

Summary: A little quiet Christmas revelation.

Pure fluff and warmth and love; a feel-good fic for those cold days in winter.

(Post-SR, First Time, Fluff)

Notes: For Barancoire, in the [2015 Starsky & Hutch Secret Santa](#).

With many thanks to incendio-nox, who poked holes in my logic and fun at my typos, and who is the sole reason no yogurt sauce was spilled in the making of this fluff.

Categories: Slash

Genre: Romance

Warnings: No Warnings Needed

Christmas Feature

by **Calliatra**

“So, what do you reckon this is?” Starsky asked, plopping into the seat across from Hutch and gesturing at the lumpy beige glop on his plate.

“Mashed potatoes?” Hutch suggested, eyeing it warily. He had opted for a salad, like he did every time the Academy cafeteria’s main dish was less than identifiable. And most other days, too, actually. Starsky called him a coward. He replied that if being a coward was what it took to escape food poisoning, he was happy to be one. He’d regretted it the first time, when the grin had slipped off Starsky’s face like the pudding off his spoon, but it was another one of those things they’d quietly decided to leave behind.

“Hm,” Starsky chewed thoughtfully on a spoonful. “Could be. Could be rice, though, too.”

Hutch suppressed a shudder. “I can’t believe you’re actually eating that.”

“It’s not that bad.” Starsky shrugged. “Kinda tastes like cheese. And anyway, I gotta keep my strength up.”

“You got a hot date I don’t know about?” Hutch raised his eyebrows.

“Nah, I mean for the Field Strategy Practical this afternoon. These kids are really fast! Did we used to be that fast?”

“Probably. We used to outrun a lot of people when we were cadets here. Remember the end of term hurdle race?”

“Course.” Starsky shook his head disbelievingly. “Jeez. What happened to us?”

You got shot, Hutch thought. But it was an old thought, and he banished it quickly. “We got old,” he sighed. “We could go with the hostage situation instead of the robbery, if you’re not feeling—”

“I’m fine.” Starsky frowned. “And I’m not old. I’m in the prime of my life!”

“If you say so. But I’m afraid these kids’ prime is still a little primer than yours, buddy.”

“Hey, I could still take any of ‘em!” Starsky protested.

Hutch snorted. “Not if you keep eating that stuff.”

Starsky leaned forward, speared a wilted salad leaf from Hutch’s plate, and stuffed it in his mouth. “Better?”

He looked so much like a puppy then that Hutch couldn’t help the chuckle that spread through him. “I doubt it. I think that might actually be plastic.”

Starsky shrugged. “Well, that are we gonna do?”

“Start bringing our own lunch?” Hutch suggested.

“Betcha did that at school, didn’t you, Blondie?”

Hutch crossed his arms. “So what if I did?”

“Nothing. Just explained a lot about you.” Starsky grinned

Hutch decided that line of enquiry was best not pursued. “How was Target Practice?” he asked instead.

“Can’t complain. Got the feeling a lot of the kids were thinking more about hitting the mall for their Christmas shopping than about hitting the targets, though. How about yours?”

“About the same. They were all present *physically*, but I could practically see the sugar plums dancing in their heads. Too bad for them that sugar plums won’t be on the final exam.”

“Ah, cut ‘em some slack, Hutch. It’s the last week before break. And it’s *Christmas*.”

“So, *peace in class and goodwill to all cadets*?”

“Exactly! Come on, that’s gotta feel better than trying to be Uncle Scrooge all the time.”

“Starsky was smirking at this, and Hutch wisely decided to give that particular presupposition trap a wide berth.

“Everything’s going to feel better than teaching Courtroom Procedure,” he sighed. “Good thing Martinson is going to be back after break.”

“Looking forward to getting back to Witness Questioning and Interrogation?”

“Yeah, actually. I like it. It feels good to be able to pass on some of what we learned to the next generation. Maybe help them avoid some of our mistakes. And the new theories they’ve developed since we were here really open up a whole new perspective—”

Starsky’s face was splitting into such a broad smile that it threw Hutch off.

“What?”

“Nothing. ’S just nice, seeing you happy.”

Hutch frowned. “I’ve been happy.”

“Yeah, but, y’know, about something like this. Something small.”

“Enjoying my job is small?”

“You know what I mean.”

Hutch looked down. He supposed it *had* been a while.

Starsky nudged his knee under the table. “Hey.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just wanted your attention back.” Starsky grinned.

Hutch rolled his eyes and stole a lump of Starsky’s glop with his fork. It *did* taste slightly like cheese, and the lumps felt a little too regular to be potato. “I think it’s supposed to be risotto,” he said.

“Thought you weren’t going to risk it?”

Hutch grinned. “I’m going to need my strength, too, if we two old-timers are going to outrun twenty cadets this afternoon.”

Starsky smiled and pushed his plate to the middle of the table.

* * *

“Maybe you were right about getting old,” Starsky sighed, jiggling the finicky shower knob. He groaned as hot water began to pound on his back.

Hutch clamped down on the urge to ask him if he was okay, and focused on drying his hair. The instructor shower room was a little small, not really meant for two people, and even from the

bench by the opposite wall, he had to careful not to get his towel caught in the spray from the shower. The shower curtain had been missing for several weeks now, and Hutch had decided to avoid speculating on its fate.

“Not sure that’s age, buddy,” he said lightly. “You got tackled pretty hard.”

Starsky grunted. “Been tackled before. Never used to ache like this.”

“Well,” Hutch said, “Look at it this way, then: With great age comes great wisdom.”

“Yeah? What’s this new great wisdom of ours then?”

“Easy. ‘Don’t get tackled.’”

“You’re a riot, you know that?” Starsky grumbled.

Hutch looked up. A bad mood could mean pain Starsky wasn’t admitting to. And pain could mean... any number of things. He ran a practiced gaze over Starsky’s back. No cuts or abrasions, not even the beginnings of a bruise on the shoulder he’d fallen on. No noticeable difference in the way Starsky was holding himself. That didn’t mean there weren’t any internal injuries, but the fall hadn’t been *that* hard, and Starsky was well-healed. Healthy. There was blood pumping steadily through every limb, reddening his shoulders where the hot water hit them; muscles moving under wet skin, shifting mounds and valleys, diverting rivulets of water onto different paths; and regular deep breaths expanding the ribcage in an even, unbroken rhythm. Starsky was the picture of health and vigor, and Hutch thought that if he had a hundred years, he could never look his fill.

Too aware, as always, Starsky spread his arms to his sides as much as he could in the tight stall and performed a perfect 360 degree turn on the stop, like a model showing off the goods.

“Sorry,” Hutch said, ducking his head.

“Nah, don’t be.” Starsky grinned easily. “S nice to know I’m still worth looking at.”

It hit Hutch that he really must not know what he looked like. Standing there in the shower, water running over subtly defined muscles, highlighting their tone, then catching in his chest hair and following it down to drip alluringly between his thighs, he looked like he could have stepped out of a magazine. Well, a certain type of magazine.

The familiar scars across his chest and back were still stark, but they had a well-healed look about them, of skin knitted together and grown back stronger to spite all opposition, of health regained and danger overcome. They wrapped around his torso, guided the eye and shaped his form, and integral and inextricable part of him. They were impossible to ignore, but they didn’t detract from his looks; they just changed them. He didn’t carry the carefree, unblemished radiance of youth anymore -- but he hadn’t for a while, even before. Instead, there now was texture, experience, carved into his very skin, but leaving him standing and unbroken. He was a vision of compact, tested, beautiful strength, and Hutch thought he had never seen a sight more worth looking at.

“You are,” he said.

Starsky laughed. “You’re not too bad yourself, Blondie.”

Hutch felt the odd, conflicting urge to cover up, and also to drop his towel. “And I suppose you’re a good judge of that?”

“I’m the best judge of it.”

“Yeah? How’s that?”

“I see you all the time.”

“So?”

“So I know best what you look like.”

It was one of those situations where it felt best just to run with Starsky’s loops of logic.

“And you like what you see, do you?”

“Now you’re fishing for compliments,” Starsky grinned.

“And we can’t have that, can we? I’d be moving in on your territory.”

“Hey, I gotta take what I can get these days.” Starsky’s tone was light.

Hutch’s heart wasn’t. “Starsk—”

“No.”

“No, don’t compliment you?”

“No, don’t try to make me feel better. I don’t need that.”

“What *do* you need?”

Starsky gave him a long look.

Hutch sighed. “Me to go back to normal?” He guessed.

“Like you were ever normal,” Starsky snorted, but he squeezed the back of Hutch’s neck wetly as he climbed out of the shower. Then he grabbed his towel and promptly buried not just his soggy curls, but his entire head in it.

He rubbed it vigorously and easily, and not in any way like he was trying to conceal an injury. Hutch sighed again. He’d have to get used to this. Try to get used to this. Try to stop worrying.

“The hair on my neck can feel you staring, Blintz,” came Starsky’s muffled voice from under two layers of fluffy cotton.

Hutch let his gaze trail across the strong torso, and over, and down to the firm calf muscles currently flexing to keep this partner from overbalancing and landing on his betoweled head.

“You do look great, you know.”

Starsky pulled the towel off and grinned. “Glad you think so.”

* * *

“So,” Starsky started, as they crawled through the by now familiar late afternoon traffic jam, “what do you want to do for Christmas?”

“Nothing,” Hutch said.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“You can’t just do *nothing*, Blintz. Now unless you plan on staying in bed all day. And all that conscience you got would never let you.”

“Fine, then: Eat, sleep, tend to my plants. Read a book. Relax. Take the phone off the hook and ignore the rest of the world.”

“You don’t want to celebrate at all?”

“Starsky, there’s nothing to celebrate! It’s just commercial propaganda full of fake sentimentality to make people feel good about themselves and get them to spend more money than they can afford. Jesus wasn’t even born in December. Everything about Christmas is one big bunch of baloney.”

“Hey!” Starsky frowned. “I happen to like Christmas, you know.”

“Well, celebrate it then, no one’s stopping you.”

Starsky scowled at him, and Hutch felt a familiar surge of regret at his casual cruelty. Of course they’d be spending Christmas together, just like the rest of their break.

He closed his eyes briefly and trusted that Starsky would read the apology in his voice. “Okay, what do *you* want to do?”

“*Everything*. But I’ll settle for *something*.” Starsky smiled.

It made Hutch feel bad all over again, and like making New Year’s resolutions early. It wasn’t easy to articulate.

“But that something has to include presents, right?” he asked instead, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, yeah, ‘course.” Starsky said, managing to smirk only a little bit.

“Of course,” Hutch repeated. “And, let me guess, you’ve already written a detailed wish list for your own personal ‘Santa’?”

“Hey, I’m doing you a favor. I know how you hate having to pick presents for people. Well, this way you don’t gotta pick anything.”

“No, just pay for it,” Hutch said drily.

“Yup.” Starsky grinned.

Hutch sighed, and said nothing. There would have to be several shopping trips, at least one for presents, and another one for decorations. They’d need food, too, festive and in huge enough quantities to keep Starsky happy, and probably egg nog and mulled wine at the very least. Since there was no way he’d trust himself to Starsky’s version of culinary skills, he’d have to be the one to cook the feast. That meant they’d be at his place, which meant he’d have to take care of cleanup, too. And he’d have to find some holiday music... he’d be lucky if he managed to avoid going caroling or wearing a Santa suit.

“Hey,” Starsky said softly. “Christmas really bother you that much?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “Not Christmas itself, anyway. I was just hoping to avoid all the stress.”

“What stress?” Starsky was either genuinely bewildered, or doing entirely too good an impression of it.

“*Christmas* stress! Between buying presents and decorating and baking and cooking and trying to make everything perfect, just like in ads and songs and the way you think you remember it from childhood and feeling like if anything goes wrong it will ruin the most important day of the year, it doesn’t leave you any room to even *breathe!*”

Starsky was silent for a short moment. “Well, how about about if we don’t do any of that?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I said. None of that. No stress. No expectations. Nothing’s gotta be perfect, or like in ads, or anything. And I don’t got any childhood Christmas memories anyway. We can burn the goose, or just get Chinese take-out or something right away. I just wanna do something small, together. And— Look, what do you want to do? I mean, what would you do on a perfect, stress-free Christmas Day?”

“Curl up on the couch with a good book.”

“Okay. so we’ll get you a good book and curl up on the couch. But maybe we can do it next to a tiny little, totally stress-free Christmas tree?”

Hutch took in his partner’s expression.

“You really like Christmas, huh?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Hutch sighed deeply. “Promise me it’ll be a really tiny tree.”

“Well definitely not a big one. No taller than me, ‘cause I gotta be able to reach the top. Or at least not taller than me standing on a chair...”

“Starsky.”

“Yeah, we’ll get a little one. A cute little one. And we’ll just sort of put the presents around it instead of under it.”

Hutch closed his eyes as Starsky continued planning their holidays and let his voice wash over him. It was almost relaxing, in a way.

Until Starsky started whistling *Jingle Bells*.

“No.”

Starsky paused innocently. “No what?”

“No whistling Jingle Bells. Or any Christmas songs.”

Starsky opened his mouth.

“No singing or humming them either. Not until it’s actually Christmas. Please.”

Starsky gave an exaggerated sigh, but stayed quiet. They inched forward in silence for a few minutes until the stop-and-go traffic came to a more permanent looking stop, and Starsky flicked the radio on.

Winter Wonderland blared from the loudspeakers, and Hutch gave in to the inevitable. With a quiet groan, he leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes.

A quiet Christmas wouldn’t be too bad, he supposed. It might even be a little relaxing, in its own way. They’d take two, maybe three days for that, make that their break, and then...

Huh.

He couldn’t think of what would come next.

Their classes were planned all the way through to the next semester, there was no more grading to be done until February, and they had filled out and filed enough paper work that no one should be coming complaining anytime soon. And taxes weren't due until April. There was nothing that needed their attention. Nothing they needed to deal with, to catch up on, or even to a head start on. They were... done?

It almost seemed impossible. Since Gunther, their lives had been chaos, one crisis after another, from medical to existential, like juggling burning clubs while doused in gasoline. There was always the immediate, the urgent, the largest inferno to be doused while other things caught fire in the distance. Healing, rehabilitation, coping with the fallout, reorienting and retraining and reestablishing themselves as they rebuilt their lives from the wreckage.

It didn't seem possible that that process could ever end, that there would be a time when he could stop swinging wildly at what was right ahead of him and take a step back. But here it was. Nothing in front of him, of them. Nothing pressing, nothing demanding. For their two week break, nothing except whatever they chose.

Somewhere deep inside him, something settled. And like a gear clicking into place in a clockwork, he could feel the effects spreading through him. His breathing deepened, his skin felt lighter, and a tension he hadn't even been aware of leaked from his shoulders. Suddenly the music sounded good, cheery and joyful, and he felt the urge to laugh.

Instead, he opened his eyes.

Next to him, Starsky was smiling unconsciously, and lightly tapping the steering wheel in time with the music. He looked happy.

Warmth spread through the car from the radiator, and Hutch let it seep into his skin and loosen his muscles. It felt good. It felt right.

Starsky, as in tune with him as ever, turned around, and his smile broadened into one that Hutch thought must match the one on his own face. And time paused for just a moment, just to let them take a breath and bask in the gentle, wonderful warmth.

Then a car behind them honked loudly, and Hutch realized they'd missed their turn to roll three feet forward.

Still smiling, he tapped Starsky lightly on the back of the head. "Eyes on the road, mush brain."

"Right back atcha," Starsky laughed.

* * *

"Go ahead and find the channel," Hutch said, strolling into his kitchen a few days later. "I'll get our snacks."

He grinned at the theatrical groan he got in reply as Starsky collapsed on the couch. It was a compromise -- they'd watch the creature feature marathon Starsky had been raving about all

week, but in return Hutch had insisted he be in charge of the snacks. It was a good opportunity to get some healthy food into both of them -- maybe counteract a little of the damage the cafeteria food was undoubtedly doing to their bodies -- and if he had to sit through a night of black and white horror flicks to do it, well, there were worse things.

He hummed as he pulled the various bowls of yogurt dips, cucumber slices, carrot sticks, and grapes out of the refrigerator, and grabbed two beers to go along with them. Their balance was more than a little precarious in his arms, and he only just managed to get everything down on the couch table right-side up. He was a little surprised at not having had to knock Starsky's feet out of the way first, but he found the explanation as soon as he turned around.

His partner was sprawled across the couch like a vision of pure, self-indulgent decadence, head on one side and feet on the arm rest of the other, eyes closed and seemingly blissfully oblivious to the world. Hutch prodded him in the side. "Shove over, lazy bones."

Starsky didn't deign to move, but he lifted his head and shoulders up enough for Hutch to sit down. Then he promptly dropped them back into Hutch's lap.

"Couldn't find a pillow?" Hutch asked drily, as Starsky shifted around to better see the television.

"You're more comfy," Starsky mumbled, finally settling on his right side, with his head firmly pillowed on Hutch's thigh.

"If you're trying to say I have more *padding*...!" Hutch threatened.

"What'cha gonna do, make us both eat rabbit food?" Starsky snorted, with a pointed look at the snack bowls.

Hutch scowled at him.

"Don't worry, Blintz," Starsky grinned, bringing up a hand to affectionately pat Hutch's stomach, "you have just the right amount of padding."

Hutch got revenge by placing Starsky's beer just out of his reach, and then resting the bowls of snacks on top of him so he couldn't move without ending up covered in yogurt. But Starsky was soon so caught up in the first film that he didn't seem to notice.

With the lights off -- for atmosphere, Starsky had insisted -- and the room dark enough to be just as black and white as the movie, Hutch felt the pull of the flickering images and slightly tinny sound as well. The utter absurdity of the plot, however, threw him back off again quickly enough.

A giant ant had appeared out of nowhere in a drive-in theatre and was chasing high school kids. And occasionally apparently eating some. It was completely, unsalvageably ridiculous; even postulating the existence of something like 'alien growth rays' -- exoskeletons simply couldn't be scaled up like that.

Starsky didn't seem to care. He appeared totally engrossed in the fate of the main couple, whose necking session had been cut tragically short, and who now had to escape the monstrous giant insect invasion and hopefully find and steal an alien shrink ray. His shoulders tensed and relaxed perfectly in time with the overwrought orchestral music, and his mouth kept opening in inverse proportion to the couple's relative distance from improbably-sized mandibles.

Hutch plucked a grape from the bowl with casual innocence and waited until Starsky was sufficiently distracted by slimy, sharp-toothed appendages closing in on the girlfriend, then plopped it into his open mouth.

Starsky snapped his teeth shut with treacherous speed, but Hutch had expected that and kept his fingers well clear of the danger.

"Anyone ever tell you you're a jerk?" Starsky growled once he had successfully avoided choking. "Now I missed if the ant swallowed her!"

"Ants don't swallow solid food," Hutch informed him.

"This one might."

"This one shouldn't even be able to walk around. It's too big, its legs couldn't support it."

"It's called suspense of disbelief."

"Suspension," Hutch corrected.

"Yeah, that. If you know all about it, why don't you try using it? It ain't fair, you judging these movies on things they were never meant to be judged on. You might as well be complaining that it's not realistic that they're in black and white, 'cause the real world ain't."

There was more logic to that than Hutch cared to acknowledge. "There's a difference between style and content," he argued. "And when your content includes aliens and giant, man-eating insects—"

"That's your problem," Starsky insisted. "You got this idea in your head of what a movie should be, and if one doesn't look like that you just assume it's no good. You don't even give it a chance. Yeah, this isn't one of your European artsy films, but it's not trying to be. And if you tried just accepting that, you might see it's got a good, fun story, and it might even turn out you like it."

Hutch frowned, confused. "I've never liked your movies. You know that. What's the big deal now?"

"I dunno." Starsky shrugged tiredly. "Guess I thought you might change your mind. What with all that old-age wisdom you're supposed to be getting."

Hutch felt a stab of guilt, and didn't really know why. Not sure what to say, he slid a hand into Starsky's hair and mussed it gently in apology.

Starsky hummed appreciatively, so he assumed he was forgiven.

The couple on the screen seemed to have been eaten -- or possibly vaporized -- in the mean time. Or maybe they'd just been replaced as protagonists with no explanation given. In any case, the military was now in charge, apparently in an alliance with the aliens.

Hutch thought that if anything, he felt bad for the ants, who had done nothing but go about their day when alien growth rays had so suddenly and spectacularly ruined their lives. Still, at least he was feeling something, he supposed. Maybe that was his wisdom setting in. Or maybe anything Starsky really cared about, he was doomed to care about as well. The prospect didn't sound as ominous as it should have, and Hutch wondered if that was old age.

Using alien vaporizing rays, the military made short work of the ants, and the plot, and before long the credits were giving way to the next movie. This one looked like it was going to take place in nebulously-medieval times, and, at least in terms of cinematography, it seemed to have slightly more to offer, if the neatly framed chiaroscuro opening scenes were any indication. Hutch resolved to give this flick its fair chance. He also moved the yogurt sauce to the table.

The story was a better one, mostly in that there was an actual story, and not just loosely connected scenes of violence, but it was a slow-moving one. A girl lived in a cottage with her father, and from what he could tell, they went about days silently doing their chores and ignoring each other. It was all very well artistically, but so far the most attention-grabbing thing about it was the cleavage in the girl's bright white dress.

Starsky seemed intrigued, though, and not just by the visuals. On some level, Hutch thought he envied his partner's ability to throw himself headfirst into a story and just let go of reality.

Just what Starsky had been so fascinated by became clearer when one of the shadows Hutch hadn't been paying attention to started moving around the cottage more independently, and before he knew it, Hutch was actually following the plot.

As the shadow monster reached out of the darkness for the unwitting girl, Hutch reached for the grapes.

A sudden strong grip on his arm nearly made him yelp.

Without turning his head away from the television, Starsky had reached back and locked his fingers around Hutch's forearm firmly enough to immobilize him. Hutch sighed internally. After his trick earlier, he should have expected Starsky to treat any movement towards the snacks as a hostile maneuver now. He wiggled his fingers experimentally, and promptly found his arm dragged forward and tucked tightly under Starsky's, so that his partner could lie comfortably without relinquishing his hold.

When, a while later, Starsky showed no signs of letting up, Hutch figured he needed to negotiate his own way out of this. His arm was starting to fall asleep. While Starsky was distracted by the father's desperate search for his daughter, he gave his wrist a sudden twist, and pulled back quickly. But Starsky still had him tightly under his arm, which slowed Hutch down, and Starsky

clamped down on Hutch's hand just as he was about to slip away. He pulled it back down again, and, his hand still firmly on top of Hutch's, threaded their fingers together for extra security.

Not the most successful escape attempt, Hutch admitted, but at least it wasn't painful anymore. An impasse of sorts, but a comfortable one. Comfortable enough even to relax.

It was odd, in a way, Hutch thought. This didn't used to be how they would spend a Friday night. But for better or for worse, their lives had changed, had been changed, and he found he didn't miss the way things used to be. On the contrary, almost. For the first time in a long time -- years, maybe -- he felt like the back of his mind was clear. There was no worry, no fear, no looming sense of doom gnawing at him. They were okay. Better than okay. They were fine, genuinely, truly fine, and doing well, and Starsky was alive and warm and happy in his lap. Life was good, and for, yes, the first time in a *very* long time, he felt free to just sit back, close his eyes, and enjoy it.

When Starsky squeezed his hand, it was expected and awaited, capstone and confirmation to his vague and wandering thoughts.

"You're missing quality entertainment here, Blondie."

And, of course, a tether to the here and now. It brought him back, as always, and Hutch snorted lightly. "Who needs horror flicks when I've got you?" But he squeezed Starsky's fingers as he said it, and turned his attention back to the TV, where -- either in a surprise twist, or as the final step of a long development that he had completely missed -- the girl was declaring her undying love to the shadow monster.

It was nice, he thought. Comfortably, sitting here together in the mostly-dark. Kind of like a fireplace, actually, with the flickering light of the television washing over them. The screen was cold, of course, but Starsky was warm and soft and breathing regularly, and Hutch basked in it and let his eyes drift shut.

* * *

Three days later, Hutch stood in the middle of his apartment with a large box of assorted Christmas decorations in his hand. Starsky had already taken it upon himself to decorate, naturally -- there were intricately woven pine branches on every flat surface, baubles hanging from the oddest places, and, of course, a petite Christmas tree in the corner. But the church kindergarten up the road had been holding a charity sale of last-minute decorations, and Hutch had thought of Starsky, and the smile that would split his face when he saw that Hutch had added to his Christmas efforts. Twenty dollars hadn't seemed like a lot to pay for that.

He spent the next hour moving about, distributing the random assortment of things he found in the box around his apartment. The colorful paper stars -- handmade, and in some cases slightly glue-sticky -- and glitter-covered pinecones settled in with the pine branches; the popcorn garlands -- to be taken down fairly quickly, so as not to attract vermin -- arced nicely from the wooden beams, and the decorated -- and hopefully unscented -- candles were arranged far away from anything flammable. The delicate paper angels -- no doubt shaped more by careful

mothers' hands than by their children's -- were hung on the Christmas tree, and the clusters of holly leaves were easy enough to pin up on the door and next to the popcorn garlands.

Hutch was just wondering what to do with the pine branches layering the bottom of the box -- he really had plenty of those already -- when he spotted a few delicate sprigs half-hidden underneath. Mistletoe. He dug one out carefully and held it in his hand. It was neatly tied together at the top with a bright red bow, and helpfully came with a loop for easy hanging. It looked perfectly charming and innocuous.

Hutch looked at it for a long time.

* * *

"Hey, you decorated!" Starsky beamed, the second they stepped through the door. He radiated so much surprised delight that Hutch thought he almost outshone the Christmas lights. Definitely a worthwhile investment. Possibly his best all year.

"Yeah," he said simply, while Starsky turned in a circle to admire it all.

"Make yourself comfortable," he added, "and useful." He gestured at the TV Guide on the table. "You find the station that's airing all the Christmas specials. I'll grab the beers."

He ducked carefully under a popcorn garland and pulled two bottles from the fridge. When he turned back, he found Starsky sprawled across the entire couch again. Much as he liked the sight, his back was already twinging in protest at the prospect.

He set the beers down on the couch table, and turned to nudge Starsky, who obediently lifted his head and shoulders to let Hutch sit. Hutch sat, and sighed as Starsky settled back down and snuggled in his lap "If you're going to fall asleep on me again, let's at least move to bed first. Friday night was murder on my back."

"Who fell asleep on who?" Starsky snorted. But he sat up.

"So, where are we in the specials?" Hutch asked, trying not to feel unreasonably cold all of a sudden.

'Bout three quarters through *White Christmas*. After that it's *Rudolph* and then *Miracle on 34th Street*. Then *It's a Wonderful Life*."

"And how many of them were you planning on watching? All?"

"Course not. We gotta get up early tomorrow! That's the whole point, spending Christmas Eve here so we can have a real Christmas morning! With getting up early and unwrapping presents in pajamas and everything."

Hutch would have sighed, but he had already resigned himself to being dragged out of bed at five in the morning to watch Starsky tear through wrapping paper like a highly localized tornado. And, if he was honest with himself, which he was trying to do more often, even his early-

morning sleep-deprived grouchiness couldn't hold a candle to Starsky's sheer radiant joy. So he just settled back against the couch and decided to give the final scenes of *White Christmas* a chance.

Starsky grabbed one of the beers and, unwilling as always to sit the way the furniture intended him to, proceeded to make himself more comfortable on the couch. He kicked off his shoes, settled on Hutch's lap as the best place to put his feet, and wiggled around until he was lying up against the other arm rest, facing the kitchen.

Then he spotted the decoration above it. "You hung mistletoe?"

"Yeah." Hutch shrugged.

"You expecting company?"

"Just you."

"Oh," Starsky said, and was quiet for a moment, before turning his attention back to his beer and then the television.

Hutch sipped his own and tried to follow the adventures of Rudolph, the reindeer outcast, occasionally absentmindedly rubbing Starsky's feet. He had to admit, it was kind of relaxing. Watching a story he already knew, letting it wash over him in its more than slightly cheesy cheer, and trusting in a happy ending. It was warm and calm and safe in exactly the way he'd found himself craving lately. He supposed he really was getting old. They were getting old.

When the credits rolled across the screen, he stretched, pushed Starsky's feet to the floor, and grabbed their two empty beer bottles. He set them on the kitchen counter, and turned to the fridge. "You want another one?"

"No." Starsky's voice was a lot closer than he had expected, and he spun around.

Starsky had followed him, and was leaning casually against the wood post, right under the mistletoe.

Hutch's stomach did a sudden backflip, and he nearly stumbled, stepping closer. "Not leaving it to chance?" he joked weakly.

Starsky looked him straight in the eye, somehow both gently smiling and completely serious.

"No way."

And Hutch found himself grabbed by the collar and pulled into a very warm kiss.

Some minutes later, while most of Hutch was still very enthusiastically engaged, his back was protesting the awkward position too loudly to be ignored. He pulled away reluctantly, and motioned to the mistletoe. "How about grabbing that and moving it somewhere more comfortable?"

Starsky gave him a searching look. "You need it?"

Oh. "No." Hutch shook his head.

"Good." Starsky grinned with a new, smoky quality that made Hutch's breath stutter. "Now, I think you said something about bed?"

* * *

Much later, just as Hutch was drifting very pleasantly to sleep, he felt himself nudged in the side.

"Hey, Hutch?"

"Mmmh."

"Hutch."

Hutch peeled one eye open. "What is it?"

"Wanna grow old together?"

Hutch groaned. "What do you think we've been doing, moron?"

"You know what I mean."

Hutch pulled a pillow over this head, determined not to let sleep escape him. "Buy me a ring."

"And then you'll consider it?"

"No, then I'll have a ring to show for it."

"So, just to be clear..."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm with you. 'Till death do us part.' But that's going to be a lot sooner than you think, buddy, if you don't shut up and close your eyes right now."

Starsky complied. For about a minute.

"Hutch?"

"*What?*"

"Nothing." The grin was even wider in his voice than on his face. "Just wanted your attention."

Hutch hurled a pillow at him.

It was another long while before they finally got to sleep.

End Notes: This is my first fic in this fandom, so any feedback – positive or negative – would be very much appreciated! I intend to keep writing for S&H, so I'd like to know what I should keep doing, and what I could do better. ;)