



Blind Trust
by
Minnie K.

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Beneath the clean bandages Hutch felt ugly, dirty and disgusting. He stank of oily smoke, burnt hair and medicinal salves, the odors surrounding and clinging to him. He wished he could take a shower, knowing that no amount of sponge baths were going to help. He wanted to go home.

The drugs were making him fuzzy. He hated them. He hated the feeling of the oily salves on his face and arms, the uncomfortable sting and stiffness of the IV in his left arm and the bandages that circled his right forearm. His head felt strange and heavy with the dressing, and he wasn't even sure he could feel his eyes under the bandages anymore. He didn't want to think of what his face must look like, nor did he want to wonder if he would ever see the damage for himself. He didn't want to think about all the things he may never see again.

He tried to concentrate on categorizing all the sounds that wafted through the air around him. It was Christmas Eve, and the hospital seemed to vibrate with the sounds of the holiday. There was the ever-present sound of rubber-soled movement in the hospital hallways, the sound of hushed voices that carried on serious conversations, the moans and sobs of pain and heartbreak. Those he knew from experience. They were sadly familiar. Behind those were the faint rhythm of Christmas carols from a television or radio, joyful greetings of loved ones coming to share the evening, and the faint crinkle of wrapping as packages made their way to rooms beyond his own. Down the hall, down where the nurses' station would be, he could hear the hint of laughter and even a bit of song, as carts could be heard making their way down the hallway with what must be the evening meal.

Such a strange mix, he mused. Songs of love, joy and hope mixed with tragedy and tears. And the day after tomorrow, all that will be left to wake up to is the tragedy. One day to pretend the world is a nice place, that it's getting better. Why even bother?

His own room was also full of sounds. The second bed in the room was mercifully empty, so he was spared the sounds of a roommate. The soft hiss of air from the heater vent dueled with the muted sounds of traffic from outside. If he listened carefully he could also hear the quiet breathing of his visitor.

He knew Starsky had been standing by the far wall, where the window must be if the chill from that direction were to be believed, ever since he had woken up. Starsky had been by his bed when he had fallen asleep, which must have been hours ago from what he could tell. When he had awakened he had known instinctively that Starsky was no longer beside him, and it had taken him only seconds to place where his partner was in the room. He knew it was Starsky, without a doubt.

Hutch had been careful not to let on that his nap was over, not wanting to talk or visit. How long had he been awake? He couldn't be sure, a half-hour maybe? But in all that time Starsky had not moved. Hutch wondered what he was watching from the window. He wondered what the Christmas lights must look like this evening.

Can't you just leave? Hutch wondered tiredly. Staying isn't going to make things better, undo the damage to my face, or heal my eyes. I don't have the energy for enthusiasm, encouragement, or any of that other bullshit right now. The odds are against me this time. My luck has finally run out.

He held himself still at the sound of the cart outside his door, not wanting to talk to them either. The person who opened the door whispered a quiet question into the room and Starsky responded just as quietly. The cart was wheeled in and Hutch listened as the food he didn't want was placed on a moveable table beside him. The stranger left just as quietly as they had come. Hutch was glad they were gone.

Starsky hadn't moved from the window, but Hutch could feel that he had turned to watch the process. As soon as they were alone, Starsky's footsteps came toward him. He could almost feel the moving presence of the man he couldn't see, feel him there beyond the sounds.

"You need to eat now."

Hutch didn't react.

"Give it up, Hutch." Starsky's voice sounded tired and drained. "I know you've been awake for a while now."

Hutch sighed. He should have known Starsky would be able to tell. He could hear the table being moved in front of him, could feel its movement disturb the air over his body as it was set up to hold his meal. A muffled sound and the smell of hot food warred with the burnt, medicinal odor that came from himself; it was not an appetizing mix. The jostling and clinking noises told him Starsky was taking the cover off the plate and setting out his silverware.

"You had quite a few visitors while you were asleep. Captain Dobey, Edith, Minnie and Huggy came by. They had to get back home, otherwise they would've stayed longer. They brought you some flowers and cards. Want me to read them to you? The flowers smell nice."

"I'm not hungry." Hutch thought he still sounded rusty. The smoke from the explosion that had choked him had left its mark. He was just as glad to have missed his visitors.

"You need to eat if you're going to get better." He could feel Starsky's weight and bulk shift the bed as he sat on it, leaning against Hutch's leg. Hutch didn't bother to move away. "It's been hours since breakfast, and you slept through lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"Maybe not, but you still need to eat something. I won't be able to dig up much after everything shuts down for Christmas Eve."

Hutch grunted. "Who said you have to do anything 'later'? Time you went home. You're going to miss the party at Huggy's."

He could feel Starsky shift almost imperceptibly and took it for a shrug.

"Looks like I'm not going this year, doesn't it?" Starsky sounded a bit amused. "Poor Huggy won't know what to do when his best clients don't show up. Gonna be a lame party without us there to entertain the crowd."

"Then they'd all better get used to it."

There was silence for a moment. Hutch could feel Starsky's eyes on him. It hurt, that little bit of knowledge that he probably would never be able to return the favor. He tried to push it to the back of his mind, letting the anger fill its place.

"Look, I really just want to be alone, okay? I'm not in the mood for visitors. Go find a party somewhere and leave me alone, willya?"

He heard a sigh. "Well, I could feed you, but that would be pretty messy since you won't cooperate. No use in wasting it. It'll save me a trip downstairs before they close up the joint."

Hutch could hear him pick up a utensil, hear the soft clicking sounds from the plate in front of him. It was amazing how you could hear a person chew and swallow when sound was all you had to go by.

"Not too bad, but then again, it's not the best I've ever tasted. Bet you can't guess what's on tonight's menu. Want a taste to see if you're right?"

"No." Hutch took a sniff anyway, deciding it was some sort of chicken or turkey dish. He could smell some kind of gravy and maybe even green beans. It helped drive away the burnt odor, but his stomach still rebelled at the thought. "Have at it, but make it quick. I want to go back to sleep."

"Already?" Starsky asked around another mouthful. "It's barely half-past six. There's bound to be some Christmas stuff on TV we could listen to. Supposed to be that Jimmy Stewart movie on later. That's one of your favorites."

"Look," Hutch began, his frustration growing at the thought of being trapped into listening to Christmas fare. "I **don't** want the company, okay? I **don't** feel like eating, I **don't** feel like listening to any Christmas shows, and I **don't** want to have to make conversation. Just finish up and leave already."

"Hutch--"

"**Damn it**, Starsky! Just how thick are you anyway? I **don't** want you here!" He found the table edge and pushed, hearing a slight clatter as his dinner was jolted by the action. "Take the damn tray with you and **go!**"

A long second passed in which neither of them moved. Suddenly Starsky's weight was gone from the bed. Hutch could hear the table being pulled away from him, then what sounded like Starsky rounding things up. *He's finally going?! Fear, anger and satisfaction warred within him. He's leaving. About time he listened to me!* Hutch found himself trembling with emotions he couldn't identify. *Isn't it?*

He struggled to sit up, then heard the creak of springs from the bed next to his.

"You want to be alone? Then **make** me leave."

The soft challenge stunned Hutch. "What? I thought--"

"I said, you want to be alone, then **make** me leave."

"Damn it, Starsky, don't play games! I'm not in the mood! I'll call a nurse and have her--"

"Can't call a nurse. I moved your call button and the phone. You want me out, then get out of bed and kick me out yourself."

Son of a bitch! Hutch felt for the call button, finding it missing. He didn't bother to check the phone on the nightstand. He realized that he'd heard it being moved only moments before. It could be anywhere in the room by now. *What the hell is he doing?*

"I ain't leavin', Hutch. Not 'til the hospital kicks me out." The voice was calm and the tone held no note of concern.

"There's nothing **left** to stay for, Starsk," Hutch replied angrily. "Can't you see what's happened here? I **can't** be a cop if I'm **blind**. We--" He stopped, trying to control his voice. "We...can't be partners anymore. It's all over. Go **home!**"

There was quiet for a long moment, neither of them saying a word. Then he heard Starsky move. Hutch could feel him come closer, could feel him lean on his bed and his presence hover over him.

"Do you..." Starsky's voice faltered, and Hutch could hear the sorrow behind it. "Do you really think that's why I'm here? That that's the only reason I would **want** to be here? Because you're my **partner**?"

"No." Hutch admitted sheepishly. "It's just..." *I don't know what I think anymore. Don't know what I feel.* "I'm sorry, Starsk. It just...it just doesn't feel like it's going to work out right this time and...and..."

"And?" Starsky's voice was gentle, and Hutch felt fingers touch his cheek for a second.

"And it's so...so...**empty**!" Hutch stopped himself, biting his lip as he felt the fear flare up within him again. He swallowed thickly, his voice barely a whisper. "Everything I've ever done has been by sight. What kind of life will I have left if I can't see? When the doctor tested my eyes in the emergency room, I couldn't see **anything** but a bit of light, Starsk! I didn't realize until then how big and empty the world was when you can't see. There could be twenty people in this room and I'd still feel like the only person in the world. And all the things I may never see again..."

Hutch was surprised to feel a sob working its way out. He bit his lip, trying to control it. Starsky's hands were on his shoulders a second later.

"Ah, Hutch..." Starsky's voice carried the fear and sorrow that seemed to echo his own. "This is probably only temporary; you heard what the doctors said. Even if it's not, we can hope for some sight. They've got glasses and contacts to help with that."

"And what if it's not enough? What if there isn't anything they can do?"

"Then we deal with it."

"**We** deal with it? You mean **I** deal with it, and you end up with a new partner and a friend who's more of a burden than a blessing. You don't need someone to baby-sit through life."

Hutch tried to turn away but felt strong fingers grab his chin and force his face back. He felt a stab of helplessness at not being able to see Starsky's face, at not being able to read him and his reactions. The fingers tightened and he could feel Starsky's breath on his face. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and deep.

"Lookit, partner. If you think I'm not just a little bit scared myself, you're dead wrong. I'm not going to lie to you about that. As bad as it was inside that head of yours, it wasn't no picnic on the outside. I kicked open that suspect's door so that you could go in first and get the bad guy, not so you could get part way in the door and have the room explode on us. At first I...I thought you were dead and that I'd set you up for it."

Hutch reached up and took hold of one of Starsky's wrists. Starsky sighed and Hutch could hear the pain in it, feel the leftover fear in his partner's touch.

"To tell the truth, Hutch, at that moment I didn't care **how** you came out of it. It was enough that you were **alive**. Before I found a pulse I would have...have..." Starsky paused, his voice lowering even further, sounding ragged. "I would've dug my own eyes out with my pocket knife and thrown them to the wind if it would'a kept you breathing. You can't think that I'd fade out on you now, can you?"

The words seemed to fill Hutch, to ease that empty hole within him. He knew Starsky was telling him the truth, and he hated the dark, empty feeling that wouldn't let him leave it alone. "No, I can't think that. And I don't, not really. But I can't ignore it, Starsk, until tomorrow, when that specialist tells me otherwise...I mean, if I really am..."

"**Say** it, Hutch. Tell me what you're afraid of."

"Of **everything**, damn it! Of not being able to handle being blind. Of you having to go back to work without me and not coming back one day. Of drifting apart because the one thing we have in common--the job--won't be there anymore! Of finding out that I've become a burden to **everyone** I love until there isn't any love left!"

Hutch felt his hand taken, his and Starsky's fingers were carefully intertwined. He gripped back strongly, as if Starsky might disappear if he didn't.

"You're worried about going through the worst, alone?"

"I don't know." Hutch shifted uncomfortably, knowing he wasn't being truthful. "We wouldn't mean it to happen. It just would. People drift apart all the time."

There was silence for a moment, and Hutch could feel Starsky's eyes upon him.

"Hutch, how long have we known each other? Longer than we've been partners, right?"

"Yes."

"All through the Academy, then all that time when we were in uniform, right?"

"Yes."

"And all through your marriage?"

"Yes."

"And all that time we both studied our asses off together to make detective, right?"

"Yes."

"And all that time as detective until that Metro job opened up and I bullied Dobby into hiring you."

"Uh huh." Hutch was feeling embarrassed now, seeing how ridiculous he had sounded.

"Are you thoroughly ashamed of yourself yet? And here I thought I raised you right!"

Hutch found a smile creeping onto his face at the playful chiding in Starsky's voice. Another part of that bottomless pit inside him was filled in. "Sorry, Mom. Guess I wasn't thinking."

"Got that right. Or thinking **too** much, in your case." Starsky squeezed his hand. "Now, wanna hear **my** plans?"

"Your plans?" Hutch did feel ashamed. Starsky had had more than enough time to do his own fretting about the future. "Guess I don't have a choice, do I?"

"Nope. None at all. You're a captive audience if ever I saw one." He paused, and when he spoke Hutch could hear his tone grow serious once again. "Okay, you want to talk about the **worst**? The **worst** case is that you could've ended up dead. That didn't happen, so everything else we can handle. Piece of cake."

Starsky took a deep breath and Hutch prepared himself to hear 'the plan'.

"We find out you're blind or close enough to it that it doesn't matter. You get disability. Fat lot of good that is, though, so you'd have to move from Venice Place. I decide I want a bigger place and we pool resources

to find a two-bedroom, one-story house. No stairs, so you won't trip down them while learning to get around again. Maybe near a bus line, so you can get around the city when I'm not home, so you won't have to live in cabs." Starsky paused and Hutch waited for him to continue.

"You spend your time in rehabilitation, learning to read with your fingers, and I put in to transfer to the first job that gets me off the streets. I can get pickier later. You spend your time learning to cope and finding what you want to do with the rest of your life. You're good with both kids and music, so maybe you can teach blind kids how to play music. I go to work where I can be helpful and stay safe, so you won't have to worry about me. You work your ass off learning to cope so I don't have to worry about you."

"On our evenings off, we stay home and listen to the radio or TV, or you can play the piano all evening. We double date for awhile until you learn how to take a lady out on your own, and we figure out some kind of warning system for when we have ladies stay the night. Maybe even someday bring a couple of wives into the mix. If we have to, we find a bigger house. If not, then we'll still have plenty of reasons to yell and argue with each other until we're both old and gray."

If Hutch had thought he might have any eyebrows left, they would have been in his hairline, if he still had a hairline.

Here I was, feeling sorry for myself and there he was, making plans. 'Us' type of plans. Heaven knows being blind or impaired scares the shit out of me, but at least I won't be alone. Ever.

"That took a lot of thought," Hutch said, squeezing Starsky's hand tightly. "Do I have a say in all that?"

"Sure. I'm flexible. As long as I get ninety percent of what I want, I'll be happy."

Hutch chuckled and found a real smile on his face. "Okay, I guess we'll have to play it by ear. But, Starsk, I'd hate for you to give up the streets just because I couldn't work them anymore. You're the best out there. They need you." He tried to keep his smile as he said it, but he knew Starsky could hear the worry in the words. "You'd go crazy in a desk job."

"If that's all I did, maybe. You know, I've been thinking about what we'd do when we decided to leave the streets. Thought maybe we could go to Juvie. You know they're always shorthanded over there, and it's not the kind of job you're pulling your gun out every few minutes. We know they need the help."

"Even then, you'd have to have a new partner."

They were both quiet for awhile. Someone down the hall had turned their television up and a chorus of "Silent Night" echoed down the corridor.

"Maybe." The tone was reluctant. "That's why I won't go back on the streets without you. I only know how to play the game one way, and I can't trust anyone else at my back but you. If I'm desk bound, or out of the live action, any ol' live body will do. But it won't make any difference to **us**, Hutch."

They both jumped as the door burst open without warning, and Hutch felt Starsky pull away even as he did the same. Someone had come for his dinner tray, and Hutch was glad when they didn't stop for anything but a few polite words before leaving. But his relief was short lived. A nurse, who's name Hutch didn't catch, was in the room a second later. She did a quick check of Hutch's vital signs, checked his IV, and clucked over the fact he'd barely touched his dinner and that his call button was out of reach. She replaced the button and Hutch could hear the phone being put back into place. He could only imagine the glare Starsky must have gotten for that.

Hutch tried to relax as she checked his bandages and insisted that he take his pain medication. Too tired to

argue, he took what was offered. All through the examination Hutch kept an ear on Starsky, who had gone back to the chilly corner of the room.

Before leaving, she made it plain that visiting hours would be over at eight sharp and that there was only a half-hour left before his visitor would have to leave.

As she worked on him, Hutch realized he was still scared, although not nearly as much as he had been before. A lifetime of blindness was still a daunting future to contemplate. Even if he could see **something**, would they be able to compensate for it?

Starsky came up beside him, pulling up a chair as soon as she left.

"That Jimmy Stewart movie, 'It's a Wonderful Life', will be on in awhile. Do you want to listen to it? I can get the TV all set before I have to go."

"Sure, Starsk. Go ahead."

The television was turned on and Starsky made sure Hutch could hear it clearly. They listened to a part of another program for a while, but Hutch really wasn't paying any attention to it. He could feel the seconds slip away and realized he didn't want Starsky to leave. Unfortunately, it would be hard to hide out from the nurses when he could get a roommate at any moment.

It was way too soon when a nurse stuck her head in the door with a friendly warning that visiting hours were almost over. Hutch could hear the noise up and down the hall of others saying their good-byes. Starsky sighed, got up and moved his chair back to another part of the room.

"Guess you'd better go, huh?"

"You think I could hide out in the bathroom all evening, or seduce the nurses into letting me stay?"

Hutch smiled. "Your reputation precedes you, Starsk. I doubt you'd have a chance. I'll be all right. You going to Huggy's party?"

Starsky was quiet for a moment, but Hutch could feel him straightening the blankets around him. "I don't think I want to."

"Go anyway," Hutch said quietly, putting a smile on his face. "Have fun. Just don't get so drunk on Huggy's eggnog that you can't remember to tell me everything tomorrow."

Starsky chuckled. "Okay. As long as I'm just going as a spy. Oh, what time do you see the specialist tomorrow?"

"He's supposed to come by at nine."

"Visiting hours start at ten. Guess they wouldn't let me in on the exam, so no use trying to sneak in early. And by the way..." Starsky moved toward the nightstand, and Hutch heard a drawer opening. "I got you a present from downstairs, while you were sleeping."

"My Christmas present?"

"No," Starsky sounded a bit shy. "It's not really for Christmas, although it kinda fits."

Starsky's hand found his and turned it palm-up on the bed. Something stiff and wiry was placed in it. Hutch held it carefully while tracing its outline with both hands, turning it over to try to figure out what it was. "It's

an angel!"

"Yeah. A crocheted angel. They had a whole bunch of Christmas decorations in the gift shop, and this little guy was the last one left in the box. Supposed to go on the top of the tree."

Examining it more, Hutch could feel the way the yarn had been woven together and then starched to keep it in a funnel-like shape. He could feel the complicated pattern of the crocheted wings that sprang from the back. But there was something wrong with the ball that was supposed to be the head of the angel. It wasn't quite as round as it should have been, under the stiff halo that had been stitched on to the top. Starsky must have been watching him examine the gift.

"He was the only one left in the box. The counter lady said he had fallen out of the display a couple of times and someone stepped on him. That's why his head is a little dented."

"You got me a dented angel? Sounds kind of fitting at the moment."

Starsky chuckled a little. "He sort of reminds me of that angel, Clarence, in 'It's a Wonderful Life'. He didn't look like what most people expect an angel to look like, all beautiful and perfect and everything. And he did seem kinda klutzy there, while he was trying to earn his wings. I just figured you'd like someone watching over you tonight who would understand what it's like to feel a little dented."

Hutch took a long, slow breath, wondering how this poor, wounded Christmas ornament could feel like one of the best presents he could have been given. Before he could say anything, a careful hand cupped his cheek and what could only be a fleeting kiss was planted on the crown of his head. They were gone almost before he realized what they were.

"Hutch, just remember that as long as we're together, we'll **make** it work."

"Starsk? I'm sorry I--"

"Don't be. That blast rattled us in more ways than one. Have a good night, buddy. Okay?"

"Ah..." Hutch gulped, trying to find his voice with his throat thick with emotion. "Okay. You, too."

Starsky left then and Hutch tried not to listen to him go, turning his attention to the opening music of the movie.

Guess it's just you and me tonight, Clarence. Maybe between the two of us we can conjure up a Christmas miracle or two, huh?

Starsky paced the waiting room. It was almost ten o'clock on Christmas morning and the room was fairly empty except for him, Huggy, Dobey and a few other people.

He felt too nervous to stand still, and this was one Christmas morning where a sour stomach hadn't spoken of too much spiked eggnog the night before. Breakfast was out of the question, and even coffee seemed too much for him to handle. He couldn't imagine being more jittery.

*He's just **got** to be okay! He just **has** to. I don't know if I can help him learn to be blind. To never see anything. No one. Ever. How do you help someone get through something like that?*

The warrant for the arrest of a dangerous drug dealer had been out for weeks. Huggy's late night tip of the dealer's location had seemed like the way to put an end to that story, so he, Hutch and a backup crew had gone to round up the suspect. Starsky had kicked in the door, Hutch had moved in with his gun ready and the world had exploded into a million pieces. After the first moment's shock he had had another, as he had gotten a first glimpse of his partner. Hutch looked like a horrid, black and burnt mess.

He had been hard pressed to find Hutch's pulse at first, he himself had been shaking so badly, his own ears ringing with the blast echo. When Hutch had come out of it the pain made him moan and flail, and it had been all Starsky could do to keep him calm so he wouldn't hurt himself further. But those moments, when it looked as if Hutch had been left a scorched corpse, had been the longest few seconds of his life.

*It could have been so much worse. So **much** worse.* He hung on to that thought, well aware that it was small comfort to the person who was hurt.

Starsky glanced at his companions, both men looking serious and staying quiet. Dobey sat in the corner of the couch, eyes on his folded hands, looking as if he hadn't gotten any more sleep last evening than Starsky had. The captain had barely had time for his own morning Christmas celebration with his family before coming in to wait.

Huggy looked even worse. Starsky knew he had blamed himself for sending them into a trap. He and Huggy had ended up spending a good deal of The Pits' holiday party in a dark, quiet corner, with Starsky trying to keep him from blaming himself. Neither of them had any real desire to celebrate so Starsky had begged off early, feeling uncomfortable with so many people asking about his partner. He really didn't know what to tell them.

There were only a few minutes left before visiting hours. As if on cue, he heard the elevator doors open farther down the hall behind him. The clamor of people arriving to visit and celebrate with their family and friends sounded almost festive.

*When I get him home, we'll have our own Christmas. I'll have his whole apartment decorated, and I'll **find** a way to share it with him. No matter what happens. And his gift...*

The sad thought that Hutch may never see, or be able to use, the gift he had gotten him was interrupted by the announcement of visiting hours. Starsky nodded at Dobey and Huggy, who had agreed to give them some privacy, and headed quickly through the doors and down the hallway.

He had just started down the long hall, when a terrified scream made him sprint toward it in reaction. He found himself skidding to a shocked halt when he came near enough to see what was happening.

The nurses' station was an open area in the middle of the hallway. It consisted of a long counter, with many desks and a mass of electrical equipment behind it. There were four nurses behind the counter who seemed frozen in shock at the scene unfolding before them.

Starsky inched forward carefully, until he could see around the corner. What held their attention was a tall, thin-looking man in a custodial uniform who was behind the counter. He held a fifth nurse by a fistful of her hair with one hand, while pressing a large, wicked-looking knife to her neck with the other.

Starsky stopped completely, hands up to block the hallway behind him, hearing the frightened gasps of the people coming up behind him.

"Get back! All of you **get back!**" The kidnapper screamed, breathing heavy and eyes wild.

Shit! Starsky thought, reading the telltale signs of panic in the man's voice and body language. *Whatever he's here for, his plan just backfired, big time. He wasn't prepared for this. And neither was I. Damn! Who's supposed to need a gun in a hospital? I'm going to have to take this slow or he'll panic.*

There were too many people in the hallways now. Patients who were mobile and staff who had heard the commotion were coming out of the rooms for a look. It was not only dangerous, but the kidnapper would only get more frightened with the pressure of a growing audience.

"Everybody **get back**, I said!"

"You heard him, everyone!" Starsky announced loudly to the gathering crowd on the other side of the hall, trying to sound more helpful than threatening. "You all get back in your rooms now. Everything is going to be fine. The nurses can help you if you need it."

It took a few moments for people to start moving uncertainly back to their rooms, and he could see that many of the staff were taking the hint to get everyone behind closed doors. It was then that Starsky heard Dobey behind him. Starsky knew that back-up would already be on the way, but they would probably be too late.

The four nurses behind the counter hadn't moved a muscle.

"Ladies," Starsky said softly, "I think the gentleman would like for you to leave." He looked at the man kindly, turning his hands palm-up. "Right?"

"Y-yeah! Get them all outta here! All of them!"

Four pairs of frightened eyes looked toward him and he nodded his head in agreement. One of the nurses, probably the one in charge Starsky thought, took a deep breath and slowly started to back away. She was soon followed by the others.

As they were leaving the area, Starsky tried to get a handle on the situation. There were only two points of escape, unless the man was going to jump out a window. He could try to move through Starsky, out to the elevators and down to the ground floor, or to the other end of the hallway where the emergency exits were. The stairs were enclosed by one-sided locked doors, which allowed you to leave but not reenter. The man was wild-eyed and jittery, the nurse in his grasp looking even worse.

She's not going to last very long, he thought. If things didn't happen soon, he was afraid she would panic and he would be too far away to stop her from getting cut. *Hang on! Don't do anything at all. Let me do it!*

"Okay, everyone is leaving now," Starsky said calmly. "Can you tell us why you're here?"

"I-I'm here to get Sarah." The kidnapper moved nervously at the question, eyes still darting back and forth. "I ain't leavin' here without her! She belongs to me and I'm taking her **home!**"

"Okay, okay." Starsky raised his hands slowly, with a slight smile, reminding the kidnapper that he was

unarmed and not a threat. He had no idea who Sarah was, but Starsky was glad that at least there were no children on this floor. Whoever she was, adult or not, she may not be in any shape to move. "Let's see what we can do for you. Why don't you let that nurse go and then we can find out where Sarah is."

"No, I can't. I'm not letting her go."

"Why not?"

"Cause they aren't going to let me just take her outta here now! The cops'll be coming! It's all those nurses' faults anyway. I wasn't supposed to be stopped, questioned..."

"Well, I bet this poor nurse isn't going to be able to help you much. I bet she doesn't even know where Sarah is. How about letting her go and..."

"I said **NO!**"

Starsky gave the man a moment to calm down, fighting to keep his eyes on the kidnapper's eyes, and not on the shaking knife at the woman's throat. He tried to look calm and collected.

"I can still help you. I can check their logbooks for you. Find out where she is." *And then I'll know where to keep you away from. No use you trading one hostage for another.*

"Back **off!** I'll hurt her!"

Starsky didn't back off, but he did keep quiet as the man moved toward the opening at the other end of the counter. The kidnapper adjusted the grip on the nurse's hair, taking a bigger fistful of it, and she began sobbing and crying quietly. It was clear that she was just on the edge of panic.

"What's your name?" Starsky tried to get the man's attention again as he neared the hallway.

"Fuck off!"

The kidnapper passed the end of the counter and looked down the empty hallway behind him. He turned to face Starsky and started walking backwards with his hostage. The two men were too far apart for Starsky to try to jump him.

"You stay back now! Get back to the end of the hallway with the others!"

He didn't want to do it. The farther he got away from the man, the less control he would have on the situation. If the man got to the stairway with the nurse, or the Sarah he was looking for, he wouldn't get out of that stairwell. Dobey would have the stairwell covered by now. But from the look of the kidnapper, Starsky wasn't sure he intended to leave the hospital alive. Starsky had no choice but to make the motions of retreat, if only very slowly.

A movement behind the kidnapper, farther down the hall, startled Starsky. He fought to show no reaction, shocked to recognize the figure. Near the end of the long hall--in a robe, slippers and dragging an IV tree--was Hutch.

Starsky tried not to look at him, needing to keep his eyes on the kidnapper who was now searching for room numbers as he worked his way backwards. Starsky's quick glance behind the man made his heart sink. Hutch's eyes were still covered in gauze, and he wobbled jerkily as if he were heavily medicated. His free hand waved through the air, as if searching for a wall or landmark as he dragged the IV with him.

Oh, damn, Hutch! Don't get in the middle of this one, too!

He didn't know if he'd given Hutch away, or if the kidnapper had heard the wheels of the IV tree, but the kidnapper whirled sideways to see who was behind him. It wasn't enough to give Starsky a chance to drop him, though. He held his breath to see what would happen, ready to move in a second.

"Get back to your room!" The kidnapper yelled, relaxing his grip on the knife. He must have recognized the patient's blindness.

"N-Nurse?" Hutch asked, his voice slurred and thick. "I...I can't...help..." Hutch tripped over the IV tree, falling hard to his hands and knees, bringing the IV down with him to clatter loudly on the floor. He pushed himself up to sit in the middle of the hallway, his left hand still searching the air as if looking for help.

"**Damn it!** Don't you move!" the kidnapper spat, looking and sounding frustrated. He watched for a second, eyes going back and forth from Starsky to Hutch. He must have become convinced that Hutch wasn't well enough to get back up again, so turned his attention back to Starsky and his room search.

The nurse was sobbing and shaking harder now, almost losing her footing at one point. Starsky watched helplessly as the kidnapper began to drag her more and more violently. Any minute now she was going to drop, with the knife still pressed against her throat. He felt himself tense again, trying to gauge the distance between him and the kidnapper, while struggling not to let it show.

The kidnapper stopped suddenly, staring at a door to his right. As he started to move toward the door, Starsky saw the knife move from the nurse's throat, her captor reaching out with his knife hand to pull the door open.

Time slowed and Starsky felt himself move to take advantage of the situation. Just as he started to run, he heard a strange, heavy 'thunk'. Almost immediately, the kidnapper's head jerked funnily, as if he were shrugging. A fraction of a second later, Starsky heard a loud crash, as if something had hit the floor. The man started to drop to his knees as the knife began its slow drop from his hand to clatter on the floor.

Starsky reached the kidnapper before he hit the floor, kicking the knife out of the way and twisting the man's hands behind him, while kneeling on the small of his back. The back of the kidnapper's head looked bloody and the man was out cold.

It was then that Starsky glanced at Hutch. Bloodshot, weepy-looking eyes, still as blue as they'd been just a few days before, looked up at him even as he recognized what had happened.

He threw the damn IV bottle! He can see!

The sound of yells and commotion behind him told him that Dobey was on his way with reinforcements, but Starsky's eyes were focused on his partner.

Hutch sat on the floor, leaning heavily on one hand and pushing the gauze back from his forehead with the other. His face looked lobster red, his hair shorter in front from the singeing it had taken, and his reddish and watery eyes would have made any horror-movie monster green with envy. Starsky felt a smile threaten to split his face and decided they were the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen.

Hutch grinned at him and began a laugh that Starsky found himself sharing, even in the midst of the chaos that was the hospital corridor.

What seemed to be thousands of multi-colored lights twinkled and glowed in the darkened apartment of Venice Place as soft strands of Beethoven wove their way around them, making it seem to Starsky as if the music and lights were working in unison. He sat quietly and enjoyed his handiwork, glancing surreptitiously once in a while at Hutch, who was seated next to him on the couch. Christmas had been over for a few days now, but in this room it didn't matter. Starsky had made sure of that by scrounging the stores for after-holiday bulbs and Christmas decorations. He'd made quite a haul and had spent hours during Hutch's last day at the hospital to get everything up and in place.

Hutch's eyes were still sore, but well on their way to recovery. His face and arms were down to a sunburned red, with the peeling just now beginning. There were still a few bruises here and there, along with cuts and scrape marks from the flying debris, but all should heal without scarring. His hair had fared better than Starsky had expected. Hutch was thoroughly disgusted by his 'new look', since he had lost several inches of hair all around, not to mention the mostly-missing eyebrows, but all in all it had been a blessing he had come out as well as he had.

Good thing he's blond and his eyebrows didn't show up much anyway, Starsky thought with amusement. He's not in style, but he doesn't look too bad. Well, not horrible anyway. And his eyes...

Starsky knew Hutch wasn't comfortable, and would have to wear sunglasses while using eye drops regularly for awhile. The doctors had confirmed that there shouldn't be any permanent damage, so even though red and bloodshot they were still the best pair of eyes Starsky'd ever seen.

Needless to say, both had been greatly relieved at the diagnosis, and all talk about an alternate future had seemed to have been forgotten. Had **seemed** to have been forgotten. Starsky could tell it was still on Hutch's mind as much as his own.

Maybe it's time we started making some real plans. 'Just-in-case' plans. If we're going to keep working this way, keep walking the tightrope, at least we'd know what to expect if one or both of us were to fall off. Time to think about getting that safety net out.

Starsky snuck another glance at Hutch, who was sitting close enough to him that they were practically leaning against each other. The blond's head was resting against the back of the couch, his eyes closed. He looked peaceful, but Starsky wondered if he'd made a mistake.

"Too much?" He asked quietly. "Givin' you a headache?"

"No. It's fine. In fact..." Hutch sighed, turning to look at Starsky in the multi-colored darkness. "It's wonderful! Much better than the decorations at the hospital. I can't believe you did all this." Hutch smiled. "Thanks."

Starsky shrugged shyly, happy that Hutch was enjoying the show. "I felt bad that you had to miss Christmas and figured it would kinda help get us in the mood to celebrate New Years. Which reminds me..."

Starsky got up and went out to the greenhouse to get the wrapped box he had tucked back there. He turned the room lights back on, after giving Hutch a warning, took the needle off the record and handed him his gift. He sat on the coffee table, ignoring Hutch's scolding glance as he did so.

"Merry Christmas, Hutch."

"Starsky, you didn't have to--"

"I know I didn't. But you can't have Christmas without presents now, can you?"

Starsky found himself holding his breath, as Hutch pulled the top of the box off and pushed aside the filmy paper lining. Hutch's eyes widened.

"So, whaddy'a think?" Starsky asked excitedly.

"I...Uh...Starsky, it's red and...uh..."

"Sure it is. S'posed to be."

"No, I mean...it's...white and **red**..."

Starsky laughed softly at the growing suspicion on Hutch's face. He'd always known Hutch had a good eye for color.

Hutch pulled the sweater completely out of the box, his eyes growing even wider as he unfolded it and took in the whole pattern. "It's your car!" he announced what sounded like surprise, and not a small bit of indignation

"It is?" Starsky broke out laughing at the annoyed glare Hutch had directed at him.

It had taken a couple of months to prepare this gift, which started with finding someone who could not only knit, but could design a pattern to his specifications. Finding the perfect shade of candy-apple red hadn't been real easy either. But Starsky thought the sweater had turned out brilliantly. The exact same shade as his car, the sweater had white collar and cuffs, divided by the thinnest row of black. But what really made the piece was the white stripe that started on the right shoulder, made its way down to mid-chest and turned gracefully to a taper on the left side. The stripe continued around the back, where it widened again, turned upward and matched perfectly with itself at the shoulder seam. All separated from the red, once again, by the thinnest hint of black.

"I can't believe this!" Hutch shook his head in disbelief, eyes still on the sweater. "You really think I'm going to go around looking like a life-sized key-chain for your car?"

"Well, not right away, of course," Starsky admitted with a grin. "You bein' pretty red yourself, well, you'd just end up looking like a cherry ice pop or somethin'. So, I guess..." Starsky reached over and took the sweater from Hutch's hands, "you wouldn't mind me borrowin' it for awhile. Right?" Starsky pulled it on, laughing. "Hey, would you look at that! A perfect fit!"

Hutch shook his head, then grunted with what sounded like exasperation. "Well, isn't that a lucky break?" He smiled a bit. "Sure, borrow it for as long as you want, partner. Just don't be surprised if I have to stand on the other side of the room when you wear it. Wouldn't want to damage my eyes any more than they have been."

Starsky went to the corner of the couch and bent down, pulling a second package from underneath. "Here's your real gift, partner."

Hutch took the box and looked at Starsky, as if he were suspicious that this box would have something even worse. Opening it, Hutch's face took on a more serious look. "Hey, it's sheet music."

"Yeah," Starsky replied, as Hutch started to finger through the various pages. "You remember that piano player at the Jazz Festival down on Kingston Street? The older guy that died last year?"

"Bumble Fingers Croy?" Hutch's face took on a wistful look. "Man, could he play! The world lost some real talent when he died. I wish I could have convinced him to record some of his songs."

'Bumble Fingers' Croy was one of Hutch's favorite club pianists, and Starsky had been pretty impressed himself. The man hadn't taken on the name 'Bumble Fingers' because he wasn't any good. On the contrary. The man could play faster than a bumble bee and could belt out a song like a swarm of them, never missing a note. But he had been getting on in age and rarely performed during the last three years of his life. More often than not, Hutch would make a trip to hear him, only to be disappointed when he didn't come in to play.

"I know you like his stuff, Hutch, so I went down to the club and asked if they knew where I could get some of the music he used to play. They sent me over to his daughter's place. She had these music sheets her father had collected and let me have some of them. I figured you might recognize a few."

Hutch's eyes never left the sheets. He handled them carefully because of their obvious age, his face growing serious, then softened as a small smile caught the corner of his mouth. "I can't believe you did this, Starsk," he said softly, the eyes looking at him seemed filled with happiness. "These are wonderful! I can't wait to play them. Thank you!"

The glowing smile Starsky got was worth all the work he had put into it, and more.

Hutch got up from the couch suddenly, still smiling, and carefully placed the box of sheet music on the coffee table. He waved at Starsky to sit down. "Now sit, it's your turn. Then maybe we can order some dinner in."

"Aw, Hutch," Starsky said. as he eagerly took a seat on the couch. "You didn't have to."

"After that gag gift, I sure shouldn't have! I mean, to even suggest I'd go around looking like that rotten tomato--"

"Hey! I like it! In fact, I'm gonna keep it!"

"Oh, **please** do! With all my blessings!"

Starsky watched as Hutch went to the bedroom and pulled out a brightly wrapped box from under the bed and brought it to him.

"Merry Christmas, Starsk."

Starsky was once again surprised at its weight, but didn't let that slow him down. He'd seen it under the bed, while looking for more outlets for the lights, and had looked it over carefully, then just as carefully put it back. He'd been dying to know what was in it.

Ripping the paper off, he thought the picture on the box looked like some sort of car part. It wasn't until he'd torn all the paper off that he could read 'rock tumbler' on the side.

"What's a...?"

"A rock tumbler?" Hutch took the box from him and began to open the top. "Oh, you're going to really like this, Starsk. You put in small pieces of rock, maybe some precious stones, then you put their special sand in with it. Plug it in, let it tumble for a few days, then repeat the process with another of their batches of sand. See?" Hutch had dug out the directions and was flipping through them. He pointed to a diagram. "They come out all polished, so you can make jewelry or other kinds of crafts out of them."

"Yeah?" Starsky took the instructions and glanced through them. He had known people could do things like

that, but didn't realize that it was something you could do at home. "This really looks interesting! I betcha I could make some money with something like this. Hey, thanks!"

As Starsky read through the booklet, which was looking more and more like something he could really enjoy getting into, Hutch put in a call for Chinese food. He rejoined Starsky on the couch, picking up the sheet music to leaf through the sheets again.

Several minutes had passed quietly, with Starsky engrossed in the instruction manual-- visions of gemstones dancing in his imagination--before he realized that Hutch was too quiet.

Turning to glance at him, he saw Hutch had placed the sheet music on his lap and was fingering their edges, looking too serious.

"What's goin' on under that blond mop of yours, huh?"

Hutch shrugged, eyes on the pages in his lap. "I was just thinking about what today might have been like if I hadn't come out as well as I did. And what a selfish bastard I was in the hospital."

Starsky put his gift on the coffee table and leaned back to look at Hutch. "Wanna run that by me again? Or are you talking about some other Hutch I don't know about?"

"Oh, come on, Starsky. You know what happened! They told me there was a good chance I'd be okay, but I couldn't believe them. I acted like the end of the world had come and was feeling sorry for myself. And taking it out on everyone...on you..."

Starsky shrugged, smiling as he reached over and clasped Hutch's shoulder. He waited until Hutch's eyes met his. "I don't blame you, partner. I was scared, too. And actually, I think we've put off talking about things like this for too long."

"What do you mean?"

"You remember that plan I had?"

"Yes." Hutch nodded. "You were trying to calm me down because I was freaking out--"

"And I meant it. It was for real, Hutch."

Hutch was quiet for a moment, then admitted softly, "I thought it was. Had hoped it was."

"It was." Starsky smiled a bit and leaned back on the couch, not looking at his partner. "I've been thinking this over, a lot, and think we've been putting off a lot of discussions that we shouldn't. One of those things we need to work out is to have some sort of plan for our future. You know, what we want to do with our careers, how far we want to go, how long we want to stay on the streets. What we'll do if we get separated while working our way up. That sorta stuff."

"I guess I've just always assumed..."

"Yeah, me, too," Starsky admitted. "We've always said we were willing to get burned for a good cause, but we both know it's more likely that we probably won't go out together. There's probably a better chance that it'll go down more like it did with, Andres, Phillips, Swaggert or O'Neil. That's what we gotta plan for."

Glancing at Hutch, Starsky could see him mulling over what he had said. Detective Andres had lost his partner a couple of years ago. The two had been close, and no amount of sympathy or help had been able to pull the man out of his depression. He had quit the force several months ago and had packed up and dropped

out of sight, leaving all his worried friends behind. Phillips had been shot in the head only months ago, surviving the bullet but unable to speak or walk, and could be confined to an institution for the rest of his life. Swaggert had lost an arm, and O'Neil had lost a leg--to bullets that had shattered bones too badly to repair. One had taken disability and retired, the other was working to stay a cop--even as a desk cop--in order to stay on the force. And in all those cases, good, hard-working cops had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was something that couldn't be predicted.

"I guess to keep pretending that it's all or nothing is pretty immature, isn't it?" Hutch sighed. "Nothing like staying young forever, huh?"

Starsky chuckled tiredly. "I wish we could! But we can't put off talking about it anymore, you know? If you hadn't been worried about 'us' so much, you might not have been so scared," Starsky's voice lowered. "And neither would I. I was scared, too, Hutch. Of the same things you were. Of not being able to help you adjust. Of us drifting apart when we didn't have the job in common anymore. Of discovering that the Academy was the only thing that made us friends."

Starsky could see by the look on Hutch's face that he'd hit home.

Hutch was quiet for a moment, then looked back at him seriously. "So we make plans? Get things settled? So if it happens for real..."

"We won't have to be scared. Give us something to hang on to while we learn to adjust."

"So...where do we start?"

Starsky thought about it for a moment. "At the beginning. With us. With 'me and thee'."

"Always there. No matter what."

Starsky grinned at Hutch and waited for it to be returned before he continued. "You got it! Look, Hutch...you're not my friend because we're cops, or 'cause we met at the Academy and found we could trust each other. We're friends because...well..."

"Because we're friends. Period."

"That's right," Starsky replied enthusiastically. "We remember that, then we gotta know that no matter what happens, no matter what life throws us, the other is always going to be there."

"Like your plan."

"Sure!" Starsky agreed. "If you'd been blind it still would've been 'me and thee'. Nothin' can change that but us, and we're never gonna let it. Tomorrow, if I take a hit, then I know for certain that you'll still be there, learnin' to make the adjustments, and helping to make the decisions, with me."

"Like I should have known you would've been there," Hutch said sadly, regret in his eyes.

"It was a scary time," Starsky admonished softly. "And we've always said how tight we are at work, how nothing will break us apart. I guess we just never thought before to say it about the rest of 'us'--our friendship. Now that we've said it, it won't have to be uncertain anymore. We know for **sure** that it's not the job that keeps us together." He reached over to poke Hutch playfully in the ribs. "It's **us** that keeps the job together."

Hutch swatted his hand away and laughed slightly. "Okay, point taken. If we'd have been garbage collectors we still would've been friends. But what's next? Or do I want to know?"

Starsky shrugged slightly and settled back on the couch, not really comfortable with where the discussion had to go next. "We gotta tend to the legal stuff, too. I think we need to get our wills up-to-date, talk about how we would want the other one to take care of things."

"What about a medical power of attorney?" Hutch added softly. "You know, that I'd trust you to...make whatever decisions I couldn't make for myself."

"Good idea."

They were both silent for a moment and both started when a loud knock rattled the apartment door.

"Good! Food!" Starsky headed for the door, glad to get away from such a heavy discussion. He knew they needed to talk more, make more plans, but it felt too much like asking for bad luck to find them. Tomorrow would be the time to talk about it some more.

After paying for the food and carrying it to the table, Starsky noticed that Hutch was digging around in his hospital bag.

"Did we forget something?"

"No, I found it." Hutch stood up and walked to the Christmas tree, reaching up to remove the star.

Starsky walked over, curious. Hutch held out the object he'd taken from his bag and held it out to him. He recognized the crocheted angel he had given Hutch on Christmas Eve.

"Hey, what happened to him?" Starsky wondered out loud. He was even more bent than before, with one wing slightly crunched and his head and torso even more out of shape than before.

"I sort of...stepped on him...when I heard the commotion out in the hallway. I accidentally knocked him off the table while I was getting ready to make my acting debut."

"Oh, wounded in action, was he?"

"Yeah," Hutch replied with a chuckle, stretching to place the angel at the top of his tree. "I figured Clarence can retire with honor now, having done his job."

"Clarence, huh?" Starsky looked at the bent and banged-up angel at the top and stepped back to get a better look. "Yeah, he looked after you pretty good there. I'd say he deserves the recognition."

Stepping back to join him, Hutch put an arm around his shoulders, pulling Starsky close.

"Thanks, partner."

Starsky returned Hutch's joyful smile, returning the embrace with an arm around the taller man's waist. "Thanks yourself, best friend."

Before he knew it, Starsky was pulled into a bear hug. It felt wonderful, and Starsky let himself enjoy it while it lasted.

"Can we eat now?" he asked, as the hug ended a few moments later.

Laughing, Hutch shoved him toward the table. "Sure, why not, then afterwards we can catch some more of your light show."

Starsky went straight to the refrigerator, got out a wine bottle he had placed there the day before, and poured two glasses of wine, holding one out to a curious Hutch. Holding his glass up toward the tree, he cleared his throat for a toast.

"To those who've come before us and paid their dues. To those who'll come after us and give us their all. To those who keep an eye on our welfare and our tails out of a sling for as long as possible, we thank you."

"Here, here!" Hutch replied earnestly.

And as they clicked their glasses together, Starsky could only smile at the bell-like tone they produced. He couldn't help but remember the part of the movie "It's a Wonderful Life", where Clarence got his wings.

Here's to you, Clarence. May you keep an eye on us both!