

Hutchinson's Trees

by Linda B.

"Here's another one, Starsk." Hutch yelled to his partner and pointed at the Christmas tree lying on the ground at his feet. "Take it to this nice lady's car. The black one on the end."

Starsky turned and glared. His back ached and his arms were sore. Intending to angrily yell something back at his partner, he noticed the elderly, gray-haired lady standing next to his partner. She couldn't have been more than five feet tall and must have been at least sixty-five. She clutched her black handbag tightly to her chest as she counted out her money into Hutch's hand. Starsky's angry stance changed and he hurried to her side. "Where did you say your car was, ma'am?"

"That black one at the end, young man." She pointed to an old, black car parked near his Torino.

Starsky reached down to pick up the tree and winced as he tried to straighten. He followed the lady to her car, loaded the tree into the trunk and tied the trunk down so that the tree wouldn't fall out.

"You are so kind, young man." The lady placed some change into his hand as she pressed it tightly. "You remind me of my grandson with all that curly hair." She smiled and slowly sank into the driver's seat. Before she shut the door, she called out, "You have a nice Christmas, now."

Starsky watched her drive away and sighed. He glanced down at the two quarters he held in his hand. He smiled wistfully, as thoughts of his mother raced through his head. He slipped the coins into his pocket and walked back between the rows of Christmas trees, stopping briefly to lean against their makeshift wooden fence. His watch told him there were still two hours to go until closing. He was already dead tired and wanted nothing more than to put up his feet and relax.

He couldn't believe it was Christmas Eve and they were working in this lot until 11 p.m. In past years they'd willingly taken the late shift, so that other officers could be home with their families, but it usually entailed driving around town in the Torino. It was the one night of the year the streets were unusually quiet. All the bad guys were either too busy staying home with the relatives or paying their respects to God.

But to be spending it, cold and tired, on a corner lot selling Christmas trees was not what he had intended when they'd agreed to Dobey's request to work the night shift. Over the last two weeks, three Christmas tree lots had been robbed. During the last robbery, the owner, Roel Gonzales, had been fatally shot.

Hutch and he had stopped by at the Gonzales household as part of the investigation. Gonzales had left behind a pretty, young wife, who spoke only broken English, and three young children. The smallest, a little girl with large brown eyes, stared at them from behind her mother's skirts. While Starsky tried to coax the scared little girl out with a chocolate bar he'd found in his coat pocket, Hutch spoke to the mother in Spanish. He'd learned that they had little family in the area and if she could not find a job soon the family would have to return to Mexico. It was because of their visit that the two agreed to run the lot in hopes of catching the murderers before the family was forced to return to Mexico. It was little to give her in return, but perhaps it would bring her a little peace of mind.

But they'd been at for a week now, and the only thing Starsky had gotten was a sore back and aching muscles.

He paused to rest against the black and white sign declaring "Hutchinson's Trees," and watched Hutch as he talked to a couple in their late twenties. He steeled himself to haul yet another tree. *I get the sore muscles and he gets to name the place after himself,* Starsky thought as he glanced at the sign while he straightened up. But in all honesty, he knew it couldn't be any other way. Hutch's back had been bothering him off and on for weeks, and while he tried not to show it, Starsky had seen the pain flash across Hutch's eyes when he tried to lift something even slightly heavy or had to move unexpectedly. He'd even noticed it as Hutch carefully slid into the Torino's passenger seat. So what if Hutch's name was on the lot sign. That wasn't Hutch's fault, he'd won the coin toss.

Starsky walked toward the trio, relieved to see the young couple hauling away their own tree.

Hutch saw him coming and bent down (carefully Starsky noted) to pour some hot coffee out of the thermos into a mug. He handed it to Starsky, then reached into his pocket to pull out an aspirin bottle. "How's the back, Buddy? Want some aspirin?"

Starsky reached for the bottle. "Thanks. I think I need it."

"Come sit down and rest a bit." Hutch pointed to the webbed lawn chair nearby.

Starsky shook his head. "If I sit down, I may not get up again. Besides there's another car pullin' in. You wouldn't think this many people would be buying trees on Christmas Eve. Everyone should have theirs by now."

"Only a couple hours left and then we've got four days off."

"Sounds good to me. I'm ready to sleep late."

"I've never known you to sleep late on Christmas morning, Starsk. You're always up before dawn." Hutch grinned. He loved the little boy that was hidden from the rest of

the world, hidden behind that tough, streetwise exterior. He knew no matter what his partner said, Starsky would be up at the crack of dawn, and so would he.

Starsky set the mug down and said, "Well, go collect their money and I'll haul one of those Hutchinson trees to the trunk of their car." Hutch scanned his partner's face as he bent forward to catch Starsky's muttered comment. "Let's hope they buy them all, I want to go home." .

As Starsky hauled the tree to the couple's car, Hutch turned toward the small trailer at the back of the lot. He climbed inside to place the money collected in the last hour inside the gray metal cash box lying on the counter. As he unlocked the box, Hutch heard steps coming toward the trailer. "Be right out," he called.

Hutch slid the key back into the front pocket of his coat and opened the door. There stood a young blond-haired boy in his late teens. Wild, brown eyes stared at Hutch and a gun pointed at his mid section. *Just a boy*, Hutch thought. The young man ordered, "Hand over the money and no one gets hurt."

Glancing out the trailer door, Hutch saw a second teenager, wandering between the trees, staying close but obviously on the lookout, nonetheless. In the distance, he could hear Starsky humming "Jingle Bell Rock." But it was dark beyond the ring of electric lights illuminating the trees and he had no idea where Starsky was or if he had any idea what was going down. He certainly didn't want his partner to walk into an ambush. If this kid had a gun, chances were pretty good the second one did also.

"I said hand it over." The boy demanded a second time.

Hutch watched the trembling right hand as it aimed the gun at him, and he reacted swiftly, knowing any action on his part would no doubt bring the second suspect and Starsky.

Hutch picked up the cash box, as if he was relinquishing it, but instead he threw it at the boy's right arm. The box hit the boy's arm, diverting it away from Hutch. As the gunshot exploded, it went into the trailer well above Hutch's head. The cash box fell open, the money spilling across the floor. Hutch threw himself at the boy, knocking them both out the door and to the ground. In a moment's time, Hutch had the teenager on his stomach and handcuffed. As he caught his breath, Hutch realized he had no idea where the second teenager had gone. Had he run off? Where was Starsky?

The sound of scuffling to his right drew his attention. Between two rows of Christmas trees, Starsky, knee in the teenager's back, reached in his back pocket for his handcuffs. He cuffed the boy, and then pulled him to his feet. Starsky walked the prisoner toward Hutch.

"You okay?" Hutch asked, as he brushed the dirt off his jeans.

“Sure,” Starsky grinned. “How ‘bout you?”

“Course. Let’s wrap this up. I’ll call for a black and white to pick them up, take them to the station, and book them.”

Starsky watched Hutch favor his right leg as he walked, and he asked, concerned. “You sure your back’s okay?”

“Yeah, nothing a little holiday cheer and a four day vacation won’t fix.

Ten minutes later the black and white pulled away with the two suspects in the back. Starsky’s eyes followed the car as it drove away. “Those families will have a lousy Christmas.”

“Yeah, partner, but think about how lousy they made it for some other families.”

Starsky brightened up. “Come on, let’s close up shop and get out of here.” They took a few minutes to straighten up the lot and collect their personal items--thermos, cups, lawn chair, as well as the gray cash box, and loaded them into the Torino.

“I guess we’ll have to stop and fill in the report on those guys before we can call it a night.” Hutch sighed. “By the time we get out of there it’ll be New Year’s!”

“Hey, I have a idea.” Starsky leaned down to unplug the lights outlining the lot. Suddenly, only the light of the stars and moon beamed on the small Christmas tree lot. “Whaddya think about making a stop on our way home?”

“A stop?” Hutch studied his partner’s face, then grinned. “Well, you know we really should take a Christmas tree with us.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll grab that one on the right. It’s not too big and it should fit just right in the Gonzales apartment.”

“What’s Dobby going to say about the missing money?” asked Hutch.

Starsky shrugged. “We’ll just tell him this was a losing proposition. After four days vacation and a little holiday cheer, he won’t remember.”

“You really think so?”

Starsky grinned. He walked over to one of the Christmas trees and lifted it up. Happy that his tree selling days were over and he’d soon be home with his feet up, he yelled out to Hutch, “Go find some rope so we can tie it to the roof of the car. I don’t want to have to vacuum needles out of my trunk.”

As Hutch went back for the rope, Starsky started toward the Torino with the tree. For the first time, he noticed something newly written on the sign. In the upper left corner the words, 'Starsky and' had been written in black marker above the words 'Hutchinson's Trees.' Starsky grinned, wondering when his partner had found the time to add it.

He yelled behind him into the darkness, "Come on Hutch, this tree's gettin' heavy. I'm starvin', and besides, the sun will be up soon and my presents are waitin'!"

The End