

Over the Edge

By Linda B.

“Just three hours.”

“What’s that?” Hutch asked, momentarily distracted from his typing.

“Only three more hours and we’re off for four whole days.” Starsky sighed, looking at his watch. “Am I ready.”

Hutch studied Starsky, noting the tired, drawn look on his partner’s pale face. “You believe it? Dobey gave us Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off, plus two extra. Wonder what put him in the Christmas spirit.”

“Isn’t like we haven’t been workin’ our butts off.”

“Yeah, been a rough coupla weeks. I still can’t believe we pulled off a major drug bust just before Christmas; thought it was going to take us into the New Year before we could shut down Bartoldi’s operation.”

“I know. I was gettin’ tired of the all-night stakeouts.” Starsky stretched, as he stood up stiffly to refill his coffee cup. Stopping to rub his neck, he continued, “I ache all over.”

Passing his cup over for a refill, Hutch paused, concerned. “You sure you aren’t coming down with something?”

“Nah, just tired of catching catnaps curled up on the back seat of a car, I guess.”

“You mean you’d rather eat a pretzel than be one?” Hutch grinned, as he pulled the finished report out of the typewriter with a flourish. “Well, I plan on crashing and sleeping for the next twenty-four hours.”

“Hey,” Starsky, setting Hutch’s cup back on the desk, couldn’t resist asking, “you aren’t going to sleep through Christmas are you?”

Hutch hid his grin at the pleading apparent in his partner’s voice. When it came to Christmas and all it’s glitter, Starsky would be a kid forever. “I’m beat and the best present I could get is sleeping through the holidays.”

“Hutch...” came the plaintive reply.

Hutch braced for the nagging he knew was sure to follow.

Choosing that moment to open his office door, Captain Dobey spied the two and ordered, “Starsky, Hutchinson, my office.”

“Almost done with the reports, Cap’n...” Starsky hurriedly slid into his chair and started typing, anticipating the usual bawling out for failing to complete his paperwork on time. “Gimme a coupla more minutes.”

“Finish them later.” Dobey said, walking back into his office.

Starsky looked at Hutch with a raised eyebrow and shrugged. Dobey telling them to drop a report undoubtedly meant more work and they only had three hours left on their shift. Pushing his chair back, Starsky slowly rose to follow Hutch into the office.

“Either of you remember Jack Schultz?” Dobey said. Glancing up, he noticed that Hutch was seated while Starsky hung near the door, skittish, as though ready to bolt.

Hutch nodded, “We put him behind bars for petty theft and fraud a couple of years ago.”

Dobey nodded in agreement. “Only, it turns out he’s a material witness in a five- year old murder case up in Wrightwood.”

At the word ‘Wrightwood’, Starsky’s stomach pitched and his headache intensified. Anticipating Dobey’s next words, Starsky leaned back heavily against the wall and studied his hands, flexing his fingers open and closed. He’d really been looking forward to the next few days off. His body was screaming at him to get some rest. He’d been feeling terrible off and on for several days and so far he’d managed to hide it from Hutch, not an easy feat since Hutch knew him so well, too well, sometimes. He’d only managed to pull it off because they both were bone tired as a result of the last several weeks preparing for the bust. They’d put in over a hundred hours in probably the last eight days alone. He wanted only two things over the next four days—his bed and celebrating Christmas. Starsky sighed, remembering he’d also planned on hitting the stores today for Hutch’s Christmas present. It looked like his plan to use the rest of the afternoon to find the perfect gift was also going down the tubes.

“I know the two of you have been putting in lots of hours,” Captain Dobey continued as he shuffled papers on his desk, still not making eye contact.

Hutch, shifting in his chair and taking in the sight of his dejected looking partner, waited for Dobey’s next words.

“And I hate to ask this.” Dobey cleared his throat and, looking uncharacteristically embarrassed, continued, “I need you two to deliver Schultz to the Wrightwood police. They seem to have their hands full up there with two officers out sick, several on leave and now this murder case. They’re a small force and have asked for our help.”

“Cap’n, Wrightwood is way up in the San Gabriel Mountains,” Starsky protested.

“And you promised us four days off.” Hutch reminded him wearily. “We’re beat.”

“I know. I know. Believe me, I hate to send you, but with the holidays we’re working with a skeleton crew and I can’t afford to take anyone off the streets. It’ll only take you a few hours. I promise you’ll still get your four days off when you get back.”

“Why can’t it wait until after the holidays?”

“It seems that the media got wind of the possibility of a witness and their breathing down the Chief’s neck. The murder took place five years ago on Christmas Day. They’ve been takin’ a lot of heat for the unsolved murder and they want to break the news on Christmas.”

“Are you askin’ us or orderin’ us?” Starsky, still staring at his hands, asked, his voice now barely above a whisper.

Dobey cleared his throat and looked at his uncharacteristically quiet, curly-haired officer. “I’m asking. Wrightwood is only a few hours away. You can spend the night there, get some rest, then head home tomorrow morning and start your time off.”

Starsky, amazed at the amount of effort it took to raise his head, looked at Hutch. He studied Hutch’s tired blue eyes momentarily, sending a message before he looked down again, sighing to himself.

“Okay, we’ll do it,” Hutch said, message received. They both knew that Dobey must have been desperate. He rarely ‘asked’ them for anything and both felt obligated. “But the Wrightwood Police better appreciate it.”

Dobey looked from Starsky to Hutch and back again. The ‘message’, left unfinished, came through loud and clear. He did appreciate it. He knew he was pushing them to the limits. He would have liked nothing more than to send them home to bed, safe and warm for the holidays, but it wasn’t within his power. The Mayor of Wrightwood was a friend of the Commissioner and Dobey had been “asked” to deliver Schultz as a personal favor. “Thanks. You can pick up Schultz at the County jail. I’ll call Thompson in Wrightwood and let him know you’ll be on your way shortly.”

Starsky pushed himself away from the wall and headed, shoulders slumped, toward the door as Hutch stood up.

Dobey cleared his throat as he reached for the phone. “Edith, Cal and Rosie are lookin’ forward to you two comin’ over for Christmas dinner....” Dobey hesitated, as if he no longer felt sure they’d still accept the invitation. He didn’t remember seeing his two detectives look as tired and as worn out as they did at that moment; unless, it was when one was standing guard at a hospital waiting for word on an injured partner or endlessly searching the city for the other when they were missing. It only proceeded to make him feel guiltier at having placed this extra burden on them. They were his best officers and he had counted on them not to say no. They hadn’t disappointed him.

As Hutch reached the door, he held it open for Starsky. “Sure, tell Edith that we’ll be there.” Pulling the door closed behind him, Hutch turned back and, attempting a half-smile, added, “Merry Christmas, Cap’n.”

Chapter 2

Hutch looked at Starsky, who sat sullenly staring out the window. They were only an hour into the trip and Hutch was already tired. It didn’t help that the roads were packed with holiday shoppers and travelers who were making the trip out of the city nearly impossible, as well as wearing his already thin patience thinner. To top it off, shortly after they’d started out, Starsky and he had argued and since then Starsky hadn’t spoken a word. He just sat there, looking miserable. ‘Well’, thought Hutch, ‘*Starsky isn’t happy about this but neither am I. I’m just as tired as he is and I’ll be damned if he’s going to take his rotten mood out on me. It’s going to be a long trip. A long silent one.*’

As angry as he was with Starsky, Hutch couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to it than that. Sure Starsky was tired, but his behavior went beyond just being tired. For one fleeting moment Hutch wondered if Starsky really was sick, but Hutch, too tired to forgive his partner’s behavior, dismissed the idea. After all, Starsky usually whined loud and clear when he was getting sick.

Earlier, Hutch had dropped Starsky off to pack an overnight bag and grab a bite to eat, and he had headed home to do the same. Returning about an hour later to pick Starsky up, they then headed over to the County Jail for Schultz. Pushing the accumulated junk on the back seat to one side, Starsky had muttered to himself as he loaded Schultz into the back seat; then, the argument had begun.

“Hutch, this back door won’t shut!” Starsky yelled, exasperated.

“Keep trying, Starsk. It’ll catch sooner or later.”

“Hutch, this car is a piece of junk! I ain’t ridin’ in it.” Starsky snapped, after slamming the door three times before it caught. Using his foot on the third attempt had finally done the trick.

Hutch returned his partner’s glare. Their cars were a constant area of dispute and logic told him to drop it. Starsky treated his like a baby, washing it, polishing it, coddling it, much to Hutch’s chagrin; he, on the other hand, saw his as a second home, warm and comfortable. Hutch knew Starsky was tired and unhappy about this trip into the mountains. He was a city boy through and through. Their few attempts at enjoying the outdoors together had failed miserably. Add to that the fact that over the last few weeks their tolerance and friendship for each other was even beginning to get strained, thanks to too many long stakeouts in close quarters. There definitely were times that Starsky could grate on his nerves.

Deciding he wasn't interested in putting up with any juvenile behavior from his partner today, Hutch had responded angrily, "It's not my fault your car is back in Merle's shop being worked on again! Maybe next time you'll think twice before chasing cars over curbs at a high rate of speed. It's your own fault that you wrecked the suspension and exhaust system."

"I can't ride all that way in this piece of junk. Mine'll be fixed tomorrow, Hutch. Let's wait!" Starsky had yelled back.

"We can't! You heard Dobey. And besides, if we wait, we won't get back in time for your precious Christmas!" Hutch instantly regretted his words, as he saw pain and disappointment flash across Starsky's pale, tired face.

"I'll wait," interrupted Jack Schultz.

"No one's asking you!" Starsky and Hutch yelled simultaneously at Schultz, their flashing eyes joining briefly in unity across the roof.

Hutch turned on Jack, bending down to stare through the back window, happy to divert his anger at someone else. He opened the driver's door and sat down heavily, glaring back through the rearview mirror. "Keep your mouth shut, Schultz or you'll be praying the entire trip that I just won't decide to lose you out that back door on purpose!" Hutch started the ignition. "Get in, Starsk. Now!"

Banging his fist on the roof of the car, Starsky climbed in and angrily slammed the door.

As soon as they were out of his mouth, Hutch had regretted his words but he didn't feel like cajoling his partner into a better mood. *'If you can be stubborn, Starsk, so can I.'*

And so, the trip had continued silently, with Starsky staring out the window, arms held tightly against his chest.

It was taking longer than anticipated and Hutch, usually relaxed by the mountain air and view, found himself drumming his fingers impatiently as they sat in the second construction backup of the trip. The road up to Wrightwood was a two lane, poorly maintained road containing several construction sites. *'The road needs work guys, but doing it over the holidays is just plain stupid,'* Hutch thought, shaking his head in disbelief as he slowly drove past a crew of men standing along the side of the road talking.

Hutch, stealing another glance at Starsky, felt his anger dissipate as he watched his partner dozing, arms crossed, head leaning against the window. It was the first time Hutch noticed that Starsky wasn't dressed appropriately for the mountain air. Instead of wearing boots and a heavier parka, he was dressed in his usual blue Adidas' and navy windbreaker. Sorry that he hadn't noticed before they'd left, so that he could have sent Starsky back in to change, Hutch also recognized that with the mood Starsky was in, he probably would have ignored him anyway. Unable to stay angry at his partner and seeing Starsky's gaunt look, Hutch resolved to apologize as soon as Starsky woke up or they reached their destination—whichever came first. Suddenly

feeling the best he'd felt all day, he reached over, flipping on the radio. As he hummed along, the sounds of "Silent Night" quietly filled the silence in the car.



Pulling into the Wrightwood police station, Hutch wearily turned off the ignition and sat back in the seat. It had certainly been a quiet drive. Starsky had slept the entire trip and even though Hutch would have enjoyed some company he didn't have the heart to wake him. Schultz had also fallen asleep, based on the snoring emanating from the back seat. The only good part of the trip was being out of the city. Hutch had finally felt a little of the tension in his body lessen as he drove along the winding, mountain roads.

Reaching over, Hutch gently shook Starsky's shoulder. "Wake up, buddy. We're here."

Slow to respond at first, Starsky eventually opened his deep, blue eyes and groggily looked at Hutch. "Lemme sleep. I don't feel so good."

Surprised to hear Starsky admit it, Hutch knew the only reason it had been shared was because his partner was still half asleep and not fully aware of his surroundings. Hutch watched Starsky lean back against the car seat and close his eyes. Hutch responded gently, his heart going out to his obviously ill partner. "Let's go drop off Schultz and get some sleep."

Hutch opened his car door; standing, he stretched his stiff legs. He was glad that they'd finally arrived at their destination. Lack of sleep and concentrating on the drive up the steep, winding road had given him a headache. To top it off, he'd been listening to the local weather report. The station was warning of an approaching snowstorm. Hutch studied the night sky and sighed in relief as he glimpsed a few stars twinkling above. So far, their luck was holding.

Hutch pulled open the back door and reached in to pull Schultz out. "Time to rise and shine. Your new home is waiting."

Starsky opened his door and stood. Breathing in the cold night air started him coughing and he winced at an unexpected pain in his chest.

"You okay, Starsk?" Hutch asked, studying his partner.

"Yeah, yeah. My lungs just aren't used to this healthy mountain air." Starsky replied sarcastically, while avoiding Hutch's eyes. Eager to change the subject, he suggested, "C'mon, let's get rid of Schultz and get out of here."



Two hours and five coffee cups later Starsky and Hutch walked out the police station door and to the car. Both were surprised to find several inches of snow covering it.

"Starsk...."

“Yeah?” Starsky replied, pulling the collar of his coat up.

“Sorry about getting angry earlier.” Hutch stopped at the driver’s door and looked at Starsky, remembering his earlier promise.

“It’s okay. We’re both tired.” Reaching out his left hand and placing it on Hutch’s right forearm, Starsky smiled at his partner, his eyes saying all was forgiven. “But you still have lousy taste in cars.”

Relieved, Hutch slipped his arm across Starsky’s shoulders. “How about we find that hotel and get some sleep?”

“Terrific.” Starsky yawned and grinned lopsidedly. “I’ll be asleep before my head hits the pillow.”

Chapter 3

Thirty minutes later they were sitting in the coffee shop attached to the motel.

“I thought we were gonna get some sleep?” Starsky complained, as he sat in the booth leaning against the window, leg up on the seat next to him.

“I know,” Hutch agreed. “Who would have thought the Mile High Motel would be full?”

“Who woulda thought every motel in town would be full? What are we gonna do now?”

“Guess Dobe didn’t take into consideration that it’s the holidays and people are here on vacation.” Hutch sighed and looked around. “Let’s get something to eat.” Hutch reached for the menu stuck behind the salt and pepper shakers and began looking it over hoping there was something edible between all the grease and starch. Settling on the tuna sandwich, he looked up at Starsky and passed the menu across the table. “Bet I can guess what you want. Meatloaf, right?”

Receiving no reply, Hutch looked at his partner closely. The dark circles were widening under Starsky’s closed eyes and he looked slightly flushed. Hutch leaned forward in his seat and reached across the table to feel Starsky’s forehead. “You got a fever?” he asked, concern growing.

Starsky, irritated, brushed Hutch’s hand away, as he began coughing. “I’ll be okay, but I don’t want nothin’ to eat.”

Starsky’s lack of appetite and warm forehead convinced Hutch that Starsky really was sick. He pulled his hand back and sat back down as the blond waitress approached to take their order.

“I’ll have a tuna salad sandwich.” Hutch, quickly scanning the menu again, added, “And my friend here will have some of your chicken dumpling soup.”

“Anything to drink?” The waitress asked, scribbling on her pad.

“Just water, thanks.” Holding up two fingers, Hutch barely returned her smile, too tired to even flirt with the pretty waitress.

“Said I didn’t want anything.”

“Well, you need something or I’ll be hearing your stomach growl all the way home. Try the soup.”

Starsky opened his eyes half way and, seeing the concern in Hutch’s eyes, relented. “I’ll try, but no guarantees.”

Thirty minutes later, Hutch had downed his sandwich and, resting back against the booth, watched Starsky twirling his spoon in the soup. “Works better if you catch a dumpling and put it in your mouth, Starsk.”

“Don’t want anymore.” Starsky continued staring in the bowl, then he pushed it away, wincing as he coughed, “Sides it’s cold now.”

Hutch sighed, “Okay, but drink the water. You need the fluids.”

Starsky perked up a little and started looking around the diner. “That reminds me…”

“What are you looking for?” Hutch followed Starsky’s eyes around the diner and, suddenly realizing what his partner was searching for, pointed behind Starsky at the far left corner. “Bathroom’s over there.”

“Oh-h-h,” Starsky grinned, relief briefly lighting his face. He slid out of the booth and stood unsteadily. As Hutch opened his mouth to speak, Starsky rested his hand on Hutch’s arm, misinterpreting what Hutch was about to say. “Don’t worry, Hutch.” Scanning the room, he added lightly, “I don’t see any Joey’s hanging around this place.” Smiling wryly, he added, “I’ll be safe.”

Hutch winced as memories of that dreadful night flooded back. He didn’t know if anything would ever erase the painful images of Starsky lying wounded and bleeding in the back room of an Italian restaurant. Hutch, smiling weakly, nodded, swallowing his comeback. Until Starsky had mentioned Joey’s name, the comparison hadn’t entered his mind—he’d buried the painful memory long ago. Or at least, he’d thought so.

As Starsky walked down the aisle, Hutch’s eyes scanned the restaurant, suddenly anxious. They were practically the only ones in the restaurant. Except for the waitress and cook there were only a couple other people. There was a gray-haired couple in their sixties sitting in the booth near the

door. A girl, with her back to Hutch, sat in the last booth near the bathroom door and one guy, in his late twenties Hutch guessed, wearing faded jeans and a jean shirt sat at the far end of the counter reading the paper. Nobody looked threatening. Feeling his anxiety level lessen, Hutch sipped his water and continued to monitor the room for any unusual movement. He didn't plan on being caught unawares again, not when his partner's life was at stake.

Coming out of the bathroom, Starsky glanced at the girl sitting in the last booth. She glanced up at him, briefly making eye contact. Seeing her red, swollen eyes, Starsky slipped into her booth. "You okay?"

Watching the girl dab at her eyes with a Kleenex as she nodded, Starsky guessed the girl with long, wavy brown hair and bangs to be in her mid-to-late twenties. His head was splitting from his headache and he ached all over but he couldn't ignore the obvious distress of the pretty girl in front of him. He reached out his hand, placing it on hers. "Can I help?"

Smiling gratefully, the girl looked up and stared into the deep, blue eyes. "I'm sorry. I'll be fine."

"What's your name?"

"Brittany Adams. Brit for short."

"Hi, Brit." Starsky stuck out his hand. "I'm Dave Starsky. Starsky for short."

After shaking hands, Brit returned to relentlessly stirring her coffee, as Starsky tilted his head trying to unsuccessfully catch her eye.

"Hey, what are you doing, buddy? Thought you wanted to get home." Seeing Starsky sitting in the booth with the girl, Hutch wandered over.

Starsky, glancing up at Hutch's voice, slid deeper into the booth, making room for him and, with a twinkle in his eye, began making introductions. "The blond blintz here is my partner, Ken Hutchinson. Hutch for short." Brit blushed, realizing the handsome brunette was teasing her. "This is Brittany, Hutch. Brit for short. Seems she has a problem."

"Oh, yeah?" Hutch looked at Brit. "Can we help?"

Brit looked up at the two sets of blue eyes, one light, one dark, staring at her, both filled with concern. She smiled sheepishly. "It's not that big of a problem. I'm sure it will work out."

"How do we know, if you don't tell us about it?" Hutch smiled encouragingly, wondering how Starsky, exhausted and sick, still managed to find a pretty girl to flirt with.

Brit looked from one to the other, embarrassed. "It's probably pretty silly to you..."

"Try us." Starsky squeezed the hand still beneath his.

“Well, I’m an actress. At least I’ve done some college productions,” Brit clarified, her voice rising with excitement. “I answered an ad in the newspaper and I was offered an audition in LA.”

Wondering what kind of ad it was and who’d placed it, Starsky, raising an eyebrow at Hutch, nodded for Brit to continue.

“But, my boyfriend doesn’t want me to go and we had a big fight. He was really angry and told me I couldn’t go.” Brit looked at Starsky and Hutch, defiance lighting her eyes. “But…”

“You’re going anyways.” Starsky and Hutch said together, both anticipating her next words.

Brit nodded, smiling at how they’d read not only her thoughts but also each other’s.

“Yeah, I’m going. This could be my big opportunity and I don’t plan on missing it.” Brit’s voice cracked with emotion.

“So what’s the problem?” Hutch asked.

“Well, I have no way to get there. My car died and he won’t drive me. I missed the last bus for LA and there won’t be another until tomorrow morning and that bus will arrive too late.”

As Starsky and Hutch exchanged glances, Starsky offered, “Well, luck is with you, Brit. It looks like we’ll be returning to LA ourselves tonight. Would you like to ride with us?”

Suddenly cautious, Brit bit her lip thinking. “I don’t think so. I don’t even know you.”

Hutch reached into his back pocket and pulled out his badge and credentials. “We’re detectives with the LA police department and we’re headed back to LA tonight. We’d be happy to drop you wherever you want. Besides it would be nice to have someone else along for the ride.” Hutch tilted his head toward Starsky as he winked at Brit. “I’m getting’ tired of talking with him.”

Brit amazed at her good fortune, jumped at the chance, literally throwing herself across the table, flinging her arms around Starsky. Taken completely off guard, Starsky briefly returned the hug and then sat back, coughing repeatedly.

Hutch, laughing as he observed the two hugging, suddenly grew concerned. “Take it easy.” He rubbed his hand across Starsky’s back, offering him the unused glass of water on the table. Starsky, pain crossing his face as he struggled to regain his breath, sank back against the bench.

“Are you okay?” Brit asked, worried.

Holding up his hand, Starsky finally managed to catch his breath and relaxed against his partner’s arm, his energy spent. “I’ll…be…fine,” he managed to choke out, knowing Hutch was watching him intently.

“I think it’s time to get you home and tucked into bed, Gordo.” Hutch stood and pulled a twenty out of his pocket. “I’m gonna pay the bill and see if they sell any aspirin.” Hutch headed toward the counter and stopped abruptly, “Are you coming with us, Brit?”

Brit nodded, eagerly,. “Of course. I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you.”

Having paid the bill, Hutch returned to the booth where Brit and Starsky still sat. “Starsk, I’m going out to warm up the car. Come out in five, ‘kay?”

“I’m a big boy…” Starsky began, protesting.

Hutch, pointing his finger at Starsky, stopped the response in mid sentence. Holding up his hand, indicating five minutes, Hutch stared Starsky down, daring him to continue. Starsky finally nodded in agreement, willing to abide by his partner’s request, willing to let Hutch take charge.

Five minutes later, Starsky zipped up his navy blue windbreaker and pulled the collar up against the cold. Brit picked up her purse and, zipping up her winter coat, stood next to Starsky. She pulled on her gloves, commenting, “You guys must be from the city. You certainly don’t dress for the weather around here.”

“Well, we weren’t planning on staying for any length of time or for any snow, that’s for sure,” Starsky explained, as he ushered Brit down the aisle and through the door, joining Hutch at the snow covered car.

Starsky opened the front door for Brit; as she climbed in, he looked across the roof watching Hutch brush off several inches of snow from the windshield.

“They didn’t have any aspirin. Why don’t you try and catch a few winks in the back seat,” Hutch offered. “Brit will keep me company.”

Starsky nodded and, blowing on his cold hands, he tucked them inside his coat pockets pulling his arms tightly against his shivering body trying to protect it from the wind and snow. Stomping the snow off his blue Adidas, Starsky climbed into the back seat, yanking several times on the door before it caught. Purposely avoiding Hutch’s eyes, Starsky couldn’t help thinking, *‘One thing’s certain. I can’t wait to get home and outta this piece of junk.’*

As they pulled out of the parking lot, none of them noticed the man at the counter set down his paper, toss some money on the counter and head to the door.

Chapter 4

They had been driving for almost an hour and the snow was coming down heavier. Hutch slowed his speed even more as the road became increasingly slick. Concerned, and unfamiliar

with the curves on the dark, mountainous road, Hutch wrinkled his forehead in concentration. He was used to driving in the snow having taken his driver's education course during one particularly long Minnesota winter, but he couldn't help wishing his car had snow tires to make the handling easier. He wished that he'd thought of putting chains in his trunk before they'd left; they didn't do him any good sitting in his closet. They hadn't been predicting snow earlier in the day and he'd figured they would make it back into town long before it started so he hadn't given them a second thought.

Hutch's original plan was to have Starsky drive back, but looking at Starsky's flushed and feverish face at the coffee shop had made him change his mind, and it had been a wise decision. Starsky had fallen asleep almost as soon as they left the restaurant. Hutch was happy to have Brit's company for the ride back; but the conversation soon became one-sided as his concentration focused more and more on the difficult road ahead of him. Brit's voice helped keep him awake, though he failed to listen to most of what she said.

"I grew up in this area," Brit continued. "Been here all my life and that's why I'm so anxious to get to LA. I want to become an actress and see some of the world. I bet you've seen lots of it."

"Yeah, well, there's lots **not** worth seeing," Hutch said, as he strained to see through the snow covered windshield wipers. "Your boyfriend doesn't agree with you, I take it."

"No, Rick wants me to stay here and get married," sighed Brit.

"You know, Brit. That ad might not be all that it advertises," Hutch cautioned, eyes staring ahead.

"Oh, I know and I've thought about that. If it's not on the up and up, I guess I'll just come home, but I have to try...." Brit sucked in her breath as the car fishtailed, despite Hutch's slowing speed around the curve.

"Sure is dark up here," Hutch muttered, as he fought to regain control.

"I know. Even in good weather you have to be careful. Lots of drivers take the curves too fast." Seeing Hutch focus intently on his driving, Brit stopped talking. She stared out the windshield into the white night, trying but unable to place their location.

"How's Starsky doing?" asked Hutch, unable to see his partner in the rearview mirror.

Brit turned toward the back, finding Starsky lying across the back seat, curled up on his left side; his left palm resting under his head as though it was a pillow, the right, tightly hugging his chest as if to ease any pain. "He's sleeping, but pretty restlessly, and his breathing sounds kind of raspy and painful."

"I was afraid of that." Hutch winced as the sound of Starsky's breathing filled the silence in the car. Even their conversation hadn't stopped Hutch from tuning into Starsky's breathing

difficulties. Trying to use the rearview mirror to reassure himself that his partner was okay only left Hutch frustrated, as the darkness obstructed his view.

Leaning back to brush a curl off Starsky's forehead, Brit said softly, "At least he's sleeping. Looks like he needed it. He's probably running a fever. His hands felt awfully warm back at the coffee shop."

"He's sick and we should all be sound asleep in warm beds instead of driving on a cold, dark night on a slick, winding road."

"How are you doing?" Brit, seeing the tired, drawn look on Hutch's face, offered, "I can drive if you want. I grew up in this area, remember, and I'm familiar with the roads."

"Thanks," Hutch responded. "I appreciate the offer but this heap can be pretty touchy to drive, especially in the snow. Hey, I don't even trust Starsky with it." Hutch smiled weakly at Brit, taking the sting out of his words. *'Hell, Starsky wouldn't wanna drive it,'* Hutch thought, chuckling to himself. A sudden flash of headlights in his rearview mirror distracted Hutch and he glanced up quickly, seeing a car closing in on him. *'Idiot,'* thought Hutch. *'He's drivin' way too fast.'*

Quickly switching his eyes forward, he strained to see through the curtain of snow. He rounded the next curve, hands tightly gripping the steering wheel. He knew the mountainside was rising skyward on his left, even if he couldn't see it, and he sensed the road's edge to his right. A thousand questions raced through his mind. Were they near any of the construction barricades? Where was the shoulder? Was it pavement or gravel? How steep was the embankment? Or was it a sudden drop-off? Why didn't the idiot behind him back off?

Hutch's eyes shifted to the mirror's reflection—headlights inching ever closer, blinding him. The height of the lights made Hutch believe it was a pickup or small truck that was gaining on them. Hutch, touching his brakes, tried to warn the other driver of his presence, as well as to slow down, but he wondered how visible the brake lights would actually be through the heavy snow. He was beginning to wonder if the other driver even cared. Hutch looked ahead again, eyes straining to see into and through the night. Every muscle in his neck, shoulders and arms ached.

When the impact occurred it wasn't unexpected. The driver of the pickup was reckless, riding too close to his bumper.

"Watch out, Hutch!" Brit yelled, suddenly grabbing the dash in front of her. "There's another curve coming up!"

Through the rearview mirror, Hutch could make out the grillwork of a pickup truck pressed against his bumper. Its red color made visible by his taillights. White knuckles gripping the steering wheel, he pumped the brakes trying to slow his slide as the truck rear-ended him again. Hutch's eyes shot to the rearview mirror as he realized the truck wasn't out of control; it was pressed against his bumper on purpose.

Struggling to stay on the road, Hutch felt his car's rear-end swerving to the left. The pickup's headlights disappeared from his mirror as he skidded sideways and the pickup careened across the road and through a construction barricade.

Hutch strained against the car's slide, as it continued spinning. Feeling the car hit the gravel shoulder, Hutch knew he no longer controlled the car, knew he couldn't stop them from going over the edge....

Chapter 5

It was the pain shooting through his left leg that brought Hutch to full consciousness. Shifting in his seat, he sucked in cold air as he tried to straighten up. Careful not to move too quickly, he concentrated on where else he hurt—his head was throbbing, his neck hurt. But, thankfully, he didn't think anything was broken.

'Where was he?' Blinking rapidly, trying to clear his fuzzy brain cells, Hutch tried to figure it out. He certainly didn't recognize anything. It was dark, making it impossible to see very far. Or at least not beyond the snow-covered branches laying across the hood of his car. *'Branches? Why branches?'*

A moan to his right made him turn suddenly, but regretfully. The throbbing in his head increased and he felt something wet above his right eye. Wiping at it with his coat sleeve, he knew it was red even though the darkness turned everything into shades of black and gray. There was a second moan. *'Starsky!'* He shifted, gentler this time, and reached out a hand. Pulling the inert body toward him, he realized it wasn't Starsky. Confused, he watched the moonlight play across the girl's face. *'Who?'* Memory returning, Hutch recognized the girl from the restaurant. Two things then hit him simultaneously—if the moon was out, the snow had stopped; if this was Brit, where was Starsky?

Brit, head resting against the back of the seat, opened her eyes and tried to focus on the confused face watching her. Slowly pushing herself upright, Brit blinked and whispered, "Hutch?"

"Yeah, how are you doing?"

"Okay, I think. My head hurts. What happened?"

Sitting silently for a moment, Hutch replayed what had happened in his mind. "I was concentrating on the icy road, when a red pickup truck pulled up behind us. It rammed us...." Hutch stopped and ran his left hand across his face.

"Hutch, you sure you're okay?" Brit, concerned when he stopped in mid sentence, reached out her hand to touch his arm.

“I’m fine. It’s just that...I remember this pickup trying to push us off the road...” Hutch replied; then leaning back in the seat, he let his hands fall into his lap “Starsky!” Hutch, twisting too quickly as the pain shooting through his head and leg reminded him, turned toward the backseat. “Starsky, are you okay?”

Hearing no response, Hutch, despite the pain constricting his body, turned to view his partner’s condition. “Hey, buddy?”

Confusion flooded Hutch as he realized Starsky wasn’t lying on the back seat. The seat was empty except for the white snow piling up as it blew in through the open doorway. Worried, Hutch looked up at Brit, “Where’s Starsky?”

Brit, turning at Hutch’s sudden intake of air, saw the empty seat. “I don’t know. Maybe he went for help?”

“He’s sick...he isn’t dressed for this weather...” All sorts of scenarios played through Hutch’s head--Starsky feverish wandering in the snow, Starsky hurt and bleeding, Starsky freezing to death, unprotected in his windbreaker. Anxious, Hutch gripped at Brit’s shoulder, “How long we been here?”

Wincing, Brit shook her head, confused. “I don’t know.”

Hutch reached for his pocket watch and snapped it open. Finding it difficult to read, he held it out, wiggling it—hoping the moonlight would catch it just right. *‘Think, Hutchinson,’* he berated himself. *‘Figure out how long Starsky’s been out there. Out there in the cold, alone, maybe injured. Maybe...’*

Frantic, Hutch yanked at his seatbelt, but it wouldn’t give. Pulling on it repeatedly, he sighed in relief, as it finally popped loose, and he shoved the door open.

“Where are you going, Hutch?”

“To find Starsky...”

“But where...?”

“I don’t know where!” Hutch yelled, instantly sorry as he saw Brit pull back from him. He was hurting and worried about Starsky but he didn’t mean to take it out on her. Rubbing his right hand back and forth through his hair, he took a deep breath, trying to regain control. “Look, I’m sorry, but Starsky’s out there somewhere and he’s sick, probably hurt.”

“The door’s hanging off its hinge. Do you think he was thrown from the car or that he walked away?”

Hutch, mesmerized by the tiny, white crystals lightly collecting on the seat, remembered their earlier conversation. *‘Hutch, this car is a piece of junk!’* “It’s my fault...”

“It isn’t your fault, Hutch. We slid off the road. Come on, we’ll go find him.” Moving into action, Brit tried pushing her door open, only to find it stuck in a snowbank. “I can’t get out this way, Hutch. I have to come out your door.”

Feeling like he was moving in slow motion, Hutch gingerly stepped out of the car, his left ankle protesting the sudden weight. He pulled his coat tight against the cold. Glancing up the side of the mountain, he watched the trees’ shadows playing across the glistening snow, the moon peeking out from behind the clearing clouds.

“How far down the mountain do you think we are?” Hutch asked Brit, reaching out to help her as she slid across the seat to exit through his door. Leaning against the doorframe, Hutch shifted as the pressure he unconsciously placed on his leg painfully reminded him of what had returned him to consciousness.

Seeing him wince, Brit frowned and reached out, touching him on the arm, “Are you okay?”

Shrugging her arm away, Hutch nodded impatiently, “I’ve got to find Starsky. He’s out there hurt...alone...”

Starting up the mountainside, Hutch sank knee deep into the snow. Struggling to move, he continued slowly up the hill. “STAR-R-R-SKY-Y-Y!” Hutch yelled, pausing to listen to the name echoing into the night.

Using bushes and branches for leverage, Hutch and Brit slowly trudged upward. Stopping to catch his breath, Hutch’s eyes strained to see through the darkness. Blinking back the wind and the tears threatening to form as his desperation increased, Hutch suddenly called out, “Starsk!” Spying what looked like a navy blue windbreaker lying in the snow, Hutch took off as fast as the accumulated snow and his injured leg would allow. Slipping, Hutch caught himself and, ignoring the icy, numbness of his hands, scrambled to his partner’s side.

“Starsk,” he whispered, as he dropped to his knees and gently began brushing the snow off his partner’s motionless body. Carefully running his frozen hands up and down Starsky’s body, Hutch turned to Brit, “I don’t think anything’s broken. But he’s been lying here for a while. I almost missed him; he’s half buried in the snow. He’s got to be frozen.” Biting his lip, Hutch turned back, “Starsky, can you hear me? C’mon, buddy, answer me.”

“There’s some blood on the snow under his head,” Brit pointed out. “He must have hit it in the fall.”

Hutch carefully lifted Starsky’s head and turned it slightly. “It doesn’t look too bad.” Frantically looking around, Hutch said, “We’ve got to get him out of the cold. Any idea where we are?”

“Not really,” Brit admitted. “But we can’t be too far from a town or a house. Somebody’s got to live out here.”

Hutch nodded his head and began searching the horizon, thankful that the sky was now almost cloudless, the moon providing them with light. “Look!” he said excitedly. “I see a chimney through the tree tops. Maybe four hundred feet or so past the car and to the left. It’s downhill but that’ll be easier than trying to carry Starsky uphill. Maybe we can get help there.”

“It could be farther than it looks,” Brit warned. “Maybe we should check it out first.”

Hutch shook his head. “That’ll only delay getting out of the cold and I’ve got to get him warm as soon as possible.”

As Hutch bent down to gently flip Starsky onto his back, Brit asked, “Are you sure you can carry him that far? You’re hurt, Hutch, and your leg is bleeding.”

Glancing down, Hutch stared at the blood soaking his pant leg as though it belonged to someone else. Returning his determined gaze to Brit, he insisted, “I’ll be fine. Let’s go.” As Hutch leaned down to lift Starsky, he was both startled and pleased when a moan escaped from his friend. Brushing back the wet curls on Starsky’s forehead, he whispered encouragingly, “Don’t worry, Starsk. Everything will be fine.”

Afraid of internal injuries, Hutch carefully slid his arms under Starsky’s back and legs. Struggling to lift him, he realized carrying Starsky was going to be more difficult than he’d first thought. He was already favoring one leg with his own weight, now he had to add Starsky’s. Hutch started downhill through the snow, carefully straining to keep his balance. Nearing his beat-up car, stuck and damaged in the snow, Hutch paused to balance against the hood as he caught his breath and shifted Starsky. “Brit, our bags are in the trunk. Can you grab them? We’re going to need dry clothes. Fish the keys out of my pocket.”

Hutch shivered in the cold night breeze, his wet clothes clinging to him. He could feel Starsky’s body heat through his own clothes, despite the cold. *‘Next time, buddy, you better dress appropriately for the weather.’* Hutch silently admonished his partner. *‘Don’t know how many times I’ve gotta tell you that.’* As Starsky suddenly began coughing, Hutch struggled to hold him closer, wincing at the sound.

Hutch again started down the hill, afraid if he stopped, his legs would refuse to take another step. *‘Shoulda been there by now,’* his aching muscles screamed at him. Holding his body taut, afraid a misstep would send them both into the snow or rolling down the hill, Hutch felt his arms shaking from the tension of holding his partner close.

Stopping to shift the overnight bags on her shoulder, Brit suddenly yelled, “There it is!”

Chapter 6

Running awkwardly in the snow, Brit hurried ahead. Reaching the porch, she dropped the bags and frantically pounded on the cabin door. Hearing no one inside, she anxiously turned toward Hutch. “There’s no one home and it’s locked.”

Hutch approached the porch steps, his body awkwardly straining against the accumulated snow and the weight of his partner; his mind fighting the hopelessness that threatened to engulf him. Unwilling to let despair take over, he said for Brit, as much as for himself, “At least we’ll be dry and out of the cold.”

Exhausted, Hutch almost dropped Starsky as he bent down to lean him against the porch railing. As he slowly straightened up, his muscles swearing at him, Hutch gasped as pain shot through his back. Arching his back to stretch the muscles, Hutch surveyed the front of the cabin. There were three windows—one on his left and two to the right. The space between the two on the right was filled with stones forming a fireplace. Eyeing the window on the left for size, he turned to search the porch and the nearby area. Seeing a woodpile stacked for cool nights, Hutch hurried to pull a log off the top.

“Brit, cover Starsky and keep your face hidden. I’m going to break the window and climb in.” Taking aim, he turned his head away as he smashed the log into the window and then, running it around the edges of the frame, he broke away any remaining shards and pieces before carefully climbing through.

Moments later, he was unlocking the front door.

“Couldn’t find a light switch, but it’s warm and dry.” Hutch directed Brit inside the door and bent down to once again pick Starsky up.

“I can walk, Hutch,” Starsky protested weakly, trying to rise.

Too tired to argue and happy to hear Starsky’s voice, Hutch helped Starsky to his feet. Placing an arm around Starsky’s waist for support, they walked the last few steps together.

Adrenalin racing through his body, made it easier for Hutch to ignore his own exhaustion and pain and concentrate on taking care of Starsky and the situation they found themselves in. They now had shelter and he would find help. He no longer felt powerless and at the mercy of the cold and the night. They’d be safe from the elements, safe from the animals; and, hopefully, safe from whomever had sent them over the edge.



Hutch stirred the coals and shifted the logs, sending the heat of the fire into the small room. He stood, returning the poker to its rack and turned toward Starsky, sleeping fitfully on the couch.

After entering the cabin, Hutch had laid Starsky on the couch and he and Brit then searched the small cabin. The cabin was basically one room with a bathroom and one tiny bedroom. The

front half of the main room contained the fireplace, a dark green couch, an old wooden rocker, a small table for four, and a worn, brown leather chair. At the back ran a small counter with a sink, three cupboards made of pine, and a small stove. A refrigerator stood at the far left side of the small room. Just past the refrigerator were the tiny bathroom and the bedroom through which Hutch had entered. The cabin wasn't very large but for the moment it felt like a castle.

Hutch's first thought had been to get Starsky warm and dry. He'd helped Starsky change out of his wet clothes with only minor protest and then settled him on the couch with some aspirin he'd found in the tiny medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Its expiration date was past but it was better than nothing. Then, he'd made a fire, warming the small cabin before sealing off the bedroom window with some planks of wood and an old blanket. It was temporary but it kept the wind and cold at bay.

The heat from the fireplace filled the room and Starsky was now warm and dry, bundled under a worn, calico quilt. Seeing his partner shift and push the quilt away, Hutch hurried to his side, tucking in the quilt. "Lie still," he mother-henned. He smiled softly as deep, blue eyes groggily looked back at him and then closed again, too tired to remain open. Watching the firelight flicker across Starsky's face, Hutch studied the pale face relaxing back into sleep. The bandaged cut above Starsky's right eye stood in contrast to the dark circles below his eyes.

"Hutch, I've been going through the cupboards and I don't find much. Just a few cans of soup and some canned fruit," Brit said. Turning away from the cupboards, she studied Hutch's ragamuffin appearance. "Don't you think it's time for you to put on some dry clothes, too, and bandage that leg?"

Scanning the room, Hutch silently acknowledged the need to take care of himself. They were safe for now, but who knew what the rest of the night could bring. Immediately after settling Starsky on the couch, Hutch had rushed to the phone, only to be disappointed when he found it dead. They were stuck in the tiny cabin, unable to reach anyone, and vulnerable if they were being tracked.

When he'd searched the cabin further, he'd also found that the electricity and water had been turned off. But Hutch had found a large aluminum pot in the cupboard and he'd filled it with snow to melt down in the fireplace. At least they would have cold water to drink and hot water to clean their wounds and, hopefully, ward off any infection.

Hutch walked over to Brit, who was holding up a pair of jeans she'd removed from his bag, and taking them from her, he grinned weakly. Heading over to the kitchen sink to clean up his leg, he called over his shoulder, "Look after, Starsky. He's pretty restless."

Slipping out of his wet jeans, Hutch set his leg on one of the dinette chairs to inspect it. There was a six-inch gash running down the inside of his lower leg. Blood had run into his shoe and long ago dried. The wound was clotted shut and he knew wetting it with warm water would probably start it bleeding again, but he had no choice. The area around the gash was red and warm to the touch.

“Sit, Hutch,” Brit ordered, coming up behind him. Taking the warm, wet rag from his hand, she steered him to the chair. “I’ll clean it up. You look like you’re going to drop any minute.”

Hutch gratefully sank into the chair and extended his leg as Brit knelt next to him. Wincing as she applied some pressure, Hutch turned and stared at the fireplace, held captive by the flickering of the blue and yellow flames. “Starsky needs a doctor,” he said wearily, as she wrapped his leg in some gauze.

“I know,” Brit said, reassuringly placing her hand on his thigh. “We’ll get some help.”

Leaning forward, Hutch rested his head in his hands and rubbed his forehead. Looking up, he said determinedly, “I’m going for help. You stay here and take care of Starsky.”

“Wait a minute, Hutch,” Brit protested, as he stood up. “You need to rest that leg. You’re bleeding and your ankle’s swollen. You can’t go traipsing off in the woods...in the dark. Let’s at least wait until morning...”

“No!” Hutch grabbed at the jeans he’d laid on the small kitchen table and started sliding his leg inside. “I don’t know that we have until morning.”

Confused, Brit asked, “What do you mean? Starsky’s sick, but ...”

“Look Brit, I keep running what happened over and over in my head. I don’t think us going over the side was an accident.”

“What do you mean?”

“That pick-up rammed us. It didn’t just slide into us. It hit us at least three times. Whoever was driving wanted to see us go over, and they could be looking for us to be sure they don’t have to finish the job.”

“But who...why...?”

“I don’t know, but as cops we work dangerous cases and a lot of guys would love to get even. Maybe we were being followed,” Hutch paused a moment and then continued, almost to himself, “though I don’t know how I could have missed a red pick-up truck tailing us.”

“Red?” Brit repeated, biting at her lower lip.

“Yeah, red.”

As Starsky suddenly started coughing, Hutch hurried to his side. Kneeling down, Hutch helped Starsky sit up as he strained against the painful cough. Watching Starsky struggle to let air in, Hutch said soothingly, “Take it easy. Just relax, Starsk.” Rubbing Starsky’s back, Hutch pulled him close, feeling him relax. Brushing the sweaty curls off Starsky’s forehead, Hutch looked up at Brit. “Is there any of that water left?”

Brit nodded and returned with a cup, handing it to Hutch. Raising Starsky's head slightly, Hutch awkwardly held the cup in his left hand so that Starsky could take a sip and he then gently laid Starsky back against the pillows. Pulling the quilt up around him, Hutch watched as Starsky closed his eyes. A moment later, Hutch stood, wincing at the sudden pressure on his leg.

Brit reached out a hand, but Hutch shook his head. "Look, Hutch, I've been thinking. You need to stay here with Starsky. I'll go for help."

"Brit..."

"Just hear me out. It makes better sense. I'm dressed for the weather and I know my way around the area. And with your injured leg, you really don't need to be walking all over the woods. It might be getting infected. Besides your ankle's swollen and you need to stay off of it."

"I need to get help."

"You need to be here. I'll get help."

Hutch listened, weighing what Brit said. His body rebelled at the thought of going out in the cold and snow, but Starsky needed help. He watched as Brit walked to the door and began putting on her boots, coat and gloves. He knew he should object but hearing Starsky fitfully call out his name in his feverish sleep, Hutch went to his side instead. Picking up the washcloth, he began cooling Starsky's forehead trying to make him comfortable.

Neither one heard the sound of the closing door.

Chapter 7

Twisting toward the firelight, Hutch bent forward to read the face of his pocket watch. Brit had been gone about an hour but the inactivity made it seem longer. Reaching down, Hutch grabbed one of the logs he'd brought in earlier and placed it on the fire. He watched the flames leap into the air, filling the room with its orange glow. "Gotta keep ya warm, Starsk," he commented, more to himself than his restless partner.

Hutch laid his hand on Starsky's flushed, right cheek, his brow furrowing at the heat he once again felt there. Sliding Starsky's legs over, Hutch sat on the couch next to him. Reaching for the washrag soaking in the cold water, Hutch rung it out and wiped Starsky's forehead; then, he moved it down Starsky's right cheek, over the left and, finally, Starsky's neck. As Starsky pulled away from the contact, Hutch brushed his index finger slowly across Starsky's cheek. "Sh-h-h, help will be here soon."

Hutch stood up and stiffly limped to the window, eyes straining to see any movement. Watching the moon light up the sky, casting dark shadows in every corner, Hutch wondered who was out

there. Who was after them? Was it Bartoldi's men? Or some other crazy intent on revenge? His mind wandered back to the crash—the lights glaring in his rearview mirror, the push on the back bumper, the curtain of snow, the blackness of the night extending forever beyond it, the uncontrollable sliding toward the edge.

It was his fault. He hadn't been able to control the car and keep it on the road and because of that they were stuck in a cabin, in the middle of the woods, in the middle of the night, with Starsky sick. Sick and hurt because he'd been thrown from the car. His car.

“Hutch?”

“Hey, buddy?” Hearing his name broke Hutch's reverie. Leaving the windows and the moonlit silhouettes, he moved over to the couch. As Starsky struggled to sit up, Hutch placed his hand on Starsky's left shoulder to stop him. “Take it easy. Just rest.”

“Been restin’,” Starsky managed to get out before the coughing started. As it stopped, Starsky leaned forward, wrapping his arms tightly against his chest.

Starsky would never admit it, Hutch knew, but he could tell his partner was hurting. “Where does it hurt?”

Starsky, running his left hand through his damp, matted curls, leaned to his right using the back of the couch for support and said wryly, “Hurt? What makes ya think I hurt?”

Hutch smiled weakly. “Oh, I don't know. Getting' thrown out of a car hurling down a mountainside might hurt a little.”

“Not when there's some of that white, fluffy stuff to break your fall.” Starsky, seeing the guilt on Hutch's face, started to smile. Suddenly, he wrapped his arms back around his chest. “Oh-h – h, I shouldn't do that,” he whispered.

“What's that?”

“Breathe.”

“Just sit still and don't move around too much. You might have some broken ribs or something.”

Watching until Starsky relaxed a little, Hutch offered. “I'll make some soup. Just stay there.”

“Where am I gonna go? Ain't this the North Pole?”

Hutch chuckled as he headed to the kitchen; relieved to hear Starsky attempting a joke. “Told you you'd like snow.”

Starsky snorted, “Right.”

Watching Hutch favor his leg as he slowly limped toward the fireplace, Starsky noticed blood seeping through Hutch's pant leg. "You're bleedin'."

Hutch looked down and, studying the blood as though seeing it for the first time, painfully bent down to place the small saucepan on the grate, face paling at the exertion. "It doesn't hurt."

'*You're lyin', Blondie,*' Starsky thought. Watching his partner stroke the fire, Starsky pulled the quilt tighter around himself. Fighting off the chills and aching all over made it difficult for him to concentrate. He wanted to convince Hutch that he was okay, so that the frown would disappear off of Hutch's face. It had become a permanent fixture. Studying Hutch's back, Starsky sighed and closed his eyes.



"Soup's ready." Hutch carefully pushed Starsky's legs to the back of the couch and sat down, bowl and spoon in hand. "It isn't your Aunt Rosie's but it's hot." He watched Starsky groggily open his eyes and sit up little straighter.

After a couple of spoonfuls, Starsky found the strength to protest. "I can do it myself."

"Just stay under the covers and open up." Seeing Starsky's willing compliance, despite his verbal protest, Hutch continued feeding him spoonfuls.

"Lousy way to spend Christmas." Starsky observed, frowning.

"Christmas isn't until tomorrow."

"We gonna get outta here?"

"Of course. Brit went for help."

"How long ago?" Starsky asked, suddenly curious. He remembered little of what had transpired, though there was a fuzzy memory of Hutch carrying him through the snow.

"She'll be back soon. Here finish up."

"Aren't you eating?" Starsky asked hoarsely, knowing that his partner would be so concerned about taking care of him that he'd forget about himself.

"Had some while you were snoozin'," Hutch stood up to put the bowl away. "Go back to sleep"

"Nah, you sleep...you look beat."

Hutch smiled weakly at the suggestion. '*Not a bad idea,*' he thought, but there was more that he had to do. "I'm going for wood. You stay under the covers and I'll be back in a couple

minutes.” Hutch grabbed his coat, once again warm and dry from sitting near the fire, and limped out the door.

After making several trips, his arms loaded with wood, Hutch stopped to grab a small saw from the kitchen drawer.

Intrigued, Starsky watched through half-open eyes lids. “Whatcha doin’ now?”

“Just wait. It’s a surprise for you.”

Starsky watched the door expectantly. Hearing Hutch stomping his feet on the porch to shake off the snow, he pulled himself up, wondering what his partner was doing.

Hutch appeared in the doorway, his upper body hidden by a three-foot pine tree.

“A tree? Hate ta disappoint you, but aren’t you supposed to chop it first? It won’t fit in the fireplace like that. Or didn’t they teach ya anything in the Sea Scouts?”

“A Christmas tree,” said Hutch, shaking off the outside chill and setting the tree on the kitchen table. When Starsky’s pale, drawn face brightened, Hutch was glad that he’d noticed the little tree; pleased to once again receive a small smile. His concern was starting to grow about Brit and the amount of time she’d been gone and he didn’t want Starsky to sense it. Maybe the tree would distract them both for a while. “There’s a bucket in the cupboard; I’ll stick it in that.”

Curious, Starsky watched Hutch retrieve the bucket, take it outside and return with it full of tightly, packed snow. “I piled some rocks in the bottom for weight and the snow on top.” Seeing Starsky’s dubious expression, Hutch explained, “The snow will help balance it and provide some moisture.” He set it down to the right of the fireplace, far enough away so that flying embers wouldn’t be a problem, but still in Starsky’s line of vision.

Seeing Starsky stare at it, Hutch, exasperated, asked, “What’s wrong? Don’t you like Christmas trees now?”

“Doesn’t look like one. There aren’t any ornaments.”

Sighing at Starsky’s little boy impatience, Hutch said, “I know. I know. Gimme a minute.” Heading over to the counter, Hutch, whistling, scrounged through several drawers. Curious, Starsky tried to sit up straighter and look over his shoulder to see what Hutch was doing.

Hearing Starsky’s movement, Hutch called out, “Sit still. I’ll be there in a sec.”

Opening and shutting several drawers, Hutch finally called out, “Got it.”

Gathering his collected items, Hutch approached the couch and sank gratefully to the floor in front of Starsky. Looking at the items Hutch laid out on the floor, Starsky placed his hand on Hutch’s forehead. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Hutch looked at the aluminum foil, Dixie cups, string and scissors on the floor.
“You wanted decorations.”

“But aluminum foil?”

“Watch. We’ll cut up the foil into stars and string ‘em up on the tree.”

“And the Dixie cups?”

“We just have to poke a couple holes in the top with the scissors, run some string through and tie it in a knot. They’ll be the bells.”

Looking at Hutch dubiously, Starsky said, “I’m beginnin’ to worry about ya, Blondie.”

For a moment, Hutch stared off into space remembering a winter long ago. “The Christmas I was ten, I stayed at my grandfather’s. My dad had to be gone on business and he insisted my mom go with him. ‘Lots of important people’, you know,” Hutch mimicked his father before continuing. “They weren’t planning on coming home in time to celebrate Christmas with us. I was sitting outside in the barn taking care of two puppies. Their mother had died. She’d given birth to the puppies about a week earlier but she’d had a really difficult time. I figured they were feeling pretty lonesome, without their mom and all.” Hutch’s voice became wistful and he paused a moment. Shaking himself out of his reverie, Hutch smiled briefly. “My grandfather came to the barn and I guess he figured out how I was feeling, being alone on Christmas an’ all, ‘cause he suggested that we get a tree and decorate it for the puppies. We set it up in the barn and decorated it with foil ornaments, pine cones and even hung dog treats on it.” Hutch smiled, remembering. “I fell asleep that night with the puppies in the barn and when I work up on Christmas morning, I found all my presents under that tree.”

“Sounds like a pretty special Christmas to me,” Starsky whispered, picturing his friend lying in the hay curled up with the puppies, his arms protectively around them. Three lonely children together on Christmas.

Hutch looked at Starsky, his eyes smiling. “Yeah, it did. I even took those puppies home. Grandfather gave ‘em to me as a Christmas present. Dad wasn’t happy, but even he didn’t dare say no.”

Watching the firelight reflecting off Hutch’s face, Starsky offered encouragement. “Well, let’s get goin’.”

“You sure you’re up to this, buddy? You don’t look so good.”

“Don’t let that fool ya. I’m fine.”

As Starsky straightened up a little on the couch, Hutch warned, “Just stay there.” He reached down and picked up the paper cups. Poking holes in the top of the cups, he handed them to Starsky with the string. “Slip the string through and tie the knots. I’ll cut out some stars.”

They worked companionably for several minutes. Then, Hutch slid his lanky body the few feet across the floor and began hanging the ornaments on the tiny tree.

“I’m sorry, Starsk.” Quietly breaking the silence, Hutch looked intently at the tree.

Confused, Starsky said, “The tree ‘ill look great. A little weird but...”

“No. I’m sorry about ignoring you about the car door. If it didn’t have a bad latch, you wouldn’t a been thrown out. You wouldn’t...”

“It’s not your fault, Hutch.”

“Sure it was. If I’d...”

“Now, ya sound like me with the ‘what if’s’.” Starsky protested hoarsely.

“Starsk...”

“What if we never had the accident? Then, we wouldn’t be here cuttin’ stars out of foil and hangin’ Dixie cups on a silly tree.” Starsky stared at Hutch’s back, waiting for him to sense it and turn away from the tree. “Right?”

Hutch finally met Starsky’s eyes, seeing only friendship and love contained there, not any blame. *‘Never any blame,’* thought Hutch.

“Right.” Hutch said relieved and, turning back to the tree, he finished hanging their homemade ornaments.

Starsky smiled as Hutch carefully, almost lovingly, placed the ornaments on the tree branches. It was clear that he was somewhere else—in a barn many Christmas’ ago. When Hutch stepped back allowing Starsky to inspect, he said apologetically, “Well, it’s not exactly what I hoped for but...”

Seeing the Dixie cup ornaments and the foil stars hanging on the tree, Starsky was touched, particularly when he saw several Star of David’s hanging between them. *“Leave it to Hutch to remember,”* Starsky thought.

“Looks terrific,” Starsky observed as he yawned, his eyelids beginning to droop.

Seeing Starsky’s tired, flushed face, Hutch moved to his side. Concerned at the heat he still felt coming from Starsky’s forehead, Hutch pulled the cover up as Starsky began dozing off, and whispered, “Merry Christmas, buddy.”

After putting away the foil, scissors and string, Hutch gratefully sank back down on the woven rug on the floor in front of the couch. Studying the waning fire, he was suddenly too exhausted to get up and stir it. His leg and ankle were throbbing. His head ached and he felt like he'd pushed his body to its limits. Before he knew it, his head was bobbing forward on his chest. After several startled jerks, he slid down and leaned his head back against the cushions. Feeling Starsky's hand gently run across the top of his head and through his hair, Hutch relaxed into sleep as the firelight glistened off the foil ornaments twisting gently on the tree.

Chapter 8

"Hutch! Hutch!"

Heavy steps on the porch and someone calling his name woke Hutch instantly. He turned toward Starsky surprised that he remained asleep. Seeing Starsky's left arm dangling over the edge of the couch, Hutch slid it under the covers and rose unsteadily to his feet.

Grabbing his Magnum from its holster, Hutch headed toward the door.

"Hutch! It's Brit. I've got help." Opening the door to enter, she threw her arms around Hutch in relief. "How's Starsky?"

"Where's the police?"

"Police?" Brit was momentarily confused. "I couldn't get to the police but I found someone else to help us. Or rather, he found me. He said he could help us get Starsky to the hospital. He'll be here in a just a second."

Hurrying over to where Starsky lay, Brit studied him by the firelight. "I'm sorry it took me so long. How are you?"

"I'll survive." Hutch, anxiously looking at the door, asked, "Where's the help?"

"Mr. Barnes is outside."

"Mr. Barnes?"

"He's waiting for us."

Those words were enough to put Hutch into action. "I'll put the fire out and leave a note for the owners in case they show up over the holidays and see that someone's broken in. You pack up the dry clothes."

Adrenalin rushing through his body, Hutch moved quickly to write the note and place it on the fireplace mantel. Poking the logs apart, Hutch tossed the remaining drinking water on the embers. Setting the empty pot down, Hutch noticed one of the foil stars had fallen to the floor. He picked it up and slid it into his jean pocket.

Hearing footsteps on the porch, Hutch turned and, looking up, was surprised to see a white-haired, bearded man standing in the doorway. He was dressed in a red and black plaid, wool coat and a red knit cap protected his head from the cold.

“You ready to go?” The deep voice filled the room and Brit rushed to introduce the two men. “Hutch, this is Nicholas Barnes. He found me wandering in the forest and said he could help. Mr. Barnes, this is Hutch.”

Hutch looked at the stranger, grateful yet hesitant. His instincts advised caution. He had no idea who’d sent them over the mountain’s edge and he didn’t know where this man had come from.

“Better bundle him up. It’s cold outside.” Mr. Barnes said brusquely, and then abruptly walked outside.

Hutch nodded and, taking the three steps to Starsky, wrapped the quilt around him and scooped him up, glad that Starsky was too deeply asleep to protest. Breathing heavily, he grunted under Starsky’s weight but started toward the door, his shaking legs feeling like they would give out at any moment. Brit held the door open and Hutch, with a quick glance around, exited the room.

Hutch walked across the porch and stopped to shift Starsky who was beginning to stir. “Careful you big lug or you’ll end up in the snow a second time,” he warned.

Grunting, Hutch carefully stepped down the three porch steps and turned to go to the car.

Stopping, he stared. There wasn’t a car, but a black sleigh. A sleigh, peeling and badly in need of paint, but transportation, nonetheless. Mr. Barnes was busily spreading an old army blanket on the seat. “Lay him down here and we can wrap him up in this.”

Hutch moved forward and, as he struggled to climb up into the sleigh, Barnes reached down to take part of Starsky’s weight. Together they shifted Starsky sideways onto the seat and wrapped the blanket around him and over his face, protecting it from the wind and cold. The seat was small; but curled sideways, they managed to get Starsky comfortable.

Once that was done, Barnes climbed down from the sleigh patting the seat running behind the driver’s seat. “You two bundle up here. There are two more blankets under the seat. The ride could take awhile and the cold, night wind will bite right through you.”

Brit climbed up next to Hutch and they pulled the blankets close around them. Starsky’s face was buried deep beneath his covers and, while Hutch couldn’t see him, he heard Starsky’s painful cough and raspy breathing. Hutch knew the exposure to the night air wasn’t going to help.

Barnes climbed up and settled onto the driver's bench. He tucked a quilt around his legs and then pulled his red cap down as far as it would go. With a flick of his whip, the sleigh jerked forward as its two chestnut horses started across the snow.

Hutch turned to study the back of the man, grateful for his appearance, unusual though it was. "How'd you meet up with this guy?" Hutch whispered to Brit.

"It's more like he found me. I'd been hurrying down the hillside as fast as I could when I tripped and fell." Touching the bandage on her forehead, Brit winced and continued, "I must have knocked myself out, 'cause I woke up at his place. He'd bandaged my head. I explained where I'd come from and that I needed to get help. Mr. Barnes said the heavy snow had knocked out the power lines and his phone was dead. He said the roads were impassable, but I convinced him that I had to get help for you as quickly as possible. The sleigh was his idea. He's a collector and had just purchased this one. He said it isn't in as good of shape as his other two, but it's bigger since it's a six-passenger sleigh. What do you think?"

"Honestly?" Hutch paused a moment before proceeding. "I'm afraid I'm in a dream and I'm going to wake up."

Despite the cover wrapped around him, the inactivity left Hutch feeling cold and stiff. The wind had picked up, blowing the snow sharply across his frozen cheeks. Hutch leaned across and, despite stiff fingers, tucked the blanket tighter around Starsky, trying to protect him from the biting wind.

Mr. Barnes silently guided the horses through the woods, letting the moonlight show the way. The blowing snow covering Barnes' red cap made it difficult for Hutch to determine where the cap ended and the beard began. Burying his own face deeper, Hutch realized that Brit was asleep, her head leaning against his left shoulder. Shifting to put his arm around her, he leaned back against the sleigh and enjoyed the luxury of closing his eyes. *'What a way to spend Christmas,'* thought Hutch. As he finally drifted off, visions of Mr. Barnes dressed as Santa Claus flashed through his head. Smiling, he promised himself he'd tell Starsky his crazy thoughts as soon as possible.



The movement—no, the lack of movement—startled Hutch. Blinking his eyes rapidly several times, he shoved the covers away. Starsky! He had to get to Starsky! Feeling someone touching his shoulders, restraining him, Hutch shoved the hands away and looked around frantically.

"Easy does it. Just lie back. We're taking care of your friend." The voice was soft and reassuring. Hutch watched as two male orderlies gently lifted Starsky out of the sleigh and onto a gurney. Hutch ran his stiff right hand through his hair and gave the outside of the small hospital a quick once over. It certainly didn't compare to their usual haunt, but its bright lights meant warmth and care for Starsky.

Anxious to join the gurney rolling through the automatic doors, Hutch stepped down from the sleigh. He was surprised to see a wheelchair waiting for him and gentle, but firm hands guided him toward it. Too tired to argue, Hutch sank into the chair and commanded, "I'm going wherever he is..."



An hour later, Hutch, sitting in the wheelchair positioned directly outside the emergency room doors separating him from Starsky, argued with the nurse. "Look, Miss..." Quickly reading the nurse's nametag, Hutch continued, "Miss Watson, I appreciate your insistence but my leg is fine and I can wait until I hear how my partner's is doing. You said it wouldn't be much longer."

Sighing, Nancy Watson looked dubiously at her patient. "Okay, but only for a little while longer. Then, I don't care how much you object; I'm taking you into Treatment Room B and stitching up that leg."

Pleased to have postponed the inevitable, Hutch smiled appreciatively, "Would you mind getting me a cup of coffee?"

Nancy couldn't resist the warm smile of the tousled haired blond and hurried off to fill his request.

Hutch, glancing across the hall and into a small waiting room stared at a five-foot artificial Christmas tree standing in the corner; it's tiny, blinking lights and shiny tinsel reminding him of the season Starsky loved so much. Seeing Brit asleep, Hutch stood unsteadily and walked toward her. His muscles had tightened up, making the walking slow going. Leaning against the receptionist counter, he stopped to arch his back and relieve some of its tension. As he glanced through the glass entrance doors, Hutch noticed Nick Barnes outside, climbing into the driver's seat. Hutch headed toward the doors. The man had disappeared the moment they'd arrived and Hutch hadn't had the opportunity to thank him for getting Starsky to the hospital. Hoping to catch the elderly man before he left, Hutch increased his speed, but as he exited the doors all he saw was the back end of the sleigh.

"Hey," he called out, arms waving to get Barnes' attention, but to no avail. Disappointed, he let them drop to his side.

"Come back in, Detective Hutchinson. It's cold out there and your coffee is getting cold," Nancy chided her patient, as she stood at Hutch's side.

"Kay." Hutch agreed reluctantly, the snow flurries obscuring the back of the sleigh as it disappeared into the night. "I never got to say thank you."

"That's okay. St Nick has more to do tonight," Nancy said smiling.

"St. Nick?" Hutch, shivering in the cold air, looked at Nancy in disbelief.

“Mr. Barnes’ been a fixture around here for years but he has the reputation of being a curmudgeon. He’s a retired English Literature professor. A number of years ago the kids in town started calling him St. Nick because of his white beard and hair. When he began buying the sleighs a couple years ago, the name really stuck.” Smiling, Nancy watched the disappearing figure. “Mr. Barnes grumbles about it, but I think he secretly loves it. I heard he found his latest sleigh out east and then had it transported here. On Christmas Eve he travels around the area, letting the kids see him. Helping them to believe.”

Looking into the darkness, Hutch whispered to himself, “Well, I know one BIG kid he helped believe tonight.”

Chapter 9

Hutch winced as Nancy finished suturing his leg and then proceeded to bandage it. He’d finally agreed to have his leg attended to after Dr. Tompkins had reported that Starsky was resting comfortably and had even allowed Hutch a brief visit. Hutch had sighed in relief when the doctor said Starsky’s condition was serious but nothing life-threatening. Starsky’s cracked ribs and pneumonia would be taken care of with antibiotics, painkillers and rest. Plenty of rest.

During his visit, Starsky had remained asleep, oxygen easing the sounds of his breathing. His bandaged head had been turned to the right, away from Hutch, but even from where he stood he’d seen color returning to Starsky’s face. Touching Starsky’s hand and seeing him resting comfortably had been enough for Hutch, at least until Nancy was finished fixing his leg.

Patting Hutch on the knee, Nancy said, “You’re all set, Detective. The doctor will write you a prescription for some antibiotics. I’m going in search of some crutches for you. You should stay off that leg and ankle as much as possible.” Hutch nodded in understanding and watched the blonde nurse leave.

After waiting several minutes, Hutch decided it was time to check on Starsky again. Carefully sliding off the examination table, he pulled up his jeans under the hospital gown Nancy had given him. Walking over and slowly opening the door, he checked both directions in case she was returning. He didn’t need another scolding. Hallway clear, he stiffly started down the corridor toward Starsky’s room.

“Hutch!”

Chagrined, Hutch stopped and turned, surprised when it wasn’t Nancy, but Brit with a young man at her side. Something about him was vaguely familiar. “Brit...”

“I need to talk to you, Hutch,” Brit said, obviously uneasy.

“What’s wrong?” Hutch asked, concerned.

“Hutch, this is Rick.” As Hutch extended his hand in greeting, he studied the tall brunette standing uncomfortably in front of him. “Hi, Rick. Pleased to meet you.”

At Rick’s grunted “Hi”, Hutch turned back toward Brit. “What’s up?”

“Rick and I’ve been talking.” Brit stopped to take a deep breath; then, continuing tenuously, she asked. “Hutch, you know how you said it was a red pickup behind us?” At Hutch’s nod, Brit studied her boots and said softly, “Rick drives a red pickup.”

Hutch stared at Rick, his eyes becoming cold steel. Reaching out and tightly grabbing Rick’s parka, Hutch threw him into the wall. “Where in the hell do you get off....”

“Hutch! Stop!” Brit’s anxious voice, and her arms tightly wrapped around his right arm, stopped Hutch before he connected with Rick’s face.

“Give me a chance to explain!” Rick responded angrily, pushing Hutch’s restraining arms away.

His eyes cold and penetrating, Hutch stared at the man in front of him, his left arm balancing menacingly on the wall next to Rick’s shoulder, blocking any escape. Keeping his voice deadly, Hutch warned, “It better be good.”

Flinching under the ice cold, blue eyes trained on him, Rick explained, “I went to the coffee shop hoping to talk...to talk to Brit. To tell her I wanted her to stay.” Glancing at Brit, Rick continued, “To tell her ...I love her.” The tall blond in front of him hadn’t moved and with the light blue eyes boring into him. Rick swallowed before continuing. “When I got there, I sat at the counter to try and work up enough nerve to go over and talk with her. Next thing I knew your partner was talking to Brit and I watched what was happening. When Brit left with you, I was furious. She said she was going to an audition.” Looking sheepish, Rick admitted, “I thought she’d been lying to me and that she had a new boyfriend. When you left, I decided to follow.” Hutch hadn’t relaxed his stance, and Rick hurried to apologize. “I just wanted to scare you a little. I...I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. Really, I didn’t. You have to believe me, Detective.”

“You could have killed all three of us! My partner...” Hutch, his anger barely controlled, pointed down the hall toward Starsky’s room. “My partner is lying in that hospital room because of you!”

“I know and I’m sorry. I only wanted to scare you to make you stop. If it makes you feel better, after I bumped your car I lost control and I spun out. I hit a construction barricade and then a tree. I was knocked out for a while, but when I regained consciousness I went down the side looking for you. But the snow had already covered your tire tracks. So I climbed back to the top to find help. It took a while before anyone came by and I could get a ride...you have to believe me.”

“Hutch.” Turning at the sound of Brit’s voice, Hutch felt her hand on his arm. “I’m really sorry. I feel like it’s all my fault.”

Seeing the tears in Brit’s eyes, Hutch felt his anger dissipate and softened his stance. Brit had put herself at risk helping him and Starsky. Sighing, Hutch said, “Go home. Both of you. It’s been a long night.”

Brit kissed Hutch on the cheek and then turned to leave with Rick.

“Hutch! What are you doing out here?” Recognizing Nancy’s voice, Hutch realized his quest to visit Starsky had been halted—at least momentarily.



“Hu-u-t-ch...”

The sound was soft and drowsy, but it woke Hutch instantly. Seeing Starsky awakening, Hutch was instantly at his side, his crutches forgotten against the bed. “Easy. You’re in the hospital, Starsk.” Hutch pushed away a few errant curls from Starsky’s forehead and frowned, still feeling the fever’s heat. The doctor had said it would start going down soon, but it wasn’t happening fast enough to suit him. “Don’t move around too much. The doc says you’ve got a couple cracked ribs and a mild concussion. To top it off, you have pneumonia as well. Not that I’m surprised, considering how you were dressed.”

“Feel terrible.” Starsky whispered as he looked at Hutch through half open lids. Brow furrowed, he tentatively began moving his legs, then his arms. It wasn’t until he tried to sit up a little that a cry of pain escaped.

“I said take it easy,” Hutch scolded, resting his hand on Starsky’s shoulder to restrain him. But Starsky sank back onto the bed, already exhausted. “I’ll raise the bed.” Hutch walked to the end of the bed and bent down to turn the handle, raising the bed slightly.

Seeing the crutches leaning against the bed, Starsky thoughtfully watched Hutch return before asking, “Aren’t ya supposed to use those?”

Feeling his face blush, Hutch retorted, “They gave me pain pills; the leg’s fine.”

But, as Hutch sank thankfully into the chair next to the bed, Starsky knew Hutch was lying. “Go get some sleep. I’ll be fine.”

“In a bit.” Hutch agreed, watching Starsky close his eyes.

Starsky laid there, the events of the last twenty-four hours blurring and blending into his dreams, until he finally broke the silence. “Is Christmas over?”

“Nope, still Christmas Eve.”

“Terrific.” Starsky yawned, “Wouldn’t wanna miss Christmas.”

“You won’t miss it.” Hutch smiled and shook his head, amazed that Starsky, the tough street cop, injured and laying in the hospital would still look forward to Christmas.

Starsky frowned, “This is gonna sound pretty funny, Hutch...”

“What’s that?”

“I was dreamin’, I guess.”

“What about?”

“Well,” Starsky studied his feet poking up at the end of the bed, wiggling them around rather than looking at Hutch. “I dreamt”

“Yeah?” Hutch prodded, beginning to grow impatient, as Starsky hesitated again..

Starsky cleared his throat and rushed through the next few words. “That I got to ride in Santa’s sleigh.”

At Hutch’s laughter, Starsky blushed and turned away.

“Starsk...” Hutch, struggling to get his laughter under control, moved next to the bed. Starsky turned to look at Hutch apprehensively, and Hutch continued, “St. Nick gave us a ride to the hospital.”

“You’re makin’ fun,” Starsky growled, growing angry.

Hutch rushed to reassure his partner. “I’m not, honest. Do you remember Brit leaving for help?” At Starsky’s nod, Hutch continued, “She came back with Nicholas Barnes. Remember him? White hair, beard, red and black plaid coat?” Seeing Starsky’s hesitant look, Hutch went on. “He gave us a ride in his sleigh. The roads were snowed under and it was the only way into town. He brought us here.”

Starsky silently absorbed Hutch’s explanation and then asked, indignantly, “What does that hafta do with Santa?”

“The folks around here refer to Mr. Barnes as St. Nick.” Hutch raised an eyebrow, expectantly.

“So you mean...”

“St. Nick’ gave you a ride to the hospital in his sleigh.” Hutch grinned as comprehension stole across Starsky’s face.

Starsky grinned in relief. Suddenly his face became serious, “I’m sorry, Hutch.”

“Sorry? You’ve got nothin’ to be sorry about. It was my....”

“Sorry, ya didn’t get the present you wanted.”

“Present?” Hutch asked, confused.

“Sleepin’ for twenty four hours,” Starsky reminded him, groggily.

“You’re the one who needs to sleep. I’ll sit here a little longer, while Nancy finds me a place to stay.”

“Nancy cute?” Starsky asked sleepily, as he closed his eyes and sank deeper into the pillow. It was only a matter of minutes before he was sound asleep.

“You’re in no shape to care, Gordo,” Hutch chuckled softly, walking over to the window. Staring through the slats of the closed blinds, Hutch was surprised to see the morning sun. Its bright rays revealing a town, covered in glistening snow, coming awake.

Content that Starsky was resting comfortably, Hutch decided it was time to listen to his own tired body. Cupping his cold hands, he blew on them and then slid them into his jean pockets. Feeling something deep in his right pocket, Hutch pulled it out and turned toward the wastebasket. Looking down, Hutch realized it was the foil star he’d stuck in his pocket. Smoothing it out, Hutch smiled, remembering the tiny tree at the cabin decorated with foil ornaments and Dixie cups.

Walking over to be sure Starsky was sleeping peacefully, Hutch brushed back a few unruly curls on Starsky’s forehead and whispered, “Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of time to celebrate Christmas. As for me—I’ve already got the only present I want.”

As he opened the door to leave, Hutch glanced back one last time. Reassured that Starsky was still sleeping soundly, Hutch pulled the door closed behind him, leaving the foil star hanging from the IV stand, dancing in its breeze.

The End

Linda B.

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