

Ripples

by Keri Mera

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Friday

"Their demands were absolutely ludicrous. Compensation. Accident prevention plans. Safety training courses! Basically they want me to foot the bill every time they're too clumsy to keep their hands out of the machinery. Needless to say, I sent them packing. Told them to find themselves another job if they didn't like it. Workers these days. Think they run the company. It's the unions, of course. Those long-haired commies are stirring up trouble everywhere. But they're not going to get away with it. Not while I'm in charge."

Richard Hutchinson brings down his fork and spears a piece of chicken like a hunter going for the kill.

"Please, Mr. Starsky," Margaret says, "have some more salad."

"David. Please call me David."

"David. Of course." She pushes the bowl in my direction and I know I have no choice. I take a spoonful of what Hutch knows I call rabbit food. He's sitting opposite me, and I don't need to look at him to know that he's smirking.

For a minute or so, only the sound of busy cutlery fills the room. The enormous dining table is matched by a massive sideboard of polished mahogany. Heavy drapes hide the windows. When no one speaks, it's very quiet.

"So what's the deal with Kathy?" Hutch finally says. "I thought she was going to be here."

"Oh, she *is* here," Margaret says. "She's been here since Tuesday. But she took the boys to see Helen this morning, and now she can't get back because of the snow. She called just before you got here. Helen," she adds for my benefit, "is a friend of hers. She lives in Chisholm near the border where they had the worst of the snow. Apparently half the roads are still blocked."

I look around for telltale signs of the presence of small children—toys, kids' books, clothes. There's nothing. The place looks immaculate, not an ornament out of place. It's like a picture in one of those magazines they have at the dentist's with titles like *Homes of Today* or *Living the Life* or something like that.

"She wouldn't be in this situation if she'd listened to me." Richard sets down his glass with a thump. "I told her there was going to be more snow today. Ridiculous idea to drive up north today. It would serve her right if she got stuck in a snowdrift overnight."

That seems a little harsh to me. After all, she has three kids with her, and the youngest is, what, eighteen months?

"I'm sure she'll be all right," Hutch says reasonably. "She's doing the right thing, staying at Helen's until the roads are cleared."

"She's as stubborn as a mule," Richard says. "It's the same thing with this divorce. She's determined to go through with it. I told her she's making the biggest mistake of her life. She has no job, no income. I told her she'd be an idiot to leave him. I—"

"Geoff cheated on her," Hutch reminds him. "For months, apparently. Christ, you can't blame her for kicking him out."

"Please, Kenneth," Margaret says tartly, "don't swear."

The look on Hutch's face is priceless, and I almost choke on a lettuce leaf. At first he looks as if he's going to say something, then he changes his mind and sticks a forkful of roast potato into his mouth, instead. It's my turn to smirk.

We got here less than an hour ago, and already things aren't going too well. For one thing we were late for dinner. The recent dump of snow put a whole bunch of planes into a waiting loop while they cleared the runways, and then we had to spend an hour in line waiting for a cab. When we finally got here, we didn't even get a chance to take our bags upstairs before Margaret steered us to the table.

Hutch's dad has a thing about eating at seven o'clock sharp.

Margaret takes a sip from her glass and turns to me. "Kenneth tells us you're quite recovered from your terrible ordeal, Mr— uh, David," she says.

"Uh, yeah, I'm back to normal. Good as new." I smile at her. She's tall and slim, and has fine flyaway hair. The last time I saw her it was almost as bright as Hutch's and done up in a sweeping hairdo. This time it's short and permed and has strands of white threading through a much darker shade of gold.

The smile I get back doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I expect you'll be looking for a place of your own soon," she says.

She catches me by surprise. *Place of my own?* I glance at Hutch, but he's as perplexed as I am.

"Mom," he says, "what are you talking about?"

"Oh, I thought now that you're both back at work and Mr— David is so much better.... Of course, it's very generous of you to put David up for so long. I was saying to the Talbots only yesterday that—"

"What your mother is trying to say," Richard breaks in, "is that surely Mr. Starsky will want his own place again before long."

Hutch's forehead darkens in an alarming manner. "What do you mean, his own place? The house *is* Starsky's place. It's *our* house, Starsky's as much as mine. We bought it together, I told you that."

"You told us you paid for it, Kenneth. You said—"

"I put down the deposit. Starsky is dealing with the mortgage payments. It's a fair deal. Christ, did you really think it was *my* house? And that Starsky was some sort of a house guest?"

Actually, I think it's kinda funny. But Hutch doesn't seem to think so.

"I'm sorry, Kenneth," Margaret says smoothly. "Property values have gone up so much lately. I simply assumed that with your income—"

"What about my income? It's the same as Starsky's. We're doing the same job. Why would you assume mine's higher than his?"

I can hear the weariness behind his irritation. Coming on the tail end of a disturbing case, this weekend isn't exactly what I'd call a perfect way to unwind. I catch his eye.

Drop it, I tell him. It ain't worth it.

He makes a face at me, but doesn't pursue the subject. He knows I'm right. There's no need to antagonize the family on our first evening in Duluth. What we came here to say will put enough noses out of joint.

ooOOOoo

After dinner we pick up our bags and follow Margaret Hutchinson up the wide sweeping staircase to the second floor.

"I put you in your old room," she tells Hutch on the way up. "David, you won't mind taking the green room, will you? I know it's not very convenient for the bathroom, but—"

"Mom!" Hutch says. "You're not asking Starsky to stay in that cupboard, are you? You can't swing a cat around, and the window is painted shut. You can hardly breathe in there."

"I know, Kenneth. I'm sorry, but Kathleen and the boys are in the West rooms, and you know how much your father hates it when someone stays in the room above the study. He says he can't concentrate when he hears someone walking around up there."

"Well, why can't he stay in the blue room?"

How about in your room, Hutch? I almost say.

Margaret doesn't miss a beat. "Elena already got it ready for the O'Connors. You know how much they adore the view out the back."

"You said the O'Connors weren't coming until next weekend—"

"Hey, it's okay," I cut in before Hutch can stir up a scene, and flash a smile at Margaret. "I can sleep anywhere. Don't worry, I'll be fine." After all, it's only for three nights. Fewer, if Hutch decides to drop the bombshell sooner.

I notice that this time she doesn't smile back.

ooOOOoo

The green room is another floor up and overlooks the neighbor's driveway. There's a single bed pushed against the wall, a couple of wardrobes, and a chest of drawers covered with odds and ends. Hutch is right, the window won't budge.

The room looks perfectly all right to me. Hutch and me, we used to squeeze into a space much smaller than this when we were still welcome at my ma's place in Brooklyn. The room isn't the problem. The problem is that it's a floor, a flight of stairs, and an endless hallway away from Hutch's.

Three nights without him. I sigh.

I leave the door ajar to let in some air, dump my bag on the floor, and toe off the boots Hutch talked me into wearing. Then I stretch out on the bed and wait.

Sure enough, two minutes later, the door moves silently inward and Hutch sneaks into the room. He shuts the door behind him and comes to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Sorry about this," he says and waves a hand around. "You can have my room, and I'll sleep up here."

Hutch's room isn't really his room anymore, 'cause his parents converted it into a spare bedroom long ago. There's no hint that Hutch once lived there.

"Nah, this is all right. It's got a bed, what more do I need?" *Apart from you?*

"It's not the bed. It's...." He waves a helpless hand around.

I know what he means. He takes this as a subtle snub. Me, I don't care. When you've spent a few months crashing in mosquito-filled tents in clothes that haven't been dry for days 'cause it's the rainy season and you've crawled through swampy jungle all week with a pack on your back, a room—any room—with a bed, a mattress and a pillow on it is a luxury you never forget to appreciate.

"Quit worrying," I tell him. And to make sure he does, I pull him down beside me, roll on top of him and kiss him. It's a strategy that never fails.

A whole chunk of time slips away while we're wrapped up in each other. Finally, Hutch peels away with visible reluctance.

"We better go back downstairs. My dad is mixing cocktails for us." He grins. "I hope you like the Hutchinson Special on the rocks."

"Think you're gonna...?"

He hesitates. "Not sure. It's late. Maybe it's better to wait until tomorrow."

I sit up and start hunting through my bag for my sneakers, thinking of the day Hutch announced his decision to go and tell his family about us.

"They have to be told," Hutch said to me. *"I should've told them a long time ago."*

We've been together for over two years, and as far as I'm concerned, I don't give a hoot who knows about us and who doesn't. In the end, IA is bound to get wind of our off-duty activities no matter what.

But Hutch has been on a crusade to postpone that fateful day for as long as humanly possible.

"You worked so hard to get cleared for active duty," he said. "We only just got back into the swing of it. We're on a roll. We can't throw all that away. At least, let's try and keep it under wraps for as long as we can."

And we did. Until a few months ago when Rosey Malone showed up out of the blue, and I, like a fool, thought I owed her the truth about Hutch and me.

She didn't take it well. She even set in motion an elaborate scam designed to drive a wedge between me and Hutch and win me back by deception. A small shiver runs down my spine when I recall how close she came to pulling it off. If Hutch hadn't refused to fall for it...

Rosey isn't a threat anymore. But she knows about us, and so do Mike Stanton, and Minnie, and Huggy, and Dobey, and Sugar, and a whole lot of other guys. The number is constantly rising. Not long, and half of LA will be in the know.

"I don't want them to hear it through the grapevine," Hutch said with reference to his mom and dad. "I'd rather they heard it from us."

So here we're in Minnesota. It's February and cold enough to freeze off vital parts of your anatomy, but Hutch is determined. It's taken him two years, but once he's made up his mind on something, not even a full-blown blizzard can make him change direction.

I eye him sidelong as I pull on my shoes. "You really think they'll kick you out?"

Hutch looks at the carpet. "I'm pretty sure of it."

Right.

They may not be very close as a family, but Hutch looks pretty forlorn at the thought all the same, so I walk over and put my hands around his face and pull our foreheads together. He closes his eyes and leans into me.

We stay like that for a moment. Then we go downstairs.

ooOOOoo

Hutch's parents are a mystery to me.

No, scrap that. The mystery is how two people as cold and distant as Margaret and Richard managed to produce a child as warm and caring as Hutch. The credit for that, I guess, goes to the grandfather Hutch keeps going on about.

Don't get me wrong. They're not bad people. They're just...*driven*. Especially his dad.

I've only met them twice before.

The first time was in LA almost ten years ago. Hutch and I had just made detective. We were cocky as hell, thought we could clean up the streets of LA single-handedly. We worked ridiculous hours and loved every minute of it. We still thought we were invincible.

Hutch's dad had an important business meeting in LA, and his mom came along for the ride. As bad timing would have it, they arrived in the middle of our first kidnapping case and we had our hands full.

We finally caught up with them in the lobby of the Sheraton, and because we came straight from a run-in with Fat Rolly's goons, we didn't exactly create a top impression. I'd torn a hole in the knee of my favorite pair of jeans, and Hutch sported a bruise on his cheekbone that was already turning purple. We must've looked pretty scruffy. The look on Vanessa's face said it all, really.

Hutch's marriage was already on the rocks at the time, but the big lug still thought he could salvage things by playing it her way. I noticed she got on great with her in-laws, though. She could turn on the charm like a faucet. I wonder if they ever saw the ruthless side of her.

We all went to the hotel bar for drinks. There was some polite conversation, and a few veiled references to the importance of college degrees, and a few not-so-veiled references to the lack of earning potential in police work, and even though they didn't say so, it was pretty clear that they didn't think much of their son's career choice.

Or his choice in police partner.

I didn't know what Hutch had told them about me, but they clearly weren't impressed by what they saw. A Jewish kid with an East Coast accent and a GI swagger, wearing sneakers and a grubby leather jacket—that can't have been what they'd been hoping for. Again, they didn't say so, but you didn't have to be a detective to pick up the vibes of disapproval.

They even managed to imply that if Hutch played his cards right, he might be assigned a different—read, more suitable—partner sometime in the future. Hutch looked pretty annoyed at that, and I had to deliver a kick to his shin to keep him from making a fuss.

What they didn't realize was that Hutch and me, we were already so much more than police partners at the time. Not lovers yet—that step took us another seven years—but best friends, buddies, and working hard to build the trust and connection that would make us such a perfect team. We already knew we had something special between us. Hutch would've no more asked for another partner than he would've considered changing the color of his eyes or the type of car he was driving.

Anyway, we had another drink and then the Hutchinsons whisked Hutch and Vanessa away to some ritzy restaurant for a family dinner. I wasn't invited.

Instead I went back to work. We still didn't have a lead on our perp, and time was running low. At around ten that night, the call we'd been waiting for came through, and I was off to haul Hutch away from his brandy and dessert. Richard and

Margaret didn't look too pleased when I showed up, but I knew Hutch would've killed me if I'd made him miss the action.

I didn't see them again until several years later.

By that time, Hutch and I were pretty well established as a team. We had our own beat, our own snitches, our own methods, and a captain who recognized that we worked better together than apart. We got results, but we also made a lot of enemies along the way.

In March that year, Hutch was planning to go to Duluth for his mom's birthday. But just a few weeks before he was due to fly out, we busted a guy named Humphries, a real slimebag, who tried to eliminate Hutch by having him run off the canyon road in his car. Hutch survived the crash, but he lay trapped under his car for a couple days while I turned the city upside down for him.

Things looked pretty desperate for a while. I actually went off the rails for a while after Slater got killed, and with him my only lead. I had no idea what had happened to Hutch, but I knew he was running out of time. But even after I found him, we still had a few anxious days while the doctors debated if his leg would have to come off.

Hutch needed help for a long time after that, so when he decided to make it to the birthday bash, I went with him. To keep an eye on him, and to help him get around. I didn't really trust anyone else to do a good enough job on that front.

That visit was my only glimpse into the world in which Hutch grew up, and I can't say I liked it much.

It wasn't so much the party, although *publicity stunt* would've been a better description. I mean, they'd hired the city ballroom, half the business community was invited, and Richard's company logo took up more space than the Happy Birthday banner for Margaret. No, I think it was the days we spent at the house afterward—the endless talk about money and status and the importance of getting on in life. The undercurrents of disapproval aimed at Hutch and his choices in life. The barbed hints that he was wasting his time on a dead-end job.

We never even got a chance to set the record straight, 'cause Hutch's parents change the subject every time we start talking about a case. They flinch at the mention of guns and murder and drugs and rape, like they're dirty words that have no place in the sheltered lives they're leading.

I kinda expected to feel like a fish out of water, but to my surprise, it was Hutch who seemed most ill at ease—and I'm not talking about the cast on his leg.

He never told his parents what happened. They thought he was in a car accident. They never knew how close he came to losing his leg.

ooOOOoo

Downstairs, in the corner of the living room that houses the bar, Richard has lined up a row of glasses and is in the process of concocting a heady mix. He's in a jovial after-dinner mood, a smooth transformation he can pull off at the drop of a hat. In the dim light, he looks so much like Hutch, it's eerie.

They're not really very alike. Richard is beefy where Hutch is lean, and his thinning hair is a dark shade of brown with plenty of gray. But they move in similar ways, and sometimes, when Richard is in a relaxed mood, I catch a glimpse of Hutch's smile on his face.

It gets me every time.

While Hutch passes a drink to his mom, I pick up mine and wander over to the bookshelf. For some reason I'm surprised all over again to find an entire shelf devoted to photos of Kathy and Hutch and Kathy's kids. There are unexpected glimpses of a normal, happy family life—a youthful Margaret on a beach, holding the hand of a small, chubby Hutch; a laughing Richard swirling little Kathy through the air. The whole family grinning into the camera before a backdrop of a snow-peaked mountain range.

I pick up a photo that has Hutch in it. He looks about ten and has a mop of hair so bright it looks bleached. He's smiling broadly and clutching a spotty dog to his chest.

"He found that dog in the street somewhere," Margaret says from the depth of her armchair and drags on her cigarette. "He always brought home strays. First dogs, then people. Like that little Catholic girl from next door. Do you remember, Richard? The Blake's daughter?"

"Nancy," I supply.

She looks at me with surprise. "You know her?"

"Sure. I've known her for years. She and her mother live in LA now. She's gettin' married in April."

For real this time, I hope.

I don't tell Margaret about Nancy's first wedding fiasco. It would mean telling her about the murder on the docks and the smuggling case, and as I said, Hutch's parents aren't into that kinda stuff.

We sit and sip our drinks. The conversation drifts from great uncle Herbert's latest property plans to a vacation Richard and Margaret are planning to the weather in Duluth, as if all parties have entered into a silent agreement to keep touchy topics off the table.

Hutch and I don't find much to contribute. It makes me realize how much our lives revolve around our work, and a bunch of colorful characters, in a world that's light years away from Margaret and Richard's ordered existence.

It's almost eleven when the front door slams and Kathy walks into the room, still in her winter coat and lugging an enormous bag full of what looks like toys and clothes and things. A breath of icy air swirls into the room with her.

She's parked her car full of sleeping children in the driveway, so Hutch and me and Richard go back out into the snow and carry in a child each. Hutch gets Jamie, and I pick up what I assume to be Max. Richard brings up the rear with the baby.

In the chaos of greetings and explanations and putting cranky kids to bed, Hutch and I say our good-nights and slip away upstairs. And because the house is full of people and privacy at a premium even in this sprawling mansion, we share a kiss and a regretful look before we go to our separate beds in different parts of the house.

It's going to be a long three nights.

Saturday

When I wake up in the morning, the empty space beside me is the first thing I'm aware of. Outside, a blanket of fresh snow sparkles in the sun, the wind has died down, and it's very quiet. Suddenly I'm overwhelmed with the urge to get out of the overheated house and into the crisp, cold morning.

But Richard has different ideas. After breakfast, he tows Hutch away into his study to go over some investment trusts he wants to have his opinion on. Since Hutch knows as much about investments as I do about the love life of the spotted octopus, I take that as a sign that his dad hasn't given up hope of interesting Hutch in a career in money-making.

I help Kathy clear the breakfast table and, since it's Elena's day off, get my first lesson in the art of loading a dishwasher.

"Hi, Uncle Starsky."

I turn around to find Jamie gazing up at me with an engaging mixture of shyness and youthful urgency. I can't help grinning back. *Uncle Starsky*, indeed. That must've been Kathy's idea.

"Hi, Jamie."

That's all the encouragement he needs, and he's off with a whole flood of breathless questions. I can hardly keep up answering.

"Are you really a detective? Have you caught a lot of murderers? Where's your gun? How many people have you shot? Can I see your scars?"

"James!" Margaret says, horrified, when she overhears that last one.

"It's okay," I say and wink at Jamie. "There's not much to see anyway. I'm all healed up now."

"But you almost died, didn't you?" he asks, wide-eyed. "Mom said you got shot, and that Uncle Ken saved you."

"That's quite enough from you, young man," Margaret says firmly. "Give Mr. Starsky some peace. He doesn't want to be bothered with all your questions."

"Jamie, Max," Kathy says as she lifts a struggling Teddy from his highchair, "go play upstairs for a while. Don't worry, Uncle Starsky will still be here this afternoon. Go on."

When the boys have left and Margaret has gone next door to make arrangements for a charity dinner she's planning, Kathy and I sit at the kitchen table and share the remains of the breakfast coffee. Kathy sports dark circles under her eyes, and she's clutching her mug as if it's all that stands between her and the impulse to put her head on the table and doze off.

"Teddy kept me up half the night," she explains and yawns. "He just wouldn't stop crying. Maybe I shouldn't have driven back so late last night."

"Yeah, your dad was worried about you."

She gives me a knowing look. "He was right, you know. I shouldn't have gone. But I just had to get away for a while. Three days in this house are about as much as I can take. The kids needed a break, too. I mean, they can't always be on their best behavior."

No kidding.

Upstairs, Jamie and Max have embarked on a lively game of tag and are racing down the stairs like a horde of pirates. Teddy has decided to be a part of the fun and picked that moment to totter into some fancy vases that stand just outside the kitchen door.

The crash brings Margaret running. "For heaven's sake, Kathleen, how did this happen? Can't you be more careful? That's expensive Chinese pottery."

Kathy looks harassed, and no wonder, trying to keep three active kids subdued in a house that by no stretch of the imagination can be called child-friendly.

"Tell you what," I say to the boys. "How about the four of us go outside and build a snowman, huh? Give your mom a break."

"Oh, yeah! Mom, can we go? Please, can we go? Mom, pleeeeeease?"

They're jumping up and down, and the noise is going through the roof. Richard sticks his head out the study door. "Kathleen! Would you *please* keep these children under control! We're trying to get some work done in here."

The look on Kathy's face tells me she's nearing the end of her tether.

"All right, guys, get your boots and jackets on," I order, "and don't forget your hats and gloves."

I never saw kids move that fast.

"I'll come with you," Kathy says when we have them all bundled up. "They can be quite a handful."

"Nah, we're good." I lift Teddy into my arms and flash a grin at her. "This is a guys' party. No girls. Why don't you go and grab a couple hours' shuteye? Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"Are you sure it's no hassle, Dave?"

"Sure I'm sure. We're gonna have a great time together, won't we, guys?"

"Yeaaaaah!"

I hustle them out of the house before Richard has a chance to reappear in the hallway. The last thing I hear is Margaret saying, "Really, Kathleen, are you sure that's a good idea? I mean, David hardly *knows* them."

Which may be her roundabout way of saying that I can't be trusted with her grandkids. I don't hear Kathy's reply.

Truth is, I'm as eager to get out of the house as the kids are.

The next few hours are probably the most fun I ever had in this place. The garden is buried under a thick layer of snow crying out to be messed up—a task we accomplish in next to no time. The kids' yells and shrieks echo from walls that probably haven't heard such a din since before the Hutchinsons bought this pile. Kathy and Hutch were never children here. The family moved here from a much smaller house when they were already in high school.

Kathy's boys are great kids. Jamie reminds me a little of Hutch, actually. At seven, he's the leader of the pack with a real mind of his own and a hint of a rebellious streak. Max is the careful one. He's only five, but he's already figured out that a visit to the bathroom is a good idea *before* putting on three layers of outdoor clothes. And then there's Teddy. He can barely toddle, but he makes up for that with an inventive crawl, and I have to keep a sharp eye on him to make sure he doesn't disappear in the white stuff.

We finish our snowman and are in the middle of building him a snow woman for company when Kathy comes out to join us. She's found her second wind, and when she's helped us put the finishing touches to our snow lady, she and the kids gang up on me and draw me into an energetic snowball battle. I put up a vigorous defense and have almost gained the upper hand when Kathy topples me into a snow drift and they all pile on top of me, and I'm forced to surrender.

We're having a ball, and the one thing that would make this moment perfect is Hutch, poor guy, cooped up inside his dad's study with a pile of paperwork, missing all the fun.

I think about that when we've brushed ourselves down, and Kathy has herded the kids inside for hot baths and cocoa. And decide to go and rescue him.

After all, what's a partner for?

ooOOOoo

The door to Richard's study is ajar, and there's no reply when I knock. The house is eerily quiet. Muted sounds of giggling children drift down from upstairs, but the first floor feels deserted, like a museum after hours.

Wondering where everyone is, I stick my head into a couple of empty rooms until I get to the dining room. It's empty, too, but someone has drawn back the drapes and there's a terrific view of our two snow people grinning madly at each other in the middle of the snow-covered lawn.

Unable to resist, I walk to the window for a better look.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Those two will definitely turn a few heads in the street.

I'm still standing there, admiring our creations, when I hear the sound of footsteps in the hall outside. A moment later, a mumble of familiar voices drifts through the open door that connects the kitchen to the dining room. I smile. *Hutch*. Having a chat with his mom.

I cast a final glance outside and am just about to join them, when Margaret's voice rises and spills into the room.

"...don't know if you've noticed, Kenneth, but he's all you ever talk about. Is there no one else in your life? You work together, you live together. Now you even go on vacation together. He's taking over your life and you don't even seem to notice."

Christ, she's talking about me.

She clearly doesn't know I'm here. Or expect me to be. And why would she? Why would anyone stand hidden behind an open door in a corner of an empty dining room?

Time for a strategic retreat.

But no, it's too late. I hear chairs scraping over the tiled kitchen floor. They're settling in. If I leave now, they're bound to see me as I sneak past the open door.

Shit.

I melt into the folds of the drape. Walking straight out isn't an option, either. Margaret would be mortified.

"I know he means a lot to you," I hear her say, "but really, you also have to think about the future. Your father is right. One day, you have to make your own way in life, without David. You're almost thirty-four—"

"And you're still trying to run my life for me," Hutch says, sounding amused.

"Of course. I'm your mother."

Now *that's* something my own ma could've said. Then she spoils it by adding, "All I'm saying is that if you really have to spend so much time with one person, I wish you could have found someone a little more suitable."

There's a heartbeat's heavy silence.

"More *suitable*?" Hutch finally says in a carefully neutral voice.

"Yes, Kenneth. More suitable. More *compatible* with you. You need someone who is your equal. Don't get me wrong; David is a nice man. But he's simply not in your league. He's not...."

"Not *what*?"

"Like us," she says. "He's not like us."

"Because he's from a working class family and didn't go to college?" Hutch's voice is riding on a dangerous undertone now that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. "You can't be serious."

"I only want what's best for you," Margaret says smoothly. "It's time you started associating with the right people, people who can help you get on in life. Like that boy Jack you were friends with in high school. He was from a very good family. Father a banker, and the mother a cousin of the senator. Such a clever young man. He was going to be a doctor, wasn't he? It's a tragedy he died so young."

This really pisses Hutch off, I can tell.

"Look," he says, "Jack was a good pal, and yes, it's terrible he died so young, but to compare him to Starsky is absurd. Jack could never measure up to him, not in a million years. Banker's son or not."

"Well, he certainly had better dress sense. And I'm sure he got his hair cut once in a while."

Ouch.

My hand goes to my tangled curls, overlong 'cause that's the way Hutch likes it. He has a thing about my hair, and every time I want to get it cut, he tries to talk me out of it. Then I look down at the faded jeans and shapeless cardigan I'm wearing, and I'm thinking that maybe Margaret has a point.

"Well, I like the way he looks," I hear Hutch say, a comment that has so many layers, it makes my toes curl.

"So I've noticed," is Margaret's pointed reply. "You seem to have trouble keeping your eyes off him. And all that touching! Really, Kenneth, do you think that's appropriate? After all, you're the one in charge. You have an image to maintain."

"An image, for crying out loud? Is that all you ever think about? And what on earth do you mean by *I'm in charge*? We're partners. You know that."

"Officially, I know. But you're the one who makes the decisions, right? You're the leader of the team. I mean you told us so yourself."

"What?"

"Of course you did. When we first met David, you told us right away that you were the one in charge. Don't you remember? You said you were the brains of the outfit. That you taught David everything he knows. You said he needed all your help to get to where he was."

Oh, Christ!

This is so bad, it hurts. I close my eyes for a moment. Next door, I hear Hutch groan with frustration.

"Mom, for Chrissakes," he says, helpless in the face of this monumental misconception. "It was a joke. A *joke*, you understand? I was pulling his leg, dammit. We do that all the time. Starsky most of all."

"Don't swear, Kenneth," she says distractedly before adding in a much gentler voice, "Look, there's no need to defend him. I mean we saw it with our own eyes. He had to come and get you away from your dinner because he couldn't solve this case on his own. He—"

"What do you mean, he couldn't solve the case? He'd already solved it! He came to get me because I would've made his life hell if he'd gone and arrested the creep without me. We're partners, we do these things together. Christ almighty, I can't believe you got this so wrong!"

He's holding onto his temper by a hair. Does he know I'm here? I wouldn't be surprised. He has a sixth sense where I'm concerned.

"We saved a little boy from a psychopath that night, and it was Starsky who figured it all out, while I was sitting on my butt in a five-star restaurant enjoying smoked salmon and imported Chardonnay. Without Starsky's quick thinking, we might never have found him."

I roll my eyes. Now that's not quite true, 'cause we did a lot of the necessary leg work in the days before—together. I just happened to be the one to take the all-important call we needed to figure it all out.

"If it's true what you're saying," Margaret counters, irritated, "then why are you always talking down to him? Oh yes, you are. You call him a dimwit and a moron all the time. Only this morning you called him a...a *peabrain*." She forces out the word as if it were a profanity.

"Yes, and just before that he called *me* a dumb blond. His favorite word for me is mushbrain. Listen to him sometime and you'd think I don't have two brain cells to rub together!" Hutch's voice is rising in an almost desperate attempt to make her understand. "That's just the way we act around each other. It has nothing to do with talking down to anyone. Why is that so hard to understand?"

"You're saying that.... But, Kenneth, you're the one with the college degree. And you were always into social causes, like that girl from next door, Nancy. And—"

"You thought Starsky was one of my *social causes*? Christ, first you think he's my house guest. Now you think he's my sidekick. What the hell is wrong with you people?"

"You mean he isn't?"

"No, dammit. Of course, he isn't. We're *partners*. Forget the damn degree. Starsky learned more in his two years in Vietnam than I did in four years of book learning. He may not know the difference between a Renoir and a Van Gogh, but that doesn't mean he's short on brains. You don't seriously think the department would've awarded him the Medal of Valor if he were a complete idiot, do you?"

"David was awarded the Medal of Valor?"

"Oh yeah. Twice, in fact. Once for saving the city from the plague, and once for his part in bringing down Gunther's drug empire. And that's not counting all the medals he got for his service in Vietnam."

I really wish I could see Margaret's face right now.

"Don't be fooled by the rough-guy act," Hutch adds in a much calmer voice. "That's just a front. He's as sharp as I am. Sharper. Christ, he's one of the best cops in the city. We wouldn't solve a fraction of our cases if it weren't for him."

He means it, too. He's absolutely serious.

Something soft and warm expands inside me. *Aw, Hutch.*

I don't hear Margaret's reply, because at that moment a chair scrapes over the tiles again. One of them is getting up, no, both of them. I hear footsteps, clothes rustling. They're moving away from the door.

This may be my chance.

I inch my head around the door and risk a glance into the kitchen—Margaret has her back to me, looking up at Hutch who is out of my line of vision. Maybe if I'm quick....

Holding my breath, I slip past the opening as fast as I can, tiptoe down the length of the dining room, and escape through the far door into the hallway.

I only start breathing when I reach the safety of the living room.

ooOOOoo

The Hutchinsons' living room is a large west-facing room, its dark-paneled interior made darker by heavy curtains that block half the light and the view of the snowy garden. The place is empty. I fall into one of the plush armchairs and stare at the ceiling.

But I don't get much of a chance to ponder the conversation I've just overheard, because I've only been there for a minute or so when Richard walks in.

"Mr. Starsky," he says, a little surprised to see me there.

"David," I say automatically.

He nods and walks over to the bar. "Can I get you a drink?"

It's a little early to start on the booze, but what the hell. "Sure. A beer would be terrific."

He gets busy with bottles and glasses. When he emerges, he carries a glass of beer in one hand and a tumbler of what looks like a generous helping of scotch in the other. I take the glass and nod my thanks.

"Actually," he says as he lowers himself into the armchair opposite me, "I'm glad to find you here. I've been meaning to talk to you."

Man to man, I can't help thinking, but all I say is, "Sure."

He spends a few seconds gathering his thoughts. "I'm worried about Kenneth," he finally begins, always a surefire way to catch my attention. "You have been partners for almost eight years now, is that right?"

I nod. "Nine if you count the year I was on disability leave."

"Nine years. And you've known each other since....?"

"Fall '69. First term at the Academy." What is he getting at? He knows all this. I take a swig from my glass, wondering when he will get to the point.

"Almost twelve years. You must know him fairly well. Would you say, in your capacity as his partner, that Kenneth has the skill and the experience to make lieutenant if he decided to take the exam?"

Ah. Now I know where this is going.

"Oh yeah," I say. "He sure does."

Richard gives the amber liquid in his tumbler a swirl before he raises the glass and knocks back half the contents.

"I understand that in order to get that promotion, you need to be in the possession of a college degree," he says. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't it true that you went from high school to Vietnam and then almost directly to the Police Academy?"

"Guilty as charged," I say with a shrug, but the small levity fails to lighten the mood in this gloomy room.

"In other words, you have reached the highest rank you can attain and can't progress any further?"

"Look, what's your point?" I know his point, but I'll be damned if I spell it out for him.

"My point is that whereas you have gone as far as you can, Kenneth hasn't. He's able and qualified. He could have made lieutenant years ago, but he hasn't pursued that option." Richard eyes me with a frown. "I've been wondering why, and the only reason I can think of is a reluctance on his part to leave his partner behind while he forges ahead."

Stop tiptoeing around the issue, man.

"You're saying I'm holding him back."

He inclines his head. "I didn't say that, but yes, I think that may be the case."

Christ, first Margaret, now Richard....

Maybe it's a conspiracy.

"Hutch does what he loves doing," I tell him. "He wouldn't be happy ridin' a desk. He's a street cop, 'cause that's what he wants to be."

"Maybe so. But what about the future? Will he still want it ten, fifteen years from now? What happens when he's forty and realizes he's left it too late? Will he still feel the same way? Or will he come to regret that decision?"

I hesitate, and he pushes his advantage.

"Let me be honest with you," he says. "When Kenneth told me he had enrolled in the Police Academy, I did not approve of his choice. I called him a fool. I thought he was throwing his life away. It took me a while to realize that he was ideally placed to rise to the top of the profession. Captain. Chief of Police. Commissioner even."

He holds up a hand when he sees I'm about to interrupt. "Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against you personally. But it's clear to me that the only reason Kenneth hasn't progressed in his career is his admirable, but somewhat misguided attachment to his first partner he seems unable to break."

Misguided? Hutch and me have been called a lot of things over the years, but misguided is definitely a new one.

"Look," I say, "I'm not standing in Hutch's way, if that's what you're implying. If he doesn't want to take the exam, that's his call. He's a big boy, he makes his own decisions. I didn't hypnotize him or anything."

"Really? Then what happened last year? He was all set to take the exam, wasn't he? He spent weeks preparing for it. He *wanted* to move on. But at the last moment he dropped out." Richard leans forward and favors me with a hard look. "What exactly did you do to make him change his mind?"

Do? Nothing much. Only went and snatched him out of the Shark's greedy jaws. And then I recovered well enough to get cleared for active duty—and Hutch tossed the books and went back on the streets with me.

He wanted it. As much as I did.

Didn't he?

I recall the emotional upheavals Hutch went through at the time, the uncertainties, the sleepwalking, the kidnapping. His almost delirious joy at my recovery. The glorious feeling of being alive and well and together again. He would've done anything for me at that point, even give up his chance of promotion, against his better judgment.

Richard can tell I'm of two minds about something.

"You claim to be his friend," he says. "If he meant anything to you, you would have his best interest at heart. Do you really want him to spend the next thirty years chasing after small-time crooks? He could do so much better. It's in your hands. If he's unable to break the status quo, maybe you should do it for him."

"You're asking me to end my partnership with Hutch?" *Ain't gonna happen, man.*

"No one says you two can't be friends," he says and spreads his hands. "Kenneth has always been loyal to his friends. Loyal to a fault, I might say. But that doesn't mean he can't move on without you."

This is getting us nowhere, and I can't sit here and listen to another word of this. I get to my feet. "You're talking to the wrong guy here. You'll have to take this up with Hutch. We shouldn't be discussing this behind his back."

He's rising, too, and as he does, his forced politeness slips away from him like a dropped coat.

"I didn't think you would see it my way," he says with what can only be described as a sneer. "It's not exactly in your interest to do so, is it? You would have far too much to lose for that."

He has his claws out, and I need to remind myself that this is Hutch's dad and not a perp I can lay into.

"What are you trying to say exactly?"

"I'm *saying*, Mr. Starsky, that the power you wield over my son is nothing short of extraordinary. Your influence seems to extend to virtually every part of his life—his work, his private life, even his marriage." He eyes me coolly. "Oh yes, it was clear to me from the start that you were at least a contributing factor in the breakup. Vanessa told us all about your attempts to come between them."

"Now hold on just one minute. That just ain't true. I don't know what she told you, but their marriage was already on shaky ground when I met Hutch. He did everything to keep it going for as long as it did."

"Did he? It is my understanding that, on the contrary, he went out of his way to spend time with you." Richard looks down his nose at me. "She never liked you, by the way. She knew you didn't approve of her."

"Neither did you. You were dead set against the marriage at first."

Richard clenches his teeth. "I didn't know her very well then. I thought she was just a hippie from that commune Kenneth was living in."

He says the word *commune* as if it produces a nasty taste in his mouth. He doesn't mention that he changed his tune about her in no time when it emerged that her dad was someone high up in the hierarchy of Mettoil Limited. It also didn't take him long to realize that Vanessa was a kindred spirit and at least his equal in ambition and the art of manipulation. She wanted Hutch to succeed as much as Richard still does. The hippie chick stuff was just a cover.

Hutch didn't see it until it was too late. It's weird: he reads a perp like a trashy novel. On the streets of LA, no one can pull the wool over his eyes. But when it comes to women, the big lug sure has a blind spot sometimes.

But Richard doesn't know that. And to him, ambition and a talent for manipulation are assets, not flaws.

"I think, Mr. Starsky, it's time we were honest with each other. From the moment I met you, I had a feeling you would be trouble, but at the time I still thought the

arrangement was temporary. I had no idea that nine years down the line, he would still be encumbered with you."

He's gone too far. I can't let this slide, and he knows it at once. "I apologize," he says, before I can say a word. "I shouldn't have said that."

But he's rattled me, something not many people manage to pull off, and maybe that's exactly what he intended.

"By the way," he adds in an almost conversational tone, "has it occurred to you to wonder how he financed his lengthy absence from work last year when he put his career on hold to look after you?"

"We used our savings. Hutch gave up his apartment."

That sounds lame. Fact is, I don't really know. When I first got out of the hospital, groggy from the drugs and all, it took all I had to hang onto a thought for more than a coupla minutes. Hutch told me he had the money angle covered. We had other stuff to worry about, and I didn't pursue the topic. When Hutch tells me things are under control, I believe him.

"So he never told you about the trust fund he cashed in for you last year?"

Trust fund?

Richard produces a cold smile. "That's strange. I thought he told you everything. I'm talking about the trust fund his grandfather set up for him when he was a boy."

You cashed your granddad's trust fund? Christ, Hutch, why didn't you tell me?

Richard can tell this is news to me.

"Maybe you'll understand now why I'm concerned," he says in that lofty voice of his. "Kenneth has never deferred easily to anyone, but it seems where you're concerned, there's no limit to what he will put on the line for you—his career, his marriage, his financial security." He eyes me narrowly. "How do you do it, Mr. Starsky? What hold do you have over him?"

Hold? Man, you have no idea. For a moment I'm tempted to tell him straight out, right here and now.

But no. That's Hutch's call. I can't take that away from him.

Richard takes my silence as some sort of admission. "Think about what I said, Mr. Starsky. Kenneth deserves better than to spend the rest of his life at the beck and call of higher-ranking officers. If it wasn't for you, he would have moved on long ago. Maybe it's time you examined your true motives for not wanting him to succeed."

And although he doesn't say it, it's clear what he's thinking—that I have a good thing going with Hutch. That I've found myself a ready source of emotional, physical and financial support. That it's hardly in my interest to give that up.

I turn away from him and walk to the window. The brightness of the snow is almost blinding from here. I blink into the glare. Something hard and heavy grows inside my chest.

Richard is right. I have to admit it. A lot of what he said is true. If it wasn't for me, Hutch would've made lieutenant ages ago. He has all it takes to move up in the force. I'm the only hurdle on his way to the top.

And Vanessa. Damn right she didn't like me. The feeling was mutual, although I tried, for Hutch's sake, not to let on how I felt about her.

But it's true that Hutch and I spent a lot of time together. I didn't exactly turn him away when he came over late at night for a game of Monopoly and a couple of beers, or a place to crash when she'd kicked him out. On the contrary, I encouraged him. Not out of malice, as Richard seems to be implying, but because I wanted, needed his company as much as he wanted and needed mine.

And then there's the matter of the trust fund.

I clench my hand around the glass I find I'm still holding and force myself to think the unthinkable—what if, *what if*, in some ways, Hutch really would have been better off without me?

The room fades a little and I see Hutch as he might be now if he had quit the streets years ago, in a world where I never became a part of his life. Where Hutch and I never met.

I see Hutch no longer in the cesspool we call our workplace, but in an office like Ryan's, respected, influential, a leader of men, calling the shots. I see him using his skills and authority to clean up the force, stamp out police corruption, make the department a place to be proud of, doing what he believes in. And instead of putting small fry behind bars, I see him going after the big fish, like Gunther, fighting for justice on a scale that's impossible for a cop on the streets.

And for a minute my heart aches for all the opportunities Hutch has allowed to slip away, all the things Hutch might have been, might have done, if it hadn't been for me....

I feel a little light-headed.

Richard stirs as if he senses my confusion. I turn to look at him. He's so sure of himself. A small self-satisfied smile plays at the corners of his mouth. He thinks he has it all figured out. There's no doubt in his mind that I'm the parasite in his son's life.

He walks to the door. At first it looks as if he's going to say something else. But he's already said everything he needed to say. Instead, he downs what's left of his scotch, sets the glass on a table, and leaves the room without another word.

ooOOOoo

I don't know how long I stand there with the glass of warm beer in my hand and a heavy heart in my chest. A few minutes? An hour? I feel as if I've just gone five rounds with Cassius Clay. When I agreed to go to Duluth with Hutch, I had no idea that it would be me they'd be putting through the wringer.

On the other hand, better me than him, 'cause he's already lost enough sleep worrying about all this.

The need to see Hutch, talk to him, connect with him, hits me with a sudden powerful urgency. I put down the half-empty glass and go in search of him.

I find him alone in the kitchen where he's in the process of throwing together a late lunch for the family. The contents of the fridge are spread all over the counter, and he's in the middle of cutting up tomatoes and peppers for one of his colorful salads.

I don't think, just act. Driven by a deep need, I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his middle, feel the solidity of his wiry body right through the shirt and sweater he's wearing. I close my eyes and rest my cheek on the back of his neck. Holding Hutch is heaven. It's all I want from life, no more than this. When his hands move to my wrists, to hold and anchor me, I feel like purring.

"Surprised you?" I mumble into his sweater.

Hutch harrumphs. "Not for a second. I heard you coming from a mile away."

We savor a minute of closeness before he lets go of me, and I reluctantly unwind myself from around him and step away.

"So, how did it go with your dad this morning?" I say before I can get my brain in gear. Great. Richard was about the last thing I wanted to talk about.

Hutch assembles a dirty look. "Oh, wonderful. While you had fun messing around in the snow, I had to sit through three separate lectures on the importance of maintaining a solid capital investment plan."

"I always wondered where you got the lecturing gene from," I say and twist out of reach when he flicks a dish towel at me.

But the banter doesn't reach below the surface, and Hutch is instantly aware of it.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

Damn. Is there nothing I can hide from him?

I have to tell him—I know I do—but this is hardly the right time and place for it. Anyway, I need some time to come to terms with the things Richard said to me before I can trust myself to relay them to Hutch.

I try a diversion. "Apart from the reason we came here, you mean? When are we going to tell them? We've been here for almost a whole day already."

He's on edge right away. "It's not that easy. I can't just pop out with it over the breakfast table, can I? Not while the kids are around. I almost told my mom this morning, but then she...." He wrinkles his forehead and gives the door to the dining room a thoughtful look. "Did you....?"

"Yeah. I heard." I make a face. "I couldn't help it."

He exhales and looks away. "That's what I thought. Christ, I'm sorry you had to hear all that. I had no idea she felt that way. She.... I couldn't believe it when she said...."

His hand describes an agitated circle in the air. When he looks at me, the troubled look in his eyes has me rooted right to the floor. His hand comes up and touches my cheek.

"I love you," he says. "I think the world of you. You know that, don't you?"

"That we're equals, in every way that matters?" I smile. "Yeah, I know. *Moron.*"

He relaxes and even manages a sheepish look. "*Numbskull.*"

But the grin he's pasting on his face is only paper-thin. "I wish we could just come out with it," he sighs. "But it's gotta be done right. It's gotta be the right moment."

"Hutch, let's face it. There ain't never gonna be a right moment for what we have to say to them."

A deep breath lifts his chest. "I know. Tonight, all right? We'll do it when the kids are in bed."

"You're on."

"And this afternoon, let's abscond and go visit gramp's old farm. I haven't been out that way for years. Maybe we can borrow Kathy's car."

And get an hour or so to ourselves.

"Sounds like a plan."

There's so much I want to talk to him about, but most of all I want to be alone with him. I want that closeness—physical, mental, emotional—that we've come to take for granted.

Somewhere in the house, a door slams. Margaret's voice wafts down the hallway, followed by the sound of small feet racing toward the kitchen. We share a resigned look and move apart. Our talk will have to wait until the afternoon.

ooOOOoo

But our time together isn't meant to be.

Kathy and the kids jump at the idea of a visit to the farm, and in the end we all go. And in the evening, the Hutchinsons have invitations for all of us—and a babysitter for the boys—to go to a cocktail party at the house of one of Richard's business pals, an event where even the waiters are dressed to the teeth, and the topic of the evening is the new actor-turned-president's likely impact on the future of the US trade policy.

I can't believe it. Here we've come all the way from LA to put Hutch's parents in the picture, and we can't even find a moment to catch up with each other.

Which may be just as well, 'cause I'm still chewing over the things Hutch's dad said to me that morning.

Richard has switched the jovial, back-slapping part of him back on as he's introducing Hutch to a string of his acquaintances, but he can hardly bring himself to look at me, and the air between us is thick with awkwardness. Now and then I catch Margaret eyeing me through half-closed eyes. When I turn to her, her gaze slides away, and I wonder what else Hutch might've told her about me.

That's just one of the things we haven't been able to touch base on.

It's late when we finally get back to the house. When we've all gone to our separate rooms and everything is quiet, I consider sneaking downstairs and into Hutch's room, but discard the idea reluctantly. For a house as imposing as this one, it's surprisingly thin-walled, and Margaret and Richard's bedroom is right next door to his.

I hang my best suit, shirt and tie over the back of the chair, turn the thermostat down, and crawl under the eiderdown.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep.

Sunday

"All right," Hutch says, "I want the truth, and I want it now, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

It's Sunday afternoon, and with one thing and another, we're no nearer to completing our mission than we were on day one. Hutch is right—short of convening a family conference, finding a suitable moment isn't easy.

But one thing, apparently, can't wait. So after lunch, he's towed me outside into the snow-covered garden, and there, in a quiet corner behind the summer house, he's taken me by both arms and locked eyes with me.

"I want to know what he said to you that's had such a weird effect on you. And don't tell me he didn't. It's written all over you."

I manage a smile. "That obvious, huh?"

"You might as well put an announcement in the papers."

It's started to snow again. Thick, heavy flakes swirl and dance around us. They settle on Hutch's knitted hat, and the arms and shoulders of his padded jacket. They cling to his cheeks and eye lashes.

For a moment, all I can do is drink in the sight of him. God, he's so damn beautiful!

But Hutch is impatient for answers. "So it's true? You talked to him?"

"Well, more like *he* talked to *me*."

"That's what I figured. And now spill. What did he say?"

"Look, it's no big deal. He's worried about your future, that's all. He knows you're ready for promotion, but he also knows you're too much of a nice guy to move on up without me."

Okay, so that's not *exactly* what he said, and Hutch doesn't buy it for a minute.

"Oh, c'mon, that can't have been all, 'cause that sure as hell doesn't explain why you look like a bug crawled up your ass."

"Don't swear, Kenneth," I say with a grin, but he just looks at me.

No secrets, I tell myself. And because he's going to get it out of me one way or another anyway, I make a face at him and give it my best shot.

"In a nutshell? He asked me to back off. He knows I'm the reason you dropped out of the lieu's exam last year. He thinks if you stick with me, you'll be a Detective Sergeant III until you retire. And you know something? He's absolutely right."

There, I've said it. But I might as well have said it in Vietnamese.

"Christ, Starsk, what are you talking about?" He's genuinely flummoxed.

I give him a one-sided smile, knowing it's not coming out right. "He's right, let's face it. If it wasn't for me, you would've made Lieutenant ages ago. And in a couple years' time, you could be in line for promotion to Captain."

"He said that?" he says, incredulous. "And you believed him?"

I shrug. "It's not a matter of belief. It's true. I just never had it spelled out to me before."

A slow change comes over Hutch as he effortlessly reads between the lines. The frown lines on his forehead disappear as his face melts into an expression of such dismay, it feels like a kick in the gut.

"Oh god," he says as he reaches for me. "Starsk, babe, what did he do to you? He put the screws on you, didn't he? He told you some bullshit about how I'd be better off without you, right? He told you I'll never amount to anything while you're standing in my way, right?"

It's hard to deny, what with Hutch's face five inches from mine and his eyes drilling little holes into my retinas.

He groans, clamps his hands around my shoulders and gives me a rough shake. "And you believed that crap? After everything we've been through together? Have you gone completely insane?"

"Hey," I protest, "what we are to each other has nothing to do with it. It's not about us. It's about work. He's right, you know. You could make Lieutenant, easy. Just 'cause we're together doesn't mean you shouldn't be the best you can be."

Hutch exhales slowly, filling the air between us with a cloud of frozen breath. "I already *am* the best I can be," he tells me in that voice that's always putting prickly goose bumps down my spine. "You bring out the best in me. Don't you know that?"

It's the eyes. I could lose myself inside those eyes. They are deep and blue, and the warmth I see in there sends an unexpected surge of blood to my groin. Christ, what is he doing to me?

I rally my thoughts with an effort. "Yeah, okay, but that doesn't mean your dad ain't right about—"

"Now listen to me, buster," Hutch says in a very different kind of voice and points a glove-encased forefinger at me. "There's not one true syllable in what he said, and if you'd stopped for a microsecond to actually think about it, you would've realized that, too. You want to know what I'd be right now if it hadn't been for you? I'd be dead, that's what."

I roll my eyes. "Oh sure. Great going."

He ignores that. "I wouldn't even have made it through our first six months if you hadn't hauled me out of that truck before it exploded. And if by some miracle I hadn't been blown up, or shot down, or died under my car, or got killed by a virus, or...or kidnapped and left to rot in some stinking rat hole, I'd be a washed-up, burned-out junkie now without a shred of self-respect or hope in my heart. And if I hadn't already quit the force, IA would've booted me out years ago. The last thing I'd be right now is a Captain, or a Lieutenant, or even a goddamn Detective Sergeant III."

Here he has to come up for air, and when he's done that, he finds that he's blown his annoyance on a single monumental declaration and can't find anything else to say.

So we stand there in the swirling snow and look at each other, mute, and with so many things left unsaid, 'cause they don't really need saying, until finally I make another face at him and say, "Well, if you put it like that...."

He releases a sharp breath. "All right, I take it all back. You really *are* a moron. How can you doubt for a single second that everything I am, I'm only because of you? You really think I could've cut it as a cop on the streets without you? The only reason we're good is because we're doing it together. I can't believe I'm having to tell you all this."

"Hutch, he wasn't talking about the past. He was talking about the future. Okay, so we make a good team, but that doesn't mean you have to stick with me forever. Your dad is right, there's no reason why you can't move on without me."

Hutch shakes his head in exasperation. "Look, will you believe me when I tell you that there's nothing in the world I want more than to be your partner on the streets? That I wouldn't change that even if the Chief himself begged me to take the damn exam? Go on, say it. Do you believe me?"

I look at him, let my eyes wander all over the planes and angles of a face I know as well as my own. To most people, Hutch is this deep, complex, unknowable soul. To me, he's as transparent as the Torino's windscreen after a wash and polish.

I feel a long overdue smile tugging at my lips. "Yeah, I believe you. You're one crazy bastard, you know that?"

"Not half as crazy as someone who takes my dad's diatribes for gospel. I know he can be convincing, but goddammit, I can't believe you of all people fell for it."

"I couldn't help it." I shrug. "I don't know how he did it. Somehow he got right under my skin."

"That's pathetic, coming from you. You call yourself a detective? What happened to your critical faculties, huh? If that had been a perp you were talking to, you would've questioned every word he said. But because he's my dad, you take what he says at face value? What's the matter with you?"

I open my mouth, can't think of a snappy comeback, and close it again.

"Exactly!" The finger comes up again and pokes me in the chest. "And now that we've settled that, can we please go back inside, because I think my toes have frozen to the inside of my boots."

That's my Hutch, all tetchy and trying not to show how much this whole thing is getting to him.

We don't mention what we both know to be true, that if one of us ever moved ahead, got that promotion, it would mean something between us would change forever. It would tip the balance of our equilibrium, take away a vital element of what makes us what we are. And that's precisely why Richard, for all his blustering, is right on at least one count: Hutch will never make Lieutenant for as long as I'm unable to follow him there.

It's not an issue now, and it may not be an issue for years to come. But one day, I think, Hutch will realize that younger detectives are getting promoted above his head, moving up, leaving him behind, and he'll look back and see that he's missed the boat to promotion island. Because of me.

And while he'll live with it and probably crack terrible jokes about it, the knowledge will still rankle—that he could've done better, but didn't. Because of me.

That's the burden I'm gonna have to live with. 'Cause there's nothing I can do about it.

I don't tell him what else Richard had to say—about Vanessa, or what he sees as my mercenary tendencies. The fallout would be catastrophic. It's not Hutch I'm worried about. It's Richard.

Hutch has pulled off his knitted hat and is running a hand over his head, making his short hair stand up in all directions.

"Christ, this whole thing is a disaster," he says. "I had no idea it would turn out to be like this. I don't know what got into them. I'm sorry I made you come out here to be insulted by my parents."

"Like you had a choice. You would've had to handcuff me to a drain pipe to stop me from coming with you."

He acknowledges that with a grimace. "I just wish I could make them understand. It makes me mad to see them treating you like this. They think you're just some bum off the street, that I'm wasting my time hanging out with you. How can I explain to them what you really mean to me? That this thing between us is all that matters?"

"You can't," I say. "How can you explain a thing like that? It's not like we really understand it ourselves."

We look at each other. Clouds of frozen breath fog the air between us. Icy needles sting my face. Hutch is right, it's time to go back inside.

There's only one thing still left undone. I hook a mittened hand behind Hutch's neck and pull our heads together. His hands encased in thick leather gloves come up around my face as he leans into me.

"I can't wait to go home," he says. "I miss you."

His face feels frozen to the bone, but his lips are warm, so incredibly warm and soft. They remind me of California, of lazy hours spent on the beach on a hot summer's day. Of home.

Joy expands inside me like a kid's balloon. *Hutch, Hutch, Hutch...*

I love him so much.

It's freezing out here, but I haven't felt this warm since touching down at the airport. I want to burrow inside him, lose myself inside his body. We're separated by way too many clothes. Only our lips are touching, and our tongues.

When Hutch turns up the heat, I'm lost. I forget where we are, forget the cold, the snow. Hutch is the only thing real in this world of ice and heat. We're together. We're one. I don't ever want to let him go.

And I don't. Not until I hear the sound. An unexpected sound in the stillness of the garden—the crunch of rubber-soled boots on freshly fallen snow.

Our cozy bubble bursts with a pop. We break apart like guilty teenagers and confront the sound like edgy cops.

Jamie is standing beside the summer house, wearing snow boots and a parka and an expression of the most wide-eyed, open-mouthed astonishment I ever saw on the face of a child.

Before we can move or say something or do anything at all, he's whirled around and dashed away, running through the snow with his short legs pumping, eating up the distance to the house as if a pack of hungry monsters was at his heels.

Terrific.

"Well, that's done it," Hutch says unnecessarily. I look at him, and he looks at me. "Ready for the fireworks?"

A slow wave of warmth cruises through my body and washes around my heart. Damn, I love this man. Sometimes that love is like a raw ache, so powerful that I wonder if I'm strong enough to stand it, or if one day, it's going to crush me.

I nod, noticing that I still have an arm hooked around Hutch's waist. There seems little point in taking it away now.

Together, we walk through the swirling snow back to the house.

ooOOOoo

In the end, we don't have to say a word. When we've shed our damp things in the entrance hall and tracked the family down to the kitchen, we find the room full of white-faced people, frozen in position as if they were trying out for some kinda human statue award. Even the air seems stunned into breathlessness. Only Jamie, still in boots and jacket, is an explosion of excitement and has just embarked on what's clearly a repeat performance.

"...and Uncle Ken had his hands around Uncle Starsky's face, like this," he clamps his small hands around Kathy's face, "and then Uncle Starsky kissed him just like this." He plants a kiss on his mother's lips and accompanies the action with a series of wriggles and smoochy noises. The kid has clearly seen too many Cary Grant movies.

When he becomes aware of us, he turns and stares at us with the undisguised amazement of a child who has just discovered that his mom is leading a double life as Wonder Woman.

Which is more than can be said for Margaret and Richard. They look...shell-shocked. I can hardly bring myself to look at their white faces. Even Kathy, who knew this was coming, looks shaken.

Margaret is the first to regain the power of speech. "Is this true?" she says to Hutch. God, she looks as if she'd give her lifeblood just to hear him say no.

We're still standing inside the hallway door. Hutch walks into the room and pulls out a chair and, taking my cue from him, I do the same. We sit down. Hutch looks at his mother across the table.

"Yes, it's true," he says. "That's what we came here to tell you. Starsky and I are together. We've been together for over two years now."

There's a long moment of frozen silence. "Together," she finally repeats as if trying out a new word. "You mean...?"

Hutch attempts a smile that sweeps first Margaret, then Kathy, then Richard, before it comes to rest on my face. My heart does a funny little skip.

"We love each other," he says. "We're together as a couple. We're lovers."

In the bottomless silence, Richard's chair scraping back over the tiles sounds like a shriek. He stands. His hands clutch the back of the chair with a grip that makes his knuckles stand out.

"James, Max," he says, not taking his eyes off Hutch. "Go upstairs to your room. Now!"

The boys take one look at his grim face and obey without a second's hesitation. A moment later, the room contains only the adults, and Teddy asleep in his stroller.

Margaret hasn't moved. A whole range of unguarded emotions climb over her face, culminating in a look of someone to whom a whole lot of things suddenly make a whole lot more sense.

"But you can't...." she starts. "Not you. How could you...?" Her voice rises. "You were married to Vanessa!"

"Vanessa was a big mistake. I didn't know any better then. Starsky is the only one who matters."

She flinches at the mention of my name. This is hard for her. For both of them. If rape and drugs and murder are dirty words in this household, then *homosexuality* is the slime at the bottom of a pond. It's what happens to social deviants—the freaks, the sick, the mentally distorted.

I can't blame them, really. Hell, I remember how freaked I was when we found out about John Blaine.

An arctic chill has invaded the kitchen, but beside me, I feel Hutch's arm warm against my own. The bubble comes around us again and wraps us in a familiar cocoon, like a shield against the cold. As long as we're together, we can face anything.

Richard seems to sense that, too, and in his fury, he looks around for another target.

"You knew about this!" he roars at Kathy.

"Y-yes," Kathy stammers, put on the spot. "I-I've known for a while." Her chin comes up defiantly. "And I think it's wonderful."

Hutch and I direct twin smiles at her.

Richard turns abruptly and walks to the other end of the kitchen. He leans his hands on the counter, struggling for control. Margaret sits very still, and the color of her face can only be described as ashen.

I think I know what's going to happen now. An ugly scene filled with questions and exclamations, protests and accusations. Shouts and pleas and denials. An attempt at an explanation that's doomed from the start.

But that's not the way it happens. Instead, Richard turns and looks straight at me for the first time that day.

"Mr. Starsky, I wonder if I might have a word with you." Every trace of joviality has been scraped off a face as dark as a weathered cliff. He sets his shoulders like an alpha male squaring off with a rival. "In private, if you don't mind."

A challenge to a duel in the local cemetery at dawn couldn't sound more ominous. It's a challenge I can't turn down. I come out of my chair, making sure it's a slow deliberate movement and that my eyes never leave his face. Richard isn't the only one who can do the alpha male thing.

Hutch is on his feet, too, much faster than me, and with protest written all over him. He's worried, wondering what his dad is up to. I shoot him one of those looks that drive our captain insane. *Relax. I can handle it.*

And although I'm pretty sure my face gives nothing away, I know he understands. He always does.

Slowly he sits back down and the look in his eyes softens. Of course I can handle it. He knows I can handle pretty much any kinda situation. People, too—the Amboys and Tallmans and Vic Montes of this world. He knows I can hold my own just about anywhere.

But that's at work, out there on the streets where we move as if we belong there. This is different, I think, as I follow Richard down the hallway and into the book-lined space he calls his study. Your partner's dad, that's different. Can't pull the bad cop routine on your partner's dad.

I have no idea how to handle this particular situation.

"Take a seat." He indicates the straight-backed chair before his desk. On the other side of the desk, he hitches his pants and settles in his padded leather chair. He's furious, but he hides it well under a veneer of chill politeness.

"Let me get straight to the point. What will it take for you to get out of my son's life?"

Out of Hutch's life? A heavy-duty construction crane, I'm tempted to say, but bite my tongue just in time. I doubt Hutch's dad would find this funny.

Does he have any idea what his son means to me? I don't think so, and the next moment I know so, 'cause he opens a drawer in his desk, extracts a check book with a red logo on the cover, and suspends the tip of a pen over it.

"All right, Mr. Starsky," he says with a look of utter distaste in my direction. "How much do you want?"

He starts writing. First the date, then my name. *David Michael Starsky*. The pen hovers over the box where the figures go, and he looks up.

"Thirty thousand?" he says. "That should be enough for your, ah, needs, I should think."

Thirty thousand? Jesus Christ, he's trying to buy me off with thirty thousand bucks? This is surreal, and I can't make up my mind if the feeling in my gut is anger, or pity, and simple contempt. It's time to get outta here.

I come to my feet, but he misunderstands the action.

"All right," he says through clenched teeth and starts writing. "Fifty. Fifty thousand dollars. In return, you will get out of my son's life *this minute* and never, I repeat, *never* see or contact him again."

His voice sounds distorted. It's a lot of green, even for him, but he seems to think it would be money well spent. The whole scene would be laughable if it wasn't so deeply disturbing.

I'm suddenly reminded of another room, another tug of war over Hutch. Only that time I was the one to extend the check to the person I thought was playing with Hutch's feelings. The figure on that check spelled out a much more modest sum than on the one Richard is placing in front of me, but it was offered with no less conviction, or desperation.

I never told Hutch about it. At first it was too soon. Then he went through a phase when he refused to talk about her altogether. Time passed, and it got more and more difficult to get around to the subject. The day I saw him flirting with that chick in the bowling alley, I knew I'd left it too late. It still bothers me sometimes. No secrets, we said. I should've told him long ago.

I thought she wasn't good enough for him. *He* thinks I'm not good enough for him, either.

Jesus.

And now? How can I condemn him? I'm no better than he is.

I walk to the door, but when I reach for the handle, I hesitate. I have to say it. I have to at least *try* to get through to him.

"You don't understand," I say. "I love Hutch. He means everything to me. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him."

"Except for keeping away from him."

"Except for that. If I did that, it would kill him. He loves me, too."

He's about to speak, but I override him. "Hutch must never find out about this. Never, you understand? It would do something terrible to him. I don't think he would ever forgive you."

Another secret. Another burden. But how can I come between a father and his son? I lost my dad when I was young. I'll do anything I can to make sure that Hutch doesn't lose his.

Even lie by omission.

ooOOOoo

When I get back to the kitchen, it looks as if it's all over. Kathy is dabbing at her eyes with a hanky, and although it doesn't show on his face, I know what Hutch looks like when he's upset. There's no sign of Margaret.

Hutch's eyes scan my face like an x-ray machine, and what he sees there makes him come to his feet real fast. But I shake my head at him. *Not now. Later.*

He nods and is about to say something when Richard marches in behind me. He's no longer looking gray. Instead, his face has taken on the alarming tinge of purple of a man who's just been conned out of his savings by a confidence trickster. He ignores the others and walks right up to me.

"I want you out of my house," he says and stabs a finger at me. "Right now. Go upstairs, pack your stuff, and then *get out!*"

"Dad!" Kathy jumps to her feet. "You can't do that. You can't just kick him out. For god's sake, Dad!"

Hutch gives her a tight smile. "It's no use, Kathy. Leave it. We knew this might happen." His eyes seek mine. "Looks like we're leaving. Meet you downstairs in five? Maybe we can get seats on the evening flight."

"I'll drive you," Kathy says in a strangled voice.

Hutch nods. We move to the door.

Richard takes a step forward and blocks Hutch's way. "Not you," he says. "You stay here. I have to talk to you."

The look on Hutch's face almost makes my heart melt. There's pain, and resignation, and infinite regret, but there's also a wealth of steely certainty, and a cold, cold determination.

"You didn't hear me," he says. "Starsky and I belong together. If he's leaving, I'm leaving. If you want to talk, you better do it now."

"In my study!" Richard barks. "I want an explanation for this ridiculous nonsense. You can't just march in here and tell us you're throwing away everything we've ever done for you."

He's already half-way out the door before he notices that Hutch is making no move to follow.

"It's not going to work this time," Hutch tells him. "Splitting us up, I mean. Anything you want to say, you can say right here in front of everyone."

I'm so proud of him. He looks calm and collected, at least on the outside. Richard seems to realize that he's losing the upper hand.

"I will not be dictated to in my own house!" he roars. "I said I want this man out of my house, and I mean *right now*. He has ten minutes. If he's not gone by then, I'll call the police."

He says that without the slightest hint of irony. I walk to the door, and Hutch sidesteps Richard and follows. Our eyes meet. Hutch nods.

We go.

ooOOOoo

Packing takes no time at all. Five minutes later, I'm outside Hutch's room with my bag. The open door reveals a bomb site of rumpled sheets, scattered newspapers, and piles of clothes all over the floor—quite an achievement given that we've only been here for two days. Hutch is still in the middle of stuffing shirts and shoes and books into his bag.

"Slob," I say, shorthand for *You okay?*

"I'm fine," he says, not looking at me. "I'll be fine." He zips up the bag, takes a final look around, and nudges me out the door.

That's as far as we get, 'cause Jamie and Max are standing in the hallway right outside the room as if they had appeared by magic. Jamie is staring up at us with huge distraught eyes and a dangerously quivering lower lip.

"Why are you going away?" he forces out. "Why is Granddad angry with you? Is it 'cause of me? 'Cause I told 'em?"

Oh, Jesus.

Taking a deep breath, Hutch carefully sets down his bag. He crouches down in front of Jamie until their eyes are level, and curls his large hands around the boy's narrow shoulders.

"Yes, we're leaving," he says, "but it's not because of you. We meant to tell them all along, so really you were doing us a favor. Granddad isn't very happy with us right now. It's a long story, but it's got nothing to do with you, you understand? It's not your fault."

Jamie nods reluctantly. "But I don't want you to go. Can't you stay? Please?"

"I don't think that's a good idea right now," Hutch says with a regretful smile. "But I've got a better idea. How about you guys and Teddy and your mom come and visit us in LA sometime, huh? Would you like that?"

Jamie's eyes go wide. "Can we really?"

Hutch smiles. "Really really. We'll talk to your mom about it."

ooOOOoo

When we finally walk downstairs, several minutes over our allotted time, we find a whole farewell committee of Hutchinsons in the entrance hall. Richard and Margaret form a grim enclave right beside the front door, a room's length away from an unhappy-looking Kathy.

Before we can do more than shrug into our jackets, there's another delay.

"Damn," Hutch says, patting his pockets. "I think I left my wallet in the study. Hold on, I'll be right back."

He disappears, and I'm left standing there with my bag in my hand, and Richard and Margaret facing me across a gulf of icy silence.

As far as awkward moments go, this one is in a class all of its own. The tension is thick enough to cut into slices, and if Richard's looks were daggers, I'd be a corpse on the polished floor by now.

This ain't right, I suddenly think. We can't do this. We can't just walk away like this. Hutch has too much to lose. Is there nothing I can say or do to make this right again?

I clench and unclench my hand, unsure for just a moment. Then I drop my bag and walk over to the silent pair, a move that's causing apprehensive looks to appear on their faces. Richard actually stiffens as if he's expecting me to take a swing at him.

"Don't do this to Hutch," I say as fast as I can. "Please. Stop this before it's too late. I promise, you'll never see me again, you'll never hear from me again. I'll do anything. Just...don't do this to him. It's gonna rip him apart. He loves you. Don't make him choose between us."

I'm begging. There's no other word for it. Hell, I'd go down on my knees if I thought that would make a difference.

Margaret looks taken aback as if I'd done just that. She blinks, hesitates, opens her mouth to speak.

Richard beats her to it. "Maybe you should have thought of that before you got us all into this situation," he says. He's recovered his cool, and his crisp voice leaves no room for dialog, or compromise. "It's a little late to talk about promises now, don't you think? I offered you a way out—a very generous way out, I might add—and you refused to take it. And now you have the impudence to imply that this is all our fault? How dare you? How dare you waltz in here and—"

He's all set to go on in this vein, but I don't hear the rest, because at that moment Margaret's gaze slips over my shoulder and her eyes go wide. I spin around, and what I see puts my heart right into my mouth.

Hutch is standing under the archway, and his face is whiter than the wall.

He's just standing there, not breathing, and his arms are hanging limp at his side.

I move without thinking. I'm already halfway across the room when I see the slip of paper he's holding in lifeless fingers—a narrow rectangle with a red logo on a gray background....

Oh.

Shit.

I come to a halt before him. "Hutch," I say tentatively.

His eyes find mine, and, *oh God*, the look in his eyes! That's how Caesar must've looked after his best pal stabbed him in the back.

I'll be haunted by that look.

"He tried to b-bribe you?" His voice is barely above a whisper. God, it hurts to look at him. His gaze slides away from me to his father. "You tried to *bribe* Starsky? To m-make him stay away from me?"

When Hutch stutters, I know things are bad. I grip him by the arms, hard. "Hutch," I say. "Hutch, don't."

He doesn't seem to hear me, doesn't seem to feel my fingers digging into his arms. His eyes are on his father.

Richard doesn't even blink. "I tried. I had to. Someone had to try and break this...*strangling grip* that man has on you. He's already got his hands on your trust fund. When is it going to stop? When he's run through your inheritance? I'll cut you out of the will before I allow a single cent of it to fall into his hands."

"You think Starsky is in this for the *money*?" Hutch is coming around fast. Every fiber in his body is tensing up. I feel as if I'm trying to hold down a cobra, coiled and getting ready to strike. "You think this is all just about the goddamn *money*?"

"Everything is about money," Richard says, neatly summing up his outlook on life.

"Then why didn't he take it?" Hutch thrusts out the check he's still holding. "Why didn't he, if that's what he's after?"

"Isn't it obvious? He has bigger fish to fry. Open your eyes, Kenneth. Can't you see what he's doing? He has his claws in you. He's squeezing you dry. Money, support, free nursing care! And now he's even managed to make you believe you're one of those *faggots*!" Richard spits out the word as if it's acid on his tongue. "He has you exactly where he wants you. Of course he's not going to give that up for fifty grand."

"Belief has nothing to do with it," Hutch says heatedly. "I *am* a faggot, if that's what you want to call it. You better get used to the idea."

"You're a *man*," Richard bellows. "You were after the women like any hot-blooded male. Just because he lets you sodomize him, doesn't make you one of those sick freaks."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Hutch roars and strains against my hold. "How dare you judge us? You know nothing about us, or about Starsky. You have no right to interfere in our lives."

"I have *every* right," Richard roars back. "I'm your father. And I'm not as ignorant as you think. I know what I'm talking about. And I'm *not* standing by, watching my son being dragged down by some Jew pervert from a family of criminals and gangsters."

Christ.

In the sudden appalled silence, Kathy's gasp sounds like a small explosion. I hardly dare look at Hutch. He's changing under my hands, a slow terrible transformation. The heat of his fury dies away, and he turns stone cold and icy. I can almost see his eyes freeze over.

I know now that nothing I can say or do will ever make this right again. When Hutch shrugs off my hands, I don't fight him. I let my arms fall and step aside. Hutch walks past me and up to his father until he's nose to nose with him.

"If you weren't my father, I would strike you down for that," he says. "You better come up with a damn good apology for what you just said, or by God, I swear I will."

"Listen to me, Kenneth," Richard says, unaware of the danger he's blindly walking into. "You don't seem to realize what kind of a man you're dealing with here. He's a trouble-maker, from a family of trouble-makers. There are a lot of things you don't know about him."

Hutch's eyes narrow. *Oh?*

"I would have preferred to tell you this in private," Richard says tartly, "but you leave me no choice. You have to know the truth."

"The truth about *Starsky*?"

"About the man. His background. His family. Criminals, Kenneth, all of them! The whole family, rotten to the core! They have ties to the mob that go all the way back to the Old World. Your so-called partner here was neck-deep in the business before he was shipped out to Vietnam. The whole family was all under investigation by the FBI at one time. Three of his uncles have criminal records. His *brother* is doing time in a Mexican jail as we speak."

His voice is rising with each fresh statement. A forefinger stabs the air. He can't reel the items off fast enough. He's relishing the revelations.

Me, I'm puzzled. My family's complex relationship with the Durniaks was never made public, and Nick's conviction on smuggling charges is too minor an offense to show up in the news. There's only one way Richard can know all this.

Hutch is thinking the same thing. "You had *Starsky investigated*?" he says in disbelief.

"A simple background check. There's a substantial file on his father, did you know that? He was in the pocket of the local crime boss for years. He even got a gangland funeral when he got himself killed by a rival gang. *That's* the sort of people you're associating with, Kenneth! I'm telling you this for your own good. For all you know this *partner* of yours is as corrupt as his old man was."

That's it. That's all I hear. A surge of blood roars in my ears and drowns out what else he has to say. Reality slips away as a dark, destructive urge takes me by the throat. And all of a sudden I'm overwhelmed with fury.

Goddammit, the things he says and knows nothing about! The way he talks about people as if they were dirt. The disdain, the need to control, the bully boy tactics.

I couldn't do anything before. Not here. Not in a fight against Hutch's family. But this is different. Richard slandered my pa. I can't let him get away with that. I want to grab him by the front of his expensive suit and punch the self-righteous smirk off his face—Hutch's dad or not, I no longer care. This time he's gone too far.

I've already taken three long steps toward him, enough to see the look of alarm on his face—he knows it's for real this time, I can tell by the way he almost trips as he hastily backs away from me.

Before I can pursue, I come up against an obstacle. *Hutch*. A solid presence in my path. Our earlier roles are reversed as I find an arm across my chest and Hutch's full weight braced against me.

"Starsky, no. Don't. You don't wanna do this. I know you don't." His worried voice reaches me through layers of wadded cotton. "Take it easy, babe. C'mon, take it easy now."

I'm breathing as if I've just chased a perp around the block. For a moment, I'd forgotten the cardinal rule in our lives, that only one of us can hit the roof at any one time. We saw the fallout that results when we both blow up at the same time.

Hutch has his hands on my shoulders and his eyes locked with mine. *I'll deal with this*, he tells me. *Leave it to me, okay?*

I know he's right, but it still takes everything I have to follow his lead this time. Only the realization that he's shelved his own fury in order to contain mine makes me back down.

I nod, and he removes his hands, trusting me. Underneath his controlled exterior I sense an emotion at least as strong as mine. Maybe stronger. And something else, something more powerful than the helpless anger that strangled his words earlier.

He turns to Richard, who looks ruffled, as if I'd really laid hands on him.

"You think you know what kind of a man my partner is," Hutch says. "You think you have it all figured out. You think it's all about money and power and manipulation. But you don't know anything."

He draws himself up and holds his father with his eyes.

"I'll tell you what kind of a man Starsky is," he says. "He's the most honest, caring, and compassionate man I know. He's warm, and smart, and funny. He's the kind of man who wins a fortune in Vegas, and then gives it all away to someone who needs it more than him. He's a man who puts his career and his life on the line to help someone in need. He's tough as nails, but he has the softest heart."

What the f—? *Hutch, for Chrissakes, what do you think you're doing?*

I can't believe I'm hearing this.

"I know Starsky as well as I know myself," Hutch goes on, undeterred. "I know his strengths and every one of his flaws, and believe me, corruption isn't one of them. Starsky has more integrity in his little finger than most people have in their whole bodies, and that's because he cares. He cares about people, about justice. He stands up for what he believes in. If anyone is incorruptible, it's Starsky. Every low-life in LA knows it. Our captain knows it. Everyone in the department knows it."

A rush of heat has set my ears on fire. I no longer know where to look. *Dammit, Hutch, will ya shut up?*

But no, he's in full swing. All the things he's tucked away in a corner of his soul all these years, the things he's always wanted to say and never could—for the sake of keeping the peace, for the sake of sweet harmony—they're pouring out all at once in a powerful, passionate flow of words.

"You don't know what it's like out there. You never wanted to hear about it. You don't know anything about our work, the things we see, the things we have to do sometimes. Things you couldn't even imagine. You have no idea that out there on the streets, the only one you can rely on to watch your back is your partner."

Hutch's presence dominates the room. His voice rings out with the fervor of someone who has things to say that need to be said.

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Starsky. I wouldn't be alive. He's pulled my ass out of the fire more times than I can count. I owe Starsky my life, my health, my sanity, and my self-respect. He's there for me every time I need him. When I fall, he's there to catch me. When I get lost, I know he'll find me. When I fall apart, he's there to pick up the pieces. Every time. Every single time."

Geez, Hutch, why don't you just sing me a love song, or something?

"He would do anything for me," he says, "and that's not just a hollow phrase. He stood between me and Gunther's bullets. He could have got down. He could have saved his own skin, but he didn't. He protected me. He..." Emotion ripples over his face. "He *died*. Did I ever tell you that? He died, but he came back to me. Because he loves me."

He's looking at me now and all thoughts of strangling him dissolve in the heat that's suddenly building between us.

"And I love *him*," he says. "Does that mean anything to you? I love him. I trust him. Starsky is the most important part of my life. He's my world, my light, my happiness, and my will to live. Without him I'm nothing."

A lump the size of a boulder seals my throat. Moisture stings my eyes. *Dammit, Hutch....*

Across the room I catch a glimpse of Margaret's astonished face and Kathy's ecstatic one. I bet they never saw him like this before. They don't really know him at all—the man, the cop, the fighter. The lover. Now they are seeing a small part of a Hutch they never knew existed.

Margaret and Kathy are mesmerized by this new Hutch. Only Richard doesn't want to see it. When Hutch stops speaking, he turns away, shaking his head as if trying to throw off the words that still hang in the air like a spell. His hands are fists, balled so tight the skin stretches white over his knuckles. When he turns back to face us, his lips form a thin line, hard and pinched with anger.

"You're deluded, Kenneth. I can see that now. You refuse to see reason even when it's presented to you on a plate. What about the things I just told you—the mob connections, the criminal background? Are you telling me all that means nothing to you? Well, what do you have to say about that? Or didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you," Hutch says. "And if anyone's deluded, it's you. I don't know what kind of a third-rate snoop you hired to get that information, but if I were you, I'd be

asking for my money back, 'cause what you've got there isn't even worth two cents."

"I should have known you wouldn't believe me."

"About the childhood friendship between Jake Starsky and Joe Durniak? The gang Starsky hung out with when he was fourteen? Uncle Aaron's tax dodge and Nicky's two-year stint in Tijuana? Sure I believe you. I know that's true."

"You know?"

"Of course I know. He's my *partner*. There's not much I don't know about him." Hutch takes a step toward his father. "I want you to listen to me very carefully. Starsky's family isn't and never has been involved in organized crime, and Jake Starsky was never in anyone's pocket. On the contrary, he fought against everything Durniak stood for, and paid for it with his life."

He spears Richard with a look that chills my heart. "You're insulting his memory with your unsubstantiated claims. You better not go around spreading those lies, because if you do, if you *ever* do, I swear I'll see you in court. For slander."

Richard's face looks as if it's being pulled in different directions by invisible strings. His belligerence slips like a badly secured mask, and I see a flash of something very different lurking underneath. And I suddenly understand.

He's afraid of us.

Not of Hutch's threat, real as it is, but of what we are, what we represent—our united front, the power of our connection he's unable to break. He's afraid of people he can't control. Like any bully, he's a coward at heart.

"How dare you threaten me in my own house?" he thunders, his voice raised like a shield. "I don't have to take this from you. Who do you think you are? You really think you can just turn your back on this family? I'm warning you—you walk out that door right now, and you will never set foot in this house again! Is that clear?"

Make your choice, he's saying. *It's him or us*.

That's not a contest. Hutch gives me a sad smile and picks up his bag. I take a deep breath and reach for mine.

And then something unexpected happens.

"Stop!" a voice says, and at first it's so distorted with distress and agitation, it takes me a second to connect the voice with Margaret. We all turn to her.

"Stop it," she repeats. "You can't do this. I will *not* let you do this!"

"You keep out of this, Margaret," Richard snarls. "This is between Kenneth and me."

He's right about that. This isn't about me, never has been. This is only about Richard and Hutch.

But Margaret doesn't see it that way.

"I'm not keeping out of this. You're not the only one who has a say in this matter. This is my house, too, and he's my son, same as yours. And David is Ken's partner. You can't just throw him out. I won't stand for it."

Her flushed cheeks burn through the layers of make-up as she turns to confront her husband.

"I've watched them together, really watched them, even if you haven't," she says. "I saw the way they look at each other. I heard the truth in everything Ken just said. You're blind if you think David is in this for personal gain. Can't you see how much Ken means him? How happy he makes him? I'm telling you, Richard, I'm not ready to lose my son. Even if it means accepting that he's...in love with another man."

Silence. Four sets of eyes are glued to Margaret. Four jaws are hanging slack. A long-range missile couldn't have done a better job of stunning the hell out of us.

Hutch is the first to recover. "Mom," he says, awed. "Christ, Mom."

She looks at him. "I can't let him do this, can I?" she says. "You're my son. This is your home. This will always be your home."

My home is with Starsky. Hutch doesn't say it, but I hear it all the same, and I think Margaret gets it, too.

"You're leaving, aren't you?" she says. "I wish we had more time. We have so much to talk about."

Hutch shakes his head. "It's better this way. We can't stay here now."

"No, I suppose not." She looks away, then back up at him. "Ken, I...." She lifts a helpless hand, lost for words.

"It's all right, mom. I understand. Look, we better get going if we want to catch that flight. Will you be okay?"

She nods. They look at each other. Hutch reaches out just as she moves forward. He puts his arms around her as if she were one of the Chinese vases in the hall, and they share a cautious hug. It's the first time I've ever seen them do that.

Before I can adjust to these rapid developments, I find Margaret standing before me, looking at me in a way she never looked at me before—hesitant, and almost a little shy.

"David. I'm so sorry. About all of this. I wish...." She shakes her head, and then she reaches out and puts a tentative hand on my arm.

"I'll call you," she says to both of us. "I'll be in touch."

It's not exactly a wild endorsement of me, or Hutch and me, or what we are to each other, but it's a beginning.

I pick up my bag again, Hutch swings the door open.

But we forgot about Richard. He's standing alone, an island an ocean away from the rest of us, and he's not happy with the way this is going.

"Don't you dare walk out on me!" he roars as he walks forward. "I haven't finished with you yet. For the last time, stop this preposterous nonsense! You will regret it if you don't. I'll cut you out of the will. I'll leave you destitute. You're not going to see a cent of my money!"

He's had a grip on himself all this time. I've never seen him lose it before. He's losing it now. In fact, he sounds demented. Sweat beads stand on his forehead, there's an unhealthy tint to his cheeks, and his voice resembles an enraged scream.

"Kenneth! Come back here this minute! *Kenneth!*"

Hutch stops. "Actually," he says, "I prefer Hutch. I never really liked the name Kenneth."

He turns to me. "Ready?"

God, break my heart, will ya? I nod, knowing my voice will let me down if I speak. Together we follow Kathy to the car.

We don't speak much on the thirty-minute drive to the airport. It's only after we've changed our tickets, hugged Kathy good-bye, and are sitting in the departure lounge that we finally, finally take a good look at each other.

Hutch looks hollow, as if scraped out on the inside, and the way his eyes walk all over me tells me there's a matching look on my own face. I decide that what we both need is a drink or three, a good night's sleep, and lots of tender loving care, not necessarily in that order.

I can't wait to get home.

Sunday night

It's late. The house is dark and quiet. Even the distant hum of the city is just a muted sound in the night.

We're upstairs in our large airy bedroom, cocooned under the covers. The window is open a crack, and the blinds move in and out with the breeze, allowing narrow shafts of moonlight to sneak inside and draw ghostly patterns on the walls.

I'm on my side, and my arms are full of Hutch. He's facing away from me, curled up hedgehog-fashion, as if that could somehow keep the world at bay.

"I'm sorry," he whispers again. "I can't. I just...can't right now."

"Hey, it's no big deal." I give the rigid body a small squeeze. "Happens to all of us. Don't worry 'bout it."

"But you—"

"I'm all right. How often do I have to say it? I'm fine."

"At least let me—"

"Shhh. That's enough now. Just relax, will ya?"

A long breath lifts his chest. "I'll make it up to you tomorrow. I promise."

"When you're ready. We got all the time in the world." As I said, when it comes down to it, holding Hutch is all I want from life. Everything else is a bonus.

He sighs and falls quiet.

We lie there in silence for a while, and although it's after midnight and we're exhausted, I know neither of us will go to sleep any time soon. There's too much stuff churning around the blond head half hidden under the covers. So I hold on, soak up the closeness of Hutch, and wait for him to make the first move.

When he finally does, the words are a muffled sound in the dark.

"He wasn't always like this, you know. He's changed. I never realized how much. I had no idea he had so much hatred inside him."

The fractured breath he's taking would be a sob by any other name. But he doesn't cry. Not yet. Maybe it's too soon.

"He did what he thought was best for you," I murmur. "He thought he was protecting you. In his own way, he does care about you."

"How can you say that? After what he did? God, Starsk, what he did...."

And finally, he comes to me. Turns in my arms and clings to me as if he's trying to crawl inside my skin with a sudden desperate need for closeness.

"I loved him so much. He was my hero when I was a kid. I wanted to be just like him. But how can I love him now? After what he did to us?"

Us. I'll always love him for saying that. What Richard did to *us*. 'Cause we're no longer separate people. Where it counts, where the most important parts of us are, we're one.

So I cradle his head against my shoulder, and I kiss him and tell him everything is going to be all right, because it has to be. Because there's simply no other way.

After a while, his breathing eases and his heartbeat slows to a low, steady thump against my chest. He stirs and eases away a little, not letting go of me as if he can't bear to lose contact for even a second. His hand comes up and touches my face.

"He wanted to break us," he whispers. "He couldn't stand to see how close we are." He tangles his fingers in my hair, runs a thumb over my temple, a gesture that's light and warm and full of tenderness.

"But he couldn't do it," he adds. "He wanted to raise a storm, but all he managed were a few ripples."

"Ripples? Felt more like a damn tidal wave to me."

But I know what he means. Richard, in spite of his best efforts, had no chance in hell to pull it off. It takes a lot more than Hutch's dad to come between us. He's not in the same league as Gunther or...or Rosey.

We're bound with ties too strong to break so easily. But something sure keeps trying.

"You gettin' the feeling something out there has it in for us?" I say as I settle down beside him. "It's just one damn thing after another. When are we gonna get a break?"

Hutch is quiet. "Maybe we won't," he finally says. "Maybe that's the whole point. The price we have to pay."

For this thing we have between us, he means. This *connection*, or whatever you wanna call it, with roots so deep down, we can't tell where they end, or how far back in time they go.

We only ever catch a glimpse of it. It's not something we can think about much and expect to hang onto our sanity. It's scary enough to know how desperately we need each other. This thing—it shouldn't exist. It's against all laws of nature.

Maybe that's why something out there is trying so hard to break it.

"One day, Starsk," Hutch says as if he's right there inside my head. "Gonna happen one day."

"Well, it hasn't yet. And maybe it never will." Call it denial. "We're still here, still together."

And will be, if I have anything to say about it.

We lapse back into silence. A gust of wind rattles the window panes.

That makes me think of the roof tiles that blew down in the gale last week. We need to get those fixed. I latch onto the problem—reassuringly real and ordinary—with great relief. All that deep stuff can wait. It's better not to think about it too much, anyway.

But Hutch—he's different. He won't be distracted so easily. Hutch is a worrier. He'll be awake for hours yet, dissecting everything that's happened, wondering what he could've done differently.

I glance at him, but all I can see is a blurred shape in the dark.

Then I notice that my hand that's resting on his chest is rising and falling with a calm, unhurried motion like a small boat riding on a leisurely swell. I lie still and watch the peaceful movement for a moment. A surge of tenderness lifts my heart. *Hutch. What'm I gonna do with you, huh?*

We still have a lot of talking to do. About granddad Johann's trust fund. About Gillian.

Tomorrow. Or maybe next week.

I reach for the blankets and tug them carefully around us. Hutch doesn't move when I inch closer to him. I press my forehead against his shoulder, curl an arm around him and close my eyes.

- End -