

Picking Up The Pieces

By Tibbie B

Chapter Seven

Hutch stretched, his back stiff from sitting in the car for almost four hours straight. Starsky had been quiet all evening, not even offering up his usual inane banter. Yesterday he'd been more like his old self; tonight the curtain of silence was once again drawn between them. Though he hated to admit it to himself, Hutch knew the change had begun when he'd none-too-delicately told his partner to butt out of his personal business. The old Starsky would've dropped the subject for all of two minutes, then jumped back in with both feet, harassing him to try one of a hundred different ridiculous schemes. Hoping to bridge the ever-widening breach between them, Hutch decided to apologize.

"Something bothering you tonight, Starsk?"

Without turning to look at him, Starsky answered, "Nope." His voice barely above a whisper. Hutch waited for more, but Starsky remained silent.

"You seem distracted...kind of not here," Hutch prodded. "Are you mad about what I said earlier? You know, about the loan?"

Starsky turned toward him, his features hidden by the darkness. "I don't know...maybe..." He paused a moment before adding, "Ya know, this time last year, you would've asked for my help if somethin' as important as this house came up. You would've been glad for me to make suggestions. But today, you pretty much told me it wasn't any of my business. I guess I just miss the old days, that's all."

Hutch felt the sting of guilt, knowing Starsky was right. He'd been too quick today to shut Starsky out. But his own emotions had been running close to the surface, after having rejected the solution Frank had generously laid at his feet. How could he explain it to Starsky without telling him what role he'd played in that decision?

"I'm sorry, Starsk," he said quietly, "but I just didn't see the point in talking about it. I've accepted the fact that it isn't going to happen and just want to forget about it. I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

Before Starsky could speak, a scream split the quiet night, jarring them both back to the job at hand. "Sounds like it's show time," Starsky said, his hand automatically going to his Smith & Wesson, as he flung open the door and bailed out of the Torino.

Hutch was out of the car and drawing his Magnum in one fluid move. Loud voices wafted through the night air, as he shouted across the top of the car to Starsky, "Front or back?"

“Front,” Starsky shouted back. They exchanged an old familiar look, each silently urging the other to be careful. Starsky felt his emotions surge, comforted by the familiar gesture.

Both cops darted across the street toward the dimly lit house, spurred on by the frightened sounds of a woman begging for the beating to stop. Hutch circled around the back of the house, while Starsky ran up the front steps. Finding the front door ajar, he hurled it open, shouting, “Police! Stop right there!”

Hand drawn back, Willie Green looked up from the pathetic girl cowering at his feet, surprise and indignation springing to his eyes. “What the hell you want, honky? This is family business! You got no right to come bustin' in here! You got a warrant?”

“He doesn't need one when there's a crime in progress,” Hutch said from behind the pimp. “Now lower your arm real slow, and lay that belt on the floor. Both hands where I can see them!”

Green hesitated, considering his options.

“I'm only gonna tell you once!” Hutch warned.

Knowing he didn't really have a choice, Green lowered his hand, a string of curses streaming from his lips.

“Come over here to me.” Starsky held out his hand, gently coaxing the weeping girl. Hesitantly, she went to him. Taking her trembling hand in his, Starsky backed toward the front door, taking her with him.

“On your knees, slime bucket!” Hutch barked. “Hands behind your head! Now!”

“Okay...okay...be cool.” Dropping to his knees, Green obeyed. “You think she gonna testify against her Big Daddy, pig?” he challenged.

“We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. One thing I do know is that right now you're going somewhere you can't beat up kids and pump them full of coke,” Hutch ground out between clinched teeth. “You have the right to remain silent...” Reciting him the Miranda, Hutch shoved the huge man face down on the floor and cuffed his hands behind his back.

Still keeping a bead on the pimp with his Smith & Wesson, Starsky drew the sobbing girl to him. “It's okay,” he soothed. “We'll get you some help—we'll get you *all* help. He ain't gonna hurt you anymore.” The diminutive figure pressed herself against his chest, hanging onto him like a lifeline.

A sad smile played upon Hutch's lips, when in a moment of astounding clarity he knew it. *This is why I'm here...this is why we're partners.*



Starsky took the steps two at a time, entering the building from the police parking garage. He felt terrific, his mood greatly improved by a good night's sleep. Seeing Green booked and safely tucked away in a cell, he and Hutch had gone their separate ways without discussing the little scene in the office earlier in the day, but today, he'd clear the air with Hutch, once and for all. He wanted to put Kira and the last few months behind them—get back to the way it used to be. When they'd made the bust together last night, he'd remembered what it was like to be that in tune with his partner. They were darn good cops, and even better friends, so it was time to tell Hutch he was tired of carrying around this chip on his shoulder, and get back to the friendship and working relationship that meant so much to him.

Starsky glanced down at his watch. Oh, man, late again! Rushing to avoid another butt-chewing from Dobey, he didn't see Purdue coming down the steps until he'd already slammed into the smaller man.

“Whoa, Starsky, where's the fire?”

Grabbing Purdue by the front of his uniform, Starsky helped him regain his equilibrium before continuing up the stairs. “Sorry, Purdue. I guess I was a little preoccupied.”

“Yeah, I don't wonder at it. Heard about Hutch.”

Starsky pulled up short. How the heck did he hear about Hutch's loan being turned down? They didn't even work in the same department. “Oh, yeah? How'd you hear about that?”

“Jenkins. He's in Barber's unit, you know.”

“Barber? Frank Barber?” Now Starsky was confused.

“Yeah. Jenkins and the other guys couldn't believe Hutch would pass up an opportunity to take Barber's job. Is he nuts, or what? You're his partner. What's the story, Starsky?”

Starsky's head snapped up. He must've heard wrong! Frank Barber's job? Hutch had been offered Frank's job? Unreal...Hutch would never keep something like that a secret...at least the Hutch he *used* to know wouldn't.

Swallowing hard, Starsky fought to maintain his composure, not let on he didn't have the slightest idea what Purdue was talking about. Of course, that wasn't an easy thing to do, considering that all the blood had drained from his face, and he felt like someone had smacked him with a two-by-four and knocked the breath out of him.

“I...uh...don't think you're asking the right person.”

“Come on, Starsky. You don't expect me to believe you don't know anything about it, do you?” Purdue asked skeptically.

“What I'm sayin' is, that's my partner's business,” Starsky answered, looking him straight in the eye. “I don't discuss his private affairs with anyone, and I suggest you don't either.”

Propelled by an overwhelming need for air, Starsky pushed past the other officer and bounded up the last few steps to the hallway outside the squadroom. Slamming the door behind him, he leaned back against its cold, hard surface, trying to regain his balance and figure out what the hell had just happened. Hutch had been offered a plum promotion and hadn't even told him. Unbelievable! Why? When? So many unanswered questions. Confusion slowly gave way to fury. How could Hutch do this? Make a fool out of him? Go behind his back and apply for another job? Did Hutch hate him now—so much that being Starsky's partner was more than he could deal with? If so, why didn't he just take the job and be done with it? Starsky pushed away from the door, his temper raging.

Storming down the hall and into the squadroom, Starsky's face was rigid with anger. Hutch looked up just in time to see him before the volcano erupted. “What the hell's this about your gettin' a promotion, Hutch? Huh? Ya wanna tell me about that, or do I just wait and catch it on the six o'clock news?!”

Caught off guard, Hutch didn't answer for a second, but looked around the room to see that every eye was on his partner. “Calm down, Starsk.” Hutch stood up and walked toward him. “Let's go outside and talk about it.”

“No! Let's talk about it right here—right now!”

Hutch took Starsky's elbow, spinning him toward the door. “Outside,” he growled under his breath, commandeering his partner out of the squadroom. As they burst through the door, Starsky snatched his arm loose and spun around, outrage contorting his features.

“Starsky, calm down, dammit! How can we talk about this if you're acting like an idiot?”

“I'm an idiot?! Me? I'm not the one who went behind his partner's back to finagle a promotion.” Starsky punctuated each word with a jab at Hutch's chest. “Then—turned—it—down!”

“That's it!” Hutch grabbed Starsky's hand and shoved it away. “Outside—NOW!” Pushing Starsky ahead of him, through the hall and down the back stairwell, Hutch bit back a response until they reached the garage and a modicum of privacy.

Starsky whirled around and glared at the blond. “All right. We're here. Now, ya wanna tell me why I had to hear from some lackey in another department about your bein' offered Frank Barber's job? Huh?”

Reining in his own temper, Hutch began as calmly as he could. “Just listen to me, Starsky. I didn’t ask for that job. Frank called and offered it to me. I turned him down, and...well...I just didn’t see any point in bringing it up, that’s all.”

“And that’s it?” Starsky challenged. “I’m supposed to believe that somethin’ this important wasn’t worth mentioning to your partner?”

“Let’s just say, I figured you’d react just like this!” Hutch snapped back.

Slowly, the fight drained from Starsky, leaving him empty and miserable. “Did he really offer you his job—command of the Special Unit?”

“Well...yes...but...you’ve got to believe me, Starsk...I didn’t apply for the job. I didn’t even know he was retiring. Doctor said his heart’s bad.”

Fighting for composure, Starsky looked Hutch straight in the eye. “If that’s true, why didn’t you just tell me, Hutch? Huh? Can’t you even talk to me anymore?”

The vulnerability in Starsky’s voice cut Hutch to the core. “I...I guess I should’ve, Starsk. I don’t know. Things have been so strained between us. I’ve tried to make it up to you, but you just—things just aren’t the same.” Hutch ran a tired hand over his face, his voice exhausted from the burden of guilt he’d been carrying around. “I just didn’t know how you’d react.”

Starsky was quiet for a moment, his emotions in an uproar, not knowing what to believe or how to deal with it. “But, why? I mean, if that’s how you feel, why’d you turn down a promotion? Especially now—when you need the money and all.”

Hutch closed his eyes and rubbed the deep furrow wrinkling his brow, trying to decide just how honest he really should be. Things were pretty shaky right now, and he didn’t want to make matters worse.

“Hutch, what is it you ain’t tellin’ me? Hmmm?”

“Starsk, man...I just...I couldn’t do it.”

“Couldn’t do what?”

“Any of it. I couldn’t imagine being a cop without you as my partner. I told Frank we’re a team, and, unless you came along, I didn’t want the job.”

There it was. Honest. Unvarnished.

His voice thick with emotion, Starsky spoke just above a whisper. “But, Hutch, I don’t wanna hold you back. If you have this chance, buddy, go for it. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Hold me back?” Hutch smiled sadly, then reached over and gripped Starsky’s shoulder. “That thought never entered my mind. Truth of the matter is, I can’t do this unless you’re there by my side. Frank’s job, nor the one I have now.”

Starsky looked up, his eyes shining with unshed tears. “I thought you couldn’t stand bein’ around me anymore. Things have been so...so...different since the business with Kira.”

“I know. I’ve felt it, too. And I hate what it’s doing to us,” Hutch said with heartfelt emotion. “I’ve tried...I’ve tried every way I can think of to win back your trust, buddy...but I can see it in your eyes. You don’t believe in me anymore—in the honest, down to earth friendship we had.” His voice penitent, Hutch searched for a way to express the anguish he’d been through in the aftermath of their confrontation in Kira’s living room. “I know I screwed up, Starsk—big time. But I apologized, and, to be honest, I don’t know what else I can do.”

Swallowing back the lump in his throat, Starsky tried to answer, but found it difficult to find the right words. Finally, dropping all pretense of anger and pushing aside his pride, Starsky did what he knew he should have done months ago—he spoke from his heart. “I know I’ve been hell to be around. And I know you’ve tried to make it up to me. I just—I guess I just needed time for the wound to heal, that’s all. You’re the one person in this world I thought I could always count on.” Seeing the hurt in Hutch’s eyes, he hastened to finish. “I did a lot of thinkin’ while I was in New York. Made me see things in a whole different light.”

Hutch nodded, knowingly. “Ever notice how a little distance can put things in perspective?”

“Yeah...that and havin’ your mother tell you how stupid you’re actin’ doesn’t hurt either,” Starsky said humorously. “Thing is, I made up my mind while I was there to come back here and put this all behind me. Set things right with you and get on with our lives. Then, when I got back, and you were tryin’ to buy the house, I was real excited for ya. I know how bad you’ve wanted a place.”

Encouraged by Starsky’s honest expression of caring, a hint of a smile curled Hutch’s lips.

“But when I wanted to help, you just shut me out. Told me to mind my own business. So...I figured that’s the way you wanted to keep things. Strictly business. No gettin’ involved in each other’s personal lives.” Starsky looked up and locked eyes with him. “That hurt, Hutch.”

“I didn’t mean it, Starsk. I admit I’m disappointed about the house, but I had no right to take it out on you.”

“So, when I heard about the job offer, I figured while I was gone, you’d been lookin’ for a way to get out of this partnership.”

Astounded at just how wrong his intentions had been interpreted, Hutch laughed softly and shook his head in disbelief. “You still don’t get it, do you?”
“What?”

“Starsk, I don’t *want* the job unless we go as a team. That’s the answer I gave Frank, and it’s the only one he’s going to get.”

“But—” Starsky tried to interrupt.

“But nothing! I’m being totally honest with you here. Me and Thee. That’s one thing that hasn’t changed and isn’t about to, as long as I have any say in the matter.”

Starsky gave him a lopsided grin, the words sinking in. “Honest?”

Exasperated, Hutch glared back at him. “Dammit, Starsk, I said so, didn’t I?”

Starsky nodded, the smile spreading across his face. “Then I say we got a job to do, partner.” Extending his hand to shake on it, Starsky grew more serious.

Hutch looked down at Starsky’s hand, then reached out and gripped it in his own, reaffirming the precious bond of friendship that had almost slipped away from them. His eyes glistened, as Starsky pulled him into an old familiar bear hug, sealing their unspoken pledge as brothers.



Starsky decided to wait at the car while Hutch ran back upstairs to the squadroom to get his jacket. Snagging it from the back of his chair, Hutch looked down and saw a note taped to his phone. *Call Mei Choi. Urgent!* His curiosity piqued, Hutch quickly dialed the realtor’s number.

“Hi, Mei. What’s up?”

“I’m so glad you called back, Ken. I wanted to tell you as soon as I got the good news. The extra two thousand Detective Starsky threw in on the down payment lowered the principal enough that the bank’s reconsidered your application and—the wonderful news is—they’ve approved your loan! We can schedule the closing for sometime next week!”

Speechless, Hutch stood frozen, the receiver glued to his ear. “The two thousand? What are you talking about?”

“Uh-oh,” Mei squeaked. “I’m sorry...I guess I’ve spoiled his surprise. He said he’d tell you first thing this morning, but I guess he hasn’t, huh?”

“Are you saying Starsky put two thousand dollars toward my down payment?”

“Yes. I thought you knew—honest. He said it was a going to be a surprise, but he’d tell you this morning. I’m so sorry I’ve spoiled it. Please ask him not to be mad at me.”

Hutch closed his eyes, shaking his head in disbelief. “Uh...don’t worry about it, Mei. But hold off on that closing, will you? I need to talk with him first.”

Hesitantly, she agreed. “Okay. But please don’t blow this deal, Ken. You may never find another this good. Give me a call in a couple of hours, all right?”

“Sure...a couple of hours.”



Starsky sat in the Torino, his hands drumming the steering wheel as the BeeGees belted out “Staying Alive” on the radio. Hutch jerked open the door and slid in beside him, his face rigid with anger. Slamming the door with a vengeance, he turned to Starsky, ready to do battle.

“What?”

“You know what!” Hutch shot back. “Starsky, how could you pull a stunt like this without discussing it with me first? You’ve got a lot of nerve, you know it? And you had the audacity to stand there not twenty minutes ago and lecture me about not telling you about the job!”

Hoping to diffuse the situation with humor, Starsky replied drolly, “Anyone ever tell you you’re beautiful when you’re angry?”

“Knock it off, Starsky! This is no laughing matter!”

Starsky leaned back against the door, deciding it might be safer to keep his distance and let Hutch rant and rave until it was out of his system.

“What gives you the right to put money down on a house *I’m* buying without asking me first?” Hutch pointed a self-righteous finger in his partner’s face. “You’ve pulled some pretty asinine stunts since we’ve been together, but this one takes the cake.”

Starsky watched Hutch from beneath hooded eyes, still reluctant to break in on his diatribe.

“You don’t have that kind of money, Starsky. That probably wiped out your whole savings.” Winding down, Hutch looked at him, exasperated. Slowly, the fire in his eyes

diminished to only a flicker. “So, what’ve you got to say? I think you owe me an explanation as to why you didn’t talk to me about this first.”

A lazy smile curved Starsky’s lips, as he answered smoothly, “Like my partner once told me, ‘Maybe because I knew this was just how you’d react’.”

His mouth already half open to deliver an angry retort, Hutch couldn’t think of a single comeback. Leave it to Starsky to turn his own words around on him. Hutch held up his index finger in front of Starsky’s face—a warning not to say another word.

Starsky reached over and gave him a friendly punch on the arm. “Got ’cha, Blondie!”

Hutch realized it was pointless to try and reason with Starsky on the matter. As always, his hardheaded, stubborn partner was going to do exactly what he wanted to do, regardless of anything Hutch said. Determined to have the final word, Hutch made one thing perfectly clear. “It’s just a loan.”

“I know.” Starsky cocked his head to one side, cutting his eyes toward Hutch. “Besides, I may need a place to crash sometime—ya know—between apartments.”

“Right,” Hutch agreed sincerely. “You got it, pal.”

Knowing he’d won this round, Starsky righted himself in the seat and turned the key in the ignition. Revving the engine of the Torino, he looked back over his shoulder and started to back out of the parking slot.

“Hey.” Hutch reached out and laid his hand on Starsky’s shoulder. “Thanks, Starsk.”

Blue eyes met blue. “Welcome,” Starsky answered lightly—not trusting his voice to say more.

Feeling on top of the world for the first time in months, Starsky threw the striped tomato into gear and headed for Huggy’s.



The End