

Picking Up The Pieces

By Tibbie B

Chapter Six

Starsky lay awake staring at the ceiling above his bed, replaying in his mind their first day back on the job. Several times, it almost seemed like he and Hutch were back on level ground. Starsky longed for that easy-going relationship, and after pouring out his heart to his mother, he'd actually begun to think it might be possible. Seeing Hutch's disappointment over losing the bungalow had stirred feelings of both sympathy and indignation. It didn't seem fair that someone who worked as hard as Hutch—protecting the public, laying his life on the line every day—would have that very thing stand between him and the normal, everyday personal life others took for granted. Starsky had mulled over the problem all day, trying to figure out some way to help his partner. Acknowledging how important doing so was to him, Starsky began to consider that perhaps he was “over” Kira, and the rift between himself and Hutch had finally begun to close. The hours slipped by, and, as the dawn began to streak the morning sky, Starsky knew what he had to do. That settled, he finally succumbed to fatigue and closed his tired eyes, hoping to catch a couple hours of sleep before putting his plan into action.



Hutch picked up the phone for the fifth time and hung it back up. Ten minutes to two. He'd promised to give Frank an answer by 2:00 p.m. Staring at the wall clock, Hutch knew Starsky would arrive soon, so reluctantly, he lifted the receiver again and dialed the number.

“Hello.”

“Frank? Hutch.”

“You had me worried, kid. I was afraid you'd gotten cold feet.” Hutch could hear relief in the older man's voice.

“Yeah. I'm sorry, Frank, but this wasn't an easy decision for me. I didn't sleep at all last night.”

“Important decisions are seldom easy, Hutch. But you're doing the right thing, kid. I mean, a chance like this doesn't come along every day, you know?”

“Yeah, I...I know. Frank...I can't accept. I want the job, and I need the money—if you only knew how much I need the money—but I'm afraid I'll have to decline.”

“What? Hutch—you can't be serious!”

“I know you think I’m nuts, but I can’t take the job when it means not working with Starsky anymore.”

“Loyalty’s a fine trait, son, but this is crazy. It’s not like Starsky can’t make it on his own. He’s a sharp guy, and I have no doubt his break’ll come along soon. It doesn’t have to be with you, Hutch.” Frank waited impatiently for Hutch’s response. “Did you hear me? Starsky’s a damn good cop on his own. He doesn’t need you to carry him, kid.”

Unreasonably, Hutch felt his temper flare. “I know that! Don’t you think I, of all people, know how good a cop he is? Hell, I’ve never carried Starsky a day in his life. He wouldn’t let me, even if I wanted to. He doesn’t need me or anyone else to get the job done!” Hutch snapped, then realizing how harsh he’d spoken, tried to soften his tone. “Look, Frank, Starsky and I have this...this connection. It’s hard to describe. I know it may sound crazy, but our instincts, our ability to know what the other is thinking, how he’ll react—that’s saved our butts when we couldn’t count on anybody or anything else.”

“Okay, you two’ve had a terrific partnership, and you’ve become close friends,” Frank said, brushing off Hutch’s words. “Just because you won’t be working together doesn’t mean that your friendship has to go down the tubes. I’m just saying if you want to have a career in law enforcement, you need to look out for number one.”

“Don’t you see? I am looking out for number one! I’m trying to tell you, I’m a good cop because of the way we work together—that’s the key, Frank. ‘Me and Thee.’ Those aren’t just words to us. It’s the way we live our lives.” Hutch ran a frustrated hand over his face, searching for the right words—wanting to explain his *bond* with Starsky, but unable to verbalize it in a way that didn’t sound crazy even to him.

“Look, something happened a while back that threw my life out of kilter and almost resulted in my losing the best friend I’ve ever had. If I bale out on Starsky now, I’m likely to give up any chance I may have of making things right with him again.”

“So, you’re willing to throw the best career opportunity you’ll ever be offered out the window, because you don’t want to take the job without your friend?” Frank reiterated, obviously perplexed by such a concept.

Hutch rubbed the bridge between his eyes and smiled tolerantly. “Frank, from my perspective, having a partner like Starsky outweighs any other ‘opportunity’ that might come along. He’s always been there when I needed him—hasn’t let me down a single time. In my book, those aren’t odds I’m likely to beat.” Hutch’s voice rang with finality, ending the need for further discussion. “I appreciate your confidence and trust in me, pal, but I can’t turn my back on Starsky for a few extra bucks a month.”

Frank sighed, sounding tired and disappointed. “I can see there’s no changing your mind on this,” he conceded.

“Afraid not,” Hutch answered resolutely, at peace with his decision.

“Okay. It’s your life,” Frank said, resigned he could do nothing more. After a brief quiet, he spoke again, his voice lighter. “I hope you won’t be a stranger, Hutch. You know, I’ll have more time to go fishing now.” He chuckled softly, reminiscing for a moment. “Remember how we used to fish together on the canal when you and Vanessa were living in that little duplex down from us?”

Hutch closed his eyes against the visual image—the memory of fishing more pleasant than the memory of being married to Van. “Sure, I remember.”

“Well, we’ll have to take out that little bass boat I’m gonna buy with my retirement bonus.”

“That sounds like a great idea to me,” Hutch said sincerely.

“Okay. You call me in a couple of weeks, and we’ll set up a time.”

“I’ll do that.” Hutch hesitated, not ready to say goodbye. “Frank—thanks for everything. The job offer, the advice, the understanding. I appreciate it.”

“Aw...go on! I know I can’t tell you young punks anything. You’ve gotta learn for yourself. Take care, kid.”

“Bye, Frank. Give Stella a hug for me.” Hutch listened until the phone clicked and went dead on the other end of the line, then slowly lowered it into the cradle and turned back to the typewriter to finish typing one more boring report.



Hutch looked up from the typewriter, as Starsky sauntered into the squadroom thirty minutes late and, without comment, tossed a bag of sweet rolls on the desk in front of him.

“You look terrible,” Hutch said drolly.

“D’you check the mirror this mornin’, Blondie?” Starsky shot back.

“I didn’t sleep very well,” Hutch confessed. “What’s your excuse?”

“I guess I was a little restless, too, then got up early to run an errand.” Starsky scooped up both their mugs and made a beeline to pour them each a cup of the syrupy liquid masquerading as coffee. Starting the work day at three in the afternoon definitely had its disadvantages—not the least of which being the motor oil consistency of coffee left to brew three to six hours too long.

“What’re you workin’ on?”

“Finally got a copy of Melba’s autopsy this morning,” Hutch answered, wrinkling his nose as he tried to take a sip of the bitter brew.

“Great breakfast reading, I’m sure,” Starsky mumbled, digging to the bottom of the waxed-paper bag, foraging for a sticky bun. “Was it the blow to her head, like the ME figured?”

“Yeah. And she was riding pretty high on crack at the time.”

“This slime bucket’s a real winner. That’s probably how he keeps the girls from taking off—hooks ’em on coke.” Starsky picked up the morgue photo and studied the girl’s delicate features for a moment before tossing it back onto the desk. “Poor kid didn’t have a chance,” he mumbled sympathetically, then, looking up to see Hutch’s grim expression grow even more rigid, regretted saying anything—remembering too late their unspoken agreement to steer clear of the topic of involuntary addiction.

Quickly ending the discussion, Hutch set his coffee mug down and helped himself to a sweet roll. “I thought we’d catch up on some paperwork, grab a bite of dinner, then stake out Green’s place. Still can’t connect him to the girl, so I guess we’ll have to wait and catch him in the act.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get the turkey,” Starsky promised. “Hey,” he said, a quirky grin lighting his face, “maybe we should join the Canadian Mounties.”

Hutch did a double take, wondering down what strange path Starsky’s overactive imagination had led him now. “What?”

“Ya know, they ‘always get their man’.”

“Starsky, do you have any idea how cold it is in Canada?”

“Cold enough for your tongue to stick to a lamp post?” Starsky came back cheekily.

Hutch rolled his eyes in exasperation. “I think we’ve got enough bad guys right here without going to Canada to track down theirs. What about sending someone in undercover?” he suggested, hoping to redirect Starsky to the case at hand.

“Can—but that’ll take a while.”

“True. But if the girls are too scared to turn him in,” Hutch reminded him, “maybe we should pay him a little visit, let him know we’re watching. Maybe he’ll freak out and confess.”

“Yeah, right,” Starsky shot back, skeptically. “I say we go with your original plan—park outside the house and wait, like we did last night. Could be he got the news that Melba

didn't make it and was just a little off his game yesterday." Starsky took another gulp of coffee and changed the subject again. "Any news on the house?"

Hutch glanced up, then back down at the desk before answering. "Uh...no...not really."

"Whattaya mean 'not really'?"

"Just what I said. You know the loan was turned down, Starsk."

"Yeah, but what about other options? You know...make a lower offer or a bigger down payment, or somethin'."

"No point wasting my breath," Hutch replied irritably.

"Ya know what? You give up too easy," Starsky grumbled. "You should be out there beatin' the bushes, findin' another mortgage company or somethin'."

"Look, pal," Hutch said, holding his hands up before him, imploring Starsky to drop the subject, "I know you mean well, but I'd really rather not talk about it. I'm a realist and know when to cut my losses. So please don't give me any of your lectures."

Starsky tipped his head to the side, shrugging his shoulders, stung by the implication that he was meddling. "Suit yourself." Snatching a stack of files off the desk, he shuffled through them, checking to see which ones were incomplete, then dug into one without another word.



End of Chapter Six