look. “I don’t know yet. Maybe. She’s my mother.”

A vision of Mr. Carlson, a hulking man of six-foot-several, coming after him with a shotgun sent a violent shudder through him.

Vanessa stood. “Please, Ken.”

He drove her home to Bay City through pouring rain, the silence a living thing, bouncing between them. The windshield wipers whispered, “pregnant, married, pregnant, Starsky, pregnant, lovers, pregnant, forever, married,” to him.

He tried to block the sound, to focus on Nancy and their baby and the situation presented to them. Yet every time he moved to touch her, she shifted away, staring out her window and furtively wiping at tears. He knew she was hurting, knew now that what she’d wanted was the fairy tale ending, with him sweeping her into his arms like a white knight to the rescue and declaring his undying love, buying her a diamond and preparing for a grand wedding.

Instead, all she got in response to her news was his shock and dismay and a very weak offering of marriage, highlighted by the surprising visage of his long-lost best friend at the very worst moment he could have possibly appeared.

And Starsky had heard the news, too.

Their forty-five minute trip came mercifully to an end. He walked her to her door, and she allowed him to kiss her on the forehead before he delivered her into the arms of her surprised and concerned mother. With barely a goodbye, he quickly returned to his car and drove straight to Al and Rosie Starsky’s.

Bay City was large for a suburb of Los Angeles, but not so big that it took very long to get from Nancy to Starsky. He threw the car in park and barely got the door shut before he was dashing through the rain to knock rapidly on the door.

Heavy footsteps heralded Al’s progress, and his face broke out into a wide grin when he saw Hutch standing there.

“Ken! It’s good to see you! Come in, come in! David’s here, did you know? Give me your coat, there’s a boy. Rosie, come say hello to Ken.”

Rosie had already stepped into the foyer and reached for Hutch, giving him a brief squeeze. “David’s asleep; he went right upstairs when he got here. He said he was really tired after his trip, but you’ll stay for dinner, won’t you? It’ll be ready in about an hour, and I’ll wake him then.”

“Hey, Hutch.” Starsky stood at the top of the stairs, barefoot and ruffled in a blue robe.

“David, I thought you were sleeping,” Aunt Rosie admonished.

“I was, but that old rattletrap car of Hutch’s woke me up. Can’t believe you sold him that hunk of junk, Uncle Al,” Starsky joked. “Hutch, come on up.” He tilted his head towards his room before turning and walking away.

“I’ll call you both for dinner,” Rosie called after Hutch as he took the stairs two at a time.

One door stood open down the hallway, and Hutch headed for it, sticking his head cautiously through the opening. The papered walls held shelves of baseball and football trophies, photographs of Starsky’s parents, and on the bedside table was one of Hutch that he recognized as one he’d sent after it was taken at his graduation party. Starsky sat on the edge of his slept-in bed, staring down at his clasped hands.

Hutch closed the door quietly behind him and leaned against it. “Starsk?”

“So, you going to marry her?” Starsky asked, finally looking up at him with tired eyes.

“I don’t know yet. You’re the one who brought it up, though, didn’t you?”

Starsky swung his feet up and off the floor, pushing himself back to lie against a pillow. “Guess I did. Didn’t mean to walk in on you two in the middle of that.”

“It’s okay. Where’d you come from all of a sudden, anyway?”

Starsky shrugged. “Colonel came stateside, and brought me with him. Said I deserved some time off and let me borrow one of the base cars. I had your letter with your new address and I thought you’d get a kick outta seeing me show up. Guess I got the kick, instead.” He gave him a crooked grin. “Missed ya enough, I drove right to you instead of coming here. Guess I shoulda called first.”

Hutch’s fingers found the latch on the door, and twisted the lock. Starsky’s eyes flicked to the doorknob, then back up at him.

In two strides Hutch had reached the bed, clambered up onto it, and gripped Starsky’s shoulders, shaking him.

“David Starsky, I should kill you where you lie. You’ve made me worry, your family worry, all this time! We were starting to think something terrible had happened, that the Army just hadn’t told us yet, and you...you...Starsky...” He trailed off, examined the mouth that had fallen open under the ferocity of his rant, then dived for it, plunging in with his tongue to seek out the special taste of Starsky he had been missing for far too long.

Too soon Starsky broke them apart, stopping the kiss but rubbing his cheek against Hutch’s. “Not here, buddy.”

“Door’s locked.”

“Walls are thin.”

“Where, then?”

“Hutch.” Starsky sighed, sat up and pushed Hutch down in front of him, until they were both facing each other on the bed. “You’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Hutch looked away from the intense gaze and down at his hands clasped nervously in his lap. Starsky covered them with his own.

“Look. You can’t leave her twisting in the wind like that. You gotta do the right thing. You know that.”

“Starsk, I-I...oh, God.” Hutch leaned forward until his head butted against Starsky’s chest. Soothing hands rubbed warmly along his shoulders and back. He drew deep breaths in a bid to calm his racing mind and heart and to douse the urge to cry.

Starsky’s heart thumped reassuringly against his forehead, and the rumble of his voice thrummed through. “It’s gonna be okay, pal. You’ll get through this.”

“I’m sorry. You come back and I’m in the middle of a huge mess. Not the way I wanted to see you again, you know.”

Starsky gave a half-hearted laugh. “I know. Me neither. But right now we got some planning to do.”

“We do?”

Starsky pushed him gently up and ducked his head to meet Hutch’s downcast eyes. “Yeah. You got a girl to marry. Aintcha?”

“Starsky—I don’t know that I want to marry her.” Ashamed, he kicked his feet off the bed and strode around the room. “I don’t love her. I wanted to, I really did. We’re good together—school and dating and...sex.” He stopped then, and raised his eyes slowly to his friend. “We took precautions, Starsk. We did. Never did we do it without a condom.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.”

“You’re angry, aren’t you?” Hutch felt drained and exhausted.

Starsky swung himself off the bed and approached. “Nope. At least, not with you. At the situation, maybe, and the things you gotta do now.”

“Starsk—if I marry her, you and I...we...” Realization dawned on him then. Whatever they had together, it would be over.

A flicker of pain crossed Starsky’s face. “Yeah. I know.”

Hutch’s arms raised in a helpless gesture, and Starsky walked into them.

Shaking seized Hutch then, and all the pain and fear and loss and shame rolled themselves into grief that welled and spilled.

“Let it out, pal. That’s it. Get it out of your system, and then we’ve got some work to do yet.” Starsky’s arms tightened around him, strong and steadfast.

My soldier boy, Hutch thought as he clung to his lover. I want from you what Van wants from me—the white knight to rescue and take care of me.

After a few minutes, he felt more in control. “Thanks. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“You said we had work to do. What’s next?”

Starsky gave him a sad grin. “We find a ring for your girl, you pop the question officially, and if she says yes, then we go from there.”

“A ring.” He remembered the steamer trunk sitting in his room back at his apartment. “I have one.”

~~*

After choking down what he could of Aunt Rosie’s meatloaf, Hutch drove Starsky back to his apartment. He sketched a brief introduction of Starsky to his roommates before they both disappeared into the privacy of his room.

From the trunk he rummaged through a small carton until he found a small jeweler’s box. Inside nestled an old-fashioned diamond ring—his grandmother’s. His grandfather had promised it to him many years ago, but Hutch had nearly forgotten until now.

“He said that I should give this ring to the woman I marry,” Hutch said, placing it in Starsky’s outstretched hand. “I never thought I’d be offering it under these circumstances.”

“No one ever does,” Starsky said. “Very nice.” He closed the lid and held it in his fist over his shoulder. “You don’t have to give her this one, you know.”

Hutch shook his head. “If I’m going to do this...she’s going to be the mother of my baby. She deserves it.”

Starsky solemnly handed the box back.

Hutch took it and contemplated it silently, his jaw working. “Will you come with me to her house tomorrow?”

Starsky nodded. “If you want.”

Hutch pressed his luck. “Stay here tonight?”

“No.”

“Starsky, I...”

“I’ll get us a room somewhere.”

Hutch’s head jerked up. “What?”

“Hey. I need time with you, too, Blondie. But not here, not with all your roomies in the house, and...” he glanced significantly around the room, “...not with all of Vanessa’s stuff.”

Hutch looked around guiltily, noting a few skirts, scarves and a robe. “Oh. Yeah. For a minute, I thought you didn’t want...” He dropped to the floor and dug under the bed for his duffel bag, then tossed a few items in along with the jeweler’s box.

Starsky sighed. “I almost didn’t. But I’m too selfish to let you go without at least one last hurrah.”

From out in the living room the phone rang, and then a knock sounded on Hutch’s door. “Ken, it’s Nancy.”

“Okay, um, have her hang on a sec,” he called. “I’ll just...uh...tell her I’ll see her tomorrow.”

“You do that,” Starsky said gravely. “I’ll finish your packing.”

~~*

It was another thirty minutes before Hutch was able to get Nancy to hang up again, reassuring her that he wasn’t going anywhere, that yes, they needed to talk, but not over the phone. That she needed to rest tonight, and he promised he’d come see her tomorrow afternoon.

Throughout the conversation, which he tried to carry while standing outside the front door in the wind and rain for privacy, he watched through the window as Starsky sat on Hutch’s bed, poking through the duffel in his lap and waiting. Once the phone call finally ended, with Nancy in tears, Hutch came back in the door, beckoned and they left.

For distraction, Hutch asked Starsky to talk to him about the things he’d been doing while out of touch for so long, and while Starsky obliged and offered vague descriptions of people and places, Hutch found his attention wandering back to Nancy and a baby and how his life was about to change in drastic ways.

He pulled numbly into the darkened parking lot and waited, thinking, while Starsky got a room key. When he reappeared, Hutch knew what he wanted.

His soldier boy yanked the passenger door open and stuck his head in. “The room’s over there—wanna pull into a parking space?”

Hutch shook his head once. “Drugstore. Where?” He ignored the piercing stare he received. “Where, Starsk?”

His partner slid back into his seat with a sigh. “Back two blocks.”

When they arrived, Starsky made Hutch wait in the car. “I’m not the one shaking like a leaf,” he said with a wry grin.

When he returned, he had a few bottles of soda and some candy bars along with the Vaseline. “Liquor store next. Around that corner.”

Armed with bourbon, beer and the drugstore bag, they dashed through the rain to the motel door, where Starsky battled the lock and won.

The room was small and dark, with one double bed, a tiny table with two chairs, and a radio. “No TV,” Starsky said, setting their purchases on the table. “It was gonna cost more, and I figured we didn’t need it.”

Hutch tossed his duffel onto the bed and switched on the lone bedside lamp. “You didn’t bring anything, though,” it suddenly occurred to him.

“I put some extras of your clothes in your bag for me,” Starsky shrugged. “Figured you wouldn’t mind.”

“You’re right.” Hutch smiled. “What’s mine is yours, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Except that baby.”

Hutch felt his stomach drop at the reminder of his predicament, and turned to open the bottle of bourbon, needing a drink badly. “I’ll name it David if it’s a boy. And we don’t have anything to drink out of.”

Starsky stepped into the bathroom. Hutch heard the water running, and then Starsky returned, two glasses streaked from their impromptu bath. "Sorry about what I said earlier. Here, let me." He took the bottle from Hutch and poured two healthy slugs.

"Drink it," he said gruffly, thrusting one glass at Hutch, who downed it without a thought and held the glass out for more.

He tossed it back, and as the mellow heat of the alcohol began to warm his bloodstream, his fingers reached for Starsky's shirt, to attempt to unbutton before they started to fumble.

"Need to touch you, Starsk. Been gone so long."

"I know, pal. I'm sorry about that." Starsky gasped when Hutch stroked a nipple with his fingertip. "I missed you more than you can know."

Hutch pulled him toward the bed. "Show me. Make it up to me."

Starsky hesitated, and Hutch tensed.

"You sure you want to do this, Hutch?" Starsky asked, weaving their fingers together. "Because once I get started, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop, not with knowing that we'll never have the chance again."

"That's why it's now, Starsk," Hutch whispered. "I don't want to talk about Vanessa or the baby or anything else. I want this to be about you and me tonight. My grandfather always said, "Let tomorrow take care of itself." Will you do that for me, Starsk? Please?"

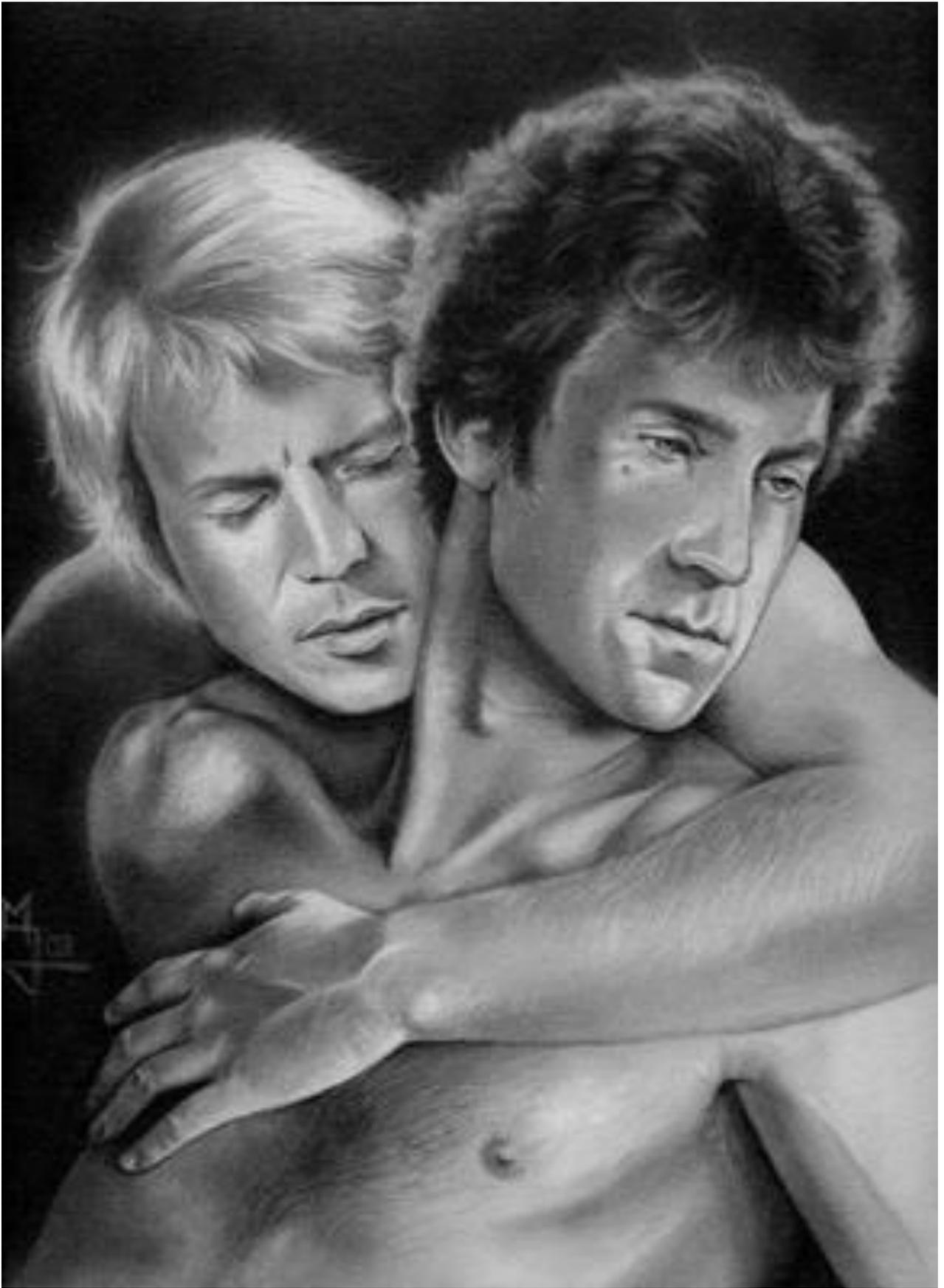
Relief relaxed him when Starsky pushed him all the way down on the bed, pressing their entwined hands over Hutch's head.

Long, slow kisses punctuated the mapping of Hutch's body by Starsky's talented mouth. Clothes slipped off without effort, and Hutch gave himself up to the sensations, feeling only Starsky's need and urges, his love, and returned it with a fervor that any priest would have been blessed to see in his church, directed at the Divine.

Hutch arched wantonly, thrusting against the excruciating tongue-tracing around his cockhead in a bid to slide into warmth and suction, nearly shouting when Starsky obliged him. Starsky's hand pumped the part of Hutch's shaft that didn't fit into his mouth, and with the other hand cupped and rolled his balls. Soon, too soon, his world turned white. He barely registered the hand that clamped over his mouth to silence his scream.

Years went by, or so it seemed, before he pulled himself back to full consciousness, shaking his head to clear the fogginess of alcohol and orgasm. Starsky sat in the center of the bed, his back to Hutch.

Hutch crawled up behind him, wrapping one arm around Starsky's chest and nuzzling into his neck as Starsky leaned back into him, turning his head to the side. Hutch sensed the sadness he knew Starsky felt, and he reached for Starsky's cock to distract him, but his lover stopped him with a grip around his wrist. "Wait. I want to stay hard. Makes the next step a bit easier, I think, if you're still wanting it."



Art by Enednoviel

Hutch gazed into the eyes that had turned to him a moment before clarity set in. “Oh.” He lay back and stared up at the ceiling. “I don’t know exactly what to do next, Starsk. Do you?”

“Yeah. I—uh...let’s just say there’s lots of willing teachers in Vietnam.”

Hutch opened his mouth, but Starsky stopped his questions with a grin. “No guys. I promise. I let one girl talk me into it, only so I’d know what to do when I got back to you, but that was it.”

“What did she do?”

Starsky ducked his head, as if embarrassed. “She used her fingers on me, got some sort of dildo up me, so I’d know how it felt. Then she had me do that to her, only I put myself in there.”

“Oh.” Hutch’s mind vividly imagined the encounter.

“You still feeling relaxed?”

Hutch nodded. “I think so. Maybe I could have a beer? I’m thirsty.”

Starsky rocked his body up to standing, and Hutch’s own cock twitched at the sight of Starsky’s, jutting out in front as if guiding the way to the table, a whole four feet from the end of the bed. It bobbed as Starsky dug into the paper bag, retrieving a bottle opener and popping the caps off two.

“Liking what you see?” Starsky asked him when he turned back and noticed the heated stare. He posed like a body builder a few times until Hutch snickered, then thrust a bottle into his hand. “Drink up, it’s getting warm.”

They clinked bottles together. “To us,” Hutch said.

“To Me and Thee,” Starsky corrected, downing his bottle with several quick swallows and palming the jar of Vaseline. “And not to put too fine a point on it, but I’m ready to get Me into Thee. How about you?”

Hutch could only nod, for the first time considering the size and length of Starsky’s cock and where he expected that to go. He closed his eyes and drew a shaky breath.

“Hey. We don’t have to do this, Hutch,” Starsky reminded him. “Just say the word.”

“Yes. I want this, I do. It’s...now or never, I think. I’ve already got plenty of regrets. I don’t want this night to be one of them because of something I chickened out on.”

Starsky shook his head, and leaned in to kiss him. “I love you, you know that, right? Since I was thirteen, I’ve loved you. And it don’t matter what woman you marry, how many kids you have, what line of work you go into—that’s never gonna change. I want you to be doing this because you love me, not because you feel like you got somethin’ to prove.”

“I do love you. I do. I trust you, no one else. Please, Starsk. I’ve waited years. Fifteen days, Starsk. All those years, we’ve seen each other fifteen days. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

A sad smile touched Starsky’s face, but he said nothing more.

He set their bottles aside and moved his pillow from the headboard to beneath Hutch’s hips. He bent Hutch’s knees and pushed them gently to fall wide, exposing his genitals.

Hutch's body ran warm and cold, alternating between sweating and shivering. Starsky knelt between his parted thighs and rubbed warm hands up and down them. He moved his hands higher, to massage Hutch's chest with long, sweeping strokes, until Hutch groaned in appreciation, his eyes drifting shut.

"Okay. Now you just lay there, just like that, relaxed and fine," Starsky murmured, and Hutch obeyed, resisting the urge to open his eyes when he felt Starsky shift on the bed and heard the popping sound of a sealed jar being opened. He focused instead on the warmth of Starsky's body against his legs.

He jumped slightly when he felt his balls being touched, and gratefully he clasped Starsky's right hand as it met his own left.

Starsky's left hand did the work, massaging below Hutch's ball sac, against the perineum, until his finger found Hutch's opening. Hutch held his breath at the first tiny push, then blew it out.

"That's it," Starsky crooned. "Just let me in there. Need another drink?"

Hutch shook his head. He felt muzzy enough, and wanted to remember everything without alcohol playing with his memory. "Do it, Starsk," he said, and when he felt Starsky's greased finger slide in, he bore down.

"Okay, okay, don't rush it, now. Breathe," Starsky commanded, and Hutch let out the breath he'd been holding without realizing. "Okay. Going for two now."

This time it hurt a bit; his body wanted to rebel and push the invading digits back out, but Hutch drew long, deep breaths, forcing himself into relaxation.

"You're doing great, just great, Hutch. Remember that breathing; I think it'll help you later on. Ready for one more?"

He opened his eyes, desperate to see his careful tormentor, and felt a rush of compassion for Starsky when he took in the red face, sweat already beading along his forehead. "You all right?" He squeezed the hand he held, hoping to reassure himself as much as Starsky.

Starsky chuckled. "Yeah, I'm fine. Trying not to hurt you, and trying to tell my dick to be patient. He's not good at that." They both laughed, and the fingers waiting inside Hutch's body felt strange under the vibrations.

"I'm ready now," Hutch said, closing his eyes again. "Go ahead."

This time the pain was sharper, and he couldn't resist a gasp escaping. "Oh, god," he panted. "Oh, god."

"Breathe. Count to ten."

"One. Two. Three..." He relaxed more with each number, until the spasms faded away and he felt calmer.

"Okay. Good boy. You think you're ready for me now?"

Hutch opened his arms. "Come here first."

Starsky crawled on top of him, peppering his face with tiny little kisses. Hutch nearly giggled under the affectionate assault. "Hold me, dummy."

Starsky did, sliding his arms under Hutch's back and squeezing him with his arms and legs. Hutch held on tightly, breathing deeply, filling his senses with the scent and feel and taste of Starsky, biting his shoulder once and licking the sweat there.

Starsky shifted back to position, offering a tender smile. “You want to be face up, or do you want to be on your stomach?”

“I want to see you,” Hutch whispered.

He raised his legs when Starsky lifted them, placing them over his shoulders as he lined his body up.

“I’m bigger than my fingers. It’s gonna be intense, I won’t lie—but just hang on, breathe, and don’t panic. Hear me?”

Hutch nodded, locking his gaze with Starsky’s until Starsky had to look down to guide his cock to the right place. Hutch could feel him leading with his fingers, feeding the head into Hutch’s body. The Starsky pushed all at once, popping the head past that first strong ring of muscle, and Hutch felt his body seize up.

“Breathe, Hutch. Breathe!” Starsky ground out. Hutch opened the eyes he’d screwed shut when he felt like the pain was going to slay him dead, and while staring into each other’s widened eyes, together they counted until Hutch’s body gave up the fight and relaxed enough to allow Starsky to move.

“Starsk?” Hutch asked, breathless. “You okay?”

“Yep. Gonna move now.” Starsky pushed forward, and this time, Hutch felt elation at the fullness without the previous shooting pain.

He’s inside me, Hutch thought wildly. He’s really inside me. He’s mine. Mine.

For a brief moment, he thought of Van, how he had been inside of her, before pushing the image away, concentrating only on his lover here and now.

Starsky looked beautiful in his pleasure, eyes soft and mouth hanging open as he pumped. Hutch took him all, contracted around Starsky’s length and laughed in joy when Starsky groaned at the squeeze.

“Do that again,” Starsky pleaded, and Hutch felt him change the angle of his thrusts.

A new sensation took hold, a brilliant spike of pleasure every time Starsky fully pressed in. “Oh! Oh! God! Starsk!”

He grasped Starsky’s arms, the biceps rock solid as Starsky bent over him, trapping Hutch’s throbbing cock between them, driving his thrusts deeper and faster, until Hutch could hold back no longer, falling over that glorious cliff into sheer ecstasy as his semen spurted hotly against their overheated skin.

Starsky moaned, then froze, gasping. Hutch felt the pulse of Starsky’s release deep inside him, filling him, and then happily bore Starsky’s weight when his shaking body collapsed on top of his own.

He floated on a blissful cloud, arms and body full of Starsky, and he would have been happy to stay like this forever, warm and close and one.

Too soon Starsky’s cock slipped free, and the warm semen between them grew cool and sticky. Starsky grunted, then rolled carefully off.

Hutch didn’t let go. Peripherally he was aware of the dim light from the lamp, the sound of carbonation bubbles popping against the inside of the beer bottle, and Starsky’s breathing. Hutch wanted to absorb every bit of Starsky inside him, to keep him forever. To hell with Van, with a wedding, with Vietnam.

He managed to release his hold on Starsky long enough to drag himself to the bathroom to relieve his bowels from their torture. Starsky followed. Together they cleaned themselves with the one washcloth provided, and then slid comfortably together under the blankets.

The night was young yet, and Starsky's stomach growled menacingly. Hutch laughed. "Want one of those candy bars, or should we try to go out?"

"Candy bar's fine; I don't wanna go anywhere, unless you do," Starsky answered, throwing the blankets back off long enough to snag the paper sack. "And a soda."

They shared chocolate and root beer, and reminisced about their camp days and Joey's pillowcase full of chocolate bars, before settling in for another round of lovemaking.

~~*

Hutch awoke with a jerk, then winced. His body hurt in places he'd never really considered for latent pain, and even though they'd limited their sexual activity to hand-and-blow jobs after Starsky had successfully penetrated Hutch, the residual ache was making itself quite clearly known.

He sat up, then clutched his head. The booze had caught up with him, too.

"Gonna be sick?" Starsky asked sleepily, stroking Hutch's back with a warm hand.

Hutch thought about that, then shook his head carefully. "No. Just sore."

"Lay back down. It's early." Starsky tugged at him until he complied, resting his cheek against the steady beat of his lover's heart. To its rhythm he sorted and filed in his head the things he needed to do and say to both his lovers.

"Starsky?"

"Hm?" Starsky cupped the back of his head and rocked him slightly.

"Would you—can you—be my best man?"

Starsky sighed deeply, and pressed Hutch closer. "Wouldn't be anywhere else."

"It's the right thing to do," Hutch said, convincing himself. "I have a responsibility to her, and to the baby."

"I agree."

"Still come with me to ask her?"

"Yep. Not gonna be in the same room, but I'll be there for ya."

"We better get moving soon. Got some paperwork to look into."

Hutch's eyes flew wide. "Oh, god. My parents. I have to tell my parents."

"And one of 'em's gotta sign off on your getting married, too, if Vanessa says yes."

"They do?"

“You’re not twenty-one, yet. She only has to be eighteen, but you gotta have a note from your mommy.” Starsky rolled his eyes. “Kills me to think that at eighteen you can go to college, buy a car, go into the army, go into a bar, but you can’t get married without permission. Seems backwards.”

They took turns in the tiny shower, eating candy bars for breakfast. Starsky checked out, and they headed for the county building to look into marriage licenses.

The clerk looked over her glasses at him disapprovingly before handing him the paper explaining the process and the permission form. “Mail it to your parents, have one of them sign it in the presence of a notary, and send it back.”

His hands shook as he accepted them, and the words all ran together on the paper. Starsky took them from him, folded them carefully, and steered him toward the door.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Starsky said for him. “You’ll have to forgive him; he’s a little nervous.”

She sniffed at them both before turning back to her work.

“Okay, Hutch. Now, who we calling? Nancy, or Vanessa, or whatever name you want her to be today, or your parents?”

Hutch shoved his hands into his coat pockets. “I told Nancy I’d see her this afternoon, so I guess my parents would be next.”

“Home, then. Yours or mine?”

“Mine. They’ll take a collect call from that number.”

Starsky drove them in Hutch’s car, complaining about the rattling and squeaking the whole way, but Hutch knew it was Starsky’s way of trying to distract him. He pulled at a loose thread on the upholstery nervously, too anxious to defend his wheels.

Even though it was barely lunchtime, Starsky stuck what was left of the previous night’s beer in Hutch’s fridge and found a cold one near the back. He opened it and handed it to Hutch, insisting he drink it before calling, to soothe his nerves. Hutch agreed, downing it quickly, then dialing the operator before his courage ran out.

When the call went through, he could hear his mother at the other end, and silently gave thanks that it wasn’t his father. “Ken? Kenny, are you there?”

“Yeah, Mom. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Ken. You don’t usually call in the middle of the day, dear. Is there something wrong?” Her voice was just a touch too cautious, and he winced at the idea that she might have already figured out the reason for his calling.

“Yes, I guess you could call it that, Mom. I, uh...that is, Nancy...Vanessa...and I...we...we...” He closed his mouth and breathed deeply. One, two, three. “Mom, Nancy’s pregnant.”

He waited through the silence at the other end, trying to gauge her reaction.

“You’re going to marry her, aren’t you, Ken?” she finally responded, and he could tell from the tremor in her voice that it wasn’t news she’d wanted to hear, but that she still was doing her best to support him.

“Yes, Mom, if she’ll have me. I’m going to go make it official a bit later today. I-I have Grandmother’s ring, so...”

“Good. It’s a beautiful ring, Ken. She’ll be honored to be offered it.”

“Mom? Are you all right with this?”

Her sigh was resigned. “It’s not exactly the order I wanted things to go in, and I wonder at how you went that far. Premarital sex, Ken. What am I going to tell our friends when this all becomes common knowledge?”

He sighed, biting back a choked laugh at the thought of her finding out his other sexual activities. “Tell them I made my own choices and I’m doing the right thing by them. Just like you taught me.”

“Do you love her, Ken?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I really don’t. But she, and the baby, are my responsibility.”

“Well. I’m proud of you for that, I guess. So when do you think the wedding will be?”

“I don’t know yet. Mom, I-I need for you to sign a permission paper, saying I can get married.”

She laughed dryly. “Of course you do. You’ll send it to me?”

He explained the process and then they said their goodbyes. “I love you, Mom,” he said.

“I love you, too, Ken. You’re about to find out just how much a parent does. I’ll call you later after I tell your father.”

Starsky had gone to Hutch’s desk and found an envelope, pen, and a stamp. Hutch folded the permission paper carefully, inserted it, and with shaking hands filled out the address.

“Want any lunch?” Starsky asked him, capping the pen and slipping it into Hutch’s pocket.

“I can’t eat. My stomach is too nervous,” Hutch explained, turning the envelope in his hands. “Time to face Nancy. Or Vanessa. Whomever she is today.”

After retrieving the ring from the duffel bag, Starsky drove again, following Hutch’s directions to the post office, and then to the Carlsons’. Hutch flipped on the radio for distraction, but as soon as Elvis began to croon “Love Me Tender”, he flipped it off again, rubbing at his eyes with his fingers.

Starsky took his left hand as it lay in his lap, squeezing it. “It’s gonna be okay, Hutch.”

“Yeah. Sure.” He returned the pressure, and they stayed connected in this way until Starsky pulled up into the Carlsons’ driveway.

Hutch stared at the front door for a minute, summoning the courage to get out of the car, and when Starsky slid down the driver’s seat and lifted Hutch’s hand to his lips, he turned to his friend.

“It’s you I love, you know.”

Starsky nodded solemnly. “I know. And don’t think I don’t wish I were a girl right now, so it would be me you were marryin’. But I’m not, and we’re not, so get goin’ and do the right thing.”

Hutch glanced at the front window, then risked it all. He leaned in quickly to drop a kiss on Starsky's lips before wrenching the door open and slamming it behind him.

~~*

Reflecting back with Starsky later while getting thoroughly smashed, it hadn't gone too badly. Mr. Carlson had opened the door, glowering, and ushered Hutch in. He had looked furtively around for the figurative shotgun, but then Nancy was there, tearful at his presence, grateful when he formally dropped to one knee and showed her the ring as her tight-lipped parents watched on. She'd clung to his neck, sobbing a relieved yes to his quavering question. He'd picked her up then and put them both on the sofa, her in his lap, and rocked her quietly until her parents left them alone and her tears had abated.

He told her what he and Starsky had done to get the ball rolling, and they discussed how and when.

Being that time was of the essence, and with the hope that Mrs. Hutchinson would return the form within a week, they planned for a quick Nevada wedding, where they could have license in hand the same day. They'd stay in Nevada overnight as a tiny honeymoon, and Nancy's parents would provide for a reception the week after they came back home.

Living arrangements were discussed next, and he agreed to move into Nancy's family's house until the baby came, while he took on a job as well as school to save up for their own home.

"I'll get to finish school, at least," Hutch said, tracing a finger through the wet rings left by their beer glasses. He picked up the tiny shot of tequila and pretended to examine it. "I think I'm going to need a lot of this to manage living under the same roof with her parents, though."

"Can't believe you're gonna do that. You both gonna live in her room?"

Hutch tossed back the shot. "Yep. And you should see it, woowee. All lace and ruffles and dolls. I'll fit right in." He held up two fingers at the waitress for more shots, looking at Starsky to see if he wanted anything more.

Starsky shook his head and waved her away. "I'm gonna be nursing you through one hell of a hangover as it is, pal."

"I'm not hammered yet."

Starsky snorted. He leaned across the table and grasped Hutch's wrist. "Yes, you are. But go ahead. Drown it all."

The waitress returned, and Hutch picked up a fresh shot. "I think I will." He tossed it back, then the other. Then he looked frantically for the men's room.

Starsky hauled him there in record time, rubbing the back of his neck as his stomach returned his careless libations.

After the punishing vomiting ceased, Starsky wiped Hutch's face with a wet paper towel before walking him out of the bathroom.

They stopped at the bar long enough for Starsky to drop some cash for the booze, then Hutch gratefully met the damp coolness of the Los Angeles November.

Starsky drove them to Hutch's place. Hutch stumbled through the front door, waved weakly at his roommates, and then Starsky, with a firm hand between his shoulder blades, guided him to his room, where he shut and locked the door behind him.

Hutch panicked. "The guys-they'll think..."

"That I'm staying with my obviously hung-over buddy for the night. Don't worry about it." Hutch felt himself pushed down onto the bed, and gratefully rolled his ankles when Starsky pulled his shoes and socks off before reaching for his fly.

"Yeah...he's ready for you...I think..." He pushed Starsky's hand against his fly, but Starsky snatched his hand away.

"As you said, the guys out there'll get the wrong impression if we start gettin' it on in here."

Hutch withdrew and lay passively, letting Starsky strip him down to his underwear, and then obligingly slid between the sheets. "I'm cold, Starsk. Come lay down with me. I won't do anything. I promise."

Starsky's grin looked sad, but he pulled off his own shoes, socks, and jeans and joined Hutch in the brass bed. Immediately, Hutch snuggled up to him, wrapping his cold limbs around the welcoming heat.

"You know what today is, Starsk?" he asked, smoothing one palm over Starsky's t-shirted chest. "It's day seventeen."

"You're keeping count, huh?"

"We've had so few, it's not hard," he answered sullenly.

"Go to sleep, Blondie. We'll add another one tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, until...well, until."

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The rest of the week went by in a blur. Hutch attended his classes without Nancy, who decided she wouldn't finish the semester and instead stayed home to make plans with her mother and her best friend Patty, who would serve as her maid-of-honor.

Hutch felt profoundly grateful to Starsky, who handled the brunt of the preparations, calling ahead to a Las Vegas chapel and arranging for three rooms in a cheap, nearby hotel. Hutch's parents returned the notarized paper the day after they received it, Mrs. Hutchinson's signature firm and clear on the paper, and within its folds was enclosed a check for five hundred dollars, to help with whatever else might be needed. Hutch felt a pang of emotion when he realized that while the paper had been signed by his mother, his father had written the check. He decided that whatever was left over would go towards an apartment for Nancy and himself after the baby was born.

Starsky picked him up after school on Monday and took him to a pawn shop, where he tried on various gold rings until he found one that fit and he liked well enough. A suit was next. The last suit Hutch had worn he'd already outgrown, for nineteen didn't mean he was done growing, which darkly amused him somehow. About to be a father, and he wasn't done being a kid yet himself.

They found a small tailor's shop and had him fitted. Starsky suggested the blue silk shirt to wear under it, but Hutch stopped that thought with a pained look. "Ours, partner," he murmured quietly, out of earshot of the tailor, and Starsky seemed to understand. Hutch picked out another shirt, still blue, but simple cotton.

School let out for the Thanksgiving week holiday on Friday. On Saturday, Uncle Al allowed Starsky to borrow a car from the lot, a 1957 Ford Fairlane, and Starsky picked them all up, loading suitcases and boxes into the trunk, and drove them all to Las Vegas.

Nancy and Patty talked quietly from the back seat, and while their attention was diverted back to Nancy's ring, Hutch braved the chance and put a hand on Starsky's thigh.

"Thanks for everything, Starsk. The car, the arrangements. I don't know how to repay you."

"Don't worry about it. It's what a best man does, you know?"

"You are my best man," Hutch said in a hushed undertone. "Always."

Starsky looked at him out of the corner of his eye and smiled softly. "You, too."

Two hundred and thirty miles and five hours later, they checked into their rooms. An hour after that, license in the minister's hand, Hutch stood at the altar of "The Hitching Post Wedding Chapel" and promised to honor, love, and keep one Nancy Vanessa Carlson as his wife, forsaking all others until death parted them.

He wondered if the minister could hear his heart cracking into a thousand pieces when Starsky handed him his grandmother's ring to place on Nancy's finger for the final time, still warm from Starsky's palm. When Nancy put his ring on his finger, he felt as if it were a lock on a door that had closed behind him, never to be opened again.

It felt like a crazy house of mirrors. He pledged his love to one person while his heart belonged to another, all of three of them standing together in the same room.

And that evening, after the four of them toured the Strip and all its lights, and had shared supper and champagne, Hutch felt overwhelmingly as if there were three people sharing the bedroom. He made all the right motions: carried her over the threshold, removed her pretty white dress, allowed her to slip him out of his own clothes, and then took her carefully and tenderly. But he felt as if the entire time the specter of Starsky stood in the corner, a silent watcher forever relegated to being a friend and a memory.

The next morning he made love to his new wife again, called her Mrs. Hutchinson, and then playfully carried her giggling to the shower where he washed her hair and fantasized about another head of dark hair with locks that had curled so sweetly around his fingers when they had made love.

They met Patty and Starsky for breakfast, checked out, and Starsky drove them to Hoover Dam. Patty sat up front next to Starsky and Hutch was gratified that his friend seemed to find Patty good company, for Nancy—now Vanessa, for she had turned into quite the coy temptress with the safety of her new last name—had insisted they canoodle in the back seat as a married couple.

Hutch leaned over the barrier at the dam, tracking the long line of the curved wall down to its end.

"Long way down," Starsky remarked. "Don't go checking it out personally."

Hutch turned his back on the barrier and crossed his arms. The girls were further down, bundled against the wind and taking pictures with the camera Vanessa and Hutch had received as an early wedding gift. "How are you feeling about all this, Starsk?" he asked. "Truly."

Starsky gave him a wry grin. "Doesn't much matter, now does it?"

"It does to me."

Starsky sent a glance toward the girls before answering. "At the chapel, I felt proud of ya. At dinner, I felt sad, and that night, I was angry that I couldn't be with you anymore. I got up and walked around until two in the morning. It's cold here in the winter, Hutch, and I felt cold. Went back to bed and imagined you were there with me. Fell asleep, dreamed about ya, then woke up and slapped myself in the face until it hurt."

Hutch reached out, grasped his arm, but Starsky gently shrugged it off. "Don't. I'll be fine later, I just need some time. What about you, how you doin'?"

Vanessa called over to them then, pointing the camera. Hutch used the request as an excuse to put his arm around Starsky's shoulders, and together they smiled for the camera. Out of the side of his mouth, he said, "I miss you already."

~~*

Living in the Carlson home grew tedious quickly. Thanksgiving passed easily enough, with a reception for the newlyweds a week after that. Starsky helped Hutch move his things to the Carlson's garage the day after they returned from Vegas, and alongside them, Hutch stacked most of the wedding gifts that would be put to use when he and Vanessa had their own home. It hurt that after that day, Starsky kept his distance, but he called the night before he left to return with his colonel to Vietnam.

They met halfway at a darkened bar. Hutch wore the blue silk shirt, and knew that Starsky adjusted its collar in a poorly hidden excuse to touch Hutch, just once more. They made the usual promises to write, and in the quiet solitude of the bar's back alley, they shared a final solemn kiss.

"Go home to your old lady, Mr. Hutchinson," Starsky said. "Make a great life together, okay?"

"I'll try, but you know..." Hutch wavered.

Starsky took him by the shoulders. "It's better this way. Guys and girls, it's the right way of things. We had a good time, a beautiful time, but it's over now. You understand me?"

"No," Hutch whispered, understanding all too well. "No, don't..."

Starsky pulled him into a hug, squeezing him tightly. "Yes, Hutch. My beautiful, beautiful Hutch. I'll never forget this time, these...how many days, now?"

Hutch's chest hitched as he struggled not to cry. "Today makes twenty-eight. Four weeks ex-exactly. Oh, god, Starsk. It hurts. It hurts."

"Shh." Starsky swayed with him for several long minutes, until, wiping at his face with his sleeve, Hutch pulled back, resigned. He pointed his finger at his friend.

"You be careful, and damn it, you better write this time, Sergeant."

"I will. I really will."

~~*

"And you did, Starsk. It was like, if you couldn't have me, then you'd at least be sure you had my letters, and I had yours." He sighed, stacking all those old letters in a neat pile on the bedside stand.

"You sent us baby clothes, remember? Tiny little shoes and caps, hand made by the old women you'd met and they cost you almost nothing. A Vietnamese doll with almond-shaped eyes,

dressed in traditional costume. I think it's still in Vanessa's room at her parents. And the sweetest white lace gown. We were going to have the baby christened in it. That was when you won Vanessa's heart over, Starsk, with that beautiful little dress. In her mind, you could do no wrong, and we were happy, as much as we could be, until..."

He sat back in his chair, covering his face with his hands as the ghosts of his family came visiting. Tiny Angela Grace, born four months too soon on Valentine's Day, with the faintest fuzz of dark hair and her eyes that never opened in life, swathed in the long white gown and laid in a pitifully small coffin. His grandfather, picking up and rocking the tiny baby in his arms. His grandmother, crying over the child, her hands over her heart.

Vanessa, forever angry, blaming him for everything that had gone wrong, for her pregnancy that became dangerous, to the early stillbirth of their baby, their three years of contentious marriage that ended when she finally threw her ring at his feet and walked out on him, her personality and their divorce proceedings unforgiving and manipulative, right up until her murder with his own gun.

Other ghosts marched by in their turn: John Blaine, nodding in understanding. Iron Mike Ferguson, regretful. Jackson Walters, smiling his thanks at their care with his son. Lionel Rigger, whom they'd failed to protect, sad but forgiving. So many others they'd met and lost took their turn. He scrubbed at his face, shaking himself out of his nightmarish dreams before he saw an empty-faced ghost, the next person waiting to be lost and mourned.

"I don't know what to do Starsk." He looked at his friend, his long-ago lover, and sighed. "I'm pushing the odds. I don't know what to do. I mean, what if?...what if." He shook his head and painfully rose from his chair. "Oh, man, what am I talking about?" He took one step away from the bed. "What am I talking about?" He turned back, ready to pace, when a familiar and long-lost glimmer of blue captured him.

"Starsky? Starsk? Y-you're awake! H-he's awake, nurse, he's awake!"

~~*

"I heard you, you know."

"Hm?" After the nurse had fetched the doctor, and the doctor the cardiologist, they'd run a battery of tests on his drowsy partner. Hutch had squeezed his hand and gotten out of the way of the medical personnel, dashing briefly to the impromptu office housing their captain to tell him the news before hovering outside Starsky's door.

What seemed like hours later, the medical staff finally left them alone, with admonishments to Hutch to not overtire his returned partner by keeping him awake.

He'd honored their expectations by slipping off his shoes and his jacket and curling up on the bed as he'd done throughout Starsky's fight for life.

"I heard you talking all this time."

"You did? Really? What do you remember?"

Starsky petted him weakly. "You reading all our letters, talking about old times, all that."

"All that, huh? And I didn't even get to you leaving the army, me finishing college, and us signing up for the academy."

“This part I know. I finished my tour, declined to re-sign, you got your degree but didn’t want anything to do with it, I talked you into the police academy, Vanessa threw a shit fit over being a cop’s wife and left you, and here we are today.”

Hutch tried to stifle a laugh. “That’s it in a nutshell, partner.”

“I only want to change one thing going forward, though.”

Hutch leaned up on one elbow, and gazed into anxious eyes. “What’s that, buddy?”

“I told you way back then, that guys and girls—it was the way it was supposed to be. Remember?”

Hutch nodded. “Worst day of my life, you telling me that. I knew what you were doing, and I loved you for it. I hung onto your friendship, since that’s all I could have of you anymore.”

“I was doing the same thing. And now look at us—no wives, no real girlfriends—but you and me, we’re constant. You know that Pink Floyd song that says, ‘We’re just two lost souls swimming in a fishbowl, year after year’? That’s us. Running over the same old ground, and what have we found?”

“The same old fears.”

“Wish you were here. Hutch, I want—I want us back again. Pick up where we left off in 1962. If you’re up for it.”

A tiny little spark of joy began to burn in Hutch’s belly. He felt a silly grin spread across his face, and the spark grew to a flame that tickled and made him laugh out loud.

“Am I up for it? Buddy, I’ve never wanted anything more in my life. Are you serious? For real?”

“Would I lie to you? Don’t answer that.”

They both dissolved into smothered laughter, before Starsky grimaced and moaned. “Shit. My chest feels like it’s on fire.”

“You were shot, dummy. What’d you think it would feel like?”

“You’d think I’d know, as many times as I got shot. And poisoned. And strung up for a sacrifice. And...”

Hutch nipped the litany with his hand. “Yeah, we’ve been through hell and back, partner. Promise me one thing—quit being a target. I don’t think my heart can take it.”

“Quit the force? Sending you out there without backup? Like hell I will. Your ass is mine, partner, and I intend to cover it, in each and every way I can.” Hutch smirked at the innuendo.

“Hush, you’re gonna pop your stitches with all that bravado. Let’s get you healthy first, and then we’ll talk about it, hm? For now, though...shut up and let me kiss you.”

Years fell away with the first touch of their lips, and he thought he could hear their childish voices singing out.

“You got a dime?”

“Yes. I’ll buy.”

“Yeah? Terrific!” David slung his arm around Kenny’s shoulders. “I think we got the beginning of a beautiful friendship here, pal.”

~end

June 2008

Author’s notes: This story was meant to be a simple, little thing, but in the way of so many stories, it grew into something far bigger than originally intended. There’s so much more I want to say, but deadlines and life have had their way with me.

This story also would not have been completed without the direct, lovely encouragement of both Marion and Sue, and the willingness to listen to me ramble on and on about it over the phone by Colleen, who tolerates my S&H love because she loves me.

My love to all three of you, my friends.