PARTNERS AND WIVES

by Sparkle731

Vanessa Hutchinson sat at her vanity, furiously pulling a brush through her long, dark hair. Her husband stood beside the bed, his face flushed with anger. For the past two hours they had been fighting about his decision to drop out of college and go to the police academy; actually going behind her back and applying despite her vocal objections. The acceptance letter had arrived in the mail that afternoon.

"What am I supposed to do while you're out playing cops and robbers?" Vanessa demanded coldly. "Stay here and play housewife?"

"God forbid," Ken said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "You might break a fingernail."

Vanessa glared at her husband's reflection in the mirror. They both knew exactly which buttons to push to make the other one angry. "Your father is not very happy with your decision. He wants you to call him right away."

"You couldn't wait to call him, could you? He's not going to change my mind any more than you are!" Ken's voice had taken on a cold hard edge that sounded as cold as ice.

"Surely you don't expect me to live on the measly salary you'll be making while you're in the academy, do you?"

"You could always get a job if you're so worried about money."

"Checks that are going to stop if you go through with this crazy idea of being a cop!" she reminded him as she threw the brush down on the vanity and stood up. Walking over to the closet, she pulled out a silky blue dress with a low cut neckline. "I'm going out. Don't bother to wait up."

Ken fumbled for the alarm and shut it off before the noise woke up Vanessa. He wasn't up to a repeat performance of last night's argument. Tossing aside the covers, he swung his long legs over the side of the bed and got up. After completing his usual morning ritual, he got dressed in a pair of pressed jeans and a brown polo shirt before going into the kitchen and making his breakfast drink; leaning against the counter to enjoy it.
the glass in the sink, he grabbed the acceptance letter from the police academy from where he had laid it the night before and walked out the front door.

The sun was shining brightly with just a hint of smog in the air. Ken raised his hand and waved a friendly greeting to some early morning joggers as he crossed the street to his car. The battered blue Chevy looked out of place in this neighborhood where most of the residents drove Mercedes or Lincoln Continentals. He dug his keys out of his pocket and opened the door, sliding into the driver's seat. Vanessa hated his car; all the more reason for him to keep it. He turned on the ignition, gently coaxing the cold engine until it sputtered and started.

He turned the radio to an early morning talk show as he drove across town to the Police Academy. The next class was scheduled to start in three days, but this morning, Ken was just picking up his books and his class schedule. After that, he would get fitted for his uniforms.

It had been a lengthy process just to get into the Academy, but he had finally made it. Ken was nervous and excited about this new direction in his life. For twenty-two years he had done exactly what his family expected of him, allowing his father to influence him and dictate his choices. It had taken a fair amount of courage on his part finally to stand up to the elder Hutchinson Sr. and tell him that he was quitting school and making his own way in life from now on. He had immediately found himself embroiled in a bitter confrontation, not only with his parents but also his wife. He had turned a deaf ear to their threats and manipulation, more determined than ever to follow his dream and embrace his future.

Ken turned into the parking lot for the Police Academy and pulled into the nearest parking slot. Several different buildings were located on the grounds and it was a picturesque setting. The various Spanish-style buildings contained classrooms, a gymnasium, and a firing range, along with the administration offices. Behind the buildings, hidden from public view, were an outdoor track, an athletic field, and an obstacle course.

Inside the administration building, Ken followed the signs to the new student registration area. A large conference room had been set aside for that purpose. Several uniformed officers sat at three long tables and each officer had a large stack of file folders in front of them. A pretty brunette in a short skirt and tight sweater stood just inside the door, a clipboard in her hand. She smiled at Ken brightly and asked, "Name?"

"Ken Hutchinson."

"Hutchinson," She repeated, glancing at her clipboard and marking beside his name on her list. "Alphabetical assignment." She dismissed him with a nod, turning her attention to the man behind him.

Ken walked across the room, his eyes scanning the tables until he found the correct officer. Standing silently, he waited patiently for the older man to acknowledge him.

"Name?"

"Ken Hutchinson."

The officer, whose nametag read Whittington, shifted through his pile of files until he found the one with Ken's name on it. Opening it, he sorted through the papers inside and handed three sheets to Ken.

"That's a list of the supplies and books you'll need, a map of the grounds, and your class schedule. Welcome aboard, Cadet Hutchinson."

"Thank you, sir," Ken said, a genuine smile on his face. He waited until he was back in the hallway to look over the papers in his hand. Besides the usual supplies, he would also need to purchase over 15 books. On paper, it looked like an overwhelming caseload to cover in just a few months.
The class schedule was almost as daunting. Classes started at 8 a.m. Monday through Friday and weren't over until five o'clock in the afternoon with an hour for lunch between twelve and one. Morning classes were set aside for academics, while the afternoons were spent on the physical portion of the training. There would be a formal orientation held in the gymnasium on the morning of the first day during which all cadets had to be dressed in full uniform.

The 105 registered cadets were broken down in sections of 35. This allowed the Academy to stagger the various classes, with each section taking a rotation at a different time. Ken was assigned to Section 3.

"Sounds like a lot, doesn't it?" A voice from behind asked, startling Ken from his reading. He looked over his shoulder at a man close to his height, with light brown hair and a welcoming smile on his face. "My name's John Colby."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Ken Hutchinson."

"What section are you in?"

"Section Three."

"Hey, so am I. You want to go to the bookstore and start grabbing these books with me?"

"Sure."

The two young men walked out of the administration building together and found their way to the student union building. The bookstore was crowded with other cadets purchasing their own books and supplies. As they started to enter, a man leaving the store almost ran into John. Slightly shorter than Ken and his new friend, the other man had a firm, compact build with dark brown curly hair and the bluest eyes Ken had ever seen. He was dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans with a hole in one knee and a blue tee shirt that had what looked like an oil stain on one shoulder.

"Sorry. Didn't see ya," the man said with a distinctive New York accent.

"Next time watch where you're going," John warned as he walked past the stranger. Ken smiled faintly and shrugged his shoulders apologetically, hoping to excuse John's rudeness. The man simply narrowed his eyes and walked out of the store.

As Ken joined John at a table that held the various 'How To' books, he was surprised to hear the other man say, "Fucking jerk. Who the hell does he think he is?"

"What's with you? He didn't see you."

"Asshole shouldn't even be here. He wouldn't have gotten in if he wasn't a Vietnam vet and had somebody higher up vouching for him." There was a bitter tone to John's voice that Ken didn't particularly care for.

"You know that guy?" Hutch asked, glancing over his shoulder. The other man was already out of sight.

"Not personally, but I heard all about him from a friend," John admitted with a sneer. He picked up one of the books on the table and glanced through it.

"What did you hear?"

"That he's a cocky little bastard with a bad temper and a chip on his shoulder. I bet he's the first one to washout."
Ken let the subject drop as he browsed through the books on display. He had always tried not to judge other people until he got to know them. Prejudice and discrimination of any kind had always been one of his pet peeves. And if the man was indeed a veteran, in Ken's opinion that earned him the right to some respect. Ken may have avoided the draft because he had a college deferment, but he still had a high regard for the men who had served in that war and lived to make it back home.

Vanessa wasn't home when Ken got back to their apartment. He sighed as he laid the bags containing his books on the kitchen table and hung his new uniforms in the closet. Ken knew that she would make his life miserable because he refused to back down this time. It hadn't taken him long to discover that the fiery woman that he had married wasn't happy unless she got her own way. For the past two years, he had given in to her simply to avoid arguing all the time. Ken had concentrated on school, while Vanessa had spent her time climbing the social ladder and cultivating a certain image. She had spent their money almost as quickly as his father could mail them a check. Their credit cards were maxed out because of her outrageous spending. She wasn't satisfied unless she was wearing the latest fashions and could hire someone else to take care of the mundane chores of maintaining a household. Even the furniture in their apartment had to be brand new; nothing used for Vanessa Hutchinson.

The ringing of the telephone broke into his thoughts. Grabbing the receiver, he answered, "Hello?"

"Kenneth," his father's voice said in his ear. "What's this nonsense that Vanessa told me yesterday about you still going to the Police Academy?"

"It's true. I start in two days."

"I thought we discussed this. You need to give up this foolishness and finish your degree so you can join the firm," Richard Hutchinson said firmly. Like Vanessa, he wasn't accustomed to Ken openly defying him.

"We didn't discuss anything. You told me that I couldn't go to the Academy," Ken reminded him pointedly. "I already made my decision and I'm not changing my mind."

"If you insist on throwing everything away, then I'm done with you. That means no more of my money to help support you and Vanessa."

"I don't want your money. I never have." Ken struggled to control his temper. This was an old argument between him and his father. Whenever he defied him, his father always threatened to withhold his support.

"I'll put a freeze on the trust fund. You won't be able to touch it either."

"You can't do that. The lawyer already told you that when he read grandfather's will," Ken told him calmly, refusing to rise to the bait. "The trust fund reverted to me when I turned twenty-one and I have complete control over it, not you."

"Well, we'll see just how long you can survive on the pittance the police department will pay you...or how long you can keep your wife from leaving you!"

There was a sharp click in his ear as his father hung up. Ken sighed heavily and gently replaced the receiver in the cradle. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, feeling a migraine coming on. He still had to deal with Vanessa whenever she got home. Ken picked up the books he had left on the kitchen table and moved them to the hallway closet. There was no point in setting Vanessa off by leaving them where she would be sure to see them as soon as she walked through the door.
He sat down on the sofa and leaned his head back against the cushions, closing his eyes. Ken had no doubts that his father was right. Vanessa would leave him eventually if he couldn't afford to give her the lifestyle she craved. The sad part about it was he wasn't sure whether he even cared any more. If he was honest with himself, their marriage had been in trouble for months even before he decided to drop out of school. He was beginning to believe that she had never really loved him for himself. She had loved the power and prestige that was associated with the Hutchinson name and fortune.

Ken was well aware that his father's wealth had given him privileges and advantages most people didn't have growing up. He had gone to the best private schools in Duluth, worn designer clothes, and got a new convertible for his sixteenth birthday. But all his life, something had been missing. His parents had always been too busy with their social obligations and charity events to pay much attention to their only son. He had every material possession that he could want, but all he ever really wanted was for his parents to tell him that they loved him.

Even his wedding to Vanessa had been a sham; the biggest social event of the year, carefully orchestrated and planned by his mother. His parents had approved of Vanessa because of her class and her family's social status. She was the perfect match in their eyes for the heir to the Hutchinson fortune. Before their marriage, she had been the perfect girlfriend. After the wedding, her true colors had started to show within a few weeks. Moving to California had been her idea. She had big plans to become a high fashion model until she discovered that wasn't as easy as she thought it would be. She might have the looks, but she didn't have the personality or the temperament for the trade. She was too selfish and self-centered. Something had to change and Ken going to the Academy was the first tentative step in that direction.

The opening of the front door signaled Vanessa's arrival. Ken opened his eyes and watched as his wife carried several bags inside and dumped them on the opposite end of the sofa. She glared at him defiantly, as if she were daring him to say anything, when she saw the look of disapproval on his face.

"Don't expect me to change anything just because you want to be stubborn about this ridiculous idea of being a cop," She spat out when he didn't say anything.

"Frankly, I don't give a damn what you do anymore, Vanessa," Ken told her in a flat voice as he shoved himself to his feet and walked into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. The door was shoved open almost immediately as Vanessa followed him, her eyes filled with outrage at his insolent manner. This was a side of him she had rarely seen and she didn't like it.

"You don't give a damn what I do anymore? Is that what you said?" she yelled, her posture rigid and unforgiving.

"You heard me."

"Well, in that case, you haven't seen anything yet!" She turned on her heel and stormed back out of the room, slamming the door so hard that a picture on the wall fell to the floor, the glass breaking in the frame.

With a weary sigh, Ken picked up the picture, smirking when he noticed that it was one of their wedding photos. Without a second thought, he tossed the broken frame in the trashcan sitting beside the vanity table. A part of him wondered if he was symbolically discarding his marriage, too. He walked into the bedroom and rummaged through the medicine cabinet until he found the medication he took for his migraines. Popping the cap, he shook two pills out into the palm of his hand and dry swallowed them, grimacing at the bitter aftertaste. Cupping his hand under the faucet, he ran some water and rinsed his mouth.

Walking back into the bedroom, he closed the curtains to darken the room and lay down on the bed, closing his eyes. He hoped the pills helped. He drifted into a restless slumber and it was almost seven in the evening when he finally opened his eyes. The apartment was quiet; too quiet. His head still hurt, but not as badly as before. He shoved himself to his feet and left the bedroom. Vanessa was gone and Ken doubted if she would be back any
time soon. He made himself a sandwich and a bowl of soup. Sitting at the kitchen table, he forced himself to eat even though he didn't really have much of an appetite.

Grabbing the textbooks and supplies he had bought earlier at the Academy, he carried them into the bedroom and stretched out on the bed, leaning back against the headboard. Ken spent the rest of the evening glancing through the various texts. He found the information in the books both interesting and challenging. It was a lot to remember, but Ken had always been blessed with good study habits. His parents had insisted on good grades. Anything below an A was grounds for discipline.

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Ken strolled into the crowded gymnasium at the Police Academy and settled into the first empty seat he saw. He had put his books in the locker he had been assigned in the student union, keeping a legal pad with him to take notes. Several officers in full dress uniform sat at a long table set up in the middle of the gym floor. Ken felt awkward in his own uniform; the shirt was stiff and scratchy, the jacket too heavy to be comfortable in the closely confined space. The equipment belt fastened around his waist felt out of place and annoyed him whenever he shifted positions. He focused his attention on the assembled officers as an older man that he recognized as the Police Commissioner got up to address the assembly.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to the Los Angeles Police Department Training Academy. Over the next few months you will be facing the greatest challenge of your lives as you train to become police officers for this great city and the surrounding suburbs. I am Police Commissioner Nelson. The other gentlemen here with me today will introduce themselves as the orientation continues.

You should all feel proud that you have made it this far in the hiring process. I'm sure by now you realize that we are very selective when it comes to the men and the women who wear the badge that represents this department. Not all of you will complete this training and graduate from this Academy. You will be expected to maintain a certain level of excellence, not only in your academic studies, but also in the hands-on courses that you will be receiving. Anyone who falls below these standards for two grading periods in a row will be dismissed. Some of you will decide on your own that this is not the place for you and there is no disgrace in that. Now, I would like to turn the orientation over to Commander Hailey, the head of the Academy."

The next man in line stood up and addressed the students under his command. "I would also like to welcome you all here today. As Commissioner Nelson stated, you should all be proud that you have made it this far. While you are here, you are expected to conduct yourselves appropriately and abide by all the rules and regulations regarding your conduct as a representative of both this Academy and the Los Angeles Police Department. Even after you leave these grounds at the end of the day, keep in mind that you are no longer mere civilians, but police officers. You should behave accordingly. The other gentlemen you see sitting here will be your instructors. They are the men who will shape you and mold you into the best police officer they can. The rest is up to you. I will now turn the rest of this orientation over to them. Each one of them will tell you a little about the courses they will be teaching and what will be expected of you in each class."

For the next three and a half hours, the cadets listened as each instructor outlined their areas of expertise. By the time the morning was over, Ken and the other cadets were all slightly glassy-eyed and more than a bit overwhelmed. When they were dismissed for lunch, they all lunged to their feet, eager to stretch cramped muscles and sore behinds. Ken joined the crowd leaving the gym, heading for the cafeteria. He smiled when John Colby fell into step beside him.

"Man, I thought that was never going to end," John complained with a good-natured grin.

"Me either," Ken admitted, smiling back. He was grateful that he seemed to have made at least one new friend. They entered the cafeteria together and made their way through the line. As they carried their trays to an empty
table in the corner of the room, John eyed Ken's meal selections: a salad, a glass of milk, a bowl of soup, and an apple.

"Don't tell me that you're one of those health food nuts." He smirked as they sat down to eat.

"I just try to eat healthy, not all that junk food someone is always trying to force on you." Ken answered with a trace of defensiveness in his tone.

"Yeah? Well, give me a good old burger and fries any day." John declared, taking a huge bite of his hamburger to emphasize his point. They made casual conversation as they continued to eat, taking the first steps towards getting to know one another. Ken found out that they shared a similar background. John came from an upper middle class family in San Diego. His father was a successful business man who headed up a large cooperation. John was also an only child who had been born to his parents late in life. Although Ken found himself liking the other man, there was something about him that he couldn't quite put his finger on. It kept him from opening up to John completely. Ken had learned to trust his instincts when it came to his acquaintances. Too many times he had made friends with someone when he was younger only to discover that they only wanted to get close to him so they could brag about being friends with a member of the elite and powerful Hutchinson family.

By the time his first day at the Academy drew to a close, Ken was more than ready to go home. The afternoon had been spent finding the various classrooms and getting his assignments for the following morning. Tossing his books in the back seat of his car, he slid under the wheel and turned on the ignition. There was a clicking sound, but nothing happened. The car refused to start. Cursing under his breath, Ken climbed back out of the temperamental vehicle and popped the hood, peering at the engine in disgust. He didn't know that much about cars and had no idea what the problem was.

"Need a hand?" A deep voice from behind startled him badly. Ken stumbled over his own feet as he turned to find himself facing the veteran John and he had ran into before. The man definitely looked uncomfortable and out of place in his new uniform, his tie pulled loose from around his neck.

"It won't start," Ken stated with a helpless shrug.

"Let me take a look. I used to help my uncle in his garage during the summer." He glanced at Ken for his permission to take a look.

"Be my guest." Ken stepped aside so the other man could lean over the front of the car and look more closely at the engine. After a few minutes, the man straightened up. "Your distributor cap is cracked. You're going to have to replace it before you can go anywhere." He informed Ken.

"Damn. Is it gonna cost much?"

"Naw. If you need a ride, I can take you to my uncle's garage. It's not far from here and he's probably got one in stock. Then I can bring you back and fix it for you. It won't take that long."

"I can't ask you to do that. You don't even know me."

"So tell me your name. I'm David Starsky. But you can just call me Starsky." He waited for Ken to introduce himself.

"Ken. Ken Hutchinson. My friends call me Hutch." Ken smiled warmly, amused by Starsky's straightforward manner and direct approach. "And, yes...I'd appreciate the lift if you're sure it's no problem."

"No problem. I'm parked over here."
Ken followed him across the parking lot to a bright red Camaro with a dented front fender. Somehow, the car seemed to fit in with what Ken had seen so far of Starsky's personality. He settled into the front seat as Starsky fit the key in the ignition, the powerful engine roaring to life. The rear tires squealed as he peeled out of the parking lot.

Starsky maneuvered through the heavy rush hour traffic with ease, handling the car like a pro. Ken had to admire his skill. Duluth was not a small town by any stretch of the imagination, but it was nowhere nearly as huge as Los Angeles. Driving in the heavier, more congested, traffic here still made Ken uneasy.

"So, what did you think of our first day?" Ken asked when the silence reigned in the car. Starsky was obviously not inclined to make casual conversation with someone he had just met.

"It sucked," Starsky replied with a snort. "It's gotta get better, it can't get much worse."

"You've got that right," Ken agreed with a soft chuckle. He looked at his new acquaintance from the corner of his eye. "It should be easier for you to adjust to the structure since you were in the military."

"How the hell do you know that?" Starsky demanded, a hard edge creeping into his voice that warned Ken in no uncertain terms to back off. Starsky continued staring out of the windshield at the traffic, but his shoulders tightened noticeably.

"I...uh...guess I heard it from somebody," Ken admitted. 'Way to go, Hutchinson. John told you that he had a nasty temper.' "It kind of reminded me of my first day in college."

"I wouldn't know. I never went to college," Starsky answered curtly.

Ken mentally kicked himself again. It seemed as if everything he said just kept pissing off the other man. Maybe accepting his offer to help hadn't been such a good idea after all. Ken wondered if it was too late to ask him to just take him back to the Academy.

Before Ken could decide, Starsky turned into a gravel lot in front of a large building with a sign out front that read "AL'S USED CARS AND REPAIR SERVICE." An older version of Starsky came sauntering out of the garage, wiping his hands on a soiled rag. As the two men climbed out of the red car, he grinned broadly and shouted, "Davey, my boy! How was your first day?"

"It was okay, Uncle Al." Starsky replied with the first genuine smile Ken had seen him use. It lit up his entire face and softened his features. "This is Ken Hutchinson. He goes to the Academy, too. He needs a new distributor cap. 1968 Chevy Impala. 350. V8."

"It was okay, Uncle Al." Starsky replied with the first genuine smile Ken had seen him use. It lit up his entire face and softened his features. "This is Ken Hutchinson. He goes to the Academy, too. He needs a new distributor cap. 1968 Chevy Impala. 350. V8."

"Coming right up." Why don't you go back to the house and change? You don't look very comfortable," Starsky's uncle suggested as he headed back to the interior of the garage.

"Come on, Hutch," Starsky said, turning to walk towards the side of the building. Ken grinned, as Starsky called him by his more familiar nickname.

The newly christened Hutch followed Starsky around the side of the garage to a tiny little two-story house that was behind it. It was an older structure, but well cared for with a fresh coat of white paint and a new set of steps leading up to the front porch. Starsky opened the screen door and Hutch self-consciously followed him inside. As the screen slammed shut behind them, a petite woman with a smooth, unlined face and short dark hair streaked with gray stepped out of the kitchen.

"David!" She exclaimed brightly, obviously glad to see him. "You're home earlier than I expected. Go change and wash up. Supper's almost ready." She looked at Hutch with mild curiosity "Who is your friend?"
"Aunt Rosie, this is Ken Hutchinson. Hutch goes to the Academy with me and had some car trouble. I just brought him home with me to pick up a distributor cap."

"Well, you two boys can just eat some supper first," Rosie insisted. "David, show Ken where to wash up."

Starsky glanced over his shoulder at Hutch and rolled his eyes. Hutch received the unspoken message loud and clear. Don't argue with his Aunt Rosie. He nodded slightly, mutely accepting the invitation to stay for supper, as he followed Starsky up the stairs to the second floor. Starsky showed Hutch the second floor bathroom and then headed on down the hallway to a room on the left. Hutch used the facilities and washed his hands. When Hutch had finished, he went back downstairs and found his way into the kitchen.

Rosie had just finished setting a fourth place at the table and nodded at Hutch to have a seat. She sat a platter of meat in the middle of the table. Hutch took a deep breath of the appealing aroma. "It smells delicious." He complimented the cook. "What is it?"

"It's called Chicken Schnitzel." Rosie told him "It's an old Jewish dish. Chicken filets with a breading of spices and fried in oil."

"You're Jewish?" Hutch blurted out without thinking. He immediately wished that he could take back his words when Starsky appeared in the kitchen doorway and glared at him coldly. Although he had not meant any offense by the observation, Starsky obviously thought that he had.

"That's right. You got a problem with Jews, Hutchinson?" he asked in a tightly controlled voice, his entire body stiff with anger.

"David Michael Starsky! Mind your manners, young man!" Rosie scolded him. She looked at Hutch with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. David usually isn't so rude to our guests. I think he's forgotten how to act around company." She turned her gaze on her chastised nephew and arched her brow. "David, don't you think that you owe your new friend an apology?"

"Sorry." Starsky muttered as he sank down on the chair to Hutch's left. His eyes were still smoldering with barely concealed anger, but his aunt chose to ignore it so Hutch decided the best thing for him to do was to follow her example. They were joined by Starsky's uncle and they began to pass the food around the table. As they began the meal, Hutch soon realized that Starsky had sat on Hutch's left side because he was left-handed. That way, they wouldn't bump elbows as they ate.

Rosie and Al included Hutch in their conversation during the meal. Starsky mumbled vague answers to their questions about his day, but his mood seemed to lighten as he ate. He definitely had a healthy appetite as he put away three helpings of everything on the table. Hutch found himself wondering how on earth Starsky stayed so fit if he ate like that all the time.

After they had finished eating, Starsky took Hutch back to the Academy to fix the car and within half an hour it was done. As Starsky slammed the hood closed, he glanced at Hutch somewhat sheepishly. "I'm sorry about giving you a hard time at supper. I just get a little defensive sometimes, ya know?"

"No problem, as long as you know that I don't care if you're Jewish or not. That's your business, not mine."

Starsky favored Hutch with a crooked smile and held out his hand. Hutch accepted the peace offering and the two men shook hands firmly.

"Guess I'll see you tomorrow." Hutch smiled warmly as he climbed into his car.

"Yeah, see ya."
As he drove away and headed for home, Hutch found himself thinking that he may have just found another new friend.

Hutch smiled in satisfaction as he looked at the score on his first test. He had gotten an A. The material wasn't all that difficult, but there was a lot of memorizing that had to be done. The hardest part for everyone, including Hutch, was all the penal codes and laws they had to remember. He glanced around looking for Starsky and John, who were both in his section. He spotted John coming out of the building, but Starsky was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, Hutch..." John greeted him. "How'd you do?"

"An A. How about you?"

"I got a B." John grinned. "Not all of us are as brilliant as you."

The two men had forged a close friendship since the start of classes over three weeks ago. Hutch had drawn Starsky into their inner circle and John had accepted his presence with some reluctance. Starsky's personality was in direct opposition to Hutch and John but Hutch still liked his somewhat surly companion. Despite his tough guy exterior and cocky attitude, Hutch sensed a hidden vulnerability in Starsky that he kept well hidden from most of his acquaintances.

He had learned a bit more about his new friend's history. Starsky had told Hutch that he had lived in Bay City since he was thirteen. He had spent his teenage years living with his aunt and uncle but he hadn't disclosed the reasons for that. He didn't like to talk much about his past and Hutch didn't want to alienate him by pushing too hard. He presumed that Starsky would tell him when he was ready, though he seemed even more reluctant to share any information at all with John.

Hutch laughed at John's backhanded compliment and looked around, searching for Starsky again. John noticed immediately. "Wonder how Curly did on the test?"

"I don't know. I know that he was worried about it."

"Why don't you go see if you can find him? I'll catch up with ya later."

Hutch smiled his thanks and strolled back towards the building. He found Starsky in a second floor bathroom, sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. The expression on his face warned Hutch that the other man was in a foul mood.

"Hey," Hutch leaned on hip against the sink, keeping a careful distance from the volatile man sitting in front of him.

"Hey." Starsky replied in a sullen tone that held just a trace of something that sounded almost like fear.

"How'd you do on the test?" Hutch asked, deciding to get right to the point.

"Lousy." Starsky snorting in disgust. He looked at Hutch with so much pain reflected in those remarkable eyes that it tugged at the sensitive mid-westerner's heart. "Benson just got done ripping me a new one. If I don't do better on the next test, I'm outta here."

"How bad did you do?" Hutch crossed the room and knelt beside his distraught friend, laying a comforting hand on his shoulder. He was mildly surprised when Starsky didn't pull instead, but leaned towards the soothing embrace instead.
"C minus," he mumbled in a discouraged voice.

"Well, that gives us a week to get you ready for the next one."

"Us?"

"Sure. Unless you don't want my help."

"Why should you care if I get kicked out of here or not?" Starsky asked. His eyes narrowed and he tilted his chin at Hutch almost defiantly.

Hutch frowned as he considered Starsky's words. Why should he care? Somehow, in a relatively short period of time, he had come to like this unruly hellion that seemed to question anyone who tried to be his friend. He didn't want to see him fail at something that obviously meant so much to him. "Because I do. I know you can do it," Hutch told him firmly. "You just need a little direction."

"What do I have to do?" Starsky asked cautiously.

"Come back to my place with me after classes and I show you some different ways to study so you can do better on the next test," Hutch suggested helpfully with an encouraging smile.

Starsky hesitated, mulling over the offer. "Okay" he mumbled "I guess I can give it a try. But I ain't never been much good at remembering stuff out of books."

Hutch straightened up and held out his hand. Starsky looked at him for a moment and then accepted Hutch's hand. They left the bathroom side-by-side. Lunch break was almost over, so they hurried to the gym to get ready for their afternoon classes. They joined their classmates in the locker room where they changed from their uniforms into their regulation gym shorts and Academy tee shirts. The rest of the afternoon was spent doing calisthenics and running the track. At four-thirty they were allowed to take their showers and change back into their uniforms before leaving for the day.

After classes had ended for the day, Starsky followed Hutch back to the upscale apartment building where Hutch lived with Vanessa. As they parked their cars on the street and walked towards the main entrance, Starsky hesitated and hung back.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all." He mumbled tentatively.

"Why not?" Hutch asked turning to look at him with a puzzled frown that deepened the furrow between his eyes.

"Oh, come on, Hutch. I don't exactly fit into this neighborhood."

"You do when you're with me." He took Starsky's arm and gave it a tug. "Come on. You want to pass that next test, don't you?"

"Yeah, okay." Starsky relented, still sounding a bit indecisive. The two men entered the building and took the elevator to the sixth floor. Hutch led the way down the hall to his apartment and unlocked the door, ushering his friend inside.

Starsky looked around, his eyes widening like a kid in a candy store as he took in the expensive trappings. He let out a soft whistle. "Man, Hutch...you never told me you were loaded."

"I'm not." Hutch replied a little more sharply then he intended. "My father is."
Starsky looked embarrassed and said, "Sorry, I didn't know..."

"Why should you? I never told you. Wait here while I get out of this damn uniform and then we can get started." He disappeared into his bedroom and closed the door.

When Hutch came out of the bedroom, dressed more casually in a pair of jeans and tee shirt, he saw that Vanessa had arrived home. She was obviously not happy at finding Starsky standing in the middle of her immaculate living room. He glanced between Starsky and his wife, the smile slowly fading from his face at the tension he could feel in the room. "I take it the two of you have met." He observed.

"Really, Ken," Vanessa snarled, turning her fury on her husband "If you insist on bringing home riff raff like this, at least keep them on a leash so they don't wet on the furniture." With that parting shot, she turned and stomped into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"I was right...this was a bad idea." Starsky said, the hurt sounding clearly in his voice. He crossed the room and darted out the door before Hutch could stop him. Hutch ran after him, catching up with his friend in the hallway just as he was about to step into the elevator.

"Starsky, wait!" Hutch said, slipping into the elevator just as the doors began to close. As the car began it's descent to the lobby, Hutch ran his long fingers through his hair nervously. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect Van to be home so early."

"I don't think your wife likes me very much." Starsky's voice was quiet and tightly controlled, the anger burning just beneath the surface.

"Vanessa doesn't like anyone unless they wear a Rolex and drive a Mercedes." Hutch told him with a disgruntled snort.

Starsky smiled thinly "Sounds like I'm the one who should be telling you that I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Why don't we go to your place and I can show you those study tips there?" Hutch looked at his new friend hopefully. He didn't want Vanessa's bad manners causing any tension between them.

"Shouldn't you go back up there and make nice with your wife?" Starsky suggested with a thin smile.

"What's the use? She's not going to be in any mood to make up. All we'll do is end up in another fight." A bitter smile tugged at the corners of Hutch's mouth as he spoke the cold hard truth.

"That bad, huh?" Starsky looked at him with genuine compassion in his sapphire blue eyes.

"Yeah...and it's getting worse all the time. She's never going to forgive me for dropping out of pre-med to become a cop." Hutch admitted with a heavy sigh.

"Think you can patch things up?" Starsky asked.

"I doubt it. I think it's just a matter of time before she decides to leave." Although it was the first time Hutch had admitted that out loud, he realized that he had already accepted that as being evitable.

"That sucks. You shouldn't have to choose between your wife and your career." Starsky consoled as the elevator began to slow down.

"Try telling Vanessa that...or my father for that matter." Hutch grunted.
They stepped into the lobby and Hutch followed Starsky outside to his car. Without a word, the two of them climbed inside and Starsky headed for his aunt and uncle's house. Rosie Starsky was delighted to see Hutch again and immediately began asking him if she could get him something to eat. Hutch smiled and politely declined.

"Hutch is going help me with some stuff for the academy," Starsky told her. "We'll be up in my room." He made a detour into the kitchen to grab a couple of beers from the refrigerator and a plate of home-baked cookies from the kitchen table. Hutch hid a smile when he saw Starsky with the drinks and sweets. If there was one thing he had learned about David Starsky in the past few weeks, it was that he always seemed to be hungry. He was also a perpetual bundle of energy; his hyperactive nature burning off the calories off just as quickly as he consumed them.

Hutch had noticed that in the classroom, Starsky had trouble sitting still and concentrating even though he made a real effort to pay attention. However, unless it was a subject that interested him, his mind tended to wander. Hutch hoped he could show him some techniques not only to improve his study habits, but to help him pay more attention in class as well.

Starsky's bedroom came as a pleasant surprise. It was spotlessly clean, with the bed neatly made. As he sat down on it, Hutch's attention was drawn to a framed photograph sitting on the nightstand. It was of a man who resembled Starsky so closely that Hutch knew it had to be his father. A younger version of David Starsky was standing beside him, the same crooked smile on his face that Hutch had learned to recognize and jokingly called a "Starsky Special." The man was dressed in a policeman's uniform with his cap perched on the little boy's riotous curls.

"Your dad is cop?" Hutch asked, as he picked up the photograph to examine it more closely.

"Was a cop." Starsky said, a sad faraway look flickering across his face for a moment before disappearing. "He's dead."

"I'm sorry." Hutch said sincerely, gently putting the picture back in its place. "How old were you when he died?"

"Twelve. He was gunned down in front of our house. He died in my arms before the ambulance got there."

"God, that must have been terrible." Hutch did some quick math in his head. "Is that why you moved out here?"

"That's why my ma sent me out here to live with Rosie and Al," Starsky said, his voice taking on a flat, toneless quality. Obviously, it was still a painful subject for him to talk about even after all those years.

"That had to be rough...especially for you."

"You better believe it. Here I was this skinny Jewish kid from New York with a funny accent," He told Hutch with a bitter little smile. "I already knew how to fight but I picked up a lot of new moves real quick when I got out here."

"I was just the opposite. I couldn't fight to save my life until I joined the wrestling team while I was in college."

"I don't suppose you had much of a reason to fight back there in Duluth." Starsky chuckled softly.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I ran into my share of bad asses who wanted a piece of the poor little rich boy." Hutch told him ruefully, smiling at the memory.

"So they kicked your ass?" Starsky said with a grin at the image that came to mind.
"Some of them did, until I grew almost five inches in one summer." Hutch chuckled. "And then I joined the track team in high school. I got really good at running away."

"So what made you decide to become a cop?"

"I always knew that I wanted to do something with my life where I could help people. At first, I let my father persuade me that the best way that I could do that was by becoming a doctor."

"When did you decide it wasn't for you?"

"My second semester in college. I was meeting new people, discovering new things, learning to think for myself for a change." Hutch explained. "Then this recruiter came to the school to talk to some of the other students and I sort of listened in. I liked what I heard so I cut classes one day and paid a visit to the Academy."

"I always knew that I wanted to be a cop...just like my dad." Starsky commented quietly. "Then I got sent to Vietnam just after I graduated. I came back pretty messed up. I took off and just bumbled around for a few months, ended up in Mexico. Stayed there for a few weeks, then came back home and applied to the Academy."

"From what I've heard, a lot of guys came back from over there pretty messed up."

"Yeah," Starsky said with a hint of bitterness in his voice. "We came back here to protesters who spit on us and called us names."

Hutch lowered his head so Starsky couldn't see his eyes. Some of Hutch's best friends had taken part in some of those protests. Hutch had never participated in any of them himself, but he had never tried to discourage his friends from participating either. It wasn't something that he was proud of, especially when he was just getting to know Starsky.

"Let's get down to work," He suggested, "And see what we can do to get you ready for that next test."

Starsky's eyes were sparkling with pleasure as he waved the test paper in front of Hutch's face. He had gotten a B+. With Hutch's help, he had improved both his study habits and his concentration in class. His grades in the academic portion of his training had improved dramatically, and he had nothing to fear from his scores in the physical portion of the training. He was at the top of the class in marksmanship, defensive driving techniques, and self-defense. Starsky had even managed to teach Hutch a few new moves that he had learned on the mean streets of New York as a kid. In return, Hutch had taught him some wrestling moves that might come in handy someday. John was a close second in both academics and the physical stuff. He was a skilled fighter, but often fought dirty, catching his opponent unaware and attacking him from behind. Starsky and Hutch were the only two cadets in their section who had ever taken him down in a hand-to-hand combat.

"See, I knew you could do it." Hutch sounded like a proud parent. As their unlikely friendship blossomed, they had adopted pet names for one another. Starsky called Hutch Blondie, and Hutch called him Starsk. Colby called them both boneheads. Although the three men often hung out together, the bond between Starsky and Hutch was the strongest.

"Good job, bonehead." John said with a thin smile. "Looks like you got lucky again."

"Luck has nothing to do with it," Starsky replied in a cocky voice. "I knew all the answers...Well, all but two." He grinned broadly as he amended his statement.

"Come on," Hutch said throwing his arm around Starsky's shoulder "Let's celebrate. The beer is on John."
John joined in their laughter as the three of them walked towards the parking lot and their respective vehicles. Unlike Hutch, who preferred to downplay his family background, John drove a new silver Ford Mustang and dressed in designer jeans. They drove to a bar Starsky had introduced them to not far from the Academy. A friend of Starsky's named Huggy Bear managed the bar. Nobody, except Starsky, his mother and the IRS knew Huggy's real name.

The tall thin black man saw the three friends come in and waved them to their favorite table in the back of the room. When they settled into their seats, Huggy was there with three mugs of ice cold beer. He grabbed a bowl of popcorn from an adjoining table and sat it down in front of Starsky.

"How's it hanging my white brothers?" Huggy asked in his usual brand of jive talk.

"We're celebrating," Hutch told him. "And John here is buying."

"What are we celebrating?" Huggy asked curiously.

"Curly passed another test with flying colors," John informed him.

"Well, good for you, Starsky. How about I get you a burger with the works...on the house?"

"That'd be great, Hug. Thanks," Starsky agreed with a huge, satisfied grin.

"So, Hutch, you gonna have to take off early to keep the little wife happy or can you stay and play with the grownups for a while?" John asked. Although his voice was light and teasing, there was an undercurrent of meanness in his tone. Hutch's continuing problems with his marriage was no secret among the three friends.

"Vanessa finally got a job. This is her night to work late," Hutch said offhandedly. "So I can stay out until at least midnight."

"Stepping up in the world, are we?" John laughed. "Or is the ball and chain just loosening up the leash a little?"

"Knock it off, John," Starsky warned his friend, taking a sip of his beer and peering at John over the rim of the mug. Although his voice was quiet and calm, there was a hard edge of steel in his tone that made John pay attention. Sometimes John just couldn't resist getting a little dig in at Starsky or Hutch, but he knew not to push it too far. The two friends had gotten almost overly protective of each other as their friendship continued to grow stronger. Hutch had already punched out one loudmouth when he started ragging on Starsky one night for making a pass at his girlfriend. The usually mild-mannered Hutch had turned into a completely different person, a raging avenger coming to Starsky's defense. Even Starsky had been surprised by Hutch's reaction to a relatively minor event that was totally under control.

The friends spent the evening drinking and playing pool. Starsky hooked up with a pretty blonde and left the bar with her around ten. That was the cue for Hutch and John to call it a night, too. Hutch drove home carefully, observing all the traffic laws since he'd been drinking. He was surprised to see Vanessa's car parked in its usual spot in front of their building. Hutch's good mood evaporated as he climbed out of his vehicle and trudged into the lobby, mentally preparing himself for another fight with his wife.

Vanessa was in rare form. She started throwing things at him the minute he stepped through the door. Luckily, he had gotten good at ducking in the past three years. Dodging a potentially deadly glass figurine, he crossed the room in two large strides and grabbed her wrists before she could find something else to throw at him. Twisting her arms behind her back, and holding her tightly, he hissed, "Calm the hell down!"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO FUCKING DO!" she screeched. He was close enough to smell the alcohol on her breath. An intoxicated Vanessa was never a good thing. Those were the times when she really turned nasty
and Hutch had the scars to prove it. Their love/hate relationship was escalating, slowly turning into a twisted parody of the love they had once shared.

"LET ME GO! I HATE YOU!" Vanessa screamed, struggling fiercely as Hutch dragged her down the hallway and into the bathroom. He winced as he felt her long sharp nails digging into the back of his hands and a well aimed kick slammed into his left shin. He turned on the cold water and pulled them both into the shower, holding her tightly as the freezing cold water ran over them, slowly calming her down. When she finally collapsed against him, sobbing quietly, he knew it was safe to let her go. As he released his hold on her wrists, she sank to her knees in the tub and wrapped her arms around herself, rocking gently back and forth.

Reaching down gently to stoke her arm soothingly, Hutch said softly, "Come on, baby...let's go to bed."

Vanessa allowed him to help her to her feet and into their bedroom. She stood impassively as he stripped off her wet clothes. He helped her lie back on the bed and then gently covered her with the heavy down comforter. She was asleep within minutes. Hutch sighed and went into the living to spend another night on the couch.

Vanessa was still sleeping when Hutch awoke the next morning. He decided to take an early morning run to clear his head. Running had always been a form of therapy and relaxation for him. He ran for almost five miles before deciding to head back home. He paused long to get a health shake to drink on his way home. The apartment was still quiet when he used his key to open the door. Then he saw the note lying on the coffee table written in Vanessa's distinctive handwriting.

Slumping down on the sofa, he picked up the single sheet of stationary, the words blurring as he tried to read. Ken, we both know it's over. I'm leaving. My lawyer will be in touch and I will come after my things Monday while you are gone. Vanessa. Hutch sat there for several long minutes just staring at the words that signified the end of his marriage. He felt numb and empty, yet strangely relieved.

He reached for the phone and automatically dialed Starsky's phone number. His Aunt Rosie answered with a cheery hello. "Hi, it's Ken Hutchinson. Can I speak to Starsky, please?" Hutch said in a choked voice.

"David! Telephone!" Hutch heard Starsky's aunt call out in the background. "It's Ken!"

Several minutes passed before Starsky disgruntled voice said into his ear, "This better be fucking important, Blondie...because your timing sucks..." he growled.

"She's gone, Stark. She left me." Hutch said in a heavily slurred voice, sounding as if he were already drunk at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning.

"Fuck!" Starsky hissed. He said something in a muffled voice to someone else and then told Hutch, "Hang on, pal...I'm on my way."

Hutch hung up the phone without reply, then rose to his feet, looking around the room at the expensive decorations Vanessa had insisted on. In a sudden fit of rage, Hutch began to systematically destroy the room. He broke Vanessa's expensive collection of glass figurines, shattered a lamp sitting on the end table, and tore up every picture he could find of him and Vanessa. Finished with his destruction, he grabbed a bottle of Jim Beam from beneath the kitchen counter and slumped down on the floor with his back against the wall and his long legs stretched out in front of him. He opened the whiskey and drank straight from the bottle. That was how Starsky found him when he arrived a short while later.

"Hey, Blondie," Starsky said, as he carefully made his way across the room to his friend and sank down on the floor beside him. "Did you make this mess or did she?"
"I guess I did." Hutch slurred drunkenly. He looked at Starsky and gave him a lopsided smile. "Hi, Star...what are you doing here?"

"You called me, dummy...remember?" Starsky chided him gently.

"Oh yeah...I got lousy timing...right?" Hutch chuckled, his laughter turning into a broken sob. Turning to face his friend, he tried to focus on his friend's face. "She left me...she's gone."

"Yeah, you told me that already." Starsky said "Come on...let's get you up off this floor." With a bit of effort, he managed to get Hutch on his feet and steered him in the general direction of the bathroom. It was long, slow process. Hutch outweighed Starsky by twenty pounds and in Hutch's drunken state, Starsky was doing most of the work. They finally reached their destination. Supporting Hutch's weight with one arm, Starsky reached out and shut the toilet lid, then slowly eased Hutch down on it. He tugged at the snug tee shirt until he managed to pull it over Hutch's head.

Starsky paused long enough to turn the water on in the shower, adjusting the spray to a comfortable temperature. Turning his attention back to his inebriated friend, he tugged him to his feet and finished undressing him. With a none too gentle shove between the shoulder blades, he directed Hutch towards the shower. "Let's get you sobered up a little, buddy, and then we can talk." He scolded.

Hutch groaned and hung his head. Suddenly, he shoved Starsky to one side and fell to his knees in front of the commode. With a grunt, he started to heave, throwing up the contents of his stomach. When he finally stopping trying to pull his stomach out through his mouth, he leaned heavily against the side of the tub and looked up at his friend sheepishly. Starsky stood by the sink, watching him impassively. He carefully noted the fresh scratches on the back of Hutch's hands and down the right side of his face. There was also a fresh mottled bruise high on his left ribcage.

"Come on, Hutch." Starsky said quietly, gently helping Hutch to his feet and into the shower. Hutch mumbled his thanks as he pulled closed the plastic curtain and began to wash. Finally, he reached out to turn off the water. Stepping out of the shower, he accepted the towel Starsky handed him, then shook his head like a dog sending a spray of water all over Starsky who complained loudly about getting wet.

Hutch dried off and grabbed an ugly orange robe from the back of the bathroom door, slipping it on and belting it tightly around his waist. Glaring at the smirking brunet, he said sullenly "There's such a thing as a mercy killing, ya know..."

"Naw...too messy." Starsky said with a chuckle. "It's more fun watching you puke out your guts at eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning. You ready to talk now?"

"No..." Hutch muttered, stomping out of the bathroom with Starsky trailing close behind.

"Watch the broken glass. It's all over the place." Starsky warned him as Hutch headed towards the kitchen.

"Yeah, Vanessa decided we didn't need any wedding crystal anymore." Hutch mumbled as he started to make a pot of very black, very strong coffee. "Or china...or anything else breakable she could get her hands on."

"You said she was gone...did you mean for good?" Starsky asked as he automatically grabbed a broom and started cleaning up the mess.

"Yeah, she left a note. Said her lawyer would be in touch and she'd pick up her things while I was at the Academy." He rummaged through the kitchen cabinets until he found a bottle of aspirin. Twisting off the cap, he shook four tablets out into the palm of his hand, taking them with a sip of coffee. He grimaced at the bitter taste of both.
"When did all this happen?"

"It started last night when I got home and we finished breaking things about seven this morning." Hutch said somberly.

"You mean you were up fighting all night?"

"No...not all night. I got her calmed down last night, after she called me every name in the book...and then some I've never even heard of." He sighed heavily and took another sip of his coffee. "I put her in bed to sleep it off and she was still sleeping when I got up this morning. I went out for a run and she was gone when I got back."

"You shouldn't be that surprised. This has been coming for a long time. You know that." Starsky pointed out.

Yeah, I know." Hutch admitted "Most of the time, I hated her more than I loved her." He raised his head and looked at Starsky, his eyes filled with an incredible pain and grief. "But a part of me still kept thinking we could work it out somehow...that it wasn't supposed to be like this."

"You were two completely different people...who wanted totally different things out of life. It's nobody's fault. It just happens."

"I used to love her...I really did."

"I know, babe. I know." Starsky said. He closed the distance between them and instinctively wrapped his arms around his friend's shoulders, holding him close as he finally broke down. "That's it...let it go." Starsky kept hanging on until Hutch was emotionally drained. Only then did Starsky slide an arm around his waist and help him into the bedroom where he eased him down on the bed. Hutch fell into an exhausted sleep almost immediately.

It was late afternoon when Hutch finally opened his eyes. Easing his long legs over the side of the bed, he stood up. He was a bit unsteady and his head pounded relentlessly, but he would live.

When he walked into the living room, he was surprised to find the room cleaned up and Starsky sleeping soundly on the sofa. Smiling fondly at his friend, he went into the kitchen to put on some coffee. The aroma of freshly brewing coffee soon aroused Starsky from his slumber. Hutch smiled faintly as Starsky stumbled to his feet, hurrying down the hall to the bathroom to answer an urgent call of nature.

"You okay?" Hutch asked when Starsky rejoined him in the living room.

"Yeah, I'm terrific. I'm not the one who got plastered at seven o'clock in the morning and then called his best friend...who was in the middle of doing something he was really enjoying...to come to help him sober up." Starsky grumbled as he opened the door and brushed past his furiously blushing friend.

"Come on, buddy...I'm sorry I interrupted you when I did...I don't even remember calling you."

"You are so gonna pay for that. You owe me big time, Hutchinson."

"You mean to tell me that your Aunt Rosie lets you bring girls home with you that you pick up at bars...and she doesn't mind them spending the night?" Hutch couldn't resist teasing his friend.

"No...I'm probably in for a lecture when I get back..." Starsky admitted ruefully. "I don't usually take them home with me...we usually find a nice little motel room somewhere for the night." He poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it down as he rummaged through the refrigerator for something to eat. "Geeze, Hutch..." he complained as he straightened up and glared his companion accusingly. "You don't have any food in there. When was the last time that either one of you went shopping?"
"The housekeeper usually took care of that but Vanessa fired the last one three weeks ago." Hutch explained. "God forbid, Vanessa actually try to cook anything. She'd burn the place down."

"Doesn't sound like she was much of a wife." Starsky commented dryly.

"There were only two things Vanessa was any good at. Spending money and sex."

"That's more than I needed to know on an empty stomach." Starsky told him with a grimace.

"Come on...let's go see Huggy and I'll buy you something to eat."

"Isn't that where last night started?" Starsky questioned with an arched brow.

"Yeah...but today's a new day. We can try to get it right this time." Hutch told him with a brilliant smile, his good mood restored.

"Yeah, it's just you and me. No John tagging along."

"Hey, at least I got him to pick up the tab last night." Hutch chuckled.

The friendly banter between them continued as they left the apartment and went out into the sunshine. Hutch was making an effort to act like everything was okay but he was still hurting inside. The two men spent the entire weekend together, taking Hutch's car to the Academy Monday morning.

Hutch was in for another surprise when they returned to his apartment that afternoon after classes. Vanessa had been there in his absence and taken everything she could haul out of the apartment. All she left behind were Hutch's clothes, his guitar, his books and a few dishes. He didn't have a place to sleep except on the floor. Hutch looked around at the empty apartment, the tears running down his face. It was the ultimate act of spitefulness on Vanessa's part.

"Come on, Blondie," Starsky said, tugging at his arm gently. "You can stay with me until you find another apartment."

Starsky and Hutch strolled out of the gym, side-by-side, acting as if they were joined at the hip. Nobody else even came close to the bond that those two had forged in the past seven and a half months of training. In less than three weeks, they would graduate from the Academy and begin their new careers with the Bay City Police Department. They would start immediately after graduation with Starsky working the tough inner city and Hutch working in the more upscale Trenton district. They already had plans to take the test to be promoted to detective when they were eligible and constantly talked about working together as partners someday. Both already had their professional lives mapped out.

"Hey, there's John." Hutch pointed out their classmate who was standing underneath a palm tree near the entrance to the gymnasium, smoking a cigarette.

"Hey, Blondie! Hey Curly!" John called out to attract their attention. Starsky and Hutch both smiled as they quickly walked in his direction.

"Hey, John." Starsky said good-naturedly. "Where have you been for the last two days? We've been looking all over for you."

"I had some business to take care of. I just wanted to come by and say goodbye."
"Goodbye?" They both echoed at the same time, looking at him in stunned amazement.

"What are you talking about?" Hutch asked, recovering first from his surprise.

"I quit the academy. I'm joining the Air Force." John explained in a pleased voice.

"The Air Force?" Starsky said his jaw dropping. "Why?"

"Let's just say I got an offer I couldn't refuse," John said smugly. "Hey, you two should be thanking me. Now, between the two of you, you'll walk away with most of the awards for excellence in the graduating class."

"We would have mopped the floor with you anyway." Starsky smirked with confidence.

"Seriously, John," Hutch said, ever the voice of reason. "Are you sure about this? Have you really thought it through? There's only three weeks left under graduation. Are you sure you want to give all that up?"

"Yeah, I'm sure and yes, I've thought it through. This is the right choice for me." John told him in a firm, determined voice.

"Then I guess there's nothing left to say except good luck," Starsky stated, holding out his hand. John shook it firmly and then startled the other man by pulling him into a hug. He offered the same gesture of farewell to Hutch, who responded a bit more enthusiastically than Starsky. Taking a step back, John grinned and stood at attention, snapping a sharp salute to Starsky and then to Hutch. They both returned the compliment.

They stood there watching as John Colby walked away and out of their lives. Hutch glanced at Starsky somberly. "You know it's funny, I always thought John would make a terrific cop."

"Yeah, me too. But, not as good as me and thee." Starsky said with a grin, using their new credo to describe themselves.

"The Air Force must have made him one hell of a deal."

Starsky's eyes darkened somberly, "Believe me, Blondie, the military doesn't make sweet deals without a lot of long strings attached."

"You think John knows that?" Hutch asked in a concerned voice.

"He's not stupid; he knows. And we're probably better off not knowing exactly what they offered him."

"You want to come over later for a pizza?" Hutch offered. He had recently moved into his new apartment and was enjoying the newfound freedom of being single again. "There's a game on tonight."

"Naw, I'll pass. I got a hot date with Ginger."

"Ginger? Who's Ginger? I thought you were seeing Kathy."

"That was last week. Ginger's the cute little redhead that works for Bradock."

"As in Lieutenant Bradock, our firearms instructor?" Hutch feigned shock and surprise.

"That's the one." Starsky told him with a smug smile.

"Uh, I don't know how to tell you this, but she doesn't work for Bradock. That's his daughter! You idiot! You're going to get yourself shot three weeks before graduation!"
"No, I'm not." Starsky with a grin and slight skip to this stride.

"Yes, you are!" Hutch predicted solemnly, struggling to keep a straight face at his best friend's playful antics.

"Am not." Starsky stated, sticking his tongue out childishly.

"Are, too." Hutch said, determined to get in the final word.

They continued to argue all the way to the parking lot where they parted ways to leave in their individual vehicles. The months of training was almost over. Soon they would be on the streets as real cops, joining the rest of their brothers in blue as they struggled to keep their own little piece of the city safe for the citizens who chose to live there. And they would do it their way, the only way that they knew how.