

Christmas in July

By Linda B.

“What are you grinning about?” Hutch asked, rubbing the back of his neck as he uncurled from yet another awkward sleeping position. He hated late-night stakeouts, especially since it was the third night in a row and he was wet with perspiration from the stifling humidity. So far, it had all been for nothing. It was beginning to appear that their snitch had been wrong. The heroin dealer, Hughes, was never going to show.

“That sign in the store window.” Starsky pointed across the street at the Skyline Furniture building—a dilapidated building on a dilapidated street. The streetlight, dimmed by dirt and cobwebs, cast a yellowish glow on the building. The needs of the street had been long ignored by the city. Just like the needs of the people who lived in its vicinity.

Hutch leaned forward, rubbed his eyes, and squinted, peering through his partner’s car window. “I don’t see any sign.”

“It’s in the door window. Says they’re havin’ a ‘Christmas in July Sale’.”

“So?”

Starsky turned to him, the smile on his face obvious even in the darkness of the night. “Just think about it, Hutch. They’re already planning for Christmas. That means I can start thinking about all the gifts I can get you.”

“Starsk, what do I care about a Christmas sale in the middle of the hottest summer in a decade? I don’t like Christmas in December, let alone in July.” Hutch leaned his head back against the car seat as he tried to stretch out the kink in his back. How his partner could be interested in Christmas now was utterly ridiculous to him.

“More like the gifts you’ll receive,” Hutch muttered.

“Whad’ya say?”

“Do me a favor. Don’t buy me anything from that store. ‘Christmas in July?’ Right. They’re just thinking about how they can make another buck.”

Undaunted, Starsky grinned at him and turned back to look out the window. Suddenly, he frowned and leaned against the steering wheel, trying to get a better view. “Did you see that?”

“What?” Hutch focused down the darkened street, eyes darting, straining to spot anyone hiding in the shadows. “I don’t see anything.” He pulled out his gun, fully awake now. “I think I saw someone turn down the alley next to the furniture store.” Starsky pulled his gun from its holster. Quietly opening the door, he slid out and rushed across the street, hiding in its shadows, knowing Hutch was right behind him.



Hutch, gun up and ready, stood to the right of the door as Starsky braced himself on the left. The padlock to the furniture warehouse dock had obviously been cut, and someone had entered. The question now was: how many were there, and were they armed?

Starsky motioned his intent to go in low as usual, while Hutch remained high. Hutch nodded. Starsky pushed the door open with his foot, and they entered as one. Silence and darkness greeted them in the warehouse. Cheap furniture of every sort, covered in plastic or in boxes stacked high, filled the room.

Hutch nodded toward the right, and Starsky, momentarily touching Hutch’s shoulder, headed to the left, staying low behind the protection of the boxes.

Hutch advanced carefully between the boxes circling the outside of the room. So far, he’d neither seen nor heard anyone, and he wondered where his partner was. He was beginning to doubt that anyone was still in the building until he heard a sound up ahead. He stopped to focus on where the sound had come from. Cocking his gun, Hutch continued cautiously.



Starsky, circling from the left, observed a faint light coming from an office at the back of the warehouse. Heading silently in that direction, he pulled up as he neared the room. Leaning tight against the wall, he looked between the blinds on the office window. Someone wearing blue jeans and a jean jacket was bent down at the office safe, cautiously turning the dial. A gun lay on the floor near his right foot. Starsky quickly glanced back through the shadows of the warehouse looking for his back-up, but Hutch was nowhere in sight.

Starsky straightened, noiselessly entered the room, and aimed his gun. “Freeze. Police.”

As the robber froze, Starsky advanced and, kicking the gun aside, said, “Stand up slowly and put your hands behind your back.” As the thief stood and turned toward him, he looked a lot younger than Starsky had originally thought. He was a teenager, probably no older than sixteen or seventeen. *Not another Lonnie Craig!*

Starsky pulled the handcuffs out of his back pocket and started forward, while keeping his gun trained on the perpetrator. Suddenly, there was the sound of crashing boxes in the warehouse, and, as Starsky hesitated, the teenager grabbed the unexpected

opportunity to dive behind the desk. Reluctant to shoot, Starsky blocked his exit through the doorway.

“Give it up, kid. There’s no way outta here. You can leave using your own two feet, or using the four wheels of a stretcher. Your choice.” Starsky could still hear scuffling sounds coming from the warehouse, and he was anxious to back his partner.

Starsky bent to pick up the intruder’s gun, when he suddenly had to dodge a paperweight flying in his direction. He rolled to the front of the desk, staying low. The warehouse was deadly silent, and he’d lost his patience. He needed to check on what had happened to Hutch. “I don’t want to shoot, but...” Starsky glanced under the desk to ascertain the teenager’s direction and location and, in one quick movement, slid across the top of the desk. Reaching down, he placed the gun’s muzzle behind the kid’s ear. “...I will. Now, put your hands on your head and stand up slowly.”

This time, the teenager did as directed, and Starsky quickly handcuffed him to the leg of the desk.



Hutch cautiously turned the corner, boxes of end tables, lamps, and lampshades stacked high beside him. Continuing down the center aisle, he paused, listening. Unexpectedly, boxes started falling from above, and Hutch rolled to the right side. As he started to stand, a metal TV stand came down hard on his head. Stunned, he went down to his knees, a sudden pain in his left side taking his breath away. Sliding to the floor, Hutch clutched his side, conscious of his increasingly difficult breathing and aware of the sticky warmth beginning to run between his fingers and across his hand.



Starsky exited the office and turned into the warehouse, unsure of which direction the sounds had come from. He headed toward the center aisle, all his senses alert. Footsteps running at the back of the warehouse forced him to quickly change his direction. He was traveling down one of the side aisles when he heard the warehouse door slam. As he rounded the corner, he could see in front of him boxes and furniture scattered across the floor—and Hutch lying beside them. Dropping to his knees next to his partner, Starsky reached out to see what was wrong. Immediately, he could hear Hutch’s strained breathing as he spotted the blood spreading through Hutch’s fingers and across the upper left side of his shirt.

“Hutch, can you hear me? Don’t worry; everything’s gonna be all right.” Starsky pulled off his shirt, folded it up, and laid it on the open wound. He could see the blood bubbling out of it and knew he had to quickly close off any air leaks. It was suddenly all too familiar.

The sights and sounds of the 'Nam jungle came rushing back. Steve Jackson, his closest friend in the platoon, was lying wounded next to him, his blood bubbling like an aquarium out of the wound, his breathing increasingly labored. Out in the hot jungle, surrounded by the Cong, there was little he could do to stop the blood flow. He covered the wound with his shirt, keeping his hand tight, afraid to move....

Frantic, visually searching the immediate area around Hutch, Starsky thought he caught sight of several rolls of packing tape stacked on boxes at the end of the aisle. "Don't go anywhere," he whispered. "I'll be right back." Rushing to the boxes, he grabbed the tape and returned, sliding down on the cement floor. Pulling pieces off, he taped his shirt down, effectively sealing off the edges. "Hutch, I'm gonna have to leave you for a second. I've gotta call for back-up—and an ambulance."

"Star-sk...."

The whispered name made Starsky waiver. "Lay still and don't move, Hutch. I'll be right back. 'Promise.'" He brushed at some stray blond hairs on Hutch's forehead before rushing for the office phone.



Captain Dobey, his sleeves rolled up, and wiping the perspiration off his forehead with his handkerchief, hustled down the hospital hallway as quickly as he could. His officer was visible at the end of the hall, slumped in a chair, an empty paper cup dangling from his hand. Dobey wasn't sure if Starsky was awake or asleep.

"Starsky, how's Hutch?" Starsky opened one eye and gradually straightened in the hard chair in which he'd been trying, though unsuccessfully, to catch a few minutes of sleep. He was relieved to see Captain Dobey. He needed someone to talk to, someone to force his memories of 'Nam and Steve Jackson to disappear. He needed to forget that Steve hadn't....

"I don't know, Captain." He glanced at his watch. "They've been working on him for a long time, and no one's come out to tell me anything. I'm hoping no news is good news."

Dobey glanced down the corridor toward the nurses' station, but it was empty. He straightened to his full stature. "I'll go find out what's going on."

A small smile flickered across Starsky's face. "Well, you carry more weight than me; maybe they'll tell you somethin'."

Dobey threw Starsky a quick glance, but seeing only the drawn, tired face of his officer, he patted Starsky on the shoulder and headed down the hall.

Starsky, hiding another smile, once again leaned back in the hard plastic chair. He'd closed his eyes for only a few minutes when he heard, "Detective Starsky?"

Instantly awake, he stood and faced the doctor. "Yes, sir, how is he?"

"Detective Hutchinson is doing well. As you are probably aware, he took a knife wound in his upper left side. It pierced his lung, collapsing it. We've inserted a chest tube into his chest cavity to suck out any excess air and blood. The lung was then able to re-expand. We're monitoring him right now. There were a few tense minutes when his oxygen level dropped, but it was only momentary. I think he'll make a full recovery. We're also monitoring him for a concussion resulting from a wound he suffered at the back of his skull, but I don't expect any complications from that, either."

Starsky grabbed the doctor's hand and started pumping it, the anxiety draining out of him, leaving him feeling relieved but exhausted. "Thank you so much. When can I see him?"

"In a while. I'll send a nurse down to escort you back as soon as he's up to visitors, but..." His voice took on a stern tone. "...it will only be for a few minutes, one person at a time."

"I understand." Spotting Captain Dobey coming down the corridor toward them, Starsky began waving for him to hurry. "And you don't have to worry. I only want to make sure he's okay; I won't disturb him."

"Good."

As the doctor turned to leave, Dobey quickly joined them. "Doctor...is Detective Hutchinson...okay?"

"As I was explaining to Detective Starsky, he's recovering now, and I don't expect any complications. He was very lucky; someone at the scene obviously knew what to do in this situation. We will have him on a nasal cannula to support his breathing until the damaged lung has had time to heal. But he should be going home in a couple of days." Dobey shook the doctor's hand with a sigh of relief. "That's good news. Thank you very much."

With a slight wave, the doctor wished them good night and headed back down the corridor.

"Now, Starsky, you can head home and get some sleep."

"Not 'til I get a chance to see Hutch, even if it's only for a couple minutes. I've gotta see for myself that he's okay."

“Why doesn’t that surprise me? Well, don’t stay too long; you look like you need some sleep.” Knowing full well the history of his two officers and how they were always there to support each other, he added, “Hutch is going to need someone to look after him when he gets released, and both you and I know who that will be.” Dobey started to walk away when he stopped to add, “You might be interested in knowing that we caught the second perpetrator. As soon as you called it in, patrols were all over the area. Barton and Follis stopped to assist a motorist with a stalled car, and, when he started acting suspiciously, they went through the car and found a bloody knife. They brought him in, and it didn’t take very long in interrogation before he confessed.”

“Thanks, Cap’n. Hutch’ll be glad to hear that. Thank them for me.”

“I will. Have a good night—what’s left of it. I better get home and tell Edith. She probably hasn’t slept a wink since I got the initial call.” Dobey patted Starsky on the shoulder before heading down the hall toward the elevator.

Seeing a nurse in scrubs headed in his direction, Starsky called out, “Thanks, Cap’n.”



A groan from the bed caused Starsky to sit up and move to Hutch’s side. The nurses had quietly gone about their business, checking Hutch’s vitals and monitoring his medications, all while politely ignoring Starsky’s presence. One had briefly mentioned that they had recognized him from prior hospital visits, whether it was from Hutch’s injuries or his own, he didn’t know and he didn’t ask. He just appreciated the fact that they hadn’t kicked him out.

Hutch had finally been moved to his own room but had not yet awakened. After going home just long enough to shower and grab a bite to eat, Starsky had returned to the hospital. He was too wound up to get any sleep, despite what Dobey had suggested. Until now, he’d sat, watched, and waited. Placing his hand on top of Hutch’s, he softly said, “Hutch?”

A second, deeper groan worried Starsky, and he was about ready to push the call button when Hutch slowly opened his eyes. “How ya doin’, buddy? The doc says everything is gonna be okay.”

Hutch blinked several times, first looking around the room, then finally focusing on Starsky. He made several attempts to speak, each unsuccessful.

Relieved, Starsky reached for the glass of melting ice chips sitting on the nightstand next to the bed. “You want something to drink?”

Hutch nodded slightly, and Starsky held the glass up to his lips. Gently sucking a few sips through the straw, Hutch sank back into the pillow. “You in any pain? I’ll get the nurse.”

Hutch shifted his hand to the top of Starsky's. "I'm okay," he whispered.

Feeling the slightest of squeezes from his partner, Starsky grinned and straightened up to return the glass to the nightstand. "I was starting to get worried. You sure wanted to catch up on your beauty sleep, didn't you?"

"After...three nights...of stakeouts...with you...I'm entitled...to some sleep."

"You bet." Starsky, feeling lighthearted, couldn't stop smiling. Anything his partner said was fine with him, even a weak attempt at a joke. Having Hutch's eyes open and hearing his voice again was enough. The next step would be to get him out of this place and back up on his feet.



Hutch shifted in the bed and immediately reached for his side, swearing under his breath. It was mid-afternoon and he'd managed to catch a short catnap after lunch, despite Starsky's constant talking. Starsky had found a new book at the hospital gift shop. It contained new and unusual facts, and Starsky had no qualms about sharing each and every one. The doctor planned to release him tomorrow, and, as much as he couldn't wait to get out of the hospital, Hutch figured he might as well take full advantage of the quiet—what there was of it. Hopefully, Starsky had tired of the book by now.

Starsky was sitting in the chair as comfortably as he could manage with his leg crossed, holding up a section of the newspaper, whistling softly. He appeared to be deeply involved in whatever he was reading. "At the risk of being bored into taking another nap, Starsk, what are you reading now?"

Starsky pulled down the paper and leaned forward, pleased that Hutch was finally awake. "Nothin' special. It's yesterday's news. Someone left the paper in the waiting room down the hall, so I picked it up to read while you were sleeping. Good nap?"

"Yeah. I can't wait to get out of here so I can sleep in my own bed."

"I can't wait 'til you get out, either. Dobey stopped by a little while ago, and you might be interested to know that the perps, the one I handcuffed in the office and the one that stabbed you, weren't working together—didn't even know each other. Apparently, Ricky Coleman, the one who stabbed you, happened to come down the alley and noticed that the warehouse padlock had been cut. He decided to take advantage of the situation and entered to see what he could easily run off with. I guess he wasn't expecting a big lug like you."

"He should've kept going." Hutch leaned his head back against his right arm on the pillow. "Hey, Starsky; lift up that paper again."

Curious, Starsky raised the paper. “What? You tired of talkin’ to me already?”

“Of course. But I thought I saw something on the back page you might be interested in.”

Starsky, ignoring Hutch’s response, turned the paper over. “Yeah? What?”

“The ad there. Isn’t Skyline Furniture where you saw the ‘Christmas In July’ sale in the window? You might want to go back and check it out; July’s almost over.”

Starsky studied the ad for a moment. “Yep, that’s the place. Why? Did ya spot something you like, after all? Or did the blow to your head make you change your mind? I seem to remember you gave me specific orders not to buy you anything from there.”

He ignored Hutch’s glare while he folded up the newspaper and tossed it in the trash. Starsky walked over to the window and stared out, not really observing all the activity around the hospital entrance. “I think I’ve had my fill of that place for now.” He turned to look at Hutch. “Besides, I don’t need to think about Christmas anymore.”

“And why’s that?”

A slight smile tweaked at the corner of Starsky’s mouth. “I already had my Christmas in July—and I got the only present I want.”

The End