

The Second Season
A Prelude to "Little Girl Lost"
by Brit

“What is *that*?”

I knew it was coming. Knew it the minute I tied the plastic reindeer to my rearview mirror that Hutch was gonna give me crap for it, and it'd more than likely set him off. *Again.*

Well, sometimes you just gotta let him rant. “What's it look like? It's a reindeer.”

“Do you mean to tell me that I've got to spend the entire day looking at that *thing* dangling in front of me?”

“Yep.” I pull away from the curb, trying to hide the smile that wanted to bust out of my face. Half the fun was goading him, after all.

He didn't say anything else, though I caught him leaning forward to check out the Star of David on my dash. He just kinda snorted and sat back, then grabbed the mic and logged us in for the start of our shift.

After a while, the silence started to bug me, so I turn on the radio, even though we're not supposed to on patrol. So, shoot me. Bing Crosby's warblin' about a white Christmas and I join in, which irritates Blondie even more. Perfect.

I head us over to Fifth. Most of the blocks on it are made up of either bars or liquor stores. A dude in a Santa beard and hat is standing outside a porno shop, trying to entice some business suits inside. From the looks of them, they must be lost. That, or else they're in the city for a convention and are looking to take a little “side trip” before heading home to their respectable wives, houses with white picket fences, two and a half kids and a dog.

“Oh, for crying out loud.”

Yep, it's building. Any minute now, it'll hit the fan.

“See, Starsky—*that's* what I'm talking about. People have no concept about what the holiday is supposed to mean, and they've not only commercialized it past recognition, they're perverting it to line their own pockets!”

Hit the fan and flying. Actually this is *good*. Call me nuts, but I *want* him to rant and rave. Then maybe—just maybe—he'll let something slip and I'll finally find out what's

really been eating him up every Christmas. I've been tracking the same clues for years, but even being the Detective First Class that I am, I sure the heck haven't figured this one out yet. Of course, I've asked him point blank what's going on inside that blond head of his, but I always get the same speech about commercialism and euphoric sentimentalism. So, each time Christmas rolls around I keep probing, but keep coming up empty. And this year...for some reason this year he's become edgier, even angry about all the holiday stuff. I'm talking really hot. This has got to be the Christmas I figure it out, before it drives him nuts.

Or worse, drives *me* nuts.

I head east, toward the more upscale part of town. He hates those plastic snowmen lit in people's yards; knowing full well that their grass will never see a flake of the white stuff. He starts fidgeting in his seat as we cruise through, and I figure he's had enough of their gaudy tinsel and lights.

Next, I swing us around to the shopping district, just on the outskirts of our beat. The streets are loaded with tourists and more than a few jaded debutantes from the Beverly Hills crowd, running around in their holiday sweaters—"slumming it"—looking for bargains. When I stopped at a red light, we both watched as a group of girls, all probably around twenty or so, loaded down with their junk, strut down the street toward their Mercedes. The sidewalk was fairly crowded, so they were forced to pass near a Vietnam Vet who had parked his wheelchair between the entrances of two shops. He held a sign close to his chest, covering up most of his ratty infantry jacket, asking for pocket change.

He didn't have any legs below his thighs.

The Vet asked or said something to the women, because they paused, uneasy-like. I heard Hutch sucking in his breath when those snotty broads said something back to the guy, then hustled away, laughing their fool, bleached heads off. The guy in the wheel chair looked embarrassed, then angry.

The temperature in the Torino heated up about a hundred degrees. Hutch whips around and glares at me, his eyes all hard. "*That's* what I'm talking about! Those...those...*women* could have spared more than a little pocket change for that guy and they certainly didn't need to trash him! Now they'll pile in the their forty-thousand dollar car and head back to their six-figure houses on the beach, and never give that Vet and the kind of Christmas *he's* going to have, let alone where he's going to get his next meal, another thought. *That's* what I've been talking about, Starsk! Its people like that who have screwed Christmas up: fake people with some glossed over, self-absorbed, bogus attitudes about everything being right in the world for a few days each year! They spew out some fake, sentimental, shallow *crap* and just out-and-out ignore other people's suffering. Oh, there's a few bleeding hearts who will give up a couple hours to serve a meal down at the mission one day out of the year, just to make themselves feel good, but turn around and not give a crap the other three-hundred and sixty-four! These are the same people who'll wish you Merry Christmas one minute and rip your heart out the

next, or tell you to ‘cheer up, it’s Christmas,’ and brush off the fact that somebody you love nearly—”

He stopped cold.

A horn honking behind us let us know that the light had turned green. We stared at each other for a second; Hutch looking like he’d just confessed to being a mass-murder. I pulled ahead and slid into the spot left by the snotty women with the Merc.

I turned off the ignition and looked at him again. I’d heard the rest of what he’d been saying, even though he never finished: *Dies. When somebody you love’s nearly dies.*

Why didn’t I put it together before? It was almost a year to the day that I’d been hit—twice, actually—a week before Christmas. Took one in the back and another creased the side of my hard head. I only remember bits and pieces of that night in the restaurant, other than that I’d been scared spitless about not being able to back Hutch up. After being loaded into the ambulance, I don’t remember squat until I woke up in my hospital room, Blondie there sleeping in the chair next to the bed. Dobey had told me during one of his visits something about Hutch tearing into a hospital volunteer while waiting for me to get out of surgery, but he never told me why, and I just chalked it up to a very tense night.

Had someone said something to him while I was out of it? Somebody patronize him with some moronic holiday garbage while he sat there waiting, my blood staining his clothes?

When Hutch looked away from me, really quick, I knew that he knew that I’d figured it out. We always have been able to read each other that way, even if I was a little slow on this one. It’s funny how he’s the one who’ll analyze people up one side and down the other, but don’t ever try to get him to talk about stuff when he doesn’t want to.

Okay, now that I knew. At least I had something to work with to get him out of this “bah-humbug” slump. Still, I decided to let him off the hook for the moment, ‘cause I know it’s better to chip away at him gradually. You never do a frontal assault with Hutch, anyway. Nope. Just keep chippin’.

I pulled the keys out of the ignition and stuffed them in my coat pocket. Diggin’ through my jeans, I come up with the wad of bills that I was gonna use for lunch. I give Hutch a nudge and nod toward the Vet. “Come on, let’s go see the man about some spare change.”

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