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Regrets

by *TibbieB*
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“Hello.”

“Starsky, where the hell are you? Dobeys about to blow a gasket?”

“You know where I am, Hutch. You’re talkin’ to me aren’t you?”

“You know what I mean. You were supposed to be here three hours ago. We had a briefing with Martin and Gross at ten. I’ve been calling all morning. Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

“I don’t feel like talking about it right now. Tell Dobeys I’m sick; tell him I went to Bolivia to knock over a coupla banks. Tell him whatever you want—I don’t care.”

Hutch didn’t know how to respond. This didn’t sound like Starsky. Usually *he* was the one quick with the sarcastic comeback. Hutch’s anger quickly drained away, leaving behind only concern.

“Look, I’ll be right over. If you’re sick and need to see a doctor, I’ll take you.”

“No!” The word came out sharper than Starsky had intended. But at the minute, the last thing he wanted was to see Hutch; or anyone, for that matter. “No,” he said, a little more softly. “I’ll be fine. Just a bug, I guess.”

“Starsk—”

Hutch lowered his voice to keep from drawing the attention of every cop in the squad room and tried again.

“Come on, Starsk. If you’re sick, you shouldn’t be alone. I can cut out of here and be at your place in thirty minutes. I already rescheduled our meeting with Gross and Martin for tomorrow. My dance card is clear,” he added jokingly.

“Look Hutch, give me a little space, will ya? I’m fine! Can’t a guy have some time to himself without you makin’ a federal case of it?”

Starsky’s abrupt outburst cut Hutch to the quick. Maybe he should have been angry, but in his gut, he knew something was wrong. For a moment, he had a strong urge

to slam the phone down, and go directly to Starsky's house and see for himself what the situation was. You didn't spend nearly every waking hour with someone for this many years, and not know when something was wrong with them. They were both silent for a moment.

"Look Hutch," Starsky said quietly. "I'll, uh, I'll call you if I need you. Honest."

Starsky was already in motion to hang up the receiver when he caught the tail-end of Hutch's question. "What? I didn't hear you."

"I said, how did your evening go with Laura and John?"

The query was met with stony silence.

"Starsk?"

"Terrific," came the monotone reply. More silence. "Look, I really got'a go Hutch. I ain't tryin' to rude but, like they say, 'don't call me, I'll call you'. I may be out a few days, so cover for me, will you?"

Hutch felt apprehension inching icy fingers up his spine. But what could he say? His best friend had just not-so-graciously told him to butt out. And out of respect for that friendship, he couldn't do anything but mutter the reply Starsky wanted to hear. "Sure, buddy. Sure. Uh, you know where I am if you need me. I'll talk to Dobe and make it all right."

Hutch slowly lowered the receiver back onto the cradle. A worried frown creased his brow. Something had happened last night, and he was going to find out what.



"Cap, I honestly don't know what's wrong with him. He asked me to tell you he's sick. That's all I know." Hutch purposely omitted Starsky's implication he may be out longer than a day.

"Hutchinson, if I find out you're covering for your partner so he can spend the day with some girl, you're going to be in as much trouble as he is! Why didn't he call in? He knows how important these meetings with federal agents are. Why, they're just looking for an excuse to take this case away from us and classify it as an interstate kidnapping/murder!" Dobe leaned forward, resting his arms on the desk before him. "Now, level with me."

Hutch met the captain's stare straight-on, held his gaze for a good five seconds, conveying he was being honest. "I wish I could tell you, but I swear, that all he said." Hutch was quiet for a moment, then continued. "It's more like what he didn't say that's got me concerned. The truth is, he sounded strange."

“Strange? In what way?”

“It’s hard to explain. You know, more of a *feeling* I’ve got, than anything else.”

That may not have made much sense to some people, but where these two were concerned, Dobby had no problem believing it. He’d worked with them too long to deny the almost spiritual bond they seemed to share. He, himself, had been baffled at their ability to communicate without speaking a single word, to sense danger for one another, even though separated by miles. Yes, he believed Hutch. He could think of no other living human being more in tune with Starsky.

“All right,” he acquiesced. “He’s got the day off. Log him out as sick, and I’ll authorize the sick leave pay.” Embarrassed by his own concern for Hutch’s partner, Dobby suddenly became very busy straightening the scads of loose papers into neat piles on his desk. “Now, get the hell out of here. I’ve got work to do,” he said a little more gruffly than necessary.

Hutch got up and quietly headed for the door.

“And Hutch,” Dobby added. “Get over there and check on him sometime today, will you?”

“Right, Captain.” His back to Dobby, Hutch opened the door to leave. He couldn’t help but smile. Dobby worked hard at being a rough, no-nonsense guy. Hutch knew it was a ruse. Compassion and concern for the men and women who worked for him were qualities that Dobby labored to conceal. But he didn’t fool Hutch, nor Starsky, for that matter.



Hutch spent the morning catching up on paperwork from the case they’d just finished. Yesterday, he and Starsky had been assigned a new murder case which involved one of the victims being transported across the state line; thus the FBI’s interest. So far, four bodies had been located in the LA area, three of them locals. The fourth woman had lived in Nevada and had last been seen in a bar near her home.

Only yesterday, Starsky had been psyched about the new case. So his strange behavior this morning had Hutch stymied. Either Starsky was really very sick, or something had happened last night.

Starsky had told him that Laura and John French were in town and had called and invited him to meet them for dinner. Starsky hadn’t seen the couple since Terry’s funeral two years ago. They had been Terry’s oldest and dearest friends, having gone to college with her at UCLA. Starsky liked them both a great deal. In fact, he and Terry had gone on vacation a couple of months before the shooting, and visited them at their home in San Francisco. It seemed likely that Starsky’s sudden change in behavior may be connected with seeing Laura and John again.

After lunch, Hutch went by the forensic lab and picked up the results of the final battery of tests on the Nevada woman. By the time he'd reviewed the reports and spent a couple of hours comparing them with the other victims' files, he was ready to call it a day. He finally admitted to himself that he was too distracted to give it his undivided attention anyway. He grabbed his jacket, tucked the file under his arm, and headed for his car.



Hutch stopped by Tony's Pizzeria and picked up a pizza with all the toppings he knew his partner liked, then drove to Starsky's place. When he rang the bell, there was no answer. The Torino was parked in its usual spot, so he knew Starsky had to be home. Hutch leaned on the bell again, then knocked loudly.

"Starsky, open up, it's me."

Getting no response, Hutch considered letting himself in. But just as he started fishing around in his pocket for his key to the house, the door opened about five inches, and Starsky's face appeared in the crack.

Starsky's appearance confirmed that Hutch had cause for concern. His mass of dark curls stuck out at odd angles, obviously not having had the benefit of a comb all day. His face, usually cleanly shaven, was covered in the dark stubble like Hutch had only seen when Starsky was too sick to care about his appearance. And despite the late hour of the day, Starsky was still dressed in his blue pajamas. Most disturbing though, was his unwillingness to open the door and let Hutch in.

"Hey, buddy. Thought I'd come by and check on you. Can I come in?"

"Uh...sorry, Hutch...I don't feel much like visitors right now."

"Since when am I a visitor? I'm family, Starsk. I stopped by and picked up your favorite pizza. Thought maybe we could have a bite to eat." Hutch held the box up to the door. "And I have the lab results back on the Nevada murder victim. I'd like you to take a look at them."

"Not hungry. But thanks anyway. And you don't need me to check the lab reports. You know as much about that stuff as I do."

Hutch noticed the listless, expressionless look in his friend's eyes. He definitely didn't think Starsky should be alone. "Are you sure I can't come in?" Hutch tried once more.

"Nah, I really don't feel like it, Hutch. I was about to go back to bed. I'll call ya in a coupla days."

Hutch's uneasiness intensified, not wanting Starsky to shut the door...shut him out. "Starsk—"

"See ya later," Starsky said, before closing the door in his partner's face. Hutch knocked again, unwilling to let it go, but Starsky didn't open up. His only option, besides leaving, was to use his key and go in anyway. Hutch considered it, but decided to give Starsky the solitude he seemed determined to have.



"Hutchinson, your partner didn't show up again today." No 'good morning', no 'how are things?' Dobey seldom went in for the niceties. "Did you go over there yesterday?"

"Yes, but he wouldn't let me in." Hutch regretted not having been more aggressive the night before. He'd just about convinced himself that Starsky would snap out of it and show up for work this morning.

"I'm really worried, Cap. It isn't like Starsky to refuse to talk to me when something's bothering him. I just don't believe he has a flu bug. I saw his face...his eyes. He looked—I don't know—" Hutch grappled for the right word, "like he didn't care about anything."

Dobey considered this for a moment, trusting Hutch's instincts. "Maybe I should call over there," he offered, "tell him to get his butt in to work."

Unable to come up with a better tactic himself, Hutch was amenable to almost any suggestion. "Sure. Can't hurt." He dropped into the chair in front of Captain Dobby's desk, reached for the phone and dialed Starsky's number before handing his boss the receiver. Starsky didn't pick up until the tenth ring.

Relieved that his partner had at least answered the telephone, Hutch listened to Dobby's side of the conversation.

"Starsky, Dobby here. Why haven't you reported for work this morning?"

"Hmmm....I see. Well have you seen a doctor?"

"Why not?"

"Well, I'm afraid I can't authorize more sick leave without a doctor's statement. So either call and get an appointment, or get your butt in here right now."

Hutch looked up, surprised at Captain Dobby's bluntness. But perhaps that was what Starsky needed right now. Dobby was quiet, listening to the other man's reply. Then his eyes widened, as though what he was hearing was unbelievable.

“I see,” Dobey said thoughtfully. “Well, I think that’s a little rash. I mean, have you talked this over with your partner? Don’t you think he should have some say so in the matter?”

“Hmmm.... Yes.” Dobey kept his eyes averted to the desk top.

“Well, David, I don’t believe you’ve thought this through. Come on in to work. As soon as you and Hutch wrap up this murder case, I’ll grant you both a couple of weeks of vacation. Maybe you could go up to my cabin again and get in a little fishing. What do you say?”

Dobey listened quietly for a few seconds. He ran his hand across his face, a gesture Hutch had seen before, when Dobey was bewildered or frustrated.

“I don’t think you should do anything about it right yet,” he concluded. “Go ahead and take this week off. I’ll put you on approved leave of absence. We’ll talk again on Monday.”

Hutch tried to get Dobey’s attention by waving his hand, motioning for the captain to give him the telephone. Dobey shook his head no.

“Okay...okay... But you still need to talk this over with Hutch. Right...right...I’ll talk to you next week.”

Dobey hung up the phone then leaned back in his chair. When he looked up and met Hutch’s inquisitive stare, he braced himself for the storm that was about to blow.

“Well?” Hutch urged him. “What did he say?”

Dobey sat quietly for a few seconds. When he spoke, the words struck Hutch as painfully as any bullet could have.

“He resigned.”

Hutch didn’t stop to ask questions. He already knew from having heard Dobey’s side of the conversation that he wasn’t able to give him the answers he needed. This was incredible! What the hell had gotten into Starsky? Taking the steps two at a time, he entered the police parking garage and went straight for his car. He’d get to the bottom of this—and he’d do it now.



Hutch pounded the door with his fist. Ringing the doorbell and knocking nicely hadn’t worked. He wasn’t about to take no for an answer; so when Starsky still didn’t respond, Hutch fished out his key and wrestled with the lock until the door clicked open.

He glanced around the living room, then headed directly for Starsky's bedroom, moving with the one-mindedness of a man on a mission. There he found Starsky lying in bed, one arm flung up over his eyes.

"Starsky." Hutch approached the bed apprehensively, realizing he was invading his friend's privacy, but unwilling to let that stop him.

"Starsky, I know you have to be awake after all the noise I made. By now the whole damn neighborhood's awake, so you may as well answer me." Hutch squatted down next to the bed. Starsky finally lowered his arm, and turned tormented blue eyes toward his partner. The dark stubble on Starsky's face had grown thicker, and his hair hadn't seen a comb even once in the last two days. He was still dressed in the same wrinkled, blue pajamas as yesterday.

"I was gonna call you tonight," he said listlessly. "Guess Dobby must've beat me to the punch." Starsky slowly swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, facing Hutch.

Hutch reached out and laid his hand on Starsky's shoulder. "What's going on with you, Starsk? We've been through a lot together, and you've never shut me out like this before. What could possibly have changed so drastically from two days ago?"

"You wouldn't understand." Starsky turned his head away.

"Try me," Hutch said, barely above a whisper.

No response.

"Starsk, *something's* happened. It has to do with Laura and John, right?" Still no response.

"Look at me," Hutch demanded. But Starsky's eyes strayed past Hutch, to the framed photo on the dressing table. Terry, Hutch, and Starsky—taken at her school's Spring picnic. Hutch turned and followed Starsky's gaze.

"She died cause she loved me, Hutch. Through all my grievin' and missin' her, I guess I never really accepted that I was directly responsible for Terry dyin'." Starsky's voice was filled with anguish and remorse.

"It *wasn't* your fault, Starsk. No one could have known Prudholm's mind was that sick and twisted. How could you possibly have known?"

"Don't you get it, Hutch? If Terry hadn't loved me, there wouldn't have been a reason for Prudholm to kill her. How many women have to pay that price just for lovin' a guy?" Tears welled his red-rimmed eyes; still he struggled to keep a grip on his emotions.

“Starsky,” Hutch’s own voice was so thick with emotion he could barely speak. “Don’t do this to yourself.” Hutch paused, trying to regain his own composure.

“I know it doesn’t make sense. It seems like the innocent are always the ones caught in the middle. Terry loved you, buddy. And she was happy when you were together. She wouldn’t have wanted you to be anything other than what you are.” He squeezed Starsky’s shoulder reassuringly, and smiled, remembering the note Terry had left, imploring Hutch to take care of Starsky and Ollie.

“I know if she had it all to do over, Starsk, she would still love you.” Hutch saw Starsky’s chin begin to tremble.

“What brought this on, buddy? I thought you’d worked through it.” Hutch asked quietly.

“Laura said it. She told me the cold, hard truth.”

“What truth?”

Starsky finally looked him in the eyes. His voice was choked with guilt when he answered. “She said...she said, ‘You’re a dangerous man to love, David.’ She said, Terry knew there were risks, being involved with a cop, but she never expected to lose her life because of it.”

Hutch ran a hand over his face, feeling the pain that must have knifed through his friend at those words. How could Terry’s friend have been so cruel?

“She’s right, Hutch. Everybody I ever loved has died. Look at Pop. And what about Helen? If Terry and I had never met, never fell in love, she might be married to an accountant by now, have six kids, and a house in the suburbs. She was too young to die, Hutch. Too beautiful, inside and out. Think of all the good she did with those kids.” The words just kept tumbling forth, like water over a crumbling dam. Hutch felt his own heart swell with pain—for Starsky, for Terry.

“Aww, Starsk. Life happens. We never know when we do something what the outcome will be. You can’t go through life consumed with guilt and what-ifs. If we do that, we’re afraid to live. The bottom line is, nothing you do will change the past.”

“No, but I can change the future.” Starsky took a deep, calming breath. “I’m leavin’ the force, Hutch. I ain’t gonna be responsible for anyone else I love dyin’—especially you. I couldn’t handle that.”

So that was it? Hutch was quiet for a moment, knowing he had to choose his words carefully if he was going to bring Starsky back from this bleak, guilt-ridden prison his mind had created.

“Starsk, now listen to me, and listen good.” Hutch gripped his partner’s arms and made him look him in the face. “Don’t you know I’d be lost without you? You’re my buddy, my best friend, my protector. Do you realize how many times you’ve saved my life just by being there, watching my back? How can you even *think* I could do this job without you as my partner?”

“Hutch—” Starsky tried to protest, but Hutch cut him short.

“Look, I know Terry’s murder has been a terrible thing to live with. I mean, look at me. Do you think Gillian would be dead today if she hadn’t gotten involved with a cop? As for Helen, you weren’t to blame for what happened to her. She was an undercover cop on an assignment. She knew the risks; she was doing her job. So put that out of your mind.”

Starsky tried to turn away, but Hutch maintained a tight grip on him. “And your dad...God, Starsk...you were a kid. You weren’t even there. It had nothing to do with you, or your mom, or even Nick. Your dad was a cop. He took the same risks you and I take every day.”

Hutch paused, and took a deep breath. “Terry didn’t blame you, Starsk. Please...don’t blame yourself. It would break her heart to see you like this.”

He continued, his voice barely above a whisper. “Don’t you realize I couldn’t face that world of degenerates and freaks out there if I didn’t know you were watching my back. Terry knew. She knew that you were doing your part to make this world a little better for the kids. She wouldn’t have wanted you to be anything other than what you are.” As he talked, Hutch’s eyes never left his friend’s face.

Without warning, Starsky lost the tenuous hold on his emotions and fell forward, resting his forehead against Hutch’s shoulder. The pain and anguish flowed from his body as cleansing sobs tore from his throat. Hutch held him firmly, anchoring him to reality. “Let it out, buddy, let it out” he whispered.

They sat there for several minutes like that. Two men, strong, yet vulnerable; haunted by ghosts of the dangerous, fast-paced lives they lived. They acknowledged in that moment that there was a price they’d paid, and would continue to pay. Being cops Being cops was the only life they could ever live. They were born to do it, and to face the inevitability that they must do it together—one incomplete without the other.



Captain Dobey looked up from his desk, irritated by one more interruption in his busy morning. “Come in!” he snapped.

“Hey, Cap,” Starsky said cheerily. “Brought you somethin’” With a flourish, Starsky dropped a smelly basket on the desk. Dobey’s nostril’s flared at the offensive odor of spoiled fish.

“Caught them himself,” Hutch added. “I’m afraid we didn’t have a chance to clean them.”

“You two get this rancid garbage off my desk, and for God’s sake, take a shower!” Dobey bellowed. “Out! And I mean NOW!”

“Aw, gee Cap, we were hopin’ maybe Mrs. Dobey would cook ‘em up and have us over for dinner,” Starsky teased.

“Starsky! NOW!”

Hutch grabbed the basket of fish off Dobey’s desk top and started backing toward the door. “Okay...okay...we can see this is a bad time,” he said.

“Ya don’t have to get your shorts in a wad,” Starsky chided, poking out his bottom lip in a fake pout.

“OUT!” Dobey shouted a final time before the two young men backed out of his office, closing the door behind them quietly.

Dobey sat there in silence for a moment, reflecting on the scene that had just taken place. The laughter started way down low, then slowly rumbled it’s way to the surface. It was good to have them back. They drove him crazy sometimes...but damn! Life would be dull without his boys. He sat back in his chair, secretly laughing, his huge body shaking with the force of it.



The End