



**They Could Call It
Murder One
by
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It was going to be another hot day.

Ken Hutchinson's mind was only half-occupied with driving as he pulled into the Police Academy parking lot and looked around as much to take in the scene as to find a space. He hit the brake and felt the old Ford Galaxie judder as it ground to a halt, coming within inches of hitting the beige concrete wall of the Police Academy building.

Of course, all Californian days were hot, he reflected wryly, compared to what he was used to. Still, he wasn't looking forward to spending another day feeling as dried out as a raisin, particularly not today of all days. Sure, he'd get used to it, but that hadn't even started to happen yet. It had been only two weeks since he'd first arrived in Bay City, after all, but it still felt as though he'd not adapted at all—and from today onward, he'd be training to be a cop in this heat.

He killed the engine, leaning back in his seat as he listened to the clinks and creaks of the car's body as it gradually cooled. His grandfather's old pocket-watch lay on the dash. 7:05 AM.

Well, punctuality might have been the politeness of princes (or was it kings? he couldn't quite remember the quote) but perhaps it *had* been overkill to allow an hour for a ten-minute journey. He had almost another hour and a half before he needed to be here. He ran a hand absently through his hair, and then halted, catching sight of his reflection in the windshield, its hair standing up in three different directions, like a jester's hat.

He met the gaze of his reflection with a sardonic half-smile, and leaned across to the passenger side, flicking open the glove compartment to search through the odds and ends for the comb that should have been in there.

Toothbrush and toothpaste, a half bar of soap, a razor . . . half a sprout sandwich? He grimaced and pulled the last item out, dropping it unceremoniously into the rest of the trash on the floor, before flicking through the rest of the contents. The comb wasn't there. He felt the inside pocket of his jacket for it, and noted that even his acceptance letter from the BCPD didn't seem to be where he had left it.

An hour and a half early—and he was still utterly disorganized. "Nothing ever changes", he could hear his father's voice saying, in the wearily indifferent voice of someone who felt that disciplining the children was his spouse's responsibility. Two months before he'd have been saying it with amused tolerance, looking down with raised eyebrows at the desk of the paper-strewn office Ken shared with three other legal aides. Ken would have smiled, only a little apologetically, and claimed it was his newly-patented stratum-based filing system. If it were tidy when clients came round—and it invariably was—nobody was going to care. After all, it took a matter of seconds to transfer the main piles of debris from desk to in-tray.

However, all that had been before—

You hold it right there, buddy, he thought. *We're not going that route today, remember?*

He wasn't going to law school any more, and he certainly wouldn't be working for Hutchinson Reeve and Keely when he graduated. As of this morning he was just another police academy student in a town where nobody knew him from Adam. What had or had not happened to bring him here was of no relevance to anyone.

Comb, he thought, annoyed at himself, he was looking for that comb. He leaned over to the passenger seat, finally finding it between two piles of folded clothes. He plucked it out and dragged it carefully through his hair, before putting it back where it belonged in his jacket pocket.

Another early morning, three months back, and he'd sat in the parking lot of his father's legal practice—he could practically see it now—a disturbingly vivid early morning image. He blinked, focusing with confusion on the brown concrete wall ahead of him. It was still very clear in his mind's eye, the clean red brick of Hutchinson Reeve and Keely, the well-kept grounds around it, the clear windshield of the black Alfa Romeo Spider that his father had handed down to him after upgrading his own for a newer model.

It could have been any one of a series of near-identical mornings. Three months before, everything had been fine. He had just finished his first year of law school, with suitably high marks, and had begun his summer job in his father's firm. Things were going well with Vanessa, and his father had been openly proud to have his son working in the family law practice.

He shook his head, in an effort to clear it of the remnants of the memory. Things hadn't been fine, not really. He'd finished his first year of law school uneasy about his chosen career, but he had ignored his unease with blind confidence, right up to the day that events had pushed him so hard that there had been no choice left to him at all.

Okay, he thought. *Okay, get a grip now. You weren't going to do this today.*

He reminded himself about the missing acceptance letter and dug through the clothes on the passenger seat again. In a fit of insane bureaucracy they'd wanted to see almost every sheet of paper he'd owned—birth and marriage certificates, high school diplomas, degrees . . .

Paper makes the world go round, he grumbled internally. He wouldn't have been surprised if they'd started asking for grocery receipts and bus tickets.

He pulled out the assorted papers from the inside pocket of his jacket and rifled through them before returning them to the inside pocket of his jacket. There should be enough documentation there to satisfy them of his existence and that he was at least sound enough in body and mind to do up his own shoelaces. Only the acceptance letter was still missing.

He gave the passenger seat another quick search and then glanced into the back of the car, catching sight of the envelope amid the blankets and pillow that littered the back seat. He reached back for it, slipped the contents out and looked through it.

Dear Mr. Hutchinson, We are pleased to inform you that your application . . .

That should be everything. Ken slid the letter back into the envelope, sliding it into the inside pocket of his jacket, and climbed out of the car, slinging his jacket round his shoulders. He closed the door, and took a few moments to stretch his rather stiff muscles. All being well, he would be moving into the Police Academy dorms later today—something of a relief, because he'd been sleeping in the Galaxie for three weeks and it was now doing cruel and unusual things to the muscles in his back.

Seven AM, and the heat was already starting to hit him. The sunlight was too bright, showing every stain and mark, and all the accumulated grime on the plain frontage of the Police Academy. He paused for a moment in the shadow of the building to give himself time to master his nerves, and then plunged quickly through the door before he could give himself the chance to think better of it.

Reception was almost dark compared with the day outside, but it was still well-lit enough for him to see that the receptionist was a long-limbed blonde lovely, with a navy blue uniform accentuating her tanned skin and

bright gold hair. She was half asleep and hunched over a large mug of black coffee as though physically protecting it. She did not look up as he came in.

"Miss? Excuse me—"

"What the hell kinda time do you call this?" she muttered into her mug, and then blinked up at him. Her double-take was followed by a sudden shift into appreciative scrutiny, which traveled over him, finally lingering regretfully on his wedding band. She picked up her coffee mug once more and sipped at it again, all interest in him waning rapidly. A married man was clearly not worth waking up for, he noted, a little disappointed.

She handed him forms and a pen, and checked his name on a typewritten list, a feat she managed without letting go of the coffee mug. He noticed instinctively that his was the last name on it, Hutchinson, K., followed by his Duluth address, and only name checked. He filled in the form, and handed her various items of documentation as she requested them.

"Waiting room's through the door on the left. You'll find a coffee machine in the corner." She looked up, the first time she had done so since noticing the wedding band. "Hutchinson, right? Check the pigeonholes over there, you've had mail."

He thanked her but she was already focused on her coffee again, so he headed over to the dark brown ranks of pigeonholes against the wall, his eye traveling along them until he encountered the letter H.

The pigeonhole contained three items, two of which were letters addressed to him. The third was a postcard to someone named Harper, from someone who clearly wanted the world to know he was making it every night. He shuffled it back and pulled his own letters out before heading into the waiting area, an anonymous and threadbare room with institutional cream walls and slightly scuffed brown linoleum. The chairs were low and upholstered in beige, and Ken wandered over to a chair in the far corner and slouched into it, eyeing the two letters in his hand.

The first was from Van, and he stuffed it into his pocket, not wanting to read it now. He knew his decision had upset her, and badly, but that wasn't something he wanted to face this morning—not today, with his new career and new life just starting off. To make up for his cowardice he tore open the second letter without looking at it. It was from his mother.

Ken, dearest,

I hope you don't mind me writing to you like this. I got your address from dear Vanessa, because I do want to talk to you before you do anything you're going to regret. Why don't you come home to us? We miss you and your father has been in a foul mood since you went.

Darling, I understand that you feel you have to make your own choice, but did it have to be such a drastic one? There were plenty of options that your father would have approved of, and you really didn't have to give up law school and go all the way across the country just because of a little tiff with your father.

I know I don't understand law things, and it's none of my business anyway, but does it really matter, now that Davies is dead anyway? I'm sure your father does what's best, and it's not our place to second-guess him.

Your father and I are as well as can be expected. Janice is well, and has just got her contract renewed for seven more years at the university.

Please come home and talk it out with us, darling. I'm sure everything will work out just fine.

Lots of love,

Mom

Ken lowered the letter and sighed. Poor mother, he thought wearily. Never had wanted much from life, had she? Just the kind of loving storybook family that the commercials sold; and yet she had married into a clan of intellectuals with razor-edged wits, whose idea of a good time was to eviscerate each other in scholarly debate.

Three months before he'd probably have despised her for a letter like that—for her vacuity and her refusal to think for herself, but perhaps he'd learned a little humility since then. After all, for a woman with little education and no academic skills it was probably just safer for her to follow her husband's views than to hold her own ideas up for scrutiny. And besides, recent events had robbed him pretty thoroughly of any illusions he might once have had about his own integrity or moral independence. When it came down to it, Davies had just been the catalyst.

Well, mother, he thought in silent answer to the letter, *I hope that you never get a wake-up call like that.* He began to ease the letter back into its envelope, his fingers brushing against a second piece of paper as he did so. It was a newspaper cutting, with half an ad for Hardwick's Furniture Emporium. That couldn't have been what she'd wanted him to see, so he flipped it over, and found a paragraph from the Duluth News Tribune:

Investigation into Quarry Death Continues

Investigations continue into the death of Richard Davies Jr., of Duluth, whose body was discovered in a quarry near Wild Rice Lake last month, Detective Declan O'Hare of the Duluth PD told our reporter today. An appeal for witnesses to come forward had proved helpful, the detective said, but also said that there was still little or no evidence as to the chain of events that led to the young man's death. The detective informed reporters that the victim was almost certainly killed by a single blow to the head, and that they are still treating the death as suspicious.'

One short paragraph—it was hardly even news any more. So simple, when seen in print, without a single mention of Paula Mason, no mention of the trial or him or his father.

No mention even of the bullet that had killed him, just something about a blow to the head. The newspaper must have gotten that wrong, he thought. They must have done. That, or—

He was breathing too fast, as though he had just run a race and lost. The world outside was dim and utterly still, somehow unreal.

(Seven weeks earlier, and the gun clatters and rattles as it slides down into the disused quarry. In stark contrast he doesn't hear anything when the body falls, even when it comes to rest on the ledge fifty feet below.

He can feel the Minnesota night air too cool against his skin, and has to wipe a hand quickly across his suddenly damp forehead.)

Dammit, Hutchinson, you swore you weren't gonna do this! He banged his fist down onto the coffee table beside him, just as another young man came through the waiting room doorway. He relaxed his fist and stuffed the letter into his pocket, very conscious of the strange look the newcomer was giving him, and put on what he hoped was an innocuous smile.

His new companion was a colored young man, three inches taller than Ken himself and twice as broad across the shoulders. He also appeared to be three times as nervous, barricading himself in the most defensible corner of the room with his arms folded across his body like a shield. His head whipped round abruptly when Ken took a step toward him.

"Hey," Ken said easily, glad of company, and even more so for a distraction. "You here for the basic training?"

The large young man gave a dry swallow and nodded. "Yeah. Been waiting three years for this. And now—it's silly, but—" He gave a nervous laugh and unfolded his arms, revealing hands that were gray with ingrained oil and dirt. A motor mechanic, perhaps. "I've wanted to do this since junior high. Can't believe it took me so long."

"Yeah?" *Three months ago, I was gonna be an attorney.* Ken suddenly felt a fraud next to the young man's sincerity. He held out a hand. "Ken Hutchinson."

"Joel Brown. You're from out of town, right?" He held out the large, dirt-ingrained hand, and Ken shook it, wondering if there was some kind of sign on his back that read "foreigner." Probably the pale skin and sunburn, he realized after a moment's thought. The last time he'd had access to a mirror he'd looked pretty odd.

"Minnesota, yeah."

"So, uh . . ." Joel asked with a touch of shyness. "What did you do before this?"

Ken gave the sanitized version. "I was going to be an attorney, but I value my conscience too much."

"Attorneys get paid real good." There was wonder in the words, and Ken wondered if Joel had ever even dreamed of an attorney's wage.

"Maybe some things just aren't worth it," Ken said quietly.

"Maybe. I suppose."

(Eleven weeks earlier, and Ken is pacing his father's office, listening impatiently to how the Davies family are a well-known family . . . clients of long standing. . . privileged communication . . . confidentiality. . . how what he'd heard was not . . .

"What about Davies's victim" he asks.

"Miss Mason has her own attorney," his father tells him. "Leave the case for the prosecution to him.")

He tried to pull himself back from the memory, and found Joel looking at him expectantly. Even now, thinking about his father made him want to punch something—preferably himself. "Sorry," he said, focusing back on Joel, "did you say something?"

Joel gestured toward the coffee machine. "Just getting coffee. You want some?"

How can anyone drink coffee in this heat? he asked irritably in the privacy of his head, but restrained himself from making comment. "No. Thanks."

"So why'd you come to California? Gotta be cop shops in Minnesota."

"I . . . ah, I've got a friend in the force here." That one he could answer almost truthfully. He wondered

offhand where he would be now if Luke Huntley hadn't been visiting his cousin that week, or if he'd stayed home that night, or if he'd not had the kind of impulsive compassion that makes good men offer kindness to strangers.

(It is ten weeks ago, and he's sitting in Richie's Bar overhearing Detective O'Hare curse Philip Hutchinson to hell and back. Riddled with guilt by association, and by the weight of his own private knowledge, he listens, accepting the words as his own deserts. O'Hare's listener is short and a little overweight, a cop from out of town.)

O'Hare's companion comes up later, and apologizes for his friend's anger. His name's Luke, he says. They get to talking.)

"Hey, you with us, man?"

"No," Ken said before he thought about what he was saying, and then stopped, half-laughing. "I think I meant yes, actually," he said. Joel was looking at him warily, as though he thought Ken might do something dangerous at any moment. The waiting room, or perhaps the memories he was bringing into it, was starting to seem oppressive. "I'm just going to step outside for a bit, get some air."

Joel shrugged, and Ken could see him trying not to look relieved. "Right. See you."

He crossed the foyer quickly, and stepped out into the open air, seeking the refuge of his car. At least if his mind wanted to play its tricks on him there, it could do it without bystanders wondering about his sanity.

You know, he thought as he crossed the parking lot to his car, I'm starting to get real bored with all this. It happened—so what? I'm not there any more.

(Nine weeks earlier, and Ken is watching Paula Mason on the witness stand, her plain face twisted with anguish as his father—his own father—interrogates her about her private life. He already has the jury half-thinking she consented to her rape.)

He stumbled and swore; and the slight jolt brought him back to Bay City. He headed a little faster for the battered gray car.

The Galaxie's door jerked and stuck as he opened it, sliding inside into the hot shade. *Okay, he thought. Okay, let's get the 'mess with Ken's head' session over with now, please?*

Of course, being braced and ready, nothing happened and the visions stayed resolutely out of sight. He stared absently at the pale concrete wall ahead of him, but it remained a wall, and a Bay City wall at that.

He'd waited for Dick Davies like this, sitting in the parked Alfa Spider across the road, for nearly 18 hours. But sitting in the Police Academy parking lot in a battered Ford Galaxie was a very different matter from the wealthier streets of Duluth, watching and waiting. The parking lot was different, the buildings were different, even the air and sky were different. The memories remained merely painful recollections, and not near-realities.

It wasn't working. Everything seemed very bright and sunlit and so Californian that it was almost different world from the paler, more subdued Duluth.

Maybe I should just stay out here all day, he thought, the toe of one boot tapping lightly on the gas pedal. He pulled out his grandfather's watch—7:20 am. He still had over an hour to wait.

Maybe it had stopped. Maybe his brain was going to behave now. He didn't feel like leaving the security of the Galaxie, though, in case the memories did choose to return.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, watching as a police car swung into one of the reserved slots next to the reception door. The doors opened as two uniformed police officers got out, lingering by the car as a bright red Mustang swept past it into the visitors lot—

(Seven weeks earlier, and Ken's watching Dick Davies pull out from the curb in his vivid red Cadillac. There's a tension in his posture that gives Ken a thrill of something like fear.)

Davies hasn't seen him yet. He starts the Alfa and follows, not allowing himself to think at all about what he is doing or why. He just drives, hanging back a little, overriding his furious urge to push the Italian sports car hard enough to drive Davies off the road.)

(Eleven weeks earlier, and Richard Davies, senior and his son are leaving Hutchinson Reeve and Keely just as Ken returns from his lunch. Dick Davies is talking loudly, and he does not seem to care whether Ken hears him or not.)

". . .so special about the little cow? She's not rich, she's not pretty or important. She's just a nurse, of all things. Why can't she just take your money like the other girls and be done with it?"

He tilted his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes—

(Ken once went to school with Dick Davies, and the conversation sticks in his mind—but he doesn't understand its import until he's told the details of the case.)

— and then flinched violently as he felt a hand on his sleeve.

"Hey. You starting today?"

He jerked his head up, at a loss for a moment as to where he was, or even when he was. The red Mustang was now parked beside him, and there was a young man of about his own age standing beside him, with a cleft in his chin and thick, straight brown hair. "What?" he mumbled. "Oh. Yeah."

"Thought so." The newcomer stuck out a tanned hand, far darker than Ken's pale northern skin. He was starting to get used to looking like a wraith beside the sun-baked Bay City denizens. "So you'd be the kid from outta state, right?"

Ken nodded. "Minnesota."

"Thought so," the young man said again. "I didn't remember you from Induction Day, and they said only one person missed it."

"When was it?" Ken asked.

Oh . . . about . . . seven weeks back, wasn't it?" The question was addressed to someone on the driver's side of the car.

"What was seven weeks back?" The driver of the red Mustang called over the top of the car.

"Induction."

"About seven weeks. Yeah." The driver came round the car to join his companion, a swaggering walk which spoke of blithe self-confidence. Ken caught sight of a long nose and large quantities of dark curly hair. "You shoulda been there—it was terrific."

(Seven weeks earlier, and Ken is looking into the wrong end of Davies's gun, his mind gloriously and

unhelpfully blank.)

"Hey—hey."

Ken looked up sharply, realizing a little late that the Mustang's driver was trying to get his attention. "Yeah, what?"

"You were the kid who missed it, then."

I'm not a kid, he thought, annoyed, while the Mustang's passenger snickered. "The rest of us only worked that out five minutes back. Looks like you're having a smart day, Starsky. "

"I'm always smart, Colby. Hey—hey, don't you think I oughta be a cop or something when I grow up?"

"You're *going* to be a cop, Starsky. But if you're waiting 'til you grow up you'll have a long wait."

(Nine weeks earlier, and he's spending his lunch break standing in a phone booth, staring at the phone number Luke Huntley has given him. After what seems an age, he stops staring and dials the number.)

Colby and Starsky didn't seem to have noticed his sudden stillness, having gotten into an argument only one step away from a double-act. "I wasn't the one who took a toy monkey to 'Nam."

"It's a lie! And besides, I told you about that in confidence!"

"Hey," Starsky said, "What's your name, anyway?"

All that talk, and he'd managed somehow to bypass the formalities altogether. "Hutchinson." He climbed out of the car and locked it. "Ken Hutchinson."

"Hutchinsonkenhutchinson. Bit of a mouthful, isn't it?" Colby said. "John Colby," he said, jerking a thumb in the direction of his own chest, and then pointed at his companion. "He's Dave Starsky, usually known as 'dummy'."

Ken laughed and shook his head, looking between the two of them in disbelief. "You two are nuts, you know that?" It was a nuttiness that made sense, though. Back when he'd been in high school, his friend Jack had always been the type to deal with nerves by making bad jokes and talking nonsense loudly too. He reached out and shook hands with each in turn.

"Yep." Starsky grinned widely as though he took it as a compliment, and walked over and took another look at the contents of Ken's car. "Says the man wearing designer clothes and living in a 1963 Galaxie." He paced round the car, his walk an exaggerated swagger. "Hey. Is that a milk carton in the back?" he said.

Ken blushed. "Goat's milk."

"Goat's milk? You're living in a car, and you're drinking goat's milk? You hafta be out of your mind!"

Ken frowned a little. "What 's wrong with goat's milk?" There might well have been reasons why he was out of his mind this morning, but it had never once occurred to him that any of them had to do with goat's milk.

Colby followed his friend over and peered into the window. "Hey Starsky, were you planning to tell him it'd fallen over any time soon?"

"What?"

"Nah, I figured with all the crud there already he'd never notice."

"Will you two move, please?" He had to push them bodily away from the window in order to see that the carton was still wedged safely upright in the foot well. Breathing a little heavily from the heat and exertion, he turned to face them. "All right, so what was that about, you jokers?"

"Why not? Hey, we just thought you needed to lighten up," Starsky said with mock innocence.

Ken stood back, seething. "Annoying someone to get them to lighten up. Yes, real logical, that." A real funny-man, this Starsky, and he wasn't sure that was something he could cope with right now.

They seemed to sense then that they'd gone too far. "Relax, Hutchinson," Colby said, pulling Starsky away from the Galaxie. "It's just nerves. You'll be fine once we get started in there."

Would he though? But that was no fault of theirs. When he had money again, he decided, he was going to go out somewhere and learn to meditate. He unclenched his fists, and tried to slow his breathing. "Sorry. Guess I am a bit wired."

"'S'all right, blondie. You stick with us, we'll show you the ropes," Starsky said. "Now, you coming?"

He tagged in after them, only half-listening to their conversation. It was even hotter now, and there were more cars coming into the parking lot. When they got to the front desk there was a line, and Starsky and Colby attached themselves to its end.

"I'll see you in there," he said, and stepped past the registration desk into the waiting area. They'd been friendly—friendlier than he'd deserved, truth be told—but he felt unspeakably relieved to have lost his two new acquaintances.

Back in the waiting area, he couldn't see Joel any more, but there were at least a dozen others, including a rather chunky young woman who carried herself with more confidence than most of the males in the room. He was reminded immediately, and painfully, of Paula.

No: not of Paula as he had last seen her, looking worried and lost and somehow incomplete; but as she had been a year ago before the rape. Before his own father's actions had let her rapist go free. He hadn't been friends with her, not exactly, not least because mannish women always left him feeling a little uneasy, but if it hadn't been for his one act of late-night philanthropy he'd never even have met her. They'd been friendly but not friends, at least not until—

Oh for God's sake, Hutchinson, get over it. Paula's not here, and you're trying to be a cop. Feeling now in desperate need of something to occupy him, he crossed to the coffee machine and poured himself a cup of the dark and somewhat viscous-looking liquid. The sugar was the usual over-processed white stuff, but he tipped a spoonful in anyway, and then leaned against the wall and busied himself with stirring the coffee.

The girl who was not Paula was over by the far window. She was apparently locked in debate with a bespectacled redhead, and, to his annoyance, Ken found his attention drawn to her again, trying to dismiss the feeling that she resembled Paula so strongly. She was shorter than Paula, after all, broader in the shoulder, and her hair was totally different. It was just her posture and movements that seemed familiar, and Ken tried not to notice those.

The girl had clearly felt his glance because she turned and stared at him with a most unfeminine directness, and then looked away again, exactly the way Paula would have done it. With something of a shock, he saw that her face was nothing like Paula's at all, but that didn't seem to stop the memories from rising up, dragging him under into the past.

(A year earlier, and he's just met Paula for the first time. It's a typical Saturday night in the ER—full of abusive drunks who have somehow managed to batter themselves, and he's brought in an old man whose name he doesn't know who has just fallen off a bus while intoxicated. It is Paula who, utterly unperturbed, manhandles the foul-mouthed creature onto a gurney, brisk and unimpressed in the face of his lewd suggestions and aggressive bluster.)

"He won't thank you for it," she tells him. She's no beauty—strong and thick-set, with a direct gaze that takes no prisoners.

"I didn't do it for the thanks."

"So, why?" She wastes no words, uses no small talk, and he finds that somewhat disturbing, even given that she's at work.

He's beginning to wonder why himself, except that it would have been unthinkable to leave even a stranger injured and lying in the street. "Guess if it was me," he says finally, "waking up in a gutter with a hangover and a broken wrist wouldn't sound so hot."

She nods—tacit confirmation of his assessment of the injury. "No. But you're not him.")

(Seven weeks earlier, and Dick Davies is pulling away from the curb in front of his father's house, seemingly oblivious to the sight of Ken's black Alfa Spider parked round the corner. Ken has never tailed someone before, but he pulls out after the red Cadillac and follows. It seems absurdly easy.)

(Eleven weeks earlier, and Ken passes by Dick Davies and his father as they leave Hutchinson Reeve and Keely. Dick does not greet him, seemingly preoccupied with complaining about someone who will not accept compensation from his father, and this puzzles Ken.

He shrugs mentally and returns to his office, where Carol, one of the secretaries, is raiding the coffee machine.

"So, who's suing the Davies family?" he asks, once the obligatory flirtation has taken place.

"Nobody," Carol tells him. "Not that I've heard. Your father's defending Richard junior for rape."

Immediately Ken is putting two and two together, and coming up with some numbers he doesn't like in the least. He recalls Dick's words, and feels his blood chill in his veins: "Why can't she just take your money like the other girls and be done with it?"

"Your dad wants you with him on this one," Carol is telling him. "He thinks it would be good experience for you."

He goes to his father's office immediately, more than ready to tell him a few things about Dick Davies.)

(Seven weeks earlier, and Davies's car is parked in front of a run-down house on the very edge of town. Ken pulls up just in time to see Davies pushing his way past someone into the building. Ken parks the car, and runs.

He stops first on the front porch and rings the bell, but there's no answer so he goes as quietly as he can round the back of the house. The curtains are nets, and with the light behind them he can see Paula, with

her back to the window, and Davies.

Ken reaches straight for the back door, unspeakably relieved to find it unlocked. He doesn't stop to consider, just plunges in, and then stops dead, because Dick Davies has a gun.

He's never thought about guns before, in the same way that he's never thought about pensions or alligators—because they've simply never been a part of his life. Now, faced with the wrong end of one for the first time in his life, all he can think is how bad this will look when Davies comes to trial.)

(Eleven weeks ago, and he is pacing his father's office, telling his father furiously what Davies has said. His father, normally a sympathetic listener, does not even seem surprised. He merely asks what Ken expects him to do about it.

Ken does the one thing his father will not tolerate: he loses his temper.)

(Ten weeks earlier, and he's sitting in Richie's bar with Van and Van's friend Ella. He's been listening to Detective O'Hare cursing his father for the better part of an hour, and he's now nursing his third beer in sullen silence.

"I suppose you couldn't help overhearing most of that." It's O'Hare's drinking companion.

Ken shrugs. He supposes that the detective must have pointed him out, because he can think of no other way this stranger might have identified him. "Something like that," he says. His tone and body language, however, say, "leave me alone."

The man doesn't take the hint and merely holds out a hand. "Luke Huntley. Declan O'Hare's my cousin." He sits down next to Ken at the bar. Van, deep in discussion with her best friend, does not notice the invasion of her seat.

"Don't blame Dec," the stranger says, undaunted. "It's nothing personal. I'm a cop myself—it always hurts when you see an attorney fighting tooth and nail to wreck your case."

Ken nods, not at all sure who, if anyone he does blame, because Luke's own refusal to share his cousin's anger has not left him feeling obliged to spring to his father's defense. For a long time he says nothing, turning his beer glass round and round in his hands. Luke Huntley sits quietly beside him, seemingly quite content to wait for him to speak in his own time. Eventually the words force their own way out. "He was the one who taught me how to treat a lady," he says bitterly.

Luke nods slowly. "Your father?"

Ken nods. His father: Philip Hutchinson, the personification of chivalry. He'd treat Paula as a lady all right—right up to the point in court where he would carefully summon witnesses to convince the jury that she was nothing of the kind. "I always thought he believed in justice." He takes a gulp of his rapidly warming beer, and then another.

"Maybe he did, once. People forget, lad."

There are things that should be unforgettable, Ken thinks, wondering how Luke can bring himself to be so reasonable. All the same, he cannot help but remember some of his law school lectures about disturbing notions like the subjective nature of truth, or the "fallacy" of right and wrong. He used to be annoyed by the cynicism of it, and countered with cynicism of his own. He remembers other days, when things used to seem simpler.

"I used to want to be a cop," he says suddenly.)

(Seven weeks earlier, and he is facing Dick Davies in Paula's dingy sitting room. He's never been held at gunpoint before.

"What are you doing here?" Davies asks him.

Davies has swung the gun round to cover him as he enters, and for the first time it occurs to him that Davies cannot aim at two people at once. This might be useful, he supposes, but he has no idea how. The tiny round circle of blackness that is his view down the barrel seems to mesmerize him.

"Well . . ." He has no idea what to say. "I was . . . I was looking for you, Dick." Even to his own ears it sounds unbelievable.

He hasn't gone so far as to think out a plan because in a million years he has never expected to find himself in a situation like this. For the first time in his life, he wishes he knew something about them, anything, that might give him a clue as to what he is facing.

Dick laughs derisively. "And why would you do that, Hutchinson?"

Davies is less than six feet away. Ken contemplates getting close enough to wrestle, but it seems to him like the kind of heroics you only find in the movies. From where he is standing, six feet looks a very long way away indeed.

"I, uh, I didn't want to see you get into trouble." Very smart that, he tells himself. That'll get you a real long way. However, the smartass inner voice doesn't have any better suggestions to offer. "We could talk it out. You don't have to do this."

Davies laughs, not taking his eyes off Ken, and gestures at Paula, still standing frozen by the window.

"That bitch dragged me through the courts, didn't she?"

Ken manages—just—to swallow all the things he wants to say in reply. He can feel Paula start to shake, the first movement she has made since he entered the room. He's surprised that she's frozen; he wouldn't have thought her that vulnerable.

He remembers what Davies did to her and starts to talk desperately, pleading, persuading, cajoling, with none of the smooth talking that got him his high marks at law school.

It happens suddenly. Paula, her back still to the window, catches her foot on something, and the point of the gun swerves abruptly back toward her. Released from its scrutiny, Ken lunges forward desperately, empty-handed, in an unplanned and uncoordinated attack.)

(Nine weeks earlier, and he is standing in the lobby of the Courthouse back in Duluth. Dick Davies has just been acquitted of all wrongdoing, and the crowd from the trial is just starting to disperse. The man is jubilant, but quiet, thanking Ken's father warmly before turning to embrace his family. Ken watches, silent, starting a little as Paula Mason brushes past him, coat clutched tight around her, and shoulders bowed.

He wants to say something, offer help or support or condolences, but she is already gone.)

(Seven weeks earlier, and Ken rushes Davies before the gun can cover him. Davies grunts in surprise and anger as Ken reaches blindly for his gun hand. Davies is bigger than he is, and stronger, but the gun is not much use now that Ken is right up against him. What happens next he cannot quite work out, but suddenly the gun is out of Davies's hand and clattering across the floor. Ken reacts first, and kicks it away just as Davies's fist connects with his head. Instantly he is in the midst of a whirl of arms and fists, ducking a roundhouse to the head only to catch a punch firmly in the solar plexus that seems to constrict his entire

chest into nothing. He strikes out once, blindly, and feels Davies fall back, his assailant's head striking the corner of Paula's mantelpiece.

Davies stumbles back against one of Paula's threadbare armchairs for a moment. Ken is still wheezing, willing himself to continue when he hears a short, sharp sound like a sneeze, and then Davies falls.

There is stillness. And there is something red blooming out of the bullet hole in Davies's back, but not much of it at all.)

(Nine weeks earlier, and, on his lunch break at work, he stands in the phone booth, staring at the phone number Luke Huntley has given him. After fifteen minutes he stops staring and dials the number. It's the day after Davies's acquittal)

(Seven weeks earlier, and Paula stands motionless, gun raised, as the aftershocks of the blast die away. Her eyes are fixed on Davies, and Ken wonders if she even knows what she has just done. He crouches down by Davies's body to attempt first aid.

Within seconds it is clear that Davies is dead. Ken comes to the realization with something like disbelief: he has never seen anyone die before. He looks up at Paula, his fingers still on a nonexistent pulse. She hasn't moved but as Ken gazes up at her she finally looks toward him.

She stares down at the gun in her hand as though she does not believe what it is telling her, slowly lowering it. "You'd better call the police."

Ken looks at her, still trying to get his breath back. Paula, gun, body. His own bruised fists, the slightly bloodied edge to the mantelpiece. He wants to protect her suddenly, which feels strange because she has always slightly repelled him before.

"You'd better," she says.

"Paula—" He needs to think, and she's not letting him. "I don't know if—"

"It was self-defense. They won't arrest me, will they?"

Ken straightens up slowly, trying to engage the lawyer part of his brain. It comes back too readily for a part of him that he is trying to disown. "When you fired," he says slowly, "he wasn't attacking you. I . . . I don't think he was still attacking me."

"What do you mean?" She has left the window now, and is checking Davies's body for signs of life with almost-steady hands.

"If you'd . . . if it'd happened two seconds earlier, well—" He lets himself watch her check the body, buying himself time to turn instinctive knowledge into unpalatable truths and unpalatable truths into words. "A few seconds earlier, it'd have been self-defense. But . . . I'm sorry, Paula, but . . . if you get the wrong prosecuting counsel . . . Well, they could call it Murder One."

"Oh." She looks lost, almost childlike. For an instant there is nothing formidable left about her. She looks at him expectantly, and then she asks, "Aren't you going to call them?"

(Eight weeks earlier and Ken is in his father's office. His resignation letter is in his hand, his fingers slightly crumpling its pristine paper. He is angry.

"You knew he raped her, dad. You knew it."

"No. I did not. If Davies had said anything of the kind, I would have—"

"No—" Ken stabs the air with a single finger, angrier than he can remember ever being. "No—you didn't know it because you made damn sure you didn't. Even after I told you—"

His father puts on an air of exaggerated patience. "Don't be immature, Kenneth. I had a job to do, and I did it."

"What if it had been my sister who'd gotten hurt? Or Nancy next door? Would you defend someone who had hurt them?"

"Of course not! You know—"

"Then why is Paula different? Why does she deserve less?"

"Really, Kenneth! Miss Mason was perfectly entitled to give her side of the story to the prosecuting attorney, and she did. It's no fault of mine if the court assigns her a fool like Saunders instead of a proper prosecuting attorney."

Her side to the story. Ken shuts his mouth, realizing for the first time that his father genuinely does not believe in truth. He drops the resignation letter on his father's desk. "I'll be leaving at the end of the month," is all he says. He doesn't even bother to ask whether this would be convenient.)

(Seven weeks earlier, and the gun clatters and rattles as it slides down into the disused quarry. The body, by contrast, falls silently, almost stealthily, even when it comes to rest on the ledge fifty feet below.

Ken walks back to the car, and climbs in, closing the door quietly behind him. The engine is running and the sun is just starting to rise. He leans back in his seat staring at the steering wheel, dimly surprised that he feels perfectly calm. His hands rest on the dash and when he looks through the steering wheel at them he notices that the knuckles are skinned raw. He can't feel them, not yet, and his hands aren't shaking at all. Not the tiniest bit.

He ought to feel something, surely. He wonders what is wrong with him.)

(Three weeks earlier, and he has been driving for almost an entire night. The black sports car unsettles him now, and not just from Davies's ghost in the trunk. It's become a symbol, of all the wrong things. He's approaching Sioux Falls and the border with South Dakota. Somehow, the moment Minnesota is behind him something inside him untwists.

He pulls into a used car lot with a screech of tires that almost sends the sports car careering into the merchandise, and asks what they'll give him to take the car off his hands. The amount the man offers is robbing him blind, but he doesn't care. Choosing a replacement is a harder matter, because his eye is invariably drawn to the kind of car he's trying to leave behind. That is, until he finds a battered gray Ford Galaxie in one corner, looking like the last puppy in the pound.

By the time he's driven a hundred miles the Galaxie feels as comfortable and familiar as a pair of old boots. It's another hundred miles before he realizes that Van will kill him when he tells her.)

(Seven weeks earlier, and he's propped limply against Paula's porch, the black Alfa Spider parked in her front yard. Paula seems calm and still now. Everything feels a little unreal.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks. She doesn't ask where he went or what he did.

He's not ready for that question, so he evades. "Did you want me to call the police?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't know what you were doing."

"Why does it matter to you? I saw you at the court. You were with your dad, you were working for him." She lights a cigarette, draws in a long breath and lets it out as a plume of smoke. "I hated you for it."

"Do you now?"

"I don't know."

"I—If it's easier to hate me, that's okay. Just . . . just whatever works, Paula. Whatever helps you get by."

She stares at him. "Are you okay?"

He looks at her, not understanding. She's the one who was raped. She's the one with blood-spattered walls and fresh bruises on her face. All he has are skinned knuckles and perhaps a couple of bruised ribs. Nothing that won't pass.

When she starts toward him he becomes gradually aware that he's sliding down against her porch wall.)

(Twenty minutes earlier, and he has just read a newspaper cutting implying that it wasn't Paula's bullet that killed Davies at all. The world is constricting round him because the only alternative is that he himself—

He remembers blindly pushing Davies back, the pause before he falls, the blood coating the corner of Paula's mantelpiece, and feels the weight of what he now realizes he has done.)

* * *

Somewhere outside of him, something shattered.

He blinked, and looked down, registering for the first time the scalding coffee coating his fingers, the shattered coffee mug at his feet, and the pool of dark liquid with its processed sugars spreading around him.

Institutional green walls. People. Cops. Everyone in the room was staring at him. The young woman who had reminded him so much of Paula was gone.

It took a moment before he realized that his presence here had nothing to do with Davies's death, and everything to do with his own career choice. "Just let me get a cloth," he muttered, and stepped across the spreading coffee puddle.

"Don't move." He looked up, and saw Colby coming toward him, Starsky beside him, tearing open the wrapper on a candy bar. "I'll get that cloth. You'll just spread it over the floor if you go anywhere." Colby spun away, striding.

"Hey, are you all right?" Starsky said, staring at him a little too closely. "You look like you just saw Macbeth's ghost."

"Banquo's," Ken mumbled, vaguely aware that he was being steered away from the coffee puddle.

"Say what?"

"Banquo's ghost. Macbeth saw Banquo's ghost."

He felt himself being shoved down into a chair, and a few seconds later a second mug of coffee was pushed into his hands. He mumbled something he would afterward hope had been thanks, and took a mouthful, choking a little on the too-sweet liquid. Colby had returned with a cloth and a bucket, and was pushing the cloth around the brown linoleum with one foot.

"Jeez, Colby, you do know that's not how you get a floor clean?" Starsky said

"It's how I do it," Colby said. "Here." he said, and snatched the candy bar from Starsky's hand. "Give that to Hutchinsonkenhutchinson."

"Hey! That's mine!"

"His need is greater. And besides, who lent you the quarter in the first place? I did."

"I don't want it," Ken mumbled, but all the phrase achieved was to ensure that Starsky pushed the bar into his hands and told him, "Eat." It was easier to obey, so he ate, drinking the coffee with both hands clutched around the mug. He should have known it—should have realized it at the time: it had been him, and not Paula at all. He'd tried to free her from the consequences of her own crime, but all he had done was to make her an accomplice in his.

He'd have to go back to Duluth, give himself up to the police, be taken into custody because there was no way in hell he had the cash to make bail . . .

"Blondie, earth to blondie, are you reading me?"

. . . make bail even if he were allowed it, be tried and sentenced-

"Can't . . . can't do that, God I can't," he muttered.

"Say what?" Ken looked up sharply, and this time Starsky caught the cup of coffee before it had fallen more than an inch.

"Hey, easy now. Give that here before you spill any more."

"Nothing." He made a gesture of dismissal, hoped that his self-appointed friend would take his behavior as nothing, but there was no such luck.

Starsky looked at him sharply, and paused, as if trying to read his face, and Ken could feel himself starting to grow uneasy. "You're quitting, aren't you?" Starsky said slowly.

He tried to say no, but the word wouldn't come out? "What kind of a thing to do is that?" Starsky said, setting the mug of coffee down under the chair. "You drove two thousand miles for this, and God knows how long you've been sleeping in that dump of a car once you got here, and now—"

Seven weeks ago he'd driven a black Italian sports car with a body in the passenger seat. "There's nothing wrong with my car."

"Don't tell me you're serious. You can't do that."

"I'm not trying to tell you anything." So who died and made him King? Less than an hour he'd known the guy, and he was trying— Ken said nothing.

"But you are, aren't you?"

"Hey, what's going on here?" Colby appeared suddenly beside his friend, bucket in one hand and cloth in the other.

Starsky glanced away from him at Colby for a moment. "Jeez, would you believe this turkey here wants to quit before he's even started? And he drove 2000 miles in that clunker of a Ford just to get here." Starsky's attention was back on him, disquieting and compelling.

If he stayed here, Ken thought, there was certainly going to be an argument. He pushed himself to his feet, gesturing with a forefinger at the two of them. "Listen, you can call me a turkey all you like, but it won't change a thing. I don't have a choice about this. Now, if you'll just get outta my way—"

"I don't think we should. Do you think we should, John?"

"Not without good reason, Starsky. And the forefinger isn't a good reason."

Ken lowered it, reduced reluctantly to speechlessly.

"Hey, don't be like that, Hutchin-Hutch-whatever you're called. It's a *good* forefinger. It's just we're gonna be cops, so it'd be kinda silly to let that sorta thing scare us."

"If you're gonna be cops then all the more reason you should let me pass." He sucked in a breath with difficulty, but it didn't seem enough air to complete the sentence. "I'm just about to go and give myself up for murder, okay?"

There was a silence. His two watchers seemed to be waiting for more, but the words had run out.

"Hell of a time to do it," Starsky said quietly.

"I only found out this morning. That it was me."

"*You* killed someone, and you only found out *today*? You planning on being a detective or something?"

"Shut up, huh? Let me handle this," Starsky said, and Colby turned and gave him a mock salute, his eyes derisive. "I think this is when we take this somewhere more private," Starsky said.

Colby frowned. "Broom closet? There's one by the kitchen. I've got to take these back there." He gestured the bucket, sloshing the coffee around inside it.

"You could just let me go and find a cop—"

"C'mon. Broom closet."

Broom closet? He'd lost the initiative, and he knew it. Events seemed to have overtaken him completely now, because he let them drag him along into the most ludicrous confined space, seating him on top of a kick stool in the darkness of the closet. He could vaguely hear his two companions arguing outside—something about whistling the Marseillaise as a lookout signal, which somehow degenerated into an argument about the differences between the French and the Canadians, before one of the two came inside and the door was shut. It was near darkness, but the figure leaning on a ladder opposite him was unquestionably Starsky, arms folded in front of him.

"So spill." There was an almost elemental quality, an intentness, in Starsky's voice, now that he couldn't see the comical face and the ridiculous overblown swagger. He'd found this guy annoying only fifteen minutes ago.

I don't know who you are, David Starsky, he thought and I don't know what you are—but you're going to make one terrifying cop.

"You want the Readers' Digest version?" He was starting to feel cold. "Girl I know gets attacked. I try to defend her, knock the guy down. She shoots him with his own gun. We don't go to the cops because—stuff it, Starsky, I don't think the Readers' Digest version is going to cut it."

"Terrific. So give me the background."

"He'd already raped her." It hurt to say. "He was from one of the richest families in town. She was—just a nurse, really. She brought charges against him, but he was acquitted. Said she was a slut." His clasped hands were suddenly very interesting. "My father was the defense attorney, got him off even though he knew—he must have known—" The events came out in fragmented bits. In few words, with no wasted details, he portrayed the web that Dick Davies had woven and pulled him into. "He tried to attack her again, and- . . . After she shot him . . . was I supposed to turn her over to the cops? She'd already been through everything the courts could throw at her. And that first rape wouldn't even have been used as evidence!" He could almost feel the judgment in the eyes burning through the darkness. "I'd just knocked him down when she fired that gun. If she'd just shot five seconds earlier—" He rubbed his face, suddenly glad of the darkness. "So I covered up for her. It was my idea."

"Let me guess—it wasn't the bullet that killed him."

"They don't think so."

"So, you giving yourself up?"

He sucked in a deep breath. "Do I really have a choice?"

"You know, if you were a cop, that would have been a righteous kill."

"I'm not a cop."

"You will be."

He started up, lurching forward in the semidarkness to where Starsky was leaning against the ladder. "Cops don't throw d-dead bodies into quarries, last I heard. You're saying I should just let it go and not come forward? Dammit, Starsky, what the hell kind of a cop would that make me?" He half-tripped over a paint can on the floor and seized Starsky's collar half to steady himself, half to shake some sense into the man. "You think I'll have any right to carry a badge with that behind me?"

"Hey, hey easy. I'm not saying that at all."

"Then what?"

"I'm saying maybe you should ask the lady."

"What?"

"You were protecting her. If you turn yourself in she'll still be charged as an accessory."

"An accomplice," he said automatically. "She was there." No matter that she'd been put through more than anyone should have to bear and had been almost shocked out of her mind. No matter that he, Hutchinson, had pretty much made the decision for her—they'd still charge her. "And there isn't time."

"Now you listen to me good, buddy. If you're planning to drop out, does it really matter if you're late? And if you're not . . . then you don't need to call her. Get it?"

"I should just quit anyway. It was stupid of me to—"

"Listen to me." Starsky's voice had changed again, and the intent, compelling tone was back, almost as if it were he who had a bruising hold on Ken's shoulders and not the other way round. He was still all but invisible in the darkness, but a stray ray of light was reflected in his eyes so that twin gleams shone in his face. "You chose to become a cop for a reason. That reason hasn't gone away. Has it?" Ken said nothing, not even breathing. "Has it?"

He shook his head, releasing Starsky's collar abruptly, and lurched backward.

"We cool now, Hutch?"

"Yeah." No. "Yeah, yeah, we're cool." He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to hold back a headache. "I can't believe you're doing this. I could be telling you--?"

"You started this, kid. You'd never have brought the subject up if you were gonna lie about it." His voice lowered and softened, and there was a quality in the voice that made Ken almost shiver. "And besides, I've never yet met the guy who could lie from the heart." Starsky's hand patted him, just once, on the shoulder. "C'mon, turkey. Let's make that call." He pulled open the door.

"There you are." Colby waved the cleaning cloth at them. "I was wondering how much longer I could clean that bucket for."

"Well. Thanks. Both of you." It felt a touch awkward to say it. "Do either of you nuts know where the payphone is?"

"Right outside. We'll go with you."

"Oh, come on! I don't need a police escort to make a phone call!"

"Call it moral support," Starsky said. "Coming, Colby?"

Colby shrugged and then shook his head. "You go, Starsky. I'll save you seats." He turned into the waiting area. "Don't be long."

The receptionist looked up as they went past and snapped, "Make sure you're back by eight-thirty." Starsky ignored her, and she turned back to the line in front of her desk, muttering something about undisciplined young punks.

It was even hotter out now, hot enough that he could almost feel himself shriveling away to nothing. Starsky, walking briskly ahead of him seemed untroubled by the heat—untroubled by anything, truth be told.

"So why'd you want to become a cop?" Starsky asked as the door swung shut behind them.

"Maybe I thought I'd make a difference." That was almost funny, now.

Starsky stopped dead, grabbing Ken's sleeve and jerking him to a halt, regardless of the fact that they were standing in the middle of the driveway. "Never laugh about that. Do it or don't do it, but never despise it."

His throat was suddenly and utterly dry. "I don't." He glanced around, looking for an escape from the too-

intense eyes. "It's just—I—after everything—"

A car turned into the driveway and Starsky pulled him over to the side of the road, toward the phone booth on the corner. "Remind me to tell you about my juvie record sometime," he said lightly, and then asked, "Will she be in?"

"She works nights," Ken said, raking through the change in his pockets.

Starsky stepped back, letting the door of the phone booth swing shut between them, and Ken stood in there, frowning at the dial before him, trying to recall her number, to visualize the piece of paper on which he had written it down.

She wouldn't want to talk to him. She deserved better than to be reminded about everything that had gone down. He glanced over his shoulder at Starsky, and, slowly and reluctantly, fed a dime into the phone. He dialed slowly, carefully, finding he did remember the number after all.

It rang twice, and Paula answered in the middle of the third ring.

"Who is it?" She didn't sound quite aggressive and she didn't sound quite scared, but there was still that core of strength at the root of it.

"It's Ken," he said quietly.

"Ken." It ought to have been a question.

"Yeah. I saw the newspaper clippings. About Davies."

"What about them?"

He couldn't say it, pinched the bridge of his nose again.

"What about them?" Paula asked again, a little sharply, but the sharpness belied a tremor in her voice.

"About- that it wasn't the b-bullet that killed him."

"They're wrong."

"But—"

"I don't care what they say. Ken, they weren't there. We were, and I killed him."

Her voice was desperate, and that was wrong, wrong on a bone-deep level. Surely there should be relief, maybe a little shock, to discover that she hadn't been guilty of murder. Surely?

"But if—"

"Listen, even they don't know for sure. I do. I fired that bullet."

He couldn't do this. It was just distressing her, getting nowhere. "I thought you'd be glad—"

"Damn you, Ken Hutchinson, what right have you to open that can of worms? He raped me and I killed him. That's what happened to me and it's what I have to live with. It's what I *can* live with. Because—because it's the only justice any of us is going to get."

"Oh," he said blankly. He'd never thought about it like that.

"I can live with it, Ken. Why can't you?"

I might have killed—, he almost said, before he realized what he was saying, and to whom he was saying it. He felt then in full measure the gulf between her courage and his own hypocrisy, balking at the stain of justifiable homicide when she could look first degree murder itself in the face and live with both it and herself.

There was a moment of silence. He could feel her breathing hard on the other end of the telephone, realized he was too.

"No. You're right," he said, but the words took effort. "Whatever works for you. If it's what you want, I'm okay with it." He'd said something like that seven weeks ago, but he could say the words now without calling back the memories.

He could feel her own breathing calming two thousand miles away on the other end of the line. "Thank you." There was a brief pause, and then he heard her hang up, very quietly, almost gently. After a moment he replaced the receiver himself, just as gently and pushed open the door of the phone booth.

"She said no, didn't she?" Starsky said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He nodded, oddly reassured by the touch. "Well?"

The hand started to steer him back toward the Police Academy entrance. "Well what?"

"You with us?"

Sarcasm seemed safest. "Should I be?"

"Depends on if you still want to make that difference, doesn't it?" Starsky said the words as if it really were that simple.

Perhaps it was. Perhaps if he looked on it as a debt to be paid -

"So, you with us?" Starsky asked again.

He looked up, around the dusty parking lot, at his companion, and then at the beckoning entrance of the Bay City Police Academy, dull concrete and gray grime seemingly transfigured gold by the morning sun that before had merely exposed its filth.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I suppose I am."