



Code of Silence

by

Gayle Smith

Summary: The years have passed, but Starsky and Hutch's friendship is stronger than ever. Unfortunately, their enemies have also gained strength fueled by manic revenge.

Notes: This story was originally published in the zine [Venice Place Times, Volume I](#). It appears here in its entirety, including the accompanying illo by Julie Henderson.

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by **Gayle Smith**

And you can't talk about it
And isn't that a kind of madness
To be living by a code of silence
When you've really got a lot to say
 Billy Joel. Code of Silence. The Bridge.

Captain Ken Hutchinson turned his head from left to right, surveying his troops and calculating his next move. He knew that despite outward appearances to the contrary, his opponent was sneaky and underhanded. The enemy would exploit any sign of weakness on their part and that meant one thing and one thing only: they could show no mercy.

"All right," he whispered to the heads bent next to his, "do we all know the plan?" When they nodded, Hutch inclined his head and sent them to their posts. Then he bent to the task at hand, staring straight into the midnight blue eyes of the enemy leader.

"Hut one! Hut two! Twenty-seven. Nine."

Hutch was on the move the moment the ball left Starsky's hand, pinning him to the ground as Rachel and Chrissy Starsky moved in on their younger brother and sister. Their team was behind 28-14 in the fifteenth annual Thanksgiving football death match. With only five minutes left in the game they couldn't allow the opposing team to score again, not with the evil specter of dish duty hanging over the losing team.

"Go left, Kenny! Go left!" Starsky yelled at his eight-year-old son, while struggling to break free from his best friend's grip.

"Hey, cut that out, no fair calling out instruction once the play is in motion." Hutch fought to maintain his hold. "If you're going to play dirty, there's only one thing left I can do."

"What's that?" The deep blue eyes regarded him suspiciously.

"This!" With that he began wiggling his fingers across his best friend's torso, watching as Starsky broke out into helpless peals of laughter. "Say uncle."

"N-no!" Starsky barely managed to plead as he gasped for air.

"Okay, then you leave me no choice but to continue," Hutch replied seriously, increasing the speed at which his fingers flew across the helpless man's ribs.

"Okay! Okay! Uncle!" Tears rolled down Starsky's face as he held up his hands in surrender.

"I thought you'd see things my way," Hutch replied with a smirk as he rose to his feet and held out a hand to help his friend to his feet. Grumbling, Starsky reached up to take the proffered hand, not noticing as Hutch's gaze fell on faded scars criss-crossing his abdomen.

Even after nearly 20 years, the strength of his reaction still surprised Hutch. The smallest glimpse of those scars and the memories they evoked was still like a fist clenching around his heart, an ache that never completely faded.

"Hey, you two done clownin' aroun'?" A voice drawled from the porch, "Some 'a us'd like to eat before that bird that I been slavin' away over all day gets cold."

Turning around, they both caught sight of the impossibly thin black man leaning against the porch rail watching them both with amusement. "Hold your water, Hugs," Starsky called out with a grin, "I ain't got no intention of missin' dinner. Especially not when all I gotta do afterward is sit back and watch the game while the losin' team does dishes."

"Starsk," Hutch swung Kenny up in the air, tousling his dark curls as he started into the house, "anyone ever tell you you're a sore winner?"

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Hutch watched with amusement as Starsky cleared the table, turning every once and a while to whisper something in the ear of his youngest daughter. Thirteen-year-old Maggie's laughter rang through the room as she shook her head in response. Watching the loving scene, Hutch felt a flash of pain as a vision of large, innocent blue eyes and a sweet smile filled his memory. Closing his eyes, Hutch fought to banish the memory and the ache of grief it brought with it. Today was about being with the ones we loved and being thankful for those still with us, not grieving the ones who'd left us behind. No matter how deep the loss ran.

"Hutch? You all right?" Starsky dropped into the chair next to Hutch, his eyes probing.

"Yeah, Starsk," he looked up with a sad smile, "I'm fine. I was just thinking about what a great family you have."

"Yeah, they are pretty great, aren't they? Thank God they take after their mother," his voice dropped as he watched Maggie shoving her brother out of the way and carrying the dishes into the kitchen. "Ya know, I never could've done this after I lost Rosey without your and Hug's help."

"Oh come on, Starsk, you're a great dad," Hutch shrugged modestly. "You'd have done fine without us."

"No, I'd've got by without ya, but I wouldn't've done fine. And you know it." Starsky turned his deep blue eyes on his best friend again. "You wanna tell me what's really botherin' you? I know thinkin' about my kids didn't put that look on your face. What is it? You thinkin' about Davy?"

"You always did know me too well, buddy." He ran a tired hand across his eyes. "It just gets hard sometimes to not think about him, especially during the holidays. He'd have been fourteen in a few more days."

"Hutch," Starsky's eyes began filling with tears as he pulled Hutch into his arms, "babe, it's okay to think about him, he was your son. And it's sure as hell okay to miss him, God knows I still do."

"God, Starsk," Hutch returned the hug, holding tightly to his friend, "after all this time I thought it'd get easier."

"I don't think losin' someone ya love is ever supposed to get easier, especially your own kid." Starsky pulled back, making Hutch meet his eyes. "But, you know you've always got us. And I'm always here when you want to talk about it."

"I know," Hutch squeezed Starsky's shoulder one last time before standing slowly, "and sometimes that's all that keeps me going from day to day. Now," he sighed dramatically, "I think I'd better get in that kitchen and handle my share of dish duty."

"Hutch, you don't have...."

"I know," a soft smile lit his face, "but I want to."

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"Uncle Hutch! That's no fair." Maggie's face turned down in a frown as she watched her uncle passing the play money to her father. "You can't give him money."

"Honey, if I don't he'll never be able to stay in the game." Hutch gestured sadly at the game board. "Look at him, all he's got are the utilities."

"That's all he's ever got," Rachel pointed out, reaching for the dice.

"Hey, I'll have y'all know that the utilities are very strategically important." Starsky scowled playfully at the assembled group. "Ain't that right, Kenny?"

"No," the boy pronounced solemnly, with a sad shake of his head. "Face it, Dad, you suck."

"Hey! Watch the language." Starsky sat up and frowned at his son. "Who taught you to talk like that?"

"That totally sucks," Chrissy groused as she dropped her playing piece on Park Place. "How much do I... What?" The fifteen-year-old looked up into her father's unhappy face. "What'd I do?"

"You lost a week's allowance for language," her father replied sternly.

"That's not fair!" She made a sound of disgust as she looked back and forth between her father and Hutch. "You and Uncle Hutch talk like that all the time."

"Not in front of your little brother. And we're both adults. Now, Christine Rose," he fixed her with a gaze that had the teenager squirming in her seat, "would you like to try for two?"

"No," Chrissy replied sullenly. "I'm going to my room. This is a stupid game anyway." With that she rose to her feet and stomped out of the room.

"Don't laugh." Starsky immediately turned a stony gaze on Hutch as he struggled to maintain his composure. "You'll only encourage her."

"Well, Starsk," Hutch shrugged innocently, "I did warn you about naming her after Christine. The woman's always been hard-headed and stubborn, did you expect any less from her namesake?"

"Hey, I just named a kid after her," Starsky shrugged as he dutifully handed his utilities over to a triumphant Maggie, "you're the one who married her. Speaking of which," he continued nonchalantly, "I ran into her a couple of days ago."

"How's she doing?" Hutch's voice softened considerably.

"She's doing good. They offered her a big promotion to the network." Starsky continued, a study in casualness. "She's going to be producing the weekend news briefs. Sounded pretty excited about it."

"That's great." Hutch's gaze turned inward. "Chris deserves it. She's really good at what she does."

"Yeah, she is." Starsky began watching his friend openly. "She asked about you, you know? Said she'd left you a couple of messages, but you never returned them."

"Yeah, yeah, I meant to get around to it, but..." he waved a hand aimlessly through the air, "things just got

away from me and I didn't really get the chance."

"It's not too late, you know," Starsky suggested, sorting out the play money and dropping it into the correct slots. "I know Chris'd be glad to hear from you. I also know she's not seeing anyone these days."

At that, Hutch's head snapped up and he finally looked at the man before him, "Oh, Starsk, for the love of God, don't tell me you're trying to fix me up with my ex-wife."

"What fix up?" Starsky asked, all injured innocence. "I'm simply saying that I ran into Christine and she asked about you. That's all."

"Oh, you just happened to *run into* my ex." Hutch's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "And where did this accidental running into take place?"

"The dining room," Starsky admitted with a sheepish grin. "Look, Hutch, she's Chrissy's Godmother. You know that. She came by to drop off some things she'd picked up for the kids on her last trip overseas. We got to talking."

"About me." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah, about you." Starsky folded his arms across his chest. "She still loves you, you know, ya big lug. She misses you. She wanted to know how you were doin' since you never returned any of her calls."

"Look, Starsk, I didn't mean to over react," He reached out and squeezed his friend's shoulder, "but let's just drop it, huh? My marriage is over. It ended a long time before it became official. And there's no reason for Christine and I to put ourselves through that again."

"Hutch, you're not being fair to either of you." Starsky's hand fell on top of Hutch's. "You both gotta stop blaming yourselves and get on with your lives."

"I know that and I'm trying, but the only way we can get on with them is separately. Whenever we're together all it does is bring back a lot of painful memories. Things neither one of us wants to face." Hutch pulled his hand away and rose to his feet. "Listen, it's getting late," he smiled down at where Kenny lay sleeping on the floor. "I'm going to head on home. I'll see you later."

"Hey, Hutch," when he looked down into his friend's worried face, Starsky appeared for all the world to be the same age as his sleeping son, "you're not mad are ya? I'm just worried about you. I want you to be happy."

"I know, buddy." He tousled the dark curls in much the same manner as he had Kenny's that morning. "I know. I'm just not sure I remember what that is."

"Why don't you stick around for a while longer?" Starsky suggested as he stood, lifting his sleeping son with a groan. "I'm getting too old for this."

"Nah, not you Starsk." Hutch laughed, and said, "you'll never grow up. And thanks, but I really should be going. I've got to stop in the office for a little while tomorrow, I've got to clear up some paperwork so I can free up some time for that Cameron guy Monday."

"Oh yeah, that producer." He shifted his sleeping burden onto his shoulder. "You ever find out what that was all about?"

"Something to do with Vanessa, of all things." Hutch responded with a roll of his eyes. "Just what I need, some producer poking into my dead ex's life."

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"Captain Hutchinson," the slight man stretched his hand across the desk, "I'd like to thank you for finally agreeing to meet with me."

Hutch shook the man's hand and then leaned back in his chair, studying him closely. To say he'd been shocked to receive the man's phone call would be an understatement. He'd barely thought of Vanessa in the twenty years since her death and he couldn't imagine why anyone, let alone a well-known Hollywood producer, would want to speak to him about her.

"To tell you the truth Mr. Cameron, I'm not sure why I am," Hutch admitted finally. "I'm not sure how I can help you. My ex-wife died a long time ago and we hadn't spoken for nearly five years before that. At least not until the night before her death."

"As I told you, I'm producing a TV movie based on Vanessa's life," Mr. Cameron responded enthusiastically. "We'd like to make it as realistic as possible. Talk to everyone who knew her. Get as many different opinions as possible."

"Why now?" Hutch began unconsciously fiddling with a pencil. "I wouldn't think anyone would be interested in this after all this time."

"Are you kidding?" Mr. Cameron laughed. "You know this town, the people here eat up this true life drama crap. And just look at all the elements in this one. We've got a beautiful, dangerous woman. We also have sex, violence, diamonds, and an innocent man framed for murder. What's not to love? I just wish I could've done this story years ago."

"So, why didn't you?" Hutch asked curtly, put off by the man's cavalier attitude. However things had ended between them, he'd once loved Vanessa enough to marry her, enough to plan a future and dream of raising a family with her.

"Couldn't get the family's permission. Hell, her old man threatened to sue if I so much as commissioned a script." Mr. Cameron shrugged nonchalantly. "But, the old guy finally dropped a couple months ago and Kendall... Well," he snorted, "I'm sure I don't have to tell you what her attitude toward her mother is. I'll tell you, she's a nice kid, but as soon you get her on the subject of her mother, her whole attitude changes. I mean, in my business you see a lot angry families, but I don't think even I've ever seen the complete lack of emotion I saw in that girl when it comes to her mother's murder. It's like she just doesn't care."

Hutch wasn't aware of the pencil snapping between his fingers as he sat straight up in his chair. "K-Kendall?!" Shock registered on his face. "Kendall who?"

"Hutchinson." Mr. Cameron rolled his eyes. "You know, your daughter. How many Kendalls do you know?" He began shifting nervously in his chair, "Look, if this is a problem you can check with the kid herself. I spoke to her about it at her studio last week."

Kendall? Hutch's mind raced as Cameron's offhanded statement shook him to the core. *Vanessa's daughter? When the hell did Van have a daughter? Why does he think that....* "What? What did you say?" The rest of the man's words finally penetrated the swirling confusion in his brain. "What studio? Where?"

"Venice Beach." Mr. Cameron began eyeing Hutch with renewed interest. "She does know I'm talking to you, doesn't she? It took a lot for me to finally find someone to agree to let me make this movie and my investors have got a lot of money tied up in it. I don't want to blow it by stepping into the middle of some family feud."

"You're not stepping into the middle of anything." Hutch struggled to maintain a light tone. "I just hadn't realized that you'd spoken to Kendall. You know how kids are. Parents are the last to know anything." He laughed in what he hoped was a casual manner. "So, you said you spoke to her last week? At the studio in Venice? I'll tell you what," Hutch rose slowly, surprised that the pounding of his own heart hadn't given him away, "I'll give Kendall a call after work and have a talk with her about this. If she's really agreeable I'll give you a call back. You do have a number where you can be reached, don't you?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." Mr. Cameron reached into his pocket as Hutch escorted him toward the office door and pulled out a business card. "My secretary should know where to get a hold of me at a moment's notice."

"That's what I'm counting on." Hutch's hand shot out, grabbing a hold of the card as if it were a lifeline.

"What?"

"You can count on hearing from me," Hutch responded as he closed the door in the man's face. Dropping back into his chair, he picked up the phone and immediately began dialing. "Hello, is this Mr. Cameron's office? Yes, this is Captain Hutchinson. I was supposed to meet with Mr. Cameron at a studio in Venice Beach, but I seemed to have lost the address. You wouldn't by any chance have it, would you? Yes, that's the one. Thanks."

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Somethin's wrong. Starsky frowned as he watched his former partner, a man he'd been closer to than his own brother for more than thirty years, make his way through Narco. It was nothing that anyone else would pick up on— a certain set to the shoulders, a stiffness to the way he moved, an extra gleam in the sky blue eyes. Signs that Starsky had learned to pick up on decades ago.

The infamous Hutchinson temper was on overload and about to boil over.

"Damn it!" Hutch hissed as he stepped into the office without knocking, closing the door a bit more forcefully than was necessary.

Without a word, Starsky rose from his desk, crossed the room and closed the blinds over the window that looked out over the squad room. "What is it?"

"GOD DAMN IT!" Hutch turned angrily on his heel, pacing the length of the small office. "THAT GOD DAMNED BITCH! HOW COULD SHE NOT TELL ME?"

"Who?" Starsky asked softly, reaching out to place a calming hand on Hutch's shoulder, stopping him in his tracks. "What're ya talking about Hutch? How could who not tell you what?"

"Vanessa," he replied through clenched teeth.

Vanessa? Starsky shook his head in confusion, the only Vanessa that he was aware of in Hutch's life had been dead for two decades. Although, if he had to pick a word to describe her, bitch was certainly at the top of the list. "Hutch, sit down. Sit." Starsky led him to the nearest chair, kneeling down in front of him as he sat. "Now, what's this about? What does Vanessa have to do with anything after all this time? Does this have something to do with that producer you were supposed to be seeing this mornin'?"

"She had a daughter, Starsk," Hutch replied wearily, sinking back into the chair, "She never told me. Why the hell didn't she tell me? Why didn't someone tell me?"

"Hutch, I don't understand." Starsky gazed up into his partner's eyes, reading the pain there, "Even if Vanessa did have a kid, why do you care?"

"Her name is Kendall." Hutch looked down at the piece of paper clutched in his hand, "Kendall Hutchinson."

The impact of Hutch's words hit him like a ton of bricks. If asked, Starsky would have been hard pressed to pin down the myriad of emotions that surged through him in those first thirty seconds. Anger toward a woman long dead. Pain for all his partner had lost. Profound gratitude that he'd been there for every milestone in his children's lives. Joy at the thought of there being another piece of his partner in this world. Hope for what the future held.

Starsky didn't speak, he knew that there were no words capable of conveying what Hutch needed at this moment. Instead, he simply reached up, wrapped his hand around his friend's neck and pulled him forward until their foreheads met.

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Starsky watched calmly as Hutch picked absentmindedly at the label on his beer bottle, lost in thought. Taking another drink from his own beer, he decided it was finally time to broach the subject that had brought them there, "Now what?"

"God, I don't know." Hutch slumped back in the booth, raising his eyes slowly. "I don't know what to think. I mean, God, Starsk, what if she's mine? My daughter." He looked a little dazed at the prospect. "Can I ignore that? And if she is, why hasn't she contacted me? Hell, why didn't Vanessa's parents contact me? But if she isn't mine, why Kendall? Why the hell did Vanessa name her *Kendall*?"

"Hutch," Starsky reached across the table and stilled his friend's hands with one of his own, "I can't answer your questions. I wish I could, but... What do you *want* to do?" he probed gently.

"I want to see her." It was more of a plea than a statement and it nearly tore Starsky's heart out to see the pain and longing in his friend's eyes.

"You want to go now or wait until tomorrow?" Starsky asked softly.

"I called the studio, it's closed for the day." Hutch began picking at the label again. "And I haven't come up with a home address for her yet."

"When's it open again?"

"Tomorrow morning," Hutch replied morosely, continuing his attack on the hapless label.

"Then we'll go first thing in the morning," Starsky stated firmly as he motioned for the waitress and held up his bottle. "Two more!"

"You'd go with me?" Hutch met his friend's eyes gratefully.

"After all this time, do you really have to ask?"

"No." Hutch smiled for the first time that day. "No, I don't. Thanks, babe."

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The squeal of brakes brought a brief smile to Hutch's face. Whatever else may have changed through the years, Starsky's driving certainly hadn't. He chuckled over the memory of the day Starsky and Rosey had brought Rachel home from the hospital. Showing up to lend his moral support (and capture another look at the baby that had already stolen his heart), he'd been surprised to find the car keys pressed into his hand.

When asked why, Rosey had stated firmly that there was no way she was letting her lunatic husband drive her newborn home. Once his fit of laughter had subsided, Hutch had dutifully, and happily, driven the new family home while Starsky grumbled in the seat beside him.

A knock on the door brought him back to the present and he opened it with a wry grin as he glanced over Starsky's shoulder at the candy apple red Eagle Talon sitting in front of the house. *Oh well, at least this one doesn't have a racing stripe.*

"You ready?" Starsky asked, tilting his head to look at Hutch over the top of his sunglasses.

"Yeah, I guess so." Hutch patted his pockets absentmindedly as he looked around the room.

"Lookin' for these?" Starsky smirked, picking up the keys off the table next to the door.

"Yeah, thanks." Hutch dropped them in his pocket, taking another look around the room with a frown. "I guess that's everything."

"Nervous?" Starsky asked softly.

"Terrified," Hutch admitted, holding out a shaking hand. "I don't think I've been this scared since..." his eyes clouded over momentarily, "Well, not in a long time."

"You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do." Hutch stepped out, locking the door resolutely behind him. "And you know that."

"Yeah, yeah, I do." Starsky unlocked the car door and held it open for his friend, "I just wasn't sure you did."

"I can do this, right, Starsk?" Hutch stopped suddenly, looking at his friend with something akin to fear.

"Absolutely, babe." Warm blue eyes sought out his as a hand clasped firmly around his shoulder, "And I'll be there with ya every step of the way."

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Starsky stood against the railing, watching the mass of confusion below him. The studio where Vanessa's daughter worked turned out to be an old Disco that had been renovated into a photo studio. A studio that, at the moment, seemed to be in the middle of a fashion shoot with a host of scantily clad models flitting about, mixing with the makeup artists, designers, lighting personnel, photographers, and other assorted hangers-on. Turning his head to the right, he could see Hutch making his way down the stairs and wondered briefly if he shouldn't have gone with him, despite Hutch's protests that he wanted to do this part alone.

Which one is she? He wondered silently, his practiced gaze sweeping the room, landing momentarily on each of the women present before moving on.

"Come on, Naomi, I know you're bored, but the sooner we get this done the sooner we can all get out of here."

Something in the voice caught his attention. Starsky couldn't say exactly what it was. A familiar inflection, a certain turn of phrase, the way it played in his ears. But he found himself immediately drawn to it, his eyes seeking its source.

Then, suddenly, there she was. Starsky had no doubt that she was the one as she lifted her head and he saw a

pair of clear blue eyes, Hutch's eyes, staring up from behind the camera lens. Everything in the room seemed to come to a halt as he stared down into them, the same eyes that had supported him through so much of his life, both good and bad, this time looking out from a smaller, feminine face.

Starsky finally tore his gaze away from those eyes to let his gaze sweep over her, taking in the whole picture. Her dark blonde hair swept up and back into a ponytail that brushed across the top of her shoulders as she moved; the worn jeans and well-washed t-shirt that she wore with a graceful ease, seemingly unintimidated by the throng of models barely clad in designer lingerie.

As she turned away from the tripod-mounted camera to grab a smaller hand-held model, Starsky allowed himself to study her face again. Comparing each feature to those of the partner he knew and loved. More than just Hutch's eyes, he decided, his nose, or his nose before it had been broken countless times, his mouth. Definitely Vanessa's cheekbone's though, high, slanted just enough to add an air of arrogance to her face when she raised an eyebrow in response to something one of the models called out to her.

"HEY, KENDALL!"

"Yes?" She responded without bothering to look up from the camera that now blocked Starsky's view of her face.

"There's a cop here to see you."

Starsky noted, with some amusement, the effect that statement had on several of the people gathered below. A stiffening of the posture, a few nervous glances exchanged, a couple of people slipping out of the backdoor. All in all, a pretty typical response to a police presence. But through it all, she remained cool, unperturbed by the announcement.

"What does he want?" Kendall called back, curiosity flitting briefly across her face before she focused once again on the task at hand, "Lily, tilt your head to the left just a little. That's it. Perfect."

"He says it's a personal matter," the voice replied lazily. "Name's Hutchinson. Captain Ken Hutchinson."

From where he stood, it looked to Starsky as though someone had just punched her in the gut. All the blood seemed to drain from Kendall's face, her hand going slack, the expensive camera she held crashing to the ground, as she swayed slightly on her feet.

She knows! he realized instantly. *She knows who he is. Why hasn't she told him about herself, then?*

As he continued to watch, she took a stumbling step toward the table behind her, clutching the edge with knuckle whitening force as she drew several deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. *Why's she so scared?* Starsky could feel the waves of panic that seemed to radiate from her. And then, just as quickly as it had come, it was gone.

A quick lifting of her chin, a squaring of the shoulders, and suddenly she was every inch Vanessa's daughter. Her demeanor cooling as she turned back to the room. "All right, let's wrap for lunch. Jason, take care of the lights. Tom, get those fans off. I want everyone back here by 1:00, on the dot, so we can finish this up."

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Hutch made his way down the staircase into the heart of the studio, the knot in his stomach growing with each step, wishing he hadn't convinced Starsky to wait up top. He allowed himself a small moment of embarrassed amusement at the realization. Here he was, a grown man, a cop with over a decade of experience of the streets, he'd looked cold blooded killers in the eye without blinking, and now he was

terrified of meeting one young woman, wishing nothing more than to have his partner by his side.

"Can I help you?"

The question startled him and he looked over at the young man standing in front of him, *It's now or never*. He swallowed hard, hoping his nervousness didn't show through. "I'm here to see Kendall...."

"Can I tell her who's calling?" the young man asked with an air of boredom.

Hutch reached into his pocket, feeling a need to flash his badge at the man. "Captain Ken Hutchinson, Bay City PD."

"HEY KENDALL!"

Hutch winced as the man practically shouted in his ear.

"Yes?"

Hutch listened intently to the answering voice, placing it as having come from somewhere on the far side of the paper screens that divided the room.

"There's a cop here to see you." The young man seemed to give that statement no more significance than he had any of the others, but Hutch noted a nervous shuffle in the employees working behind him.

"What does he want?" There was the voice again, calm with just a hint of curiosity in it this time. Hutch could just make out some directions aimed at someone named Lily.

"He says it's a personal matter." The man started toward the partition. "Name's Hutchinson. Captain Ken Hutchinson."

Hutch thought he heard something crash to the floor, but the shape of the room and dividers kept him from being sure. A few seconds later he heard a muffled orders being called out as the place suddenly began to clear.

"Hello, Captain Hutchinson."

Hutch's head snapped up, his heart leaping into his throat as he saw her. She didn't have his height, that was for sure, standing only about 5'6" and her hair was darker than his had been at her age, but the eyes staring back at him... *She has my Mother's eyes*, he thought with a start.

"Can I help you?" she asked solicitously.

"Yeah, hi, sorry," he responded quickly, offering his hand to her. "I was hoping that you might have a minute to talk to me about your mother. I'm... th-that is I th-think that I'm...."

Her hand felt cool as it wrapped briefly around his own and she pulled it back much too quickly for his liking. "I know who you are, Captain. And what you were to my mother."

"Then I guess you know why I'm here." Hutch felt a stab of disappointment as she turned away, busying herself with a stack of messages that lay on the desk.

"Actually, I have to say that I'm pretty much at a loss as to why you're here," Kendall responded lightly, perching on the edge of the desk and reaching for the phone. "My mother's been dead for a very long time and I'm sure there's nothing new I can tell you about her. In fact," she glanced briefly over her shoulder, "I'd

be willing to venture that you know a lot more about her than I do."

"Yeah, I guess I would." He cleared his throat before continuing. "I guess I'm really here more about you. I was wondering if... That is..." Hutch drew a deep breath. "What did your mother tell you about your father? Am I...?"

Hutch thought he detected a slight tremor in her shoulders before she turned to face him, but when she did there was nothing timid or uncertain about her. And for a brief second he could believe he'd seen Vanessa reborn in her cold eyes and dismissive demeanor.

"Captain, I'm sorry," Kendall replied with a sigh. "I'm not sure how you became aware of my existence, I've always gone to great lengths to ensure that you didn't for just such a reason. Are you my father? Frankly, I don't know. We both know what kind of woman my mother was. You can't possibly believe that she was faithful to you in the final months of your marriage." Her eyes drifted over to the face of the clock, as though she wished to be anywhere but here. "I suppose that it's possible you're my father. It's possible half a dozen other men are as well. I don't know. I don't wish to know. I'm happy with the life I have now and I'm not looking for any entanglements. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." With that she rose and exited the room through a backdoor, without offering him even the solace of a backward glance.

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"What'd she say?"

Hutch raised his head slowly, looking around in a daze, not sure how he'd gotten from the studio to Starsky's car. "What?" he asked uncertainly.

"What'd she say?" Those eyes that knew him so well studied him closely. Hutch had been practically catatonic by the time Starsky had made his way down to him.

"I don't... She doesn't know and doesn't care," he replied dejectedly, slumping back in the car seat.

"Bull!" Starsky revved the Talon's engine and pulled into the heavy midday traffic.

"What do you mean, *bull*? You weren't there, Starsk!" Hutch's temper flared. "You didn't see her face, hear her voice. She didn't give a damn about me."

"You're wrong," Starsky switched gears as he zipped onto the freeway, "I was there. And I saw some things that you didn't. Like her face when she heard your name." He glanced over to see if he'd gotten Hutch's attention. Sure enough the other was staring at him intently. "Believe me, she wasn't indifferent, she looked like she'd been kicked in the gut. The kid was scared stiff. Hutch, all it took was hearin' your name and she was so shook up she dropped the camera she was holdin'. The very expensive camera."

"I thought I heard a crash." An almost indiscernible whisper came from the other seat.

"Yeah, that was it. Anyway for a sec I thought she was gonna pass out," Starsky continued, whipping around a truck that was going too slow to suit him. "Then she grabbed onto a table, holdin' it for all she was worth and just tryin' to breathe. Then, after she calmed herself down, then she went to see you." When he finished, Starsky could all but hear the wheels turning in his partner's head.

"Are you sure about this?" Hutch finally asked.

"It might not've been obvious to anyone else, at least not anyone that wasn't watching her close," their eyes met, "but I've had years of practice reading Hutchinson body language and I can tell you two things about that girl: one, she was terrified from the moment she heard your name. And two," his voice dropped and he

smiled warmly at the man across from him, "she's definitely your daughter."

"She's got my mother's eyes," was Hutch's quiet reply.

"Only if you've got your mother's eyes, babe, because the eyes I saw are the same ones I'm lookin' at now."

~*~*~*~

"God, I don't understand, Starsk." Hutch shook his head as he climbed out of the sports car and stretched his tall frame. "Why the hell would she be afraid of me?"

"I don't think that was it." Starsky had played the events he'd observed at the studio over and over in his mind, hoping he'd drawn the correct conclusion. "I don't think she was afraid of you, I think she was afraid *for* you."

"What? Why would you..." The blond head shook uncertainly. "What would give you an idea like that?"

"Just call it a hunch." Starsky shrugged as he reached back into the car.

Hutch eyed his friend closely, having learned long ago not to question Starsky's instincts. "So, where do we go from here?"

"I'm glad you mentioned that." Starsky stood, pulling out a large plastic bag to reveal a broken camera. "I thought we might get this dusted and then run the prints up to RandI. See what Minnie's magic fingers can do with them."

"Starsky, where did you...."

"What'd you think I was doin' while everyone was clearin' out?" A mischievous grin lit his face. "Now let's get this down to the lab and get the prints lifted. Then I'm gonna check out that studio and see what else I can dig up on her. Maybe we can figure out what the kid's so scared of."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Hutch asked as he followed his partner up the stairs.

"Well," Starsky stopped and offered him an apologetic smile, "I thought maybe you could call your ex-mother-in-law and see what you could get from her. I mean, if Vanessa had a baby, they had to know about it, right?"

~*~*~*~

Hutch drummed his fingers nervously on the desktop, staring at the phone as if it were a poisonous snake. Steeling himself, he took a deep breath and picked up the receiver, dialing quickly before he lost his nerve. Barely listening to the phone ring in his ear, he instead searched his memory for some idea of how to approach a woman he hadn't spoken to in twenty-five years. A woman who'd had no use for him even when he'd been married to her daughter.

"McNeill residence." A male voice greeted him.

"Yes," Hutch swallowed past the lump in his throat, "I'd like to speak to Mrs. McNeill, please."

"May I tell her who is calling?"

"Yeah, it's Ken... Kenneth Hutchinson."

"One moment please, sir."

Hutch cleared his throat uneasily as he waited, stilling his fingers by picking up a pencil.

"Kenneth?" The cultured, impersonal voice coming from the line caused his shoulders to tense with memory.

"Hello, Mrs. McNeill," he began politely. "I realize that it's been some time since we've spoken, but I was hoping that you could help me out."

"Yes, Kenneth," the note of disdain traveled easily through the thousands of miles separating them, "it has been quite some time. Since before my daughter's death. I don't see how I could possibly help you after all these years."

"Actually, I'm calling about Kendall, I was hoping that...."

"I have nothing to say to you or anyone else regarding that young lady." The ice in her voice sent a chill down his spine.

"Please, Mrs. McNeill, I know that Vanessa and I didn't part under the best of circumstances," Hutch pleaded to get through to her, "but I was really hoping you could give me some information on your granddaughter...."

"I have no granddaughter." The line went dead.

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Kendall's hand shook as she closed the door quietly behind her. For a moment, she simply stood in the doorway, looking around in numb shock, before taking a few hesitant steps into the bedroom.

"This can't be happening," she murmured, cupping her face in her hands as she started rocking back and forth, "Oh, God, this can't be happening." Stumbling against the wall, she slid slowly down, sobs shuddering through her slender frame.

~*~*~*~

"Starsk?"

"Yeah, come on in." Starsky waved Hutch into his office as he held the phone trapped between his ear and shoulder. Mumbling a cursory response into the phone and dropping it into the cradle, he looked up at the anxious blond with a large grin.

"Did you find something?" Hutch didn't bother to try and hide his nervousness.

"Not much." The midnight blue eyes twinkled with excitement as he slapped a piece of paper on the desk, facing Hutch. "Just a couple things. Kendall Cathleen Hutchinson, born March 19th, 1975 in Kensington hospital, London, England. Weighing in at seven pounds even. Nineteen and a half inches long. Father listed on birth certificate as Kenneth Richard Hutchinson. Enrolled in Bristol Girl's Academy at age four, but was withdrawn immediately after the death of her mother. Then there's nothing until she started high school." He shifted through the papers in front of him, "She went to JFK, here in Bay City, and graduated a year early in '91. So far nothin' on the prints though."

"God, Starsk, how the hell did you get all this?" Hutch shook his head in amazement. "It's only been a couple hours."

"Let's just say, I've got my ways." He wiggled his eyebrows playfully.

"Your ways, huh?" Hutch eyed the sheet of notes that Starsky had read from. "So, what do you owe Minnie for this?"

"About a week's worth of dinners. And possibly my body if she can come up with somethin' off the prints," Starsky admitted with a laugh. "There's more." He passed a stack of papers across the desk. "Minnie managed to get copies of her school transcripts. She faxed these up to me just a few minutes ago. From the looks of these, I'd say the kid's definitely got your brains."

Hutch slid back in the chair, his eyes scanning the transcripts. "What was that you said about Bristol Academy? What's that?"

Starsky shifted uncomfortably in his chair, knowing his friend wasn't going to like the answer. "It's some high class boarding school."

"Boarding school?" The blond head snapped up, angry blue eyes flashing fire. "Vanessa sent a four-year-old to boarding school?"

"Yeah," the reply was filled with sympathy, "I'm sorry about that. No kid should be just shipped away from home like that."

Hutch softened at the tone in his friend's voice, remembering that once upon a time a young David Starsky had been shipped across country to live with an aunt and uncle he barely knew for his *own good*. A move that Hutch was forever grateful for, because it brought this man into his life. But he knew that it couldn't have been easy on his friend, a man who loved and cherished his own children so deeply that the thought wouldn't even have occurred to him.

"Hey, I'm sorry if this...." Hutch reached across the desk and lay his hand over his friend's.

"What? Aw, no. That was a long time ago," Starsky smiled ruefully, "and I didn't exactly leave my mom with a lot choices considerin' the crowd I was runnin' with. Besides I was practically grown. I know you always said Vanessa could be a cold bitch, but, man, shipping off a little baby like that? 'Specially when she had a daddy who would have been thrilled to have her."

"I would've been you know." Hutch sighed softly.

"I know, babe, I know." Starsky reached over and squeezed the hand that lay on his desk, waiting a moment before continuing. "Did you get anythin' from Vanessa's mother?"

"Besides frostbite?" Hutch shook his head, a hint of his previous anger at Vanessa returning to his eyes, "Helen's lost none of her warmth over the years. You know, she couldn't even be bothered to acknowledge that she had a granddaughter? Hell, she couldn't even bring herself to say Kendall's name. She just referred to her as *that young lady*."

"I'm sorry, Hutch." Starsky leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms, "Any idea where you want to go from here?"

"Not really," Hutch admitted with a defeated sigh. "I was thinking about calling my mother, seeing if she or any of her friends heard anything about Van showing up with a kid or one turning up at her parent's place, even if it was only briefly, after Van died. Kendall had to spend the years between Vanessa's death and turning up at Kennedy somewhere." He fingered the file in front of him, "Jesus, Starsk, she's been here all this time, right under my nose. Why the hell didn't she try to contact me?"

"I don't know, but I've got another idea where to look." Starsky jumped from his chair and started for the door.

"Where?"

"Remember when Vanessa was killed?" Starsky stopped with his hand on the doorknob, watching Hutch intently.

"Considering I found the body in the middle of my living room? Yeah. That's not something I'm likely to forget."

"And you remember the way Dryden and Simonetti were all over you?" He started pacing between the door and Hutch's chair, hands gesturing wildly. "They couldn't wait to nail you. And they were crawling all over any problems you and Vanessa had in your marriage, the argument you had at The Pits night before...."

"Yeah, I remember," Hutch's eyes traced Starsky's restless path, "but I don't get where you're going with this."

Starsky froze in his steps, not sure he wanted to go there, not sure he wanted to make an accusation against a brother cop, even one in IA, that could never be retracted. "So, why didn't they know?"

"What? Starsk, what're you..." Understanding slowly dawned on Hutch's face. "Why didn't they know about Kendall?"

"Exactly." Starsky crossed his arms with a satisfied smirk. "They were supposed to be checkin' out every aspect of Vanessa's life, especially where you were concerned. Why didn't they come up with this? Hell, it'd've been a lot better motive for you to kill Vanessa than that damn diamond was."

"You've got that right," Hutch muttered under his breath. "So, what are you going to do now?"

"Now, I'm gonna pull every file on the investigation into Vanessa's murder and the IA case against you. Somewhere along the line, somebody dropped the ball. The only question is, was it an accident or not?"

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"Kase?" A hand gently brushed the hair away from Kendall's tear-stained face. "KC? Are you awake yet?"

"Wh-what happened?" Kendall sat up slowly, looking around her bedroom until her eyes landed on the concerned figure crouched next to the bed. "Oh, God, he found me, didn't he?"

"Yeah. Here, drink this." A warm cup was pressed into her hands.

"How? Why?" Kendall set the cup, untouched, on the nightstand and fell back against the pillows, turning away. "God, after all this time I was so sure it was safe. I mean, I always knew that it was a possibility that he'd find out with me living so close. But... How?"

A weight settled next to her on the bed as a comforting hand started rubbing slow, soothing circles across her back. "Cameron."

"Cameron?" Kendall groaned as she pulled a blanket over her head. "I knew that whole movie was a bad idea. I just knew it."

"Come on, Kase, why do you think he insisted you accept Cameron's offer in the first place?" Her companion prodded. "He wanted this to happen. This is just another escalation. Just another way to score

points in this twisted little game he's playing. First it was enough for him to know that he had you, that he took something that belonged to Hutchinson, without his ever knowing it, thinking he could raise you to be just as crooked as he is. When that wasn't enough, he moved here so he could keep you practically under Hutchinson's nose. But now, even that's not enough."

"Okay, okay, I get your point." One angry blue eye peeked out from beneath the covers. "You can stop anytime now."

"Look, Kase, I'm sorry if I seem like I'm being a little rough here, but I need you to stop feeling sorry for yourself and get back in the game, here. We've got a lot of damage control to do and you know it."

"I know, I know. It's just... Oh, God, what am I going to do? How do I make this right?" Kendall sighed, turning away once more. "Can you tell me that?"

"I don't know," a hand brushed gently through her hair, "but together we'll find some way to do it."

~*~*~*~

Starsky maneuvered the Talon smoothly into a parking space and climbed out. Listening for the telltale beeping of the vehicle alarm engaging, he glanced around the packed parking lot and felt a swell of pride. At times it was hard to imagine that the same street hustler he'd known all those years ago owned all this. What had started as a favor to a family member had turned into a lucrative vocation for Huggy, who now owned one of the most popular eateries in the Bay City/Metropolitan Los Angeles area.

Stepping into the crowded restaurant, he scanned the noisy throng for a familiar face. As he did, a skinny black youth set down his guitar and stepped away from the band. Weaving his way expertly through the patrons, his face split in a large grin, "Hey, Uncle Dave! I hope you're not looking for a table tonight."

"No, Ike," a matching smile spread across Starsky's face, "I learned a long time ago not to drop by at dinnertime and expect a table. I need to talk to your pop. He around anywhere?"

"Yeah, he's in the back arguing with the new chef." Ike threw back his head in laughter. "I don't think this one's going to last long. The minute he started talking about imported truffles I could see the dollar signs going off in Dad's head."

Starsky snorted softly, "Yeah, I can imagine how well that toney cuisine went over with Hugs."

"Not to mention the equally toney costs." Ike motioned toward one of the waiters. "Juan, can you pop in the back and tell Dad that there's someone here to see him?" Catching the affirmative nod, he returned his attention to Starsky. "Dad said Thanksgiving went really well."

"Yeah, it did," Starsky commented with an amused smirk. "It's too bad your mom insisted on dragging you to your grandparents' house this year."

"Oh, man, you have no idea." Ike rolled his eyes. "Four hours of listening to Gramp's sermonizing. You know what that does to your appetite?"

Starsky's sudden bray of laughter startled several of the patrons near them as he struggled to regain his composure. "Come on, Ike, you know how much it means to your mother."

"Yeah, and it's nice to see Grandma," Ike admitted with a shrug. "I just wish Gramps'd get over his thing with Dad."

"I don't know, Huggy seems to think that being banned from your grandparents' place is the best thing that

ever happened to his marriage."

"Speaking of Thanksgiving," Ike looked down, suddenly shy, "how's Chrissy? Did she miss me? I mean," He cleared his throat uncomfortably, "did she ask about me?"

"Ike, stay away from my daughter." Starsky scowled menacingly, nearly losing the charade when the boy's face flushed deeply.

"Ah, Uncle Dave, it's not like that, it's just..." Ike looked with relief as he watched his father approach. "I, ah, I'll talk to you later." With that, he quickly retreated to the stage.

"Starsk, what'd you say to the boy to get him to move so fast?" Huggy crossed his arms over his chest, watching Starsky quizzically. "I've been trying to get him motivated all day."

"I tol' him to stay away from my daughter," Starsky answered, laughing.

"Ah, young love." Huggy nodded knowingly. "Those two certainly have started getting all googily-eyed around one another haven't they?"

"Gee, I hadn't noticed," Starsky replied with a snort. "God, Hugs, we're too young to have kids who look at each other like that."

"Ain't that the truth?" Huggy shook his head and sighed, leading Starsky over to a small, secluded table. "So, what can I do for you, my friend? I know you didn't come all the way across town to discuss our starry-eyed offspring."

"No, Hugs, I didn't." Starsky settled back in the chair, looking suddenly weary. "I need your help with somethin'. And more importantly, Hutch needs it. "

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Anxiously, Hutch paced his living room, pausing every now and again to stare at the telephone û willing it to ring. When it refused to obey, once again, he sighed with frustration and resumed his pacing.

Finally, he made his way to the sliding glass door, drew back the curtains and pushed it open. Standing there in the waning light of the moon, he let the soothing sounds of the ocean wash over him, again feeling the peace that this place brought him. Within a few steps, Hutch could begin to make out the white edges of the waves as they broke on the shore. A cool breeze blew in off the water, raising goosebumps on the exposed flesh of his arms, but Hutch ignored it, needing the comfort and serenity this place offered him. He sank down into the sand, toeing off his shoes, feeling the residual heat in each tiny grain as they worked their way between his toes.

~*~*~*~

"I know it's a lot to ask, Huggy, but...."

"Think no more of it, Starsk." Huggy's eyes skimmed quickly over the list in front of him. "I haven't lost all my contacts on the street. If there's anything to find out about those suckers, I will. As for that other matter," Huggy jerked his head in the direction of the stage, "I'll place it in the hands of my eldest son. You'd be surprised what the boy can turn up once he starts workin' his magic on a keyboard. If that don't work, I'll see what rocks I can turn over."

"Thanks, Hug, I really appreciate this." Starsky smiled warmly at his friend. "And remember, not a word of this to Hutch. I don't want to get his hopes up and have us turn up nothin'."

"Starsky, my man, after all these years, you should know, the Huggy Bear's lips are sealed tighter than Fort Knox." He leaned back in his chair, a smug grin spreading across his features.

"All right, what are the two of you up to?" A tall, thin brunette stepped up to the table, hands planted firmly on her hips as she eyed both men suspiciously.

"Us? Up to, darlin'?" Starsky looked up at her, all wide-eyed innocence. "Nothing but discussing your dazzling beauty, my love." He sprang to his feet, pulling her into his arms and kissing her soundly. "So, when are ya going to give this all up and run away with me?"

"For you, baby blue eyes, I just might." She chuckled fondly, running a hand through Starsky's short curls.

"AHEM!!" Huggy cleared his throat loudly, fixing them both with a pointed glare until he had their attention. "Starsky, get your hands off *my* woman."

"Only until she realizes the error of her ways and makes off with me to a tropical island." Starsky wrapped his right arm around her shoulder as he began to gesture with his left, "Picture it, if you will: warm Caribbean breezes blowing in off the ocean. The waves lapping at your naked toes. Me lapping at your naked...."

"All right! That's enough." Huggy unceremoniously removed Starsky's arm and pointed him toward the door. "Now get out of here before I forget my gentlemanly manners."

"You know where to find me when ya change your mind, Schweetheart." Starsky nodded briefly at Huggy. "Thanks, Hugs."

"Yeah, yeah, now go on, git! Before I change my mind."

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Hutch wasn't sure how long he'd sat like that, allowing the tattered fragments of his thoughts to settle into some semblance of order, before the harsh jangling of the telephone brought him back to himself. Springing to his feet, Hutch rushed inside, snatching the hapless phone from its cradle, "Hutchinson!"

"Kenneth?" His mother's hesitant voice came back at him, "Darling, is everything all right? I got your message when your father and I got home from the Symphony. Has something happened? You're not in the hospital again, are you?"

"No, Mother, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you." He sank down into the couch; a tired hand pinching the bridge of his nose as the tension he'd finally released came flooding back. "I'm fine."

"And David?" The worried voice continued.

"He's fine too, Mother." A small smile formed at the corners of Hutch's mouth. "Everyone here's fine."

"But your message sounded so urgent."

"It is, Mother, it's about..." He cleared his throat, suddenly nervous. "It's about Vanessa, Mother. I was wondering if you could..."

"Vanessa?" His mother's voice grew colder. "What could she possibly matter after all this time, Kenneth?"

"More than you could imagine," He mumbled under his breath.

"I'm sorry, dear, what was that? I didn't quite catch it."

"I said, it does matter, Mother." Hutch drew a deep breath. "I need you to see if you can find out for me if Van came out to stay with her parents after our divorce. And if she did, did anyone ever see her pregnant or with a small child? Or after her death, did her parents have a little girl turn up at their house? Even if it was just for a little while."

"Kenneth, what is this all about?" His mother's voice took on an edge of concern once again.

"I can't tell you, Mother, not yet." Hutch closed his eyes, struggling to maintain his composure. "Not until I get everything straight. But this is important, maybe the most important thing I've ever asked of you. And I promise, as soon as I've got it all worked out, I'll explain the whole thing to you." After exchanging a few more platitudes with his mother, Hutch hung up the phone, his hand lingering over it as his eyes searched the darkened room, finally landing on a small framed photograph of a little boy. The boy's blue eyes sparkled as he grinned at the camera, proudly displaying the fish he held.

Hutch's hand reached out of its own volition, picking up the frame and bringing it to rest against his heart as tears began pouring down his face.

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Sitting alone in her room once more, Kendall reached between the mattresses of her bed and pulled out a time worn photo album. Opening the cover, she gazed down at a photo of Hutch and Vanessa on their wedding day, eyes bright with joy, faces lit from within. Turning the pages, though, quickly painted the picture of a disintegrating marriage as the smiles grew less frequent and the distance between the couple, both emotionally and physically, grew. A few more pages and the pictures were replaced with carefully clipped newspaper articles, most yellowed with age.

Wiping a tear from her eye, Kendall lingered over the remaining pages before carefully returning the album to its hiding place.

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"Hold on. Just a minute." Hutch ran the towel through his hair one last time, frowning slightly at the rich silver that was slowly replacing the golden strands of his youth. Satisfied that it was as dry as it was likely to get anytime soon, he wrapped the towel around his waist and hurried to the front door. "What's the hurry, Starsk? I thought you were going to stay home with the kids tonight... Oh. Hi. Chris, what're you doing here?"

"Well," the tall blonde shook her head in amusement, "I figured if the mountain wouldn't come to Mohammed, or even return Mohammed's voice mail, I was just going to have to come to the mountain. Can I come in?"

"What? Yeah, sure." He stepped back, allowing her into the room. "Come on in." Hutch motioned toward the couch. "I'm really sorry I haven't gotten back to you. It's just been kind of hectic lately and... Oh, sorry." He scooped an armload of clothes off the couch to clear a spot for her. "Hey, I heard about your promotion. Congratulations."

"Thanks." Christine sat down, her eyes playing over his form as a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "The station's new owner seems to have a lot of faith in me. I hope I'm up to it."

"Come on, Chris, no false modesty allowed." Hutch dumped the clothes in a nearby chair, perching on the edge, "You're damn good at your job and you know it."

"Maybe, maybe not." She shrugged, still fighting a smile. "But it's nice to hear someone say it every once and while."

"Well, you are. Take it from a member of your adoring public." Hutch felt her smile pulling at him, urging him to return one of his own. "All right, what's so funny?"

"Nothing." Christine replied, clearing her throat as she ran her eyes deliberately over him. "I'm simply enjoying the view."

"Enjoying the what?" He glanced down, turning a deep shade of crimson as his blush extended to the tips of his ears. "I... uh, excuse me, I'll just" Hutch jumped to his feet, stumbling into the chair. "Uh, I ... I'll be right back," he managed to mumble before rushing from the room.

~*~*~*~

"Dad?"

Starsky smiled at his oldest daughter as he carefully closed Kenny's bedroom door behind him. "Yeah?"

Rachel studied her father's face for a moment, noting the lines of fatigue around his eyes and the air of sadness that seemed to surround him. "Are you all right?"

"What? Yeah, of course I am. Why do you ask?" Starsky tilted his head to the side, puzzled, as she shrugged.

"You just look tired." Rachel wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. "You'd tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Probably not," he admitted, returning her hug, "but everythin's fine. Your Uncle Hutch was just thinkin' 'bout Davy the other night and it got me to thinkin', that's all."

"Thinking about what?" Rachel asked softly.

"Just how lucky I am an' how little I deserve it." He brushed a kiss across the top of her head. "I got the best kids on the planet and you're all here and healthy and I get to be your dad every day for the rest of my life."

Looking up into her father's eyes, Rachel said nothing and just hugged him tighter.

~*~*~*~

"How's this? Better?" Hutch stopped in the doorway, arms wide as Christine looked up, a glimmer of tears in her eyes. Alarmed, he stepped quickly to her side. "Chris, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She smiled tearfully, holding up the small picture frame that Hutch had clung earlier that evening. "I was just looking at this. It was always one of my favorite pictures."

"Yeah, mine too," Hutch admitted, sinking down next to her. "He was so proud of that fish."

Christine lovingly traced her son's smile. "Do you remember the way he drug that smelly thing around showing it to everybody he knew?"

"Yeah," a fond smile graced Hutch's lips, "I think Starsk was just as proud. Remember how he wanted to get that scrawny thing stuffed and mounted?"

She nodded, a tear rolling down her cheek. "I wish we'd let him now."

"Me, too." He draped an arm across her shoulders, squeezing gently. "But I always thought there'd be other fish, other chances."

"Oh, God, Hutch, I still miss him so much." She rested her head on his shoulder. "Some mornings I still wake up and expect to see his sunny little face."

"I'm sorry, Chris." Hutch started rubbing her arm unconsciously. "I'm just so damn sorry. I should've been there. I should've been home that night."

"And what?" She pulled away from him, looking up sharply. "Ken, what do you think you could've done differently?"

"I don't know, something, I..." He stood and began pacing, his hands tracing random patterns through the air. "Maybe if I'd been home we could've gotten him to the hospital sooner and..."

"And what? What, Hutch? You heard the doctors; he had meningitis. There was nothing they could've done." She grabbed his arm, stilling him. "Do you blame me? Do you think if maybe I'd taken him to the hospital sooner that night he would've been all right?"

"No. What? No!" Hutch pulled her into his arms. "God, Chris, no. I don't blame you. Never you."

"Then why do you keep insisting on blaming yourself?" She clung to him. "Ken, we lost our little boy, and it was the worst thing that could've happened to us. But it wasn't our fault, yours or mine, and we've got to let the guilt go. We need to go on with our lives and learn to be happy again."

"And how do we do that?" Hutch rested his head on top of hers, planting a small kiss there. "How do we get on with our lives without him? Because I've tried, Chris, I've really tried, and it just doesn't get any easier."

"I don't know, Ken, but I'd really like to try to figure it out, together." She raised her eyes to meet his. "If you'd just give me the chance. Give us the chance again."

"Chris," he caressed her cheek lightly, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear, "there's no one else in the world I'd rather start over with, but I just don't know if I have the strength to put myself out there again."

She turned away sadly, bending to pick up her purse. "You know where to find me if you change your mind." Pausing in the doorway, she cast one last, long look at him. "Please think about it, Ken. Please. I miss you. I miss us."

"Me, too." Hutch admitted to the closed door.

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Starsky yawned sleepily and raised his arms above his head in a long, slow stretch. Rubbing the remnants of last night's sleep from his eyes as his gaze fell on the photograph sitting on the nightstand. A couple, dressed in wedding finery, stared back at him; their faces aglow with happiness.

"Mornin', Rosey." He kissed his fingertips and pressed them against the glass. "Wish you were here, I sure could use someone to talk to about Hutch's problem. Heck, just wish you were here period." Picking up the photograph, he settled it on top of his chest with a sigh. "I don't know what I'm gonna do about Hutch, baby. I can tell how excited he's getting by this already and I don't think I could stand it if he got hurt. He's been through so much, losing Davy and all. And he's never gotten over it." He waved a dismissive hand through the air. "Yeah, yeah, I know, I lost you and I'm doing okay, even if I do miss ya somethin' awful at times."

But I've still got the kids, so there's a part of you here with me every day. Rachel's so much like you at times it's scary. Can you believe our little girl's startin' at UCLA this fall? She got an art scholarship and everythin'. She gets all that artsy stuff from you, ya know?" He laughed softly, touching her smiling face, "Of course, ya know, angel."

A loud pounding on the bedroom door drew his attention from the photo. "DAD," Kenny called out petulantly, "MAGGIE WON'T LET ME IN THE BATHROOM!"

"And so starts another serene mornin' in the Starsky household." With a sigh, he set the photo back down and sat up. "I'll talk to ya tomorrow, darlin'."

"DAD!"

"ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! I'm comin'." Starsky opened the door to find a determined little face, surrounded with dark curls, staring up at him. "Come on, let's go talk to your sister."

Stepping up to the bathroom door, he tapped lightly.

"GO AWAY YOU LITTLE CREEP!" a voice hollered from inside.

"Excuse me?" Starsky quashed the note of amusement in his voice. "What was that?"

"Oh, Daddy," the door flew open, guilty blue eyes peering out, "sorry, I thought it was...."

"I know who ya thought it was." Starsky raised an eyebrow. "What I want to know is why you thought it was necessary."

"Well, because... Um..." She cast her eyes downward, staring intently at her tennis shoes. "He started it!" Maggie pointed an accusing finger at her younger brother.

"Oh, really? How?"

"He, ah, he used all the hot water yesterday," she pronounced triumphantly.

"He used all the hot water?" Starsky nodded seriously, looking from sister to brother and back again. "Is that so?"

"Yeah," Maggie continued enthusiastically. "I had to take a cold shower. And I didn't have any time to fix my hair and I was almost late for school and...."

"He did all that, did he?" Starsky turned, flashing a quick grin at his son before scowling deeply. "Did you do that?" When Kenny nodded, Starsky shook his head, "And here I thought it was because your sister overslept when she forgot to set her alarm."

"Oh, yeah, I kind of did do that, huh?" Maggie twisted her toe against the linoleum. "Guess I forgot."

"Guess you did." Starsky looked at her pointedly. "Now apologize to your brother and let him in the bathroom."

"Yes, Daddy." Maggie sighed heavily, fixing her brother with a glare. "Sorry, you little tattletale."

"Margaret."

"Sorry, Dad." She grinned sheepishly and hurried down the hall. "But he is!" She tossed back over her

shoulder.

"Oh good, the bathroom's free," Rachel slipped past them both, closing the door behind her.

"But... but... Dad!" Kenny whined. "It's my turn."

"Come on, Son." He wrapped his arm around the boy's shoulder. "You can use mine. We men gotta stick together 'round here."

~*~*~*~

Hutch dropped down to the sand, leaning back on his elbows and letting the cool breeze drift across his face as he caught his breath. His talk with Christine the night before had stirred up a lot of old emotions, guilts and regrets he'd hoped long buried. After a sleepless night spent tossing and turning, reliving painful events left untouched by the passage of time and distance, he tried to push them away with a punishing run on the beach, but they'd only followed him along, matching whatever pace he set. Now, in the cold light of a new day, he was faced with the daunting task of meeting them head on, perhaps finally dealing with them and moving on, or burying them so deep they'd never see the light of day again.

"Damn," Hutch cursed softly under his breath as he watched the soothing rhythm of the waves, "what the hell am I going to do? This is nuts. All Chris and I ever do is end up hurting each other in the end." With a sigh, he rose to his feet and jogged the last few yards back to his house and slipped in the backdoor.

Reaching for the phone, Hutch was startled when it rang in his hand and answered it with a rueful grin. "Hutchinson."

"Kenneth."

"Father?" Hutch's eyebrows shot up in surprise and he found himself automatically standing straighter, as if his father could see and disapprove of his stance. "Is something wrong? Is Mother...."

"Your mother is fine, Kenneth," Richard Hutchinson replied. "She told me about your conversation last night and that you stated its importance."

"Yes, it's very important. Did Mother find something out already?" Hutch held his breath, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

"Actually, I hope you don't mind, but I made a few inquires of my own." He cleared his throat. "I had Maria speak to the McNeill's housekeeper, you remember Cathleen, don't you, Kenneth? I believe she's been with the family since Vanessa was a child."

"Yes, I remember." A picture of being hugged by a bright-eyed, laughing woman flashed through Hutch's mind as he remembered a distant visit to his in-laws' house.

"According to Maria, Cathleen remembered the child well." Hutch grasped the phone tightly, listening intently to each word. "She said the girl came to live with the McNeills shortly after Vanessa's death but only stayed a few weeks before she was sent away to school." His father paused, waiting for his reply.

"Kenneth, are you still there?"

"Yes. Please, go on," Hutch prompted, taking a deep breath to steady his voice. "What else did Cathleen say? Does she know what happened to the girl?"

"Only that she came back to live with them a few years later, when Joseph's company was in financial straits, but left soon, around the time the company turned itself around." Richard paused, his voice softening

as he spoke again. "Kenneth, I hope that this is the information you needed. I know we haven't been close the last few years, especially since David's death, but... we miss you, son."

"Thank you, Father. This, it helps, a lot." Hutch felt a sudden constriction in his throat, surprised by his father's show of emotion. "I wish I could explain to you how much." He started to hang up, but stopped. "I miss you too, Dad. When this is all over, maybe I could find time for a visit."

"Your mother would like that, son. Very much," Richard replied gratefully. "So would I."

~*~*~*~

"Did he have anything else to say?" Starsky frowned into the phone as he stuffed a sandwich into a paper sack and dropped an apple on top of it. "So what're ya gonna do now, call the old witch again and ask her what's up?" He shook his head and snorted. "You're forgettin', Hutch, that I met Vanessa's mom once. Witch is one of the nicer things I'd call her. And that's only 'cause there are kids in the room."

"I'm not a *kid*, Dad." Rachel sighed and tucked a strand of light brown hair behind her ear. "When are you going to figure that out?"

"Yes, you are." Starsky responded lightly, a proud smile on his face as he watched his daughter. "You'll always be my kid. But this time I was talkin' about myself. Not even I'm old enough to hear all the things that woman oughta be called."

"Dad." Rachel rolled her eyes. "You're incorrigible, you know that?"

"That's not what your mother called it." Starsky's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Now get outta here before you're late for school."

"Okay. Are you dropping off Kenny this morning?" Rachel grabbed a set of keys off the counter and hollered for her sisters.

"Yeah, I'll see you tonight. And drive safe, baby." Starsky held up his hand to stave off the protest he knew was coming. "I know, you always do and you're not a baby. Now go on, git!"

"Bye, Dad!"

"Sorry 'bout that." Starsky's attention returned to the phone. "What else did your father have to say? That's it, huh? Love to, but I've got a meetin' down at Central. They're thinkin' of startin' a task force to look into that string of home invasions on the west side. Yeah, lucky me. How 'bout tomorrow? I can pick you up in the mornin' and then we can go over everythin' over lunch. Sounds good. Talk to ya later, Hutch."

~*~*~*~

Hutch smiled as he contemplated the phone in his hand for a moment, wondering again at how easily his friend could lift his spirits, even with a short, simple phone call. Finally hanging up, he glanced around the room, somewhat at a loss as to his next step. His eyes wandered around, never quite settling, when he turned around suddenly, grabbed his keys and hurried out the door.

~*~*~*~

Closing the battered door of his late model Taurus, Hutch casually circled in front of it and stepped onto the sidewalk. Nervously, he smoothed a hand through his hair before reaching for the doorknob, still wondering what he was doing here.

After his disastrous first meeting with Kendall, this hardly seemed the way to approach the situation again. But even the voice in his head that told him he shouldn't be here wasn't enough to keep him away. He knew that he should wait, wait until they had more, wait until there was something substantial that he could go to her with, something to break through the defenses she'd built around her, but he couldn't stay away. Not if there was even a slim chance that it was true, that she really was his daughter.

The front desk was empty, so he bypassed it quickly and started up the stairs, listening for signs of life in the rooms beyond. A few steps later he could make out the sounds coming from the studio. Instead of the cacophony of music and equipment heard on his previous visit, all that reached him now were a few quiet snatches of conversation and a muted burst of laughter.

Hutch reached the top step and turned the corner. The room below him was transformed, emptied of people, most of the equipment gone or pushed to the side, it was hard to imagine that it had recently been the sight of so much frenetic activity. Something in the quiet saddened him, a sense of loss touching his heart just briefly.

"I'm telling you, Kase, she loves me."

Hearing Kendall's answering laughter, Hutch stepped back into the shadowy doorway, watching in silence as she walked into the room, shaking her head at the blue-haired man behind her.

"You're nuts, you know that, don't you?"

"I'm telling you, she does," he insisted, gesturing wildly with his hands. "Couldn't you see the passion in her eyes when she looked at me?"

"Erik, honey, sweetie," Kendall turned and reached up to grasp his shoulders. "Here in the real world we call that loathing."

"You just didn't see the signals she was throwing me across the room."

"No, you're right, I didn't," Hutch could see her biting her bottom lip to corral the smile that threatened to blossom across her face, "all I saw was the right cross she threw at your chin."

"Yeah," Erik rubbed at his chin, a thoughtful gleam in his eye, "but did you see all the passion she put into it?"

"Oh, God, I give up!" Kendall tossed her hands in the air and rolled her eyes heavenward. "You're right, she wants you, only you. And I think you should head straight home and sit next to the phone until she calls you."

"So I can leave early?" He grabbed a jacket off the chair behind her and planted a quick kiss on her cheek. "Thanks, boss!"

"Wait... I didn't mean..." Kendall gaped at Erik's smirking face as he hurried toward the stairs. "Get back here, you brat!"

"Ah, come on, Kase, luv," he looked at her pleadingly, "the barbecue's this evening. Jenni'll skin me alive if I leave her with all the work."

"And that's my problem, how?" Kendall teased, but her resolve quickly floundered when he turned a pair of puppy dog eyes on her. "All right, fine, I think you're nuts for having a barbecue in December, but go." She laughed wickedly. "Just remember to be here bright and early tomorrow. We're going to have to spend all day in the lab if we want to get these out to the client on time."

"Right, 11 a.m., bright and early." Erik dashed up the first few steps.

"SEVEN!" Kendall called after him.

"Ten." He stopped short of the top step and looked back down at her.

"Eight."

"Nine?" Erik bargained hopefully.

"Eight," Kendall reiterated.

"8:30?" A last hopeful attempt.

"Sold!" Kendall laughed, and added, "Now get out of here before I change my mind."

"See ya, boss." He turned to leave, but stopped once more, "Hey, Kase, you know you and Michael are invited, right? Why don't you leave this for tomorrow, swing by your place, grab Mikey and come on by?"

"Thanks, Erik," a sad smile that didn't quite reach her eyes flitted across her face, "I wish I could. But Thomas told me, in no uncertain terms, that Father expects me at dinner tonight."

Hutch jerked back, shock and disappointment reverberating through him. *Father?*

"Oh." He hovered for a moment more. "Well, if you change your mind...."

"I know where to find you." Kendall looked at him fondly. "Now, go on, get outta here before I change my mind."

Watching Erik climb the last few steps, Hutch realized that it was time to make his presence known or retreat to the relative safety of his car. "No time like the present, right?" he asked himself softly and took a step forward, meeting the startled man's gaze.

"Can I help you?" The young man frowned at Hutch, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"I'm here to see Kendall." Hutch's nervousness increased under Erik's careful scrutiny.

"The studio's closed today." Erik reached to grab Hutch's arm, clearly intending to escort him out. "You can come back tomorrow."

"This isn't about... It's personal," Hutch explained, glancing down into the room below where he saw Kendall staring back up at him.

"Is she expecting you?"

"She is now," Hutch replied quietly, nodding to where Kendall stood watching them both. "Excuse me." Stepping around Erik, Hutch made his way down the stairs. "Hi."

"Hi," Kendall greeted him tentatively. "What are you doing here?"

"I was hoping, that is," Hutch felt the butterflies in stomach take flight once more, "could we have lunch?"

"Lunch? I don't..." Kendall fidgeted with edge of her shirt, a restless hand tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't think that would be a very good idea. I've already told you how I feel about...."

"No pressure, I promise." Hutch reached out slowly toward her, moving cautiously, as though approaching a skittish colt. "We won't talk about anything you don't want to. I'd just like a chance to get to know you better." When she continued to hesitate, he reached out to catch her hand. "If what you say is true and you don't care, don't need a father, what's one little lunch going to hurt?"

Kendall's stomach twisted in knots as she gazed up into Hutch's calm blue eyes, her head and her heart at war, one screaming for her to run as fast as her feet would carry her, the other pleading with her for this only chance. It was too dangerous. There were too many things that could go wrong. Kendall knew all too well where all roads led as she opened her mouth to tell him no, but instead heard. "Just one little lunch?"

"Exactly," a smile blossomed across his face, "just one little lunch." *One of many*, Hutch promised himself as he followed her up the stairs.

~*~*~*~

Hutch watched as Kendall picked aimlessly at the sprouts sticking out of her sandwich, only pausing to gaze at him surreptitiously through hooded lashes.

"How's your sandwich?" Hutch asked softly, stilling her hand with his.

"What?" Kendall looked up at him, startled. "The sandwich. It's fine."

"Sure you don't want to try a bite before say that?" Hutch smiled gently. "Kendall, the point of this lunch wasn't to make you so nervous you couldn't eat."

"I'm not nervous." She broke eye contact, studying her sandwich intently. "I guess I just wasn't as hungry as I thought."

"Okay, you're not nervous," Hutch schooled himself to ignore the trembling in the hand beneath his. "So why don't we talk a little?"

"I don't really know what there is to talk about." Kendall shrugged, slipping her hand from Hutch's and looking up. "You already know how I feel about wanting a father around."

"Then we'll talk about something else, for now," he finished quietly. "Tell me how you got into photography."

"There wasn't a lot to it." Kendall smiled tentatively as she leaned back in her chair. "I used to spend summers and holidays with Aunt Lucy. And since she was always working back then and there wasn't a lot for a kid to do around a photo shoot, I started trying to make myself useful. And somewhere along the way I picked up a love of the photography side of it."

"Aunt Lucy?" Hutch stopped, his focus shifting as he searched his memory. *Lucy? Lucy?* "Wait a minute. Are you talking about Lucy Collins? Wasn't she one of your mother's roommates in college?"

Kendall nodded and broke off a piece of crust, chewing it thoughtfully. "Aunt Lucy was really great. When she wasn't working she'd take me all kinds of places. And she was..." Her eyes dropped again. "Well, she was the only person I knew who ever had anything nice to say about my mother."

"Hey, I'm sorry," Hutch cupped her chin, lifting slowly until her gaze met his again, "you shouldn't have had to grow up hearing nothing but bad about your mother."

"Thanks," Kendall blinked back the sudden tears that rimmed her eyes, "but it's not like it was that big a deal. I mean, I barely remember her and from what I hear she wasn't that into motherhood, but...."

"But she was your mother." Hutch finished, his thumb brushing aside the single tear that rolled down her cheek. "I'm sorry. This isn't exactly what I had in mind when I invited you to lunch."

Their eyes locked and Hutch thought he felt something, a moment of understanding, pass between them before she pulled away. "So, what did you have in mind?"

"I just thought maybe we could talk, get to know one another." Hutch resisted the urge to take her hand again.

"I don't really see the point of it," Kendall responded uneasily. "Like I told you, I'm a big girl now. I don't need a daddy anymore."

"Maybe I need a daughter," Hutch replied quietly.

"I can't I... I can't do this." She shook her head and stood quickly. "I just can't... I have to go. I'm sorry, I have to...." Turning on her heel, she fled the restaurant, disappearing into the bright sunshine beyond the door.

"Kendall, wait." Hutch stood quickly, getting tangled with his chair as he tried to follow her. "Kendall!" But by the time he reached the street she was nowhere to be seen.

~*~*~*~

Starsky looked up in surprise as he stepped out of the Deputy Chief's office to find Hutch waiting for him. Fear constricted his heart for a brief moment, worry that something had happened to one of his kids, as he recalled stepping out of another room to find Captain Dobby waiting for him.

"Cap? What're you doin' here?" Starsky glanced quickly over at his partner as a sense of foreboding crept over him, "I thought you were headed home."

"I was." Dobby replied quietly, his face drawn with worry. "Starsky, I need to talk to you, in my office." When Hutch moved to step away, Dobby shook his head. "I think you better stick around for this Hutchinson."

"What is it?" Starsky demanded, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Let's go into my office, Dave." The Captain dropped a sympathetic hand on Starsky's shoulder.

"I don't wanna go in your office." Starsky tried to ignore the painful beating of his heart. Dobby never called him Dave. Never. Not unless something was seriously wrong. "I wanna know what's goin' on. Now!"

"Buddy, I think maybe we should just go into the captain's office and...."

"NO!" Starsky exploded, pulling away from them both, "Just tell me what's going on."

"I'm sorry, David, there was an accident." Dobby's eyes dropped, his voice cracking with emotion as he delivered the news. "The officers at the scene said the other driver was drunk and she never had a...."

"No." Starsky shook his head, taking a stumbling step backward, as if he could make it untrue by simply distancing himself from the information. "No. This isn't... No. Not my Rosey. Please tell me it's not...."

Next to him the blood drained from Hutch's face as the captain's words slowly penetrated. "Is she... What hospital? What hospital is she at?"

Dobey's focus slowly shifted to the shocked blond cop and he shook his head sadly. "She never had a chance." With a heartfelt sigh, he turned back to Starsky. "Dave, I'm sorry, but there's more. Kenny... Kenny was in the car with her and...." When the startled cop's knees began to buckle, Dobey reached out for him, but Hutch was already there, enfolding the devastated man into his arms. "They think he's going to be all right, but he's at Mercy General right now and...." As words failed him, the large man simply closed his eyes and turned away, leaving his detectives to their grief.

"Starsk?" Hutch's worried voice shook Starsky from his introspection. "Are you all right?"

"What? Yeah, I just... When I saw you waiting there." Starsky shrugged and looked away. "It's nothing. What're you doin' here?"

"What's nothing?" Hutch pressed, concern for his friend overriding his own needs. Studying Starsky's face, a memory surfaced. "Oh, God, Starsk, I'm sorry. You saw me standing out here and thought...."

"Only for a sec," Starsky quickly assured him. "Then I realized there's no way you would'a waited till the meetin' was over to tell me if somethin' was wrong. 'Least somethin' important. So, what *are* you doin' here? Last I remembered, hangin' out at city hall wasn't exactly one'a your favorite ways to pass the time."

"I had lunch with Kendall," Hutch replied softly.

"What? Hutch that's great!" Starsky slapped him on the back.

Hutch sighed and shook his head, as he looked his partner in the eye. "I'm not so sure it was."

"What do you mean?" Starsky put a hand in the small of his friend's back, steering him toward the exit. "Come on, let's get out of here and then I wanna hear everything."

Hutch smiled gratefully as he allowed himself to be led from the building, knowing he'd come to the right place.

~*~*~*~

Quietly, Kendall closed the massive oak front door and made her way toward the imposing staircase, slowing only momentarily to take in her tear-swollen eyes as she passed the ornate mirror hanging on the wall.

Great, she shut her eyes against the image, *no one's ever going to suspect a thing's wrong with you looking like someone just shot your dog*. Wiping angrily at the last traces of her tears, she hurried on toward the stairs when a cultured voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Kendall, my dear, a moment of your time, if you please."

Taking a deep breath, Kendall carefully schooled her features to hide her pain and fear, making sure her voice was level and calm before replying. "Of course, Father."

Stepping into the silent room and closing the door softly behind her, she approached the foreboding figure behind the desk.

"Have a seat, my dear." Kendall sank slowly into the plush leather chair, trying desperately not to clench her hands before her. "How was your luncheon?"

Smothering a small gasp, Kendall felt her heart begin to beat a frantic rhythm in her chest. "It was... uncomfortable."

"Yes, I can well imagine it was." Long elegant fingers opened a humidor and extracted a cigar. "Tell me, my dear, when exactly where you planning on sharing Captain Hutchinson's visit with me?"

"I didn't..." A faint blush crept across her cheeks as Kendall met his steely gaze. "I hadn't really thought about it. I guess I was hoping you wouldn't have to know."

"Really, my child, don't you think that's quite nanve of you?" He leaned back in his chair, studying her closely as he lit the cigar. "After all, I pay Miguel quite well to make sure that you are... adequately protected."

"Don't you mean: kept under lock and key?" Kendall muttered under her breath.

"I beg your pardon?" The cigar was suddenly and violently ground out. "Did you have something to add?"

"No," Kendall met his penetrating gazing levelly, only the slight whitening of her knuckles as she gripped the arm of the chair betraying her inner conflict, "what could I possibly have to add?" Kendall watched closely as he continued to study her. After several seconds of intense scrutiny, she began to feel her skin crawl, knowing the slight tremor that began in her hands would give her away if she remained much longer. "May I go now?" she asked, willing herself to not flee out the nearest door.

Leaning forward, elbows planted on the desk in front of him, he stared dispassionately at her. "I hear this was not his first visit." When Kendall remained silent, he continued conversationally. "Of course, you do realize that this violation terminates our agreement."

"What? No." She sprang to her feet, crossing the space to the desk in two quick strides. "You can't do that. This isn't my fault, I didn't tell him, I didn't tell him anything."

With a speed that belied both his age and size, he rose to his feet, his hand shooting out suddenly and striking Kendall across the cheek, knocking her to the floor. "How dare you tell me what I can not do? I will not tolerate disrespect. Not from you, not from anyone."

Bastard! Kendall fought down the urge to scream the word in his face, knowing the thin line she was treading from too many years experience. One hand crept up to rub unconsciously at her swollen cheek as she glared up at him with hate filled eyes.

"Now look what you've made me go and do." He tsked softly, shaking his head sadly as he looked down at her. "You really shouldn't do that, you know. Forcing me to behave like that. You know how I abhor violence."

Kendall pursed her lips together, taking a moment to silence her rage before continuing. "I'm sorry, Father."

"Now get up, child, and take your seat." He extended his hand to her. "Where was I? Ah, yes, our agreement. Tell me, my dear, what did Captain Hutchinson want?"

Kendall's eyes blazed momentarily with righteous anger, her stomach twisting at the sadistic game being played. "He wanted to know if I was his daughter."

"Just as I suspected." He settled back in his chair. "And what did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know and didn't care." She dropped her eyes, afraid he would see the hope and pain she couldn't hide. "I don't think he'll be back."

"Of course he will." He leaned back in his chair, the cruel smile of a cat playing with its prey spreading across his cold features. "Captain Hutchinson fancies himself as something of a White Knight. Even if he

doesn't believe that you are his daughter, he'll no doubt feel compelled to help a pretty young woman he views as a damsel in distress."

"God, do you have to enjoy this so much?" Bile rose in the back of her throat as Kendall stared at the monster before her. "Can't you just let this go? Please. After all this time, after everything you've taken from him, can't this be enough? I swear to you, I will never see him again. I promise."

"Enough? After what he did to my family?" His eyes captured hers, pinning her down with his gaze. "Nothing will ever be enough."

"What are you going to do?" The blood drained from Kendall's face as she grasped the edge of the desk.

"Kill him, of course."

"NO!" Kendall reacted without thinking as he reached for the phone, her hand slamming down on top of his, "You can't. You promised."

"I promised as long as you never saw him, he would be allowed to live." His grip on the phone tightened as a menacing note crept into his voice. "Now that you have, I am released from my promise."

"Now that I have? This is all your doing!" Kendall pulled the phone from his hand and flung it across the room. "This is what you wanted all along. You made me talk to that producer. You knew he'd go see my father. You made this happen and I'm not going to let you kill him. I'm not!"

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT?" A roar of anger filled the room as he swung around the desk, his fist making contact with Kendall's bruised cheek before she had a chance to react, knocking her to the floor once more. "HOW DARE YOU DEFEND HIM AFTER WHAT HE DID?" He grabbed the front of her shirt, pulling Kendall to her feet and shaking her. "He ruined my family's good name. He came into my father's home and arrested him like he was some two-bit common criminal off the street."

"That's because he was one." Kendall wrenched away from him, backing into the wall, oblivious to the blood pouring down her cheek or the pain behind it. "He was a power hungry old man with delusions of grandeur. The only thing he ever did right was to put a bullet in his brain before they could send him to rot in prison."

For a moment neither of them moved, the tension between them causing the air to seemingly vibrate. Their eyes, both sets filled with white-hot fury, met and challenged one another. Then, with slow precision, each step carefully measured and calculated, he crossed the room to her. Raising his hand slowly, he ran a finger across her torn cheek.

Kendall could feel her pulse quicken as adrenaline rushed through her veins, knowing how little it would take for him to end her life right there, but no longer caring. She was tired of it. Tired of this life, tired of the lies and deceptions, tired of living every day in the shadow of a madman. Having it all end right here could hardly be worse than going on like this.

"Do it," she hissed softly. "You know you want to. You've always wanted to. Destroy his family like he did yours."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you my dear?" he whispered, his voice almost a caress as his eyes moved across her face. "Take the easy way out and absolve yourself of all responsibility. No, I'm afraid it won't be that easy. For either of you." He reached into his pocket and tossed a fresh linen handkerchief at her. "Now clean yourself up. We're expecting company for dinner. The rest of this discussion will have to wait until later."

"What are you going to do?" Kendall felt her knees weaken as the rush of adrenaline faded, one hand

clinging to the wall for support.

"Nothing." His gaze swept over her, regarding her disdainfully. "Perhaps you are right and this is what I wanted."

Kendall's eyes bore into his back as he made his way to the door to call for his butler. "Thomas, would you please send for Robert. Have him escort Miss Kendall to her room."

"Yes, sir." The aged black man inclined his head, backing out of the room. Moments later a tall, muscular man in a chauffeur's uniform stepped through the doorway.

"Ah, Robert, Miss Kendall has had a small *accident*," he informed the chauffeur. "Please see her to her room. And see that she stays there. We wouldn't want there to be anymore accidents today, would we?"

"Yes, sir." Face shadowed by the cap he wore, Robert crossed the room and grabbed hold of Kendall's arm, hauling her unceremoniously toward the door.

"Oh, and, Kendall, my dear, see to it that you don't see him again. If you do I will consider our agreement terminated, along with Captain Hutchinson." His soft taunt followed her from the room.

~*~*~*~

"Are you gonna sit there all night starin' at your beer or ya gonna tell me what happened?"

"Huh?" Hutch looked up, a sheepish grin floating across his features. "Sorry, I was just thinking about it."

"So?" Starsky prompted.

"There's not much to tell." Hutch shrugged. "She didn't brush me off the way she did the first time, but she seemed pretty uncomfortable being there with me."

"And? Come on, Hutch, I know there's more." Starsky could read the emotions skimming across his friend's face. "Tell me."

"I don't know, maybe I'm just reading more into it than there really was. But," he shook his head, one hand waving vaguely through the air, "there was a moment there when I was talking to her where" Hutch stopped, his gaze softening as he remembered the afternoon.

"You're gonna make me drag this outta you word for word, aren't ya?"

"Sorry, Starsk. It was just for a little while there, while she was talking, I had the feeling that she didn't mind me being there." Hutch held the beer bottle between two fingers, twirling it slightly.

"But?" Starsky leaned forward, reaching out to still the bottle. "Hutch, if everything'd gone all right you wouldn't'a been waitin' outside my meetin' lookin' like someone'd just shot your dog."

A self-deprecating huff escaped Hutch and he set down the beer. "One day I'm going to learn I can't pull anything over on you. She told me again that she didn't need a father, but it wasn't quite the same as before, the coldness wasn't there. So I told her that maybe I needed a daughter." He raised sad blue eyes to his partner's. "I think I blew it, she ran out of there like the hounds of hell were on her heels."

"She just needs a little time. Time to figure it out in her head and time to learn to trust you." He covered Hutch's hand with his own. "Just give her that. You got her to have lunch with you, it's a start."

"Thanks, Starsk. I hope you're right. God, I really do."

~*~*~*~

Robert pushed Kendall roughly into the room, slamming the door behind him. "JUST WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING? WERE YOU TRYING TO GET YOURSELF KILLED?"

"I DON'T KNOW. MAYBE!" Kendall pulled away from him and started pacing frenetically. "What if I was?"

"WHAT IF YOU WERE? ARE YOU NUTS?" Robert reached out to snag one of her arms as she made another circuit past him. "JESUS CHRIST, KC, HE COULD'VE KILLED YOU. AND WHAT ABOUT MICHAEL? WHAT WOULD'VE HAPPENED TO MICHAEL IF HE'D KILLED YOU?"

"I DON'T KNOW, OKAY! I SCREWED UP. I ADMIT IT, ALL RIGHT. THE MIGHTY KENDALL LOST HER TEMPER AGAIN AND SCREWED UP! I'M SORRY. ARE YOU HAPPY NOW? AND STOP YELLING AT ME! AND...." She froze suddenly, collapsing into the sheltering warmth of his arms. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I did that. I didn't plan it. I just... He started threatening my father and I lost it, all right?"

"No," his voice softened, "it's not all right. Nothing that hurts you is all right. You've just got to trust me, give me a little bit longer and I swear I'll get us out of this. I'll get us all out of this."

"God, Bobby, I want to believe you, I really do." She closed her eyes, failing to trap the tears that spilled from them. "But I just don't know how much longer I can take this. It was hard enough before, not knowing him, but now... You should've seen his face at the studio and then again at lunch today." Kendall burrowed her face into his shirt, allowing her tears to fall freely. "He was so damn hopeful. It was just all out there on his face for the whole world to see. He wants me. He wants to be my father." Her grip tightened around him. "Do you know how that felt? No one's ever wanted me like that, never. All I've ever mattered to anyone is as a pawn, some plaything to be moved around and positioned as needed. Even to you. But he wanted me."

"That's not true, Kase." He tilted her face up to his. "You know I love you."

"No, you just think you love me." Kendall pulled away, walking over to the window and looking out. "It soothes your conscience to tell yourself that you're not really using me, you're doing this all to help me. Your mother read you too many fairy tales as a little boy, Bobby. Not every princess can be saved and there are some dragons even the strongest knights can't vanquish."

~*~*~*~

Hutch dropped his jacket on the arm of the couch and rubbed his temple to ease the headache building behind his eyes. A quick trip into the kitchen yielded a glass of water and two aspirin before he noticed the blinking light on the answering machine.

What now? he thought wearily as he punched the play button.

"Hutch, hi, it's me. Chris, that is." He heard an embarrassed laugh. "I guess you figured that out, huh? Anyway, I just called to see if you were in. And to tell you... Ken, I know I was upset when I left, but I really am glad we talked. It felt good. Right. Call me if you get in early, okay? Maybe we'll do dinner or something?"

He reached for the phone, fingers stalling just above it, before giving it a light tap. "Not tonight, Chris. Maybe...." Shrugging into the empty room, he dropped onto the couch and closed his eyes.

~*~*~*~

Starsky stopped in the middle of a sentence and glanced over at the passenger seat where Hutch sat gazing silently out the window. "What's wrong? Hutch? Hutch!"

"Huh? You say something, Starsk?" Hutch glanced over at him absently.

"I asked what was wrong." Starsky studied his friend closer. "You've been quiet ever since I picked you up."

"Oh, yeah, I was just thinking about my conversation with Chris."

"What conversation with Chris?" Starsky eyed him with renewed interest.

"Guess I forgot to tell you with everything that's been going on." Hutch shifted uneasily, considering his words carefully. "She stopped by the night before last."

"She did? Really? That's great."

"Yeah, yeah, it was nice," he admitted. "We had a nice talk." At Starsky's probing look, he continued, "About Davy, about us."

"And?"

"And nothing, we just talked, Starsk, nothing more. It just got me thinking about a few things." Suddenly aware of their route, he looked at Starsky quizzically. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, well," Starsky said as he shrugged, grinning boyishly, "I thought we'd stop by Huggy's for some breakfast."

"You didn't have breakfast already?"

"At my house? Are you kidding?" Starsky snorted softly. "It's the same thing every mornin', four kids plus two bathrooms equals lucky to make it out of the house alive. I swear, I think Christine was actually taking up both bathrooms at the same time at one point."

"You're just looking for an excuse to hit on Victoria." Hutch rolled his eyes, slumping back further in his seat.

"I'm tellin' you, Hutch," he wiggled his eyebrows playfully, "the woman wants me. She's just waitin' for the right time to leave it all behind for me."

"You're insane. You do know that, don't you?" Hutch went back to gazing out the window. "Besides, if she was going to leave Huggy for anyone, it'd be me."

~*~*~*~

Starsky stopped in the bathroom doorway, glancing over to where Hutch and Victoria were speaking, small smiles lighting both their faces. Taking a moment, he studied Hutch closely. Whatever course Hutch and Christine's conversation had taken, it had done his friend some good. Already he could see lines of tension that had existed for years beginning to fade, as though a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders. *It's about time you allowed yourself to be happy again, buddy.* He thought. *And if being with Chris does that, I'm not going to let you blow it again.*

Spotting Huggy coming out of the kitchen, Starsky waved him over before stepping further back into the

shadows. "What'd you find out?"

"Not a whole lot," Huggy admitted with a shrug as he joined Starsky in the alcove. "I spoke to some of my less reputable former associates. It seems that the young lady in question is not unknown of on the streets."

"Really? What'd they have to say about her?" A note of worry crept into Starsky's voice.

"Mostly, what I heard is that the kid is clean, but her old man is a serious heavyweight." Huggy spread his hands out in front of him. "The kind of weight that makes people cross the street if you just mention his name."

"Which is?" Starsky pressed.

"Sorry, m'man, but the minute I pressed for that piece of enlightenment, my associates tended to disassociate themselves, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, thanks, Huggy." He started toward the table.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Huggy's arm shot out to block him, a slip of paper appearing between his fingers. "I didn't say that was all I had."

"What this?" Starsky snatched the piece of paper, glancing from the list of names to Huggy.

"That is something my genius of a son ran across while he was... Well, never mind what he was," Huggy revealed proudly, "let's just say he was and leave it at that."

"Huggy."

"Okay, okay, hold on to your britches." Huggy stretched dramatically before pointing to the first name on the list. "This is the name of the holding company that owns the building little Miss Kendall's studio is in. This company owns that one and, in turn, is owned by this one."

"Three companies? Who needs three companies to own one buildin'?" Starsky mused, "So, who owns the last one?"

"Well," Huggy reached up to rub the back of his neck, "Isaac didn't quite get that far. His mother has these foolish notions about bedtimes on school nights."

"Positively barbaric, ain't it?" Starsky shook his head sadly. "Expecting a kid to go to bed just 'cause he's got school in the mornin'. So, what's the address?"

"I thought you'd never ask. That is a condo over on Oceanside that's owned by the second holding company."

"Oceanside?" Starsky whistled long and low, "That is one very expensive neighborhood. But why do I care about this company's condo?"

"Because the leaseholder is one Kendall Hutchinson." The grin that split Huggy's face would've set the Cheshire Cat to shame.

"What? You're kidding. Thanks, Hugs, I owe you one." Starsky shoved the slip of paper into his pocket. "Big time."

"You're damn straight, you owe me." Huggy crossed his arms. "And it's more than just one. Thirty years of

keeping you two hopeless honkies alive. If it weren't for me, the two of you would have...."

"Would've what, Huggy?" They both jumped guiltily as Hutch interjected himself into the conversation.

"Nothing, nothing at all." Huggy replied a little too quickly. "Now if you'll excuse me, some of us have real work to do. We can't be standing around gabbin' all day."

"So, Starsk, what was that all about?" Hutch asked casually, watching Huggy's retreating form.

"Like the man said, nothin', nothin' at all." Starsky responded with a shrug, sauntering toward the door.

"Yeah, well whatever that nothing was," Hutch grabbed his arm, smiling warmly and squeezing it when Starsky turned, "thanks."

~*~*~*~

Hutch stood in the doorway of Starsky's empty office, looking around in mild confusion. Closing the door, he turned to the young redhead sitting outside it. "Keri, have you seen Starsk? I thought we were supposed to be having lunch."

"No, Captain Hutchinson." She smiled brightly, "I'm sorry. I don't know where Captain Starsky went. But he told me to give you his apologies and said he'd see you this afternoon."

"Now, Keri," Hutch leaned on the desk, flashing her a dazzling smile, "how many times do I have to tell you to call me Ken? Or at least Hutch?"

Keri blushed deeply as she broke eye contact. "Starsky told me not to listen to you. He said you're just trying to steal me away because your secretary keeps throwing away your messages."

"Oh, he said that, did he?" As she nodded, he mumbled. "Remind me to thank him later."

~*~*~*~

Starsky tapped quietly on the door in front of him when he saw the red light above it go off. "Miss Hutchinson? I'd like to speak to you for a few minutes, if you've got the time."

"Hold on, just a sec." Kendall's voice carried through the thin door. A second later the sound of a lock being disengaged reached his ears and the door slid open a couple inches. "Come on in. What can I do for you?" she asked as she hung a photograph to dry.

Squinting in the red light, Starsky started toward her, struck suddenly by how much her profile resembled Hutch's. "Hello, Kendall, my name is Dave Starsky. I know we haven't met yet, but I'm a friend of your father." He noted the way she immediately tensed up at the word father. "I'd like to talk to you about him."

"There's nothing to talk about." She turned quickly away.

"I think there is." Starsky followed, stepping right up behind her. "But if you don't want to talk, just listen, I'll do all the talkin'." He paused to gather his thoughts, looking at the blonde head bent in front of him. "Your father is the finest person and most loyal friend it's been my privilege to know. He's stood by me through everything in my life. Hell, he's saved my life more times than I can count."

"Please...."

"When my fiance, Terry, died... I didn't want to go on being a cop, I didn't want to go on living. Hutch was

there for me, through the whole thing, he was ready to quit the force for me. He sat up with me, night after night, he cried with me. When I got shot real bad a couple years after that, he stayed with me through it all. I don't know what I would've done if he hadn't helped me put myself back together and get the courage to go back out there onto the streets."

"Please, don't. I understand how you feel about your friend, but...." Kendall's voice broke.

"Do you? He celebrated the births of my children with me, he mourned the death of my wife." Starsky reached out to touch her shoulder, "Did you know you had a brother? He was the sweetest little boy you ever saw. Looked just like Hutch." He could feel her beginning to tremble beneath his hand. "When he died..." Starsky paused to blink the tears from his eyes, his voice choked with emotion. "He was only six years old. And it just happened so damn fast. Hutch and I were out on a stakeout, wasn't even a very important one, just some stupid pusher, and Davy only had a little fever and a rash. No big deal. Except it was. By the time his mother took him to the hospital it was already too late. They had to wear masks to go see him, they didn't even get a chance to hold him one last time."

"Why are you doing this?" Kendall made a weak effort to pull away.

"Because I want you to know who he is. What he's about." Starsky turned her slowly toward him. "Give him a chance. He's a good man and he'll be a good father if you let him."

"I don't need a father." Kendall kept her head turned, refusing to make eye contact.

"Everyone needs a father. And what would it hurt to let Hutch in?" he asked softly. "What are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

"Then look at me." Starsky gently grasped her chin, turning her face toward his. As he did, the large purple bruise on her cheek was unmistakable, even in the eerie red light. "What's this?"

"Nothing." She tried to pull away as Starsky snapped on the overhead light. "I walked into a door.

"A door with a ring? Who did this to you, Kendall?" he demanded. "Who did this? Is this why you're so afraid? Just tell me who it was and I'll stop them, I'll help you. Hutch and I will both help you."

"Do you really think it's that easy?" She laughed coldly. "If you want to help me you'll leave now. And if you know what's best for your friend you'll keep him away." Kendall pulled away from him. Walking out of the room backward she implored, "Just go, leave me alone. That's all anyone can do."

~*~*~*~

Hutch looked up from the report in front of him as his office door flew open, "Starsk, what are you...."

"We gotta talk." Starsky slammed the door behind him.

"About?" Hutch raised an eyebrow, casting a curious glance at the door.

"Kendall. I went to see her." Starsky began pacing in front of the desk, almost a mirror image of Hutch's actions just days earlier.

"What? Why?" Hutch sprang to his feet, placing himself in Starsky's path. "Starsk, what happened? What did she say?"

"She said that I should stay away from her and I should keep you away, too." He executed a sharp turn, resuming his pacing, arms flying around him. "Hutch, someone hit her."

"What?!" Hutch's eyes widened in alarm. "Starsk, what are you talking about? Who hit her? Is she all right?"

"Yeah. I don't know. I mean...." Starsky stopped, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. "I don't know who did it. She wouldn't tell me, said she ran into a door. But I've never seen anyone get backhanded by a door before."

"Where was this?" Hutch grabbed the jacket off the back of his chair and slipped into it. "Where'd you see her?"

"At the studio, but she ain't there anymore." Starsky sighed with frustration and plopped down in the chair in front of Hutch's desk. "She took off outta there like a bat outta hell when I confronted her about it."

"Damn it. I don't even know where she lives, Starsk." Hutch slammed his fist into the wall. "How the hell am I supposed to find her?"

"I may be able to help you with that." Starsky reached into his pocket to pull out a piece of paper when the office door opened.

"Captain Hutchinson?" A tall blond man in a dark, expensive suit stepped into the room.

They exchanged an exasperated, knowing glance before Hutch turned to the man, "How can I help you, Agent...?"

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his ID and flipped it open, "Agent Montgomery. I need to speak with you on a private matter."

He moved to replace his ID, but Starsky snatched it out of his hand, inspecting it closely. "Special Agent R. Edward Montgomery, Los Angeles field office. What's the R stand for?"

"If you don't mind, Captain Starsky, I'd like my identification back." Agent Montgomery held his hand out patiently. "Thank you." He stored it back in his pocket. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to have a word in private with Captain Hutchinson."

"Well, I mind." Hutch turned a cold stare on the man. "We were right in the middle of a private conversation and I resent your barging into my office unannounced. Now, if you have some business with me I suggest you speak to my secretary and make an appointment."

"This won't take long," Agent Montgomery assured him coldly.

"Then get on with it," Hutch barked angrily, "and get out of my office."

"Very well, Captain. I hear that you've been making some inquiries into the background of Kendall Hutchinson." The agent watched Hutch closely as he made his announcement.

"What?" Hutch started, his pulse racing as he focused on the agent. "What if I am? What do you know about her?"

"I know that your inquiry is interfering with an ongoing federal investigation." Montgomery handed a piece of paper to Hutch. "This is a Federal Cease and Desist Order. You, and your department, are to stay away from Miss Hutchinson, her residence, and her place of business."

"What?" Hutch's eyes blazed with righteous fury. "Just who the hell do you think you are? What gives you the right to come in here and tell me to stay away from *my* daughter?"

"The federal government." He turned on his heel and strode out of the room without another word.

"What the... Who the...." Hutch struggled to get the words out as anger stole his power of speech.

"You gonna do what he says?" Starsky asked needlessly.

"What?" Ending the blistering glare he'd been favoring the door with, Hutch looked at Starsky as though he'd forgotten his friend was in the room. "What? Are you crazy? No. No way I'm walking away from this. Especially not on the say so of some federal agent and an order that probably isn't worth the paper it's printed on."

"Then you'll probably need this." Starsky waved the piece of paper under Hutch's nose with a triumphant grin.

"What's this?" Hutch took the piece of paper, scanning it quickly.

"It's the address of a condo leased to one Kendall Hutchinson."

"Starsky, where'd you get this?" Hutch asked in amazement.

"Let's just say I have my sources and leave it at that," Starsky commented as he sat back down, propping his feet up on the corner of Hutch's desk.

"Huggy or Minnie?" Hutch perched on the edge of the desk, reading the address again. "And get your feet off my desk."

"I've got other sources, you know," Starsky grumbled, dropping his feet to the floor. "It's not like I get all of my info from them." At Hutch's raised eyebrow, Starsky continued, "Okay, fine, Huggy. He got it from Ike, who got it off the Internet."

"Thanks, Starsk." Hutch's face softened, losing the last of the anger that Agent Montgomery's visit had provoked. "And thank Ike and Huggy for me, too."

"So, what're you going to do now?"

"I'm going to go see my daughter." Hutch folded the piece of paper almost reverently and tucked it safely into his pocket.

"Want company?" Starsky watched Hutch's face closely, knowing it would reveal more to him than mere words could.

"No. Thanks, buddy, but this time I think I should handle it on my own."

~*~*~*~

Kendall paced her room nervously; her eyes bouncing from the door to the bedside clock and back again, her patience wearing thinner with each repetitive step. When several anxious minutes failed to produce the desired results, she sat heavily on the bed, mindlessly pushing the pile of clothes off of it and onto the floor.

Pulling her legs into the lotus position, Kendall began taking deep even breaths, trying to calm her racing mind. But her brain refused to be silenced as scenario after scenario played itself out in her overactive

imagination.

A light tapping on the door broke her last attempt at concentration and Kendall leapt to her feet, yanking the door open. "How did it go? Did you talk to him? What did he say?"

"Calm down, Kase," Bobby cautioned as he pushed past her into the room. "Yes, I saw him. I gave him the cease and desist order."

"And? Come on, Bobby, what'd he say?" Kendall searched his face, looking for some clue that would tell her how it had gone. "Bobby!"

"And... well, he looked pissed, Kendall. Really pissed," Bobby responded with a worried frown. "I think this was a bad idea, Kase. A really bad idea. I think all this is going to do is make Hutchinson more determined to find out what's going on."

"Well, what the hell else am I supposed to do? Huh? Would you please tell me?" She turned away from him and went to gaze out the window. "Because I could really use some help here. If he doesn't stay away from me, Father *will* kill him. You know that."

"I know, Kase, I know. We'll just have to find a way. Maybe..." Robert came up behind her, wrapping her in his arms. "Maybe we should just tell him the truth. Ask him to back off for a little while."

"God, Robert, you don't really think that would work, do you?" Kendall sighed heavily, letting her head fall back on Bobby's shoulder. "I think, if anything, the truth would just make him more determined to see me, to get me out of this. God, I hate this. I don't want to think about it anymore."

"Then don't." Bobby caught her hand in his, bringing it to his lips. "I've got the rest of the night off. Change into a swimsuit and shorts and we'll grab Michael and hit the beach. What do you say?"

"I don't know." She hesitated. "I should probably stick close to home. I don't want Father thinking that I'm sneaking off to see...."

"Come on, Kase, you need this." Loosening his hold on her, Bobby slipped between Kendall and the window, tilting her face up to his and brushing his lips across hers. "We all do. We'll take a picnic, play in the surf," leaning forward he nuzzled her ear, "make out under the pier."

"Stop that." Kendall giggled. "You know I can't think when you do that."

"That's the whole point, baby, stop thinking." Bobby planted a trail of kisses down her neck. "Just let it go for a while and have some fun."

"All right," she sighed dramatically, "you've talked me into it. But," Kendall pulled back suddenly, toppling them both over onto the bed, "if we're taking Michael, I really think we ought to do our making out here, now."

"Yes, ma'am," Bobby replied huskily as he lowered his lips to hers.

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Hutch nervously fingered the scrap of paper Starsky had given him and checked the address before knocking on the door again. Still no answer. Ten minutes of waiting had produced no results and Hutch wondered if no one was truly home, or if Kendall was simply avoiding him.

Heading back to his car, he stopped to look back at the row of townhouses stretching out impressively along

the expensive strip of beachfront property. The architecture blended seamlessly with the surrounding scenery, creating an air of serenity just blocks from the city's urban sprawl.

Climbing back into his car, Hutch found himself wondering just how much a small photo studio made and who was footing the bill for this exclusive little slice of heaven.

~*~*~*~

"Ken?"

"Hey." A smile lifted the corners of Hutch's mouth as he locked his car and spotted the lithe figure walking down the drive. "What are you doing here? Why are you waiting outside? You've still got your key, don't you?" He kissed Christine briefly on the cheek. "Come on in."

"I'm here to take my favorite ex-husband out to dinner." Chris dropped her purse on the couch and laughed. "And I was waiting outside because my favorite ex-husband tends to enter the house gun first when he comes home to unexpected company."

"One time, Chris. It was one time." Hutch shook his head. "Don't you ever forget anything?"

"No." She stepped up to wrap her arms around his waist. "I never forget anything, including my pledge not to give up on us. Which means that I'm taking you out to dinner."

"Chris, it's been a really long day and...."

"No ands, Ken, I'm not taking no for an answer tonight. We're going out to dinner." Chris checked her watch. "I've got reservations at Bernardo's in twenty minutes, which gives you about ten minutes to change."

"All right," Hutch raised his hands in surrender, "but I'm buying. Call it a congratulatory dinner for the new promotion."

"In that case, I'll call ahead and tell them to break out the bubbly," Chris teased as she gave him a push toward the bedroom. "Now go get changed. And don't come out here half-dressed again if you expect to make it to dinner."

"You know, I don't remember your being this pushy when we were married." Hutch ducked as a sofa cushion flew at him.

"I was just a lot subtler back then, now hurry." She waved him toward the bedroom. "I want to get a table overlooking the water."

Hutch's laughter echoed down the hall as he complied.

~*~*~*~

"Now, you have to admit, this is nice." Chris beamed across the table at him as the waiter refilled her glass. "Much better than sitting at home alone."

"You're right, Chris, this was a great idea." Hutch leaned back in his chair, smiling at her in the candlelight. "I didn't realize how much I needed this."

"You never did know when to take a break. I'm going to see to it that you, that we *both*, start enjoying life a lot more." Christine reached for her glass and held it up. "Here's to many more nights to come."

"I've got a better way to seal this pact." Hutch took her hand in his and leaned across the table, pulling her into a passionate kiss. "How's that?"

"Oh." Christine fell back into her chair. "I think that will do just fine."

~*~*~*~

Starsky tapped his pen impatiently on the pad in front of him, trying to focus on the meeting he was attending and not the slowly moving hands of the clock.

"Captain Starsky, is there anything you'd like to add?"

Starsky looked up guiltily and cleared his throat. "No, not really. I think that Lt. Marsh covered all the bases." Starsky glanced quickly at his second-in-command, receiving the barest of nods in return. "Why don't we meet again on, uh, Tuesday and see what everyone's come up with."

The scraping of chairs across the linoleum followed Starsky out of the room and across the hall to the elevator where he stabbed impatiently at the down button.

"Something up, Cap?" Marsh leaned against the wall, watching in amusement as Starsky's eyes traced the elevator's progress. "You looked like you were ready to bust out of your skin in there."

"Yeah. No. I just gotta talk to Hutch," Starsky admitted frankly. "He had somethin' kinda important goin' down last night and I just wanna know how it turned out."

"Really?" Marsh crossed his arms and frowned. "I didn't hear about anything going down in Homicide."

"It was personal. Ah, ha!" Starsky dashed into the elevator as soon as the doors opened. Punching the floor he wanted, he then proceeded to glare at the doors until they slid shut.

~*~*~*~

Hutch lifted his head in acknowledgment when he saw Starsky step anxiously into Homicide and look around. With a quick nod, Starsky darted into Hutch's office to wait.

"Okay, Peters, let me know if there are any further developments on the Creighton case." Hutch straightened. "I think you're right about the husband, but we can't get a warrant on suspicion. We need something we can take to a judge."

"Right, Captain." The portly man nodded and closed the file in front of him with a frustrated sigh. "I'll try talking to the secretary again, see if I can't shake her story up a bit."

"Good." Hutch checked the clock on the wall as he started for his office. "I'm heading out for lunch, call me if anything comes up." Slipping into his office, Hutch cleared his throat to get Starsky's attention. "Hey, buddy, how do you feel about getting out of here and grabbing a bite to eat?"

"I'll drive," Starsky responded as he pushed Hutch out the door. "Then you can tell me what happened last night."

~*~*~*~

"Starsky, how can you eat that crap?" Hutch winced as he watched his friend devour his second chili cheese dog of the afternoon.

"Easy. And quit tryin' to change the subject." Starsky crammed the last of the hotdog in his mouth. "So, wha hap'n wif K'nll?"

"Starsky, don't talk with your mouth full." Hutch handed him a napkin. "Nothing happened. She wasn't there when I stopped by. Or wasn't answering the door. I don't know which. So, I gave up and headed home."

"Then where were ya when I called?" Starsky swatted aside the napkin and grabbed his soda. "I tried a couple times."

"Chris was waiting for me when I got home." Hutch wiped his own hands on his napkin and started gathering his leftovers. "We went out to dinner, had a couple drinks."

"Chris? Really?" Starsky's face lit up. "That's great. What happened? When're ya seein' her again?"

"I told you, nothing happened. Not really." Hutch dumped his trash and started back to the table. "We had dinner, that's all. It was nice."

"Nice how?" Starsky wiped his hands on the napkin.

"Starsk, it was just nice." Hutch replied with a hint of exasperation. "Would you just let it go?"

"Sure, I'll let it go." A smile played with the corners of Starsky's lips. "For now. But I'm tellin' ya, lettin' go of each other was the biggest mistake you and Chris ever made."

"Starsk...." Hutch warned.

"A'right. A'right." Starsky raised his hands in surrender. "Let's talk about the kid, instead. You gonna go by there again tonight?" Starsky asked casually, rearranging the French fries on his plate.

"No. Yes. I don't know." Hutch closed his eyes and rubbed his hand down his face before continuing. "I don't know what I'm doing here, Starsk. I don't even know if she's my kid. She doesn't seem to want to have anything to do with me. Maybe I was wrong about what I thought was happening at lunch." He held up a hand to stave off Starsky's protest. "I know what you think, but, aside from your instincts, what else do I have to go on? Vague theories that she's afraid of something? Maybe it's just what she says it is. Van's parents sent her off to boarding school and didn't tell me about her because they blame me for Van's death. She doesn't want or need a father and she really did walk into a door. Simple as that."

Starsky listened patiently throughout Hutch's recitation, nodding in all the right spots, and looking thoughtful. "Uh huh, and exactly how much of that do you really believe?"

"None of it," Hutch admitted reluctantly. "But I don't know what else to do, Starsk. I can't make her talk to me if she doesn't want to. All of our attempts at investigating her background have run into a dead end. I don't know what more I can do."

"You can start by not tryin' to fool me or yourself," Starsky replied pointedly. "You know what ya need to do. Just do it."

Hutch stopped, a fond smile coming to his face. "Thanks. I guess I just needed to hear someone else say it."

~*~*~*~

Kendall spun around the room, frowning in concentration as she pawed through the jewelry box in front of her. "I know it's here somewhere."

"Kase?" Bobby rapped quietly on the door and stuck his head in the room. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes." She dropped the necklace in her hand and dragged him into the room. "Tell me you remember where I left that damn necklace."

"What necklace?" Bobby laughed and nodded toward the mess on her dresser. "You've got dozens of them."

"*THE* necklace. His mother's necklace. That diamond and emerald thing." Kendall chewed on her lip as she dumped a dresser drawer on the bed. "He wants me to wear it to this thing tonight."

"What thing?" Bobby asked worriedly, grabbing her arm when she failed to answer. "Kase, what thing?"

"I don't know, some party. After the stockholder's meeting," she replied absently. "What the hell did I do with it?"

"KC, what party?" Bobby took a hold of both her arms, spinning Kendall around to face him. "Who's going to be there?"

"I don't know, not for sure. All he told me was to be there by eight and to make sure I wore the necklace," Kendall responded softly, casting her eyes downward. "I know you're worried, but just let it go, okay? You know I have to do this. I can't risk making him angry. Not right now."

"All right, I'll let it go." Bobby sighed, his grip relaxing as he rubbed her arms. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"Aren't I always?" Kendall turned away before he could answer. "Now help me find the necklace."

"What?" Bobby shook his head. "Oh yeah, it's out at the townhouse."

"What?"

"Last time you wore it, you had me drop you at the townhouse afterward." Bobby reached up to touch her cheek. "You were wearing that pale green dress, the one with the low back and you had your hair up...." He blushed slightly. "Anyway, you had me drop you there because you had to get the place cleaned up for some model that was coming in the morning. It's probably still in the safe there."

Kendall closed her eyes and leaned into his caress. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I screwed this all up for you. If it wasn't for me, you would've been out of all of this a long time ago."

"Don't ever apologize for my loving you." Bobby kissed her forehead. "Come on, I'll give you a ride out to the townhouse."

"No," Kendall pulled away from him, "Father's probably already wondering where you are. Besides, I'm going to be there a while. There's some make-up left there from the last shoot. I'm going to see what I can do about this cheek."

"I should kill him for that." Bobby traced the edges of the bruise.

"Bobby...."

"I know, I know." He turned away. "And you're right, I better get back. Just promise you'll call me when you get in tonight."

"I promise." Kendall followed him to the door, pausing only to retrieve the garment bag that lay on the bed

before leaving herself.

~*~*~*~

Hutch pulled up across the street from the townhouse. Turning off the car, he paused for a moment to gather himself before stepping out and crossing the busy street. Fighting down the anxiety that churned in his stomach, Hutch failed to notice the car stopped down the block watching him.

Climbing the stairs to the front door, concentrating only on the butterflies that circled around in his stomach, Hutch didn't see as the shadowy figure inside the car picked up a cell phone and begin dialing just as he knocked on the door.

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"JUST A MINUTE!" Kendall called out frantically as she hurried to the door, fastening an earring as she pulled open the door. "Just give me two more seconds and I'll be... Oh, Captain Hutchinson. What do you want?"

"I'd like to come in and speak to you for a moment." He studied her face, picking out the faint hint of bruise beneath her make up and noting the flash of pain and longing in her eyes before the wall came crashing down. *Starsky's right*, he realized with something akin to gratitude, *She is afraid, but whatever it is, whatever she's afraid of, it's not me*. A sudden wave of protectiveness washed over Hutch and it took all the strength he had not to her reach out right then and pull her into his arms, wanting nothing more than to hold on tight and keep her safe.

"I'm sorry, Captain, I don't know how you found me here, but you really shouldn't be...."

"Please, call me Ken or Hutch." *Or Dad*, he added silently. "Anything, but 'Captain'."

"I'm sorry, but you really need to leave." She started to push the door shut, but Hutch's hand shot out and stopped it.

"I'm already here, what's it going to hurt to talk to me?" Hutch smiled encouragingly. "Just for a couple of minutes. Please."

Kendall stuck her head outside, looking around nervously. "You can't be here."

"Why not?" Hutch leaned into her line of sight. "Why shouldn't I be here?"

"Because someone might see you and...." She stopped suddenly, her eyes growing large as she realized the implications behind her words.

"Then invite me in and no one will." Hutch could see the indecision in her eyes. "If you don't, I'm just going to wait out here until you do. You wouldn't want anyone to see me loitering about, would you?"

"I..." Kendall glanced over her shoulder, the butterflies in her stomach turning to knots, knowing that she should send him away immediately, but wanting to prolong whatever small bits of contact were allowed her. Slowly, she stepped back, letting him into the room. "I guess it wouldn't be a problem. But only for a little bit. I have to leave for a dinner party soon."

"Thank you." He stepped past her into the townhouse. The cop in him immediately took note of his surroundings. The apartment was furnished with sleek, ultra modern furniture. A black leather sofa and loveseat surrounded a glass and chrome coffee table. The black marble fireplace against one wall looked cold and foreboding, nothing like the inviting stone one at his place or the cozy little brick one at Starsky's.

As he turned, his eye was drawn to the wall of windows that afforded the viewer a breathtaking oceanscape. But the rooms felt cold and un-lived in, as if no one had occupied them in a long time.

Turning again, he felt his gaze caught by a large black and white picture that hung on the wall above the fireplace. It was a simple print, a mother and a daughter sitting on a bench in a park. The child's eyes seemed to dance with laughter as the mother held her tightly, placing a gentle kiss on the side of her head.

"This is beautiful." Hutch said softly. Staring up at the print, he could almost hear their laughter ringing in the room.

"Thank you." She took an unconscious step forward and stopped behind him. "It's one of my favorites. I knew the second I saw them that there was something special there. The way they looked at each other, you could feel the love between them."

"You took this?" He looked at her in surprise. "I thought you were a fashion photographer."

Kendall laughed, forgetting for just a moment to keep the wall up. "I do fashion photography to pay the bills. The rest of this I do for myself. Fashion pays the bills, keeps the studio going, but this is what makes it worth it to me, makes me excited to pick up a camera and try to show the world what I see." Then, as if suddenly remembering herself and the need to keep a distance between them, she stepped away from him and turned to the window. "You said there was something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yes." Hutch watched her reflection in the glass; she looked so scared and alone that he once again had to fight the urge to take her in his arms. "You said that you didn't know or care who your father was."

She squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped her arms around her shoulders, presenting the perfect picture of misery as she spoke. "That's right."

"The problem is I don't believe that." He spoke softly, noting the slight trembling in her body, "I think you already know. And I think you do care, but you're too scared to admit it. What I want to know is, what or who are you afraid of?"

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"Yes, sir, he's there right now."

"Then you know what to do, Miguel," the voice on the phone ordered.

"Yes, sir." Hanging up, Miguel reached into the backseat and retrieved the bundle that lay there.

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Silence fell throughout the room, thick and heavy, as if even the normal street sounds were unable to penetrate the cloak that had suddenly been thrown over the apartment. Kendall stood perfectly still at the window, the blood draining from her face and leaving her skin a stark white, as though she were a statue carved of the purest alabaster.

And then, just as suddenly as it had descended, the silence fled as Kendall whirled around to face Hutch, her eyes blazing with righteous fury. "WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK GIVES YOU THE RIGHT? YOU KNOW NOTHING, NOTHING ABOUT ME, ABOUT MY LIFE. HOW DARE YOU COME IN HERE AND TELL ME WHAT I'M THINKING AND FEELING!"

Hutch took a step backward, startled by her outburst. "I d-didn't mean it th-that way. I just want to...."

"Wanted to what?" She tossed out angrily. "Show up on my doorstep twenty years too late and start playing daddy? I'm a grown woman, I don't need a father, I don't need any..." Her eyes widened abruptly, attention caught by something on Hutch's shirt, and she crossed the room in a single step. "NO!"

Hutch's stomach clenched at the sudden fear he saw in Kendall's eyes as she cried out. Looking down, he spotted a pinpoint of red on his lapel an instant before she hurled into him, sending him flying behind the couch as the room exploded around him in a hail of gunfire.

~*~*~*~

"Maggie, set the table and call your brother and sister." Starsky inched open the oven door with a satisfied grin before turning it off and grabbing the potholders.

"What about Rachel?" Maggie peeked over her father's shoulder. "Lasagna again?"

"She's got a date. And yes, lasagna again. I thought you liked lasagna." He pulled his masterpiece out, carefully carrying it over to the table and setting it on another potholder.

"I do, it's just, well," she sighed and looked up from setting the table, "you make it a lot, Daddy."

"I like it a lot." Starsky ruffled the curls on the top of her head. "Now, go get your brother and sister."

"Yes, Daddy." Maggie hurried out of the room with a laugh.

~*~*~*~

Hutch went instinctively for his gun, pulling it free from the holster as he raised his head above the back of the sofa. Pieces of broken glass littered the room, remnants of the shattered windows, glittering in the failing light.

"Kendall?" Hutch tried to quell the fear that rose up in him. Where was she? He hadn't heard a sound from her since she'd pushed him out of the way. Turning his head to the left, he felt his heart leap into his throat. One black shoe lay on the floor next to a still leg. "KENDALL!"

Heedless of the danger, Hutch crawled through the broken glass and around to the front of the couch. He knelt over her motionless body afraid to touch her and equally afraid not to. "Kendall? Honey?" He called softly brushing the hair back from her face. "Come on, honey, say something."

Dropping his gun, Hutch turned her over gently, his stomach nearly revolting at the sight of the bloodstain spreading across the front of her designer dress. For an instant he was transported back to another time when the sound of automatic gunfire filled the air and the sight of different bloodstain filled him with terror.

Starsky, get down!" Hutch yelled out, ducking behind the Torino and pulling out his gun as the sound of an automatic weapon echoed around him.

"STARSKY?" Firing off shot after shot at the fleeing assassins, Hutch called out to his partner, growing increasingly frantic as no answer came. "STARSKY?!?"

Rounding the front of the Torino, his heart leapt into his throat at the sight of his partner lying still and bleeding on the cold, hard ground.

"Please, God, not again. Please, not again." Ripping off his jacket, he pressed it against the wound to stem the flow of blood, his other hand punching desperately at the buttons of his cell phone. "Come on, honey, just hang in there. Hang in there." Hutch repeated this mantra as he waited for a connection.

"911 operator."

"H-hello, this is Captain Kenneth Hutchinson, Metro PD." His voice was ragged and frantic. "I need an ambulance at..." his mind went momentarily blank, "... at 13500 Oceanside Terrace. Tell them there's been a shooting. And I need... Tell them to send out a black and white and a forensics team. And..." Hutch struggled with his emotions. He needed... He needed... "Starsky. Get me Captain Starsky."

~*~*~*~

Starsky hit the Emergency Room doors at full tilt, not even slowing down to allow them to open of their own accord, slamming them violently open in his haste to reach Hutch's side. His own stomach tied up in knots as he relived Hutch's frantic phone call.

"DADDY!" The sound of his daughter's scream propelled Starsky from his chair.

"Maggie? What is it? What's wrong?" Starsky tore into the living room, grabbing his daughter and checking her for injury.

"Daddy, it's Uncle Hutch." Maggie thrust the phone at him, tears trembling in her eyes. "Something's really wrong. I can hardly understand him."

"Hutch? Hutch, what is it? What's wrong?" Starsky's heart pounded in his chest as he tried to understand Hutch's words. "Hutch, slow down. What's wrong?"

"They shot her, Starsk. Oh, God, I was... I was just talking to her and they...." The rest of the statement was lost as the phone fell to the floor with a thud.

"HUTCH? HUTCH, PICK UP THE PHONE!" Starsky strained to make out the muffled sounds in the background. "Hold on, Hutch, I'm comin'. I'm comin'." He was about to drop the phone when Hutch picked it up again.

"Starsk? They're here now, we're gonna, they're, umm...." Hutch sounded lost.

"Hutch, what is it? Who's there?" Starsky implored softly, trying not to startle him.

"The paramedics, they're here... They're going to take her to the hospital." Hutch's voice broke. "Oh, God, Starsk, there's so much blood. It's everywhere. Oh, God, there's so much of it, Starsk. She's dead, I know she is."

"Hutch, I need you to calm down." Starsky threw what he hoped was a reassuring glance in Maggie's direction. "Find out what hospital you're going to and I'll meet ya there."

"I, um, I ... Hold on." Hutch's voice faded into the background and Starsky could hear another voice. "General. They're taking her to Bay City General."

"Hang on, buddy, I'll be right there."

Rounding a corner, Starsky rushed into the emergency waiting room, his heart leaping into his throat at the sight of Hutch. He stood still, in the center of the room, his clothing soaked in blood, too much blood, as he stared blankly ahead.

"Hutch?" Starsky grabbed his friend's arm. "Hutch, are you all right? Is any of this yours?" When Hutch continued to stare forward, Starsky shook him gently. "Hutch! Talk to me, buddy. Are you all right?"

"Starsk?" Hutch shook his head, trying to clear his scattered thoughts, and looked at Starsky in confusion. "When did you ... They won't ... They won't tell me anything. They took her in there," he pointed a shaky finger at the emergency room doors, "and they won't tell me anything. Oh, God, Starsk, there was so much blood. Just like ... just like when...." Hutch's knees gave way.

"Hutch!" Starsky grabbed his arm, half carrying him to a nearby seat. "Hutch, look at me. Look at me!" Grasping Hutch's chin, he brought Hutch's eyes up to meet his. "She's going to be all right. You have to believe that. Okay?"

"O-okay." Hutch closed his eyes and nodded slowly.

"Now, I want you to just stay right here. I'll be right back." Starsky moved to take a step away when Hutch's hand shot out and grabbed him.

"You're leaving?" A panic-stricken Hutch asked.

"No, no, of course not." Starsky knelt down in front of Hutch, taking both of Hutch's hands between his own. "You know I'll never leave as long as you need me. I was just going to go over to the counter there and see if I can get any information and maybe get someone to take a look at you. But I can stay here with you for a little longer, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Hutch closed his eyes again, leaning back in the chair as Starsky sat in the one next to him, "thanks, Starsk."

"Whatever you need, babe." Starsky pulled Hutch's head down onto his shoulder, rocking him gently. "Whatever you need."

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Christine quickened her pace as she entered the Emergency Room, her eyes searching for a familiar face. "Excuse me." She stopped at the admittance desk, trying to catch the attention of the harried looking duty nurse. "Excuse me, please, I'm looking for a Captain David Starsky. He called me a little while ago and..."

"Just a moment, please." The nurse turned back to the phone. "Look, don't give me that. Just get the portable x-ray down here now." She slammed down the phone and turned to Christine. "I'm sorry, what was your question?"

"I'm looking for Dave Starsky or Ken Hutchinson." Christine replied anxiously, shifting the bundle she held from one hand to the other while trying to catch a peek at the admittance sheet.

"Let me see." The nurse ran her finger down the paper. "Captain Hutchinson is in exam room three. Down this hall and on the right."

"Thank you." Chris took off in the direction the nurse had indicated. Finding the exam room, she paused outside, taking a deep breath and steeling herself for whatever might lie within before peering through the glass windows. Inside she could see Hutch sitting on the exam table, his legs dangling over the side. Starsky sat beside him, a hand on Hutch's shoulder as he spoke in hushed tones.

Chris felt her throat tighten as she watch them. Ken was hunched over, as if in pain, his head bowed, resting in his hands. Next to him, Starsky kept up his constant litany of comforting words, one hand resting against the small of Hutch's back, drawing small, comforting circles, his eyes never leaving Hutch's face.

Hand shaking, she pushed the door open and stepped inside. "Dave?"

"Chris?" Relief flooded Starsky's features as he looked up at her. "Did you bring 'em?"

"Yes," she held out the bag she'd been carrying, offering it to Starsky, "but I don't understand. What's going on? What happened? Dave, are the kids all right?"

"Here, Hutch, let's get you changed into these." As Starsky started to pull the clothes out of the bag, Christine took her first look at Hutch's clothes. Blood soaked the fabric, staining it a deep rust and turning it hard and brittle.

Biting back a horrified gasp, Christine stepped forward and assisted Starsky in trying to remove the ruined clothing as Hutch sat nearly unresponsive, reliving an experience neither of them could see. "Ken, sweetheart, can you hear me? Dave, I don't understand. What happened?"

"Kendall was shot." Starsky pushed the edges of Hutch's shirt back, trying to figure out how to remove it without disturbing him. Finally giving up with a sigh of frustration, he shook Hutch's shoulder. "Hutch, babe, I need your help here. Come on, the nurse said we could use the intern's shower. We need to get you cleaned up before you can change." Gently, he pulled on Hutch's arm helping him off the gurney.

"Wh-what? Starsk?" Hutch looked around bewildered. "What's going on? Did the doctor come back?"

"No, Hutch, they're still working on her." Starsky led him toward the door. "Christine's here. She brought you some clean clothes and we're going to get you cleaned up so you can change into them."

"I can't go." Hutch looked at Starsky through bloodshot eyes. "What if something happens? The doctors won't be able to find me. I have to stay here, in case... in case... Oh, God, Starsk, what am I going to do?"

"You're going to come with me," Starsky told him quietly. "Christine will wait here while you take a shower. If the doctors come, she can tell them where to find you."

"Yeah, okay." Hutch walked along beside Starsky, lost once more in his own thoughts.

"Dave, wait." Christine grabbed Starsky's arm to get his attention. "Who's Kendall?"

"Hutch's daughter."

~*~*~*~

Starsky sat on a bench waiting, keeping a watchful eye on his friend, as Hutch leaned into the nearly scalding stream.

Hutch felt some of the evening's tension slowly bleed from his body as he felt the hot water work its way down his body, washing away the evening's horrors with the red stain circling the drain. Reaching for the soap, he started to lather his body, needing to wash away the last of the blood, as if that life giving fluid were a contaminant. He began to scrub harder and harder, still feeling it on his skin, until a hand reached from behind him and tenderly removed the soap from his hand.

"It's okay, babe. Everything's going to be all right," Starsky crooned soothingly as he stepped into the water and wrapped his arms around Hutch. "You just gotta believe it's gonna be all right."

"Oh, God, Starsk, I don't know if I can do that." Hutch braced himself against the tile wall as sobs racked his body. "I don't think I can do this again."

"You're not gonna, you hear me, Hutch?" Starsky held him tighter. "You're not gonna. She's going to be all right. Say it, Hutch. Say it."

"She's going to be all right." Whisper soft.

"Say it again, louder," Starsky insisted.

"She's going to be all right." Hutch's voice was stronger this time as he turned to look at Starsky. "She's going to be all right."

"You got it, pal." Starsky favored Hutch with a small smile. "Now why don't you finish cleanin' up and we'll go find a doctor to tell us what's goin' on. Even if we've gotta tear this whole place apart."

"Thanks, Starsk." The corners of Hutch's mouth lifted, ever so slightly, as he watched his best friend slosh his way out of the shower. "By the way, Starsk... you're all wet."

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"Ken?" Christine stood slowly, worrying her lower lip as they walked down the hall toward her, scarcely noticing that Starsky now wore a wrinkled pair of scrubs. "Is everything... Are you all right?"

"Chris? When did you get here?" Hutch rubbed the side of his face, looking at her in confusion.

"She brought your clothes." Starsky gave him a nudge in Chris' direction. "You two talk. I'm gonna see what I can find out from the nurse."

"Here, Ken, sit down." Chris moved her purse to make room in the seat beside her. "Are you all right? You seemed so upset when I saw you earlier. And I'm not sure I understood what Dave said. Your daughter's been shot? Ken, what daughter?"

"Kendall, she's... she's Vanessa's daughter. My daughter." Hutch leaned forward in the chair, studying his hands. "I just found out about her a few days ago."

"How is that possible?" Christine reached to take one of Hutch's hands between her own. "You told me that Vanessa died years ago. How could you just be finding this out now?"

"I don't know." Hutch squeezed her hand lightly. "That's one of the things that Starsky and I are trying to find out."

"And someone shot her?" Chris shook her head, trying to clear her confusion. "Who? Why?"

"I don't... God, Chris, I don't know." A deep sigh escaped him as Hutch slumped back into the chair. "I've barely had any chance to talk to her and when I have it's been all I could do to keep her from fleeing the room. Starsky thinks she's afraid of something, someone, whoever it is that's kept me from finding out about her."

"And what do you think?"

"Right now, I don't give a damn," he spat out. "All I care about is whether or not she's going to live and... DAMN IT!" Hutch jumped to his feet, glaring angrily. "This isn't fair. I just found her, Chris. I just found her. I can't lose her now. I can't do this again." He started pacing in front of her. "I know it's not the same as Davy, I know that. I wasn't there when she was born. I didn't see her first step or hear her first word, but damn it, Chris, she's mine and I love her and...."

He fell back into the chair with a stunned expression. "I love her. I just realized that. Isn't that insane? I just now realized that for the first time."

"I don't think it's insane at all." She wrapped her arms around him, pulling his head to her chest. "I think it's wonderful. You're a good father, Ken, you always were. And when she gets through this you'll have the chance to tell her."

"You think so?" a small voice asked.

"I know so."

~*~*~*~

Starsky walked up to the nurse's duty station, casting a quick look over his shoulder to see how Hutch was doing. Satisfied that his friend was in good hands, at least for the moment, he turned his attention to the woman in front of him. The top of a blonde head greeted him as she scribbled furiously on a chart. He glanced at her nametag. A'lyce.

"Excuse me, Alice." He leaned across the counter, a smile spreading across his face.

"Elise," she corrected automatically, without looking up.

"I'm sorry, A'lyce." Starsky injected a note of humor into his voice. "I should've known a woman as beautiful as you must be named something exotic."

A pair of suspicious blue eyes looked up at him. "Can I help you?"

"I surely hope so, darlin'." Starsky flashed her a megawatt smile. "I was hoping I could get some information on a patient from you."

"Are you a family member?" she asked pointedly.

"Well, no, but...."

"Patient information is confidential." A'lyce closed the chart in front of her. "However, if you have a seat in the waiting room, I'm sure someone will be out to speak to you soon."

"Look, Miss." Starsky reached down and placed his hand over hers. "A'lyce, please. It's my friend's daughter." He nodded back over his shoulder in Hutch's direction. "He's scared and worried and all we want to know is what's going on. Please."

A'lyce looked from Starsky's pleading face over to the picture of abject misery that Hutch presented and her expression softened. "Is she the gunshot victim?" When Starsky nodded, she rose with a sigh. "Wait over there and I'll see what I can find out."

"Thank you." Starsky watched for a moment as she disappeared down the hall before rejoining Hutch and Christine.

"What did she say?" Hutch sprang to his feet as Starsky approached. "Is there any news?"

"She's going to find out now." Starsky gave Hutch's arm a quick, reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, buddy, as long as there's no news that means they're still workin' on her, which means she's still alive. Right?"

"Right. Right." He looked around, eyeing the chair he'd just vacated, but opted to resume his pacing instead.

"Dave," Chris smiled weakly as Starsky sat down, "how do you think he's doing?"

Starsky shrugged, his eyes never leaving his friend. "He's scared, but he's holdin' up. How 'bout you?"

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't shocked." Chris twisted her hands together in her lap. "And maybe just a little jealous."

"Jealous?!" Starsky asked, turning to her in disbelief.

"No, not of this." She waved her hands in front of her. "Never of this. This horrible waiting. But of Ken, of what he'll have if she makes it. He'll have another chance. A chance to get to know his daughter, a chance to be a father again. That's something I'll never have. Davy's dead and no amount of wishing and praying will ever bring him back."

"I'm sorry, Chris." Starsky closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "I never should've called ya. Sitting around here, watching Hutch worry... It's probably the last thing you needed. I just couldn't think of anyone else to call."

"I'm glad you did," Chris assured him. "Once, I let Ken push me away when we needed each other the most. I'm not going to let that happen again."

~*~*~*~

"Mr. Hutchinson?"

They looked up to see a tired looking man, his scrubs spattered in blood, standing just inside the waiting room to looking expectantly between them.

"I'm Hutchinson." Dropping a cup of coffee he didn't remember getting, Hutch hurried over to the doctor.

"Hello, Mr. Hutchinson, I'm Dr. Webber." He shook Hutch's hand and offered him a wan smile. "I've been treating your daughter."

"How is she?" Hutch asked anxiously, searching the doctor's face. "Is she...?"

"We've gotten her stabilized enough to send her up to surgery." Dr. Webber ran a hand through his short spiky hair. "I'm not going to lie to you. It doesn't look very good at this point. She took two bullets in the back. The first one shattered two ribs, pierced her left lung and exited through the sternum near the cardiac muscle. Frankly, if it had been another inch to the left we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"And the second bullet?" Starsky interjected, reaching a supporting hand to Hutch's shoulder as Christine hovered behind them.

"The second bullet entered in the lower back, nicking her left kidney and lodging in the liver."

"Her liver? Oh, God," Hutch stumbled backward, grabbing onto one of the cheap plastic seats, "she can't...You have to have a liver. It's not like kidneys, she doesn't have two of them."

"I don't want to alarm you unduly, Mr. Hutchinson," the doctor continued, "hopefully the surgeon will be able to repair the damage to the liver and kidney with little or no loss of function. Our greatest concern at this time is to control the bleeding, repair the collapsed lung and remove the bone fragments around the heart. If she survives that, the other damage should be easily handled."

"You said control the bleeding," Christine stepped forward, "how much blood has she lost?"

"We're not sure how much she lost at the scene, but we've transfused her with," Dr. Weber consulted the

chart in his hands, "3 pints already to try and prevent hypovolemic shock."

"Hypovol..." Starsky glared at the doctor as Hutch drew a sharp breath. "What the hell is that?"

"Shock from loss of blood." An almost ghost-like whisper came from behind him as Hutch sat down, clutching the arm of the chair. "When you... When you were shot the doctors were worried about that. You'd lost so much blood that they were afraid your organs would go into shock and shut down before they had a chance to repair the damage." Hutch continued his recitation, only a slight tremor disturbing the perfect monotone in his voice, his eyes glazing over as he focused inwardly on the never forgotten terror. "They told us later that they nearly lost you twice on the table."

"Hutch." Starsky knelt down in front of him. "Hutch, look at me. That's not going to happen here. She's young and strong and they've gotten a whole lot better at this since then. Besides, I'm still here, aren't I?"

"Yeah." Hutch met his eye, a glimmer of hope beginning to shine through. "Yeah, buddy, you are."

"Mr. Hutchinson?" Dr. Webber cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I was wondering if, off hand, you know your blood type."

"What? Uh, yes, it's B negative," Hutch replied quietly. "Why?"

"Your daughter is AB negative. It's a very rare blood type, but fortunately AB negatives can take transfusions from A negative, B negative and O negative, as well as their own blood type. We were hoping that you were the same type." The doctor looked at him hopefully. "But you are still a donor. If you don't mind, perhaps you could donate a pint of blood down at the blood bank. Studies have shown that donated blood from a family member usually present less chance of rejection and can aid in speeding the recovery."

"Yes, of course," Hutch stood immediately, nearly knocking Starsky over in his haste, "just tell me where to go."

"Check with that nurse over there and she'll direct you to the blood bank." Dr. Webber pointed to where A'lyce sat behind the counter once again.

"Hey, Doc, can I talk to you a sec?" Starsky caught the doctor's arm as soon as Hutch and Christine were out of earshot. "There's a favor I need to ask of you. An important one."

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Hutch ran his fingers gently through Christine's hair, trying not to disturb her as she lay sleeping, her head pillowed in his lap. Lost in slumber, the lines on her face relaxed, expression softened, Hutch could still see the feisty girl reporter that he'd first met. All righteous conviction and full of the desire to change the world through the truth of those convictions, he'd been immediately drawn to her blonde beauty and pure heart. And he'd been just as quickly repelled when her first article had come out, proclaiming them to be the "Mutt and Jeff" of police work and citing what she perceived to be their woeful inadequacies.

To say that he and Starsky had been livid at her portrayal of them, and the censored version of their work they'd been forced to show her, would've been a gross understatement. But to her credit, when shown the real streets, the kind of crime and violence they'd dealt with everyday, Chris had retracted her earlier statements, instead printing a fair and unbiased accounting of the pain and loss they dealt with every day. Telling not only of the fine line they walked, striving to keep one step ahead of the criminal element, but also of the compassion they were still capable of showing to one lost, confused soul.

"She's still one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen." Starsky handed him another of the countless cups of coffee they'd consumed during the interminable night. "Ever wonder what would've happened if

she'd gone for brunets?"

Hutch snorted softly and rolled his eyes. "There's a thought too frightening to contemplate."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Starsky asked, raising his eyebrows in mock indignation.

"It means that with your temper and her stubborn streak, the two of you would've killed each other by now if she had." Hutch laughed, rubbing his eyes as he stretched carefully. "Is it my imagination, or has that clock stopped?"

"I think it's running at half speed," Starsky growled into his coffee cup. "I keep telling myself that no news is good news, but how much longer is it gonna take?"

"Ten hours," Hutch responded quietly.

"What?"

"I'm sorry." Hutch sighed, looking sheepishly over the top of his cup. "This just brings back so many memories from when..." He turned away. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothin', Hutch. It's about Gunther, right? All this is makin' you think about when I got shot?" Starsky studied his friend closely. On the rare occasions Starsky had tried to bring the subject up, Hutch had simply shrugged it off, preferring to keep the pain bottled up inside rather than allowing it to face the light of day, as if mentioning his fears would somehow cause them to come true.

"That was the longest day of my life," Hutch stated simply. "I kept praying I'd wake up and it would have never happened. You know, like those dreams you have that feel so real the next day you keep asking yourself if it really happened? The only problem was, it wasn't a dream and nothing I did would end that nightmare."

"God, Hutch, I'm so sorry." Starsky's head dropped as he broke eye contact, his voice low. "You never should've had to go through that."

"**I? I** never should've had to go through that?" Hutch's mouth fell open as he stared at his friend in amazement. "In case you've forgotten, buddy, **you** were the one that got shot. All I did was wait around."

"And even knowin' how it turned out, I wouldn't trade places with you for a million dollars." Starsky raised his head slowly, the pain in his eyes evident. "I remember what it was like watching you dying from that plague, knowing that Callendar was the only one who could save you. But at least I had that. I knew he was out there. All I had to do was find him, no matter what it took. I don't think I could've kept it together the way you did, waitin' around for days not knowin' if you were going to live, not being able to do anything about it."

"Who says I held it together?" Hutch's closed his eyes, wishing the memories away. "Jesus, Starsk, I didn't know which way was up. All I did was pace the waiting rooms." He let a small, self-deprecating laugh escape. "I can still tell you how big they are. The ER waiting room was fifteen by ten paces. The surgical waiting room was eight by six paces. And the ICU waiting room was ten by six. I spent sixteen hours pacing them that day. Hell, by the time they brought you down to the ICU from recovery it felt like a blessing just to be able to watch you through the glass. To be able to see for myself that you were still alive."

Hutch slid from beneath Christine, careful not to wake her, and wandered over to the window, staring out at the first rays of the rising sun. "When they finally let me in to see you, God, there were so many tubes and machines hooked up to you. I was afraid to touch you, it didn't seem like there was anywhere that I wouldn't disturb something. So all I could do is sit in a chair next to you and watch you breathe. I was so afraid that if

I looked away I'd lose you in the space between one breath and the next."

The room fell silent for a few moments, each of them lost in their own thoughts and memories until finally Hutch turned to Starsky with his first real smile of the evening. "I never did thank you."

"For what?" Starsky returned his smile with a slightly confused one of his own.

"For making it. For coming back to me. Against all the odds, against all the doctor's predictions, you made it through that night and the next and the next." Hutch's smile widened. "The fact that I still have you in my life is the single greatest miracle I've ever known."

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"Hutch, wake up," Starsky nudged him gently. "Here comes the doctor."

"What?" Hutch sat up, looking around the waiting room bleary-eyed. "What is it?"

"The doctor's here." Starsky rose slowly, stretching his cramped muscles as the doctor approached them.

"Ken?"

"The doctor's back, Chris." Hutch offered her his hand, helping her rise while nervously watching Dr. Webber. "Well?"

"I just came from the OR, Dr. Stevens is in the process of closing now. She'll be in recovery for about five hours before she's moved to ICU." Dr. Webber took in their ragged appearance. "You might want to go home and get some sleep, clean up a little. You won't be able to see her until she's settled in her room. And even then, visiting hours in the ICU are only ten minutes every hour."

"But she's going to be all right?" Hutch asked hopefully, holding tightly to Christine's hand.

"At this point it looks very good." Dr. Webber smiled reassuringly. "Dr. Stevens was able to remove all the bone fragments and repair the damaged organs. There is still some concern about the damaged lung. We've got her hooked up to the respirator until she regains consciousness. After that we'll keep a close eye on it. She's still very weak, but on the whole it looks very good."

"Thank you. Thank you." Hutch grabbed the doctor's hand, shaking it heartily before turning to embrace Christine and Starsky. "She's going to be all right."

"YES!" Starsky returned the hug, beaming at them both. "Didn't I tell you? She's gonna be just fine."

"No thanks to you, Hutchinson." A venom-filled voice interrupted their celebration.

"What the...." Starsky spun around, eyes blazing, ready to take on the intruder, but stopped in surprise at the figure in front of him. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Damn you, Hutchinson," Agent Montgomery spat out, his eyes cold and angry as he glared at Hutch, "I told you to stay the hell away from her. Why didn't you listen? This never would've happened if you'd just done that."

"Hey!" Starsky pushed between the two of them as a stunned Hutch stared shockily ahead. "Just what the hell gives you the right to talk to him like that? You ever think that maybe if you'd told us what was going on instead of trying to yank our chain we might've been able to stop this."

"Stop this?" Montgomery shook his head in disgust. "You started this, then you left it half done and the rest of us to cope with the fallout."

"What are you talking about?" Hutch finally snapped out of his stupor, grabbing Agent Montgomery's arm. "What did we start? What do you know about this?"

"What I know is Federal information," Bobby pulled away, "and none of your business. All you need to know is to stay away from Kendall."

"THE HELL I WILL!" Hutch exploded, stabbing his finger in Montgomery's direction. "You march into my office out of nowhere, start waving orders in my face, telling me to stay away from my kid. Then you barge in here saying that this is all my fault without giving me any details about what's going on." Hutch's expression grew hostile and he tightened his grip on Montgomery's arm. "I don't give a damn who you think you are or who you work for, I want to know what's going on. NOW!"

"You know, Hutchinson, I don't really give a damn what you want," Montgomery retorted. "And if you think that you can intimidate me into...."

"Uncle Bobby?"

Montgomery stopped in mid-sentence, Hutch forgotten, as he turned to focus on the five-year-old behind him. "What is it, Michael?" He bent down next to the small blond boy, a gentle smile spreading across his features. "What do you need, sweetheart?"

"Uncle Bobby," he pursed his lips together and frowned, "I'm not a sweetheart. That's a girl."

"Sorry, slugger." Bobby Montgomery reached out to ruffle the boy's hair. "What is it?"

"Where's Mommy?" Michael's eyes moved nervously over the stunned faces surrounding him. "You said I could see her."

"You will, Mikey, just let me talk to the doctor for a minute. You wait right here while I do." Bobby brushed the long bangs from Michael's face as he stood. "You need a haircut, kiddo."

"Do not." Michael playfully stuck his tongue out at Bobby's back and then turned to Hutch. "Do I know you?"

"What? No, no." Hutch shook his head, trying to find a way to wrap his mind around this latest shock. Behind him, he could hear Christine trying to hold back a sob and as much as he wanted to comfort her, he couldn't tear his eyes from the little boy in front of him. "I'm sure I would've remembered meeting you."

"Then why are you lookin' at me like that?" Michael crossed his arms, glaring intently at Hutch.

"Because you look just like someone I used to know. Someone I loved very much." Hutch knelt down in front of Michael. "And because I think that, just maybe, I'm your grandfather."

Michael's eyes widened and he tilted his head to the side as he inspected Hutch. "You don't look like a police officer."

"What?" Startled, Hutch looked up at Starsky, who was standing behind the boy beaming from ear-to-ear.

"Well, he is one." Starsky pulled his badge out of his pocket and handed it to Michael for his inspection. "So am I. How did you know he was a cop?"

"Wow, is this a real badge?" Michael demanded. "Do you have a gun? Can I see it? Does your car have a siren on it? Can I...."

"Yes. Yes. No. Yes." Starsky laughed as he retrieved his badge and stuck it in his back pocket. "Now, you tell me, how'd ya know that Hutch was a cop?"

Michael looked carefully from one to the other. "Mommy told me my real grandpa was a police officer."

"Your mommy told you that?" Hutch blinked back the tears that had appeared in his eyes. "What else did she tell you?"

Michael chewed on his lower lip, beginning to look a little worried. "She said that we couldn't see him because Grandpa Jimmy hates him and he'd get very, very mad if we tried to see him." His voice fell to a whisper. "You're not gonna tell Grandpa Jimmy, are you?"

"No." Hutch reached up tentatively to touch Michael's cheek. "I promise, we're not going to tell anybody anything."

"Michael," Starsky lay a hand on the boy's shoulder, making sure he had Michael's full attention, "what's your grandpa Jimmy's real name?"

"Well, Mommy calls him," Michael's voice dropped and he glanced around to make sure no one else was listening, "son of a bitch when he's not around." Starsky stifled a laugh. "But Uncle Bobby and Thomas call him Master James or Mister...."

"Michael!" Bobby called sharply. "Let's go. The doctor's going to show us where your mother is."

"Okay!" Michael started toward him, but turned suddenly, running back to Hutch and throwing his arms around him in a quick hug. "Bye Grandpa!" He waved cheerily and hurried back down the hall.

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"Damn it!" Ike growled in frustration as his search hit yet another dead end. "This doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't?" Huggy draped himself across the back of Ike's chair, his eyes drifting across the computer screen. The bits of information that his son deciphered so easily looked like so much mish-mash to Huggy.

"This!" Ike gestured at the computer in disgust. "Every time I try to get a list of shareholders or trace the next holding company I run into a dead end."

"What's that mean?" Huggy leaned in closer, watching as Ike's fingers danced across the keyboard.

"It means that somebody went to a lot of trouble to hide the name of the owners." Ike hit the enter key, watching intently as the website appeared. "Ah ha!!"

"Is that it?"

"No, but it's one step closer," Ike replied proudly, scribbling the company name down on a pad of paper. "And it's one step closer than they ever thought anyone would get." Ripping off the page, he handed it to his father. "Give this to Uncle Dave and tell him I'll see what else I can get."

"I've got a better idea," Huggy turned away, picking a jacket up off the bed and tossing it to his son, "why don't you deliver it to him yourself? Your mother's going to turn the electricity off if you don't leave this room soon."

"Thanks, Pops," Ike's attention was already recaptured by the screen in front of him, "but I want to see what else I can come up with."

"Okay, I guess I can drop this off with Chrissy by myself." Huggy started out the door. "Maybe she'll...."

"Chrissy?" Ike was out of his chair like a shot, snatching his coat and slipping into it as he sped out the door. "I guess maybe I could make a little time to spend with you, Pops."

"Don't do me any favors." Huggy laughed as he slipped an arm around the boy's shoulders.

~*~*~*~

Christine stood in the background, trying to calm her shattered nerves, watching as Starsky slung an arm around Hutch's shoulder and grinned broadly. Standing there, gazing down the hallway, stunned smiles gracing both their faces, they looked so much like the brash young men she'd first met that Christine could almost feel the intervening years, with their triumphs and tragedies, slip away.

"So, Hutch, how's it feel to be a grandpa?" Starsky asked playfully, tightening his arm in a brief hug.

"I don't... I..." Hutch worked his jaw, opening and closing it in bewildered silence. "Did you see that? He looks just like...."

"Like Davy." Christine finished quietly, reaching out to take Hutch's hand in hers. "Congratulations, Ken, he's beautiful."

"Thanks, but I didn't do anything." Hutch shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs from his thoughts. "Are you all right? I know seeing him must've been a shock for you."

"Yes, it was," Chris admitted, bright tears beginning to shimmer in her eyes. "And no, I don't really think I'm all right, but I will be."

"Chris, I'm sorry." Hutch pulled her into his arms and rested his head on top of hers. "I shouldn't have let Starsky call you."

"Don't you dare say that, Ken." She rubbed her cheek against his chest. "There's nowhere else that I would rather have been tonight than with you. This doesn't change that."

"Thank you," Hutch whispered softly, pressing a kiss against the top of her head. "I don't think I could've made it through this without you."

"You could've, but it's nice to know you think that way." Christine raised her head and favored him with a sad smile. "Now, if you don't mind, I think I need some time alone."

"Are you sure?" At her nod, Hutch tightened his arms in a last hug and stepped away. "Promise you'll call me if you need anything."

"Promise." Christine caressed his cheek briefly before smiling over his shoulder at Starsky. "Thanks for calling me, Dave. Take care of Ken, and his family."

"Always." Starsky promised. "That's one classy lady." He commented proudly as Christine stepped onto the elevator. "Don't blow it this time, buddy."

"I'm going to try not to." Sighing deeply, Hutch ran a hand down his face. "What about you, Starsk? You ready to get out of this place for a while?"

"Depends."

"On what?" Hutch asked curiously.

"On whether you're going to go home and get some rest, like the doc suggested," Starsky eyed him knowingly, "or you're going to go sit in another hallway waiting for them to move Kendall into a room."

Hutch shook with repressed laughter, more of the evening's tension draining away, and wiped a tear of mirth from his eye. "How many sugars do you want in your coffee?"

~*~*~*~

"Uncle Huggy," Rachel smiled warmly as she opened the front door and moved forward into Huggy's open arms, "what are you doing here so early? I thought it was against your deeply held religious beliefs to get out of bed before noon."

"It is, my dear, it is." Huggy let out a long-suffering sigh. "And if you didn't have all of your mother's beauty and none of your father's dubious charms, I would be slumbering away even as we speak. However, since a little bird informed me that you are in charge of the ravenous hordes of Starsky offspring this fine mornin', I thought it behooved me to bring you this sumptuous repast."

Following the gesture Huggy threw over his shoulder, Rachel found Ike standing behind him, his arms laden with bags and serving dishes. "Ike, let me help you with that."

"Nonsense, my dear, let the younger children get it." Huggy gave Rachel a knowing wink and cleared his throat. "Fair Christine, do you think that you could aid my overburdened offspring while I converse with your sister?"

"Sure, Uncle Huggy." Chrissy laughed and reached for the top bag. Making eye contact with Ike, Chrissy blushed all the way up to her chestnut curls as she led him into the dining room, yelling for her younger brother and sister.

"So, what's the word?" Huggy asked, suddenly serious.

"Dad called a little while ago." Rachel replied quietly, "She's out of surgery and they should be moving her to the ICU soon."

"That's good. That's good." Huggy nodded, speaking more to himself than Rachel. "Did he say how Hutch's doin'?"

"Not really, only that everyone was tired, but relieved." Rachel turned probing blue eyes on her uncle.

"What's really going on? Maggie said that Uncle Hutch was practically hysterical when he called last night. Now suddenly he's got this daughter that nobody's ever heard of and people are shooting at her." She stopped, considering whether or not to go on. "Is she really his daughter?"

"It sure looks that way, darlin'." Huggy draped a thin arm across Rachel shoulders and pulled her into a hug.

"Then I really hope she's going to be all right." Rachel closed her eyes and rested her chin on Huggy's shoulder. "Because I don't think Uncle Hutch could take it if he lost someone else."

~*~*~*~

Bobby stood outside of the ICU, watching as the orderlies carefully transferred Kendall from the gurney to the bed. A detached portion of his mind marveled at how easy they made it look, not disturbing the wires

and tubes that seem to protrude from every visible surface of her body. Next to them, a nurse worked quickly and efficiently to reattach the respirator and reconnect the monitors that seemed to fill the small space.

"I'm sorry." He spoke without turning to look at the figure that had stepped up behind him. "I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. I know this isn't your fault."

"Then whose fault is it?" Hutch asked with a quiet intensity. "Just tell me who it is and I swear, I'll see to it that they're put away forever."

"I wish it were that simple, but it's not." Bobby's eyes never left the still figure in the room. "I love her, you know? She doesn't believe me when I tell her that. Thinks that I'm just trying to appease my conscience, but she's wrong. I'd end this all today if I thought I could get her and Michael out safely. That's all that matters to me anymore."

"Then let me help you." Hutch stepped in front of him, blocking his view. "We both want what's best for Kendall and Michael. If you'll just tell who's behind all this we can bring him down together."

"Listen to him." Starsky appeared on Bobby's other side. "Let us help you. Tell us what you know and we will stop it. I promise."

"There's the problem," Bobby said as he shook his head and laughed bitterly. "I promised, too. And I'm not just talking about my Federal oath. I promised KC."

"KC?" Hutch frowned, glancing over his shoulder into the room. "What did you promise her?"

"I promised that first, foremost, I'd protect Michael." Bobby's gaze softened as he looked down at the sleeping figure in the chair behind him. "Beyond that, she made me swear that I'd do everything in my power to keep you safe and out of this. I can't break that promise."

"Safe and out of this?" Hutch's voice began to rise. "I'm already in this. I'm her father." He stabbed his finger toward the window, then pointed at Michael. "I'm his grandfather. I was there in the room when they shot her. Hell, the shot was probably meant for me. How much more *in* this can I get? Would you tell me that? Because I'd really like to know."

"You could get dead," Bobby replied wearily. "All right, you want to help? I'll tell you how you can do that." He bent down to scoop up the bag that lay on the floor next to Michael and handed it to Hutch. "Take damn good care of both of them. And when Kendall wakes up, tell her I love her. That I always have."

Turning around, he planted a quick kiss on Michael's cheek with a whispered, "love you, slugger," before walking away and leaving the sleeping child behind.

~*~*~*~

"Starsk!"

Starsky turned away from the ICU window, flashing a warm smile at Huggy Bear as he came down the hall. "Hey, Hugs, what's up?"

"I came to see how everyone's doing." Huggy stopped next to Starsky and looked to Hutch sitting next to Kendall's bed, hands clasped before him. "So, that's her."

"Yeah, that's her."

"What do the doctors say?" Huggy moved closer to the glass.

"They say..." Starsky sighed, leaning against the window. "They say that it looks good. They repaired the damage that the bullets did and barring any complications she should be all right."

"Should be?" Huggy turned a concerned look on Starsky. "And what did they mean by 'barring complications'?"

"I don't know! Why don't you ask them?" Starsky snapped, immediately dropping his head and sighing. "Sorry, Huggy it's been a long night and it ain't over yet. I guess I'm just gettin' grumpy."

Huggy snorted softly, returning his attention to the room in front of him. "I'll let it slide, this time, just don't let it happen again." They stood together for several more minutes, keeping watch over their friend before Huggy spoke again. "By the way, if you're interested, I've got some information."

"What kind of info?" Starsky's attention instantly focused on Huggy. "Did Ike find out something else?"

"A little of this, a little of that." Huggy handed Starsky the slip of paper without further ado. "Ike managed to trace the holding companies a little further before running into another brick wall. And a former *associate* of mine dropped by with a fascinating bit of knowledge concerning your old friend Simonetti."

"Simonetti?" A scowl darkened Starsky's face. "What about him?"

"Well, it seems Mr. Straight and Narrow used to have a little problem with the ponies, a very *big* little problem, actually." Huggy crossed his arms, taking time to relish Starsky's reaction. "Seems he was into Little Tony Baker for the tune of thirty-five big ones."

"That's a pricey little tune," Starsky commented dryly. "Any idea how he paid the piper?"

"All at once, in cash," Huggy replied pointedly. "Two weeks after the former Mrs. Hutchinson met her unfortunate demise."

"That son of a bitch!" Starsky slammed his fist into the glass. "He knew. He knew and he let someone buy him off. God damn it! All his big words about making sure that crooked cops went down and the whole time..." His head dropped down and he leaned against the glass. "The whole time he was keepin' Hutch from his little girl. And what for? Money. A bunch of stinkin' money. When I get my hands on him I'm gonna rip his heart out and feed it to him. Then I'm gonna take that badge he's so proud of and shove it...."

Huggy slapped a hand over Starsky's mouth and nodded in the direction of the small blond boy staring up at them wide-eyed. "So, Starsk, you gonna introduce me to your young friend?"

"What? Oh, yeah." Starsky took a deep breath and tried to smile. "Huggy, I'd like you meet Michael Hutchinson. Michael, this is Huggy Bear, a very good friend of your Grandpa's and mine."

"Hutchinson?" Huggy asked startled.

"He's Kendall's son." Starsky bent down next to the chair. "How you feelin'? You want somethin' to eat?"

"No." Michael shook his head, stilling eyeing Huggy. "Is your name really Huggy Bear?"

"Yes, my name is Huggy Bear, little man." Huggy extended his hand. "And I am very pleased to meet you."

Michael shook Huggy's hand quickly and then turned to Starsky. "Can I see my mommy now?"

"I'm not sure, Mikey, let me check." Starsky looked up at Huggy. "Keep an eye on him for a minute, will ya?"

"Sure thing." Huggy pulled a chair up next to Michael's and sat down. "I'll just keep my man, Michael, here company for a...."

An alarm from beyond the glass silenced their conversation as a nurse rushed past them into the room.

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Hutch scooted his chair next to the bed, looking at all the tubes and wires that led from the silent figure lying there. Her pale face bare of make-up, lying still and dwarfed by machinery, Kendall looked like nothing more than a small child and Hutch was almost overwhelmed by the urge to gather her into his arms and protect her from the outside world.

Finally he reached out a shaky hand, picking up a strand of hair that had come loose from the ponytail one of the nurse's had gathered it in. It felt soft between his fingers, a shimmering gold that caught and played with the light, and for just a moment Hutch wanted to lose himself in the play of colors, to be anywhere but in this cold, sterile hospital room. The silence broken only by the steady beep of the monitor and the rhythmic ins and outs of the respirator, each breath unnaturally even.

Tucking the strand of hair behind her ear, Hutch looked into Kendall's face once more. "God, you look like such a baby lying here. But then you are, aren't you? My baby." Hutch felt tears stinging his eyes again and blinked them away. "I'm so sorry this happened. You have to know that this isn't what I wanted. If I had... If I'd had any idea that this would happen I would've never gone to see you, I swear." The room fell silent again, only the sound of muted sobs playing counterpoint to the unrelenting cadence of technology.

"I always wanted a little girl," Hutch continued after gathering himself together again. "I don't think even Chris knows that. Starsky probably does," Hutch smiled softly, "he seems to know everything else. But I always did. Even before Davy was born. I used to think how nice it would be. I could even picture her, blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a smile that lit up a room. In fact, she looked suspiciously like my sister, Carrie, but don't tell her that. She'd never let me live it down."

Hutch lay his hand against her temple, his thumb tracing gentle circles. "You know, this heart to heart sure would go a lot better if you'd wake up. What do you say, huh? Open those blue eyes of yours and give this old man a break."

When no reaction came from the still form, Hutch released a sigh and leaned back in his chair, his hand drifting down to capture Kendall's. "You're not going to make this easy on me, are you kiddo? That's okay. I've waited a lifetime, I can wait a few more hours." He gently squeezed the hand within his own. "I met Michael tonight. He's waiting outside for you to wake up and... Kendall?" Hutch leaned closer to the bed when he felt a slight pressure around his hand, "Kendall, can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me."

There it was again, the faint pressure as her fingers tightened around his own.

"That's it, that's good. Come on, baby, open your eyes." Hutch leaned over the bed, watching hopefully as pale lids fluttered above watery, unfocused eyes, "Hello, beautiful." Hutch made no effort to hide the tears that flowed down his cheeks as the eyes he'd been waiting to see tracked his voice, settling on his face as they slowly came into focus. "Welcome back."

Confusion swam in Kendall's eyes as she tried to move her head, only to find it inhibited by the respirator. Panicked, she began to struggle against it, pulling her head from side to side in an attempt to dislodge it.

"Kendall, calm down, you're in the hospital, but everything's going to be all right." Hutch quickly pushed the call button. "You just need to calm down and...."

An alarm from the respirator sent a surge of fear through Hutch just as the door burst open and a nurse rushed into the room. "I need you to wait outside, sir."

"But... I..." Hutch's heart raced in his chest, beating painfully. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Please, sir, just wait outside." The nurse took Hutch by the arm, pushing him firmly toward the door. "Please, just wait out here and the doctor will be with you as soon as he can."

"Don't tell me to wait out in the hall." Hutch barked. "The doctor told me she was going to be all right, now I want to know what's going on."

"I'm sorry, sir, you'll have to wait for...."

"Sheryl, what's going on?" Doctor Webber pushed past Hutch into the room.

"It's the vent alarm, doctor," Sheryl indicated, giving Hutch one last shove out the door.

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"Hutch! What is it?" Starsky grabbed Hutch's arm as he stumbled into the hallway. "What happened?"

"I don't... I don't know..." Hutch looked around, crestfallen. "She was awake, she woke up and... and she was confused and scared and then" He gestured vaguely. "Then the alarm started going off and the nurse threw me out."

"Where's my mommy?" Michael demanded fearfully, beginning to pick up on the panic of the adults around him. "I want my mommy."

"I know, Michael," Hutch reached out to him. "I know this is scary, but I'm sure she's going to be fine and...."

"NO!" Michael shouted and pulled away, tears rimming his eyes. "I want my mommy. NOW!"

"Shh, shh, it's all right, sweetheart." Hutch wrapped Michael in his arms, holding him close. "It's going to be all right. I promise. I'm not going to let anything happen to your mommy. I won't, I promise." He rocked Michael in his arms as the boy sobbed into his shoulder. "Everything's going to be all right."

~*~*~*~

"You sent for me, sir?" Bobby repressed a nervous shudder as he stepped into the study.

"Yes, Robert," The dark head, streaked with gray, didn't lift from the model ship in front of him. "Please, take a seat." He motioned for the chair next to him.

"I'll stand." Bobby unconsciously twisted the chauffeur's cap in his hands. "If that's all right with you, sir."

"Quite all right, Robert." He set down the tweezers he held and turned to focus his full attention on Bobby. "I have to tell you, Robert, that I am sorely disappointed in you."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Bobby felt the knot in his stomach tighten.

"I had such high hopes for you. I knew of your government connections, of course." He reached for the drink that sat on the table. "That is why you've had so much trouble obtaining the evidence you seek. However, I had hoped that your attachment to my daughter would be enough to sway your loyalties. Sadly, I now see that it is not."

Bobby found it hard to swallow past the sound constriction in his throat. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't know what you're...."

"My grandson." The man's eyes blazed with a sudden fury. "You took Michael to Hutchinson. That is one betrayal I cannot tolerate. Michael is the key to all this, to everything I have done to avenge my family on Hutchinson and I will brook no interference from you. From anyone."

"I don't understand, sir, I have no idea where Michael...." Bobby's eyes widened as another figure stepped into the room. "Miguel?" He looked from the gun in Miguel's hands to his employer. "Mr. Gunther, I...."

"Good-bye, Agent Montgomery." James Marshall Gunther, Jr. watched dispassionately as Miguel pulled the trigger and Bobby's body jerked twice before crashing to the floor.

~*~*~*~

"Mr. Hutchinson?" Sheryl stepped out of Kendall's ICU room, giving Hutch a reassuring smile, "Dr. Webber says you can come in now."

"I can?" Hutch sprang to his feet, still holding onto Michael's hand. "Can... can Michael..." He glanced with trepidation over her shoulder into Kendall's room. "Is it all right if Michael comes with me?"

"I don't see why not." She extended her hand to Michael. "Would you like to come with me and see your mommy?"

"Yes!" Michael jumped up, reaching eagerly for Sheryl's hand.

"Then here we go." She pushed the door open and led the excited child inside, with Hutch following closely on her heels.

"Hello, Mr. Hutchinson." Dr. Webber looked up from checking the cardiac monitor next to the bed. "I'm sorry if we alarmed you. I realize how frightening something like that can be."

"What the hell happened?" Hutch stepped around the doctor to gaze down at his sleeping daughter. "How is she?"

"Her vitals look good, and aside from that slight scare she's holding her own."

"Slight scare?" Hutch growled. "You still haven't told me what happened!"

"It's not an uncommon occurrence for patient's to fight the respirator upon awakening," Dr. Webber replied calmly. "They wake up scared and disoriented and don't realize that it's there to help them. Her struggles are what set off the alarm. However, since her lung is fully reinflated and she seems to be breathing on her own, we've taken her off the respirator."

"Is that safe?" Hutch asked in alarm. "She just got out of surgery a few hours ago. You said that she needed it to give her lungs a chance to heal. How much healing could they have done since then?"

"Mr. Hutchinson, the anesthesia that your daughter was given for the surgery depresses respiration, that in conjunction with the injuries she received is why we chose to put her on the vent, but she's recovered

enough that it's not necessary," Dr. Webber assured him. "Struggling against the respirator will only draw strength that she needs to heal."

"I'm sorry, Doctor, I didn't mean to snap at you." Hutch turned back to the bed, slipping his hand beneath Kendall's. "I'm just worried, that's all."

"I understand, Mr. Hutchinson." The doctor smiled warmly. "I see a lot of that. I'll leave you alone with your daughter for a few minutes, but then the nurse will be back to give her a mild sedative and I expect you to go home. I don't want to see you back in here until tomorrow morning."

"But...."

"Mr. Hutchinson," Dr. Webber continued gently. "You're obviously exhausted, your grandson can hardly keep his eyes open. Go home, get some rest. Kendall's going to sleep straight through and I promise someone will call you if there's any change."

"All right," Hutch agreed wearily, "in a few minutes. I just, I want spend some more time with her."

The doctor left the room with a nod, leaving Hutch and Michael alone with Kendall.

"Come here, Michael." Hutch stretched his hand out. "Let's say hi to your mother?"

"Is she asleep?" Michael whispered, tiptoeing toward the bed.

"Yes, but I'll bet that she knows you're here anyway." Hutch lifted Michael over the bed. "Look, see that? She's smiling, just a little bit, and she wasn't doing that before."

"Mommy?" Michael reached down to touch her cheek. "Mommy, can you hear me?"

Heavy lids lifted, revealing a clearer gaze than the one just moments before "M... Mi... Mich...." a cough rattled out of her dry throat.

"He's right here," Hutch replied comfortingly as he set Michael down. "Here, the nurse left you some ice." He spooned some into her mouth. "Don't try to swallow it, just suck on it a little. I'll be right back." Hutch pulled the chair closer to the top of the bed and set Michael on top of it. "See, here he is, safe and sound."

Kendall smiled gratefully at Hutch and reaching weakly for Michael's hand. "H-hi, baby."

"Hi, Mommy." Michael leaned onto the bed, looking alarmed at her wince of pain. "I'm sorry."

"N-no, it's all right." Kendall bit back the pain and tried to clear her throat. "I'm okay, really. Come here."

Michael crept closer, biting his lower lip before sitting on the edge of the bed. "Does it hurt?"

"Only a little bit, baby." Kendall stroked his cheek and struggled to keep her eyes open. "Are you being a good boy?"

"Yes." Michael nodded enthusiastically. "I sat outside and was real quiet for Uncle Starsky, just like you taught me."

"That's my good boy." Kendall winced as she tried to shift in the bed, lifting her eyes meet to Hutch's. "Where's Bobby?"

"I don't know," Hutch admitted quietly, laying a hand on Michael's shoulder. "He dropped Michael off and

told me to tell you that he loves you. Then he left. Kendall, honey, please, tell me who did this. It's the only way I can..." He looked over at the door as the nurse stepped in, irritated at the interruption. "Excuse me, can we just have a few more minutes?"

"I'm sorry," Sheryl smiled apologetically as she swapped the IV port and injected the sedative, "but she really does need her rest. You have a couple minutes before it kicks in, but then you have to go."

Hutch turned back to his daughter. "Kendall, please, tell me who it is."

"I can't. It's too... too dangerous. I can't," was her sleepy reply. "Take care of Michael. Promise me. Promise you'll..." Her words drifted off as sleep claimed her.

"I promise." Hutch pressed a kiss against her forehead. "I promise."

~*~*~*~

Starsky jumped out of his chair as Hutch walked out of the room carrying Michael. "How is she?"

"Sleeping. The nurse gave her a shot of something, knocked her right out." Hutch looked aimlessly around the hallway, at a loss as to what to do next.

"But she's going to be all right?" Starsky asked worriedly.

"Yeah, yeah, the doctor thinks so." Hutch sighed and shook his head. "She still won't tell me, Starsk. Whoever's behind this shot her and she still won't tell me anything. I don't know what to do now. Do I keep trying? I mean, the last time I did I nearly got her...."

"Hutch, stop, this isn't your fault," Starsky interrupted compassionately. "The person who shot Kendall is responsible for this, the person who kept her from you for all these years. And you and I are going to find that person, buddy, and then we're going to put them away for the rest of their miserable lives."

"How, Starsk?" Hutch demanded. "How are we going to do that when we don't even have a clue where to start?"

"But we do have a clue, we've got a few of them, in fact, we just need to start using our noggin's." Starsky tapped the side of his head. "Let's face it, partner, we've been going about this all wrong. Ever since you found out about the kid we've been running all over, pickin' up pieces of clues when all we need is right there in that room."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hutch sighed, rubbing his face with his free hand. "Starsk, I already told you, she's not going to give us anything."

"I know that, but we know where she was born, we know where Vanessa sent her to school." Starsky pointed out patiently, "And we know the school didn't just turn her out on the streets. Somebody had to come for her and that means there are records of who did. And we know where she went to high school; that means more records. We just need to get those records." Starsky grinned broadly. "See, it's simple. We just connect the dots until we find the light at the end of the rainbow."

"Tunnel, Starsk." Hutch shook his head with barely concealed amusement.

"Tunnel?" Starsky paused, looking at Hutch in confusion.

"The light at the end of the tunnel, Starsky." Hutch laughed. "Tunnel."

"Oh yeah, whatever, anyway that's what we need to do," Starsky finished with a gesture toward Michael. "But, until then you need to take your grandson," a huge grin spread across Starsky's face, "home. And I need to go home, see my kids, and get some sleep in a real bed before I follow up on what Huggy brought me."

"What did he bring you?" Hutch asked, suddenly interested.

"Nothin' that hasn't waited twenty years and can't wait another day," Starsky replied pointedly, nodding toward Michael's drooping eyelids. "Go home. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Okay, you're right." Hutch placed a steadying hand on Michael's back, smiling softly as he did so. "And thanks, Starsk."

Starsky watched fondly as Hutch juggled his sleepy burden and pushed the elevator call button, holding back a laugh as he started forward to help his partner.

"Excuse me, Mr. Starsky?"

He turned to find Dr. Webber licking his lips nervously and watching Hutch as the elevator doors closed in front of him. "Do you have a moment?"

"What is it, Doc?" Starsky's heart leapt into his throat at the somber expression on the doctor's face. Had something gone wrong? Why hadn't the doctor stopped Hutch if it had? "Is somethin' wrong?"

"What?" Dr. Webber looked momentarily confused. "Oh, no, no. Sorry. Ms. Hutchinson was stable the last time I checked on her. I'm here about the tests we discussed. I have the preliminary results back."

"Already?" Starsky bounced onto his toes, eyeing the doctor with excitement. "And? What'd they say? Is Hutch her father?"

"As I said, these are simply the preliminary results, a DNA test will take several days." Dr. Webber reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses. "I have to tell you, though, in spite of all you told me, I feel very leery of discussing these results with you. I really feel that it would be best that I got Captain Hutchinson's permission to perform these tests and then sat with him to go over the results."

"I understand where you're comin' from, Doc, I really do." Starsky shifted from foot to foot, trying to resist the urge to rip the clipboard out of the doctor's hands. "But believe me when I tell ya that either way this turns out, it's best if Hutch hears it from me. And that he doesn't hear it until we know for sure."

"Very well," the doctor sighed and put on his glasses, "I guess I'll have to trust your judgment on this." Flipping up the top page on the clipboard, he scanned it quickly. "From what I've been able to gather from the autopsy records, as well as some medical records on file, Vanessa McNeill Hutchinson's blood type was A positive. Which means for her daughter to have AB negative blood the father's blood type would have to be...."

"B negative?" Starsky guessed, when the doctor nodded his affirmation Starsky's face split open into a wide grin. "Which means Hutch *is* her father."

"Which means that someone with B negative blood is her father," Dr. Webber reminded him. "In most likelihood, Captain Hutchinson."

"Thanks, Doc, that's just about the best news I've had all day." Starsky clapped the doctor on the back before stepping into the elevator.

~*~*~*~

Hutch carefully shifted his sleeping bundle, fumbling for his keys as he tried to unlock the door without waking Michael.

"Where are we?" Michael's sleepy question was accompanied by a yawn.

"We're home." Hutch ruffled the boy's hair and set him down. "Are you hungry?"

"This isn't my home." Michael frowned as he walked into the unfamiliar house. "Where is it?"

"No, this isn't your home, it's mine." Hutch crouched down in front of him and brushed Michael's bangs out of his eyes. "I hope you don't mind staying with me for a while. Just until your mother's feeling better."

"I guess." Michael shrugged, wandering around the room. Hutch watched with amusement as Michael peeked down the hall before moving on to the sliding glass door. "Wow." Michael turned wide eyes up at Hutch. "You live on the beach?"

"Yeah, I do." Hutch unlatched the door and slid it open. "Do you like the beach?"

"Yes!" Michael nodded enthusiastically. "Mommy takes me to picnics on the beach when Grandpa James is gone."

"Your mother likes the beach?" Hutch felt his breath catch in his throat. It was a little thing, he knew, but it was a connection nonetheless, a link between him and his daughter. A common bond that might hopefully lead to more one day.

"Mommy says it's peaceable." Michael bounced eagerly on his heels. "Can we go out and look at the water? Please?"

"Why don't we have something to eat first?" Hutch stood slowly, ignoring the creaking in his knees. "I'll bet you're starving after spending all morning at the hospital."

"Could we..." Michael looked down at his shoes, suddenly shy. "Could we take it outside and have a picnic on the beach?" Clear blue eyes looked up at Hutch beseechingly.

"I think that sounds like an excellent idea." Hutch reached out hesitantly and took Michael's hand in his. "Why don't we see what I've got in the refrigerator?"

"Okay!" Michael's smile broadened as he clutched Hutch's hand and followed him into the kitchen.

"Mommy makes potato salad and tuna fish and apples and grapes, Mommy loves grapes, and pickles and...."

"All that, huh?" Hutch asked, laughing as he opened the fridge door. "Let's see, I've got alfalfa sprouts, wheat germ... No, huh?" He looked down at Michael's crinkled up nose and expression of disgust. "All right, let's see what else I've got in here. Bread. Mayo. Mustard. Bologna. Bologna? Starsk must've left that."

"I like that!" Michael popped out with quickly, "With lots of mayo... mayona...." he struggled to wrap his tongue around the long word, "mayonnaise. We could have baloney sandwiches!"

"I don't know, sweetie... Sorry, Michael," Hutch turned the package over dubiously, "your uncle Starsky must've left this here, but I don't know if it's any good."

"Smell it!" Michael offered helpfully. "That's what Mommy does."

"She smells it?" Hutch looked down at the hopeful little face and back to the package. "How does bad baloney smell?"

"Bad?" Small shoulders lifted beneath a bewildered face. "But Mommy always makes a funny face if it smells bad and, oh yeah, you're not s'posed to eat it if it's green."

"Don't worry, if it's green we'll throw it right away." Hutch peeled back the edge and took a tentative sniff. When nothing assailed his nose, he took a deeper breath. "Well, I guess it's okay. It looks all right."

"YAY!" Michael threw up his arms triumphantly. "A baloney sandwich picnic!"

~*~*~*~

Starsky dropped his keys onto the table next to the door and shrugged out of his jacket with a tired stretch. The long and emotionally trying night had left him feeling old and wrung out. All he wanted at the moment was a hot shower and eight blissfully uninterrupted hours of sleep.

Stopping outside his bedroom door, his attention was caught by the sound of voices drifting down the hall, accompanied by the happy peal of laughter. Curiosity piqued, he traveled further down the hall, quietly nudging Chrissy's door open and peeking inside.

Ike sat in the chair in front of Chrissy's computer, laughing as she shoved him aside with her shoulder and tried to take over the keyboard.

"What are you doing?" Ike asked between bursts of laughter.

"Showing you how it's done, hotshot," Chrissy responded with a smirk as her fingers flew over the keys.

Starsky pushed the hospital room door open slowly, not wanting to disturb the occupants if they were sleeping. "Rosey?" He peeked around the edge.

"Dave! There are you are," Rosey's face lit up as her husband stepped into the room and approached the bed, "come see her. Isn't she beautiful?"

"Her? It's a girl?" Starsky grinned broadly, peeling back the edge of the blanket so he could get a good look at the baby Rosey held. "We've got another girl? What did the doctor say? Is she all right? She wasn't supposed to be here for another three weeks."

"The doctor says she's fine, just a little impatient." Rosey lifted the baby up and offered her to him. "Would you like to hold your daughter?"

"Would I ever." Tears blurred his vision as Starsky lifted the small bundle into his arms and began cooing softly. "Would ya just look at her?"

Rosey watched her husband, falling in love with him all over again as he gazed lovingly down at their daughter. "You're not too disappointed, are you?"

"Disappointed?" Starsky's head snapped up from the baby he'd been cooing at. "Baby, what're ya talkin' about? Why would I be disappointed?"

"Come on, Dave, I know you were hoping for a boy and..."

"A boy? Are you crazy?" Starsky pulled the blanket further back and tilted the baby to face Rosey. "Look at this beautiful little face. How could anyone want a boy when they could have a sweet little angel like this?"

"Are you sure?" Rosey caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I know how much you wanted a little boy to name after Ken."

Starsky laughed, laying the baby gently in Rosey's lap before perching on the edge of the bed. "Ya know, for such a smart lady, you sure can be pretty stupid sometimes. Yeah, if she'd been a boy I woulda liked to name her after Hutch, but Rachel's the best thing that ever happened to me. Well, next to the day you walked back into my life. And I can't imagine anything that would be better than having a dozen little girls just like her." He bent to kiss the top of the baby's head. "Besides, maybe the next one will be a boy. Or the one after that. Or the one after...."

"Stop, already!" Rosey ordered, laughing. "Why don't we concentrate on naming this one before we start thinking about any others?"

"Okay, what'd ya wanna name her?" Starsky asked playfully, wrapping an arm around Rosey's shoulder. "I know, how about Petunia?"

"Petunia?" Rosey stared at him in horror. "Dave, tell me you're kidding."

"You don't like Petunia?" Starsky turned to her with a wounded pout. "I like Petunia. Well, how about Gladys?"

"DAVE!" Rosey punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Would you take this seriously?"

"Ouch!" Starsky turned a mock glare on her. "That hurt. All right, Miss Serious...."

"That's Mrs. Serious, to you," Rosey stated imperiously, barely managing to conceal her grin.

"Mrs. Serious," Starsky corrected with a tilt of his head. "What do you propose we name yon offspring?"

"Well, I was thinking, if it's all right with you," Rosey took a deep breath, "I thought we could name her after Christine."

"I like that." Starsky carefully smoothed his thumb through the baby's thin, silky hair, "Christine Rose."

"Rose? Where did that come from?" Rosey eyed him suspiciously. "Dave, I told you when Rachel was born, we're not naming a baby after me!"

"Who said it was after you?" Starsky immediately broke eye contact, fussing with the baby instead. "I'll have you know that Rose is my favorite Aunt's name."

"Uh huh."

"Well, it is," Starsky continued inspecting the baby, smiling as her tiny hand wrapped around his finger. "Would you look at the grip on this girl? She's gonna be the first female major league pitcher."

"That is so not true!" Chrissy's voice broke through Starsky's recollections. "God, you are such a dork sometimes."

"I'm a dork?" Ike scoffed. "You're in The Computer Society."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Chrissy planted her hands on her hips and fixed Ike with a glare.

"It means that only dorks are...."

"I thought I told you to stay away from my daughter," Starsky barked out gruffly, scarcely containing his laughter as they both jumped guiltily. "And what have I told you about having boys in your room, young lady?"

"Uncle Dave, hi." Ike leapt to his feet, putting as much space between himself and Chrissy as possible while still staying beyond arms reach from Starsky. "We were just... Um, we were just looking to see if we could crack the security on that holding company I told Pops about."

"Oh, I see." Starsky circled around the nervous young man. "You were just in here engaging in illegal activities on the Internet with my daughter."

"Yes!" Ike nodded vigorously, but then stopped suddenly. "I mean, no, I mean, yeah, we were but it wasn't...."

"Daaaaaad!" Chrissy rolled her eyes at him. "Stop it. You know that Ike and I were just trying to help you out."

"All right, all right." Starsky threw up his hands in defeat. "So, did ya come up with anything?"

"A whole lot of nothin'," Ike responded dejectedly. "Man, it's like trying to track smoke, there's just nothin' there."

"Hey, you can do it, Ike." Chrissy bumped him with her shoulder, giving him an encouraging smile. "You've just got to back away for a while."

"She's right, Ike." Starsky cuffed the kid playfully on the side of the head. "You've gotten a lot farther than I could've. Just give it a rest. I'll see what I can shake out with what you've given me."

"Thanks, Uncle Dave." A grin sprouted across Ike's face. "I guess I better get goin'. Mom'll pitch a fit if I'm late. We're going to supper at Grandma and Gramp's."

"Bye, Ike!" Chrissy smiled shyly at him. "I'll call you later."

"See ya later, kiddo." Starsky ushered the young man to the door and then turned back to his daughter. "Where're your brother and sisters?"

Chrissy shrugged, plopping back down into her chair. "I don't know, I think Rae took 'em out for ice cream."

"Kay. I'll see ya later." Starsky stopped in the doorway and looked back over at Chrissy, hunched over her keyboard. Crossing the room, he planted a kiss on top of the surprised teenager's head. "Love ya."

~*~*~*~

Hutch sat up with a gasp, sweat rolling down his face. Reaching under his pillow for his gun, he was surprised to find it missing until his gaze fell on the sleeping child beside him. Michael. He'd locked the gun in the safe before lying down to catch up on some much needed sleep.

Falling back on the pillow, Hutch tried to remember what had woken him. The threads of his nightmare eluded him, leaving him feeling unsettled and anxious. Closing his eyes, he listened carefully, but nothing reached his ears other than normal sounds of the day and the soft breathing of the child next to him.

Turning over, he punched his pillow, twisting and turning in an attempt to get comfortable. Taking a deep breath, he willed tense muscles to slowly unwind and relax, but sleep still eluded him. Heaving an angry sigh, Hutch sat up and tried once again to place the uneasy feeling that churned in his gut. It wasn't Starsky,

that was a fear he was all too familiar with. It wasn't the kids; Starsky would've called him first thing if there had been a problem. Michael slept peacefully beside him, undisturbed by his restlessness. That left Kendall.

Even as he told himself that the hospital would've called if there had been a problem, Hutch reached for the phone. Fumbling through the address book on his nightstand until he found the number and quickly dialed.

Instead of the quick response that would have calmed his fears, Hutch found himself listening to the repeated jangle of the phone. "Come on, come on, answer the phone."

"Wuz wron'?" Michael rubbed his sleep filled eyes and looked up at Hutch, yawning, "'S it Mommy?"

Hutch felt his heart freeze in his chest as he looked down at Michael. *Please, please let everything be all right. I promised him, please don't let me be wrong.* Inhaling slowly, Hutch paused to gather himself and tried to smile, "No, I'm sorry, it's not your Mommy. Just go back to sleep, sweetheart."

"K," was Michael's sleepy reply and he fell back asleep the instant his head hit the pillow.

Carefully opening the bedroom door, Hutch slipped out into the hall and hurried into the living room, still attempting to get a response. Spying his cell phone lying on the coffee table, Hutch hit the speed dial and brought it to his other ear.

"Starsky residence." A bright voice answered.

"Rae? Is your Dad there?"

"Uncle Hutch? Sorry, no, he got a call from the station and said he had to go down and start a records check on something." She hesitated a moment before asking nervously. "Uncle Hutch, how is... I mean, Dad told us about your d-daughter and I was wondering...."

"She's fine, or at least she's going to be." *I hope*, he finished silently.

"That's really great," Rachel sighed with relief. "You know that if there's anything I can do to help you just have to ask."

"Yeah, I know, sweetheart." Hutch glanced down the hall and contemplated the still ringing phone in his other ear. "Actually, if you're not busy this afternoon, there is something you could do for me."

~*~*~*~

"Are you sure this is okay, Rachel?" Hutch asked for the third time, his hand curling anxiously around Michael's shoulder. "Because if you've got something else to do I can make other arrangements. Maybe take Michael with me to the...."

"Uncle Hutch, it's fine really." Rachel assured him with an affectionate smile. "Actually, you're probably doing me a favor. Hopefully he'll play with Kenny and then I can actually get some work done on my term paper today."

"You're sure this isn't a problem?" Hutch looked down into Michael's face, his heart melting at the trepidation he saw. "I could just take him in with me."

"Uncle Hutch, stop it. He'll be fine here. He can help Kenny drive me crazy," Rachel admonished as she bent down to Michael's level. "Hello, Michael, I'm Rachel. I hope we're going to be friends. And I know that my brother's very excited about your visit. He's in his room getting all his cars out to show you. Would you like to see them?"

"Can I?" Michael looked up at Hutch, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Of course, you can." Hutch ruffled his hair briefly, watching as Michael stepped inside. "Call me if you need anything."

"I will," Rachel promised. "You'd better get going. Listen, about that call Dad got. I know he said he was just going ahead to start a records check, but he practically had steam coming out of his ears when he left. If you get a chance, could you maybe call him and see what's going on?"

"Sure, I'll call him as soon as I'm done checking on Kendall." Watching Rachel's worried expression, Hutch was struck anew with her resemblance to her mother.

"Thanks. I don't know who Dad's mad at, but I sure wouldn't want to be them when he finds them."

~*~*~*~

"Simonetti," Starsky spat the name out as he barged through the office door, looking as though it had left a bad taste in his mouth.

Lt. Simonetti started out of his chair as the door slammed into the wall. "Starsky? What the hell's going on? Didn't your mother ever teach you to knock?"

"Didn't your mother ever teach you that there are laws against being a crooked cop?" Starsky growled, reaching across the desk and hauling Simonetti forward across it. "I oughta rip your head off and shove it up your ass, ya sorry excuse for a human being." Starsky punctuated his statement by slamming Simonetti into the wall.

"Get your hands off me, Starsky." Simonetti tried to pull away, panic spreading across his features. "Have you finally snapped? I'll have you up on charges for this."

"CHARGES? CHARGES?" Rage contorted Starsky's features. "You want to talk about charges? I'll give you charges. How about aidin' and abettin' a kidnappin'? Or maybe graft? Corruption? How does slavery sound to ya? Huh?" Starsky pushed the man away, unable to trust his own heated emotions, and watched as he slumped to the floor.

"What the hell are you talking about, Starsky?" Simonetti rose on shaky legs. "You've finally lost your mind. Slavery? What in God's name are you talking about?"

"That's what they call it when you sell someone, isn't it?" Starsky asked, his voice low and deadly. "When you steal someone's little girl before they even get a chance to know about her and then sell her just to pay off your gambling debts."

Simonetti froze, his eyes frantically seeking a means of escape. Realizing that there was no way he could get past Starsky's furious form and to the relative safety of the hall, he chewed his lower lip nervously and tried out his best bluff. "I don't know what you're talking about. There must be some...."

"CAN IT!" Starsky roared, turning on Simonetti with frightening speed. "So help me God, if I hear another lie come out of your mouth I'm gonna toss ya out the nearest window with the trash. I know what you did to Hutch. I know what you did to his little girl. All I want to hear from you is who and why."

"How did you find out?" Simonetti deflated in front of Starsky, stepping across the room to slump down in his chair. "All these years. I thought it was behind me. When it first happened I went to bed every night expecting a knock on the door. But after the first year, when it didn't come, I thought it was really over."

"I don't give a damn what you thought," Starsky hissed. "Just tell me who was pullin' your strings."

"The McNeills," he whispered, head bowed. "I found some papers from the boarding school in Vanessa Hutchinson's belongings. After I called them, I got a call from Mrs. Hutchinson's parents. They said that their granddaughter didn't know about her father and they didn't want her to know. It all seemed so simple. Hutchinson was going to jail, anyway, for killing his wife. I figured what harm could it do?"

"Except Hutch didn't kill her." Starsky slapped his hands down on the desk. "And you knew that. Why didn't you tell him then? WHY?"

"It was the money." Simonetti's shoulders shook. "I needed the money. You don't understand, I was so far under and I had a wife and two kids to worry about. If anything had happened to me who would take care of them?"

"Who would take care of them?" Starsky's lip curled in disgust. "Who took care of that little girl? Thanks to you, to your lies, she grew up without her daddy. She was raised by someone who has her too terrified to even tell her father that she's alive. And now, she's lyin' in a hospital bed with two bullets in her back." He grabbed a handful of Simonetti's shirt, hauling him to his feet once more, "You're through here. If you know what's good for you, you'll get the hell out of here before Hutch finds out. And if I ever see your face around here again, I'll rip it off for him."

~*~*~*~

"Captain Hutchinson." Sheryl looked up from the bank of monitors in front of her. "I thought you were going home."

"I did. I just..." He gestured toward Kendall's room. "I couldn't really sleep and when I tried to call there was no answer."

The nurse eyed him frankly, weighing her response carefully before replying. "We had a small problem earlier, her pressure started dropping. It took Dr. Kaplan about twenty minutes to get her stabilized again."

"What?" Hutch asked, alarmed. "What happened?"

"We're not really sure." Sheryl admitted quietly. "Sometimes things like that just happen and we're never really sure what caused it. But she's stable now and her vitals are all improving."

"Can I go see her?" Hutch gazed nervously down the hall.

"Sure," she smiled warmly at him, "just don't stay too long. Rest is the best thing for her right now."

"Thanks."

He hurried down the hall and into Kendall's room. She was still so pale, but she looked a little better, didn't she? Hutch tried to assure himself as he approached the bed. The deathly translucence replaced by a hint of color in her high cheekbones.

Leaning over the bed, he pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "I guess I'd better go figure out what that partner of mine is up to, huh?" Brushing another kiss across her brow, he silently left.

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"Keri, is Starsky in?"

"Captain Hutchinson." Relief flashed across the young woman's features as she spotted him. "Thank goodness you're here. Captain Starsky got in about an hour ago. I don't know what's wrong but... I've never seen him this angry. I tried to find out what it is, but he just locked the office door and he won't take any calls."

"Thanks, Keri. I'll take care of it," Hutch assured her as he moved to knock on the door. "Starsk? Starsky!"

The door flew open, crashing into the wall next to it. Hutch peered cautiously inside. "Starsk?"

"I shoulda just dumped him out the nearest window," Starsky barked, pacing furiously across the office. "Sanctimonious, two-faced bastard."

"Starsk, what are you talking about?" Hutch approached his friend slowly, hands held before him. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that pig Simonetti's still alive." Starsky stopped in mid-pace, glaring angrily at his friend. "That son-of-a-bitch knew. All this time he knew about Kendall and kept it quiet 'cause Vanessa's parents paid him to."

"Simonetti?" Hutch shook with anger. "He knew this? All along." He surged toward the door. "I'll kill him."

"Hutch, no." Starsky shook his head, his anger finally giving way to weariness as he reached for Hutch's arm. "Leave Simonetti for IA. By the time they're done with him, he'll be wishin' all he had to worry about was a poundin' from you. We got more important things to take care of."

"You're right, you are," Hutch agreed, sounding as if he were still trying to convince himself. "It's just that..." His hands flexed, unconsciously forming fists.

"Ya wanna rip his head off and shove it up his ass?" Starsky suggested helpfully. "Pound his head into the nearest wall? It can wait. 'Sides, I already did that."

A bubble of laughter escaped as Hutch looked at Starsky. "Thanks, buddy."

"Anytime." Starsky sank into his chair, ignoring Hutch's exasperated sigh as he propped his feet up on the desk. "Believe me when I say it was my pleasure. Now what?"

"Now I guess you go see if Minnie's dug up anything new." Hutch reached for the phone. "I'm going to call Helen again. And this time I'm going to get the truth out of her even if I've got to fly down there and shake it out of her."

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Starsky leaned across the counter, peering into the records department with a large grin. "Hey, pretty lady, I'm here to take you away from all this."

"Don't you just wish, baby," a mischievous twinkle lighted Minnie's eyes as she ambled toward him, still spry despite her years, "don't you just wish. You know you'd never be able to keep up with me."

"But what a way to go," Starsky clasped his hand over his heart and threw back his head. "What more could a man ask for?"

"Good question." Minnie fixed a penetrating gaze on him. "Two visits in a week? What're you looking for now, Starsky?"

"Same as before, Minnie, my love." Starsky turned serious, a drained expression settling on his face. "I'm hopin' you've found out some more about that matter we discussed the other day."

"You mean Hutch's daughter?" Minnie asked astutely.

"How did you..." Starsky held up his hands in front of him. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

"I heard about the shooting." Minnie gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze. "How's Blondie holding up?"

"He's holdin', Min, he's holdin'." He gave her a grateful smile. "But he'd be doin' a lot better if we could figure out what's goin' on. Tell me you came up with somethin'."

"Wait right here." She turned away from the counter, retrieved a file off of her desk and slapped it down in front of Starsky with a grin. "How about a fingerprint match?"

"What? She's got a record?" Starsky snapped the file open. "For what?"

"No, not a record." Minnie flipped through the pages, stopping at the appropriate one. "She was a material witness to a murder. Her fingerprints were taken, to be compared to the ones on the weapon found at the scene."

"James Michael Andersen, age twenty-one, shot twice in the chest at point blank range." His finger skimmed down the page. "Witnesses relationship to victim, fiancTe. Michael's father," Starsky murmured under his breath.

"What?"

"Huh? Oh sorry." Starsky closed the file and looked at her thoughtfully, "I was just thinkin'. Two shots in the chest, someone wanted to make sure this kid was dead. So why'd they leave a witness just stand there? Mind if I take this?"

"No, just make sure you bring it back," Minnie admonished him playfully.

"You know where'ta find me if I don't," Starsky tossed over his shoulder on the way out.

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"McNeill residence."

"Helen McNeill, please. Tell her that Captain Hutchinson of the Bay City Police Department," Hutch fought down a rush of anger, "needs to speak to her on a police matter."

"Yes, sir."

Hutch drummed his fingers impatiently on the desktop, his fingers gripping the phone tightly as the same mantra repeated again and again in his head. *Damn them. How dare they? How dare they?*

"Kenneth?" The same frosty voice answered the phone. "What is this about? I told you I had nothing to say regarding the subject we spoke of."

"You better come up with something," Hutch replied, his voice low and dangerous, "because we're now talking about an attempted murder investigation. As well as possible Federal kidnapping charges."

"I... What? What are you talking about?" Helen's voice faltered. "You're making no sense, Kenneth."

"I'm talking about your granddaughter, who's lying in the hospital after being shot," Hutch growled. "I'm talking about Simonetti, who spilled everything, including the fact that you paid him to help you keep my daughter from me."

"Kenneth, I don't know...." She fell silent for a moment. "What do you want?"

"The truth," Hutch replied coldly. "All of it."

"I'm not sure where to begin. You know that Joseph blamed you for Vanessa's death," Helen began with a weary note. "I suppose I did as well. He was determined that you would have no part in her daughter's life."

"That much I figured out," Hutch snarled. "Now tell me what happened to my daughter, what did you do with her?"

"Joseph and I agreed that neither of us was interested in raising another child, so we found a good school, one that took younger children and...."

"And shipped her off?"

"Yes, I suppose you could look at it that way. We chose to see it as providing her with a good education." A pretentious note crept back into her voice. "The same kind of education you chose to throw away. Joseph suffered some financial set backs, however, and after a few years it became necessary to bring her back to live with us."

"And then?" Hutch asked, his tone glacial.

"And then... I don't know, not exactly." Her voice trailed off. "Joseph made a deal with someone. Someone who was willing to adopt Kendall, to give her a home and...."

"And use her as a pawn against me?" Hutch leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, trying to ward off the nausea that rolled through his gut. "So, you just sold her. You sold your own grandchild. What the hell kind of people do that?"

"You have no right to judge us," Helen countered, hotly. "If you had stayed married to Vanessa, given her the kind of home she deserved, instead of divorcing her and bringing shame to our family, you could have raised the child any way you saw fit. But you didn't and the girl was our responsibility. We did as we saw fit under the circumstances."

"And it never, not once, occurred to you to do what was best for Kendall?" Hutch sighed, feeling suddenly drained. "Who, Helen? Who did you *sell* her to?"

"I don't.... I don't know. That's the truth, Kenneth," Helen replied. "Joseph took care of all the arrangements. I never even spoke to the attorneys he dealt with."

"There has to be something, some paperwork, canceled checks, adoption papers, something!" Hutch pointed out. "I want you to find them Helen. Find them and call me back." Hutch started to hang up, but stopped and brought the phone back up. "You never even asked, you know."

"Asked what?"

"I told you that your granddaughter had been shot," Hutch's voice broke, "that she was in the hospital. You never even asked how she was."

Starsky waited while Hutch read through the file in front of him, fingers drumming nervously on his thigh as he did. Hutch turned another page and Starsky shifted in his chair, stretching to catch a glimpse of the page. When no comment was forthcoming, he leaned back and sighed heavily.

"Well?" He finally asked loudly.

"Well, what?" Hutch glanced up from the folder, mildly confused.

"Well, what'd ya think?" Starsky shook his head in exasperation. "You've been studying that thing for forty minutes. What'd ya think?"

"God, Starsk, I don't know. I mean, you're obviously right." Hutch leaned back in his chair, unconsciously massaging his temple. "There's something not right with this file, but then this whole thing seems surreal, like the plot of a bad soap opera. Things like this just don't happen to people in real life."

"So what now?"

Hutch rose slowly and picked up the file. "Back to the hospital. If Kendall's awake, maybe she'll finally feel like talk to us. To me."

~*~*~*~

"Hello, Mr. Hutchinson." Sheryl looked up from the chart in front of her and smiled as Hutch approached the nurse's station. "Dr. Kaplan's in with her at the moment, but you should be able to see her in a few moments."

"The doctor? Did something happen again?" Hutch looked anxiously at Starsky. "Nobody called me. I thought...."

"Oh no, Mr. Hutchinson, nothing's wrong," Sheryl assured him quickly. "She just woke up a little while ago. The doctor's just giving her a routine check up. Why don't you have a seat?" She indicated the small waiting area behind them. "I'm sure he'll be with you soon."

"Thanks," Starsky flashed her a quick smile as he directed Hutch toward the nearest chair, "you'll let the doctor know we're here?"

"Of course." Sheryl picked up the chart as another nurse stepped into the station. "I was just taking this to him."

"Is that her chart?" Starsky glanced curiously at the folder in her hands.

"No, the doctor has that one," Sheryl grinned, "but it was a good try. Now have a seat with your friend and I promise we'll have some news for you soon."

"What did she say?" Hutch craned his neck to watch the nurse's progress as she started into Kendall's room.

"That she prefers brunets," Starsky replied smugly, dropping into the chair next to Hutch's. "And that she gets off at nine."

Hutch snorted softly and eyed his friend sadly. "You can't even manage to stay up till nine these days, old man."

"Who you callin' old?" Starsky crossed his arms, glaring at Hutch in mock indignation. "I'll have you know that I'm in the prime of life."

"She'd kill you, Starsk," Hutch replied, enjoying the easy banter. "One night and she'd lay you out flat with a heart attack."

"Maybe, but what a night." Starsky raised his eyebrows playfully. "And if ya gotta go, what a way."

"Starsk..." Hutch opened his mouth, primed to deliver a crushing retort and stopped, reaching out to curl his hand around Starsky neck and squeeze it affectionately. "Don't ever change, buddy."

"Why tamper with perfection?" Starsky asked with a twinkle in his eye. "Hey, here comes the doc."

"How is she?" Hutch clenched his hands nervously at his sides. "Can I see her?"

"She's holding her own." Dr. Kaplan glanced casually at his watch. "Her vitals are improving slowly and the lung appears to be functioning on its own. All and all, I'd say your daughter is one very lucky girl." He looked again at his watch.

"You got somewhere more important to be?" Starsky scowled at the man.

"Sorry, I have another patient coming down from the recovery room soon." He smiled apologetically. "You can go in and see her now, but only for a few minutes. She needs her rest."

"Thanks, Doc." Hutch smiled hesitantly at Starsky. "I'm just going to...."

"Yeah, go on, get out of here." Starsky waved Hutch away with a grin. "I'll be waitin'."

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Dr. Kaplan nervously licked his lips, looking anxiously down the hall before slipping into his office and closing the door behind him. He picked up the phone, dialing the number from memory, and waited.

"Hello, this is Dr. Kaplan." He cleared his throat. "I have the report you requested. She's still alive. And she should pull through if there are no complications." Kaplan nodded weakly, listening closely to the voice on the other end. "Yes, Hutchinson's in with her now. What? No, I can't... I can't do that. I've already done too much. If they should trace.... No, you listen; I'm a doctor, not an assassin. If you want that done find someone else to do it." His hands shook as he hung up the phone.

~*~*~*~

Hutch stopped outside the ICU room and took a deep breath before pushing the door open. Once inside, his eyes immediately sought out the figure on the bed, noting with relief the color that had returned to the still too pale cheeks.

"Kendall," he called quietly, not wanting to disturb her, "are you awake?"

Clear blue eyes opened slowly, blinking to bring him into focus, and a lazy smile crossed her face. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." Hutch leaned over the bed, smoothing Kendall's bangs away from her forehead and leaving his hand there. "How you feeling?"

"Floaty." She giggled, her smile widening. "Like I could just fly off to Never-Never Land."

"That sounds nice." Hutch slipped his other hand around hers, noticing how tiny it looked engulfed by his.

"But how about you stay here with me for a while? You think you could answer some questions for me? Tell me who did this?"

"Okay." Kendall's eyes began to drift shut. "I always wondered if you'd like me."

"How could I not?" Hutch asked softly. "You know I would've been so proud to be your father, to watch you grow up." He squeezed her hand, trying to feed his warmth into it. "Kendall, I know this going to sound strange, coming from someone you barely know, but I just want to tell you... I love you." He looked up to find her eyes closed. "I guess it can wait." Hutch brushed a kiss across her forehead. "Sleep well."

"Night, Daddy"

Hutch almost missed the quiet utterance as he started for the door. Turning back, he felt his heart leap in his chest as Kendall's eyes slid closed once more, her features relaxing in sleep.

~*~*~*~

Starsky frowned and closed his cell phone as he watched Hutch step out of Kendall's ICU room, a stunned expression on his face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I, she, she called me Daddy." A goofy grin started to spread across his face. "I mean, she was all doped up on pain medication and she probably won't even remember saying it, but she said it."

"Aw, Hutch, that's great." Starsky pulled his friend into a bear hug. "Just great, buddy."

"Yeah, it was." Hutch wiped at his suspiciously moist eyes and cleared his throat. "Who was on the phone?"

"Peters." Starsky ran a hand through his short curls, starting for the elevator. "He tried to get a holda you, but your cell was off. He's got a body he thinks you better see."

~*~*~*~

Hutch squinted into the setting sun and ducked under the police tape Starsky held up for him, looking around for his detective as he pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket.

"Over here, Captain!" A familiar voice called out.

"What've you got?" Hutch followed Peters through the crime scene leading him toward the coroner's wagon.

"Sorry, to call you away from the hospital, Captain," Peters reached for the zipper on the bag, "but I thought you'd want to see this. We've got a murdered Federal Agent on our hands."

"What?" Hutch sighed wearily, a headache already beginning to build at the thought of dealing with the Feds. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, we found his I.D. on the body. " Peters drew the bag away from the body. "Poor guy took two slugs in the chest."

Hutch blanched as he found himself staring down into the lifeless eyes of Agent Robert Montgomery. "Starsky!"

"Hutch? What is it?" Starsky was behind him instantly, peering around his shoulder. "Damn," he swore softly, "guess we got our answer."

"Answer?" Hutch looked at him sharply.

"Yeah, as to what kind'a person would keep Kendall from you all these years." Starsky covered the body

carefully, "a dangerous one."

~*~*~*~

Hutch weaved his way through the desks littering the squad room, coming to a sudden stop a few feet from his office door. He suppressed a sigh at the sight of the petite brunette sitting at the desk outside it.

"What is it?" Starsky leaned around the tall blond and chuckled. "Hutch, she's *your* secretary, you've got to get over this."

"That's easy for you to say, she likes you," Hutch hissed over his shoulder. "I'm telling you, Starsk, the woman is evil."

Starsky rolled his eyes and pushed past his friend to lean on the desk. "Hey, doll, how's it going?"

"Captain Starsky!" Brown eyes twinkled with delight as she smiled at him. "I haven't seen much of you around here these days."

"Well, you know how it is." Starsky sighed forlornly, "Criminals just got no respect for a man's need for a little time off."

"Excuse me, Julie," Hutch cleared his throat nervously, "are there any messages for me?"

"Here." She thrust a pile of pink slips at Hutch, scowling in irritation as she did. "And there are two federal agents waiting to see you in your office."

"Ah, thanks, thanks a lot." Hutch circled around the desk, never once turning his back on her as he made his way toward his office.

"Guess I better go with him, make sure he doesn't hurt himself." Starsky straightened and shook his head sadly. "Another time, another place, darlin'."

~*~*~*~

"Detective Hutchinson." The tall agent set down the picture frame he'd been holding as Hutch walked into his office. "Sorry, it's Captain now, isn't it?"

"What can I do for you, Bettin?" Hutch stepped around the man, standing behind his desk and straightening the picture. "I've got a lot of work to do."

"Then you should be glad to see me." Bettin settled into the chair across from Hutch's desk. "Because I'm here to relieve you of some of that work."

"Bettin?" Starsky couldn't quite school the derision from his voice as he followed Hutch into the room. "What're you doing here?"

"He was just about to explain how he was here to make my life easier," Hutch explained as Starsky perched on the edge of his desk. "Isn't that right?"

"Starsky," Bettin acknowledged in a cool tone. "I should've known, where one goes the other's sure to follow, huh?"

"Just cut the attitude, Bettin, and get to the point," Hutch snapped impatiently. "Why are you in my office?"

"We're here regarding the murder of Agent Montgomery." The second agent, a thin black man in his late twenties, finally spoke up. "We were told that you handled the scene."

"That's right." Hutch focused his attention on the young agent. "What can you tell us about the case he was working on?"

"Nothing," Bettin responded before the agent could reply. "That's part of an ongoing Federal investigation."

"It's part of an ongoing murder investigation," Hutch replied angrily. "Or do you *not* care that one of your agents was shot twice and dumped in a field?"

"Of course, we care." The younger agent sprang to his feet, his dark face flushed with anger. "Bobby was my partner and the man behind this is going down, *hard*, but not if you tip our hand before..."

"Curtis." Bettin cut him off with a glare and stood. "The case is out of your hands, Hutchinson. Stay out of it and out of our way."

"That was a complete waste of time." Starsky's lip curled back in disgust as he slammed the office door behind Bettin.

"You didn't really think they were going to give us the time of day, did you?" Hutch asked with a frustrated sigh as he dropped into his chair and reached for the phone. "Bettin doesn't give a damn who gets hurt, as long as he makes his case."

"I know, I know, I just..." Starsky plopped into the chair opposite him. "You'd think with one of their own agents dead, they'd want to be a little more cooperative. Give us a better shot at findin' out who killed him."

"Problem is, I think they already know." Hutch leaned back in his chair, listening to the repetitive drone of the ringer. "They're just not about to let us poor, stupid locals in on it."

"Yeah, well, it ain't right." Starsky's scowl deepened, "We're s'posed to be on the same team here. No one answerin' at the hospital?"

"How'd you... Never mind." Hutch shook his head, a bemused expression on his face. "I don't want to know if you've started reading my mind."

"Naw, just your face, Blondie." Starsky's face softened and he smiled tenderly at his friend. "I can see you're worried about her. Come on, we can swing by my place, pick up Michael and head on over to the hospital to see her. I figure you should be the one to break the news about Montgomery to her anyway, 'fore the Feds do."

~*~*~*~

Michael sat on the floor, his brow furrowed in concentration as he lined the brown Hot Wheel up on the track. Inspecting his handiwork, he nodded with satisfaction and turned to Kenny. "Ready."

"All right!" Kenny's small fist slammed into the lever in front of him, sending the car flying through the air and crashing into a pile of cars across the room. "Let's do this one next," he plopped a small red sports car onto the track, "it's my favorite."

"Wow, that looks like your daddy's car." Michael leaned in close, examining the car closely. "Cool."

"Yeah, and watch this." Kenny pulled a large book off the shelf and struggled across the room with it. Dropping it to the floor with a loud thud, he fell down next to it and shoved it under the end of the track.

"This'll make it fly even higher." With a laugh, he brought his hand down and both boys watched in awe as it sailed into the bookcase.

Reaching onto the bookcase, Michael came back with the small red car and turned it over in his hand. "How'd you get a car that looked like your daddy's?"

"I got all of 'em." Kenny started pulling cases of cars out from under the bed. "What's your daddy drive? I bet I got one like it too."

"I don't have a daddy." Michael replied distractedly as he picked through the cars. "Mommy says he died 'fore I was born."

"Oh," Kenny looked at him thoughtfully and sat on the edge of the bed, "my mommy died when I was a little boy."

"She did?" Michael's lower lip began to quiver at the thought. "How?"

"Daddy said that a drunk driver hit her car." Kenny studied the car in his hands closely. "He told me I was in the car with her, but I don't remember it." He dropped the car into the pile in front of him. "Wanna see something neat? Daddy says we're not supposed to mess with it when he's not home, but I'll show it to you." He stood, stopping in the doorway. "Come on."

~*~*~*~

Kendall gasped as someone shook her arm, causing a small wave of pain to cascade through her body. Grimacing, she pulled her eyes open to find herself looking up into the all too cheerful face of an unfamiliar nurse.

"Oh good, I'm so glad you're awake." She beamed down at Kendall. "I'm your night nurse, Nancy, if you need anything just give me a buzz. In the meantime, you've got a phone call. I know they're not allowed in the ICU," Nancy confided in a whisper, "but your father seemed so anxious to check on you that I didn't see the harm." She thrust the phone into Kendall's hand. "Here you go, sweetie."

Kendall blinked in confusion, staring at the phone in her hand as if it were a foreign object. After a moment's contemplation, she brought it to her ear. "H-hello?"

"Hello, Kendall, dear," the cold voice sent a chill racing down her spine, "I assume that it is unnecessary for me to tell you how disappointed I am in you."

"N-no, sir." The phone shook in Kendall's hand. "I'm sorry."

"Miguel tells me that you stepped in front of Captain Hutchinson. That was very unwise of you, my dear." His voice grew impossibly colder. "Very unwise, indeed. In fact, it makes me question your loyalties."

Kendall shrunk back into the pillows, blinking back the tears that sprung to her eyes. "What do you want?"

"I want my grandson back with me, where he belongs," he stated precisely. "Whether or not you come with him at this point, is of no consequence to me. My annual meeting with the Board of Directors of our French subsidiary is scheduled for December fifth. I will allow you a few more days' recovery time, but I expect Michael to be home in time to join me for the flight to Paris. If you do not bring him, I will be forced to send Miguel to retrieve him." He paused to let the weight of his words sink in. "It would be tragic, would it not, for another accident to befall the Starskys, young Kenny perhaps? They've been through so much already."

"No, don't." Her hand tightened around the phone. "I'll bring him. Just... just give me a couple days."

"This is your last chance, Kendall. Do *not* disappoint me again."

Kendall continued to cling to the phone long after the dial tone sounded, tears streaming down her face.

~*~*~*~

Michael stared, open-mouthed at the large, tarp covered mound in the garage, as Kenny approached it. "What is it?"

"Watch!" Kenny laughed as he grabbed a corner of the tarp and started pulling, sending clouds of dust into the air. Tongue peeking out from between his teeth, Kenny struggled to remove the heavy canvas. "Come help me."

"Okay." Michael grasped the opposite corner and tugged with all his might as the cover slowly gave way to reveal the treasure beneath it.

Leaving the tarp in a pile on the cement floor, Kenny bounced with excitement as he presented the old red car, white stripe proudly emblazoned down each side. "Isn't it cool?"

"Wow. Oh, wow." Michael's eyes lit up as he approached the Torino. "Can we get inside it?"

"Uh huh." Kenny latched onto the handle and yanked the door open. "C'mon," He climbed into the driver's seat and flashed Michael a crooked grin. "You can turn on the siren."

Michael scrambled through the open door and across Kenny to land in the passenger seat. "Is your dad gonna get mad at us?"

"Naw." Kenny shook his head, his small hands clasping the steering wheel, engine sounds rumbling out of his throat.

"Ya think so, huh?" A deep voice growled from the doorway. "Kenneth, what've I told you about playin' around in here when I'm not home?"

Kenny jumped in the seat, his eyes turning guiltily to where his father stood glowering at him, "Daddy."

"Well, what'd I tell you?" Starsky carefully schooled the smile that tugged at the corners of his lips as he watched the two pairs of alarmed blue eyes staring back at him, their positions eerily mirroring those of he and his partner in years gone by.

"To stay out unless you're home," Kenny mumbled, looking down.

"That's right." Starsky stepped into the garage and leaned into the car. "Now why don't you get in there and clean up that mess ya made."

Hutch dodged to the side, barely missing the two boys as they went speeding into the house, and leaned against the doorway. "Starsk, why do you hold onto that rusted piece of junk?"

"Junk?" Starsky looked up at him, injured. "You never did appreciate her. I'll have ya know this is one of the finest pieces of craftsmanship to ever roll outta Detroit." Pride shone in his eyes. "And I defy you to find even a speck'a rust on her."

"Yeah, whatever," Hutch answered with a shrug, turning away.

"It's just a car, Hutch," Starsky responded lowly, standing to gaze at his friend over the top of the Torino. "Just a car. It's not gonna bite you. And it's not some evil talisman, nothing bad's gonna happen just 'cause it's here."

"I know that," Hutch's reply was barely more than a whisper, his eyes closing against the painful memory, "but every time I look at it all I see is you, lying in a pool of your own blood, dying in front of my eyes."

"Hutch...."

"I gotta go, Starsk." Hutch refused to meet his eye. "I want to take Michael over to the hospital to see his mother before visiting hours are over."

Starsky's head dropped against the cold steel of the Torino, a muttered string of "stupid, stupid, stupids" escaped his lips. Taking a deep breath, he stood and hurried after his partner. "Hutch, wait up, I'll come with you."

~*~*~*~

Sheryl suppressed a smile as she saw the two police captains step out of the elevator, each man holding onto the shoulder of his tiny duplicate. Straightening her scrub blouse, she rounded the corner of the nurse's station. "Hello, Captain Hutchinson...."

"Hutch, please," his blue eyes twinkled as he captured her hand in his, "after all, we are going to be seeing a lot of each other."

"While his daughter's in the hospital." Starsky muscled in between them, flashing Sheryl a grin that made her knees suddenly go weak. "Then you're all mine. So, tell me, how do you feel about Italian?"

"I love it," Sheryl purred, gazing into his eyes. "Especially when it's my husband's night to cook."

"Ouch." Starsky brought his hands to chest, shaking his head ruefully. "Too bad, schweetheart, we coulda made beautiful music t'gether."

"Starsky, quit bothering the woman." Hutch cuffed his friend lightly on the back of the head. "Is it all right if I take Michael in to see his mother?"

"I think that would be an excellent idea." Sheryl bent down in front of Michael, lightly tapping him on the nose. "I know if I was your mama, I'd sure be happy to see you. Besides," she rose and looked Hutch in the eye, "she's been restless all evening. Maybe this will help to calm her down."

"Come on then, slugger," Hutch took Michael's small hand in his own, "let's go cheer up your mother."

~*~*~*~

"Mommy!" Michael burst through the door at full speed, smiling from ear to ear as he spotted his mother.

"Michael," Kendall hid her relief and reached a hand toward him, "did you come to see me?"

"Yes," he scrambled onto the chair and plopped on the edge of the bed, "Grandpa brought me."

"Michael, careful." Hutch picked him quickly off the bed and set him back on the chair. "How are you feeling?" He brushed a hand across her forehead. "The nurse said something was bothering you."

"What? No, nothing's wrong. I d-don't know what she was talking about." Kendall turned her attention

quickly to Michael, hoping that Hutch hadn't seen the flash of panic in her eyes. "What did you do today?"

Michael bit his lower lip. "We got in the car when weren't s'posed to."

"Car?" She frowned at Hutch. "What car?"

"Starsky's old Torino," Hutch replied quietly, looking away. "It's not really a big deal. It's just sitting in the garage, moldering away under an old tarp. The boys went out to look at it."

"It was cool," Michael confided in a conspiratorially whisper. "You shoulda seen it, Mommy."

"You liked the car, huh?" Kendall tightened her grip around his hand. "Did you have fun with Kenny?"

"Uh huh. You should see all the cars he has." Michael's smile widened. "He's got 'em all."

Smiling at Michael's recollection of the day's events, Kendall missed the sharp look Hutch threw in her direction at the mention of Kenny's name.

"Michael," Hutch mussed his hair fondly, "why don't you go outside and wait with Starsky and Kenny while I talk to your mother?"

"Are you gonna talk about grown-up stuff?" Michael asked suspiciously, looking from one to the other.

"I'm afraid so," Hutch picked Michael up and set him on the floor, "but I promise to make it real quick. Your mother needs her rest and you need dinner."

"Okay," Michael sighed heavily and rolled his eyes, "I'll wait outside."

"Michael, wait," Kendall called out softly, extending her hand to him, "can I have a kiss first?"

"Yes, Mommy." Michael sprang back into the chair and planted a kiss on her cheek before jumping down and scampering out the door.

"He's a great kid," Hutch spoke quietly. "You've done a pretty amazing job with him, considering."

"Considering?" Kendall raised her head, staring at him defiantly.

"Considering the fact that you've been running scared his entire life, that his father was murdered before he was born. A murder that's still unsolved to this day." Hutch sighed as she turned away, refusing to meet his eye. "All right, if you won't talk to me about it, can you at least tell me how you found out about Agent Montgomery?"

"Agent Montgomery?" Kendall closed her eyes, feeling a constriction around her heart. "What do you mean?"

"That's why you've been upset all day, isn't it?" Hutch's hand hovered over hers, not quite sure if the intended comfort would be welcome. "Did the Feds come by and tell you about the murder?"

"Murder?" If Hutch had thought it impossible for Kendall to get paler, he was wrong, what little color remained in her face faded as she shrank back into the pillows. "Bobby's dead? Oh, God. Oh, my God."

"You didn't know?" Hutch shook his head, swearing softly under his breath as he grasped her hand. "I'm so sorry, I never should've just blurted it out like that. I just... I thought you knew. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, God, this is all my fault. It's all my fault. Oh, God." Kendall pulled away from him, turning on her side with a painful gasp.

"Kendall?" Hutch grasped her shoulder, easing her back against the mattress. "Oh, God, I'm sorry, I thought you knew. I'm so sorry. Please, calm down." He stabbed at the call button. "Kendall, please, you're going to hurt yourself."

"What's the problem?" Sheryl stepped into the room, brushing Hutch aside. "What happened?"

"S-she got upset about s-something and...." Hutch stammered worriedly. "Is she all right?"

Sheryl made an adjustment to the I.V. and took Kendall's pulse. "She'll be fine. She just needs some rest." She turned to Hutch with a kindly smile. "I'm afraid you'll have to go now."

"I... Okay." Hutch nodded ruefully and slipped out of the room.

~*~*~*~

Starsky watched surreptitiously as Hutch pushed the food around his plate, never moving any of it toward his mouth. Eyeing the two boys chattering happily away over their French fries, he pulled a five-dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to Kenny. "Here, why don'tcha go over and get yourselves some more milk."

"But, Dad, I don't..." Kenny stopped as he met his father's eyes. "Okay. Come on, Michael, let's see if they've got chocolate milk."

Starsky waited until the boys were out of earshot and leaned across the table. "Now, you wanna tell me what's wrong?"

"I blew it, Starsk." Hutch sighed, leaning back in the chair and pushing the plate away. "I just went in there and blurted out that Montgomery was dead."

"What?" Starsky's eyes widened in shock. "What the hell'd ya do that for?"

"I thought she already knew." He threw his hands up in disgust. "I thought that was the reason she was upset. Damn it, Starsk, you should've seen her face. It was like I'd punched her in the gut. Damn it!" Hutch's chair flew back as he stood. "How could I be so stupid? What the hell was I thinking?"

"Hutch." Starsky reached out to grab his friend's sleeve. "Hutch, stop, listen to me for a sec. You gotta stop beatin' yourself up over this. I'm sure Kendall knows you didn't mean for it to come out like that."

"You know, Starsk, that doesn't make me feel a whole lot better." Running a hand through his hair, Hutch dropped back down into the chair. "Damn. How am I ever going to get her to trust me if I keep sticking my foot in it?"

"Just give it time, buddy." Starsky squeezed his arm reassuringly. "You know she wants to, she's just scared."

Hutch's eyes reflected his gratitude as he dropped a hand over Starsky's. "Thanks, Starsk."

"Dad, I can't find my car." Kenny interrupted, a pout on his small face.

"Where'd ya leave it?" Starsky inquired with an indulgent smile.

"I don't know." Kenny shrugged, exchanging a quick glance with Michael. "Maybe I left on my chair."

"Your chair?" Starsky frowned as he glanced under the edge of the table. "You mean the one downstairs, don'tcha?"

"Uh huh." Kenny admitted sheepishly. "I can't leave it, Dad, it's my Talon."

"All right." Starsky sighed, heaving himself up out of the chair. "Wait here with your Uncle Hutch and I'll see if I can find it." He patted Hutch's shoulder as he passed. "Try and eat somethin', 'kay?"

~*~*~*~

Starsky frowned in exasperation as he bent down and peered at the floor under the chairs he and Kenny had waited in. No Talon. Straightening, he began poking his hands between the cushions, "Where is... Ah ha!" Starsky pulled his hand out, his nose wrinkling in disgust. "Gum? Don't people know how'ta use a garbage can?"

Turning around he looked for a trash can as he pulled the wad of gum off the toy. Seeing one next to the Nurse's station, he reached over to grab a tissue and picked the rest of the gum off before dropping it in to the trash.

"Can I help you?" A fervent voice asked from behind him.

"Nah, thanks. Just needed a tissue." He held up the rescued car with a sheepish grin. "My son left his car behind."

"Aren't you here with Miss Hutchinson's father?" Nancy's hand shot out and grasped his. "I didn't really get a chance to meet him earlier, but he seemed so nice when we spoke on the phone this afternoon."

"That's really great." Starsky attempted to extricate his hand. "I'll let him know you... Wait a minute, did you say this afternoon?"

"Yes." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Well, of course, I know we're not supposed to let critical patients have phones in their rooms, but he seemed so concerned and really, I've always believed that loved ones are among the best medicine."

"Yeah, yeah." Starsky nodded quickly, fixing the woman with one of his best smiles. "So, 'bout what time would you say he called?"

"Oh, let's see, it was just after I came on shift, so a little after three, I'd guess."

"Thanks. Thanks, a lot." Starsky hurried away, and after stabbing impatiently at the elevator button, rushed for the stairs.

~*~*~*~

Hutch looked up with a frown as Starsky approached the table in a hurry. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin'." Starsky nodded toward the boys as he latched onto Hutch's arm and pulled him a few feet from the table, "Did you talk to Kendall 'round three this afternoon?"

"Starsky, you know I didn't." An exasperated frown crossed Hutch's face. "We were both in with the Feds getting the run around then."

"Yeah, I do know," Starsky drew him closer, "but the nurse on duty don't, which is why she put through a call from someone claimin' to be Kendall's father this afternoon."

"WHAT?" Giving his head a quick shake, Hutch glanced over his shoulder to see if the two boys had noticed his outburst. "What are you talking about? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, that weird nurse told me all about how she took the phone in to Kendall." Starsky sighed wearily. "How much you wanna bet if we asked Sheryl, she'd say that that's about the time Kendall started acting upset?"

"Jesus," Hutch visibly deflated, "even in the hospital this bastard won't leave her alone. What the hell am I going to do, Starsk? I'm going to go talk to her again."

"Hutch, wait." Starsky reached out and gently took his friend by the arm. "Why don't ya wait 'til tomorrow, huh? You said yourself that the nurse gave her somethin' to knock her out. Let's get the kids home. First thing in the mornin' you can come back and talk to her."

"For all the good it'll do," Hutch muttered under his breath.

~*~*~*~

"Dad. Dad, wake up."

The figure in the bed groaned and cuddled up closer to the warm body next to him. "G'way."

"Dad, it's important." An insistent hand shook him. "Come on, Dad, I got it."

"Got what?" A bleary eye peeked from beneath the covers as a thin hand groped for the clock. "Six a.m.? This better be good, boy."

"It is." Ike shifted anxiously from one foot to the other. "I've cracked the holding company's security system. I know who the owner is."

"And this couldn't wait till a decent hour?" Huggy grumbled as he climbed out of bed.

"No, Dad," Ike replied solemnly, "I don't think it can."

A shiver of dread made its way down Huggy's spine as he followed Ike from the room.

~*~*~*~

Hutch folded the magazine he'd been pretending to read and stood as a movement from the bed told him that Kendall was waking up. Folding his hand around hers, he rubbed small circles across the back with his thumb and leaned forward.

"Good morning," he watched as her lids raised to reveal sleepy blue eyes, "how're you feeling?"

"Wh-where..." Kendall looked around in confusion. "Where am I?"

"Still in the hospital." Hutch brushed the back of his other hand over her cheek before tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Bobby." Tears immediately sprang to her eyes. "He's dead."

"Yes, he is. I'm sorry." He held her hand a little tighter. "I know the two of you were close."

"This is all my fault." Kendall turned away, bringing her free hand up to wipe away her tears.

"Stop that," Hutch admonished gently, "this isn't your fault."

"Yes it is." She turned away, burying her face in the pillow. "You don't know what happened."

"So tell me." He turned her face back to his. "Kendall, please let me help you and Michael."

"I can't." She made a weak attempt to turn away again. "I just...."

"Kendall, trust me, please." Hutch framed her face between his hands and gazed down at her imploringly. "Honey, you've got to trust someone. Look at yourself. You're in the hospital with bullet wounds. Before that someone used your face for a punching bag. How much longer can you go on like this? And what happens to Michael when you can't anymore?"

The sob that wracked her frame tore at his heart and he carefully gathered her into his arms. "Please, Kendall, tell me who it is. Please."

"He's going to take Michael away from me." Her head rested on his shoulder. "And then he'll kill you."

"No, he won't," Hutch reassured her softly, his cheek brushing against the top of her head. "I won't let him. Please, Kendall, trust me. I can take care of myself, trust me to take care of you and Michael too."

"Gunther," she whispered against his chest. "His name is James Marshall Gunther, Jr."

~*~*~*~

"STARSKY!! STARSKY, GET UP!" Huggy pounded determinedly on the front door of the Starsky home, "STARSKY!"

The door flew open and an arm reached out, grabbing a hold of Huggy's jacket and hauling him inside the house. Huggy stumbled into the living room as Starsky slammed the door shut, his gun held out in front of him. "You all right? What the hell's goin' on?"

"You always answer your door like that?" Huggy inquired as he straightened his coat.

"No, only when some maniac bangs on it at..." Starsky squinted at the clock. "At whatever the hell time it is. What's goin' on, Huggy?"

"We got a problem, my friend." Huggy's chin dropped down to his chest. "A very big problem."

"Hugs, what're ya talkin' about?" Starsky dropped his gun into the pocket of his robe and wrapped his hand around Huggy's arm. "Did somethin' happen?"

"Yeah, you could say that." Huggy looked up slowly, remembered pain clear in his eyes. "Ike put a name on the Hutchette's deep pockets."

"What?" Starsky stared at him in shock. "We got a name?" When Huggy's only response was a slow nod, Starsky grabbed his arm. "Who?"

"Gunther Industries."

~*~*~*~

Kendall held her breath as she felt the arms surrounding her stiffen. For a long moment, too long a moment, silence reigned and she knew that she'd said too much. Once more she had put her trust in a hero who was

too failingly human, one who couldn't help but hate her for years spent being raised by the son of the man he despised most in this world.

Then, to her surprise, the arms tightened around her as a choked voice whispered in her ear. "I'm sorry."

It was only two words, but the silence that followed was warming and comforting and for the first time in years, Kendall allowed herself to truly hope.

~*~*~*~

Starsky burst from the elevator, barely avoiding a collision with the orderly waiting to board, before barreling down the hallway.

"Captain Starsky," a familiar figure stepped firmly into this path, holding out a hand to impede his progress, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you slow down. This is the intensive care unit, not the Indy 500."

"I'm sorry, really," Starsky grasped A'lyce by the shoulders, moving her gently to the side, "but I gotta find Hutch. Now. Is he in her room?"

"Yes, but...."

"Thanks, you're a doll." He flashed her a quick, worried smile before sprinting down the hall.

Reaching the room, he paused to catch his breath, trying to compose himself, before slowly pushing the door open.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Hutch asked quietly.

Starsky strained to hear Kendall's reply, but the words were too soft and he found himself suddenly feeling the intruder. Stepping backward, he began to turn away.

"Starsk?" Hutch rose from the edge of the bed, catching the door before it slid shut. "What're you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Hutch, I didn't want to interrupt you, but..." He took a deep breath. "But I figured you'd want hear this right away. Ike found out who's behind all this."

"Gunther."

"It's Gunth... How did..." Starsky stared at his old friend in shock for several seconds before his gaze wandered to the figure on the bed. "She told ya?"

"Yeah," Hutch nodded, a shy smile playing with the corners of his mouth, "she finally trusted me enough to tell me."

"God, Hutch, that's great." Starsky enveloped Hutch in a quick bear hug. "So, what do we do now?"

"That's a good question." Hutch turned to stare at the still figure on the bed. "Mostly I want to find Junior and rip out his spine. But we both know the kind of power his father wielded and the first thing I've got to do is make sure that Kendall and Michael are safe."

"Where is Michael?"

"Hey, I thought you were going to get some sleep." Hutch moved quickly to the bed, brushing his hand

across her cheek. "You need to rest."

"Where's Michael?" Kendall began to struggle to sit up.

"He's safe," Hutch assured her quickly. "He's back at my place with a friend."

"You left him alone with a stranger?" She asked fearfully, trying to get out of the bed.

"No, I left him with my ex-wife, he's fine." Hutch grabbed her legs and swung them back into the bed, tucking the covers around her. "Chris knows what she's doing and she'll call me if there's any trouble."

"No, you don't understand." Tears of frustration welled up in her eyes. "If he finds out I told you the first thing he's going to do is take Michael from me and make sure I never see him again."

"What? Kendall, what're ya talkin' about?" Starsky crowded in next to Hutch. "Why would he go after Michael?"

"Because, next to revenge, Michael's the most important thing in the world to him." Kendall grabbed Hutch's hand. "You have to go get Michael, before anything else, please. Promise me you won't let him get Michael, that's all I care about."

"Honey, he's not going to get Michael, I won't let him." Hutch swore to her. "I promise. He doesn't even know where Michael is."

"Yes, he does! He knew that Michael was with Captain Starsky's children yesterday." She tightened her grip on Hutch's hand. "He threatened to send Miguel after Michael unless I brought Michael to him."

"Who's Miguel?" Starsky's asked tightly, his face grim.

"Miguel takes care of his dirty business. And he likes what he does." Kendall closed her eyes as she sank back into the pillows. "Likes it a lot."

"Christine!" Hutch bolted for the door, with Starsky close on his heels.

~*~*~*~

Hutch jumped out the car, as it pulled to a stop in front of his house, not bothering to wait for his partner before rushing through the open front door. "CHRISTINE?"

Silence met his call and Hutch scanned the room, looking for any sign of trouble. Moving down the hall toward the bedrooms, he heard Starsky burst in behind him as he called out again. "CHRIS?"

"Anything?" Starsky stepped up behind Hutch, gun held close to his body.

"Nothing." Hutch approached his bedroom door cautiously, stepping to the far side before turning the knob slowly and busting through. Empty.

"Maybe they're out on the beach?" Starsky suggested quietly as he peered under the bed.

"With the front door standing wide open?" Hutch asked tersely. "Chris knows better than that."

"I know, I was just... hoping." Starsky sighed as he flattened himself against the wall and nodded toward the next doorway.

Moving in a rhythm long since abandoned, but never forgotten, the partners made their way to the next room, flanking the door before flying through it in one smooth, polished motion. Another empty room. Tucking their guns in their holsters, they started a methodical search before moving on to the next empty room.

"Nothing. DAMN IT!" Hutch slammed his fist into the wall. "Where the hell are they?"

"Hutch, calm down." Starsky reached out and grabbed Hutch's arm before he could repeat the motion. "Look around you. Nothing's messed up or outta place. You know Chris, she wouldn't've just given up without a fight."

"Then where the hell are they?"

~*~*~*~

"Sir, they're here."

James looked up from the portfolio on his desk and favored the elderly butler with a smile. "Excellent. Show them right in."

Seconds later, Michael ran through the doorway and into his grandfather's waiting arms. "Grandfather!"

"Michael, my dear, I've missed you." The older man hugged the child. "Did you have fun on your adventure?"

"Uh huh. I met my Grandpa Hutch and Mr. Starsky and Kenny," Michael prattled on excitedly. "You should see all'a Kenny's cars."

"All of, Michael." Gunther frowned at the boy. "I will not allow you to speak like a common street thug."

"Sorry, Grandfather," Michael replied quietly, his eyes downcast.

Gunther placed a hand under Michael's chin, lifting the boy's eyes to meet his. "Just don't let it happen again. Now run up to your room. We're going to be taking a little trip. Thomas will help you pack."

"Is Mommy coming?" He asked apprehensively.

"No, your mother will not be able to join us." Gunther's gaze hardened. "Now run along to your room while I speak to our guest."

"Yes, Grandfather." Michael scampered out of the room, just as another figure slipped in.

"Did you have any problems, my dear?" Gunther inquired as he settled back into his chair.

"No," Christine replied with a laugh, "none at all."

~*~*~*~

Starsky hung the phone up slowly, turning to look down at where Hutch sat in the doorway, staring blankly ahead. "I put an APB out on them, but we both know how much good that's gonna do without a place to start."

"Jesus, Starsk, what've I done?" He drew a tired hand slowly across his face. "I promised Kendall I'd take care of him and then I just left him here unprotected. What am I going to tell her?"

"Hutch, don't. You can't beat yourself up over this. Come on," Starsky reached down and grabbed Hutch's arm, pulling him to his feet, "let's go take care of that hand."

"Sit." Starsky pointed to the closed toilet and scowled as he inspected the bruised and cut appendage. "You're lucky you didn't bust the damn things." He reached for the rubbing alcohol, scowling as Hutch tried to squirm away. "Sit still. I swear, you're worse than my kids sometimes."

"That stuff stings." Hutch winced as Starsky cleaned his scraped knuckles.

"Quit slamming your fist into walls and I won't hafta use it." He examined his handy work. "Think it needs a bandage?"

"It's just a scratch." Hutch rubbed his hand absentmindedly, his gaze becoming unfocused as he concentrated on something only his mind's eye could see. "God, Starsk, Chris wasn't even a part of this and I brought her into it. If they hurt her...."

"They're not gonna hurt her." Starsky knelt down in front of his friend. "You've gotta believe they took her for a reason. If they were gonna kill her there was no reason for them to take her. Right?"

"Yeah, I guess so, I just... What am I going to do, Starsk?" Hutch asked imploringly.

"We're gonna find them, Buddy. Even if we've gotta take Gunther Industries apart brick by brick, we're gonna find them."

~*~*~*~

A light tap on the study door drew James' attention from Christine. "Just a moment, my dear. Yes?"

"Sorry to interrupt, sir, but Mr. Howard is on the phone." Thomas waited patiently for his employer's response.

"Thank you, Thomas. I'll take it in here."

"Yes, sir. Line two." With a discrete bow of his wizened head, Thomas backed slowly out of the room and closed the door behind him.

"This is James Gunther. That is quite unfortunate." A slight tightening of the hand holding the receiver was the only outward indication of his anger as James listened to the news. "Yes, Mr. Howard, I understand the difficulty in obtaining the part and I have no doubt that you've been trying your best to procure it. However, you must understand that I pay you a great deal to ensure that my plane is ready to leave on a moment's notice. I'm afraid, however, that this delay will not reflect well in your next contract renegotiation. How long until you procure the part in question? That long?" James permitted himself a sigh of frustration. "Very well, there's nothing to be done about it now. Be sure there are no further delays."

"Problems, James?" Christine rose gracefully from her chair and crossed to his side.

"Nothing that concerns you. Just a slight alteration in my timetable." James lifted her hand to lips and kissed it tenderly. "Our deal still stands. Now, you'll excuse me if I don't see you out? I'm afraid I have some alternate arrangements to make."

"Of course, not." Chris brushed her lips across his cheek. "And thank you for allowing me to help you in this matter."

"It was nothing. Miguel will show you out." He waved to the large man in the doorway. "Miguel, please

take Ms. Phelps to the location we discussed earlier. And do take care not to mar her delicate features too much. I expect to see them gracing my network's broadcasts in the near future."

~*~*~*~

"Starsk, I can't do this." Hutch swallowed hard, leaning his head against the cold metal of the ICU room door. "She's just starting to trust me. I can't go in there and tell her that I let that bastard get Michael."

"Yes, you can, Hutch. You gotta." Starsky pushed aside his own fears, refusing to give in to the frightened voices in his head when Hutch needed his strength. "She needs to know and she needs to hear it from you. Besides, right now, Kendall's the best lead we've got. She knows more about Gunther than we could possibly hope to find out in time."

"You're right, I know. It's just..." Hutch gestured vaguely toward the door and straightened. "There's no time like the present, I guess."

"I'm with you all the way, buddy." Starsky reached an arm in front of Hutch and pushed the door open. "You go high. I'll take low."

"Thanks." He took a brief moment to gather strength from the confidence shining from his partner's eyes before stepping into the room.

"She's not here!" Hutch whirled around, his gut in a knot as Starsky pushed past him into the room.

"What? Where the hell is she?" Starsky turned about in the empty room, even dipping to get a better look under the bed. "She's gotta be here somewhere."

"Oh, God, Starsk, what if he got her, too?" Panic gripped Hutch as he took in the abandoned equipment. "She's supposed to be in an ICU. She's in no condition to be... kidnapped and dragged God knows where."

"Hutch, calm down, okay." Starsky closed the space between them, grabbing a handful of Hutch's sleeve. "You don't know that anything's happened, okay? She's probably just out getting a test or somethin'. This place is crawling with doctors and nurses, no one would be stupid enough to try anythin' here."

"His father was." He burst out of the room and started for the nurse's station.

"What're you talkin' about?" Starsky hurried after his friend. "Hutch, what're you...."

"In the hospital, when you were in ICU, Gunther sent one of his goons after you." Hutch leaned across the empty station, looking for some signs of life. "Where are all the damn nurses?" He drew a deep breath, glancing over at his partner. "You were barely alive, the doctors were sure you weren't going to make it, and that still wasn't enough for the old man. He sent them here to kill you. If I hadn't... if I hadn't seen that dead orderly in the bathroom... there would've been nothing to stop them."

"But you did." Starsky nudged him gently, a small smile warming his features. "And you've got to believe that your strange, twisted Hutchinson luck is gonna hold for Michael and Kendall."

"I do?"

"Yeah, you do. Hey, you see what I see?" Starsky bumped his shoulder into Hutch's once more and inclined his head toward the elevators.

Hutch lifted his head in time to see an orderly pushing a gurney bound Kendall off the elevator, followed closely by a nurse. "Kendall."

"Told ya." Starsky took him by the arm and lead him toward the waiting room. "Let's sit for a few minutes while they get her settled. It'll give us time to collect our wits."

"Okay." With a quiet nod, Hutch followed.

~*~*~*~

With a final look around his office, James carefully slipped the last of the papers he needed into his briefcase. The loss of the house was regrettable, his father had purchased it before James' birth and it was one of the few tangible assets he had managed to keep from the government vultures that had swept down upon the family after his father's arrest. But Thomas would see to the export of the furnishings and the house itself was merely a token, easily replaced in the grand scheme.

"The Rolls is ready, sir," Thomas spoke quietly from the doorway. "Shall I have Master Michael brought down now?"

"Yes, Thomas. Take him to the car and have him wait. I have one last call to make."

"Yes, sir." Thomas discretely retreated as James reached for the phone.

"Is it taken care of? Excellent. I have one last situation that requires your unique brand of discretion. It is in our mutual best interest that Kendall no longer be in a position to aid the authorities in discovering our whereabouts. Yes, I thought you would understand. Meet us at the yacht once you've dispatched this final chore, Miguel."

~*~*~*~

"How's she doing?" Hutch intercepted the nurse as she stepped out of Kendall's room, glancing nervously inside as the door slid shut.

"Tired. As careful as we are, being moved around hurts at this stage." She gave them both a brief sympathetic smile. "But she did very well. The doctor was pleased with her progress. If nothing changes, he's going to be releasing her from the ICU in the morning."

"Good. That's good." He turned a nervous gaze on the door, unsure of his next move. "Can I see her?"

"Yes, but just for a few minutes. I just gave her a shot for the pain and a mild sedative, so she's probably not going to be awake for much longer."

"This shouldn't take long." Starsky promised, a supportive presence at Hutch's side. "Come on, buddy, the sooner we get this over with the sooner we can find Michael."

The room was silent when they stepped in, the quiet noises that were produced by the myriad of equipment that surrounded Kendall in the past absent. Hutch took a deep breath, glancing again at his friend and finding the strength he need in those warm blue eyes, and stepped up to the bed. "Kendall?"

"Hmm?" She raised her eyes to his, obviously fighting exhaustion. "Michael?" A thin hand, still weak, but stronger than he would've thought possible at this point, gripped Hutch's as she searched his face for an answer.

"I don't... We don't know." Hutch gestured helplessly with his free hand. "The house was empty when we got there. Chris and Michael were both gone. We don't know that...."

"He has him," Kendall replied dully, turning her head to hide the tears that rimmed her eyes.

"We don't know that, Kendall." Hutch gently turned her face to his.

"Yes, we do. I do." She closed her eyes, not bothering to hide her tears. "This is all my fault."

"Your fault? How could it possibly be your fault? Kendall?" Hutch brushed the tears from her cheeks. "Kendall, look at me, please."

"It doesn't matter." Her reply was so low Hutch had to strain to hear it.

"Of course it matters." He squeezed her hand tighter, needing to feel that connection to her, hoping to somehow will some of his own strength into her. "Kendall, the only person responsible for this is that sick bastard, Gunther. And I don't care what it takes or how many laws I've got to break, I'm going to find Michael and I'm going to bring him back to you."

"Listen to your father, kid." Starsky's persisted warmly, confidence infusing his words. "Together your old man and I are the best there ever was. Neither of us is gonna stop until we get Michael back."

"Or he stops you." Kendall opened her eyes and gazed at both of them regretfully. "Please go. I can't... I just... Just go, please."

"Hutch, come on." Starsky pulled his friend back, his heart breaking as he watched Hutch's hand slip from Kendall's. "We've got work to do and she needs to rest. Come on, things'll look better after she gets some sleep."

~*~*~*~

"Excuse me, is one of you Captain Hutchinson?"

They both turned to watch the duty nurse making her way toward them, a slip of paper in her hand.

"I'm Hutchinson. What do you need?"

"I'm very sorry, but I just got a message from the ER." She held the paper out to him. "Your wife was brought in a few minutes ago."

"My wife?" He exchanged a quick, puzzled glance with Starsky. "Chris?"

"Let's find out, buddy." They rushed past the startled nurse, foregoing the elevator for the stairs.

~*~*~*~

"Where is everyone?" Hutch peered over the empty desk and down into the hallway. "Isn't there supposed to be someone on duty here all the time?"

"Maybe they had an emergency, this is an ER, Hutch." Starsky leaned over the counter and snagged the binder that held the registration information for the patients. "Let's see what we got here. McGwire. Grant. Hardy. Phelps. She's in exam room B." He dropped the binder and gave Hutch a quick shove. "What're we waiting for?"

"Starsk, here it is." Hutch motioned toward the first door on their right as they entered the hallway. "Think I should just go in?"

"Well, they did call you," Starsky pointed out, scratching his head and trying to see through the thin curtain drawn across the windows. "The worst they can do is toss you out if they don't want ya there."

A hushed gasp of pain from the other side of the doorway settled the question as Hutch rushed in. "Chris?"

"Ken!" She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes as the doctor finished wrapping her arm. "Oh, God, Ken, I'm so sorry."

"What happened? Are you all right?" Hutch pulled her into an embrace, holding her carefully as she cried. "It's okay, Chris, I'm right here. You're okay."

"I know, I know. I just feel so stupid and angry." She brushed away the tears that glistened on her cheeks, gazing up at him with sorrow-filled blue eyes. "I knew whoever you were hiding Michael from had to be dangerous. I never should've opened the door. I should've looked to see who it was, but I just... I thought it was you and...."

"Hush, shh, that's enough, Chris," Hutch cooed softly, rocking her in his arms. "It's not your fault. I never should've left the two of you unprotected."

"Chris," Starsky stepped quietly forward, "can you tell us anything about what happened?"

"Yes, sorry." She dried her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to compose herself. "It was about 15 minutes after Ken left, I thought he'd forgotten something and when I opened the door there were two men standing there. After that, it all happened so fast it was a blur."

"What happened?" Starsky pressed. "I know this is hard, but we need all the details you can give us."

"The first one grabbed me and threw something over my head." Chris closed her eyes and leaned heavily against Hutch. "I was so scared. I didn't know what they were going to do to me or Michael."

"It's all right, Chris, I've got you now," Hutch soothed gently. "You're safe."

Nodding against his chest, she continued in a shaky voice. "The next thing I knew my hands were being tied behind my back and I was being dragged outside. I could hear Michael in the house, crying, but there was nothing I could do."

"Don't worry, Chris, we know that. Go on." Starsky encouraged her.

"I think they shoved me in the trunk, it all gets fuzzy after that." Drawing another deep breath, she tightened her grip on Hutch. "The next thing I knew I woke up on the side of the road with my hands still tied behind my back. I'm not sure how long it took me to get my hands free, but when I did I just started walking until this carload of kids stopped and picked me up."

"Where were you when you came to?" Hutch asked anxiously. "Was there any sign of Michael?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere out along the coast highway." Chris pulled away, looking up to meet Hutch's eyes. "There was no sign of Michael, I'm sorry, Ken. But that's probably a good sign, right?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it is." Hutch kissed the top of her head. "I'm just glad you're all right."

"I'm sorry, gentlemen." The doctor cleared his throat behind them. "But I think that's enough for now. Ms. Phelps has had a traumatic morning. She's still in shock and needs some rest."

"Okay, Doc, whatever you say." Hutch carefully laid Chris back on the gurney, smoothing her hair away from her face. "You get some rest and I'll be back later."

"Promise?" she asked hopefully.

"Promise." Giving her hand a final squeeze, he turned for the door.

"Hutch, wait!" Chris struggled to sit again. "There is one other thing I remember. When they were dragging me out of the house, I heard Michael call one of the men Miguel."

~*~*~*~

Miguel slipped quietly down the deserted ICU corridor, sparing a quick glance for the bored looking woman sitting at the nurse's station before stepping confidently into the silent room. Looking down on the still figure in the bed, he smiled serenely. "Your father is disappointed in you, Kendall. You should have known better than this."

He turned away from the bed, surveying the room with a contemptuous eye. "Look at all the trouble you have caused your father. And now look what you have gotten yourself into. You always were a disobedient child. I always told your father that you had too much of that cop in you. He should have let me discipline you more, I would have broken that willful spirit in you, if he had only let me."

Reaching up, Miguel brushed his hand over her hair and down across her cheek. "But we still have this moment. I will always carry it with me, cherishing the memory of the moment life leaves your body. Perhaps, when Michael is older I will tell him about it. Tell him how beautifully you died." Miguel slipped the pillow from beneath her head.

Taking one last look at her face, he pressed the pillow down, cutting off her air supply, "Goodbye."

~*~*~*~

"You wanna say it or should I?" Starsky watched as his friend paced impatiently in the hall.

"No, Starsk, I don't want to say it. I don't even want to think it." Hutch turned angrily on his heel, fists clenching at his sides as he fought off the urge to punch something. "She's scared, she's upset, there could be any number of reasons why...." He trailed off, wishing away the traitorous thought.

"Why her story has more holes than Swiss cheese?" Starsky finished with a note of disgust. "I know you don't want to think it, hell, neither do I. But we both heard her story and we've both been cops for too long not to catch the inconsistencies. They knocked, but she thought it was you when she opened the door? Her hands were tied and she had to break free, but her wrists are barely chaffed?"

"I know, I know, but it just doesn't make sense." He stopped to lean against the nearest wall, his eyes closing. "Why would she lie about something like this? Maybe she's just..." he looked at his friend, pain shimmering in his eyes, "maybe she's just afraid to talk, with the doctor there in the room."

"Gentlemen," the doctor closed the exam room door quietly behind him, cutting off Starsky's reply, "I'm sorry to have rushed you out of there, but Ms. Phelps has suffered quite a shock and she needs her rest."

"How bad is it, Doc?"

"She's really quite lucky, all things considered. Her wounds are basically superficial." Hutch's gaze drifted toward the door as the doctor answered Starsky's question, his thoughts shifting, sorting through all the moments of his relationship with Chris, trying to pinpoint something, some event that would either confirm or repute the horrible suspicions gnawing at his gut.

"When can I see her again?" Hutch interrupted.

"I'd like to get her settled into a room first, give her a bit of a chance to recover before...."

"Doctor, we're dealing with a kidnapped five-year-old here." Hutch snapped, turning an angry glare on the doctor. "We don't have time to waste waiting for her to be comfortably settled."

"Hutch, the doc's doing his best," Starsky reminded him gently.

"How long?" Hutch bit off, ignoring his partner's mild admonishment.

"An hour?" The doctor offered nervously.

"Fine. I'll be upstairs in my daughter's room when she's ready."

With an apologetic smile to the doctor, Starsky hurried off after his friend.

~*~*~*~

Nancy eyed the clock on the wall with an impatient sigh. There were still four hours left in her shift. Another four hours of dealing with ungrateful patients, condescending doctors and loud-mouthed family members. None of whom appreciated all that she did for them. Her face still burned every time she remembered that self-important bitch Sheryl reprimanding her for putting a phone in that patient's room. Like she was supposed to know the guy wasn't really her father.

As one of the monitors in the bank before her burst to life, emitting a high-pitched squeal, she rolled her eyes in annoyance and stood. Great, she wasn't even going to get to spend her last four hours in peace. She briefly considered paging the doctor before deciding it was probably just another patient who didn't know better than to mess with the cardiac leads. Besides, if there was something wrong, she was a fully trained and licensed nurse, she could handle any emergency. No matter what the others thought of her.

Nancy hurried through the door, stopping in stunned silence at the sight that met her eyes. Before her a man stood next to the bed, pressing a pillow into her patient's face as the woman clutched weakly at his wrists. Disbelieving she watched as the hands gave up their struggle, falling limply to the mattress before snapping into action.

"STOP THAT! What are you doing?" Rushing up to the bed, Nancy pushed the man aside and grabbed Kendall's wrist, checking for a pulse. "My God, what were you trying to do?"

"I don't know who you are, but I want you to get out of this room right now!" Adjusting an oxygen mask over Kendall's face, Nancy moved toward the call button, ignoring the man behind her.

"I am sorry, I cannot let you do that." Miguel reached out swiftly, grabbing her around the neck and pulling her against him as he closed his hands around her throat and squeezed with increasing pressure. "But I must thank you for this gift you have given me. This final intimacy."

Tightening his grip, Miguel's smile grew wider, almost serene, as he felt her go limp in his arms and finally lowered her lifeless body to the ground. Pausing only to assure himself she was truly dead, he returned his attention to the still figure on the bed. "It is a pity she disturbed us. I did so want to take my time and enjoy your death. Alas," he reached smoothly into his jacket and pulled out a gun, putting on a silencer with practiced ease, "it appears as though we do not have the time for that."

~*~*~*~

"Damn it, Starsk, can't this wait until after I see Kendall?" Hutch stepped out of the elevator and down the hall before giving his friend a chance to reply.

"Fine, Hutch. But as soon as you're done, we've gotta start talkin' about it." Starsky caught up to his partner

in a few quick strides, slowing him with a restraining hand. "Look, I understand how hard this is for you. It's hard for me, too. I pushed you at her. Pushed, hell, I practically wrapped you up and handed you over with a big red bow. But if Chris is involved in this, she may have the answers we need to find Michael."

"God, Starsk, I just... I don't want to believe it. She's my wife, okay, my ex-wife, but still, we were married for ten years." His step faltered. "What does it say about our relationship if she's really capable of something like this and I never knew it? And what about our marriage? Our son? What was that all about?"

"I don't know, partner, but we're gonna find out. We're gonna find out, I pro..." Starsky stopped mid-word, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Where's the nurse?"

"What?" Hutch asked, surprised by the sudden change in topic. "I don't know. Checking on one of the patients probably."

"Huh uh." Starsky unholstered his gun, moving toward the nearest wall and motioning for Hutch to join him. "There's always supposed to be someone on that desk. I asked Sheryl about it. Unless there's an emergency there's always supposed to be someone at the desk watchin' the monitors."

"You don't think...." Hutch reached for his own gun, sliding along the wall with Starsky.

"Yeah, I do." Starsky came to a stop across from Kendall's door. "On three?"

Hutch nodded his consent.

"One."

"Two."

"Three!"

~*~*~*~

Miguel turned, anger at being interrupted again coloring his features, prepared to deal with the interloper, and found himself staring at the business ends of Starsky and Hutch's guns.

"Drop it!" Hutch edged out from his position behind and above his partner. "Drop it now or I swear the first bullet's going between your eyes."

"Would you really take such a chance with your daughter so close behind me?" Miguel inquired in a light tone, taking a half step back toward the bed.

"I would," Starsky replied, firing off a single shot that caught Miguel in the temple, dropping him to the floor and spraying blood and brain matter across the room. Closing in on the corpse, Starsky kicked the gun away before bending to check both bodies for a pulse. "Nothing. How's she?" He nodded to where Hutch was bent over Kendall trying to rouse her.

"I don't know. I can't get her to wake up, but I don't know if it's because of the sedative they gave her or something he did." He tapped lightly on her cheek. "Come on, Kendall, wake up." A soft moan was her only reply. "I'm going to get a doctor."

"I'll do it. You stay with her." Starsky stepped over Miguel's body. "I'll have 'em send up someone from the morgue while I'm at it."

Hutch spared a quick glance of gratitude for his friend before turning back to Kendall. "Kendall, come on, I

need you to wake up. Let me know you're all right." He stroked the hair away from her face and was rewarding with a gasping cough and flutter of eyelashes. "That's it. Come on."

Coughing raggedly, Kendall curled into herself trying to escape the painful pulling at her stitches. "Wh-what happened?"

"Someone tried to kill you." Hutch shifted position as she attempted to look past him, blocking her view of the bodies. "But it's okay, you're going to be fine."

"I don't..." She struggled to sit up, falling back with a pain filled gasp. "I don't understand."

"Kendall, stay still." Hutch pushed her back into the mattress. "You're just going to hurt yourself."

"Let me see," she insisted, pushing upward again.

With a reluctant nod, Hutch moved slowly to the side, allowing her to see the bodies.

"Miguel." Hutch had to strain to hear the whispered utterance as Kendall fell back, turning tear filled eyes to the wall.

~*~*~*~

Huggy shook his head at the two forlorn figures before him, both gazing morosely at the hospital room across from them. "Anything new?"

"Not really." Hutch laughed mirthlessly, head falling back against the wall. "Same corridor, different day."

"I hear that, m'man." Huggy dropped a stack of folders onto the empty chair next to them. "Here are the files you requested. Ike printed me off a copy of everything he had and I swung by the station to pick up everything the marvelous Minnie could come up with as well. You fellows need any help sorting through it all?"

"Yeah, Hugs, thanks." Starsky grabbed the top file, flipping aimlessly through it. "Listen, I'm gonna call the kids real quick, let Rachel know I'm gonna be late."

"How you really doing, Blondie?" Huggy asked wryly as he dropped into Starsky's vacated seat.

"I don't think I really know anymore." Long fingers stroked across Hutch's forehead as he stared at the ceiling. "I just keep thinking that I must've done something really horrible in another life to keep going through this."

"Bad karma?" Huggy raised an eyebrow. "I thought we left that back in the seventies with Starsky's pet rock."

Hutch snorted softly and flashed Huggy a genuine smile. "Come on, let's see what's in those files."

"Hey, Hutch, is your phone off?"

"Huh? What?" Hutch glanced up from the file in front of him and frowned at Starsky. "No, I don't think...." Pulling the phone out of his pocket, he hit the power switch and watched as it flashed *low battery* and died.

"Dead?" Starsky asked with a knowing grin before scowling at Huggy, who continued to ignore him, and

then cleaned the files off the third chair before plopping down in it. "Peters left a message at the nurse's desk that he was on his way up with the dead guy's personal effects."

"What personal effects? He didn't have anything on him when we searched him."

"Yeah, he did." Starsky replied a little smugly. "He had car keys. Peters put a team in the parking lot and had 'em try every car 'til they found one that fit. He's bringing the stuff forensics is done with up here. And Hutch," he paused, making eye contact with his partner, "they found a high-powered rifle with a laser scope in the trunk."

~*~*~*~

"Is this everything you found in the car?" Hutch shifted through the plastic evidence bags, turning over a small address book.

"Except for the rifle, a cell phone and a couple samples forensics took back with them." Peters cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the tension radiating from the room. "They're going check the ballistics on the rifle again the slugs the docs pulled outta your daughter."

"And the phone?" Starsky interjected.

"They're going to try tracing the numbers stored in the memory." Peters' gaze moved back to his captain. "Cap, I just want you to know, I've got the best men I could find on your daughter's door."

Hutch looked up finally, nodding his approval. "Thanks, Peters. I'll let you know if there's anything else I need."

"Okay, Cap."

"So what now?" Starsky asked as the door closed on the Sergeant. "You wanna stick around here or head back to the station and wait for the ballistics?"

"Here. I want be close when the doctor says I can talk to Chris again." He exchanged a pained glance with his partner. "I don't want to believe she's a part of this... but what other choice do I have? I can't take that chance with Michael's life."

"Then we better get started on this." Starsky indicated the files spread across the table. "I've got a feelin' the more we know before you talk to her again, the better."

~*~*~*~

"God, what do they put in this stuff?" Huggy pushed away the cold cup of coffee in front of him. "I've had three-day-old coffee that's less toxic."

Starsky snorted softly in response as he continued to sort through the piles of paper in front of him.

"This is useless!" Hutch threw a file across the room. "Junior's not going to be stupid enough to leave a paper trail. Not after what happened to his father."

"You don't know that, Hutch," Huggy reasoned, smiling gently before stooping to pick up the scattered papers. "Everythin' we've got so far came from connecting the dots. We just gotta find a few more."

"A few more? A few more?" Hutch spat out. "What the hell good am I doing Michael sitting in this room staring at a bunch of... of... useless paper?"

"Hutch," Starsky reprimanded lightly without looking up. "Hugs is just trying to help."

"I know. I know." Hutch deflated, sagging back into his chair and rubbing his hands down his face. "I just feel so damn helpless."

"Don't worry, m'man," Huggy patted him briefly on the shoulder before resettling in his chair, "everyone in this room knows what's at stake. We're all feelin' on edge."

"Thanks, Huggy...."

"Hutch!" Starsky interrupted, sitting up and leaning over the table. "What was the name of that producer that came to see you?"

"Huh? Umm, Cameron. Why?"

"And the company he worked for?" Starsky looked up sharply when Hutch didn't answer. "Come on, what was it?"

"Uh, I don't know. I don't remember." Hutch pulled out his wallet and began rummaging through it. "I've still got his card here, somewhere. Here. Venice Films. Why?"

"Cause, I think I found the connection." He stabbed excitedly at the page in front of him. "Take a look at this. Venice Films is owned by Werner Family Studios. Gunther Industries owns fifty-two percent of Werner."

"I don't get it." Hutch circled the table, stopping to read over Starsky's shoulder. "What does that tell us besides Gunther was behind Cameron's visit?"

"Which we already suspected." Huggy joined Hutch in staring at the scattered printouts.

"Yeah, but see what else Werner owns?" Starsky pointed with a triumphant smirk.

"Damn." Huggy swore softly. "I'm sorry, Blondie. I really hoped y'all were wrong about her."

~*~*~*~

Hutch took a deep breath, choking back the anger that threatened to consume him, and pushed open the door to Chris' room. "Hey, hi." He was surprised by how level his voice was as he stepped inside. "Mind a little company?"

"Ken." Christine's face lit up as Hutch approached the bed. "I'm so glad you came back. One of the nurses told me that there was some trouble upstairs in the ICU. I was afraid you'd be tied up there."

"It's all taken care of." He perched uneasily on the edge of her bed and reached to take her hand in his. "I always thought you were beautiful. From the first moment I saw you. I'm not sure I ever told you that. There was always something regal about you, something that seemed to set you apart from the rest of us." Hutch threaded his fingers through hers, pulling their joined hands into his lap. "I thought the same thing about Vanessa when I first met her. I guess I should've taken that as some kind of sign, huh?"

"Ken, I don't... What are you talking about?" Chris searched his face. "Is something wrong?"

"You tell me, Chris." Hutch's eyes blazed with righteous fury as he looked at her. "Tell me how long you've been working for him."

"Working for who?" She tried to pull her hand back, but found it trapped in his grasp. "Hutch, I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't!" He hissed, leaning menacingly forward. "Gunther. How long have to been working for Gunther? Since you showed up so unexpectedly at Starsky's? Before that? Was our whole marriage a scam? Part of some twisted scheme of Junior's to get back at me for arresting his old man?"

"Hutch, please, you're hurting me. Let go." She jerked her hand free, looking at him fearfully. "I don't know what's wrong with you or where you got these ideas, but they're wrong. I would never...."

"Never?" Hutch sneered, backing away from the bed, eyeing her contemptuously. "Tell me about your big promotion, Chris. Tell me about the great new producing job at the network Gunther Industries owns."

"GET OUT!"

Hutch ducked as the water pitcher sailed across the space between them. "Not until you tell me where Michael is."

"Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you," Chris replied scornfully.

"Why Chris? Why?" Hutch shook his head, gazing at the woman he'd married, the mother of his child, and seeing a complete stranger. "Why would you do this?"

"Why?" She laughed derisively. "How can you even ask that? How could you possibly not know how much I hate you?"

"I don't. I... Why Chris?" Hutch implored softly. "After everything we went through, everything we were to each other, how could you do this?"

"Everything we were to each other?" She scoffed. "I was always second best. Second to your career, to your partner, to everything. When our son died you turned to him, to Starsky, for comfort. You treated me like I was a stranger instead of the mother of your child."

"My God, Chris, I was out of my mind then." Hutch staggered back, closing his eyes against the painful memories. "I thought you blamed me. Hell, I blamed myself. I didn't turn to Starsky, I didn't do anything but try and close myself off from the world." His eyes were filled with tears when he opened them. "Starsk wouldn't let me. He wouldn't let me out of his sight and he wouldn't let me alone until I broke down. Then he did what he always does, he picked up the pieces and put me back together again."

"And I didn't," she finished coldly. "It always comes back to that. Starsky was there for you and I wasn't."

"I never said that, Chris," Hutch took a hesitant step back toward the bed, "I never even thought it. I just thought that you must have hated me as much as I hated myself. Chris, please, whatever we might have done to one another in a past, please, try to remember what we once were to each other. Help me."

"I can't." Her voice wavered and she turned to stare out the window. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't. I don't know where they are. Please go."

Hutch nodded morosely and left in silence.

~*~*~*~

Starsky's steps faltered as he turned the corner and took in the picture of abject misery Hutch made. Hands thrust deeply into his pockets, he stared blankly out the window. The dejected slump of his shoulders and

wounded expression telling Starsky more than words ever could.

"She hates me, Starsk. I mean, she really, truly hates me." Hutch intoned, his gaze still caught by some far off sight. "God, how could I not have seen that? How could I not know? I was married to the woman for ten years. How could I not know?"

"Hutch..." Words failed Starsky. What could he possibly say at this time that would make Hutch believe this wasn't his fault? Nothing. And so, he turned to the one form of communication that had never failed them and took Hutch in his arms, holding his partner tightly until his trembling stopped.

"I'm sorry." Hutch finally lifted his head from Starsky's shoulder.

"For what?" Starsky cuffed his cheek lightly, letting his hand linger for moment longer. "That's what partners are for."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Hutch smiled sadly. "What are you still doing here anyway? I thought you were on your way to the precinct."

"I was, but I came up with an address for Gunther. So, I called Judge Abrahams." A broad grin crossed his face. "I got a warrant on the place. If we leave now, we should just beat it there."

"How the hell did you get his address?" Hutch asked in stunned disbelief.

"Checked the phone book."

~*~*~*~

Starsky whistled, long and low, as he climbed out of Hutch's car, his eyes taking in the panoramic yard that lead up to Gunther's mansion. "Geez, Hutch, take a look at this place, would ya? You'd think that someone with this kind of money would have better things to do with their time than playing God with other people's lives."

"It's this kind of money that *lets* people think they have the right to play with other people's lives," Hutch replied in disgust. "Let's get this over with while I've still got my lunch."

Starsky motioned toward the young patrolman standing in front of the door. "You got the warrant?"

"Yes, sir." He quickly handed the piece of paper over to the captain. "No one's been in or out since I got here."

"Good job. As soon as the other units get here send 'em in and tell them to find Captain Hutchinson or myself." Starsky peered back over his shoulder at Hutch. "Come on, partner, let's show the rookie how it's done."

A firm knock on the front door quickly yielded the aged black butler, his gaze sweeping over the two men in front of him, lingering just a moment longer on Hutch before clearing his throat. "Mr. Gunther is not in at the moment. May I help you?"

"Police department," Starsky replied insolently, flashing his badge at the man. "I'm Captain Starsky, this is Captain Hutchinson," and again the man's gaze skimmed over Hutch, "we have a warrant to search the place."

"Yes, sir." He stepped away from the door, allowing the two police officers inside.

Once inside, they ran a practiced eye over the surroundings, both taking note of the crates scattered about.

"Going somewhere?" Hutch asked gruffly, stepping up to the nearest crate and reaching inside.

"Mr. Gunther has chosen to ship several of his art pieces to one of his overseas estates," the butler responded mildly.

"Overseas?" Starsky arched a single eyebrow. "And exactly where overseas might that be?"

"Nice, I believe sir."

"You believe? I think you'd be a damn sight more sure with artwork of this value." Hutch twisted slowly toward him, a glimmer of recognition in his eye. "Where is Mr. Gunther?"

"Out of the house, sir," Thomas rejoined quietly. "Now, if there is nothing else you gentlemen will be needing me for, I must to return to my duties."

"Fine, but just make sure none of this fine artwork or anything else leaves the premises until we say so." Starsky peered over Hutch's shoulder at the painting in the nearest crate. "Just looks like a bowl of fruit to me."

"A five million dollar bowl of fruit." Hutch snorted softly, dropping the painting. "Where do you want to start?"

Starsky cocked an eyebrow, looking around the large entry hall. "Eeny, meanie, miney...."

"Knucklehead." Hutch tapped the back of Starsky's head affectionately. "I'll take the one on the right."

"Guess that leaves me the left. Holler if you need me."

Hutch turned the knob and stepped into the first room, his stomach turning as he took in the setting, holding each feature up to the mirror in his mind. The expensive wood paneling, the dark leather sofa, the Rodin statue on the mahogany coffee table. Every piece of furniture, each knick-knack, finding its match in his memory of that day. He half expected to see Bates' body slumped over in the leather chair, eyes staring blankly, Gunther sitting behind the desk, imperious even in defeat.

Trying to break the room's spell, he rounded the desk, fingers brushing lightly over the wood as he remembered the sound his handcuffs made against the polished wood, the arrogance, mixed with desperation, in Gunther's eyes as he pulled his gun. Slowly, he opened the top drawer and began to rifle through its contents, distracting himself from the memories that threatened to pull him under.

Several minutes later, he closed the last drawer in frustration. "Damn it! There's got to be something here. God damn it!"

"Hutch?" Starsky appeared, as if summoned by Hutch's anger, dispelling the last of the room's effect on him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Everything. It's just... This room, Starsk." Hutch gestured vaguely around. "It's insane."

"Huh?" Starsky twisted around, taking in the room, and shrugged. "It looks a little rich for my blood, but I don't see a problem."

"That's because you weren't there, you didn't see it." Hutch's fingers grazed across the globe standing next to the desk. "This is the room I arrested Gunther in. I mean, not the actual room that was in San Francisco,

but... My God, Starsk, it's the same, exactly the same. Down to every last detail."

"Are you sure?" Starsky asked hesitantly. "You were only there once."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Hutch closed his eyes. "That's not a day I'm ever likely to forget."

"Creepy."

"According to the SFPD's reports, he killed himself in this room." Hutch opened his eyes and fought off the chill that crept down his spine.

"Come on, the black and whites are here." Starsky guided Hutch toward the door. "Let's get out of this mausoleum and check out the rest of the house."

"Sounds like a plan, partner." Hutch closed the door on the room and the memories it contained.

~*~*~*~

"The Cellular One customer you are trying to reach is not available at this time. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please try your call again."

James silenced the phone with an impatient flick of his wrist. Miguel was nowhere to be found, a development that did not bode well for the assignment he had been sent on. Behind him, he could hear Michael talking enthusiastically to the yacht's captain as he considered his options. Miguel knew of his plans to escape the country, if he were in police custody, Hutchinson would undoubtedly be waiting at the airport.

"Captain Hennessy, a moment of your time please." He gestured imperiously to the man. "How long would it take to make the ship ready for a long journey?"

"A couple hours at least, sir." The captain scratched his head as he considered his employer. "She's low on fuel and we'll be needing to stock up on supplies. Plus, we're down a couple of crewmen."

"We can sail without them, can't we?"

"Aye, sir, we can," he agreed. "It's just not something I'd advise if we're planning on taking an extended journey."

"Unless you can replace them in the next two hours, we'll simply have to make do until we come to a port where we can hire more hands." He made a dismissive gesture. "Let me know when all the preparations are ready. And send Michael down here. It's time the boy learned to sit still."

Muttering under his breath about daft old men, the captain left the room hurriedly.

~*~*~*~

"Hey, Hutch, you got a couple minutes?" Starsky poked his head into the bedroom Hutch was searching, a light gleaming in his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm not turning anything up in there," he replied in disgust. "What'd you find?"

"Just come on." The gleam blossomed into a grin. "There's something I think you should see."

"What?"

"Just come on." Starsky grinned. "Trust me."

Grumbling about wasted time, Hutch followed his friend down the long hallway and into the next wing of the house, finally finding himself outside a sunlit bedroom. Even from the doorway, he could tell that this room was different. Gone were the dark colors that seemed to permeate the rest of the house. It was bright and airy, if somewhat messy, filled with mementos that could only have belonged to a young woman through the different stages of her life.

Stepping inside, Hutch found his hands drawn to a worn Raggedy Ann doll perched precariously on the edge of a dresser. "Kendall's room?"

Starsky nodded, rocking back on his heels with a boyish grin. "Wait 'til you see what I found!"

"What's this?" Hutch sat on the bed, settling the doll on his lap as he eyed the album Starsky held out to him.

Starsky rolled his eyes and shoved it into Hutch's hands, "What's it look like? It's a photo album. Now look at it."

Slowly, almost reverently, Hutch turned the first page and found himself gazing into his own face, 30 years slipping away as he looked at the young couple standing side by side in their wedding finery. "These are from my wedding." He turned the page and then another, finding himself gazing upon picture after picture taken through the course of his marriage to Vanessa. "How did she get all of these?"

"Keep going." Starsky encouraged, flipping the next page over for him, then watching his friend's reaction as he took in the newborn image of his daughter. "She sure was somethin', wasn't she?"

"I can't believe Gunther let her keep this." Hutch's fingers skimmed lovingly over the pictures as he watched the baby become a toddler then a little girl, growing with each page he turned.

"I doubt he did." Starsky's gaze hardened. "I found the ones with your pictures stuffed between the mattresses. There're more, but I guess we don't really have time to go through them all."

"No, I guess we don't." Hutch stood slowly, clutching the album to his chest with one hand. "Do you think she'd mind if I..."

"I already had one of the uniforms take the others out to your car." Starsky patted his partner's hand.

"Thanks." Hutch wandered around the room, randomly reaching out to touch the scattered mementos of Kendall's life. "Have you turned up anything else?"

"Not even a dust bunny," Starsky grouched. "Nothing but that creepy butler lurking around every corner."

"I think they call that being discretely available, Starsk." Hutch squinted at the snow globe in his hand, trying to make out the tiny scene within it.

"Whatever it is, it creeps me out." He gave a mock shiver. "I keep expectin' him to offer me some tea, laced with arsenic." A sudden crash caught his attention and he looked to find Hutch staring at him, oblivious to the shattered keepsake at his feet.

"Oh, my God! That's where I've seen him!" Hutch shook his head in disgust, stepping distractedly over the glass shards. "You know what, Starsk? I'm an idiot. Don't let anyone ever tell you any different."

"Okay, Blondie, you're an idiot," Starsky agreed amiably as he followed Hutch out of the room. "Mind clueing me in to just why you're an idiot?"

"The butler. I knew there was something familiar about him, but I was so focused on finding Junior that I just... Starsk," he stopped suddenly, turning around to face a startled Starsky, "he's the same butler that worked for the old man when I busted him. The SFPD were sure he knew more than he was talking about. Hell, they were half convinced that he was the one who poisoned Bates, but they could never prove anything."

"He's in the kitchen." Starsky pushed past Hutch and hurried down the stairs.

Seconds later they burst into the kitchen, finding the object of their search sitting calmly at the table, sipping tea.

"Hello, gentlemen." Thomas carefully set the cup in the saucer. "I wondered if you would remember me, Captain Hutchinson."

"Where are they?" Hutch advanced slowly on the table, the menace clear in his voice. "Don't tell me you don't know."

"Of course, I know." Thomas replied disdainfully. "I wouldn't be doing my job properly if I didn't."

"Where. Are. They." Hutch ground out, taking a deliberate step toward the man.

"Hutch," Starsky warned, grabbing his friend's arm and pulling him back a step and then another. "Tell us where they are," Starsky implored quietly. "Whatever you or Gunther have against me and my partner û Michael's a little boy. He doesn't deserve this and neither does his mother."

"Perhaps. But it is not my place to decide," Thomas responded with a tired sigh. Slowly lifting his head, he met Hutch's eyes with defiance. "Say what you will about Mr. Gunther, he was a great man. Not a good man, but a powerful one, with his own code of conduct. His method of revenge was direct. He did not use children to exact revenge on their parents."

"That's bull. Gunther did whatever the hell he thought he could get away with." Hutch sneered, pulling at Starsky's restraining arm. "Where is my grandson?"

Thomas turned the cup of tea in his hands, examining the fine china before finishing the last of his drink. Some undefined emotion flickered behind his eyes as they met Hutch's once more before coming to rest on the phone that sat before him.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me, I think I'll retire to my quarters." He rose slowly, shambling out of the room.

"Hutch, wait." Starsky grabbed his friend's arm as he made to follow the old butler.

"Wait?" Hutch asked incredulously. "That man has all the answers we need."

"Yeah, and I think he gave 'em to us." He reached for the phone, hitting the redial button as he lifted it to his ear.

"What are you....." Hutch quieted as Starsky held up a hand for silence.

"Yeah, hi, listen, I gotta order here for a Mr. Gunther," Starsky spoke with an air of distraction and boredom, "but it don't say where I'm supposed ta deliver it once I get there." He motioned to Hutch for something to write with as he continued. "Yeah, uh huh. Number twenty-seven, got it." Starsky hung-up and turned to Hutch with a smug grin. "Let's go, partner."

"Go? Go where?" Hutch hurried after his partner. "Starsky, who'd you talk to."

"One very friendly young lady, at the yacht club," Starsky swung into the driver's seat of Hutch's car and held out his hands for the keys, "who informs me that Mr. Gunther is on his yacht right now and if I hurry, I should be able to make my delivery *before* they set sail."

"Then you'd better move and let me drive."

Starsky snorted and wiggled his fingers for the keys. "Not if we want to get there in this lifetime."

Grumbling, Hutch tossed the keys to his partner.

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Hutch killed the siren as Starsky sped around the last corner, unholstering his gun as they skidded to a stop in front of the yacht club. Reaching for the handle, he was halfway out the door as he felt the comforting weight of Starsky's hand land on his arm.

"Hutch....."

"I can't promise you anything, Starsk," Hutch replied, unable to meet his partner's gaze. "I have to get Michael out of there, you know that."

"Yeah, I know that, but I also know that Kendall won't forgive herself if you get killed in the process." He held on until Hutch turned to look at him. "And I'd never be able to forgive myself either...or you. Just remember that."

Identifying themselves as police officers, they waited impatiently for the guard to open the gate leading into the yacht club's marina before slipping quietly inside. Cautiously, they crept down the dock, past the many displays of conspicuous consumption, checking carefully for any suspicious activities. In the distance, the faint sound of sirens made themselves heard as reinforcements made their way toward the club.

"Hutch," Starsky whispered, coming to a sudden stop and motioning with his gun to the large yacht three berths down on their right. The words "Divine Right" emblazoned on its stern in an impressive script.

Their target sighted, they now moved swiftly, flattening themselves against the back, before inching slowly to the edges with a darting glance around the corner. No words were exchanged as they slipped carefully toward the stairs and up them.

Once on deck, they quickly took in their surroundings and stepped into the cabin. Listening for signs of activity in the massive yacht, a quick motion of Hutch's gun and an answering nod from Starsky were all the discussion that took place before the partners went their separate ways.

Watching Hutch hurry down the stairs, Starsky waited until he was safely at the bottom before starting up the second set of stairs to the pilothouse. Easing into the room, he watched for a moment as the captain and first mate studied the chart in front of them.

"Freeze."

Both men turned, identical expressions of shock on their faces as they looked at the gun in Starsky's hands and quickly raised their own.

"I don't know who you think you are," the captain blustered, "but Mr. Gunther is a very important and powerful man. You won't get away with this."

"Captain Starsky, Bay City PD." He waved them toward the nearest wall with the gun. "Put your hands against the wall and spread you feet." Approaching them slowly, Starsky reached into his pocket, pulling out a pair of handcuffs as he kicked the first mate's feet further apart. "You have the right to remain silent, if you give up that right....."

~*~*~*~

Hutch pulled the plastic restraints tight as he leaned over the man on the floor. "One word out of you and I'll be back, got it?"

A glare was the only response as Hutch retrieved his weapon and sidled over to the cabin door, pulling it open just a fraction of an inch to peer into the corridor outside it.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell me, where on this tub I could find your boss?" Again, a frosty silence was his captive's only reply. With a final shrug, Hutch slipped out of the room and down the hall, making his way to the last remaining cabin on this deck.

He wasn't sure whether to call his luck, so far, bad or good. He'd managed to find and restrain three *crewmembers*, one of whom looked more than a little too muscle-bound for an everyday crewman, but there was still no sign of Gunther or Michael. Hutch hoped Starsky was having better luck.

Stopping at the last door, he strained to hear the sounds within, but nothing met his ear. Slowly, almost painfully so, Hutch turned the knob and inched the door forward.

Nothing.

Damn it. He turned to leave the room when a sound from the hall caught his attention. Hutch wasn't sure what it had been, a slight rustling of fabric, the hushed fall of foot on the plush carpeting, maybe just an instinct born of years on the street. Gun held steadily in front, he moved into the hall in one swift movement, only to find himself gazing down the barrel of a gun.

His partner's gun.

"Damn it, Starsk." Hutch quickly lowered his own weapon. "You just about scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry, babe." Starsky's gun dropped to his side as he reached up with his right hand to lightly cuff the side of Hutch's head. "Any luck?"

"Depends on how you define it." He jerked his head in the direction of the last crewman he'd left trussed up. "Plenty of flunkies, but no Gunther, no Michael. You?"

"Same." Starsky made his way cautiously back toward the stairs. "You think the old guy meant to send us on a wild goose chase while Junior got away?"

"I don't know, maybe." He turned in a slow circle as they arrived on the main deck. "It's possible, but I didn't get that feeling. I think old Thomas doesn't approve of the way Junior's been handling Daddy's affairs. I think he wanted us to catch the snake."

"So, where is he then?" Starsky followed Hutch's gaze as it swept around the room. "What? What is it?"

"Where's the rest of this deck?"

"What?" Starsky looked around the lush sitting room and back to his partner.

"This deck is bigger from the outside." Hutch stepped up to the nearest wall and tapped lightly on it with his gun. "A lot bigger. So where are the rest of the rooms?"

"Maybe there's a door on the outside?" Starsky leaned out the nearest doorway, scanning the wall in both directions.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Hutch moved over another foot, again tapping lightly with his gun. "Starsk, come listen to this." When his partner joined him, Hutch repeated his tap. "Hear that?" He moved back a foot and tapped again. "And that?"

"The first one sounded wrong," Starsky began running his hands across the wall, "like it was hollow or something."

"Or something is right." Hutch pressed on the panel in front of him with no results. "There's got to be some way of opening this."

"CAPTAIN STARSKY? CAPTAIN HUTCHINSON?"

The loud voices coming from outside the cabin startled both men momentarily before Starsky raised a hand and motioned toward the open doorway. "I'll send 'em after the ones we already got and have 'em check the engine room and kitchen, galley, whatever it's called. You keep looking."

Hutch nodded his consent and went back to examining the panel and the surrounding area. There had to be something. Something he was overlooking, but what?

"Peters said the Feds are on their way." Starsky voiced quietly behind him. "Find anything?"

"Not yet."

"Maybe it's not in the wall." Starsky lifted a small statute off an end table. "Maybe it's somewhere else in the room. Or maybe...." He crossed the room and picked a small square box up off the bar, "maybe there's a remote for it."

With the push of a button, the panel slid silently back, revealing the short hallway behind it with a door on each side.

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"Grandfather, there's policemen outside!" Michael called excitedly as he pressed his face against the two-way mirror.

"I am aware of that, Michael," Gunther responded curtly, turning back to the paperwork in front of him. "You have all of the arrangements made?"

"Yes, Mr. Gunther." The well-dressed man in front of him discretely slipped the contract into his briefcase while sliding another in front of his client. "As soon as these are all signed I'll phone the office and have them start making the transfers at once."

"Excellent. Bail money?" He signed the last form and handed it back to the attorney.

"Already set aside in a Swiss account." The last contract was tucked away with the others. "We'll have you out as soon as the Judge sets bail."

"Talk to Wells, be sure to get a Judge that is sympathetic to our cause." Gunther directed his frown to where

Michael stood, his face still pressed against the glass. "Michael, sit down."

"Sorry, sir." The boy looked at him contritely and sat quickly in the nearest chair. "Can I go out and see the policemen?"

"No. They will be in here soon enough." He turned his attention back to his attorney. "Will that be all Mr. Caley?"

"Yes, I believe that covers it, Mr. Gunther. Would you like me to let the officers in now?"

"There's no need." Gunther indicated the small monitor set into the desk before him. "It seems Captains Hutchinson and Starsky have found their own way in." Seconds later the door flew open as both cops burst into the room.

"FREEZE, GUNTHER!" Hutch moved swiftly toward the seated figure. "Raise your hands. Raise them now!"

"You, too." Starsky motioned with his gun toward the other man. "Drop the briefcase, nice and easy, and raise 'em."

"Grandpa!" Michael jumped out of his chair, rushing across the room to Hutch in his excitement. "Did you come to get me? Are you going to take me to Mommy?"

"Yes, Michael, I am. But I need you to get behind me right now." Hutch gently maneuvered the boy behind him with a hand on his shoulder. This accomplished, he waved his gun at Gunther once more. "Stand, slowly, and back away from the desk."

"Are you arresting Grandfather?" Michael asked, eyes wide as Hutch advanced on the other man.

"Yes." Hutch shoved Gunther down to the floor, planting a knee in the middle of the man's back as he holstered his gun pulled out his handcuffs.

"Wow." Michael watched in wide-eyed wonder as Hutch slapped the handcuffs around Gunther's wrists and tightened them.

"You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law." Grabbing a handful of Gunther's jacket, Hutch hauled him unceremoniously to his feet. "You have the right to speak to an attorney and to have him present during questioning." Hutch punctuated this statement with a rough push toward the door. "If you so desire and cannot afford one, one will be appointed to you. Do you understand these rights?"

"See here, there's no reason to treat Mr. Gunther like this," Caley protested even as his own cuffs were being tightened. "He's been an upstanding member of this community for the last decade."

"Save it for the courtroom, Counselor," Starsky growled as he grabbed the neck of the man's jacket and hauled him toward the door. "You're gonna need it."

"And just what am I being arrested for?" Caley twisted, trying to peer over his shoulder at the cop as he was directed out of the room. "I've done nothing, but confer with my client."

"Try Accessory After The Fact on for size," Starsky replied directing the man out after his client. "I'm bettin' with the company you keep it's not goin' to be too hard to shake something else loose after that."

"You don't really believe you'll be able to keep me in jail, do you, Captain?" Gunther inquired imperiously.

"My attorneys will have me out within the hour."

"Don't bet on it." Hutch leaned in menacingly. "You're going down, Gunther, hard. And you'd better believe we'll be taking a long hard look at the judges and prosecutors assigned to your case. You're not getting off on this one and you're not going to get to take the easy way out like your father."

"Don't you dare mention my father." Gunther pulled away from Hutch, turning on him and showing his first real display of emotion. "My father was a great man...."

"Your father was megalomaniac," Hutch's eyes glowed with an angry passion as he stabbed his finger into Gunther's face, "and the only thing he ever did right in his life was putting a bullet in his brain." Turning to a young policeman in uniform, he jerked his head in Gunther's direction. "Get him out of my sight before I do something he might regret. And make sure he gets processed right, right down to the t's and i's."

"Take this one, too." Starsky prodded Caley forward. "And send someone in there," he nodded in the direction of the secret room, "to retrieve the briefcase sittin' in there. I have a feelin' it'll make some interesting reading."

With Gunther out of his hands, Hutch quickly dropped to one knee in front of Michael, running his hands over the boy's arms and legs. "Are you all right? He didn't hurt you did he?"

"No." Michael quickly shook his head, gazing over Hutch's shoulder to where Gunther had just been hauled out of the room. "But he said I couldn't see Mommy anymore." Tears started to well up in his eyes. "Is that true?"

"No. No, Michael. God, no." Hutch swept the boy into his arms and hugged him tightly. "I'll take you to see her right now. Come on."

"Hold on, Hutchinson."

Hutch stood, perching Michael on his hip and turned to glare at Agent Bettin. "What do you want, Bettin?"

"I told you this was a Federal Investigation and to stay out of it." Bettin responded angrily. "Do you know how many years worth of investigations and cases you've put in jeopardy?"

"I don't give a damn about your investigation or your cases." Hutch's glare deepened. "If you think for one second that your arrest rate is more important than the lives of the people we're supposed to be protecting, think again." Hutch pushed past him and started out the door.

"Just where the hell do you think you're going, Hutchinson?" Bettin yelled after him. "You can't just walk away from this."

"Oh yeah?" Starsky appeared suddenly in the man's face, his anger clear. "Either you arrest my partner or you shut the hell up. And while you think about it, think on this, you try and get anywhere near him, you'll have to go through me first."

"Is that a threat, Starsky?" Agent Bettin's face flushed an angry scarlet.

"You bet it is," Starsky snarled in reply, "just try me."

"Sir," Agent Curtis stepped out of the shadows, "I'll accompany Captains Starsky and Hutchinson to the hospital and handle matters from that end."

"Fine." Bettin waved them away in a vain attempt to save face.

"Come on." Starsky acknowledged Curtis abruptly before following his partner.

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Michael clung to Hutch's hand as he pulled him eagerly down the hallway toward Kendall's room. "Come on, Grandpa. Hurry up."

"Hold up, Michael, let's find out from the nurse how she's doing first, okay?" Hutch tugged on the boy's hand, bringing him to a stop in front of the empty Nurse's Station.

"Scared?" Starsky asked knowingly.

"Terrified," Hutch admitted. "I'm not sure what to expect now that we don't have all of this hanging over us. What if... what if she still doesn't want a relationship with me? I mean, I couldn't really blame her, you know? Everything she's been through has been because I'm her father. I'm not sure that's something she can forgive."

"Listen, babe," Starsky leaned in close, massaging Hutch's shoulder, "she's gonna love you. She already loves you, you've seen that. You just gotta give yourselves a chance to get to know one another, okay?"

"Okay." Hutch nodded, smiling at his friend. "I guess I should get on with this."

"Yeah, you should." Starsky gave his friend a gentle shove down the hallway. "Get going before Michael busts a gut."

"You're not coming?" Hutch asked, suddenly nervous again.

"Naw, I got a couple things to take care of." Starsky smiled reassuringly. "But I'll be around if you need me."

Hutch hesitated once more. "Thanks, Starsk, for everything."

"No thanks necessary, you know that. Besides," Starsky confessed with a sheepish grin, "it was kind of fun. Felt a lot like old times, *partner*."

"Yeah, it really did." Hutch smiled fondly at his old friend before finally surrendered to the impatient hand tugging on his.

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Hutch raised a finger to his lips, cautioning Michael to be quiet, before pushing open the door and stepping into Kendall's hospital room. "Kendall?" he called out quietly, torn between not wanting to wake her and not wanting to prolong her worry.

The soft rustle of sheets greeted his call as she turned to look at him, red-rimmed eyes filled with worry. "D-did..." She cleared her throat. "Did you find...."

"Take a look." Hutch moved into the room, making way for the bundle of energy behind him.

"Mommy!" Michael sprang toward the bed, finding himself immediately engulfed in his mother's arms.

"Oh, God. Oh, thank God," Kendall's words were muffled as she pressed her face against the top of Michael's head and clung to him tightly. "Oh, God, baby, I was so worried about you. Are you all right? Let me look at you?" She finally released him, holding him at arms length while she ran a mother's eye over

him. "Your grandfather didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Naw." Michael looked down, suddenly bashful, torn between embarrassment and pleasure at his mother's reaction. "He just told me," Michael's voice dropped as he looked at Kendall fearfully, "he told me I couldn't see you no more. But then Grandpa Hutch came and he arrested Grandfather and put him in handcuffs and everything and then he...."

"Michael, breathe." Kendall couldn't help laughing as she hugged him again. "You'll have plenty of time to tell me everything." Planting a quick kiss on top of Michael's head, she finally raised her eyes and looked at Hutch. "I don't know how to begin to thank you."

"No thanks are necessary." Hutch cupped his hand around the back of the boy's head, ruffling his hair lightly. "There's nothing I wouldn't... I'm just glad you're both all right."

"Thanks to you." She reached a hand out for his, giving it a warm squeeze as it folded around hers. "I won't forget that. I won't ever forget that. Thank you."

Hutch looked down at their joined hands then again at Kendall before pulling her and Michael into a hug. "I think you just figured out how to thank me."

Silence reigned in the room as the small family held one another, letting old wounds begin to heal.

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"Captain Starsky?"

Starsky finished giving directions to the uniform stationed outside of Christine's room before turning to catch Dr. Webber hurrying down the hallway toward him. "Problem, Doc?"

"No, not a problem, really, just a..." The doctor thrust an envelope into Starsky's hand. "I haven't looked at them. I thought maybe Captain Hutchinson should see them first, or maybe you should. I'm still not real comfortable with this whole thing and...."

"Are these the results? From the test?" A delighted grin spread across Starsky's face and he started to tear the envelope open, but hesitated. "No, you're right. Hutch should see these first. I'm going to take it to him. Thanks, Doc. Thanks a lot!" Starsky tucked the envelope into his pocket and hurried toward the elevator.

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Hutch smoothed the hair away from Kendall's temple, watching as her eyelids dipped for the second time in as many minutes. "Listen, why don't we get out of here and let you get some sleep. The docs have been pretty lenient about visiting hours, but if we keep this up they're going to have us barred from this floor."

"No." Kendall grasped his hand again, holding it tightly. "Stay for just a little bit more. Just till I fall asleep, okay?"

"Okay," Hutch agreed, smiling as his free hand continued to card through her hair, "but you have to close your eyes and quit fighting it. Right, Michael."

"Right." The five-year-old nodded solemnly from his perch on the end of the bed. "You always tell me I hafta get lots of sleep when I'm sick," he reminded her.

"Yeah, I do. Okay." She stifled a yawn as her eyes drifted closed again. "I guess I know when I'm beaten."

Kendall's breath slowly evened out, her hand going slack in Hutch's. Gently disengaging it, Hutch motioned Michael to be silent and lifted him from the foot of the bed and directed him toward the door.

"Come on," he whispered, pulling the door open slowly, "let's go to the cafeteria and get something to eat." Laughing quietly as Michael made a face, Hutch followed him into the hall. "Yeah, I know the food's not so great there, but it's close and maybe your mom will be awake by the time we finish. Starting tomorrow we'll bring our own food, okay?"

"Okay." Michael reached hesitantly for Hutch's hand, slipping his shyly inside it. "Can I have chocolate milk?"

"You can have anything you want," Hutch vowed, eyes sparkling.

"Captain Hutchinson." Agent Curtis stepped away from the nurse's station. "I'm sorry, but Agent Bettin wants to see you and Captain Starsky in the third floor conference room, now."

"Now?" Hutch replied impatiently. "Can't this wait until tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," Agent Curtis responded apologetically. "I've put him off for as long as I can."

"All right." Hutch sighed wearily. "But I need to find someone to look after Michael while I'm in there. And I'm not sure where Starsky is...."

"I'll look after Michael, Agent Bettin assigned me to stand guard over both of them until other arrangements can be made. Besides," Curtis gestured toward Michael, "my man, Mikey, and I go way back, right?"

"Yeah," Michael nodded enthusiastically, "Uncle Bobby took me to play basketball with Eddie before."

"That's right. I whooped Uncle Bobby's, ah, butt." Curtis' grin turned melancholy. "Bobby couldn't make a decent jump shot to save his life. Come on, Mikey, we'll hang out with your momma until they're done."

Hutch looked uncertainly from Michael to Curtis and back again. "I don't know about this. Maybe I should take Michael with me."

"Captain, I understand how you feel, but Bobby was one of my best friends and I'm good at my job." Curtis spoke quietly, confidently. "I promise, nothing will happen to them on my watch."

Hutch nodded once, then bent down in front of Michael. "Go ahead and go with Agent Curtis for now. I'll be back as soon as I can, okay?"

"Okay, Grandpa." Michael threw his arms around Hutch's neck, hugging him quickly before turning to look up at Agent Curtis. "Do you really work for the FBI? Do you have a badge? Do you have a gun? What kinda car do you drive...?"

Hutch smothered a laugh as he waited for the elevator, Michael's enthusiastic questions still ringing in his ears as the doors popped open.

"There you are."

"Where're you goin'?"

Hutch grinned as he led Starsky back into the elevator. "I was on my way to find you. We have a command performance scheduled in the conference room."

"Bettin?" Starsky rolled his eyes.

"Yeah." Hutch punched the button for the third floor. "The man still hasn't grown tired of the sound of his own voice."

"What about Michael and Kendall?" Starsky fingered the envelope in his pocket.

"Curtis is with them until we're done." Hutch replied, eyeing Starsky suspiciously. "What's up?"

"A lot," Starsky admitted, taking a deep breath. "Not all of it good."

"Chris?" Hutch asked quietly, watching as the floor number lit up.

"I had a talk with her doctor about our *suspicious*, he agreed that none of her injuries are life-threatening or even serious enough to really warrant a night in the hospital." Starsky studied the profile next to him for a moment before going on. "I had one of the uniforms arrest her. She should be on her way to booking now."

"Thanks, Starsk," Hutch shrugged as he continued to watch the numbers change, "I don't think I would've been able to handle that." A quiet nod was Starsky's only reply as they stepped out onto the third floor. "Anything else?"

Starsky sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "That butler guy, Thomas? He's dead."

"What?" Hutch stared at him in shock. "What the hell happened?"

"The ME's not sure yet," Starsky admitted, "But it looks like suicide. The ME thinks there was somethin' in that tea he was drinking."

"Jesus. That's just... just...." Hutch gestured broadly with his hands.

"Yeah, I know," Starsky agreed with Hutch's unspoken statement.

"Geez, Starsk, you said it wasn't all good." Hutch shook his head and eyed his partner. "Tell me you've got at least some good news for me in all this."

"I think, maybe, I do." He pulled the half-opened envelope from his pocket. "Here."

"What's this?" Hutch looked it over suspiciously, turning it over in his hand. "What'd you do?"

"Nothing. Just open it." The childlike gleam reappeared in Starsky's eyes as he rocked back on his heels. "Go on, open it."

"Starsk, if you got me roller derby tickets again, I swear I'm gonna...."

"Just open it!" Starsky insisted, watching impatiently as Hutch eased the flap open.

"Starsky! Hutchinson!"

Starsky fixed Agent Bettin with a quelling glare before settling his hand over the envelope. "This has waited this long, I guess it'll wait a little longer. Let's get this circus over with."

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Hutch groaned and stretched as he stepped out of the elevator. Two hours of sitting in a conference room, listening to Bettin drone on about professional responsibility, the evils of the Bay City PD and the personal

culpability of himself and Starsky in particular, all the while repeating the same story over and over had left him tired and ready to put his fist through a window. But at least it was over, for now, and he could visit with his daughter for a little while before taking Michael home.

His daughter. The phrase sounded foreign and welcoming all at the same time. His daughter. His family. A possibility he thought he'd buried forever with Davy.

Hutch's hand lingered on the door for a second, as he contemplated what waited for him on the other side. With a slow smile, he pushed the door open and walked inside.

The room was empty.

"No." Heart pounding, Hutch opened the door and checked the room number again. It was the right room. He knew it was. So where were they.

"Captain Hutchinson."

Hutch looked down the hall to see Agent Curtis hurrying toward him. "Where are they?"

"I'm sorry about this. I was hoping to be back before you...." Curtis found himself lifted up by lapels and slammed into the nearest wall.

"I said where are they?!" Hutch growled between clenched teeth. "What have you done with them?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell you that," Curtis replied calmly in the face of Hutch's wrath. "I wish I was, but...."

"I don't give a damn about your excuses, just tell me where my daughter and grandson are." Hutch punctuated his statement by slamming Curtis into the wall again.

"Please, sir, if you'll put me down and follow me into the room, I promise I'll tell you what I can." Curtis motioned toward the empty room as Hutch stepped back from him. "Please, follow me."

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Starsky bounced excitedly through the doorway and into Kendall's hospital room, a quick smile on his face. "Hey, partner, you ready to..." Spying the forlorn figure on the bed, leaning back against the wall, a single sheet of paper clutched in his hand, Starsky came to a stop. "Hutch, what is it? What's wrong?"

"It's positive," Hutch said, laughing hollowly. "Isn't that just a kick in the teeth?"

"What's positive?" Starsky approached the bed cautiously, sensing his friend's despair. "What're you talking about?"

"This!" Hutch crushed the piece of paper in his hand and waved it at Starsky. "This damn paternity test. It's positive. Kendall *is* my daughter."

"But that's... I mean I thought that was a good thing, right?" Starsky scratched his head in obvious confusion. "Isn't it?"

"Yes. No. Damn it, Starsk," his entire frame shuddered as Hutch dropped his head into his hands, "they're gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone?" Starsky looked around the otherwise empty room in bewilderment. "Hutch, what the hell happened?"

"Protective custody," Hutch's response was barely a whisper. "While we were down being questioned by Bettin he had them moved from the hospital and placed in protective custody until the trial. Then he's putting them in the Witness Protection Program."

"What? He can't do that!" Starsky exploded. "He had no right to do that!"

"Oh, no, Starsk, he had every right, don't you know that?" Hutch replied dully. "Every right conferred to him by the fucking United States government to swoop in here and take my family without even letting me say goodbye!"

Hutch's sudden movement caught Starsky by surprise as the phone crashed against the wall on the other side of the room.

"God damn it, Starsk," Hutch collapsed into the strong arms that encircled him, "I didn't even get to say goodbye."

"I'm sorry, Hutch." Starsky held his friend tightly, rocking him slowly as they sank to the ground. "I'm so sorry, but you gotta know we'll find them. I don't care what it takes, we'll find them." Starsky held on, feeling the strong tremors that rocked his friend as Hutch poured his grief onto Starsky's shoulder. "We will find 'em. I swear we will. Bettin's a moron, you know that. He couldn't hide a needle in a smokestack!"

"We can't." The words were soft, barely breathed against Starsky's neck as Hutch struggled to regain control.

"Of course, we can." Starsky responded immediately, tightening the arm around Hutch's shoulders. "It won't be easy, but together you know we can do it."

"And then what?" Hutch asked, opening his eyes and releasing a tired sigh as he looked at Starsky, "Lead Gunther straight to them? Starsk, the only way to keep them safe is to give them up. I just wish... I just wish I could've said goodbye.

Knowing Hutch was right, and with no words left to say, Starsky once again enfolded his partner in his arms and held on tight.

~*~*~*~

A light tap on the door pulled Hutch away from the contemplation of the photograph in front of him. "Come in."

"You ready?" Starsky leaned into the room, scanning the man in front of him.

"Yeah, sure." Hutch set the picture down carefully and rose. "How much time have we got?"

"Enough to stop and get a mega-burrito on the way," Starsky replied casually as he slipped past Hutch into the room and picked up the small frame. Inside it he saw a two or three year old Michael laughing as Kendall blew bubbles in front of him. "This is nice."

"I took it out of one of the albums," Hutch replied quietly, taking the frame from Starsky and running his fingers across it before setting it back on the desk. "I didn't think she'd mind."

"I'm sure she doesn't." Starsky wrapped an arm around Hutch's shoulders. "You know, we can skip this whole thing if you want."

"No, no, I want to be there for this." Hutch straightened his shoulders and smiled sadly at his friend. "Chris

and I went through a lot together, good and bad. I need to be there for her sentencing. Maybe I can get some kind of closure from it."

"Okay, buddy." Starsky squeezed the shoulder beneath his hand. "Hey, I've gotta surprise for you."

"Surprise?" Hutch raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Why is it that *that* word always scares me coming from you?"

"Because you just don't got no faith, Hutch." Starsky shook his head sadly. "No sense of adventure. Luckily, you've got me to take care of that. Come on."

"Don't got no faith?" Hutch sighed and regarded his friend sadly, "Starsky, it's a wonder any of your kids ever learned to speak the language."

"Stop trying to change the subject and come on." Starsky opened the door with a flourish and gestured for Hutch to proceed him.

"Starsky, I'm not eating at some new roach infested greasy spoon you've discovered." Hutch warned as he called the elevator.

"This isn't a new greasy spoon."

"I'm not eating at an old one either."

"Would you shut up and get on the elevator?" Starsky asked with an exasperated sigh.

~*~*~*~

"So, what da ya think?" Starsky leaned against the bright red car, pride evident in his voice.

"I think there's no way on God's green Earth you're getting me back in that car." Hutch took a large step backward. "I've told you how I feel about it."

"Yeah, I know you have, pal." Starsky stood, suddenly serious. "But it's just a car. A car we had a lot of good times in. You need to get over it, Hutch."

Hutch looked into his partner's eyes and knew he was talking about so much more than the car, knew that he was right, it was time to let go of the pain, the fear, the guilt that had seemed to follow him through so much of his life.

"Come on." Starsky held open the Torino's door and smiled. "We've got places to go, partner."

With one last hesitant glance, Hutch slid into the passenger's seat and pulled the door closed behind him. "Yeah, we sure do."

~*~*~*~

Epilogue

Hutch sighed wearily and reached up to squeeze the bridge of his nose. It had been a long, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately satisfying, day. After another round of preliminary hearings, a change of judges and enough paperwork to crush a small country, Gunther was still in jail and set to go on trial in two short weeks. Maybe Starsky was right, maybe there really was a *light* at the end of the rainbow.

Hutch snorted softly and climbed out of the car. "Okay, when Starsky's fractured clichés start sounding good it's definitely past your bedtime." He fished around in his pocket for the keys as he made his way up the walk, stopping as a figure disengaged itself from the shadows surrounding the front door.

"Can I help you?" Hutch asked warily, one hand creeping toward the gun strapped to his left shoulder.

"I was kind of hoping we could help each other." The figure took another step forward, coming into the pale light cast by the slip of a moon. "If... that is...."

"Kendall?" Hutch's mouth fell open as he stared at her in shock, unable to do so much as blink for fear the spell would be shattered and she'd disappear. "I don't understand... What are you... How... Is it really you?"

"Yeah," she took another hesitant step toward him, "I wasn't sure if I should just show up like this or what. Especially after the way we left, but...."

Strong arms pulling her into an embrace temporarily cutting off Kendall's ramblings and she clung to the chest before her. "I'm sorry. I never wanted to leave like that. I wanted to call you, but I was in the hospital and then a safe house and...."

"Shh, shh, it's all right." Hutch leaned back, just enough to reach down and tilt her face up so their eyes met. "I'm just glad you're here now. Are you all right? Michael?"

"Michael's fine. He's back at the hotel, sleeping." Kendall cleared her throat nervously. "You think we could go inside?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, you must be freezing," Hutch replied, finally noticing the thin jacket she wore, "Here, have a seat." He directed her toward the couch. "Is there something I can get you? Water? I think I have some instant coffee or...."

"No." Kendall shook her head gently. "I can't stay long. Eddie's waiting in the car and they're expecting us back at the hotel pretty soon. I just wanted, I wanted to see you, to tell you I was sorry for the way everything happened." She took a deep breath. "They offered me a chance to go into the witness protection program when this is all over."

Hutch felt a knot form in his gut as he tried to look supportive. "That's probably the safest thing, for you and Michael."

"Maybe," she responded with a shrug, "but I'm not going to do it. I've lived too much of my life looking over my shoulder, worrying about saying or doing the wrong thing. I'm not going to live like that anymore. I'm not going to make Michael live like that."

"So that means...." Hutch was afraid to ask, to hope.

"It means that once this is all over Michael and I are going to try and build a life here." Kendall smiled tentatively. "The condo and a lot of other stuff have been seized by the Feds, but they're letting me keep my studio. There are some rooms in the back, a small kitchen, just the right amount of space for Michael and me."

A loud horn sounded from outside, cutting the nervous tension in the room and they both laughed.

"Your ride?" Hutch asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I'd better go." Kendall stood and started for the door. "I just wanted you to know we'll be around, when this is all over, if you want...."

"I want. Very much." Hutch pulled her into another hug. "As soon as the this damn trial's over with, you, Michael and I are going to start getting to know each other."

"I'd like that." Kendall's smile lit up her face as the horn sounded again. "My chariot's getting impatient. I'd better...."

"Yeah, you'd better." Hutch followed her to the door, watching as she hurried down the walk and across the street, only closing it when the car pulled out of sight.

Picking up the phone, he dialed without pausing to think. "Hey, Starsk, you're right, there is a light at the end of the rainbow."

The End

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