



Tracks in the Snow

by wightfaerie

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The squad room was quiet for once. It was just over a week before Christmas and all the detectives were on the street, desperately trying to close their outstanding cases. No one wanted to risk any vacation time being cancelled, and handing them over to the detectives covering for the holidays was almost an embarrassment.

Hutch was grateful for the peace. He'd had enough Christmas chatter already. Glancing over at Starsky, he could see the glint in those indigo eyes. That glint meant that Starsky was as excited about the holidays as ever. To give the guy his due, he'd held his merriment in pretty well. Hutch didn't know if that was because Starsky was tired of Hutch raining on his parade, or if Starsky was lulling him into a false sense of security and would explode with Christmas spirit when Hutch least expected it. He suspected the latter, knowing his partner.

Starsky merely grinned back at him and ripped the report out of his typewriter. "We're up to date, buddy. Whatever they throw at us can have our full attention."

That would be every unsolved crime then. He and Starsky had pulled Christmas duty for the past six years. To be fair, they'd offered most of the time, and this was no different. Neither of them had requested time off over the festive period.

Christmas was for kids and family. He and Starsky had none of the first, and minimal of the second.

Starsky's mom, Sarah, came out to Bay City to stay at Rosie's some Christmases. Nicky was just Nicky. He turned up when you least wanted him.

Hutch's parents, William and Eleanor, usually went on a cruise. His sister, Grace, and her husband, Lou, preferred a Canadian celebration. This time, however, they were all spending the holidays in Duluth, mainly because his new niece, Kelly, was barely five months old. The proud grandparents wanted their only grandchild to spend her first Christmas in the Hutchinson family home; just as they had with their own children. Hutch had yet to meet Kelly, and assuming he would be on duty, had promised Grace that he'd head for Vancouver on his next vacation.

"Starsky, Hutchinson, my office," Dobby said, poking his head around the edge of the door between his office and the squad room.

Hutch threw a quizzical look at Starsky.

Starsky shrugged his shoulders and pushed his chair away from the table, twisting and standing in one fluid movement. With his usual swagger, he disappeared into Dobby's office.

Taking a moment to appreciate the view, Hutch stared at Starsky's butt, before deigning to follow his boss' order. Closing the door with a backward kick of his right foot, he perched on the arm of the chair Starsky already occupied.

"Christmas rosters," Dobby started.

"We know, Cap." Starsky jumped in. "Hutch and I are working over Christmas." He turned his head to Hutch and whispered, "as usual."

"No, Starsky," Dobby said, glowering at the interruption. "You have ten days vacation, starting on the twenty-second."

Hutch leaned forward. "We always work the holiday period. So the guys with kids can spend time with their families."

Dobby nodded. "You have families, too," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Simmons and Babcock have volunteered this year. They haven't got kids either."

"Why?" Starsky asked suspiciously. His shoulder was digging into Hutch's leg as he wiggled in his seat.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Starsky." Dobby scribbled on the paper in front of him. "Now get out of here and give your families the good news."

"Thanks, Captain," Hutch said, standing up and dragging Starsky after him by the scruff of his shirt.

"Good news, my eye," Starsky mumbled, as he tried to extract Hutch's fingers from his clothing. "Choking here, buddy."

"Sorry," Hutch said, releasing his hold. "Didn't want you to blow the first Christmas we've had off in seven years."

"Not much point," Starsky said, stopping at the coffee cart and pouring a mug of coffee. He sighed, ladling sugar into the cup like it was going out of fashion. A waterfall of milk followed the sweet overload.

Hutch shuddered. "You want coffee with that glop?" he asked, grabbing a mug and pouring one for himself. "Where's your holiday spirit? Thought you'd be over the moon, gives you more time to spend with your mom."

"That's the problem. She ain't coming to Bay City this year. Guess you'll head off to Duluth to see that lovely niece of yours." Starsky sipped at his drink, making a face.

"Too sweet?" Hutch laughed. Served Starsky right. Hutch was tired of telling him to cut down on the sugar. "You can go see her instead."

Starsky slumped heavily on his chair. "No can do. She's taking Aunt Rosie on a ladies only jaunt. First Christmas without Uncle Al."

Damn, Hutch had forgotten about that. Al had passed away in the February. A victim of living life to the excess; fast food, too much alcohol, and fast used cars.

“Oh,” was the best Hutch could come up with for a few seconds. Plunking his half empty mug on his desk, he glanced at Starsky. “Mother’s not expecting me. I’ll stay here. We can still spend Christmas with Huggy, Kiko, Molly and the Dobeys.” *And have some free time to ourselves! They hadn’t had a scene in months.*

“Hutch, you haven’t been back to Duluth in the past two years,” Starsky stated a fact that Hutch was well aware of.

Not since I told my father about us, he silently finished Starsky’s sentence. Hutch smiled. He’d been nursing a secret and now was the time to tell Starsky.

“Come with me.”

“To Duluth?”

“Where do you think, dummy.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“It’s fine. Mother told me last week that Father has finally, albeit grudgingly, accepted that we are partners.” He scanned the still empty room. Thank God they were the only ones here. Their relationship wasn’t common knowledge yet. The only people in the precinct who knew about them were Dobeys and Minnie. “We’ll probably have separate rooms though.” William might have come around, but Hutch wasn’t going to rock the boat by demanding they share a bed.

“Talk to your mom, and then we’ll see.”

Hutch took that as a yes. “I’ll call her tonight.” He snagged his jacket from the back of his chair. “Come on, time to hit the streets or Dobeys might change his mind about our time off.”

Starsky chugged the rest of his coffee. Hutch could swear the guy was actually chewing his drink.

“You really should have left that in the mug. I’m glad that I am not your stomach.” Hutch glanced at his own drink and gagged a little. Only Starsky could put a man off of black coffee. He walked to the double doors and pulled open the right one.

Starsky was directly behind him, resting his hand on the small of Hutch’s back. It was a seemingly innocent touch to anyone observing, one that they would have seen many times. Only Hutch could feel the tantalizing pressure of Starsky’s fingertips, and the promise that was being made for later, when they were alone.

The quietness they’d enjoyed in the squad room was shattered by the opening of the door. Hutch stepped into the hallway, into the hustle and bustle of the busy precinct. Cops and

civilians alike went about their business, carrying files, moving prisoners around, and just generally chatting to each other. Most of them he knew, a few were strangers.

Starsky pushed him aside. “Last one to the car buys lunch,” he shouted over his shoulder, already fifty yards or so in front of Hutch by the time he delivered the challenge.

Hutch accepted silently, starting his run just as Starsky hightailed it around the corner. By the time Hutch caught up with him, Starsky was at the front door. They jostled each other in a bid to gain the advantage, both tumbling in a controlled kind of way to the sidewalk. Hutch reached the car first, planting his hand firmly on the handle. “I win,” he crowed.

Starsky glared at him from the front of the car. “No fair,” he whined. “I had further to go to my door.”

Hutch smiled. “You parked the car. You lay down the challenge. You buy, I choose the place.”

Starsky unlocked his door. “No way, I buy, I choose.”

“We’ll see,” Hutch said, curling his body into his seat.

Starsky screeched into the mid-morning traffic, slowing only when they hit heavier flow on South Broadway.

Hutch scanned the streets to his left and right as usual. There seemed to be a Santa every few blocks. The iconic Christmas figure came in all shapes and sizes. His cop’s brain kicked in. Most were probably legit, but at least a quarter of them would have gone through the system by Christmas Day. Nobody thinks Santa’s going to be the bad guy. Pickpockets love Christmas. The bearded guy is a great disguise. He sighed. People called him a cynic, a bah humbug. How could he not be with what he and Starsky saw every day? Hutch glanced sideways at Starsky. How did his partner do it? His joy of the holiday season never wavered. No matter how heinous people were, Starsky still bashed through to enjoy the festivities.

“What?” asked Starsky.

“Huh?”

“You were looking at me. You had that expression that can only mean trouble.”

“What expression?”

“You were thinking, buddy boy. Lay it on me.”

“Just thinking that I need to buy Kelly a gift, if we’re going to Duluth,” Hutch lied. He didn’t feel like ragging on Starsky right now.

“Thought you already mailed her a present to your parents.”

Hutch nodded. “That was just clothing.” Minnie had helped him pick out this cute little pink satin dress, complete with ruffled panties and matching soft shoes. “Now I can buy her something special.”

“She’s five months old, Hutch. She won’t know what you bought her.” Starsky pounded on the horn at the white panel van that decided to barge its way in front of them. “Stupid idiot. Wait ‘til she’s older and buy her something special when she can appreciate it.”

“Aren’t I supposed to be the Christmas Grinch?” Hutch braced his hands on the dash.

“What’s he playing at?” he snarled, as the van ahead continued to slalom across the lanes of traffic, dodging into any gap he could.

“Dunno, but I’m gonna find out.” Starsky stepped on the gas, mimicking the van’s behavior.

“Oh, Starsk, please, don’t.” Visions of other chases flashed before Hutch’s eyes. He didn’t want to spend his vacation in a hospital bed.

The van jumped a red light. The cars between it and the Torino obeyed the stop command. Starsky swerved around the vehicle directly in front of them. A bus entered the junction from the left, blocking the road and halting Starsky’s pursuit.

“Damn,” he said, slamming his left palm on top of the steering wheel.

Hutch breathed a sigh of relief. A simple traffic violation wasn’t worth the risk of life and limb. A point he’d made to Starsky more times than he cared to remember. Not that it made any difference. Starsky couldn’t resist a chase, the chance to prove that he was the better driver.

“Take the next right turn,” directed Hutch. “We’ll go to Huggy’s for lunch.”

Starsky opened his mouth, probably to remind Hutch that he was choosing the venue. Instead, he maneuvered around the requested corner with a simple “Kay.”

Starsky pulled smoothly over to the curb outside Venice Place. Hutch had never been so happy to see the imposing façade of his building. Four hours of crowded streets, milling shoppers and myriad Santas had just about killed any holiday spirit that Hutch had left. Climbing out of the car, he stretched the kinks out of his back.

“Hutch.” Starsky leaned across the seats. “Don’t forget to call your mother.”

Hutch bent down, right arm resting on the roof of the car. “You not coming in?”

“No, I promised Aunt Rosie that I’d move a few things for her.”

“You need a hand?”

“No. Stop stalling.” Starsky licked his lips. “Get that luscious butt inside and figure out our Christmas. I’ll be back about nine. Have dinner ready, honey.”

“Yes, Master.” Hutch saluted, happy to take even the slightest bit of domination from Starsky. He missed his Master, and it looked like a little Christmas fun would be out of the question! They could get in a few good sessions with so much free time and not having to worry about work the next day. Maybe that’s why Starsky was pushing to go to Duluth, so they couldn’t play.

“Over thinking, Hutch, just do it,” Starsky commanded in his Master voice.

Hutch shook his head. Sometimes he wished Starsky didn’t always know what he was thinking. He patted the car roof and straightened, standing at the curb until Starsky drove away.

Running up the stairs, he unlocked the door and grabbed the phone before he changed his mind. His brain flipped between his desire to see his family after so long and wanting to wrap his relationship with Starsky in a bubble where no one else could enter. He automatically dialed the number that had been engraved into his child mind so many years before.

“Hutchinson residence.” The familiar lilting accent of his parents’ housekeeper, Rosa, calmed the nerves in his stomach. She’d been with his family since he was eight years old. William had gone down to Mexico City on a business trip. Rosa had been a maid in the hotel where William had stayed, and for some reason Hutch was never made privy to, came back to Duluth with his father.

“Rosa.”

“Master Kenneth. Es maravilloso escuchar su voz. Cuando vamos a ver?”

Hutch smiled. Rosa always lapsed into Spanish when she was excited. Even after almost thirty years in America. “Pronto. Soon. May I speak with my mother, please?”

“Un...a momen, I get her for you.”

The clunk of plastic against wood echoed in his ear before he had the chance to thank Rosa.

“Kenneth. Lovely to hear from you again so soon; is anything wrong?”

“No,” Hutch quickly assured her. Damn, he hadn’t considered that she might think the worst. He usually called her once a month, and he had phoned last Thursday. “Just the opposite, good news. Captain Dobey told us today that we aren’t on duty this Christmas. I can visit with you all.”

“Wonderful,” Eleanor said shrilly. *“We don’t see you enough!”*

“I know, the job and,” Hutch floundered for the next part of the sentence. “Everything,” was the best he could come up with, without spelling out the reason he preferred to stay away.

“That’s no longer an issue. Should we expect you both?”

Hutch smiled. “Yes. If you’re sure...”

“It’s fine,” Eleanor cut into his sentence.

“I’ll call when I’ve booked the flights. Love you.”

“You, too. Speak soon.”

Hutch held onto the receiver several seconds after the dial tone indicated that Eleanor had ended the call. He wished he felt as confident as she sounded that the visit would be fine. Fine was usually a word used when things weren’t really as good as they should be. All he could do was pray.

December 23, 1980

Hutch retrieved their luggage from carousel number five in Duluth airport. Starsky’s canvas army sack was big and heavy. “Jeez, Starsk, have you got everything you own in that?” he said, dumping the bag in front of Starsky.

“We’re in Duluth,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“So?”

“It’s cold,” Starsky said, blowing on his hands and stamping his sneaker clad feet.

“We’re still in the airport. How can you be cold already?” Hutch picked up his blue and brown suitcase and matching carryall.

“Unlike you, I don’t got winter stuff in the closet at your parents’ house. I had to bring them with me.”

“You could have shared mine. Did you buy clothes especially for this visit?” Hutch sidled over to Starsky, making contact hip to shoulder. It warmed him inside to know that his buddy had secretly gone out and bought winter stuff, as Starsky called it. All he’d really needed was that huge sweater of his.

“No. Yeah,” Starsky admitted sheepishly. “Huggy’s pal helped me out with the latest fashions in winter sports.”

“Dear God, tell me you didn’t go to Duke’s Used Clothing.” Hutch had only recently gotten over the humiliation of walking into the hotel in Las Vegas looking like a 1930s gangster. The laughter rang in his ears every time he thought about going undercover.

“Okay, I didn’t go to Duke’s Used Clothing,” he said, winking at Hutch.

Hutch rolled his eyes. At least they’d missed his parents’ annual Christmas Ball. Who knew what gem Duke would have convinced Starsky was suitable for a high society event? Not that they were high society, but William mixed with the Duluth elite because of his successful corporate law firm.

“Which way to the taxi stand?” Starsky asked, throwing his sack over his shoulder and looking around.

“Follow me,” Hutch said, heading for the exit. “Mother said that someone would come and get us. Probably one of the town car companies father has a business account with.” Stepping through the doors, he scanned the pick-up area.

“Ken,” shouted a high pitched voice that he recognized, although he’d only heard it over the phone for the past few years.

Hutch turned in the direction the sound was coming from. “Grace,” he said, walking towards the slim blonde figure in a bright pink ski jacket, blue jeans and pink boots picking her way delicately across the snow laden asphalt. “I thought Father was sending a car.”

Grace leapt into his arms as soon as she was close enough. “I wanted to come and get my big brother, spend a little time with you, without the rest of the family,” she said, smothering him with kisses. “You haven’t changed a bit. I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you, too, baby sis. A telephone can’t take the place of your smile.” Hutch blushed at the corny song lyric that he had just quoted to his sister.

Starsky guffawed behind him. “You want me to leave?”

“Hi, Dave,” Grace said, wiggling out of Hutch’s grip and hugging Starsky.

“You look as beautiful as ever, Grace.” Starsky pulled Grace into a brotherly hug. “If you weren’t married, I’d marry you myself.”

“No, you wouldn’t. I’m the wrong Hutchinson,” she teased, smirking at Hutch. “The car’s over there.” She pointed in the direction of the parking lot.

Linking arms with Grace, Hutch guided her slowly over the slippery surface, avoiding the odd car, cab and bus picking up fares in their respective zones. He was glad that he had opted to wear his tan cowboy boots and lumberjack jacket. “You okay there, Starsk?” Though he’d ragged on Starsky for feeling cold, he sympathized with his partner. His feet must be freezing in those stupid sneakers. At least Starsky was wearing his thick woolen sweater. The last thing Hutch wanted was Starsky catching a chill.

“You worry about the little lady. I can take care of myself,” Starsky said.

Squeezing between two cars, Hutch spotted William’s cream Chrysler two rows further into the lot. “Father let you drive *Patricia*?” he said incredulously, linking arms with Grace and walking to the car. He dropped his bags by the trunk.

Starsky circled the car, whistling tunelessly. “Wow, a 1934, four doors, Chrysler Airflow. There aren’t many of these around.”

“It was my grandfather’s,” Hutch told Starsky. “My father restored her about twenty years ago, after grandfather died. We were never allowed to drive her,” he said pointedly, looking at Grace.

She unlocked the trunk. “The BMW wouldn’t start, and I couldn’t get a town car for at least two hours,” she said, innocence written all over her face.

Hutch snickered. “You little minx, you conned him, and he fell for it.” He flipped open the trunk lid and loaded their luggage, then slammed it shut. “He must be mellowing in his old age. I’m driving back. Might never get another chance.” That way he could take the long way around. His stomach was doing somersaults at the thought of how William was going to treat them when they got to the house. He could see Eleanor laying down the law to her husband. She took a lot from him, but when she put her foot down, William usually knew to back down. Hutch suspected that their visit was one of those times.

“I’ve never driven one of these,” Starsky said, caressing the curving mudguard and hood.

Hutch’s heart skipped a beat as he watched the delicate way Starsky touched the car, his skin tingling at the memory of Starsky’s fingertips stroking his body in exactly the same way. He moaned quietly.

“Dirty boy,” Grace said, thumping Hutch on the upper arm. “Wait until you’re alone.”

Hutch bit his bottom lip, a little embarrassed at Grace’s perceptiveness. “Sorry, that was inappropriate.”

“I’m teasing, dumbo. I am an adult.” Grace handed Hutch the keys. “I think it’s sweet. Good for you.”

Starsky clambered into the back seat. “You guys have to catch up,” he said. “I’m going to take a nap.”

Hutch opened the passenger door for Grace, waiting until she was settled before closing it and walking around to the driver’s side. “Enjoy your sleep.”

Starsky lay across the spacious back seat. “This is some machine.” He wasn’t in the least tired, but he wanted to give the siblings some space. He knew that Grace hadn’t had much time to chat with Hutch since Kelly was born.

Hutch started the engine. “She’s father’s pride and joy. Grandfather taught him to drive in this car.”

Starsky closed his eyes, listening to the chatter in the front seat.

“How’s my beautiful niece?”

“She’s gorgeous, and exhausting. This is the first day since she arrived that I’ve felt half human. Rosa insisted on taking her last night so that Lou and I could have some sleep.” Grace’s voice was soft, like Hutch’s, but more soprano in tone.

Starsky cracked open one eye. Two identical golden heads bobbed in the front seat.

“How’s Lou?”

“He’s good. He dotes on Kelly. I don’t get any attention these days.” Grace laughed.

“Seriously, we love her to pieces.”

“I can’t wait to meet her. Babies are so precious.”

Starsky could hear the yearning in Hutch’s voice. They’d talked about the implications of their relationship when they got together. Hutch had said he was okay with the fact that he’d never have the white picket fence and two point four kids. Starsky hoped that seeing Kelly wouldn’t remind Hutch of the very thing they could never have as a couple.

“They’re also a lot of work.” Grace turned to Hutch, a half smile on her face. “Not that I’m complaining, really.”

“You’ve got five willing helpers this holiday,” Hutch stated.

Starsky wasn’t so sure about that. They hadn’t had a whole lot to do with babies. From what Hutch had told him about his childhood, neither had Mr. Hutchinson, even though he’d two offspring.

“I’d forgotten how hard it can be to drive in the snow,” Hutch said, as the car slid slightly when he turned a corner.

Starsky clutched at the seat, struggling to push himself up. “You shoulda let me drive.”

Hutch snorted. “Says the guy who’s never driven in snow.”

“Have, too,” Starsky protested.

“When?”

Starsky sputtered. “When you weren’t there. In New York.”

Hutch pointed to the side of the highway. “See that house,” he said, pointing to a huge mansion.

Starsky looked at the building just visible through the trees. “Yeah,” he said suspiciously. It wasn’t like Hutch to rag on him and then give up so easily.

“That’s Glensheen, where they filmed ‘You’ll Like My Mother.’” Hutch said.

“I saw that movie. Patty Duke and Richard Thomas.”

“There was also a double murder there in 1977,” Grace said.

Hutch pulled into the flow of traffic. “Nearly there, Starsk.” Hutch took a few turns before driving through an archway at the side of an imposing brick and stucco house that was almost as impressive the mansion he had pointed out earlier.

“Number 2425, East First Street. Home, sweet home,” Hutch said jovially, though the slight tensing of his body told Starsky he was anything but.

Starsky whistled. “Thought you said you weren’t rich,” he said, recalling Hutch’s reunion with Jack Mitchell in Las Vegas.

“I said that Jack was filthy rich,” Hutch said in the sad tone that he always used when Mitchell was mentioned. He followed the driveway around the house to a one storey garage with two sets of double doors and one single. One set was open. Hutch stopped short of the garage space and killed the engine.

Eleanor met them at the front door wearing her signature beige slacks, twin set and pearls. She must have those sweaters in every color. The one she wore today was pale pink. Hutch never saw her in anything else, unless she was dressed up for an event. “Kenneth. You’ve put on weight,” she said, putting her arms around his waist.

Thank you for that, Mother. Hutch hadn’t yet lost all the weight he’d gained over the past few years, when he’d been less active, some of that time was because of Starsky’s shooting. A fact he wouldn’t bother pointing out to her. She didn’t mean any harm; she was merely stating a fact, as mothers do. “Hello, Mother,” he said, draping his arms over her shoulders. He kissed the top of her head, feeling far more emotional than he should. She seemed smaller than he remembered.

Pushing away from Hutch, she turned to Starsky, holding out her arms. “David, lovely to see you.”

“Mrs. Hutchinson.” Starsky smiled, hugging Eleanor back. “Why, I do believe, that you Hutchinson women get prettier every time I see you.”

Eleanor simpered. “You are still such a charmer, young man.”

Starsky grinned at Hutch over Eleanor’s shoulder.

Hutch raised his eyebrows. Eleanor had had a soft spot for Starsky from the first time she met him, when they graduated from the academy.

Eleanor linked arms with Starsky and Hutch. “Father had to take a work call. He’ll meet us in the library afterwards. Come.”

Grace came up behind them. “I’ll get Juan to take your bags upstairs. Which rooms, Mother?”

“I’ve put both you boys in Kenneth’s room.”

Hutch looked over her head at Starsky. He supposed that the shock on his face was similar to the expression on Starsky's face. "We expected separate rooms," he said haltingly. "Don't bother Juan." Rosa's skinny teenage son would never carry that kitbag of Starsky's. "We can manage our own luggage."

"No bother," Eleanor said. "He works for us, now. He got mixed up with the wrong crowd, and your father took responsibility for him, to keep him out of prison. Manuel, that no good father of his, left them a while ago."

Another shock for Hutch. He didn't see William as the social worker type, not unless he could bill the recipient for x amount of hours. What was it about Rosa and her family? "Do you mind if we freshen up first?"

"Go ahead. I'll have Rosa bring us some food and drink." Eleanor grabbed Grace's arm. "Let's go and see if that granddaughter of mine has woken up yet."

"This way," Hutch said to Starsky, leading the way through the front door and up the staircase to the left of the large entrance hall. He could imagine the things going through Starsky's head, and he hadn't seen the inside of the house yet.

Starsky followed Hutch up the steps, along the long hallway, and through the first door. He stepped into a large beige bedroom with two dark wooden beds and matching furniture.

"They're new," Hutch said, indicating the beds. "I thought it was too good to be true. Father hasn't accepted us. He's keeping Mother happy, and that's all."

Starsky rubbed Hutch's belly. "Baby steps, partner. He's trying. Meet him halfway?" Starsky walked across the room. "We can push the beds together. Or share one of them, they're big enough. Where do they lead?" he asked, pointing to three white doors in the wall to the right of the bedroom door.

"Bathroom," Hutch said, pushing at the first. He opened the middle door. "This one is the dressing room." One side was full of winter clothes, all neatly pressed and hanging, or folded on the shelves, ready to wear by the looks of it.

"This is almost as big as our apartments." Starsky shook his head. "All you need is a kitchen."

"Game, set and match," Hutch said, opening the last door.

Starsky peeked through the opening, into a long, narrow room containing what looked like a fully functioning kitchen and eating area.

"That door." Hutch pointed to the one directly across from where they were standing. "Leads to Grace's room. Rosa would cook our meals up here when Father had dinner parties for his clients. The caterers used to take over the main kitchen."

Starsky stared across the space, aware that his mouth was open.

“Don’t worry, we can lock the doors.” Hutch turned around and walked over to the nearest bed, slumping down heavily on what looked like a soft mattress, if the way it dipped under Hutch’s weight was anything to go by. He wiped his face with his hands.

“What’s wrong?” Starsky was concerned by the whiteness of his lover.

“I dunno. Something feels off.” Hutch pulled Starsky onto the bed next to him. “He giveth, and he taketh away.”

“What?” Starsky leaned against Hutch, lacing their fingers together.

“Father. He gives, or appears to give, us his blessing, allows us to share a room.” Hutch locked eyes with Starsky. “Two beds. Message received, loud and clear. Share a room, but not a bed. Why am I surprised?” Anger flashed in his eyes.

“Calm down. We expected separate rooms.” Wrestling his hands out of Hutch’s grasp, Starsky pulled Hutch’s head to him, their foreheads meeting with a soft thud. “It’s our room. We can sleep how we want. He can’t control that.” He pushed Hutch flat on the mattress. “It’s Christmas. We’re together, and you have a gorgeous niece waiting to meet her Uncle Hutch. Plaster on that ultra bright smile and play nice.” He straddled Hutch, laying full length on top of him and claimed his first kiss since they’d arrived.

Hutch wrapped his long legs around Starsky and ground his genitals into Starsky’s.

Knock, knock.

Hutch started. Wondering where he was when he first opened his eyes. Home? No, he definitely wasn’t in either his or Starsky’s bedroom. A hotel somewhere? No. Duluth? Yes, that’s it, Duluth. In what used to be his bedroom, not that it looked the same anymore.

Knock, knock.

“Just a minute.” He struggled to sit up only he was pinned down by Starsky’s full weight covering his left side. “Starsk, wake up.” Hutch somehow wiggled out from under his sleeping partner.

A grunt scolded Hutch for his trouble. He quickly crossed the room and opened the door.

Grace stood in the hallway, holding a squirming bundle of pink satin. “I hope you don’t mind. I opened her Christmas present from you early. The parcel was so squishy, I just knew it would be something gorgeous. Didn’t think my brother had such good taste in baby clothes.” She held Kelly out to Hutch.

“Take her,” Starsky said from behind Hutch.

Damn Starsky’s sniper training. He was too stealthy for Hutch’s own good.

“Kelly, meet your Uncle Ken,” Grace said, balancing Kelly on her hip. The baby gurgled in delight, starting into Hutch’s face with a gummy grin.

“Uncle Hutch,” Starsky said.

A little too forcefully in Hutch’s opinion. This was his sister, for God’s sake. “Starsk!”

“Ken, Hutch, I don’t mind what she calls you.” Grace laughed. “You choose.”

Hutch looked over his shoulder at his lover. Starsky seemed set on Kelly calling him Uncle Hutch. Probably because he thought it would stick one in the old man’s eye, to coin Starsky’s turn of phrase; or maybe just because Hutch didn’t sound as stuffy as Ken or Kenneth. Either way, Hutch preferred Hutch. It sat more comfortably on his shoulders. “Uncle Hutch.”

“Uncle Hutch it is,” Grace said, pushing Kelly into Hutch’s arms.

Hutch cuddled the baby to his chest, supporting her head with his right hand. “Hey there, Kelly, you are a beautiful little girl. I am so happy to meet you.”

Kelly smiled and wiped her face on Hutch’s shirt, leaving a streak of drool.

“I think she likes her Uncle Hutch, don’t you, schweetheart.” Starsky tickled Kelly under the chin.

Her bottom lip quivered.

“She’s not so sure about her Uncle Starsky,” Hutch said, chuckling. Watery blue eyes looked back at him. She had the trademark Hutchinson eyes and lips, and a downy covering of white hair on her head. He inhaled. She smelled weird; must be that baby smell women were always cooing about.

“Mother sent me to get you.” Grace stroked Kelly’s head. “Shush, little one. Father’s in the library. He wants to talk to the two of you.”

“Why?” Hutch went cold. Suddenly he felt like a little boy again. How many times had he stomped up to his room after an argument with William, to be summoned to the library like this? Grace had always been sent to bring him down.

Starsky rubbed Hutch’s shoulder. “Hey.”

Hutch was vaguely aware of Grace taking Kelly from him. “Ken. He wants to talk, that’s all.”

Hutch was an old hand at William’s talks. He made a fist, realizing that he wasn’t scared, the way he used to be. He was angry; angry for being summoned like a child. Why couldn’t William have waited until he and Starsky were downstairs, then asked to speak with them in private? Because that wasn’t William’s way; everything had to be done on his say so, when he wanted.

“You’re an adult. There are two of us. I got your back, partner,” Starsky whispered in his ear.

“The rest of us will be in the drawing room when you’re done.” Grace made a face. “For afternoon tea. I hate cucumber!”

Some things never changed. Even though she had lived in America since her family moved here when she was 17, Eleanor still honored her British middle class upbringing. She kept a special room for entertaining visitors and the tradition of high tea. Scones and delicate cucumber sandwiches were always on the menu. Grace had hated the salad ingredient since she was a young girl, if Hutch remembered correctly. Her childish reaction brought Hutch out of his negative mood some. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and there won’t be any this time.”

“Fat chance,” Grace said, poking her tongue out at Hutch over Kelly’s head. “He’s changed, Ken,” she said, as she walked away.

“We’ll be there in a minute. I just need a clean shirt.” Hutch fingered the drying stain. “Damn, the bags are still in the car.” He went into the dressing room and grabbed a blue sweater from the neat pile on a shelf. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“Right behind you,” Starsky assured him.

Hutch covered the distance between his bedroom and the library in half the time it used to take him. Flinging open the heavy wooden door, he stopped and stared at the man sitting in the high backed brown leather chair in the center of the room. Hutch hitched in a breath. William seemed different; no longer the imposing tyrant that Hutch always pictured when he thought about his father. This man was smaller, older, less intimidating. Had William changed so much, or had he?

Starsky barreled into Hutch’s back. “You could warn a guy when you’re gonna stop, Blondie.” He pushed Hutch farther into the room and closed the door.

William stood up, holding out his hand to Hutch. “Hello, Kenneth,” he said, formal as ever.

Hutch took the offered hand. “Afternoon, sir,” he said, reverting to the expected address of his youth.

William gripped Kenneth’s hand, covering their clasped hands with his free one. His son was no longer the gangly teenager that’d left the family home after a stupid argument so many years ago. Neither was he the same person William had dismissed two years ago, when Kenneth told him about his and David’s relationship.

David! He turned to Starsky, offering the same greeting. “Hello, David.”

Starsky pumped his hand enthusiastically.

Too enthusiastically, but William let it go. There was so much he needed to discuss with his son, and it was time that the hostility was eradicated. That’s why he’d included David in this meeting. This was the first in a long line of olive branches.

He was aware that he hadn't been the best father. He'd tried, but not hard enough. It'd taken so much of his energy to build his law firm that he'd lost sight of the bigger picture. His children were grown up before he knew it, and somewhere along the way, he and Kenneth had become estranged. Every encounter between them had turned into a war, a war of wills that neither wanted to back down from. He'd towered above Kenneth back then, and used his size and authority to his advantage. He hoped he could somehow make up for the past, before it was too late.

William released Starsky's hand. On impulse, he turned back to Kenneth and pulled his son to him, hugging him briefly, for the first time in many years, before pushing him to arm's length.

The shocked look on Kenneth's face tugged at his heart. He wasn't a monster. How had they gotten so far apart that a simple hug caused such a reaction?

"Kenneth," William faltered, trying to find a way back from formality. "Ken, H..." No, not Hutch. Oh, his son preferred that to his given name, but it brought back too many bad memories for William. Things he hadn't told a single soul; except his father, Chester.

He could hear the school bullies even now, taunting him on his first day at boarding school.

"Father?"

Dragging himself back to the present, he said, "Sit down, boys." William indicated to the red fainting couch to the right of the two leather chairs.

David sat down.

Kenneth took the other leather chair in the room.

William saw the admonishing look David gave Kenneth and silently applauded Kenneth's act of defiance, or show of strength, whichever way he wanted to take it. He sat in the chair opposite Kenneth.

William leaned forward, looking directly into Kenneth's eyes. "Ken," he said, trying to use the less formal version of Kenneth, "I know we have never had the best of relationships."

"That's an understatement," Hutch said. He perched on the edge of his chair, muscles visibly coiled, ready to pounce. William saw the anger flash in Kenneth as it had in him with those bullies. True anger, but with an underlying fear that gut instinct retaliation wasn't the best move.

"Hutch!" David never moved, but that one word said it all, even to William's ear.

Kenneth glanced at David and settled back in his seat, obviously calmed by his influence. "Go on," he ground out between clenched jaws.

William watched in awe. He had been in the boys' company before; had interpreted their friendship as the closeness of brothers, not by blood, but by choice. This was the first time,

however, that he had witnessed them as a couple, seen the effect David had on his son. Saw the love reflected in each man's eyes.

In that moment, he realized there was nothing sordid or dirty about their relationship. He truly regretted those words, and the venomous way he'd spat them at his son over two years ago. Kenneth'd had the courage to give him the opportunity to be part of their lives, and he'd thrown it back in his face. Why? Because he'd been too much of a coward to admit that a child of his had an unconventional love life. His reputation had been more important than blood. Well, not anymore. Eleanor was right. He had to build bridges with Kenneth before it was too late, and not just half-heartedly.

The speech he had written in his head seemed stiff and impersonal now that he was face to face with Kenneth and David. He struggled with how to start.

William stood up, pacing the room. He always thought better on his feet. The first time they'd butted heads, he guessed. "You always wondered why we wouldn't call you Hutch, even though you asked us many times."

Kenneth nodded.

"Your grandmother used to call me Hutch. She loved to tell the story about how I struggled to say our last name, getting as far as Hutch before stopping, tongue tied. She thought it cute, and used it as her pet name for me throughout my childhood." He paused, waiting for the slightly nauseating feeling that this memory caused to pass. "My first day at boarding school, she called me Hutch in front of my peers. The moment we reached the common room, Herbert Lawrence-Fontainebleau grabbed my arm. "Hutch, what kind of name is Hutch?" he asked me. "That's a cage you keep rabbits in." Everyone laughed. Herbert kept chanting "Rabbit, bunny, baby bunny. Mommy's little baby bunny." He swallowed and forced himself to continue. "Everyone started shouting "Baby bunny. Baby bunny." That went on for the rest of the semester. Other students taunted me wherever I went."

Hutch's brow furrow deepened.

William continued quickly, without letting Kenneth break his train of thought. "I never gave you the guidance I should have when you were growing up, Kenneth, Ken." He paused. "No, guidance is the wrong word. Attention." He nodded. "That's it. Attention, love and attention. I was too busy nurturing my company, the people who could give us a better life. I thought that being a good father meant providing for my children. I realize now that, by doing what I thought was right; I neglected you and Grace."

Kenneth opened his mouth.

David shook his head.

"The older you got, the farther apart we grew, the worse things became." William swept his hand down his face. "I didn't try hard enough to show you how a family should be, to give you the unconditional love that my parents gave me. Father took me out of boarding school

the minute he found out what Herbert and the others were doing,” William said, the catharsis both liberating and exhausting. “Your mother tried her best, arranging family vacations, skiing trips, parties. I always found a way to leave early, not to go at all or turn it into a business event.”

He walked over to the large window and looked out over the covered swimming pool. “You had the best that money could buy. Then, one day, a colleague lost his son, in a car accident, and the devastation in his eyes cut through me. I wondered what it would feel like if it was me, instead of him. What if I lost you or Grace? How would the money, the big house and the successful business help then?”

William sat on the window seat, staring at the back of Kenneth’s chair. All he could see was the top of his son’s head. His son was still facing William’s empty chair. “I came home that night believing I could turn things around. Shower a lifetime of love on you both.”

He leaned back against the cool glass. “That was the night you told me that you were dropping out of law school, Ken, to become a doctor. Instead of being a supportive father, I yelled, pushed you away, sent you out of the house, and eventually the state. You flitted from city to city. Started a pre-med course, and left half way through. When you joined the police academy, I expected that to be another whim, another attempt to show your independence from the family firm. I told you that I wasn’t funding anymore hare-brained ideas.”

Why wasn’t Kenneth saying anything? William had expected something. Anger, reproach, but not this, total silence.

“I made my peace with Grace a long time ago. The female mind is more receptive, less bullheaded, at least in the Hutchinson family anyway. I want to make amends, Ken, now before it’s too late.” William stood up, slowly inching closer to the seating area.

“Are you ill, dying?” Kenneth’s voice was barely more than a whisper.

David stood up and went to Kenneth, kneeling at his feet, rubbing his trembling leg.

“No, why would you think that?” It hadn’t occurred to William that Kenneth would consider he had another reason for wanting to be part of his son’s life. He stepped in front of Kenneth, aghast by the paleness of his face.

“Why now? I mean, there have been plenty of opportunities over the years to tell me this.” Kenneth glared at him, his right hand floundering in mid-air.

David clutched the flailing arm.

“Thanksgiving, two years ago would’ve been a good time. When I did the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Tell you about me and Starsky.” Kenneth looked lovingly at David. “You belittled me, called us perverts, and vowed you’d never accept us as a couple, so, why now? If you’re not ill or dying, what changed?”

William sat on his chair. "I have. Time has. When Kelly was born, and I saw that new little life, the love on Grace and Lou's faces, it brought everything back to me. Your birth. Grace's birth. That first rush of love for my children. My hopes for the future." William smiled. Kelly, his beautiful little granddaughter. Her presence on this earth had changed his outlook so much. "I started thinking about the past, the regrets, the things I would do differently, if I could. Then I realized that, even though I am already an old man, there's still time to do those things."

He took Kenneth and David's joined hands. "You're my son, and I love you, with all my heart. I know you probably don't believe that right now, but it's the truth, and I want you to be happy."

He looked at David, then back to Kenneth. "Your mother, and even Grace, told me how happy David makes you. I can see that for myself. I don't want to be the person looking in through the window at the loving family group any longer. This is my family and I want to be a part of it."

"What about Starsky?" Kenneth said softly.

"I am happy to call him my son-in-law, if he'll have me."

A tear slid down Kenneth's cheek.

"Yes, sir." David grinned, and hugged Kenneth. "See, I told you this holiday would be a good one."

"This is a lot for you both to take in, I know, but there's something else I wish to discuss with you, Ken." William walked over to the desk in the corner and removed the white envelope he'd put there last Friday.

"Here we go," Kenneth said, wiping the tear away with his thumb, the usual note of suspicion creeping back into his voice.

William ignored Kenneth's tone, knowing from experience that this wasn't the time to defend himself. To react would lead to a full blown argument before either of them could stop it. The very thing he was trying to eradicate, that pattern of defense and assault. He handed the envelope to Kenneth.

"The deeds to the cabin, transferred to you, and a checkbook for a bank account in your name."

Hutch took the envelope, turning it over in his hand. He handled it carefully, expecting it to explode. "Why?" he asked, ripping off the end.

William stood behind Hutch's chair. The leather of the chair creaked, from William resting his hands on top of the chair, Hutch assumed. He didn't bother to look up and check his

theory. He was too intent on trying to decide whether he wanted to read the contents of the envelope or not.

“It seems like the right time. Your mother and I haven’t been up to the cabin in years. It’s probably falling down by now.” William sighed. “I shouldn’t have neglected it. Your grandfather loved that place.”

“Neglect seems to be the word for today,” Hutch mumbled.

“Remember, play nice,” Starsky whispered, brushing his lips against Hutch’s forearm.

“Do what you want with it. Fix it up or sell it. I’m sure the land is worth something at least.”

William switched on the overhead light and closed the wooden shutters on the window.

“There’s more than enough in the bank to cover repairs.”

“What exactly is this bank account? Why is it in my name?” Hutch felt many years of resentment falling off of his shoulders as William opened up to him. He’d actually given valid reasons rather than excuses for the lack of fatherly presence in Hutch’s upbringing. Finally given him an explanation of why no one would respect his wishes when he wanted to be called Hutch. That particular disclosure must have been painful. A very personal memory to share. Hutch let a few of his defensive walls fall, now they were building up again, rapidly.

“I opened the account when you were born, and one for Grace, even one for little Kelly. To cover college fees, weddings, and the like. Any monies left in the account, I planned to give on your wedding days. Grace put hers towards their house in Vancouver.”

“I was married first. So what happened to mine? Did you decide to keep it because I wasn’t the meek son you wanted?”

“No. You really think I would keep the money through spite? No matter what our differences, that wasn’t the reason.” William circled around Hutch’s chair and faced him. “I’m sad, but not surprised, that you have such a low opinion of me. I doubted Nancy’s reasons for the wedding.”

“Why? Is it so hard to comprehend that someone could love me when you couldn’t?” Hutch was starting to get sick of asking questions, but there was so much he needed to know. Understanding why was part of healing, in some circumstances. William was here to give him the answers.

William’s lips trembled. “I’ve always loved you. No matter what happened, please believe that I always loved you.” He flopped heavily into his chair, leaning against the back as if all his strength had drained away.

Hutch felt a rush of compassion. He hadn’t meant to be that cruel. This seemed to be taking a lot out of William. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“No. I’m sorry that my actions left you thinking so little of me.” William closed his eyes. “To answer your question, I thought you were marrying beneath you; especially when Wilfred came to see me.”

“Nancy, Vanessa’s father,” Hutch told Starsky.

Starsky nodded.

“Wilfred confided that he couldn’t afford the lavish wedding that his daughter wanted and asked me to help.”

“You paid for our wedding?” Hutch was floored.

“Yes; and the honeymoon. I suspected that Nancy was merely ensuring that she landed a man who could keep her in the fashion she wanted to become accustomed to.”

“Then I ruined her little dream by becoming a cop, and you cut me off. I should have known when she started insisting that we called her by her middle name, Vanessa. She thought it sounded more like a society wife than Nancy did.” Hutch leaned his head on the back of his chair. He was physically and emotionally worn out.

“We should go and join the others. There is more to talk about, but I’m sure it can wait for another day.” William looked as exhausted as Hutch felt.

“Rome wasn’t built in a day,” Starsky said, standing up and shaking his legs.

Hutch looked at him. “No, it wasn’t.”

“I hope I’ve managed to lay the foundations, if nothing else.” William held his hand out to Hutch. “I’d like to be friends.”

Hutch grabbed his hand and stood up, pulling William with him. “So would I. More than friends if possible.” He hugged his father tightly. It might take a while, but he was sure they’d mend all the bridges eventually. He wanted to try. He owed himself, and William, that much. “There is one thing I’d like to know.”

“Yes?” asked William.

“Where did the fainting couch come from? Is it new?” Not the most important question Hutch could have asked, but he didn’t recall seeing the couch before.

William smiled. “I bought it for your mother. Her ankles have been swelling lately, and her doctor told her to rest her legs as much as possible. Eleanor likes to sit and keep me company. I moved my desk into the library so that she could read and relax while I attended to business.”

It wasn’t the answer that Hutch had expected, but it showed another sign that William was mellowing, and changing his ways when it came to family.

Christmas Eve, 1980

Starsky's left side suddenly went cold. *Where had all the warmth gone?* He opened his eyes. He was enjoying lying next to Hutch, dozing, knowing they didn't have to get out of bed at some ungodly hour this morning. He turned over to cuddle and found an empty bed. "Hutch, where are you?"

"Here." Hutch stood in the doorway to the upstairs kitchen, sipping a mug of strong coffee by the smell of it.

"Whadda doing up so early? Couldn't you sleep?" Starsky was aware that he was whining, but he'd been dreaming about a lazy morning in bed with his lover. A nine thirty a.m. alarm call wasn't on his agenda, unless it was for some serious lovemaking.

"I'm going for a run."

"It's nine thirty in the morning on Christmas Eve. That's seven thirty, California time." Starsky patted the mattress next to him. "Come back to bed. We can exercise together." He wagged his eyebrows at Hutch.

"I need to get my workout routine going again." Hutch backed into the kitchen and returned to the bedroom without the mug. He held a thermos, instead.

"Start when we get back to Bay City. It's cold here, and there's snow on the ground." Starsky shuddered at the thought of running on the slippery streets.

"I've checked the weather report. The sun is out and it's twenty six degrees." Hutch walked over to the bed. "That's warm for this time of year."

"It's still damn cold," Starsky muttered.

"I'm not asking you to come, Starsk. I like running in the snow, it works the muscles harder." Hutch leaned over and kissed Starsky. "I'm going to run up to the cabin. Check out my inheritance. See you later."

"kay." Starsky snuggled back under the blankets, listening to the noises of Hutch moving around the room. A thought struck him. "Did I see a dirt bike in the garage?"

"Yeah, I think my old bike is still there." Hutch sat on the bed. "Why?"

"Does it work?" Starsky asked. He'd ride the bike and put Hutch through his paces.

"I think so. It did last time I was here. Why?"

"I'll ride, you run." Starsky jumped out of bed and looked at Hutch. He was dressed in dark blue shorts, a grey and orange sweatshirt with a hood and white socks. None of which Starsky recognized. "Won't you be cold dressed like that?"

"What is it with you and the cold?" Hutch pulled on beat-up beige sneakers. "New York has similar weather to Duluth."

“Been in California too long, I guess,” Starsky said, shrugging. He dug into his duffle bag and yanked out red long johns, a grey sweatsuit and thick socks. Struggling into the undergarment, he glanced at Hutch. “What?” Hutch had a bemused look on his face.

“Seriously, you’re wearing that as well as the sweat suit.” Hutch shook his head.

“Yep, the cabin is in the mountains, ain’t it?” Starsky dragged on the sweats and rummaged in the bottom of his bag for his hiking boots.

“You want some coffee?” Hutch asked.

The thick hiking socks were making it hard for Starsky to push his feet into the new boots. Standing up, he stamped each leg until his feet were finally snugly in place. “No, thanks,” he said, tying his laces and pulling on woolen gloves.

“You ready? I could have been halfway there by now.”

“I wish you’d wear more clothes. You’re gonna freeze.”

Hutch sighed. “Okay, mom. Just for you.” He walked into the closet and came back out wearing a pair of grey sweatpants. He even had on a pair of silk gloves.

Although, he wasn’t a skier, Starsky recognized them as ski glove liners.

“Happy?” Hutch twirled, as if showing off a party dress to a doting mother.

Starsky chuckled. “Yep.” He followed Hutch through the sleeping house.

Hutch quietly opened the connecting door into the garage. He checked the gas in the motorbike, pushed it out of the garage and kicked the starter pedal. The machine sputtered into life. “You sure you want to ride this? Can’t guarantee it’ll get you there and back, although it looks cleaner than last time I was here.”

“That would be my fault,” said a voice behind them.

Hutch turned around, startled.

Juan popped up from behind Patricia in the next parking slot. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. I was just wiping her down.” He patted the gleaming vintage car.

Hutch stared at the young man. He was no longer a gangly teenager. Juan had grown into an adult and gained bulk over the past few years. His features were stronger, skin darker, more Mexican than they had been when he was younger. He looked a lot like a younger version of Manuel, his father. “Your fault?”

“I’ve been using the bike, to run errands.” Juan wiped his hands down his t-shirt. “I did some work on it.” He seemed worried, scared even. “Doesn’t sputter anymore. I hope you don’t mind? Mr. William said it was okay.”

“If he doesn’t mind.” Starsky grinned. “Why should you, Hutch?”

“Thanks, Juan, for taking such good care of the old thing.” Hutch waved, surprised Juan was busy so early on Christmas Eve. “Don’t work too hard. Merry Christmas.” He jogged out of the garage.

“Nice to meet you, Juan!” Starsky called, pushing the bike into the snowy front yard. “Where are we going?” He straddled the bike, switching on the motor. The engine throbbed between his legs. Keeping the bike idling, he admired the view of Hutch bending and stretching during his warm up. Every time Hutch bent over, Starsky’s cock responded with more than a little interest.

“Just follow me,” Hutch said, running down the driveway.

Starsky didn’t move for a few seconds. He watched his partner’s lengthy stride eating up the relatively short path down to the road with ease.

Hutch swerved right at the bottom.

Starsky revved the bike into motion. Struggling to keep a safe distance behind Hutch’s flying feet and control the bike on the slippery road, Starsky barely noticed his surroundings. Gradually, residential properties gave way to a more rural landscape.

Hutch turned a few more times. The wide blacktop roads becoming narrower, more rustic with every change of direction. “Nearly there,” Hutch panted as he veered left between two tree trunks.

Starsky executed the same turn with less finesse, the back wheel sliding on the frozen path. “Shit, shit,” he swore, as the tires slithered into ruts left by whatever vehicles came up this way.

“Over there.” Hutch swiveled, jogging slowly backwards and pointing over his shoulder.

Starsky looked up to a cluster of buildings. One was large, with two smaller, rougher, structures to the side. He stopped the bike, gazing at the picture postcard in front of him. He assumed the larger place was the cabin. Through bare branches, the snow covered landscape was pleasing to his photographer’s eye.

The log cabin had a stone chimney and dark wooden shingles. It was slightly bigger than the Dobey’s at Pine Lake. Small windows broke up the walls at regular intervals, and a lone window near the roof indicated a second floor, or maybe it simply provided extra light into the interior. It was hard to tell from this angle.



Hutch led the way along the isolated dirt road to the cabin. The frozen ground was topped with soft snow, which moved with every step, working his muscles almost as well as running on sand did.

Starsky rode the motor bike behind, sliding around on the slippery surface if the sounds were anything to go by. "Slow down, Hutch, it's rough going back here." His voice was barely audible over the droning engine.

"Come on, Starsk. You've got horsepower helping you; should be halfway up the hill on that bike." Hutch slowed his pace, running through the gap in the old fencing. Nostalgia stopped him in his tracks. The cabin didn't look any different, not really. A little more weathered, but not as tumbled down as he'd expected.

William said he hadn't been up here in years. Not since Hutch's grandfather, Chester, had died by the look of it. The shovel still stood against the shed, as did the wooden step ladder.

"Kenny. Bring the shovel. Help an old man clear the snow." Chester stood on the porch, pointing to the shed.

Hutch grabbed the handle, dragging the metal spade along the ground and leaving a deep gouge in the perfect snow. He hated being called Kenny, almost as much as

Kenneth or Ken. He was ten years old, why wouldn't William let anyone call him Hutch? Surely he was old enough to choose his own name.

"Come on, boy. The snow'll be melted by the time you get here." Chester clapped his glove clad hands together. "You think too much. Just like your father." He grabbed the shovel, chipping away at the snow that had drifted against the house during the night. Slowly he revealed the wooden walkway across the front of the building. There was a bank of white between Hutch and Chester.

"Hutch, you okay?"

Chester's face turned into Starsky's.

"Yeah, fine." Hutch stepped onto the snowy porch, feeling along the lintel. Finding the key as he'd expected, he unlocked the door, struggling with the rusty lock.

"That explains a lot." Starsky rested his chin against Hutch's upper arm, his jawbone digging into the flesh.

"What?"

"The key. Never understood why you kept your key above the door in a big city. I decided that must be the country boy in you. Now I know, your grandfather always did it." He snaked his arms around Hutch's waist.

Hutch nodded. "He left it there so that I had a bolt hole anytime things got rough with father. Also, if anyone got lost or caught in bad weather up here, they could get inside. He always thought about other people." Hutch fingered the wooden knob, twisting gently, then a little harder. The door opened with a screech of metal, the hinges complaining after all this time.

"Goes through you. Shoulda brought some oil." Starsky steered Hutch through the open door.

Hutch came eye to eye with the deer head hanging to the right of the entrance. Chester liked to display his hunting trophies, as he called them. Each wall had a mounted deer head; all were still intact; which was surprising, because the rest of the downstairs was a mess.

"Looks like someone's been camping here," Starsky said, sifting ashes in the fireplace with a branch.

"By way of thanks, they trashed the place." Hutch shook his head, remembering the simple wooden furniture, and the soft furnishings that his grandmother, Violet, had made for the cabin. There wasn't much evidence of the care and love his grandparents had lavished on their second home. "I guess I should be grateful that they locked the door and left the key!" he said sarcastically.

Starsky put his hand on Hutch's shoulder. "I'm sorry, buddy. This must be hard for you."

Hutch stalked around the room. He spotted the two large hooks where Chester had hung the spoils of his hunting trips. The large slabs of skinned meat used to make Hutch shiver. On

impulse, he grasped the cold metal and pulled himself up, tucking his knees up to his chest and swinging. Strangely, it was a soothing motion, and he stayed there for a short while, attempting to appease the anger that some stranger's actions had brought out.

Starsky stood by one of the windows. The ripped white material fluttering in the icy breeze from the broken pane was all that was left of the curtains. It was a couple of degrees colder up here than in downtown Duluth.

Starsky watched as Hutch gradually uncurled his lithe body. His partner's athletic prowess had started hatching a plan in his brain.

"Father was probably right. I should sell the place. The land is worth money." Hutch walked outside and stood at the end of the porch.

Starsky followed him. "Is that what you want to do?"

Hutch stared down the mountainside. "Not really. There are a lot of good memories here. Grace and I used to spend the first part of our Christmas vacation skiing with Grandfather. On Christmas Eve, we'd all go down to my parents' house until my grandparents left on New Year's Day."

Starsky caught the wistful tone in Hutch's voice. "Then keep it. The building looks sound. I'll help you with the labor."

"Come on, Starsk. I don't see you with a saw in your hand." Hutch leaned against the log wall.

"I resent that remark," Starsky said, miming sawing and hammering. "I did a lot of work on the fixer upper, and you know it." Hutch certainly needed a little bit of Master Starsky at the moment.

"It would be nice to have a mountain retreat, get away from the dirt of the city. But Duluth is a long way to travel. We could probably buy a place closer with the money from the sale and the cash in that bank account, however much it is." Hutch stroked the antlers hanging from the porch roof.

"Wouldn't mean the same to you, would it?" Hutch wasn't fooling Starsky. He could see the conflict in Hutch's face, sensibility fighting with sentiment.

Hutch jumped off the porch and walked towards the gate and the shed. "Better go. We can talk later."

"No rush," Starsky said, stepping in Hutch's footprints. The holes were a good two sizes larger than his. "I got plans for you, boy."

Hutch raised an eyebrow. "We can't, not here. We didn't bring anything with us."

“I wasn’t planning a full blown scene.” Starsky winked. “I think I could find plenty to use, if I put my mind to it.”

Hutch’s eyes brightened. Excitement flickered on his face.

“I was thinking more about working that sexy body of yours.” Starsky rubbed Hutch’s ass. “Stress and stamina. You keep saying that you need to tone up more.” Starsky thought that Hutch’s body was pretty damn hard, but Hutch always had been a perfectionist.

“What did you have in mind, Master?” Hutch asked, pulling off his sweat pants. “Hot.”

“You sure are.” Starsky looked at the rough fencing around the property. In one section, the bottom board was missing. He patted the single pole. The winter sun had melted the snow from everywhere except the ground and warmed up the wood. “Hang upside down on this.”

Hutch handed Starsky the thermos and gave him a questioning look. He did as instructed, hanging from the bar by his knees.

Leaning on Hutch’s ankles, Starsky said, “Hands behind your head, and do sit ups.”

Hutch pulled his head towards his knees. “How many?” he grunted on the way up. The fence shook under his effort.

“Until I tell you to stop. Count them for me.”

“One,” Hutch said when his hair skimmed the snow underneath him. He pulled up again.

“Two,” he counted on the second down. “Three.”

Starsky kept count silently, admiring the strength powering through Hutch’s body as he completed his task.

Hutch’s sweatshirt slipped up his body, exposing his torso from waist to nipples. His stomach muscles rippled, Hutch flexed and stretched.



Starsky could see down the leg hole of Hutch's shorts. He almost salivated over the clenching of Hutch's buttocks.

"Ninety seven, ninety eight, ninety nine, one hundred."

"Stop," commanded Starsky.

Hutch grabbed the pole and rolled backwards, standing when his feet hit the ground. Elbows on the pole, he rested his head on the wood and exhaled heavily. Sweat run down his face.

"Damn."

"No swearing." Starsky handed Hutch the thermos. "Drink."

Hutch twisted off the top and swigged the liquid inside.

Starsky looked around, searching for more inspiration. "Lay on the ladder and reach for the highest rung that you can."

Placing the thermos on the ground, Hutch checked to make sure the ladder was stable and leaned against it, presumably to test that it wasn't about to break under his weight. Lying back, he took the requested position.

“Legs out in front of you.” Starsky sat on the bottom rail of the fence. “Count to one hundred.”

Elevating his legs, Hutch said, “One, two.” He grinned. “Piece of cake.”

Starsky observed his lover. “We’ll see.”

Hutch’s face went from a healthy pink to a darker shade of puce. “Seventy nine.” New sweat beads appeared. His legs lowered an inch or so.

“Lift those legs.” Starsky was actually enjoying this exercise. He loved watching Hutch work out.

Hutch struggled to raise his legs to their original position. “Slave driver,” he mumbled.

“A Master has to do what a Master has to do,” said Starsky, trying to sound like he had the hardest job. “Some slaves need to be trained.” He’d been training Hutch since they first met, and Hutch had never noticed, or if he had, he’d never mentioned it.

“One hundred.” Hutch slid down the ladder, panting and crouched on the snowy ground. “I prefer the whip. Hurts less!”

Starsky had taken a quick glance around while Hutch was doing the ladder exercise and had the next task in mind. The far side of the shed was built on the slope and mounted on thick poles to support the overhang of the structure. He pointed to the nearest leg. “Stand there, back up against the wood, and slide down until you’re in a sitting position.”

“No more, Starsk,” Hutch puffed. “I jogged five miles up here, did sit ups and leg lifts.”

“No pain, no gain.” Starsky licked his lips. “Do as your Master tells you.”

Hutch walked to the designated prop, even though he was protesting at Starsky’s request. No, make that his Master’s order. He had every intention of carrying out the chore, but he didn’t like to let Starsky have his own way without a fight. It was expected of him.

“Good boy.” Starsky followed Hutch, standing in front of him as he slid down the damp surface.

This time, Starsky didn’t ask Hutch to count, but he counted mentally anyway. His muscles started to ache around the one fifty mark. They hurt at two fifty and then quivered at three hundred with the pressure of maintaining the seated stance. Fresh sweat covered the drying perspiration on his face. His body was shaking as much as his legs.



“Enough,” Starsky said, just as Hutch counted four hundred and one.

Hutch collapsed to the ground, not caring that the snow was melting under his ass. “Shit.”

Starsky sat down and pulled Hutch to him, wiping the perspiration from Hutch’s face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “You okay?”

“Pins and needles,” Hutch gasped as the blood started to flow back into his legs and feet.

Starsky rubbed Hutch’s right leg with one hand, keeping his other arm around Hutch’s neck.

“Oww, no, that makes it worse.” Hutch used the building support to stand up. His legs were like jelly.

Starsky got up, putting Hutch’s arm around his shoulders. “Lean on me.”

“No need, I can walk on my own.” Hutch untangled himself from Starsky.

Starsky threw Hutch’s pants over his shoulder, hiking back into the cabin through the drifts of snow.

“I think we ought to go, Starsk.” Hutch limped until the feeling came back into his legs. He climbed the few steps to the porch on slightly shaky feet, sipping water from the thermos.

Starsky was pacing the room when Hutch strode through the door. “What’s up there?” he asked, pointing up the rough staircase at the back of the cabin. It was little more than a ladder.

“It leads up to a small space under the roof. Grace and I used to sleep up there on a goose feather filled mattress than Grandmother made to fit the loft.” Those were such simple times. Grace used to snuggle against Hutch for warmth. They would lay, cocooned between the mattress and the heavy quilt, talking and laughing until one of their grandparents hollered at them to go to sleep.

“Want to share what’s making you smile, blondie?”

“Just thinking of the good times.” Hutch climbed up the ladder, bumping his head on the rafter that ran the width of the cabin. “Oww.” He crawled on all fours across the bare floor. The space was tinier than he remembered. But then, he was a lot bigger than he was as a child.

Starsky scrambled up after him. Hutch’s pants slipped off of his shoulder and floated to the floor below. He scrimmed across the boards on his belly.

“The roof’s not that low, Starsk.” Hutch laughed, laying on his back and studying the uneven wooden ceiling. Stains dotted the timber. “Might need a new roof. Looks like there’s been a lot of water leaking through the shingles.”

“I’ve got something else leaking over here,” Starsky said, inching up beside Hutch. “Do you know how sexy you looked out there? All rippling muscles. A gorgeous physical specimen.” He kissed Hutch’s face and snaked his hands under Hutch’s sweatshirt, caressing his torso with a featherlight touch.

Hutch arched his back, raising to meet Starsky’s body above him.

Starsky pulled down Hutch’s shorts, cupping his balls. Twisting his body, Starsky ended up with his feet by Hutch’s head.

Hutch got the message. He reached up and yanked Starsky’s pants down over his hips and groaned. “Shit, Starsk. Way to kill the mood.”

“What?” Starsky asked, kneading Hutch’s sac and licking his inner thigh.

“These stupid long johns.” Hutch fumbled with the buttons, finally freeing Starsky’s cock from its fabric prison.

Starsky wrapped his lips around Hutch’s cock, sucking hard. His penis hardened, showing his appreciation of Starsky’s efforts. The rough, bare boards chafed Hutch’s butt, but he was too far gone to care. Myriad stars collided with the wooden roof struts. Trying hard to concentrate on Starsky’s pleasure more than his own, Hutch exploded at the same time as Starsky’s semen filled his mouth. Swallowing quickly, he thrust, involuntarily, deeper down his partner’s throat.

Starsky gagged as Hutch bucked his hips. He gulped down the juice in his mouth, and rolled off Hutch. “Well, if you decide to bulldoze this place, at least we’ve had one good time in here.

Hutch covered his modesty and sat up, narrowly missing hitting his head on a rafter. He grinned. “Not planning on getting rid of the place that soon. Like you said, too many memories.”

Starsky rearranged his clothing and sidled up behind Hutch. “Not quite what I said, but I hear you.” He curled his body around Hutch, nuzzling his neck, and breathing in the faint aroma of Sandalwood mixed with musty sweat. The pheromones assaulted his system, making his groin sizzle with want, even though he had just climaxed. “Too bad it’s the holidays. We could’ve found someone to clear out the place and check the structure while we’re here.”

“Why can’t we clear it out?” Hutch kissed Starsky’s hand. “We’ve got a week before we have to be back to work.”

“We can’t run out on your family like that.” Starsky crawled around Hutch, sitting crosslegged in front of him. “Your pop is trying. You gotta do the same.”

Hutch grimaced. “That’s just it, Starsk. Father seems to have done a 360 on our relationship, but I’m not sure I can take the whole vacation couped up in the house with him. We need some space for us.” He stroked Starsky’s face. “I’ve never had a less romantic feeling when we spooned in bed last night. I kept expecting Father to crash through the door and scream at us that there were two beds and both should be used.”

Starsky had never seen Hutch so vulnerable when it came to another human being. What the hell had his childhood really been like? How often had Hutch faced the wrath that they’d both experienced a couple of years ago? Even when William was being nice, Hutch was obviously sure that he had another agenda. “We’ll see how things go. Maybe we can get away after December 26th.”

Hutch nodded. “I wouldn’t mind getting some skiing in. I could give you a lesson or two. Then we can come up here and do some work.”

Starsky raised his eyebrows at Hutch. “I’m not sure about the skiing,” he said, hesitantly.

“It’s easy. I’ll have you going down the bunny slope within the hour.” Hutch crawled toward the ladder. “I promise,” he said, looking back over his shoulder. His hair fell messily over his eyes. It was longer than he’d worn it for a while.

After Starsky’s shooting, Hutch had neglected himself for a long time, his whole focus on taking care of Starsky. A fact Starsky was all too aware of. “You need a haircut,” he observed, trying to deflect Hutch from his skiing idea.

Hutch perched on the edge of the precipice, dangling his legs. “I know. Mother said I’d put on weight. She has a point. I’m not as slender as I used to be. I’ve let myself go this past few years.”

Starsky hunkered down next to him. “Because you were more concerned about my health.”

“Not letting you take all the blame, buddy. I went off the rails before that, and you know it.”

“You’re older. The gangly guy I met at the Academy has gone. But there’s no way that you’re fat.” He rubbed his hand on Hutch’s abdomen. “That’s pure muscle, my boy. You’re as fit as you ever were.”

Hutch slid off, plunging rapidly to the floor below.

“Hutch.” Starsky grabbed at fresh air. “Of all the…”

Hutch landed in a crouch. He looked up at Starsky and laughed. “Jump. It’s not far.”

“I’ll take the steps, thanks. You could have broken something.” Starsky descended down the ladder. He picked up the sweat pants. “Put these on.”

“Thanks. My legs are getting cold.” Hutch yanked the sweats over his sneakers.

Starsky headed for the open door. “You running back?”

“No. I think I’ve had enough exercise for today. The bike’ll take us both.” Hutch slammed the door behind them, locking it and putting the key in his pocket. “This key stays with me. No more free bunks for strangers.”

Starsky straddled the bike. “You take the back. If you ride like you drove that dune buggy, we won’t make it to your parents house in one piece.”

“I’m a good driver,” Hutch protested. “Did I crash us into a construction site office?”

Starsky ignored Hutch’s jibe. He hadn’t totally forgiven his partner for that amnesia stunt he’d pulled. “You coming or not?” He kicked the engine into life, rolling the bike off of its stand.

Hutch leaped behind Starsky and clamped his arms around Starsky’s waist.

Starsky manoeuvred the bike steadily over the frozen ground, squeezing hard on the brakes the whole way down the mountainside. He increased the speed when they reached the main road.

Hutch’s inner thighs massaged Starsky’s outer legs as they rode. Their knees were almost level because of Hutch’s long legs.

Starsky spotted a familiar landmark. He pulled over to the side of the road.

“What’re you stopping for?” Hutch shouted in Starsky’s ear.

“That house.” Starsky pointed to the mansion just visible through the evergreen trees. “Didn’t Grace say there’d been some murders there?”

Hutch groaned. “Yeah, she did.”

Starsky flicked down the stand and climbed off the bike. He walked to the wall and poked his head over. The place was huge. The red brick building and white stone work made for an imposing sight. “Tell me about it.”

“Really?” Hutch sat astride the bike. “I just want to go home. I’m tired and hungry.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” Starsky joked, wiggling his eyebrows at Hutch and pretending to smoke a cigar.

“Quit messing around. It’s not the weather for sitting outside, especially now the sun’s disappeared.” Hutch rubbed his legs. “Come on.”

“Tell me quick then, Mr. I’m-From-Duluth,-I-Don’t-Mind-The-Cold.” Starsky loved throwing Hutch’s smug remarks back at him. To be fair, he was better dressed for the chill than Hutch was, even with the extra clothing Hutch had put on to keep Starsky happy.

Hutch huffed. “The house was owned by the Congdon family, and in 1968 the estate was given to the University of Minnesota.”

“Why?” Starsky asked, looking at the house again.

“Why what?”

“Why was it given to the University?”

“I don’t know, Starsk,” Hutch said, looking vexed. “Story is that, at the time, Elisabeth Congdon, the youngest daughter of Chester Congdon...”

“Same first name as your grandfather,” Starsky observed, to show Hutch that he did listen to him when he talked.

“Yes.” Hutch sighed and continued, “Was given a life estate.”

“What’s a life estate?”

“Starsky, if you keep interrupting, I will leave you here,” Hutch said, kicking the starter. “A life estate allowed her to occupy Glensheen until she died.”

“So, who got murdered?” Trust Hutch to give Starsky a history lesson when he wanted to know about the murders.

“Miss Congdon was 83 and partially paralyzed when someone smothered her with a pillow in her bedroom. They killed the night nurse first, by beating her to death with a candlestick holder on the sweeping central staircase. It was said that she was trying to defend her frail

patient.” Hutch shrugged and blew on his hands. “Roger Caldwell, the second husband of Congdon's adopted daughter, Marjorie, was charged with the crimes, convicted on two counts of first degree murder and sentenced to two life sentences. Marjorie was charged with aiding and abetting and conspiracy to commit murder, but she was acquitted on all charges.” He rattled off the details like he was reading the case file.

“What lead them to him?” Starsky knew he was bugging Hutch, but he was genuinely interested.

“Can’t we do this back at the house?” Hutch whined.

“It’s more real standing outside the scene of the crime.” Starsky walked over to Hutch.

“They said he was trying to speed up his wife’s inheritance. The couple lived in Colorado, and was flat broke. Marjorie had been cut off from the Congdon millions because she was considered a spendthrift constantly trying to wheedle money from her mother.” Hutch grabbed the front of Starsky’s jacket. “Now can we go?”

Starsky patted Hutch’s face. His skin was freezing. Time to get his lover somewhere warmer. Starsky climbed onto the bike and fired the engine. “Hold tight, babe.”

Christmas Day, 1980

Hutch lay dozing, snuggled in the warm bed. The weak morning light filtered through cracks in the window shutters.

Starsky snored gently next to him.

Hutch stretched languidly. “Ahhh. Ohhh.” He quickly returned to his original position. Shit, he might have overdone the exercise yesterday.

Starsky started. “You okay?” he asked, turning to face Hutch. He yawned so hard that Hutch could see his tonsils.

“Back spasm, legs ache.” Hutch kissed Starsky full on the lips. “Not in as good condition as we thought.”

“I pushed you too hard.” Starsky swiped a lock of hair out of Hutch’s eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It felt good to exceed my current physical capabilities.” Hutch stroked Starsky’s stubble with his thumb nail. It was still a little weird to find himself turned on by the very hairy and masculine body of his partner. “You should take over my exercise regime. I liked the stamina and stress session; even if you were kind of sadistic.”

“Lay on your belly.” Starsky sat up, running his knuckles over the spot on his jaw line where Hutch had just caressed.

“Why?”

“Do as you are told, boy!” Starsky said sternly, giving Hutch his Master look.

“Yes, Sir.” Hutch rolled onto his front, tucking his arms under his forehead. Submitting to Starsky was as natural to him as breathing. He’d never been comfortable letting someone else take control of him before. William tried, and Hutch rebelled eventually. Van tried, and they fought, to the end. Starsky, the perfect Master, and Hutch’s equal in every other way.

Starsky mounted Hutch’s backside.

“Not sure I can do that here,” Hutch protested. He had no problem bottoming for Starsky. That was his usual position most of the time in their lovemaking. But not under William’s roof.

“Relax, cowboy,” Starsky leaned over and whispered in Hutch’s ear. “Not what I’m planning.” He massaged Hutch’s shoulders, working on the tense, knotted muscles until they were pliable under his hands. Slowly, he navigated his way down Hutch’s body, finishing with rubbing his feet, one by one.

Hutch purred throughout the manipulation. “Nice.” No one could relax him the way Starsky did. He always seemed to know what Hutch needed; whether that was a good rub down, domination, rough sex, gentle lovemaking or simply to talk.

“How’d you feel? Better?”

“Mmmm.” If he died now, Hutch would die happy.

Starsky’s stomach rumbled. He snickered. “Do you suppose there’s chance of getting any breakfast?”

“Time is it?” Hutch asked, though he didn’t really care. He could stay in this blissful bubble all day.

Starsky grabbed his watch from the bedside table that stood between the two beds. “Just after ten thirty.”

Hutch groaned. “We should go downstairs. We don’t want to be responsible for breaking the family tradition of presents, then brunch.”

“You had to wait to get your Christmas presents?” Starsky asked, incredulously.

“Once Grace and I stopped believing in Santa Claus, Father decided that we would start the day in a more civilized way than screaming and throwing ripped paper everywhere.”

“No wonder you hate Christmas.” Starsky got out of bed and went into the bathroom.

“I don’t hate Christmas,” Hutch started.

“Yeah, I know. It’s the commercialism,” Starsky shouted from the bathroom.

“You’re Jewish. You shouldn’t even celebrate Christmas.”

“My pop still believed in Santa,” Starsky said, gargling at the end of his sentence. “Mom stopped trying to turn him into a practicing Jew before I was born.”

Hutch walked into the bathroom. Nudging Starsky to one side so that he could get to the sink, he washed and cleaned his teeth. “Dress adequately. Please don’t wear those skintight jeans today.” He never told Starsky what to wear, but he was trying to meet William halfway, as Starsky requested.

“You like my denims.” Starsky winked, and wiggled his butt.

“I do,” agreed Hutch, salivating at Starsky’s taut buttocks. “But my family doesn’t need to see your best assets while they’re eating.” He left the bathroom and went into the dressing room, pulling on a pair of beige chinos and a black shirt.

Starsky came in carrying a pair of beige slacks and a dark blue shirt. He looked Hutch up and down. “Don’t need to ask if these are acceptable!” he said, waving the garments in the air.

Hutch sat on the bed while Starsky slipped into his clothes. It was surreal being in Duluth for Christmas after all these years. He’d been home for Thanksgiving, but not Yuletide.

William looked up when Kenneth and David came into the room. The pensive smile on Kenneth’s face was a familiar sight to him. He couldn’t blame his son, but he’d hoped that the strain in their relationship had eased in the past few days.

“Morning, everyone.” Kenneth said.

He walked over to the buffet Rosa had prepared. There were covered serving dishes set up at the other end of the room. He poured two cups of coffee, adding sugar and cream to one of them before handing it to David.

“Can I get anyone else a drink?” he asked.

“Good morning, boys. Sit down,” William said warmly.

Kenneth sat next to Grace, on the larger of the two couches in the room. “Where’s Lou?” he asked as she slid Kelly onto his knee. He cuddled the infant, leaning his head close to hers and whispering in her ear.

“In the library, speaking with his parents on the telephone.” Grace smiled at David before turning back to her brother and daughter.

William marveled at how similar his offspring still looked. The tow-headed siblings were sharing some private joke if Grace’s giggle was anything to go by. Those two had always been close. He felt a quick pang of pain, seeing his son playing with his granddaughter. The thought that Kenneth would never have a child of his own, would miss out on the possibility of a son to carry on the family name, hurt more than he could have imagined. He pressed the unwelcome revelation deep down. He was doing his damndest to accept his son’s life

choices, and improve their relationship. Thinking about what couldn't happen because of Kenneth and David's coupling wouldn't help.

David stood by the window, looking out. He seemed distracted, almost uncomfortable. It couldn't be easy for him, knowing that he was another part of the reason that Kenneth was estranged from his own father.

The latter in a long line of things William had condemned because they didn't fit into his ideal of the life he expected for his son.

Eleanor crossed the room, putting her hand on David's shoulder. "Come, sit by me," she said in the soft voice that she usually used when talking to children and elderly relatives. She led David to the smaller couch. "I suppose your family has traditions for Christmas Day?" She smiled. "Kenneth has told you of our ritual, I assume."

"Yes, ma'am," David said politely, sitting a few inches away from her.

Eleanor smiled. "I think it's time for you to call me mother, or Eleanor, if that makes you feel more at ease." She took David's hand.

Kenneth and Grace stopped chatting, glancing at Eleanor and David, with surprised expressions on their faces. Two peas in a pod, in almost every way.

"I think Eleanor works for me, if that's all right with you." David looked over at Kenneth, a smile playing on his lips.

"I hope that Lou won't mind, Grace, but I would like to start opening the gifts," William said, moving towards the brightly decorated tree in the corner of the room.

Grace shook her head. "Go ahead. He could be a while yet, if he has to speak to all the relatives that congregate in his parents' house on Christmas."

William picked up the small black box with a white ribbon that he'd placed under the tree last night. He hoped that Kenneth would understand his reasoning behind giving this particular gift to David. It was the most significant way he could think of to express his acceptance of their pairing. "The first present goes to our guest of honor." He handed the container to David.

"Thank you, sir," David said, taking the package tentatively, and turning it over in his hands. He pulled on one loose end of the ribbon, took the lid off, and unfolded the white tissue inside. Extracting the contents, he held the silver chain between his thumb and finger, the pocket watch swinging like a pendulum. "It's beautiful," he said, examining the intricately molded silver back of the watch.

Kenneth gaped at the watch with a puzzled look on his face.

Grace mirrored Kenneth's expression. She squeezed Kenneth's knee, a show of her support for whatever stunt they assumed William was planning. How little his children thought of him, and it was sad that he was acutely aware of their silent emotions.

Eleanor smiled serenely. William had discussed his choice of gift with her, and she'd agreed wholeheartedly.

Kelly fussed, seemingly unnerved by the quiet lull that had descended over the room.

"Shh, baby girl," Kenneth soothed, jiggling her on his knee.

Grace retrieved Kelly from Hutch's grasp. "Come to mommy, darling."

William picked up a similar box to David's, with a red ribbon, and sat on the arm of the couch next to Kenneth. "I know the pocket watch was meant for you, Ken, but I hope you understand why I gave it to David."

"I think so," Kenneth said. "Family tradition dictates that you give your mother's engagement ring to your oldest son for his chosen wife, which incidentally, you didn't do when I married Van. Nancy," he corrected himself.

"I didn't think that she would appreciate the modest turquoise stone in a simple silver setting. Your Grandmother loved the ring so much. She was always telling us that it was the best my father could afford at the time. Even when the business started making a profit, she refused a more expensive ring. Somehow, it felt wrong to give her ring to Nancy, Vanessa." William grimaced; so many different names for so few people. His head was reeling. "I was right, wasn't I?" He recalled the obscenely sized diamond in a platinum setting that she paraded around the country club. He'd even told his accountant that he didn't want to know how much the ugly thing had cost him.

"Yes." Hutch bowed his head. "The first thing she did after the split was sell both the engagement ring and matching wedding band."

"Enough maudlin talk," Eleanor said. "The past is past. We have to look to the future, all of us. Is that Kenneth's present?" She pointed to the box still in William's hand.

"Yes, Merry Christmas, Ken." William shoved the gift into Kenneth's hand.

Hutch stared at the box. He felt off-kilter. He understood the significance of William giving Starsky Chester's watch. It meant that William really was accepting his and Starsky's union. Not quite an engagement ring, mainly because it would be a cold day in hell before two men were ever allowed to wed. Jeez, they couldn't even tell the world that they were in love.

"Open it." Grace nudged Hutch's knee with hers.

Hutch fumbled as he untied the ribbon and dropped the box onto the floor.

"Butter fingers," quipped Starsky.

"He was a clumsy child," William stated.

I am here, you know. Hutch retrieved the box, the contents falling out as he picked it up. “Car keys,” he said rather unnecessarily, spotting the familiar tan leather key fob a second later. “For *Patricia!* You can’t be serious.” He had thought that nothing on this earth would make William part with his beloved vehicle. The times he’d dreamed of getting his license and being allowed to drive the prized possession, only to be warned that his life would not be worth living if he even considered taking a joy ride in her.

William had bought him a red Mustang instead. Hutch had gone out the very next day and purchased a rusty green Bug, just to piss William off. He’d refused to drive the shiny new car, opting to limp the Bug around Duluth’s most expensive areas, knowing full well that he would be recognized wherever he went. Anything to flip his father off.

“I don’t drive her enough.” William got up and walked over to Eleanor. He went behind the couch, and placed a hand on her upper arm. “My eyes aren’t very good these days. Your mother and I have talked about employing a driver, possibly Juan. I won’t have Patricia driven by anyone who isn’t blood.”

That answered a question that Hutch hadn’t even realized needed answering until now. The little niggle in the back of his mind about how Rosa came into their lives, and why William seemed to be taking responsibility for Juan. The skeleton that Hutch had been imagining wasn’t there any longer. Juan wasn’t blood, not even half-blood by the sound of it. “I can’t accept this,” Hutch said, jingling the keys. “I don’t have anywhere to keep her, not safely.”

“Yes, you can,” Starsky said. He wiggled into the small gap between Hutch and Grace. “Say thank you,” he whispered into Hutch’s ear. “I’m sure that you can keep Patricia here, until we get something figured out,” he said so that everyone could hear. “Can’t he, Mr. H?”

“Call me William, David. Yes, you can, Ken. She’s yours when you want to take her.” William went over to the tree and grabbed a big parcel wrapped in pink teddy bear paper. “For my beautiful granddaughter.”

The rest of the morning was a blur to Hutch. He vaguely remembered things being thrust into his hands, paper ripped off, and, at some point, a plate of food, which he picked at, but wasn’t sure exactly how much he ate. Lou’s deep booming voice signaled that he had returned at some time during the festivities.

“Come on, Hutch, let’s get some fresh air.” Starsky guided Hutch out of the room and out into the cold. “Breathe, buddy, breathe,” Starsky coached.

Hutch inhaled for all he was worth.

“You don’t have to kill yourself.” The phrase that he’d said to Starsky just over two years ago resonated in his brain, his stupor popping like a balloon.

“What?” he said, spinning around, imitating a demented periscope. “How the hell did I get out here?”

“You walked, mush brain, with my help.” Starsky turned Hutch around to face him. “What happened? You were there, but not there.” He stroked the side of Hutch’s face. “Talk to me.”

“Shock, I guess.” Hutch leaned against Starsky, taking strength from his warm body. “The pocket watch...”

“Hey, you can have it when we get home, if it’s a problem.” Starsky patted his left pant pocket, pulling Hutch to him with his right arm. “It’s your inheritance, after all.”

“No. God, no.” Hutch gasped and placed his hand on Starsky’s belly. “That watch symbolizes the new beginning to the rest of our lives. Father finally approves of something I’m doing. No way am I going to jinx that by taking the watch off of you.”

“I thought I was the suspicious one,” Starsky said seriously.

“Superstitious.” Hutch snickered. “It’s superstitious, Starsk.”

“I know,” Starsky said, winking. “Made you laugh, though.”

Hutch bear hugged him. He was never going to let this amazing man get away.

January 3, 1981

Hutch climbed the stairs to his apartment. He was worn out after a twelve hour shift where every psycho in Bay City must have high tailed it to their beat.

The Torino wheels screeched as Starsky pulled away.

Neither of them had been in the mood for company tonight, so Starsky had taken off to his own apartment. Maybe one day they would be able to move, as a couple, into that fixer upper they’d bought a while ago. For now, it provided a nice return on their investment every month, and the young couple living there kept the place neat and tidy.

Unlocking the front door, Hutch pushed it ajar and walked into the living room, slamming it behind him. The apartment was cold and felt very empty after the madness of the holidays. Dropping onto the couch, the pile of mail on the coffee table caught his eye. He hadn’t opened his letters for a few days. Rifling through the pile, he discarded the usual bills and settled on a package adorned with Grace’s neat handwriting. Ripping the envelope across the top, he emptied the contents into his lap; a purple, sweetly scented sheet of paper folded in half, four photographs, a checkbook and a key.

He tossed the checkbook on the coffee table, and quickly looked at the pictures, smiling. The first one was a group shot of the Hutchinson family, minus Starsky because he’d nominated himself as photographer for much of the vacation. The next, a shot of him and Starsky rolling in the snowy garden—he hadn’t even noticed that Grace was around when they were throwing snowballs and wrestling with each other. The third photo was a very formal photograph of him and Starsky with William and Eleanor; and lastly, the best one of all, him and Kelly on the morning he took Starsky skiing.



Grace had written *Kelly with proud Uncle Hutch, December 27, 1980* on the back.

He was proud of his beautiful little niece, but he also felt a slight sadness for the children he'd never have, that Starsky would never have. It was a subject they'd discussed at great length before they embarked on their chosen path. Although Hutch had accepted the consequence of his future, he still had a way to go to find peace with it. Kelly would help in some respect; he could be there for her throughout her life.

Putting the photographs back into the envelope, he unfolded the letter. The scent of the lavender scented paper Eleanor had bought Grace as a stocking filler was strong.

Brother Dear,

Finally back at home in freezing Vancouver. The airport opened early on New Year's morning. Seemed to take forever to get from Duluth to here. We had to change twice, and rent a car for the last thirty miles. Kelly was very fretful by the end of the trip. Which I get, I wasn't too happy myself!

Enclosing some photographs, your checkbook and the cabin key. I managed to get Lou and Juan to help me clean up the inside of the cabin. I guess that was the silver lining to Vancouver airport being shut down because of the weather, ha ha.

Mom and Dad looked after Kelly for us. They spoiled her rotten. Fed her too much milk.

Happy you and Father are working through things, finally. Patricia is all tucked up in her garage waiting for you, lucky duck.

Look after yourself and that gorgeous hunk of a partner of yours.

Come and see us soon.

G xx

He and Starsky had never gotten around to cleaning up the cabin. Turned out that Starsky was not a natural on skis and he'd sprained his ankle on his first attempt at the bunny slope.

Grace had told Hutch to leave the key with her because she was grounded for a few days longer. She'd decided to find someone to clean the place for him. He'd also left her the checkbook to his new account, to pay for the work, which she obviously hadn't used. Looked like the little minx already had the plan in mind to do it herself! He must remember to send her and Lou something nice as a thank you. He suspected that either she or William had paid Juan for his time; part of the ever expanding job that William had given him.

Tucking the letter in with the photographs, he put the key on his Chez Helene fob. Gone were the days of leaving his front door key for all and sundry to use to enter his home.

The package from Grace had made him feel a hundred per cent better. He longed to share it with Starsky. He should never have let Starsky leave.

Knock, knock.

Hutch jumped up. "What?"

"Delivery," shouted a familiar voice.

Hutch yanked at the door. "Starsk," he said unnecessarily. "What're you doing here?"

"Couldn't stay away. Thought you might want a beer and pizza," Starsky said winking as he shoved the corner of a takeout box into Hutch's stomach.

"Yes, yes," Hutch said, excitedly dragging Starsky into the apartment, and planting kisses all over him. "I was thinking I wished you hadn't gone home. I got a letter and some photographs from Grace. She cleared out the cabin with Lou and Juan. Maybe next vacation, we..."

"Enough already," Starsky said, silencing Hutch's ramblings with his mouth.

Screen shots from David Soul's movie, Swan Song, 1980.

David Soul and Child – from the internet