



# **A Certain Familiarity**

**by**

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**Summary:** A pre-pilot case story.

**Categories:** Gen

**Genre:** Me and Thee Archive

**Warnings:** Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

## A Certain Familiarity

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"What kind of a woman kidnaps her own kid?"

It occurred to Hutch over the course of several minutes — and by virtue of some very pointed glances Starsky sent his way — that the question might not have been rhetorical, as he'd first assumed. But by the time he'd come up with a few choice answers, Starsky was already warming to his theme.

"So who the hell was watching her? The kid, I mean. To let some psycho nutjob waltz right in and grab her and take off again. And how did we catch this case? Seems to me it oughta be the Kid Squad. Or the FBI? Why us, huh? And why now?"

Sensing that Starsky was winding down, Hutch cut in quickly.

"Cause the captain asked us."

"Yeah, well this is all your fault."

"Mine?"

Starsky slowed the car and turned onto a quiet residential street.

"Yeah, you: captain's brand new blue-eyed boy."

Hutch took a careful breath to take some of the heat out of his answer. "*You* were the one who said I should try to make a good impression."

Starsky slowed the Maverick and pulled into the driveway of a salmon-painted bungalow. He killed the engine and then twisted in his seat, favoring Hutch with a penetrating look.

"Be my partner, I said. We'll be good together, just like the academy, I said. Stay outta trouble — "

"Check, check and, uh, check. Mostly . . ." Hutch added a small smile to prove he wasn't such a bad guy after all.

"You fixed the filing system," Starsky said accusingly. "Tied Harry Benton in with the pawn shop scam when he'd had half the department chasing their tails for six months. And you connected Crabbe and

Pearson to the dead hooker at The Shangri-La and *then* you figured out where they were holed up."

"And that's a problem?"

"That's not even counting what you pulled off at McKinley High School. Six weeks with the department and you've got Dobby thinking you can walk on water. And *that's* why he stuck us with *this*."

Hutch took 'this' to be the gaudy little house that Starsky designated with a wave of hand.

"Well, seeing as we're here . . ." He reached for the lever and opened the door.

Starsky did the same, but Hutch got the impression of lingering resentment in the motion and he marveled at his partner's knack for wordless self-expression. He raised his eyebrows questioningly. Starsky shook his head just slightly as he joined him by the car's front bumper. Still, they walked up to the front door side by side and perfectly in step.

Starsky knocked.

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An hour later, Hutch was forced to make a hasty exit. Starsky was already in the car, the engine running, and Hutch barely got the door closed before they were backing up out of the driveway.

"What the hell — "

"We got the gory details," Starsky said. "Wasn't like the lousy coffee made it any easier to swallow."

He spun the wheel and straightened the car. As he hit the gas, Hutch told him, "You know it's 30, right?"

"Huh?"

"Speed limit."

Starsky rolled his eyes and started driving.

Hutch pretended he was letting Starsky focus on the road conditions, but the truth was he couldn't think of anything to say to him right then. Starsky's mood was hard to gauge, though 'pissed' seemed to describe it pretty well, leaving Hutch to wonder what he'd missed that Starsky seemed to have picked up on.

He double-checked his notes. The interview with Mrs. Drummond, grandmother and guardian of Casey, hadn't seemed out of the ordinary. The woman had described a rocky marriage, the divorce, a less than typical dispute over the custody of Casey, now aged seven. More recently, with Casey's father in D.C. — working at the Pentagon, no less — the grandmother appeared to be the ideal choice to raise the child. Certainly better than letting some —

"Pothead with a record," Starsky said out of the blue. "Oh, and she's nuts, too."

"I just love it when you give in to your sensitive side," Hutch said dryly. "Lady had some problems — "

"Can't even take care of herself. And she thinks she can take care of a kid?"

"So what are you trying to say?"

"Nothing."

Hutch opened and closed his mouth a few times, but this was clearly some new aspect of their fledgling partnership that he didn't have a handle on as yet. So he kept quiet, fumbling his notebook back into an inside pocket of his jacket. His fingers drifted to the collar of his shirt and, feeling just a bit self-conscious, he undid the two top buttons so he could scratch an itch that had been plaguing him.

He wasn't sure, but he thought Starsky nodded in approval so he said, "Hey, at least I lost the tie."

"It was embarrassing. I had to tell everybody you let your old lady dress you on account of your tattoo."

Hutch turned his head so fast that whiplash seemed a likely outcome, but at least he caught the cockeyed grin before it had completely faded from his partner's face. But Starsky didn't say another word until they made it to the squad room, where he rapidly excused himself and vanished.

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Hutch hung his jacket on the back of his chair, sitting down the very moment the captain emerged from his office. Dobey reached across the desk to hand him a manila folder.

"The records from Cabrillo," Dobey said, as if that explained it all.

Glancing at the label bearing Casey Drummond's mother's name, Hutch guessed it did.

He was buried nose-deep in the file when Starsky made his entrance, but he peered over the top to track his progress to the coffeepot, the donut box, and then to his side of the desk.

Starsky pushed the folder upright with a finger as he read the name out loud. "Celine La-bee-off. What kind o' name's that anyway?"

"LaBeouf. It's French."

"Figures . . ." Starsky stuffed half a chocolate-coated donut in his mouth. "So what's the scoop?" "We're dealing with a bona fide whacko, right?"

Hutch winced and ran a finger down the page he'd been reading; it gave him something else to look at other than his partner ramming home the remnants of his snack.

"Says she had some kind of breakdown a couple years after Casey was born. Institutionalized, released, but then there were some incidents of 'inappropriate behavior' — "

"I'd say hanging out in bars without her panties on was pretty inappropriate," Starsky retorted. "And one time she even had the kid with her. Left her out in the car."

"Picked up for prostitution three times. And get this . . . her defense was that she never asked for payment. Said she was lonely."

Starsky rolled his eyes, just visible above the rim of his coffee cup.

Hutch checked his notes against the information from the file. "After the divorce there's a couple of vagrancy busts, possession, nothing too heavy. Got herself readmitted to Cabrillo . . ."

"See?"

"See what?"

"Whacko."

Hutch pointed. "You've got custard on your chin."

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Lunchtime came and went with neither of them eating. Starsky seemed to function fine on sugar and caffeine, and whatever Hutch felt gnawing at the inside of his guts, he was pretty sure it wasn't hunger. He tried to call to mind the textbook symptoms of a stomach ulcer.

Every now and then, he glanced across the desk. Van might give him crap about what she called his and Starsky's date nights — every other Tuesday, shifts permitting. But in the course of all those "dates" he'd come to know the man he now called partner pretty well. He'd witnessed every mood, and learned to read every expression in Starsky's varied repertoire. He'd thought he knew them all by heart. He knew the man inside and out. Could read him like an open book.

Obviously one of them had skipped a couple pages.

That single thought made Hutch review his case notes and the thick file from Cabrillo. Starsky had an old address book Mrs. Drummond had supplied and spent the next hour checking up on Celine's high school buddies and her fellow members of the Young Moms Club, Bay City Chapter.

Hutch waited until Starsky was between calls then held out a letter he'd found in the folder. "Look at this."

Starsky hesitated, then took it from him. "What — they don't make 'em use Crayola anymore?"

Hutch let the comment slide, leaning back in his chair to watch Starsky as he read.

Minutes later Starsky looked up. "So?"

"That doesn't tell you something?"

"She wanted her kid back. She took her in the middle of the night. That tells me plenty."

Hutch sighed. "Okay, then read this one." He passed another letter over. "Or this one."

Starsky batted back the last sheet Hutch tried to give to him. "What's the point? Stuff like that, it woulda messed the kid up. Reading stuff like that . . ."

"Like what? 'I love you'? 'Mommy's been sick but she's getting better'," Hutch quoted from the source. "'I miss you, and some day —'"

"Yeah, just like that. Probably why they wouldn't let her send them in the first place."

"Starsk, the hospital *encouraged* her to write. But Casey's dad and grandma sent the letters back. They shut her out of Casey's life completely."

Starsky laid down the letter that he'd been holding, smoothing out the tri-fold creases as he read it over. Hutch watched a range of more familiar expressions play across his features: solemn concentration, honest puzzlement, and sometimes there was even a slight hint of a smile. But when he finished reading, Starsky folded up the sheet of paper and said nothing.

The rest of the afternoon was notable only for the complete lack of legwork involved. Dobby passed their desk from time to time, but with one or the other of them always on the phone, he never gave a sign that

might suggest he was less than happy.

As their shift creaked slowly toward five, Hutch said, "So how about I buy you supper?"

Starsky checked his watch and stretched. "'You' and 'buy' in the same sentence? Van must've loosened up her purse strings."

Hutch grimaced, but refused to take the bait. "She was gonna leave me something in the crock pot. My place, my food, that counts as me buying. There'll be more than enough to share between the two of us."

For a moment he was sure he was about to be turned down. Instead Starsky said, "No Van?"

Feigning outrage, Hutch replied, "Buddy, there's some things a man just doesn't share. Not even with his best friend."

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They drove separately, which gave Hutch time to practice a few lines to open up a dialog. Starsky had been acting 'off' all day, and it was starting to get to him. Besides, he didn't like to eat alone, and what was the point of company if not for conversation?

He needn't have worried.

As soon as they set foot in the apartment, Starsky said, "Hey — this is pretty nice." He made a slow three-sixty in the center of the living room, as if committing everything to memory. Like he thought he'd never see it again . . .

Like he'd never seen it before.

Hutch frowned at the impractical white couch and carpet, wondering why he had gone along with Van's ridiculous ideas. He realized, with a flash of guilt, that he was in defiance of her edict about having guests. But it was Starsky to whom he felt he owed the first apology. How weird was that?

Hedging, he said, "Yeah, well, Van's been on a hausfrau kick. She figures since the baby thing's not happening, she'll turn this place into something out of Better Homes And Gardens."

Looking a shade uncomfortable, Starsky said, "This baby thing — "

"Nothing serious. Just taking longer than I — than we hoped."

Starsky only nodded, so Hutch went through into the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, "Make yourself at home."

The crock pot sat dead center on the countertop and Van had left a note propped up against it. Hutch read it distractedly as he got plates down from the cupboard overhead. They were out of beer, he remembered, but there was an almost full bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon in the door of the refrigerator.

He opened up the hatch between the kitchen and the living room. "Is wine okay, or d'you want beer? There's a place around the corner . . ."

"Wine's good," Starsky answered from his place next to the window. "Hey, is this you?" He held up a photograph, one of half a dozen lined up on the sill.

Hutch brought the plates out and began to set the table. "Yeah. Van had my mom send her some of my

yearbook photos. Said she was trying to figure how our baby might turn out."

He made another couple trips between the two rooms, bringing out glasses and the wine, then emptying the contents of the crock pot into one of the good serving dishes. On his last return, he found Starsky seated at the table with a glass of wine.

"You might want to go easy," Hutch said. "Looks like Van's expanding her culinary range; Beouf Bourguignon instead of pot roast." He began to ladle out a portion onto Starsky's plate.

Starsky investigated the food with his fork, turning things around and over. "Looks like beef stew."

"It is. Beouf Bourguignon is beef cooked in Burgundy wine, so factor that in with whatever you're drinking."

"So Beouf means beef; I get it. This lady's name is Beef?"

Hutch recalled the file on Casey's mother. "That's right," he said.

He filled his own plate, waiting for his partner to start waxing philosophical.

"Good stew," Starsky said. "So what's the Celine mean?"

"Celine? It's French too. I don't know if it means anything. May be just a name."

"Oh."

They ate in silence for a while. Hutch drank half his glass of wine then topped it up.

Starsky took the bottle from him and filled his own glass for a second time before he drank it down.

"I didn't know that Van could cook," he said later as he wiped his plate clean with a slice of Wonder Bread.

"You think I fell in love with her on looks alone?" Hutch asked him lightly.

"I woulda said her mind, but then, if she was so smart, she wouldn't have married you."

"Like I haven't heard that before. Or my other favorite: it'll never last."

Starsky went quiet for a moment and looked thoughtful. Then he said, "For what it's worth, I think you're stuck with each other until you're bald and Van looks like my Aunt Rose."

Hutch raised his glass and smiled, inexplicably delighted. He'd never been one hundred percent sure that Starsky even liked Van.

"The photo in the little girl's room," Starsky said softly, almost as if he were thinking out loud. "Celine LaBeef was a pretty lady. Then in her mugshot she looked like twenty miles of bad road. And all of a sudden she wants to play mommy."

Hutch leaned back and pushed his plate away. "Is there a problem with this case? Seems to me you're — "

"We've got a crazy lady and a missing kid. I'd say that's a problem."

"Hospital records say there's no indication — " Concerned he sounded like a pompous ass, Hutch started over. "They're certain she wouldn't hurt her child, whatever else she might have done."

Starsky started on a third glass of the wine. "She's gotta be unscrewed to even think she can get away with

this. There's no telling what she might do."

"All she ever wanted was to be a mom. Even her ex said so when I called him," Hutch said. "And believe me, he's no more a fan of hers than you are. She didn't just lose custody, she lost visitation. Hell, they wouldn't even give her letters to the kid."

"So, you're putting this all down to what? Maternal instinct kicking in?"

"I think she felt cheated. Courts don't always make the right decisions. Hell, I lived with my dad for three years, and *he* was an alcoholic. If he — "

Hutch hesitated. There wasn't much about his life he hadn't shared with Starsky. And the way the man was chugging down the wine, he wouldn't fault Hutch for some sappy reminiscing.

"Well, let's just say that if Mom hadn't made a lot of good investments, she *still* might never have got custody."

Starsky answered with a noncommittal grunt, his nose deep in his glass.

"She cut him out of both our lives. He sent letters, and I'd get a card every birthday and at Christmas . . . It wasn't enough. I didn't care what he was, or how he was; I missed him being a part of my life." He took a gulp of wine, abruptly discomfited, knowing he'd hit upon a tender spot in Starsky's past.

"Hey, better a lousy parent than no parent. It's okay. I get it," Starsky said tonelessly. "So, what happened?"

"It was like he dropped off the surface of the earth. The cards, the letters — they stopped coming. And after a while, Mom stopped getting angry when I asked about him. She'd just cry. So I quit asking."

"You're saying Casey's family should've given her the letters. That maybe they brought this on themselves."

"I think they could've been a little more accommodating, sure."

"Maybe your poss — pross — your perspective's a little squiffed."

Hutch reached out and took away the empty glass that Starsky was about to fill. "I think *you're* a little squiffed there, partner."

Starsky looked offended. "It's only wine. My gran'ma lived over an Italian restaurant. As she always used to say, when in Rome . . ." He made a grab for his glass and missed badly, almost falling off his chair in the wake of his momentum. "I've been drinking wine since I was six years old."

"Oh, yeah? Then you're pretty well steeped by now," Hutch said as he stood up. He walked around the table, and got Starsky to his feet, though not without some effort. "You should lie down for a few."

Starsky giggled, but he let Hutch steer him to the couch. "That's what you do to wine," he said. "Lay me down for a few years; I'll ferment."

"You ferment on this couch, and Van'll rub your nose in it. And I mean literally."

"Where's she at anyway?"

"Working."

From lying almost flat out, Starsky bounced back upright. "Van got a job? Doing what?"

Hutch pushed him back down. "This past month, she's been at Lombard's."

"Hey, that's that department store on — " For a moment, Starsky got distracted by Hutch pulling at his shoes. He struggled and then let Hutch have his way. "So, she works as . . . what?"

"In ladies' fashions." Hutch dragged the afghan off the back of the couch and draped it clumsily over his partner. "Now, go to sleep."

Starsky squirmed his legs to get them fully under cover, looking like a bug constructing its cocoon.

"Think she can get me a discount?"

Hutch stopped en route to the bedroom for another blanket. "Didn't know you were into ladies' fashions."

"Into, inside, underneath," Starsky mumbled as he plumped a pillow. "'S all the same to me."

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Van got in just after ten. Hutch heard her key scrape in the lock and met her at the door. She strung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Close your eyes," she said. "I want to show you something."

"Van — "

"Shhh . . . no peeking."

She closed the door and pushed him two steps back.

Hutch heard the swish of fabric sliding and a soft "Ta-dah." And when he opened up his eyes, Van stood before him with her silk suit pooled around her ankles. She smoothed her hands over her breasts, her nipples clearly visible above what she had told him once was called a demi-bra. Her panties . . . Her panties were unworthy of the name, a tiny swatch of lace and ribbon that left nothing to imagination.

"Look," she said, as if she couldn't track his line of sight. "You like? This costs a hundred dollars retail. And I get it free. For nothing." Her eyes glittered.

Airlessly, Hutch said her name again. She took his hand and pressed it to the wisp of lace between her legs. He felt the tickle of her pubic hair against his palm.

Van said, "Of course, I'll have to shave . . . Or you could do it for me."

Hutch felt his cock begin to swell. He pushed Van up against the door and ran a single finger along the ribbon edging of her panties. When he found a likely point of entry, he started working his whole hand inside.

Van rose up on tiptoes. "Don't you dare."

"What?"

"Don't tear the fabric. Wait. I'll take them off."

Starsky coughed the very moment Van began to step out of her panties. Shock and then something like fury filled her eyes.

"You bastard! What am I? A party favor?"

Quick to recover, she bent down and scooped her other clothes up off the floor. She'd made it to the bedroom before Hutch had even wrapped his head around the fact that they were not alone.

He checked on Starsky first — still sleeping, if a little restless — then hurried to the bedroom.

He found Van sitting at the dresser, brushing her hair with the kind of vigor that made his own head ache in sympathy. Before he'd said a word, she turned and pointed the brush at him like a loaded weapon.

"No guests, I said. No parties, and nobody sleeping over. How the hell am I supposed to keep this place nice?" She turned back to the mirror. "Especially now we're both working."

Hutch sat down on the bed. "You know, you don't *have* to work."

"And I'm supposed to get things like these on a cop's salary?"

He watched as Van's reflection touched a satin bow between her breasts.

"That's not the kind of 'things' we talked about using the money for," he pointed out.

"Well, you seemed not to object too much a few minutes ago. As soon as I fall pregnant, we can start getting other things. Baby clothes, toys, a bassinet . . ." Van looked beautifully wistful, all her anger burned away. "I just want a chance to look like this," and she stood up and modeled for him, "while I still can."

Mindful of the damage he could cause if he were careless, Hutch slotted a finger in between Van's lower belly and the tiny triangle of lace. And when he tugged ever so gently, Van came to him, as if she too was scared of destroying something valuable.

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At three the next morning, Hutch wasn't particularly surprised to find the bathroom was occupied when he got there. With three people, one toilet, and twenty-four hours in any given day, it was just another of those fucked up mathematical probabilities. Still, he wasn't in that much of a hurry, so he diverted to the couch to sit and wait his partner out.

When Starsky emerged, he looked disoriented.

Hutch turned on the lamp. "You okay?"

Starsky flinched and held a hand up, shading his eyes. But he nodded and then walked on over to join him on the couch.

"I puked," he said.

"I figured. I've got Alka Seltzer."

"Found it."

"So . . . you're okay now?"

"Dunno. Having to look at one of you is bad enough." Starsky dry-washed his face with his hands. "The three of you together just might finish me off."

"Want the light out?"

Starsky shrugged, but a pained expression lingered round his eyes. Hutch thumbed the off-switch, and Starsky sighed the way a man did when setting down a heavy load.

"What time is it?" he said.

"Ten after three."

"Van make it home okay?"

The question took Hutch by surprise. "You remember last night?" he asked, careful to keep his voice neutral.

"Not much. I think somebody slipped me a mickey."

"Oh, no, partner. You brought it on yourself."

"Like the Drummonds."

Hutch gritted his teeth. "Are we back to that?"

"We didn't find the Beef chick, and we're still short a kid. I'd say we never left 'that'."

"We'll be hitting the streets in another five hours, and you said Huggy had a few leads."

"You know Huggy. He wouldn't say too much till he was sure, but there's a working girl, goes by the name of Sweet Alice. He said she might have a few ideas."

"A hooker? Someone Celine knew when she was living on the streets?"

"So Huggy said."

Hutch's bladder chose that moment to remind him why he was awake at three. He said, "I'll be right back. Don't go away."

But when he returned from the bathroom, the couch had been abandoned. He found Starsky in the kitchen making coffee.

"Is this okay?" Starsky nodded toward the percolator.

"Sure. Won't hurt to get a jump on the day."

"Van won't mind?"

"Don't worry about it." Hutch sidetracked to the refrigerator. "I've got eggs. No bacon, but I think there's sausage patties in here somewhere."

Starsky was persistent. "Hutch, about Van . . ."

"It's okay. She took a sleeping pill. Said you were snoring."

"Not me." And Starsky grinned, looking ten times better than he had ten minutes earlier. "Must've been some other guy."

"Maybe I should check under the bed," Hutch said.

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While Starsky showered, Hutch made omelets. He chopped up the solitary sausage patty, mixing it in with the eggs to stretch it out. And Starsky must have found his appetite in the same place he'd found a missing tennis shoe, because his plate was empty within minutes of sitting down to eat.

"I don't suppose there's toast." Starsky said. He sounded hopeful.

"There's bread and a toaster."

Starsky said nothing, but fixed Hutch with a steady stare.

"You'll eat me out of house and home," Hutch grumbled, but he rose and dropped some bread into the toaster. "Next thing, you'll be asking for another cup of — "

"Well, since you're up already . . ." Starsky held out his mug.

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They beat Dobey in by fifteen minutes and the look on the man's face when he walked into the squad room made Hutch wish he had a camera handy.

Shortly after, Starsky got a call. He jotted something down and said, "Thanks, Hug." He hung up the phone, and stood, pulling on his jacket. Then, as if to make sure he had Hutch's full attention, he slapped both hands down on his blotter.

Hutch extracted the report he had been trying to make sense of, frowning at a smudgy palm print. "We going somewhere?"

"That was Huggy. Gave me a location on that hooker."

"Alice something."

"Yeah, Sweet Alice. Only he said we gotta be there in the next five — " Starsky glanced at his watch. "Four minutes."

Hutch swept everything into a drawer.

"So, what're we waiting for?"

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Judging from appearances, Sweet Alice operated on a rigid schedule. Two minutes after their appointed meet, she was leaving the room right as Starsky and Hutch made it to the top of the stairs.

She wagged a finger at them, like a school marm, and turned on her heel, opening the door.

"Y'all come on now," she said as she hustled them inside. "I didn't count on there bein' two of you."

"Sweet Alice?" Hutch said, just for confirmation.

"None sweeter," she replied and dropped her coat. The move brought Hutch a flashback to the night before — not in a good way — but he couldn't seem to tear his eyes away.

Alice glanced back at him over a bare shoulder. A bare everything, in fact. "Wha's the matter, hon?" Then she turned fully to meet his gaze.

"I — You — We — "

Starsky swooped to pick up the discarded trench coat and he held it out to her. "Alice, we're cops, and I think you better put your clothes back on before my partner swallows a fly or something."

Hutch closed his mouth with a snap that rattled his teeth.

Sweet Alice snatched the coat out of Starsky's hand and clutched it to her chest. The way she had it all bunched up, it didn't cover much else.

Hutch stepped forward and pulled the coat away. He shook it out, holding it for Alice so she could slip her arms into the sleeves. He kept his eyes fixed on the dingy carpet the whole time.

"Am I busted again?" Alice asked, fumbling with her buttons. She matched them up all wrong and started over. "Please don't bust me. I'm behind on my rent already. C'mon guys . . ." Her lower lip began to tremble and she bit down on it.

Hutch reached out to her again and smiled in reassurance. He finished doing up her buttons, tied the belt at her waist, then led her over to a chair beside the window. "We just want to talk to you," he said as she sat down.

Starsky took the only other chair and faced Sweet Alice across a table that wobbled when he leaned his elbows on it. Sitting back again, he said, "Celine LaBeef. You know her?"

"L'il Sally? Sure I do . . . But she's not a workin' girl, so don't go telling me she's in trouble . . ." She tilted her head to look up at Hutch. "She's not in trouble, is she?"

"We don't know. She might be."

Starsky jumped in, stealing Alice's attention. "We want to know where we can find her. Where she might go if she wanted to stay out of sight. We know the two of you were friends. Did she come to you and — "

"And what?" Alice's eyes went wide.

Privately Hutch thought his partner might be pushing harder than was necessary. "Alice?" Her gaze shifted to him. "Now, Alice. You know that Celine — that Sally had some problems."

Alice nodded solemnly, like a little girl admitting that she'd misbehaved.

"She wasn't well. When you met her, she'd been sick."

"She was sad, that's all. Just so sad all the time. And lonely. She thought that being with guys . . . *You* know." Hutch gave her a slight smile and nodded encouragingly. "I told her if she wasn't gettin' paid to put her legs up in the air, wasn't no sense in throwin' herself down. I tried to be a friend to her."

Starsky coughed. Hutch hoped he wasn't laughing.

He said, "Alice, we're worried about Celine, your friend. We know you tried to help her before. Help her this time. Help us find her."

Alice stared at her fingers as she wove them into knots and pulled them apart. Hutch covered her two hands

with one of his.

"Please, Alice."

"She wouldn't hurt a fly. She's more like a little kid herself than someone's mama. Got married straight out of high school — "

"You met her kid?" Starsky said suddenly. "Did she bring Casey with her? Are they at your place?"

"No, silly. But she talked about her all the time."

Starsky slumped back in his seat again.

"Starsk? I don't think — "

"Hey, handsome," Alice said, freeing her hands and tugging lightly on the edge of Hutch's jacket. "If you think it's important, I can tell you where she *might* go. O' course, she might not be there . . ."

"Yes?"

"There's this one guy. He owns a book store. Sally went with him a couple times and, well, she said he was nice to her."

Starsky stood up. "This guy got a name?"

"Why, sure he does. It's on the sign above his door." Alice looked vaguely puzzled. "Hey, does this mean I'm not busted?"

"What's the guy's name," Starsky asked sharply, already to the door, turning the handle.

"Oh something," Alice answered.

Starsky shot her a dark look. "Something?"

Hutch said, "Oh . . . Like O'Toole? O'Malley?"

"Something like that. Sorry, handsome, I don't usually concern myself too much with names."

Coming back across the room, Starsky said, "You looking for a ride downtown?"

Hutch caught his arm. "Hey, why don't we just check the Yellow Pages?"

Starsky glanced down and Hutch dropped his hand away.

"Yellow pages," Starsky muttered, heading for the door again.

Turning to Sweet Alice, Hutch asked, "Can we give you a ride? No strings, no booking."

She stood, and he pulled the chair out of the way. From years of habit, he cupped her elbow as he walked her to the door.

"You sure you're a police officer?" she asked him on the threshold. "Maybe you should give me your name. Next time I get myself busted . . . Well, it wouldn't be so bad if it was you."

"I thought you didn't concern yourself with names."

"Well, in special cases, I've been known to make an exception," Alice said, batting her eyelashes. "And, Mr. Handsome Police Officer, you're pretty special. Been a long time since somebody — "

"It's Hutchinson. Hutch. Ken Hutchinson. Uh, Detective."

"What, all of that? How about I call you Handsome Hutch and make it easy to remember."

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Sweet Alice slipped away the second they made it to the lobby, scared that being seen with Hutch would hurt her reputation. Starsky must have overheard the comment. Joining Hutch, he said, "She's worried about *her* reputation? What about *yours*?"

"Mine? Hey, I'm a happily married man. She knows that."

"You two got awful friendly for three flights."

"Three flights? Oh, yeah, well . . . We talked, she asked, and I told her, that's all."

As they headed for the door out to the street, Starsky said, "She proposition you? We can still pull her in."

"For what? Prostitution? Evasion? Attempting to corrupt a police officer?"

Starsky waved a hand dismissively. "Dunno. But I bet Van could think up a few charges."

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"So, where to next? You find it?" Hutch asked once they were back in the car.

"Oh, yeah. One of those astronomical places. You know . . . the zodiac."

Hutch knew he was gaping again when Starsky asked, "Is that a permanent condition," and used a hand to lift his jaw into the upright, closed position.

He jerked his head away. "Say again?"

"I said, 'Is that a permanent condition?'"

"No, before that — Never mind."

They drove a mile or so, then Starsky said, "See? It's right here." He wedged the Maverick between an El Camino and a panel truck, both of which were parked illegally. "Can you believe these morons?"

"Wanna call it in?"

Starsky was clearly considering it, but by the time the traffic thinned for long enough for him to get his door open, he said, "No, guess not."

He led the way to a storefront fifty feet south of where he'd parked.

"O'Brien's Aquarian Books," he said. "Wonder where the Capricorns go. Or Sagittarians."

Hutch looked up at the gold-lettered sign. "Do you do that on purpose?"

"What?"

"Antiquarian, Starsk. It's antiquarian."

"Oh." But Starsky looked none the wiser for the information.

"Like antique. Old."

"O-h-h-h, is that all." Starsky pushed the door open, and a bell rang somewhere in the store.

Hutch started down the left side of a long table crowded with books. Starsky headed to the right, his fingers gliding over the spine of every volume. He made a low surprised sound.

"Hey, Hutch, look at this. It's got 'you' written all over it."

Hutch barely caught the book as it was lobbed his way. He read the title — *A Clean Heart* — and grimaced.

"It's by Hutchinson, even," Starsky said, and he sounded pleased with himself.

"Funny." Hutch slid the book into the gap he'd created when he'd taken out another. "Try this one. Should be about your speed." He passed a slim volume across the table.

"*The Little Golden Funny Book*," Starsky quoted from the cover. He flipped a couple pages. "Hey, I think I used to have this one."

"Can I help you, gentlemen?"

They turned, coming face to face with a elderly man with a paunch held in place by a tightly buttoned vest.

"Mr. O'Brien?" Hutch asked.

"Yes." O'Brien wagged his finger in the direction of Starsky's book. "A fine choice, sir. Not worth much now, of course. But children's books in good condition appreciate in value."

"They do?" Starsky took another look the book in his hand. "Five bucks, huh?" He wedged his fingers into a front pocket in his jeans.

O'Brien made a shooping gesture. "Please, feel free to browse. Who knows what other treasures you might uncover."

To verify that they were still on track, Hutch said, "Well, we *would* like to take a look around. Right, Starsk?"

"Guess you could say we're on a sort of treasure hunt," Starsky said, and he reached into another pocket.

"Mr. O'Brien, know where we could find something like this?" He held up his open wallet, his badge on one side and a photo of Celine LaBeouf held by a finger over his own ID.

Hutch watched O'Brien's face for a reaction. The old man peered at the photograph and Starsky let him take it.

Holding the picture inches from his nose, O'Brien said. "Yes, I know this lady. That's Sally. And you're right. She's a rare one indeed."

Starsky asked, "And do you happen to have this 'treasure' on your premises?"

"Oh, no. No, no, no," O'Brien thrust the photo back at Starsky. "No, I — "

"Mr. O'Brien," Hutch said, "it's very important we find this lady. And her daughter."

"No, I told them they couldn't stay here. You see, she asked me to help. But I sent her away. I couldn't — Well, what would Mother say?"

"Your *mother*?" Starsky's voice shot up in disbelief.

"Ninety-seven, and still going strong," O'Brien said with pride and maybe just a hint of 'heaven help me' in the words.

"Your mother," Hutch reiterated. "What's your mother got to do with this?"

"There's only two bedrooms upstairs, you see. Mother's in the front one, and with my room right next to hers . . . well, you can see it's not possible."

"So you won't mind if we take a look?" Starsky said. He took a step toward the older man, not quite looming, but in Hutch's opinion O'Brien would have to be blind and stupid not to sense a certain menace in the action.

"Starsk . . ."

"Your mommy know how you spend your evenings?"

O'Brien paled. "What?"

"We could ask her. Hey, Hutch. You wanna go talk to the old lady? See if she's had any unexpected guests lately?"

Mentally Hutch fell into step alongside his partner. "Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt. I like talking to people. Sometimes my mouth just runs away on me. Never know what I'm gonna end up saying." He walked to the far end of the table and peered up a staircase near the back of the store. "Is this the way?"

"But Mother never saw her." O'Brien snatched a handkerchief out of a rear pocket and dabbed his face with it. "She came here. Last night, early, maybe eight o'clock."

Starsky said, "Was there a kid with her?"

"I don't know. She said she needed a place to stay. And she said she had someone waiting in the car, so I suppose . . ."

"You suppose. So what'd you tell her?"

"That she couldn't stay. I offered her some money."

"For what?" Hutch asked, almost certain that he wouldn't like the answer.

O'Brien spun in his direction. "For her to — Oh — For a place to stay. I gave her money for a place."

"And what else?"

As Hutch approached, O'Brien stepped away and bumped the table broadside. Books tumbled off at either end and landed with a series of dull thuds. O'Brien jumped with every hit.

"I didn't do anything wrong. But she's such a dear little thing. And I'm an old man. I get lonely . . ."

Starsky wore a strange half-smile. "So this lady, this Celine LaBeef, had sex with you, and you gave her money. And afterwards, she went where exactly?"

"I — I — "

"Oh, c'mon. You're keeping her real close. She's gonna need more money." Starsky's tone dropped to that of a co-conspirator. "And I'll just bet you're the one who's gonna give it to her, right?"

At that, Hutch felt a small smile of his own sneak up on him. He ducked his head as a precaution.

"Well, I get lonely," O'Brien said again feebly.

Hutch said, "And where do you go for a little . . . companionship?"

Looking as if tears were next on his agenda, O'Brien said, "There's a rooming house two blocks down, The Emerald, owned by a Mrs. Fahey."

"Mrs. Fahey?"

O'Brien gave Hutch a nod of confirmation.

"From the Auld Country," Starsky sing-songed, sounding exactly as Hutch imagined a leprechaun would sound if born and bred in New York City.

"I wouldn't know," O'Brien said, and he sniffed with disdain. "My family's from North Dakota."

"Yeah? Well, paying for the services of a prostitute is as illegal here as it is there. Not to mention harboring a fugitive, obstruction of justice, kidnapping, conspiracy — "

O'Brien flinched with each new charge that Starsky threw his way.

And when Hutch asked, "What room," the old man almost sobbed his answer.

Starsky nodded, evidently satisfied. He turned as if to leave and then turned back again.

"You might need this," he said, handing O'Brien the book he'd been holding the whole time. "'Cause if we have to come back here, you're gonna have trouble finding something to laugh about."

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Starsky said it wasn't worth moving the car, so they walked the two blocks to The Emerald. It seemed to Hutch his partner had developed a fresh spring in his step; he had trouble keeping up with him.

The Emerald was nowhere near as much of a dive as Hutch had expected. There were even boxes filled with flowers on the ground floor window ledges, though when he got up close he could see that they were made of plastic. Still, it was a nice touch.

The lobby was clean, if a bit shabby; the furniture had probably been new while Hutch was still in college. There wasn't anybody at the desk and he remarked on that fact out loud, just for something to say.

"So I guess we invite ourselves up," Starsky said.

They made a false start at the second landing, heading right and then having to double back. Room 208 was missing its last digit, but by process of elimination, the room closest to the fire escape had to be it.

"Are we announcing ourselves?" Hutch asked, unsure how Starsky wanted to play this. Unsure of lots of things about his partner in the last twenty-four hours.

"What, room service, you mean?"

Hutch lifted his shoulders and let them drop.

"I could give 'em my Irish landlady impression."

"That probably counts as cruel and unusual punishment. Maybe if I knock, she'll just open the door."

"And maybe she'll decide to take a dive out the window with the kid."

"Starsk . . ."

"No, be my guest," Starsky said expansively.

Hutch raised his hand and knocked, and listened closely to the silence that followed.

"Great technique," Starsky muttered, or maybe it was "Breakneck speed," but Hutch mixed likelihood with context to come up with something that made sense. Something he could respond to.

"Yeah, well I'm not done yet," and he knocked a second time. "Hello? Anybody home? I'm your neighbor, in 206. I was wondering if you'd seen my dog."

There was a definite sound of movement from within the room.

"Hello? He's just a little dog. He won't bite, but — "

The door opened a fraction of an inch. Looking down, Hutch saw a small green eye that peered back up at him.

A young girl's voice said, "A dog?"

From further back in the room there came a clear cry of alarm and the door was slammed abruptly closed, almost clipping Hutch's thumb where his hand rested on the door frame.

He jerked his hand back. "Shit."

"I'd say this is the right place," Starsky said, oblivious to Hutch's close escape. He tried the handle. "Locked."

"Go figure," Hutch said gloomily. "You want to — "

Starsky placed the flat of his left foot against the door an inch or so below the handle and just seemed to pump his knee a couple times. With the third push, the door flew open.

" — bust it down," Hutch finished.

Starsky ran ahead of him into the room. And that was when the screaming started.

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Celine LaBeouf crouched in a corner of the room, her arms wrapped tight around her child. She swung her head partway in Hutch's direction when he entered, but her eyes never left Starsky.

He was standing hunched over with his arms outstretched a few feet from her, saying, "Easy . . . easy . . . calm down . . . take it easy," over and over, as if he thought his voice of reason could penetrate the woman's high-pitched keening.

Hutch put both of them out of his mind, and sat down on the edge of the bed, turning his attention to the terrified child.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said softly, the instant that he caught her looking at him. "My name's Detective Hutchinson. And that's my partner, Detective Starsky." He tilted his head in Starsky's direction. "I know he looks pretty scary right now, but that's just because he's standing up and you're all the way down there."

Casey blinked and dared a glance at Starsky.

"Maybe, if you come over here and sit with me, your mom and my partner can figure out exactly what the problem is."

He could tell that she tried, because a moment later she winced, her mother having clearly reinforced the grip she had on her.

"Mommy's getting kinda loud, huh?" And Casey nodded. "Is she hugging you too tight?" Another nod. "Perhaps you should tell her."

Casey shook her head vehemently. And then she winced again. Hutch was just about to try a different tack when the little girl spoke up.

"I have to go pee."

Starsky took a step back, slowly lowering his hands. "How about it, Celine? Gonna let your little girl sit there getting all uncomfortable?"

The stream of sound Celine was making dropped in pitch, but stayed unrecognizable as speech.

"Mommy? I need to pee."

Celine groaned, and she dropped her head forward so that her chin rested on Casey's shoulder.

"Mommy, pleeeeeeease . . ."

"No, baby. No. These men want to . . . to trick you."

Celine's voice was soft, but surprisingly deep — almost mannish — and Hutch wondered if she'd strained her vocal chords. Or maybe she had always talked that way.

"They're policemen, Mommy. Were we bad? Are we in trouble?"

"No, baby. Oh, no, baby."

Twisting her head sideways, Casey tried to look into her mother's face. "Mommy, I don't want to wet myself . . ." She picked indelicately at the crotch of her denim jumper. With the grip that her mother had on her, squirming didn't look like it would be an option. But for the first time, Hutch saw Casey's look of fear turn to one of abject misery.

"Celine," he said gently, "your little girl's getting to be a little lady. You don't want her embarrassed by an accident, now, do you?" He half stood, extending his right hand. "C'mon Casey, you can show me where the

bathroom is, right?"

Casey worked both of her arms up and out of the restrictive embrace. Instead of breaking free immediately, though, she wrapped her arms around her mother's neck and then kissed her.

"Mommy, I'll be right back. I promise."

Celine sobbed into her daughter's neck. Looking up at Starsky, she nevertheless addressed her question to Hutch.

"What about him?"

Starsky took a couple steps backward — baby steps, to demonstrate compliance — and he said, "Backing up, see?"

At the same time, Hutch leaned further forward. Casey turned again, this time to face him, and Hutch made a come here gesture with his hand. Celine released her daughter so abruptly that Casey almost pitched onto her face. One of her flailing hands struck Hutch's upturned palm, and he secured it in the gentle prison of his fingers, pulling Casey forward.

Celine screamed, rage and terror mixed in equal measure, and she wrapped her arms around her head. Starsky held position, shooting Hutch a look that said succinctly 'well, what are you waiting for'.

"C'mon, Casey," Hutch said, and satisfied the child was steady on her feet, he drew her with him toward the far side of the room. "In here?"

Casey nodded gratefully and ran the next few steps, making it to the bathroom and breaking free of his hand to close the door behind her. Celine looked up just as Casey vanished.

"Oh God, no. No. Give her back, please. Just . . . give her back."

She started to rise, but her legs seemed to buckle underneath her. She pressed her palms to the walls either side of the corner she had wedged herself into, and tried again. And again. Still nothing doing. It was pitiful to watch and Hutch thought involuntarily of flies gummed to the resin of a pine tree.

Standing as if similarly held in place, Starsky watched her too. His face was utterly impassive, but everything about him spoke to Hutch of readiness to spring. Hutch suppressed the urge to intervene. To his way of thinking, he'd been given charge of Casey. He stayed put and hoped that Celine would respond to nonverbal clues that neither he nor Starsky were a threat.

The toilet flushed and then Hutch heard the soft snick as the child unlocked the door. The second Casey made her entrance, Celine crumpled to the floor and drew her knees up to her chin. Starsky straightened, standing almost upright, staring down on her like he was drilling holes into her head.

Casey took a few steps forward as if to approach her mother, and Hutch dropped his hands onto her shoulders, slowly, gently, but enough to make her pause.

"Mommy?"

Celine's head jerked up. "Casey, come here."

Hutch flexed his fingers. It wasn't restraint, but Casey must have understood the message and she said, "Mommy, I don't think we're s'posed to be here."

"Casey . . ."

"I don't like this place. The toilet made funny noises all last night. And there's nothing to do. Mommy, I don't want — "

Celine fixed her eyes on Hutch. "Let her go."

Calculating the risk, Hutch raised his hands, letting them hover a scant inch above Casey's shoulders. Casey stayed exactly where she was.

As if waking to the fact that she was one place and her daughter was another, Celine lurched to her feet. Forward motion brought her within Starsky's reach and he made a grab for her, ducking when her free arm swung with force directly at his head.

Starsky caught Celine's other wrist and, in a move that would have made a Latin dancer proud, he spun her round until he stood behind her, holding Celine's arms around her just below her breasts.

"Mommeeee . . ." Casey darted forward, forcing Hutch to catch hold of the back of her jumper.

"Hutch, get her outta here!" Starsky sounded breathless as if Celine's frantic struggling was more of a workout than he was used to. "Now!"

Hutch bent down and scooped Casey up into his arms. She clung to him, bringing up her legs reflexively to wrap around his waist.

"I want Mommy," she said, but her voice held no conviction. She sounded merely tired.

Hutch said, "Let's get some air. Okay?" To Starsky, he said, "I'll go get the car."

"Left jacket pocket," Starsky answered.

Hutch took Casey as far as the door. "Just a second, sweetheart," he said, and he opened the door and lowered Casey to the ground. "Wait there just a second."

In the short time that trip took, Celine managed to bloody Starsky's nose. She was still slamming her head backward in an effort to do further damage as Hutch reached into Starsky's pocket.

"You sure?"

Starsky grunted. "Just get the car. I got her." He shuffled forward, moving closer to the bed.

Celine's feet didn't even reach the floor, a blessing and a curse; she couldn't jam the brakes on, but she kicked with booted feet, connecting more times than she missed.

Hutch secured the keys and hurried to the door, concerned that Casey would try to return or, worse, that she might have taken off running. One last glance over his shoulder showed him Celine face-down on the bed and Starsky wrestling one of her arms to the small of her back.

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Without visuals to influence her, Casey seemed happy to disregard the noises coming through the door. Hutch put her indifference down to fatigue, an idea that was reinforced when she leaned against his leg and rubbed her eyes.

Hutch picked her up again. "You ready for a little ride?"

She nodded then laid her head on his shoulder. "Not too far," she said.

"No, not too far."

Hutch steadied himself with a hand on the rail as he went down the stairs. The burden that he carried made progress slower than he would have liked and made him feel uneasy. Suddenly the idea of leaving Starsky alone with Celine had him wishing they'd called for backup. The precinct would have sent them Sergeant Harris — 'Sister Kate' to her friends — the ultimate blend of Mom and Sherman tank.

By the time Hutch hit the sidewalk, Casey's head was lolling, and he was sure that she was sound asleep before he made it halfway to the car. A heavy drizzle started falling and when Hutch got to the Maverick and tried to insert the key into the lock he dropped the whole bunch in the gutter. He bent awkwardly, bumping his head on the car door handle as he groped for the keys.

He propped Casey against himself as, on his knees, he ran his hands in ever-increasing circles on the concrete slab. Shifting to one side, he finally found the keys with a foot and picked them up. Once he had the door unlocked and open, he tilted the seat forward and put Casey in the back seat lying down.

And then banged his head again as he tried to straighten up too soon backing out of the interior.

"Ah, fuck it!"

"That's bad," Casey mumbled.

Hutch jogged round to the driver's side and got behind the wheel. "Starsk, your next car? Get a four door."

It took longer to pull out of the parking space than it had taken to walk back from the hotel. Hutch stuck the Mars light on the roof just to get noticed, and some old lady in a station wagon jammed her brakes on, freeing him to get into the stream of traffic.

When he parked, he ended with a front wheel on the sidewalk five feet from steps up to The Emerald's front door. He kept the engine running, but opened the door and stepped out, craning his neck to look up at the approximate location of Room 208. He reached back inside and laid on the horn. There was no way he was leaving Casey in the car so he could go inside.

Someone on the third floor opened their window and looked out, and behind Hutch, a trucker gave a long blast on his airhorn.

"Is there a problem?"

Hutch jumped. Looking across the roof of the car, he met the inquiring gaze of a middle-aged woman standing on the steps of The Emerald.

"Uh, no. No problem, ma'am." Hutch hit the horn again in three short taps.

"My name's Iris Fahey. This is my establishment, and you're causing a disturbance."

"I'm a police officer. Just waiting on my partner."

"Well, I suggest you go up and get him. All this noise . . ."

Hutch made a quick assessment of the woman's face. "I'd love to, but I have a little girl in the back of the

car."

Mrs. Fahey left her vantage point and crossed the sidewalk to peer into the car through the window.

"Poor little lamb. Would you like for me to watch her?"

Hutch glanced up. The third floor occupant had a companion now, but there was still no sign of anybody on the second floor. This whole situation sucked and he was left without too many choices. Only one, in fact, so he said, "If it's no trouble . . ."

"I'll just sit inside, if you don't mind," Mrs. Fahey said, and she got in on the passenger side. "This rain, it's no good for my joints, I swear."

Having had his mind made up for him, Hutch said hasty thanks, and then he ran into the hotel, through the lobby, and pounded up the stairs.

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Room 208 was silent, but when Hutch knocked, Starsky answered, "Come on in."

Celine was seated in a chair beside the dresser, her hands cuffed in front of her. Starsky, on his knees at her feet, had a towel, damp-darkened at one edge. As Hutch watched, Starsky passed the wet edge carefully over Celine's features. She leaned forward into the touch.

"Starsk? We ready?"

"Just a couple minutes," Starsky answered, dabbing at Celine's face with another part of the towel.

"Casey's fine," Hutch said deliberately, but Celine paid no attention to him. "She's sound asleep. The owner of this place is looking after her."

Starsky said, "Hear that, Sally? Casey slept through the whole thing."

Celine shuddered, and then she tipped her face forward as if seeking the towel held just out of her range. Starsky brushed the fabric against her cheek and she relaxed noticeably.

"Hey, Hutch. Check in the bathroom. Should be another one of these left, only without the crud."

"Crud?"

Starsky turned to face Hutch and mimed rubbing his nose with the back of his hand. It didn't look like he'd used a towel himself; there was blood crusting his upper lip and it had dripped to form a grisly goatee, captured in his stubble.

Hutch said, "Oh," and fetched the last clean towel. "You wanna clean up?"

"Huh?"

"You look like Mephistopheles."

"Hey, Sally, whatcha think? Do I look like Mephistopheles?"

Celine blinked lazily at Starsky. Hutch thought she looked drugged or like a sleeper slowly waking. She asked, "Who?"

Before Hutch could fill her in, Starsky said, "You know . . . Mephistopheles. Guy sold his soul to the devil."

"I remember," Celine said. "I think maybe I know how he felt."

Starsky put a hand out behind him, and Hutch passed him the clean white towel then sat down on a corner of the bed.

Starsky said, "You do?" and he began to smooth the towel across Celine's face. "Tormented with ten thousand hells, huh? Is that what it feels like?"

Nodding, Celine took the towel from him, and pressed it to her face and started weeping.

Starsky got up slowly and his knees popped like firecrackers. "Watch her a second," he said, and then he went into the bathroom. Hutch heard water running, but he kept his eyes on Celine. He needn't have worried; she never moved from the chair.

Starsky came back, looking cleaner, but somehow even worse for wear. Hutch frowned.

"What? Don't I pass?"

"For what," Hutch said. He pushed himself upright and started for the door. "You gonna take her?"

Starsky nodded. He crossed the room and bent down to slip his hand under Celine's arm. "Ready for a ride in my car?"

Celine's answer was muffled.

"Well, sure you can? Hutch won't mind, will you Hutch?"

"Mind what?" Hutch asked as they joined him.

"Sally wants to ride up front with me."

It went against procedure, but Hutch said, "No, don't mind at all."

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Celine remained docile all the way down to the car. She kept the towel wrapped around her eyes, and Hutch remembered holding an old feed sack over his horse Charlie's eyes to lead him anyplace he didn't want to go.

At their approach, Mrs. Fahey got out of the vehicle, and she hovered round them, making disapproving noises as they settled Celine in the front passenger seat. Hutch walked round to the driver's side and got in. He lifted Casey's feet to lower them to the floor, but ended with them draped over his lap.

"I hope she isn't in a lot of trouble," Mrs. Fahey said when she was done tut-tutting. She bent at the knees to peer into the car. "I won't have anything illegal going on in my establishment."

"We'll mention that to your friend Mr. O'Brien," Starsky said caustically, about to get into the car.

"Who?"

Starsky got behind the wheel and, having thrown Hutch a brief look over his shoulder, generously eased the front seat forward half an inch.

He said, "We'd appreciate it, ma'am, if you could pack up Ms. LaBeouf's things. We'll send an officer to pick them up."

"But what about her bill?"

Hutch had to imagine the look his partner gave the woman, but whatever it was, it rendered Mrs. Fahey speechless. Starsky leaned to his right, over Celine, and then straightened.

"Just in case," he said, and Hutch concluded that he'd fastened the seat belt round her. Then, in an unprecedented move, Starsky belted himself in, saying, "See? Now were all safe, and snug as bugs in rugs."

Hutch felt slightly claustrophobic crammed in the back seat. "Can we just get going?"

Starsky twisted round, a look of almost comical surprise appearing on his face when the seatbelt complicated his maneuvering.

"You in a hurry?" he said.

"You ever tried sitting back here?"

"What for? 'S my car."

Hutch slid his butt forward so that just his shoulders rested the back of the seat, and tried to get comfortable.

"Besides," Starsky said as he started the car, "haven't had to make out in a car since I turned twenty-one."

"Just drive."

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Starsky took a scenic route. He headed for the coastal highway, barely keeping pace with the speed limit, though the traffic by that time of day was lighter.

Hutch wondered what the hell was going on, but the only insight he had into Starsky's way of thinking was the glimpse of Starsky's eyes he caught every so often in the rearview mirror. It was just enough to convince him Starsky hadn't gone completely insane.

Casey slept on, her feet propped on Hutch's lap, and Celine, like her daughter, missed the ocean view entirely. Hutch could hear her crooning behind the towel, but couldn't make out if the song was something that he knew or merely wordless consolation that she gave herself.

Starsky turned the car a mile before the exit that would take them back into the city, and he turned the wrong direction anyway, pulling into the parking lot alongside of the entrance to the pier.

"Hey, Sally," he said. "Want some ice cream? I bet Casey does. Hutch, you wanna wake her up?"

Hutch nudged the sleeping child, and he kept his questions to himself. There might be hell to pay when they got back to the precinct, but if he had to sit another minute in the Maverick, he figured he'd be at the chiropractor's for a week. There was such a thing as the lesser of two evils.

The rain had eased off right as they hit the highway, but dark clouds were still looming overhead. They trapped a single strand of blue sky on the far horizon, a teasing hint of better weather.

"Like someone drew the shades down," Celine said, and Hutch saw that she'd let her blindfold fall into her

lap and was now staring at the ocean.

Starsky got out of the car and ran around to Celine's side. Hutch, having checked that Casey was fully awake, pushed the driver's seat forward. He bent almost double as he exited the vehicle, mindful of the damage his head had suffered earlier, and Casey followed right behind him.

Getting Celine up and mobile proved to be more of a problem. Starsky opened her door and then released the cuffs, stuffing them into a pocket. He tugged on Celine's elbow, but when he let go, her arm dropped like a bag of sand. Hutch heard her knuckles rap against the rocker panel and winced, though Celine didn't even flinch.

Starsky made two or three more attempts to coax her from the car, but she made no effort on her own behalf, and he was rendered helpless by the forces of inertia. Meeting Hutch's gaze over the roof of the car, Starsky raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

Hutch said, "Casey, why don't you go help your mom. Then we'll go get some ice cream."

Casey skipped around the car to where her mother sat, chanting "ice cream, ice cream" to the tune of 'Ring Around The Rosey'. She tugged on Celine's hand more forcefully than Starsky had — it wasn't as if she ran the risk of charges being laid against her — and she didn't make the mistake of letting go.

Hutch reached in through Starsky's open window and called Dispatch to tell them Zebra-3 would be out of contact for the next hour. Celine moved away from him, as he'd half expected, and that gave Casey the leverage she needed to pull her mother from the car.

"Zebra-3, say again. An hour? Jeeze, Hutch, that's some lunch. Whatcha gettin'?"

"Hey, Barbara. Would you believe ice cream?"

"I guess I can forget about the doggie bag. Okay, Zebra-3, I got you going Code-7 at 13:15. Dispatch out."

Hutch hooked the mic up and backed out the way he'd come. He joined the little gathering on the other side of the car.

Starsky rubbed his hands together gleefully, but Hutch could spot a fake a mile away. Celine was at least upright, if not particularly animated. Only Casey looked as if she really thought this was a great idea. She took hold of one of her mother's hands and one of Hutch's and started pulling in the direction of an ice cream stand near the pier.

For a moment it didn't seem that Celine was fully behind the plan. It was only when Starsky got ahead of her that she took her first step forward, then another. Casey eased up so that they walked four abreast until they reached the picnic tables.

"Wait here," Starsky said. "My treat. Four cones, right?"

"Get me a can of soda," Hutch said.

"Soda?"

"Make sure it's cold."

"Three cones and one cold soda coming up."

Hutch waited until Celine and Casey had ranged themselves on one side of the picnic table, then he sat

sideways on the bench opposite them so he could keep an eye on both them and Starsky.

"They're going to put me back in Cabrillo, aren't they?"

Hutch turned to face Celine. "They'll give you the help you need. What you did . . ." He glanced briefly at Casey and lowered his voice. "Cabrillo's not Disneyland, but you gotta admit, it beats fifteen to twenty in the state penitentiary."

"Penitentiary? Prison? For what?"

It occurred to Hutch that, up until that moment, Celine had no grasp at all of her situation.

As gently as he could, he said, "Kidnapping's a capital offense — "

"Kidnap? How can you call it kidnap? She's my daughter, my baby." Celine looked up and spotted Starsky returning to the table. "Tell him . . . tell him he's got it all wrong!"

"Hey, Hutch. Are you upsetting the lady? Can't turn my back on you for two seconds." Starsky distributed his bounty. He held an ice cream cone about an inch from Celine's nose until, impatiently, she snatched it from him. She held it two-handed, staring at the unanticipated treat as if it was a complicated puzzle or a ticking time bomb. Casey had no such qualms and was nose-deep in vanilla in no time.

Starsky plunked a can of 7-Up in front of Hutch and leaned across the table. "Sally? How about you and Casey take a walk down on the sand. Share some girl talk, or something." Before Hutch could protest, Starsky added, "We'll be right here waiting when you're ready to leave."

This time Celine needed no assistance getting to her feet. Casey latched onto a belt loop of her mother's jeans and, focused on her ice cream not her feet, she acted as a kind of drag anchor as they walked.

Hutch monitored their progress — not too far, and none too fast — then cast his field of vision wider. On any other day, there would have been a mass of humanity to get caught up and lost in, but the rain had driven people from the beach as surely as a shark fin in the water.

Once Hutch was certain they were out of earshot, he said, "Wanna tell me what we're doing here?"

Using the bench as a step up, Starsky sat down on the table. "Look at 'em, Hutch."

Hutch looked again. Celine and Casey were standing hand in hand a few feet from the water's edge, holding the remains of their cones above their heads, like oddly matched Statues of Liberty.

"Probably the last time they get to do that kind of thing for a while."

Hutch stood and then sat down beside his partner. "Starsk, I get what you're trying to do. I really do. But it'll only make it harder when they have to say goodbye."

Instead of opening his soda, he reached behind his head and applied the can to the base of his skull. It hurt for a second and then began to numb the throbbing pain he'd felt there.

"Maybe it won't have to be."

"Have to be what?"

"Have to be goodbye. We could talk to Casey's dad — you said he was flying in today. Cabrillo's got visiting hours, and there's a TV room, even a space for kids to play."

Finding Starsky's optimism jarring, Hutch said, "Oh, that's a swell place to take a kid."

"Hey, you said it yourself: you didn't care how your dad was, you just wanted a chance to spend some time with him."

Hutch switched the can from his neck to his forehead where his headache had relocated. The damp air condensed on the aluminum, and when the breeze blew against the trail of moisture left on his skin, Hutch moaned in appreciation.

"You okay?" Starsky said after finishing his ice cream cone in two large bites.

"Ever thought about getting a bigger car? You know, a nice sedan, four-door."

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

Hutch popped open the 7-Up and took a long draft.

Starsky reached across, took the can out of his hand, and took a drink from it. "There's some aspirin in the glove box if you need 'em."

"Nice of you to bring it up now."

"I'm not a mind-reader, y'know. Want some of this instead?" He offered Hutch the soda.

"Give me that," Hutch muttered and reclaimed it.

His attention had drifted, but when he looked along the beach, Celine and Casey hadn't traveled any further. Casey had found a piece of driftwood and was using it to dig with. And Celine was sitting on the wet sand, propped up on her hands and with her legs stretched out in front of her.

Starsky said, "You don't think they oughtta get their shot at that?"

"I didn't say — "

"If your dad showed up tomorrow, wouldn't you want to — I don't know . . . go shoot some pool, or have a beer, do *something* with him?"

Hutch glanced over, and Starsky met the look and held it, saying, "I know I would."

"What I said last night, Starsk . . . I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Crying in my beer."

"Wine."

"Whine?"

"It's allowed."

Hutch took another slug of soda. "Pretty stupid. Regretting a man I barely even remember."

"That's the difference about us. You miss your old man 'cause you didn't have him long enough to leave you any memories," said Starsky. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "And I miss mine because I did."

Hutch nodded slowly, and emulated Starsky's pose. His hands hanging between his knees, he swirled the last of the soda in the can.

"Is that what this is all about? So they can build some memories?"

"I figured I owed Sally something. I came on a little strong — "

Hutch waved him into silence. "She didn't exactly want to go down easy."

"No . . ." Starsky chuckled, and he touched his nose experimentally. "No, she didn't."

"Is that what changed your mind?"

"Bout what?"

"About them . . . about her," and Hutch pointed down the beach.

"Who said I changed my mind?"

"Oh, c'mon Starsk. A couple hours ago, you were about ready to lock her in a tall tower and throw away the key. The way you went after O'Brien . . ."

Starsky leaned his head back as if about to make a statement on their chance of rain. "Like I said, I came on too strong."

"So what happened when I went to get the car? 'Cause I swear, that had to have been the fastest conversion since Saul changed his initial en route to Damascus."

"Hmm? Oh, nothing much. She cried. Told me how she hadn't seen the kid in over two years . . . It was 'Casey this' and 'Casey that' and all the time she's crying . . ."

Starsky's voice trailed away to nothing, leaving Hutch with the impression the rest of the story had nothing to do with Celine. Or Casey. Or —

"If this is none of my business," he said, "you can tell me to butt out."

Starsky stared at him for so long, Hutch thought he was about to do just that. But then he got up off the table and said, "Let's take a walk."

"What about — "

"They're not going anywhere."

Hutch tossed his empty can into a nearby trash receptacle. His head throbbed once in warning when he stood, but as soon as he and Starsky got to walking, the pain abated. Celine turned, shielding her eyes against pale daylight, and then rose, pulling Casey up with her. Forty feet away, they paced Hutch and his partner.

"Too bad they got stuck with lousy weather," Hutch said, trying to draw Starsky out.

"Could be worse. It could be snowing." Starsky stuffed his hands into his pockets as if he thought that there was still a chance it might. "That's one thing I don't miss. How about you?"

Hutch thought about it for a moment. Frigid air that burned the lungs, tree limbs creaking — sometimes breaking — under winter's heavy load. Waiting for the school bus, sometimes being forced to walk the whole way when it failed to show up. But then, at the weekend, he and Jack would head upstate with Jack's dad . . .

"Not snow for snow's sake. I miss skiing though."

Starsky sidestepped a sprawling mass of kelp that was too high up the beach for the ocean to have left it there. He fell back into step with Hutch. "You ski?"

"Used to."

"You're a man of many talents, Hutch, you know that?"

"And you're the master of evasion," Hutch said, and stooped to pick up a folded picnic plate that stuck up from the sand like a broken tooth.

"That good, huh?"

Down at the water's edge, Casey stormed a flock of gulls. The birds launched themselves skyward, and the little girl ran in circles, arms outstretched, shrieking in delight. Celine applauded her and Hutch found himself smiling. He was starting to believe their detour might even be worth a written reprimand.

"I hate snow," said Starsky.

"I think you mentioned something about that," Hutch said, and he felt his lips twitch again. "About thirty or forty times during the last Winter Olympics."

"I ever tell you why?" At Hutch's inquiring look, Starsky went on. "It was snowing the day I left New York."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. The first time, back when I was just a kid."

"You were, what? Ten? Eleven?" Starsky didn't answer. "Rough time, huh?"

"You better believe it. I cried all the way from Scotch Plains to Columbus, Ohio."

"Jesus, Starsk . . ."

Starsky looked everywhere except at him. "Yeah, that was one helluva ride — I thought we were only going as far as the Bronx Zoo."

At the next garbage can they came to, Hutch discarded the paper plate and some pocket trash. Starsky dropped onto the sand and pulled off his right shoe. He took out his pocketknife and went to work on some mystery goo stuck to the rubber sole.

Hutch stood over him and Celine must have read it as a signal, because when he next checked, she had gathered Casey into her arms and was closing the distance on him. He was in half a mind to tell her to stay back until he'd heard the rest of Starsky's story.

"Here come the ladies," Starsky said. He grabbed onto Hutch's pocket as if about to haul himself up.

Hutch reached down, pulled Starsky to his feet, and was rewarded by a slim smile.

Celine said, "I don't suppose — Can I . . . Could we stop on the way, and get me some cigarettes? Before I have to — "

Starsky blushed, as if he was ashamed he hadn't thought to offer. "I might even have a pack in the glove compartment of my car."

"Next to the aspirin and the bicycle puncture kit," Hutch said, more harshly than he'd meant to. His headache was creeping up on him again, a tide of discomfort that steadily advanced.

It made him feel as if there was a storm approaching.

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Starsky called in their location and the fact they had their prisoner in custody, and then found an even more indirect route to headquarters.

In the back seat with her daughter now, Celine smoked her cigarettes, one after another, leaning over Starsky's shoulder to blow blue trails from his window. Hutch found Starsky's almost empty bottle of aspirin and chugged the contents, dry-swallowing everything except the cotton ball which he tossed back in the glove box.

Casey started Starsky singing 'Ninety-Nine Bottles Of Beer,' screaming with laughter at him whenever he lost count. And Starsky put the blame on Casey every time he took a wrong turn, something Hutch noticed he was doing with surprising frequency considering he claimed to know every mile of road and every shortcut in Bay City.

By the time they made it to the precinct, the next shift had just started, so Starsky had his choice of half a dozen parking spaces. He drew up in front of the main entrance and parked. He and Hutch got out, but Celine hesitated, half in and half out of the car.

Counting on her influence to get her mother moving, Hutch coaxed Casey out, keeping his eye on traffic as he walked her around onto the sidewalk. As far as he knew, nobody had talked to her about the future, or even what had already gone down, but Casey seemed to have a handle on the situation.

She said, "Don't be scared, Mommy. I'm gonna talk to Grandma, and Daddy, and then I bet I can come see you."

She took her mother's outstretched hand and Celine flinched as if she'd just received a static shock. But she recovered quickly, and all in all she looked more lucid now and more composed. Calm, the way that movie heroes were when facing death on screen, Hutch thought.

She settled her free hand on Casey's hair then frowned. To Starsky she said, "I don't suppose there's a hairbrush tucked away in your glove box. She looks a mess."

"She looks like a kid that just spent a day at the beach with her mom," he replied.

Celine ducked her head and focused on the current problem, trying to finger-comb the tangles. "I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. What you did for us . . . for me . . . You have no idea."

Starsky patted her arm and Hutch thought a lot went unsaid with that simple gesture. And to think, Starsky

sometimes accused *him* of being a soft touch . . .

Their delay had given someone at the precinct time to contact all the need-to-knows, so when they finally made it upstairs, there was one hell of a reception committee waiting, with Dobby at its head.

The department shrink was present, as well as someone from the DA's office. And Casey's father had shown up with an entourage that featured his mother, Casey's pediatrician, and a marine assigned as his personal driver. A woman from Child Services took Casey into a side office, while Celine, under the supervision of a doctor from Cabrillo, ended up in an interrogation across the hall.

Dobby caught Hutch's eye and pointed at him, then Starsky, before calling them to order with a beckoning finger. They followed him into his office and only had the chance to give a cursory report before a knock at the door interrupted them and Casey's father was shown in.

Rear Admiral Drummond was something of a surprise. He had to have been a good twenty years older than his ex-wife. He was a man used to command by virtue of his rank, and Hutch wondered what kind of husband that would have made him.

Clearly the man resented having been "handled" by the department's liaison officer, Sergeant Peters. Still, as she showed Drummond into Captain Dobby's office, the sergeant looked close to boiling point herself.

After the most perfunctory of handshakes, Hutch gave up his chair for the admiral and went to stand behind his partner. Starsky didn't even rise, just nodded in acknowledgement as Drummond was introduced. Dobby gave an apologetic cough on Starsky's behalf.

Drummond launched right in. "I understand that you're the men that apprehended my ex-wife. Can I assume you'll be testifying at her trial?"

Hutch was on the point of fudging his way through a diplomatic answer, when Starsky said, "What trial?"

"I believe kidnap is still a federal offense, even in Bay City in this day and age," the admiral said acerbically.

"You have a ransom note? Hey, Hutch — anyone give you a ransom note?"

Prepared to follow Starsky's lead until he came up with a better plan, Hutch said, "Ransom? I don't remember anybody asking for money. Don't think it counts as extortion either." He perched on the arm of Starsky's chair. "Did she make any demands at all?"

"Seems to me," said Starsky, draping a leg over the chair's other arm, "the lady was only taking what was hers."

Hutch cleared his throat excessively.

"Borrowing," Starsky amended. "She just borrowed Casey for a while. Can't say as I blame her. Nice kid."

"Y'know, Starsk, I think Casey had a good time."

"Well, sure she did. Spending a couple days with her mom . . . I bet that turns out to be the high point of her year."

"Mothers and daughters — that's a very special relationship," Hutch pointed out.

"Mothers and sons, too. Don't you love your mother, Admiral Drummond?"

"That's enough!" Drummond said, coming to his feet. "Captain Dobe, I was told that you're a parent. Well, I hope this isn't representative of the degree of authority you exercise in your home *or* your department. You will of course order your men to present a full report at the appropriate time, which this clearly is not."

Dobe stayed in his chair, his hands clasped in front of him, a picture of self-assurance. "*My men* have conducted a thorough investigation of this case, resulting in the swift and safe retrieval of your daughter," he said.

Hutch judged Drummond a fool for attempting to browbeat the captain in his own domain.

"Safe retrieval? My daughter looks like she's been dragged behind a moving vehicle. Her clothes, her hair — "

"We took her to the beach," Starsky cut in. "Tell me, Admiral: when was the last time you jumped ship long enough to take your kid out for the day?"

"Starsky, that's enough," Dobe said firmly. "Admiral Drummond, once the various authorities have assured themselves of your daughter's wellbeing, I'm sure you'll be happy to take her home. In the meantime, I'll have Sergeant Peters take care of your needs." Dobe buzzed through to the squad room, and when Peters knocked and entered, Drummond was delivered into her hands.

Hutch hoped that someday she would be able to forgive the captain.

In the calm that followed Drummond's exit, Hutch poured coffee for them all and passed it around. Dobe loosened his tie, but if anything, he looked even more unyielding than before.

"All right, men. D'you mind filling me in on the purpose of your little shell game?"

"I don't know — "

"Can it, Starsky. You picked up the suspect two hours before you showed up here to book her. Not to mention, you had in your care a seven year old girl who was abducted from her home in the middle of the night. A little girl who's probably going to have nightmares tonight and for weeks to come."

Starsky looked singularly unimpressed. "It's a rotten deal all round, Captain. I'm willing to bet that little girl had more fun in the last two days — in the last two *hours* — than she's seen in two years with that asshole who calls himself her father."

"This isn't the first time we've had this conversation, now is it?" Dobe said wearily. "There was the Harris boy — "

"I gave him bus fare."

"He was a material witness!"

"He was a fourteen year old kid a long way from home!"

Hutch rubbed his forehead, hoping to keep a low profile. The Harris incident was old news, and he'd been more than willing to drive the kid to the Greyhound depot while Starsky was busy with the DA.

"As for you, Hutchinson . . ."

Hutch jerked upright, barely salvaging his coffee. "Who, me?"

"I thought you had more sense. You came to this department highly recommended," and at this point Dobby turned again to Starsky, "though, naturally, some of those opinions were prejudiced, so I put them out of mind."

"Captain, what happened today . . . All we did was give a scared young woman breathing space. Just a little time to get her head together. It was absolutely the right thing to do."

Dobby still looked unconvinced. More than that, he looked deeply worried. He said, "I'm pulling you both off the roster for the next few days — " He raised a finger when it seemed that Starsky was about to voice a protest. "It's not a suspension, or any kind of official reprimand."

Inwardly, Hutch breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing he needed was a short paycheck; as things stood, he and Van were barely scraping by.

"Spend those days at home. Wash the car, brush the dog, build some bookshelves — whatever it is you guys do when you're not in here playing Mother Teresa. But hear this: I'd advise both of you to spend some time reflecting on your future in this department."

He looked first at Starsky, then Hutch, then back at Starsky. Hutch willed his partner not to say another word.

"Are we all done?" Starsky asked after a deathly pause.

"You're done when the paperwork's done. Now, go on . . . get out of here."

Starsky led the way out of the office, but as Hutch put his hand on the door to go through it, Dobby said, "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what's going on in your partner's head?"

Hutch hesitated and then closed the door again. "Sir?" he said and hoped his answer had conveyed the right amount of genuine incomprehension. He backtracked to stand in front of Dobby's desk.

"Hutchinson, sit down."

Hutch sat.

"Starsky's a fine police officer."

"Yes, sir."

"He's got damn good instincts, and there's no cop out there I'd rather have backing me up in a dicey situation."

"Yes, sir."

"But there's some days when he's got more heart than smarts, if you know what I mean."

Hutch let go of some of his tension. "Yes, sir."

Dobby leaned forward and, lowering his voice, he said, "Some days, he reminds me of me."

Hutch decided he didn't know the captain well enough to make some smartass comment about seeing the resemblance. So what he said instead was, "He's a good cop, captain."

"And so are you. I didn't put the two of you together on a whim. Or because your partner's been bugging me

for months. I did a lot of asking around; you can't always believe statistics or the other crap they put in personnel files."

"No, sir."

"Luke Huntley said you were the best rookie he'd ever worked with. Mike Ferguson spoke very highly of you, too."

"I learned a lot from both of them," Hutch said. He left out the fact that much of what he'd learned from 'Iron Mike' Ferguson amounted to a list of things he hoped he never caught himself doing. "But sir, I've learned more from Starsky in the last five weeks than — "

"I'm sure you have, son." Dobe's tone was unexpectedly kind.

Hutch felt like a rookie again — one who, having overslept, had shown up for roll call with his shirt untucked, his hat askew, and an empty holster strapped around his waist.

"But it works both ways," Dobe went on. "Starsky may be lead detective, but you're there to balance him. To be cautious when he's reckless, be the bad cop sometimes, mix things up."

"Yes, sir."

"And when he gets it into his head to try and throw the book out the window?"

Hutch raised his brows.

"Shut the damn window!"

And with that, Dobe sagged back in his chair.

"Now, go help Starsky finish the reports, and then make yourselves scarce. I have to do some kind of do-si-do with our friend the admiral. Personal feelings aside, the man's the victim of a crime. And after this afternoon's stunt, Starsky could've done better than to sit here baiting him."

"Haven't you heard, Captain?" Hutch said as he crossed to the door and opened it. "Word around the precinct is that when it comes to baiting, Starsky's a master."

He slipped through the gap, closing the door hurriedly behind him. It supported his assertion that he never heard the captain yell his name.

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Starsky was beating the keys of his typewriter into submission. Without so much as a backward glance to verify that Hutch was there, he said, "Van called."

Hutch picked up the phone and started dialing. "What'd she say?"

"Someone took a message, left a note." Starsky picked up a wad of three-by-three inch square papers. "Actually, I think it's a novella."

Hutch took the messages — they appeared to have been put in order, last one first — and he sifted through them as he listened to his home phone ringing. At the tenth ring, he hung up.

"This is turning out to be a beautiful day," he said with irony.

"Uh-oh," Starsky said. "Sounds like someone's in deep doo-doo."

"I don't think 'deep' describes it once it's over your ears."

"That bad, huh?"

Hutch started back at the beginning of the sequence.

"Don't forget my big debut," he read. "'Pick up a bottle of wine for later — we seem to be out.'"

Starsky grinned and failed to mask it with the pencil he then clamped between his teeth. "Nah hah'd dat habben?" he said.

"I wonder," Hutch replied. "Oh, you'll like this one: 'Remember to wear a tie.'" He skipped over the next few, reminders of the time he had to be there, and finally arrived at "don't you dare spoil this for me." With a growing sense of apprehension, he pulled out his watch and saw he'd missed his deadline by an hour.

Starsky flung the pencil down, linked his hands behind his head and said, "Okay, I give. So what's the big occasion?"

"Something with her job," Hutch said, nonspecific by design. "I'm supposed to be there."

"Her job? Oh, the department store. What's she gonna do? Set some kind of record with her sticker gun?"

"Not exactly. She's . . ."

*Half-naked on a catwalk, modeling the outfit that she'd worn the night before, but this time for a crowd of strangers . . . Her moment in the spotlight — the acclaim and the appreciative stares — not for her role as someone's wife . . . nor as the mother of a bunch of children yet to be . . .*

"Ah, shit. I should've just told her 'no'."

"No, as in you can't go?"

"No as in don't take the job, we don't need the money."

"Not that it's any of my business, but do you?"

"Only every dime," Hutch said, fixing on a bright smile. "I've been known to toss pennies around like birdseed."

"Sorry."

"For what? You weren't prying and we're not exactly destitute."

Starsky pulled the report form out of the typewriter and admired his handiwork. "Wanna check it over?" he said and handed it to him

Hutch scanned it quickly. Then he retrieved Starsky's cast-off pencil, wiping the spit onto his pant leg. "It'd be a lot easier if you left the paper in the machine. I could type in the corrections."

"Be easier if you typed it in the first place," Starsky grumbled with his usual sagacity. "Then there wouldn't be anything to correct."

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The only break they caught in the remainder of their shift occurred when Casey staged an all-too-brief escape and tracked them down. She found her way into the squad room via Dobe's office, so Hutch was the first to spot her peering around the door. He was thrown back to that morning and a single green eye peeping through a narrow opening.

He smiled to show that she was welcome to come in.

Starsky, in the middle of changing the ribbon in the typewriter, said "What're you grinning about? Think you can do better?" Hutch pointed, and Starsky turned around. "Hey, look who came to see me."

Casey swung the door open and came toward them. She seemed shy all of a sudden, absolutely out of her depth. He beckoned her over and she came, but not before she'd thrown a look over her shoulder as if she thought that she was being followed.

"Daddy had to go and do some papers or something," she said. "The lady policeman said I couldn't go along, but she said I could look around."

"She did, huh," Hutch said, with a strong suspicion that Sergeant Peters had fully intended for Casey to find them. He made a mental note to ask her the next time he ran into her at Huggy's.

"Daddy's mad, you know," Casey said solemnly.

"But not at you, right?" Starsky asked.

Casey shook her head, but she still looked doubtful.

Gently, Hutch drew her to him and she laid an arm over the back of his chair.

"Mommy's in a lot of trouble, isn't she?"

Hutch glanced at Starsky before he answered, "Your mommy has to . . . go to the hospital again. You know about the hospital?" Casey nodded. "But they're gonna help her to get better, so it's not a bad thing, is it?"

Starsky said, "And when she's doing better, I bet they let you come visit her — "

Casey shook her head. "Daddy says I'm going to go with him when he goes back."

"Goes back," Hutch said. "To Washington, you mean?"

"Grandma was crying, but Daddy said . . ." Casey wrinkled her forehead. "Daddy said the situation was untenable — Un-ten-something."

"Untenable?"

"I think. That's bad, huh," the little girl said miserably.

"Not bad," Hutch hastily reassured her. "It just means something isn't working. That it can't go on the way it's been going."

"But it's okay," said Starsky brightly. "You love your daddy, right?" When Casey shrugged, he said, "And I know he loves you a lot. He told us — right, Hutch?"

"Well sure he loves her, Starsk. I know I'd love to have a little girl like Casey."

"Yeah, me too. All dimples and curls. And did you see the way she charged those birds? Some o' them were bigger than she is, and she just ran right in, brave as a lion."

Casey squirmed and blushed like she was unused to receiving compliments.

Starsky warmed to his theme. "I bet a kid as brave as her likes lots of adventures. The past coupla days were an adventure, right? And going to D.C., that's gonna be a whole other kind of adventure . . ."

She still looked uncertain, but nonetheless stood more upright. "An adventure?"

Hutch placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "All kinds of things to see and do in Washington. It's our nation's capital — "

"I know that, silly."

"Just think," Starsky said. "You'll be walking down the same streets where George Washington lived — "

"And Abraham Lincoln?"

Starsky snapped his fingers. "That's right, Abraham Lincoln. And you know what? I bet he used to take his little boy for walks around the city, and to the park, and — "

The squad room door burst open.

"Casey!"

Starsky stood up quickly, and by instinct Hutch put Casey in back of him with one hand as his other went straight to his .38.

Drummond, already halfway across the room, stopped abruptly. His eyes made the short trip from Hutch's gun hand to his face, and then he smiled.

"I've seen bigger closer, and in the heat of battle, while you were still had your mouth around your mother's tit," he said.

Before Hutch could respond, Starsky said, "I don't know how they do things in D.C., but around here we don't use that kind of talk in front of little kids."

Hutch uncurled his fingers and released his gun butt, before stepping to one side so Drummond and his daughter could see one another.

"Casey, come here," Drummond said, but not unkindly. Casey dragged her feet, but eventually made it over to her father.

She cocked her head to one side and looked up at him. "Daddy, can we go for walks when we get to Washington?"

Drummond looked like he had just been propositioned by a hooker, his shock was so clearly manifest. "Can we do what?"

"Go for walks. You know, just like a family. Like Abraham Lincoln . . ." Casey's voice trailed off uncertainly. She tried another tack. "We learned about him at school. He had a little boy, and he died and Mr. Lincoln was so sad because he missed his little boy — "

In a surprising move, Drummond bent suddenly and picked his daughter up off her feet. Casey curled her arm around the back of his neck. Then, without another word to either detective, Drummond turned on his heel and walked out.

A second stretched and became five, then Starsky said, "Cold-hearted bastard."

Hutch let his locked joints relax then scooted his chair back into its proper place. "We don't know that," he said.

Sitting himself down, Starsky asked, "Is that what you're gonna tell yourself tonight when you're done being a police officer for the day? Or . . . how about when you're holding your baby for the first time, and feeling what you're gonna feel. Is that how you're gonna remember Drummond feeling, or seeming, or looking? Is it?"

Startled by the accusatory tone, Hutch said, "You said it yourself. We're police officers. We're not judges. And you can't sit there and tell me Casey won't be better off in a- a- a more stable environment — "

"With her father — "

"Yes, with her father!"

Starsky stared at him a long time, and Hutch couldn't bring himself to look away.

Ultimately, it was Starsky who relented, saying, "Yeah. Well, just keep telling yourself what the kid needs is a — what did you say — 'stable environment.' Me? I got work to do."

And with that, they settled into an uneasy truce of silence.

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It was six o'clock before they got done with reports, by which time the hint of impending conflict had faded away. Hutch figured there was no point in him going to Lombard's. And knowing Van would be out late — she'd said something about a party after — he found he wasn't in too much of a hurry to go home.

Starsky had been sneaking glances at him for at least the last half hour, and even brought him coffee without being asked, so Hutch knew he had to be still wearing his bleak mood on his face. When Starsky volunteered to take a stack of obsolete files down to RandI, Hutch knew it was time to put his foot down.

"If you've no place better to be, go right ahead. I'm done for the day. Let's go see if my credit's any good at Huggy's"

Starsky stared at him, clearly considering the invitation. He said, "I'll go one better. How about I return last night's favor?"

"What — the use of your couch to puke on?"

"Hey, that's a lie," Starsky said and he gave an aristocratic sniff. "I saved it for the john. I meant I'll buy you dinner."

"Oh, yeah? What'd you have in mind?" Hutch cleared off his desk and stuck two chewed up pencils in the cup on Starsky's side.

"How about Italian?"

"Too heavy."

"Whaddaya want? Soup and a salad? Forget it." He looked thoughtful for a second. "I know . . . we could go Mexican."

"I was thinking *Athena's*, off the PCH," Hutch said, already picturing one of their village salads, topped with feta, kalatini olives and a drizzling of oil. "And I can pay my own way, thanks."

"Go Dutch? If you insist. But . . ." and Starsky grinned wickedly, "if you think I'm going Greek on your account, you got another think coming."

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Starsky still insisted on a quick trip down to RandI and came back looking less than happy. When Hutch called him on it, he said, "They left already."

By Hutch's calculation, 'they' meant 'she', and 'she' had probably been at Cabrillo for at least an hour before Starsky noticed. He said, "Starsk, it's past six. What did you expect — a long goodbye?"

"You'd think somebody — the doctor — somebody would've wanted our side of the story."

"They've got our side of the story. Or they will have, as soon as Dobey signs off on our reports, and that's assuming they even want our opinion."

"What do you mean?" Starsky said. "Of course they're gonna want our opinions. We've got a better idea of Sally's state of mind than they do, that's for damn sure. She misses her kid . . . and they're *surprised* she acts a little crazy?"

"We're not doctors, Starsk."

"No, we're people living in the real world. We know how shit goes down. And there's nothing wrong with Sally that a few days with her kid every now and then won't fix."

Hutch could see no sense in arguing; Starsky had clearly made his mind up. Changing topic he said, "So, you still taking me to dinner?"

It was a weak deflection at best, but Starsky fell for it. "Thought we were going Dutch," he said reprovingly.

"I hope that's not how you treat all your *other* dates," Hutch said. He put his jacket on and headed for the door, calling over his shoulder, "I'm surprised you ever get laid."

Starsky followed him, protesting. He regaled Hutch with lurid stories of his many conquests the whole way to the restaurant.

Faced with the extensive menu, Hutch picked child-sized portions of everything he said that Starsky ought to try, and throughout dinner they passed their plates back and forth across the table.

In deference to his head, Hutch drank only water, but their waitress suggested ouzo and when she'd explained exactly what it was, Starsky said he really ought to try that too.

"Just to get the whole . . . ambience," he said as if to justify himself.

"Ambience, huh?" Hutch said later, ruefully, as he helped Starsky climb the stairs. It was the least he could do; he'd let him get in this condition, after all. That was twice in two days, too, Hutch thought. Some partner

he was turning out to be.

Starsky raised his head from Hutch's shoulder. "Wha'?"

"Nothing. Come on, three more steps."

The "three more" proved to be three up, four back, four up again, but at least they made it to the door without an accident. Hutch used Starsky's key and pushed the door wide open with his foot. Starsky seemed almost to be asleep on his feet.

Hutch shook him gently. "Hey, buddy. We're home."

"Nice of you to take me in," Starsky replied, and in an eerie echo of Hutch's own thoughts, he added, "Tha's twice in two days."

Hutch half dragged him over to the couch and dropped him. "No, *your* home."

"You said that already. Now I'm *hearing* double."

Hutch squat down in front of Starsky. "Hey . . . hey, look at me."

Starsky lifted his head and said, "Wha'," slipping the word out on a gust of alcoholic air.

Hutch rocked back on his heels. "How about some coffee? Lots and lots of coffee." He used that as an excuse to get up and walk away. When he checked, though, Starsky was still sitting more or less upright, his head held in his hands.

Hutch set the coffee brewing, and while he waited, he washed up a few cups in the sink and emptied Starsky's kitchen trash. He felt the need to make amends, being sorry without actually saying the word until such time as Starsky was coherent. And, besides, he'd have to deliver a whole shitload of apologies when he got to his own home later; he had to keep something in reserve.

But Van was not the problem at that moment, Starsky was. Or, at least, the man that currently wore Starsky's face and body — wore it like a Goodwill suit, used and crumpled out of shape. In Hutch's experience, Starsky was at most a two-beers-a-night man, if he drank at all. Not a lightweight, but he didn't touch the hard stuff out of preference, he'd once said.

Hutch was jolted rudely to the here and now when Starsky's phone rang. Before he could get the one hanging in the kitchen, Starsky picked up in the other room.

He couldn't make out specifics of the conversation, but Hutch heard a surprised and then excited Starsky talking up a storm, and he shook his head in sympathy for whoever was on the receiving end.

Then he heard his name thrown into the mix. He strained to pick up more, but that one reference was the only word that registered. He poured coffee — black, with lots of sugar — and carried it through to the other room, just in time to hear, "Okay . . . Bye-bye . . . Don't be a stranger now." Then Starsky hung up.

"Hey, is that coffee?"

"Think you can handle some?" Hutch passed the cup over, making sure that Starsky had a firm grip on it before he let go.

"Who, me?" Starsky took a short sip. "Hot!"

"Yeah, hot. It's coffee."

Starsky made a face. "There's too much sugar."

"You like sugar."

Starsky wrinkled his nose, but he drank the coffee anyway, then held his cup out, silently beseeching. Hutch fetched him some more.

"You'll make someone a bee-yoo-tiful wife someday, you know that," Starsky said, midway through the second cup.

"Drink your coffee."

Starsky finished it and set his cup down. "Oh, that reminds me," he said. "Wife."

"Wife?"

"Yours. She just called here, looking for you."

"What!"

Starsky smiled. "She sounded — Hey, is she mad at me?"

"At you?"

"Yeah, she was yelling."

"What'd she — " Hutch sat down on the couch beside him. "No. Scratch that. I don't think I want to know."

Starsky patted his knee. "Look on the bright side. At least she didn't kick you out."

Hutch felt hope begin to seep into his melancholy mood. "She didn't?"

"Nah . . . you'd have to be there for her to do that."

Hutch reached for the cup on the table in front of him, about to take a drink, and then he noticed it was empty. "Oh," he said, and put it down again.

"Women," Starsky said, as if he knew what the hell he was talking about.

Hutch felt another headache in the making. "No," he replied, "Just the one."

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At around eleven, when Starsky had finally stopped jabbering about the Mets, the state of the economy, and how he'd learned to boost cars from a skinny pimp named Huggy Bear, the phone rang for a second time. With Starsky having slipped into a light doze, Hutch picked up the phone, surprised to hear their captain speaking.

Naturally, the captain was just as surprised as he was when he said, "You've reached the home of David Starsky. Please don't leave a message; he can't handle the commitment."

"Hutchinson? Is that you?"

"Uh, yes, sir. Sorry about that."

"I take it you're enjoying your night off," Dobby said.

"We went to dinner, and I- I — " Hutch looked to the TV screen for rescue. "We were watching a movie. Godzilla, I think . . ."

"I was going to call you next," Dobby said, freeing Hutch from the opportunity to talk himself into a deeper hole. "I just had an idea that the two of you would want to know: Celine LaBeouf passed tonight."

Hutch caught the name and the word "passed" and for a moment he blanked. She'd passed what? Some kind of test of competency? That had to be good news . . .

Dobby voice rolled on. "They'll be an inquest, naturally, but they're calling it a suicide."

"Suicide?"

"Are you all right, detective?"

"Sorry, sir. She *died*? She *killed* herself? How'd she — How the hell — Tell me, captain, how does something like that happen at a hospital?" Starsky rolled over on the couch and kicked a pillow off. Hutch hushed himself then said, "How'd it happen?"

"In the restroom. Seems she stuffed handfuls of toilet paper in her mouth . . ." Dobby cleared his throat noisily. "Initial reports are calling cause of death asphyxiation."

"Asphyxiation." Hutch glanced at Starsky who at that moment had his face pressed into the back of the couch. Gently, so as not to wake him, Hutch pulled on his shoulder and rolled him over onto his back. Remembering the phone, he said, "She suffocated herself?"

"That's how it looks. Now, listen, Hutchinson, the other reason I was calling. I had a . . . meeting with the admiral, and I wanted you to know, I don't think you'll have a problem with him. Either of you."

"Thank you, sir," Hutch said, though he was barely listening. Whatever it was sounded good. "Is there anything else?"

"Take a few days anyway. Stick with your partner, if he'll let you. See if you can't put right whatever's ailing him of late."

Hutch rubbed his forehead, feeling vaguely bewildered. "Sir, about my being here . . ."

Dobby said, "Son, there's two things in this world a cop ought to be able to count on. And that's his wife, for one, and his partner."

"That's, uh, good advice," Hutch replied meaninglessly, just for something else to say.

"You better believe it. My former partner taught me that. Except he used to say, his partner and his dog."

"His dog?" Hutch slumped on the couch and started wondering if someone had slipped him something with his water at the restaurant. This conversation kept on turning, twisting unexpectedly; one or other of them had to have been drinking and it surely wouldn't be his captain.

"His dog. Of course, he only said that because it aggravated his wife," then Dobby chuckled. Hutch yanked the phone away from his ear — had everybody on the planet tied one on except him?

Cautiously he said again, "His dog?"

"Ugly thing. Dalmation. I always used to think that dog was laughing at me," Dobby answered, fondly, but sadly, like every reminiscence was underpinned by memories less sweet.

Floundering, Hutch said, "Is there anything else, sir?"

"No. No, I think I'll take myself on home now," the captain said. "I've shared the bad news, now it's your turn."

The captain hung up. Hutch held onto the receiver just a moment more than necessary, gathering his thoughts, and then he set it down. The tiny *ting* as he replaced it must have reached into his partner's dreaming like the banging of a gong; Starsky jerked awake and sat up fast.

Seeing Hutch, he swung his legs around to sit up properly then rubbed his eyes. "That Van?" he asked, and then, "What time is it?"

"A little after eleven."

"Gotta whizz."

Starsky ambled to the bathroom, walking like a cowboy too long in the saddle. Hutch heard him pee and then a clatter as the seat dropped down.

"Ever consider closing the door," he said.

"Primal pleasures," Starsky answered loudly. "Three things in life that bring a man instant gratification . . ."

"I don't want to know."

"That's taking a leak, taking a dump, and getting off," Starsky said.

"In that order?"

The toilet flushed and Starsky came back out. "Depends on who I'm with," he said and tipped Hutch a wink.

"Well," Hutch said, "thanks for sharing. I guess two outta three ain't bad."

"I might try to steal your virtue, but I don't think Van would ever let you live it down," Starsky said and patted Hutch's arm in passing. "You want coffee?"

"No. No coffee."

From the kitchen, Starsky asked, "So was that her again?"

"Who? Uh, no . . ."

"You ever going home?"

"You want me to leave?"

Starsky stuck his head around the door. "Nope." He vanished again.

Hutch rearranged the sofa cushions — Starsky was a lot like Van, liking everything just so — and then sat down, dislodging them again.

Hutch took the cup that Starsky brought in from the kitchen. He sniffed then took a sip. It must have been the same pot he'd made earlier that night.

"How can you drink that stuff," he said when Starsky took it back and drank it down. "Leave a spoon in there, it'd dissolve."

"Cast iron stomach," Starsky answered and he patted his belly. "Besides, it was there." After a pause in which he drained his cup and stared at the TV, Starsky said, "So how'd the movie end?"

"No idea," Hutch replied, but he took it as a cue, crossing to the TV and turning it off. "Starsk, that was Captain Dobey."

"On TV?"

"On the phone."

Starsky frowned. "About today - are we suspended?"

"Not suspended, but you're right: it's got something to do with today." Hutch hesitated. Starsky looked at him expectantly. "It's about Celine."

"She liked to be called Sally," Starsky reminded him. His expression was grim.

"Starsk, Sally — Wait a minute . . . you said 'liked'?"

"Well, she's dead, isn't she. Can't say someone 'likes' something when they're dead. Different tense. *Amo, amas, amat, amabam, amabas, amabat . . .*"

Starsky delivered his lines in a level tone of voice, but Hutch kept close watch on his eyes, waiting for an indication of what was going on in his head.

"Remember Latin in school, Hutch? I never could keep that stuff straight. Present indicative, split the infinitive, and all that crap. Used to think it was funny they called the past 'the imperfect'? Wonder why that is . . ."

Hutch said simply, truthfully, "I don't remember."

"It's true, y'know. The past's not perfect. Never is."

"No . . ."

"Think that's why she did it?"

"Maybe. I don't know, Starsk."

"Or maybe her future looked even worse."

Hutch had no answer for him. He wasn't even going to try to fake one.

Seated on the couch, Starsky hugged a pillow to him. "I really thought things'd turn out okay. Stupid, or what? Thought she believed me when I told her it'd be okay." He let out a gusty sigh. "Now why'd she go and do a thing like that?"

"You ever read *To Kill A Mockingbird*?"

"Saw the movie. Gregory Peck, Brock Peters. Robert Duvall's first movie." He sat upright as if struck by a sudden realization. "Oh, no. Don't you pull that crap on me."

"What?"

"Try telling me it's better this way, that's what. D'you think Casey's gonna think it's better this way too? Growing up without a mom. Not just wondering *if* she'll ever see her again, but knowing for certain."

Hutch put his head in his hands, thinking about how well Starsky saw right through him. And knowing just how blind he himself had been. "The wrong parent," he said aloud.

"What?"

"You were so fired up about this case, and I kept thinking it had something to do with losing your dad."

Starsky stood and took a step away from him. "What about it? Yeah, I missed him. Wouldn't want any kid to have to go through that. Kids need their dads. But I turned out okay."

"Kids need their moms too, in a perfect world, though. Right?"

Starsky held his arms crossed over his chest, like he had to do that or he'd take a swing at something, probably his partner's head. He said, "I told you that woman was a whacko nutjob. Turns out I was right."

"Is that why you were mad at her when we caught this case? 'Cause you thought she was crazy . . . dangerous?"

No answer.

"Because she broke up the happy little home?"

There was a flicker of *something*, a fleeting ripple of emotion across Starsky's face. Hutch dug a little deeper.

"Or was it because Casey didn't get to have a say in how it all went down?"

"She's just a kid. Kids aren't supposed to have a say. That's why they have grownups to take care of 'em."

"Parents, you mean. Family."

"Yeah. Family." Starsky uncrossed his arms as, visibly, he forced himself to relax. "Family's important."

"But we don't get to pick them, do we?"

"Are we all done here, Sigmund?" Starsky said. "'Cause I don't know where you're going with this, and I'd really like to get some sleep tonight, if you don't mind."

Hutch could see that he was getting nowhere. He said, "I thought, maybe if you talked about it. Remember what you told me on the beach? Jesus, Starsky, think about it; you were practically *kidnapped* . . ."

Starsky looked suddenly as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Is that all? I came out here with my aunt and uncle. My family. And they treated me just fine."

"But no one told you what was going on. You cried the whole way — "

"I was a little kid. Kids cry. Don't read nothing into that that isn't there."

Hutch held his hands up. "Okay, I give up. This was just another case. I'm seeing stuff that isn't there. You're perfectly okay with all of this. Now, if it's all right with you, I'll call a cab and get out of your hair."

Hutch got as far as dialing the first three numbers before Starsky reached over and cut him off. Hutch put the receiver back in place, following his partner to the couch and sitting down.

Solemnly, Starsky said, "This isn't some reverse psychology thing, y'know. And I don't have to tell you squat."

Hutch took the safest course; he nodded.

"And anyway, it's no big deal."

Starsky paced a shallow groove into the carpet before sitting down. He chose the armchair, facing Hutch, but with the low table between them. Hutch couldn't help but see the arrangement as defensive.

"After Pop died, Ma was . . . I used to hear her crying in the middle of the night. Every night, these . . . sounds. More than crying, almost screaming, only she must've had her face down in the pillow. So I used to go into her room and lay down on the bed with her. No big deal."

"So anyway, my aunt and uncle were staying over. My uncle used to pick up cars sometimes, drive 'em coast to coast. That night was just like every other night. The next morning, all the grownups were acting . . . weird. I didn't get it all at once. What my aunt and uncle must've thought. And later, well I could've understood it if I'd been older - thirteen, fourteen, y'know? But I was just a little kid . . . See?"

Hutch held his reactions in check, certain that a word or even the slightest twitch from him would put the cork back in the bottle.

"So they took mom to dinner that night, and must've said stuff to her. The next thing I know, we're heading for the zoo, me and them, only we end up driving all the way to California."

"We stopped for the night just outside of Columbus, and my aunt gave me this letter Ma'd written. It said that Aunt Cecile from Queens was moving in so there wouldn't have been room for all of us and it was for the best if I spent some time out west. Said it'd only be for a little while then she'd come get me."

With utmost caution, Hutch said, "But you figured out that she — that it wasn't true."

"Well, sure I did." Starsky flashed him a smile. "Just took me a month or two of her not showing up. My cousin Bernie filled in the blanks. O' course, he had to explain to me what sex was, before he could explain what kind of pervert I was, sleeping with my ma."

"You said it yourself, Starsk. You were just a little kid. Your aunt and uncle overreacted, sure, but — "

"Goddammit, don't you get it?" Starsky burst out. "I don't give a fuck what they thought and that's not even what burns me up. Ma . . . She let 'em take me, like I didn't even matter. Said goodbye like we'd be seeing each other in a few hours. And she never once tried to come and get me!"

Understanding came upon Hutch suddenly, with clarity so great he almost smacked his forehead with his fist. Celine — crazy, maybe, with all her faults and flaws — had done, or tried to do, all the things that Starsky's mother hadn't dared.

Starsky and his mother always seemed to have a close relationship, as far as Hutch could tell. But underneath it all he now saw years of lingering resentment. And there must have been something else besides, to turn the Starsky boy-that-was into the man he now knew as his partner.

Starsky said, "Sally loved her kid so much, she put it all on the line. She must've figured, when she blew it, it'd be years before they'd see each other, 'cause Casey's dad . . . you know damn well he wouldn't have let her visit. All those years of missing Casey . . . Sally couldn't take it."

"What about your mom, Starsk?" Hutch felt as if he'd stepped into pool of unknown depths, where one wrong step would send him plunging to the bottom. "You don't think she ever felt that way? Like it was hopeless, like her heart would break — "

"She had Nicky. Sometimes I think Nicky saved her," Starsky answered softly. Even softer, he said, "And sometimes I hated his guts."

"But not anymore."

"Hate Nicky? Are you kidding? Me and him, we're thick as thieves."

"So how did you work things out with your mom?"

"I grew up. And then this guy, a cop, named John Blaine — Damn, I didn't introduce you yet? What'm I thinking? You're gonna love this guy."

"Starsk, your mom . . ."

"Oh, yeah. Well, I got a little out of hand when I hit my teens. Let's just say that John, he turned me round. Helped me get my head on straight. He was always there for me to talk stuff through . . . a lot like you."

Hutch hid a smile behind his hand then said, "Well, you still need a lot of work."

"It's been said," Starsky acknowledged. "So, John . . . he stuck me on a bus and sent me home one summer. Ma and me, we were like strangers, 'cause we only ever wrote to one another since I got to Bay City. And trust me, Ma couldn't write a letter like the ones that Sally wrote — she doesn't have it in her."

"All she'd ever said, over and over, was that it was for the best and, later, that she didn't have a choice. But I'd always figured she was feeding me a line. I had to see her again to figure out that's what she really believed. I used to feel sorry for myself, like I was a little kid lost in a cold hard world. Poor Ma, she was more lost than I ever was. Couldn't hate that, now, could I? Couldn't blame her anymore."

Starsky hauled himself out of his armchair and walked across the room to a low bureau. From one of the cupboards, he pulled out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses then poured two large shots. As if knowing he was under scrutiny, he turned to look at Hutch, then, very deliberately, screwed the cap back on the bottle and put it away.

He brought the drinks back over, handing one to Hutch before he sat down, this time on the couch.

"What are we drinking to?" Hutch asked.

Starsky stared at his glass, rolling it between his palms. "Maybe I'm just thirsty," he said.

"Yeah? And maybe one day you'll take my advice and buy a four-door."

Starsky kicked his foot lightly and said, "Does the phrase 'cold day in hell' mean anything to you?" Then abruptly, like the slamming of a door, his aspect changed. "I could say something corny, like 'to moms that tried, and moms that died . . .'"

"And the kids that survived in spite of it?" Hutch offered.

"Sounds like an epitaph," Starsky said gloomily. "I was aiming for something more uplifting."

"You don't think that's uplifting? Look at Casey. Don't you get a feeling that, in spite of everything, she's gonna turn out okay?"

"Well . . . yeah."

"And you turned out okay."

"Still need a lot of work," Starsky reminded him. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You and your mom — you're pretty close."

Feeling a prickle of suspicion, Hutch said, "Yeah. But we had it pretty easy, too." The night before replayed itself in Hutch's mind. He surely hadn't said anything to put his childhood under any kind of microscope . . . had he?

Starsky's gaze was piercing, like the man could see right through him. Hutch looked away, down at his glass, then over at the window.

Starsky said, "I know — "

"What?" Hutch said sharply.

"We could drink to future generations. *Our* kids."

Hutch released a trapped breath. "Our kids?"

"Sure. Here's to the kids we bring into the world," Starsky said, and he raised his glass. "May we not fuck 'em up as badly as our folks did theirs." And with that, he clinked his glass against Hutch's and tossed back the whiskey in three gulps.

Hutch drank because it was expected, but when he'd finished coughing, he said, "That was meant to be uplifting?"

Starsky looked surprised. "What, you're not gonna try and be the best dad that ever was? Think Van is gonna sit down and plan ninety-nine ways to mess up your kids?"

Hutch said simply, "I plan on being the kind of dad that my kids are gonna to point out in the audience of the school play and say 'that's my dad' like they're bragging about it." His face burned and he didn't know if it was from the whiskey, or —

"You're blushing," Starsky said. "You're embarrassed? What for? I think that's terrific."

"You do? It doesn't sound . . . sappy?" Hutch said, relieved, unaware that he'd been seeking Starsky's endorsement, until it had been given. "And what about you, Starsk? What do you want?"

Immediately, Starsky said, "I want to go to Sally's funeral."

"Yeah . . . me too."

"But first, I really want to get some sleep."

"Good idea."

"I want you to go home. Maybe if Van's calmed down you can — you know — start on your plan."

Hutch brightened. "Yeah, I think I can do that." He got up and found his jacket.

"You can take my car."

The keys, left on the table, flew across the room. Hutch dropped them from a fumbled left-hand grab, then bent and picked them up. "I'll bring it back tomorrow."

"Not too early. I wanna sleep in."

"Sure." Hutch headed for the door, and as he opened it, the last of Starsky's demands rang across the room.

"And tomorrow, I want to know everything there is to know about Van's job . . ."

The end.