

Picking Up The Pieces

By Tibbie B

Chapter Five

Hutch unhooked his shoulder holster and hung it in the coat closet before walking over to the kitchen counter to check his answering machine. The red light blinked impatiently, alerting him to at least one message. Pressing the playback button, he recognized a voice he hadn't heard in a long time.

“Hi, Hutch. This is Frank Barber. Listen, kid, I have a business proposition to discuss with you. Thing is, you've got to call me as soon as possible. We're working under a time crunch here. Give me a call at home, 555-3102. I'll be here. Later.”

Hutch rubbed his chin thoughtfully, wondering why Frank would be calling, and what could be urgent enough that he needed to return the call “asap.” Well, if Frank needed him, he'd be there. The veteran cop had been a second father to him, taking Hutch under his wing when he was green, right out of the Academy. They hadn't seen each other often these past few years, but they'd stayed in touch—and Hutch knew he owed a great deal to the Barbers. The couple had been a constant source of encouragement to him during his nasty divorce from Vanessa. He immediately picked up the receiver, dialed the number and plopped down on one of the kitchen chairs. After two rings, Frank's wife, Stella, answered.

“Oh, hi, Hutch. It's so good to hear from you! How've you been?”

“Good. Doing good, Stella. How about you?”

“I'm better now that Frank's improving,” she answered, lowering her voice slightly.

“Improving? What're you talking about?” The intonation in her voice alarmed him.

“I tried to call you, but I guess you were out of town for the holidays. I told Frank you'd want to know. Anyway, I'll let him tell you himself now. It's good hearing from you, dear. We'll have you and Dave over for dinner one night soon. Okay?”

“Sure...sounds good, Stella,” Hutch answered, his mind still stuck on the ‘I knew you'd want to know...’

Hutch heard wife and husband passing the phone before Frank Barber's voice—just a little weaker than Hutch remembered it being—came across the line. “Hi, kid.”

“Hey, Frank. What's going on?”

“Not a lot. Well, nothing all that unusual for an old war horse my age,” Barber answered, hoping to soften the blow of the news he had to deliver. “Seems like the old ticker’s started acting up on me. Had a little scare Christmas Eve. Nothing all that serious, but, you know, enough to make a guy slow down.”

“You had a heart attack?” Hutch hoped he was presuming the worst and that Frank would allay his fears.

“So they tell me.” Frank chuckled—a hollow, contrived sound. “Said it wasn’t a serious one, though, that I was lucky to get a wake-up call.”

“Man, I’m sorry to hear that, Frank. So...are you gonna be okay? Will they have to operate or anything?”

“Nah...no surgery right now—if I do what they tell me. Thing is, the doc said I’m going to have to take an early retirement.”

Hutch could hear pain beneath the veneer of nonchalance.

“That’s a tough break, buddy,” Hutch said, finding his own words inadequate.

“Aw, that’s all right. I’ve never had time to do any serious fishing or build that wood-working shop in my basement. Now I will.” Frank seemed to be trying to convince himself as much as Hutch. He abruptly changed the subject. “But I really wanted to talk to you about something; that’s why I called.”

“Sure. You have my undivided attention,” Hutch said, leaning back in the stiff-backed chair, trying to get comfortable.

“You know how long it took me to get this Special Unit up and running, and what a positive impact we’ve had on breaking up these teen gangs. There’s been a major decrease in gang-related deaths since we’ve been in this precinct. I’d sure hate to see it go under now, just because this old man can’t run with the big dogs any longer.”

“Yeah, I know what a great job you and your unit have done, Frank. I’m sure the chief will make certain someone’s brought in to keep things going.”

“Well, that’s what I want to talk to you about. They’ve asked me for a recommendation. I didn’t even have to think about it. Hutch, it has to be you.” Barber hastened to finish before Hutch could object. “Now, you’ll need to sit for the lieutenant’s exam sometime within the next six months, but they’ve agreed to go ahead and hire you at your current rank, but with a significant pay increase. Once you pass the exam, you’ll get another raise. I don’t have to tell you, Hutch, your record speaks for itself. And your involvement in the Big Brothers organization is another feather in your cap. With my recommendation, you’re a shoo-in.”

“Whoa—hold on, Frank. You’re going too fast here. Me—head up your task force? I don’t have the experience for that job.”

“But you’re a natural. You’ll be able to talk to those kids on their level. You’ve already helped several boys that you’ve come in contact with through Kiko. Hutch, you can do this, son. Just don’t sell yourself short. I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have take over the reins for me.”

“Frank...I...I appreciate your confidence in me, but...I just don’t know. This is pretty sudden. I mean, I could really use the money, but I don’t know that this is a good idea.” As the words left his lips, Hutch was struck by the timing of the call. Only hours ago, he’d lamented losing the loan over a poor salary. Now this golden opportunity was being dropped into his lap.

“I wish I could give you more time to think about it, son, but the chief wants an answer from you by tomorrow afternoon. I wasn’t able to give them any notice, so they’ll have to act pretty quickly. I’ve agreed to serve as an advisor from here at home.”

“I...uh...I’ll need to talk it over with Starsky. He may not be interested in transferring into a special unit like that. He really likes working Homicide.”

It seemed to Hutch that the silence blared back at him over the phone line, until Frank replied hesitantly, “I’m sorry, Hutch. I guess I didn’t really make myself clear. This promotion is just for you. There’re no vacancies on the team right now. There’s no place for Starsky. Of course, if someone leaves, as squad commander you can bring in anyone you like.”

For a moment, Hutch was speechless, never having considered the deal might exclude Starsky. “Frank, you know Starsky and I are a team. We’ve been through too much together to...to end a seven-year partnership without him having a say in the decision.”

“I’m sure Starsky will understand—not want you to pass up an opportunity like this. I mean, this is business, Hutch. Here’s a chance for you to make a real difference in a lot of youngsters’ lives. If Starsky’s your friend, he’ll see the wisdom in you taking this job.”

Hutch reached up and rubbed the tense groove between his eyes, not knowing how to deal with the situation. It was too much to comprehend. Too fast. He couldn’t make such a life-altering decision on the spot—a decision he’d never dreamed of an hour ago.

“Hutch? You there?” Frank prompted, when Hutch didn’t respond.

“Uh...yeah...sorry...I’m here, Frank. Listen, I’m really overwhelmed and flattered by all this, but I need to think it through, okay?”

“Sure. I understand. I hate to press you, Hutch, but do you think you can let me know something before the chief leaves at two o’clock tomorrow? If you’re interested, he’d like to meet with you on Thursday. Unless one of you has some major concerns, I’m sure the job will be yours for the asking.”

“Yeah. I’ll call you before two tomorrow. Thanks, Frank. And, listen...you take care of yourself.”

“Don’t worry. Stella’s doing a damn good job of that. If I know you’ll be in charge of my team, I won’t worry about them either. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Hutch slowly lowered the receiver to the cradle, then stared down at it like a coiled snake. He couldn’t believe the conversation that had just taken place. He was actually being offered a phenomenal job, at better pay, with an incredible chance for advancement. *But without Starsky.*



End of Chapter Five