

## **Picking Up The Pieces**

*By Tibbie B*

### *Chapter Three*

Huggy looked up from the bar when the two detectives entered The Pits. “Well, look what the cat dragged in. Welcome back, guys.”

Starsky and Hutch each slid onto a stool and sat down. “Hey, Hug. We need your help,” Starsky said without preamble. Resting his chin in his hand, Starsky leaned on his elbow and stared across the bar at the thin black man.

“Ooo, that’s cold, Starsky,” Huggy said, wrinkling his brow. “Not even a ‘Happy New Year’ or ‘how was your Christmas?’ Can’t you at least *pretend* to be interested?”

“You’ll have to overlook Starsky, Hug,” Hutch hastened to explain. “Dobey saddled us with a homicide case the minute we walked in the door this morning.”

“Let me guess,” Huggy said, pressing his fingers to his temples, imitating a sideshow psychic. “The Fabulous Huggerino knows all, sees all.”

“Well, I hope so,” Starsky said. “We’re hopin’ to sew this one up pretty quickly.”

“The prostitute murder that occurred two days ago, right?”

“Hey, you’re pretty good. Does the Fabulous Huggerino have a name to go with that?” Starsky pressed.

Huggy sobered, dropping his pretense at clairvoyance. “Wish I could help you. Really. But, nobody’s talking. Seems this dude is real bad news. Arrived on the scene about six weeks ago, moved his stable here from Chicago. The word is that things heated up for him when one of his girls there disappeared. She’d apparently complained to the local heat that the man was a little heavy-handed when the ladies didn’t bring home as much green as he thought they should. Next thing anybody knew, she was taking an unscheduled swim in Lake Michigan.”

“Sounds like this creep plays for keeps,” Starsky observed.

“Yeah. And ten to one, that’s why nobody’s talkin’ this time,” Huggy agreed. He set two cups of fresh coffee on the bar in front of them. “I mean, not only are his own girls scared, none of the other chicks on the street are talking either.”

“I guess it goes without saying, you’ll keep your eyes open and your ears tuned, won’t you?” Hutch asked, taking a sip of the scalding hot coffee.

“Hutch, you gotta ask? This dude’s bad for business, if ya know what I mean. No action on the street makes Huggy’s a dull place.”

“Thanks, Hug,” Starsky said, slapping a dollar down on the counter before standing up to leave. Hutch followed suit, and they headed back to the car.



The two detectives passed the morning tracking down their contacts on the street, but no one was giving up any information. Either they didn’t know anything, or were just too scared to talk. As the day began to wind down, Hutch suggested they head back to the station to check the autopsy report on Melba Brand, the murdered prostitute. Although he didn’t mention it, Starsky suspected Hutch was also hoping to find a message from the realtor.

Starsky stared out the window on his side of the car, wishing they’d taken the Torino. It was easier to avoid making conversation if he could concentrate on driving. There’d been an uneasy silence between the two men since leaving the bungalow, and, despite his desire to act as though nothing had happened, Starsky couldn’t for the life of him think of anything to say. This was driving him nuts!

When they reached the station, he offered to go upstairs and retrieve a copy of the autopsy report while Hutch checked the office for messages. They parted company in the hallway on the first floor. “Meet you in the squadroom,” Starsky said, sprinting up the stairs toward the coroner’s office.

Hutch veered off to the right and went into the squadroom. When he reached the phone, he noticed a message taped to the receiver. This was it—Mei Choi had left a message marked “urgent.” His heart pounding just a little faster than usual, he dialed the number, and she picked up on the first ring.

“Mei, this is Ken Hutchinson.”

“Oh, yes, thanks for calling back so quickly. Listen, Ken, I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

Hutch felt his heart drop to his stomach. He held his breath as she continued.

“Your loan has been turned down. You have excellent credit, but you simply don’t have enough income to guarantee your ability to make the payments. Now, we can go back to the seller and see if he’ll lower the price in order for you to qualify, but I don’t hold much hope of him doing that. He’d already accepted your bid, despite it being considerably less than the asking price. I doubt he’ll go any lower.”

“I see,” Hutch muttered. “Well, thanks for all your help, Mei. I...uh...I guess you shouldn’t bother asking him to lower the price.”

“Ken, we’ll keep looking for something in your price range,” she encouraged him. “Or, if you could talk to your boss about a raise, we still might be able to hold the contract a few days.”

“Thanks, but there’s no chance of a raise. The city only gives across-the-board living increases once a year, and we’ve already gotten ours for this round.”

Mei Choi could hear the disappointment in his voice, and her heart went out to him. This was one part of her job she hated—seeing perfectly nice folks lose their dream home. “Well, if I find something else that I think might fit your needs, I’ll call you right away.”

“Okay...that’s fine. Thanks, Mei.”

“I’m sorry, Ken,” she said sincerely.

Hutch dropped the receiver back into the cradle and looked up just as Starsky came through the door, carrying what he presumed was the autopsy report. Starsky knew from the look on Hutch’s face that something was wrong.

“Hey, you look like you just saw a ghost or somethin’.”

Hutch didn’t respond, just reached out and waited for Starsky to drop the printed report into his hand. “I see you got it,” he mumbled.

Starsky handed him the report. “Not ready yet, but the girl had a record. This came in from Chicago this mornin’. Picked up a couple of times in Chicago for prostitution.” Noticing the change in Hutch’s mood from minutes earlier, Starsky asked, “Did you get some bad news? Nothin’ wrong with your folks, is there?”

“Uh...no...it’s nothing,” he lied.

“It’s somethin’ all right. Hutch, come on...you’re freakin’ me out here.”

“Okay,” Hutch said resignedly. “Mei Choi just called. My loan was turned down.”

Starsky reached down and squeezed Hutch’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, partner. Isn’t there anything you can do about it? I mean, like pay off some old debt and get your credit cleaned up?”

“It’s not my credit, Starsk. It’s this damn low-paying, thankless job. I just don’t make enough money.”

Starsky shook his head in anger. “It’s okay for us to put our lives on the line every day, but they don’t even pay us enough to have a home! This stinks, Hutch!”

His face a grim picture of dejection, Hutch snapped open Melba's arrest record and said brusquely, "It doesn't matter. I don't need the headaches of keeping up a house, anyway. Now, let's get busy on this case before that jerk beats another woman to death."

Starsky was quiet for a moment before sitting down. Hutch continued reading the report while Starsky's mind raced, searching for a solution to his partner's problem. Unfortunately, he couldn't come up with anything that made sense. Wanting to break the uneasy silence between them, Starsky looked up and suggested offhandedly, "Hey, how about some lunch? We can go to that new place you been wantin' to try. You know, the one that serves up all that health food junk. Maybe a tofu burger—or, or one those seaweed sandwiches. Whattaya say?"

"Not hungry," Hutch mumbled.

"Well, ya gotta eat something. May as well be something you like. I'll buy," he added magnanimously.

Hutch tossed the report on the desk and ran a hand over his face. "Look, Starsk, I'm not a little kid that you have to bribe me when I'm disappointed. It was a bad idea in the first place."

Sensing that Hutch wanted to change the subject, Starsky dropped it for the time being. He'd have to give it more thought—maybe come up with a plan to help Hutch out.

Picking up the report, Starsky began flipping through the pages. The mug shot, though not flattering, was more palatable than the way she looked on the ME's table. "What was she, about fifteen?"

"Sixteen," Hutch replied. "Just a kid. I want to nail this turkey to the wall. I hope something breaks soon—somebody comes through with something to help us find him."

"Wait a minute!" Starsky snapped his fingers. "Hutch, I don't know why we didn't think about this before! Alice. Sweet Alice. She'll help us. Ya know she'd do anything for you."

Hutch looked up, surprised that he hadn't thought of her himself. His enthusiasm for the idea vanished almost before it had time to take root. "I don't know, Starsky. It might be a bad idea to involve her. If this guy's as violent as they say, we'd be putting her in danger."

"We'll give her protection," Starsky offered, "if she can just give us his name, or where he's operating from. It's not like we'd be askin' her to go undercover or anything."

Hutch mulled the idea over in his mind a moment before deciding. "Well, maybe. I mean, if we made certain to meet her somewhere that no one would see us together."

“Right,” Starsky agreed. “We know where she lives. We can go straight to her apartment. I doubt this guy even knows who she is.”

“Let’s do it,” Hutch agreed.



*End of Chapter Three*