

Tomato Red

By Linda B.



Starsky laid down his textbook and leaned over to peek in the small aluminum pan heating on his hot plate. Picking up a spoon, he started to stir the bubbling soup. “Ouch!” He stuck his thumb in his mouth and shook his head at his own stupidity. Reaching for the braided hot pad his mother had sent, he grabbed onto the handle of the pan again. The hot pad had arrived as part of a package his mom had sent him several months before. His second cousin, Lucy, had made the pad, along with many more, from a kit she’d received on her tenth birthday. Apparently, her intention was to keep the family fully supplied. Starsky looked at the burnt

edges and loose braiding along the side and decided it would be one of the first things he’d have to replace when he got out of the Academy and into an apartment of his own. But for now...

Whistling, he turned off the hot plate and poured the soup into the mug that also doubled as his coffee mug. He glanced at the clock. It was 2:30 in the morning already and he wasn’t nearly done studying. The 7:00 a.m. test was going to be on him before he realized it. Deciding his muddled brain deserved a ten-minute break, Starsky pulled his desk chair over to the window. Before sitting down he flicked off his overhead light, leaving only the desk lamp on. He settled at the window, munching on a saltine cracker. He enjoyed looking at the city at night. For him, its flickering lights offered hope—a promise for tomorrow, but he knew for too many it offered only fear and hopelessness, darkness and despair. He knew others would laugh if he told them of his objective to bring that light of hope to others. He was sure being a police officer offered him that opportunity. His dad had been a police officer, and he used to talk about the gratitude of the people he helped. People hurt by the cruelty of others. His dad had said that their expressions of thanks—the look in their eyes, their handshakes, their hugs—were what kept him going, what made the job worthwhile.

A knock at the door startled him, and Starsky rose to see who was there. He figured most of the cadets were long asleep. Book studying seemed to come so easily for many of them. He recognized early on that it was a struggle for him. He preferred the hands-on stuff—the feel of the gun at target practice, the physical energy of downing his “perp” in combat training. So here he, was pulling another all-nighter while the rest were catching their beauty sleep.

Starsky opened the door and started when he realized the person at his door was the tall blond he'd been teamed with earlier in the week. Hutchie—Hutchin—Hutchinson, that was it! Well, at least the last name; he couldn't remember the first. Why would he be standing at his door at this hour? He was one of the brainiest of the bunch. "Yeah? Whaddya want?"

The blond shifted feet and looked down at the floor. "I saw your light was on, and I thought I'd stop and see how you were doing."

"I'm okay."

"O-Oh, that's good."

Uncertain, Starsky waited. When he didn't continue, Starsky asked, "How's your studying going?"

The cadet looked up from the floor pattern he'd been studying and smiled. "Pretty good." Seeing Starsky's lips tighten, he quickly added, "But I've got more to do."

Starsky held the door open. "You wanna come in for a minute?"

"Sure." Hutchinson looked around the room. One desk was cluttered, but the one with the light on was neat and orderly. "Where's your roommate?"

Starsky shrugged. "Zimmerman? Who knows, probably at his girlfriend's."

"That could get him kicked out of the Academy."

"Not my business." He went over to pick up his soup mug and settled in the chair at the window as he motioned for his visitor to take the other chair.

"What do you have there?" Hutch asked, hoping to start a conversation. The curly-haired trainee had intrigued him ever since the two had been teamed in Self-Defense. He might have some height and weight on the dark-haired cadet, but he certainly hadn't won. They were the last two battling it out, and the wiry moves and determination of his fellow cadet surprised him. In the end, the instructor called it a draw. But Hutchinson had seen something deep in the other's eyes, something that told him any perpetrator that fought this Starsky character wouldn't be so lucky, and he was glad he wouldn't be the one on the receiving end except in training.

"Tomato soup," Starsky answered, an edge to his voice. Through his lashes, Starsky observed his visitor. He'd been impressed with the fight the blond had put up in their self-defense class several days earlier. He hadn't been a pushover, and Starsky could have sworn there'd been a connection between the two, a flicker of respect in the blue eyes looking back at him when they shook hands. But he also knew, from a conversation he'd overheard, that the blond came from a well-to-do family, and that seemed to

intimidate many of the cadets. Several wanted to see him go down, to fail at something, but the tall blond seemed to rise above it all. He was focused, first in their class in most subjects. Starsky had figured the others were just jealous, though he had to admit, even he felt a certain amount of intimidation. “I like its color.”

When Hutch replied, “Sounds good to me,” Starsky thought, *Gimme a break. You’ve probably never tasted tomato soup from a can. It’s all I can scrape enough money together for, and you’re probably out there enjoying a New York strip steak with a baked potato.* He took another sip and continued studying the man sitting in front of him. “It’s pretty late. Aren’t you gonna get some sleep?”

“Sure, soon as I study a little more.”

Starsky watched the blond’s facial expressions, trying to determine if he was being mocked. “Well, I better get back to it. It’s gonna be a hard test and I’m only half done.”

Hutchinson rose. “Oh, sure, sorry to bother you.” He stood and headed to the door. “See you tomorrow.”

“Kay.” Starsky watched him leave. As the door shut, he rubbed his tired, burning eyes before hitting the books again.

He had just settled down when there was a knock—or was it a kick?—at the door. He sighed and muttered, “What is it now?”

He opened the door again and there stood Hutchinson. “Sorry I had to kick the door with my foot, but my arms are full. I was hoping maybe we could study together.” Seeing Starsky hesitate, he added, “I hate studying alone.”

Starsky debated for a second before holding the door open.

Hutchinson entered the room and dropped several textbooks on the desk. “I brought some leftover pizza. It’s cold...but if you want some...” Hutchinson’s voice trailed off, uncertain.

Starsky’s face lit up. “Pizza? I love pizza. The colder the better.”

Within minutes, the two were huddled next to each other, poring over Hutchinson’s notes. Starsky took a bite of pizza and then a sip of tomato soup. Hutchinson watched him. “You really like that stuff—together?”

Starsky grinned. “Sure. What’s wrong with that? They all get mixed up in your stomach, anyways.”

“I guess.” But Hutchinson felt his stomach flip-flop as he watched the other happily chew.

“I’ve lived on tomato soup for a long time. It’s cheap, warm, reminds me of Mom and home...”

“Kinda like a comfort food?”

“Yeah.” Starsky nodded. “You could call it that. Besides, I like its color.”

“You like red?”

“Don’t you? Red’s my favorite color. I plan on having a brand new car one day, and it’s gonna be red.”

Hutchinson laughed. “Red, huh?”

“Sure. Something wrong with that?”

Hutchinson shook his head. “No, no...red is good. But *I* plan on being an undercover cop one day, and you won’t find me riding around the streets in something that shouts to everyone ‘here I am.’ I’ll have to be more discreet than that.”

“You wanna go undercover?” Starsky held his breath. Someone who wanted the same thing as he did.

“You bet. Best job on the force. You get to help a lot of people, get the real criminal off the street—the guy who’s destroying people’s lives—not just the two-bit hustler.”

“I agree.” Starsky leaned in, anxious to learn more about his new study partner. Maybe he’d been right in Self-Defense, there was a connection, a flicker of respect. Maybe they did have something to share—the future. “But I’ll be driving around in a red car—a tomato red car or...” Starsky leaned back in his chair, stretching, hands linked behind his head. “...maybe a candy apple red one.”

“And you’ll be doing it all alone,” Hutchinson muttered under his breath as he thumbed through his textbook for the correct chapter.

“What?”

“Nothing. Come on, partner, we’ve got lots of studying to do before dawn.”

Starsky stifled a grin. “You bet...partner.”



The End