

Promises

by Brit

She'd heard the shouting, the pounding on the outer room's door. She couldn't understand the words, but the tone of the man's voice held the unmistakable threat of violence and warning. She instantly rolled out of her small bed, the creaking springs sounding far too loud as they protested her rapid movement. Within seconds she was on the floor, curled into the small space between the stack of plastic milk crates she used as a makeshift nightstand and the wall, praying she would be hidden by the shadows, but knowing she wouldn't be.

From the noise that followed, she determined there was more than one person and that they had kicked in or rammed open the dilapidated hallway door. After a few tense moments of silence, she heard the creak of floorboards as cautious footsteps moved to the next nearest room, a second bedroom. That door had been left open, and she surmised that whoever it was didn't find what they were looking for there. The footfalls grew closer as they made their way next to the bathroom and, after a brief pause, continued on to the final door—*her door*.

When the bedroom door burst open, the two men who lunged through were the last things she'd expected. How the terror that still constricted her chest could somehow mingle with a fleeting wisp of relief would have been baffling if she really made the effort to think about it. All she knew at that moment was that it wasn't *him*. But who they were, what they wanted, and why their drawn guns were aimed in the general direction of the darkness she crouched in was still a threat. Part of her wished they would just go ahead and start blasting away, ending it all, ending her nightmare. But the other part of her—the tiny, fragile, guarded part of her heart—still clung to something she dared not call hope.

A soda can filled with pebbles had clattered unevenly across the floor when the door had swept it aside. The stones spilled out as it rolled noisily away until it bounced once against the nearest wall. The men glanced at it, their expressions fleetingly quizzical at the unusual sight, but they were far too aware of what they were doing to let it distract them for more than a heartbeat. They were fierce, their expressions intense. She thought at any moment they would literally burst from pent-up adrenaline and rage. Instead, their steely gazes swept the room, as if they could easily see in the dimly lit space. The erratically blinking neon sign from the neighboring motel's marquee cast bleary light through the single window, bathing the men in its glow as they both swung their guns left and right, seeking out any threat. As their eyes further adjusted, they leveled their gazes—and their guns—on her.

The shorter of the two took only a second to release one hand from the double-fisted grip on his gun to reach behind him and flick on the overhead light. The two blinked as the single bare bulb strained to illuminate the room.

Now that she could see them better, what was even more unexpected was how their expressions softened marginally as they considered her as well. Their guns lowered, but were still held at the ready before them.

The taller blond man spoke first, his voice low but urgent. "Is there anyone else here with you?"

She felt compelled somehow to want to answer him, want to help, but she was paralyzed with fear and couldn't even move to shake her head. *He* was gone—where, she didn't know. Nor did she know if he'd return in a minute or an hour or a week. But she did know he would come back. He always did.

And then it would start all over again.

"Is he here?" His voice hissed out as he stepped farther into the room, approaching her. She shook her head urgently, then flinched as the tall man crossed past her to the lone window and jerked it open. The rotting wood stuck for a moment before giving way to allow him to thrust his weapon then head out in order to see if anyone was on the fire escape. After a moment, he moved away from the opening and turned toward the other man. "It's clear."

As the terror and adrenaline began to dissipate, she was able to steady her frantic heart and really *see* the two strangers. One was fair, the other dark, and each wore an expression of intense anger. Before she could contemplate them any further, the shorter of the two withdrew something from his back pocket and jerked it over in her direction. Instinctively, she buried her head into her folded arms and tried to pull herself into an even tighter ball.

The room fairly crackled with tension. But as the silence continued and no blow was forthcoming, she held her breath and slowly lifted her head. The darker man had sheathed his gun and crouched before her, moving so silently she never heard him approach. Before she could flinch, he held a detective shield before her eyes and spoke in a low tone. "It's all right; we're cops. We're not going to hurt you."

The blond officer stepped behind his partner as he replaced his gun in his shoulder holster. "I'm Hutch; this is Starsky. It's going to be okay. I'm sorry we frightened you."

The man called Hutch looked back over his shoulder to where the soda can rested after leaving its trail of pebbles. "But I'm guessing you were already afraid of something...or *someone*. Is that right? That's why the can was against the door—to warn you?"

He knelt down beside his partner. "We can help you, if you'll let us. What's your name?"

The girl's eyes didn't meet either of the officers' kind faces, but instead stared mutely at the soda can—her makeshift alarm to warn her in her sleep that *he* had come home. That he was coming for her.

She didn't even seem to hear Starsky whisper to his partner. "She's traumatized. She can't be more than what—? Nine? Ten?"

"I'm eleven," she whispered, surprising herself that she would answer when every protective instinct commanded she remain silent. Trusting them, trusting their offer of help, was foolish and futile. How could she trust a stranger's offer of aid when the ones who were supposed to love and protect her were the ones who shattered her? When the ones who promised they would never hurt her again did it over and over?

Hutch's face softened further as he took in her thin, fragile features and her haunted, frightened eyes. Her bony frame made her appear considerably younger than she actually was. His expression changed when she turned away from his gaze and he could make out the unmistakable imprint of a hand staining the side of her face.

“Who did that to you?” Without thinking, Hutch reached out to gently take hold of her jaw to better examine the bruise. She shot up to her feet and would have scrambled over the top of the milk crates to get away from his touch if the two detectives hadn’t been equally as nimble.

Starsky extended his hands before him in a gesture of supplication. “Hey, hey—take it easy. It’s okay, I promise. It’s just that we can see you’ve been hurt, that’s all. Who hit you? Was it your dad?”

She didn’t answer, but stood trembling in the corner, her back pressed against the wall. Her eyes darted from one man to the other, then to the obstacles blocking her path to get away from them.

“You don’t want to tell us, we get it,” Hutch coaxed, his voice low and gentle. “You think if you tell us, he’ll be madder yet, and then he’ll *really* hurt you. That’s it, isn’t it?”

There was a flash of surprise on her face at Hutch’s intuition, not knowing how truly common her circumstances and reactions really were. Still, it didn’t prompt her to respond, but a modicum of tension left her, and her breathing quieted.

“We’re sorry we scared you. We don’t go around kicking down doors unless we have to—when we’re looking for someone who’s broken the law. I think you know who we’re looking for and why.” The kindness in Hutch’s expression sent a wave of longing and grief rippling through her and scrambled her thoughts—could they really care about what happened to her, or were they just trying to get her to do what they wanted her to? Why would they give a flip about her? Could she really trust what they were saying?

“Why are you here alone?” Hutch glanced around the dingy room again, taking in the meager furnishings. “Where is he? Does your mother live here, too? Are they coming back soon?”

Again, she nearly spoke, knowing she should negate everything he was assuming, but now the detective was venturing further into dangerous territory and she retreated back into herself. After a length of tense silence, Starsky donned a self-deprecating grin and exhaled a sort of laugh.

“Look at us…” Starsky began, almost comically slapping a hand to his forehead. “Here we are, asking you a bunch of questions, and we don’t even know your name. What kind of detectives are we if we don’t even learn your name?”

Hutch exhaled noisily, nearly matching his partner’s contrived embarrassment. “Pretty lousy ones, I’d say.”

She would have been insulted by their thinking she didn’t see through their façade, but there was something unexpectedly sincere about them that wouldn’t let her be angered by their exaggerated antics. She still didn’t give them her name; trusting them even with something as innocent as that was dangerous, and she knew all too well never to let her guard down, as it would inevitably be used against her.

Starsky gave her a toothy smile. “Like we said before, he’s Hutch and I’m Starsky.”

A few more awkward moments passed as they waited patiently for her to respond. When she didn't, Hutch cocked his head to one side as he looked her over. "Well, we've got to call her something. We can't just go around saying, 'Hey, you'."

"You're right. I think..." Starsky paused and nodded solemnly, as if studying her. "I think she looks like a 'Max.' That's what we'll call her, *Max*."

"Max, it is," Hutch agreed, giving her a tender grin that faded as quickly as it had come. "Max—*sweetheart*—someone hurt you. Someone's made you afraid. We want to stop them from ever hurting you again, and take you some place safe. Will you let us do that? Please? Will you let us help you?"

She licked her lips nervously, looking from one to the other. In the secret recesses of her heart, she cried out for rescue, for them to take her away from the horrors that had become her life. But even their apparent gentleness and sincere desire to protect her could not break through her fear, and she regretfully shook her head.

"*What the—?*" The drunken bellow came from the hallway outside the broken front door. It was *him*. He staggered into the large single room and blearily gazed around, seeking her out. When she did not appear, his face contorted in rage. "Girl, get out here *now* and clean up this mess. What the hell happened out here?"

"*Please—just go!*" She unexpectedly pushed against Starsky's side, irrationally wanting them to run before he could find a way to hurt them, too. She also knew what he would do to her—again—as he would never believe she didn't tell the officers anything that went on in the cramped, filthy apartment, regardless of the truth.

What happened next was beyond her imagination.

With what seemed like impossible speed, the two detectives had their guns drawn and charged into the main room. After Starsky shouted "Freeze! Police!" with effortless coordination, the man was thrown face first against the wall and his legs kicked apart. Hutch searched him for a weapon and, finding none, spun the man around and pushed him into the nearest chair. Starsky's gun remained thrust before him, aimed at his chest.

She could see her father was going to explode at any moment. Something inside her almost wished he would—then she would know if the detectives were really as good as their word. Instead, he straightened in the chair and began shouting. "What's going on? You have no right to bust in here and—"

Starsky barked out her father's name, and when he drunkenly nodded in affirmation, the detective pulled a sheaf of papers from his back pocket and tossed them on the table. "We have a warrant for your arrest on multiple counts of drug trafficking."

"Drug *what?* I ain't done anything wrong! You can't arrest me—you got no proof!"

"The judge who issued that warrant thinks we've got *plenty* of proof." Starsky leaned in close. "We also searched your vehicle and found a stash of coke, so add to that possession with the intent to sell."

Hutch took a menacing step closer and leaned in from the side opposite his partner, his breath hot on the man's cheek. "Add to that assault and battery, and child abuse and neglect."

"*Child abuse?* You guys are nuts—you don't have any proof! Whatever she told you is a lie!"

Hutch's hands were lightning quick as they snatched up the front of the man's shirt and nearly pulled him up out of the chair. "She never said a word. That bruise on her cheek is plenty of proof, dirtbag."

Her father's eyes were wild as he searched her out. "What did you tell them, huh? What lies did you tell them, you little whore?"

She stood frozen in terror for a moment, knowing what he would do to her once he got away from them. He would. He always did. After an instant, she mutely shook her head, desperate to convey that she hadn't betrayed him, hadn't said anything to them.

Starsky crossed over to where she stood in her bedroom doorway and again knelt before her. In her fear, she never noticed that his big hands, so threatening as they had brandished his gun, were gentle as they gripped her forearms.

"Max? What has he done to you? Can you tell me that? Please, I know it's hard. But if you can tell us what he's done, how he's hurt you, then we can make sure he never gets a chance to hurt you again." The pleading she read in Starsky's eyes nearly broke her heart open. "Please, how did he hurt you? What has he done to you, Max?"

"*Max?*" her father barked from across the room. "Why the hell are you calling her Max? That's not her name! See? All she does is make stuff up. I never touched her!"

"Come on, sweetheart," Starsky implored as he shifted, trying to further shield her father from her view. "Tell us what he's done, and we can put him away for a very, very long time. So long that he'll never touch you again. *I promise.*"

In that one instant, time stood still for her. Her father's ranting faded away to a muffled noise in the background of the moment, and she stood staring in turn at each of their faces—from his contorted with rage, to the detectives' expressions of silent pleading.

But the promise that she could trust the detectives, that they would protect her, was simply too good to be true. What good were promises when they were just empty words? She dropped her gaze from theirs and shook her head—a few moments of fragile hope could never overcome years of devastation and shame.

Starsky lowered his chin to his chest and exhaled quietly. Hutch jerked the man onto his feet and recited the Miranda rights as he led him to the door. Her father began shouting back over his shoulder at her. "Don't think I'm not coming back here for you! You just wait 'til I get out on bail, *then* you're going to be sorry!"

Hutch slammed the man against the doorframe and thrust an angry finger against his chest. "Don't think for a second we're not going to add those threats onto the counts against you! Now shut up before *I shut you up!*"

Her father sneered at her mockingly, promising her more of the hell she'd been living, despite Hutch's threats. She knew she'd never be free of him. Unless....

Unless she was willing to risk it all on their promises.

"He hurts me," came a tiny whisper—fragile, precious, desperate to be heard, desperate to be believed.

Starsky's head whipped up to look her full in the face. "What'd you say?"

The detective's piercing blue eyes were too much, and she looked down at the floor. From across the room, her father began shrieking, "*She's a liar! I never touched her. She lies!*"

With blinding speed, Hutch shoved her father against the wall again and then pressed his forearm into the man's throat, cutting off both air supply and caustic words.

A few more thundering heartbeats passed before she was able to summon up her courage again. "He hurts me. Sometimes, he comes into my room at night and...and...and makes me *do* things."

"You're doing great, Max." Starsky's quiet voice was calm, steady. Gentle. But if she would have looked up, she would have seen the pain and rage burning in unresolved conflict there. "What things does he make you do? It's okay to say it, Max. What happened...it's not your fault."

It's not your fault.

That, too, she had waited a lifetime to hear, measured against the shame and pain of what she'd had to endure.

"Bad things," was all she could manage.

Starsky swallowed hard. "Things a little girl shouldn't have to do? Not with her father—or anyone. Is that it? Grown-up things?"

"Yes." Her voice trembled. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "He hurts me so bad."

She didn't look over when a muffled grunt of pain was emitted from across the room. Hutch had thrown his full weight forward against his forearm and, subsequently, into her father's throat.

"Well..." Starsky wiped his eyes before managing an encouraging lift to the sides of his mouth, and stood. He left one hand on her shoulder, a simple gesture of reassurance and protection. "He won't ever hurt you again, Max—I *promise*."

Hutch looked back across the room, fury in his icy blue eyes. His gaze locked with Starsky's for a moment before releasing the pressure against his prisoner. With little formality or gentleness, he gripped a handful of her father's shirt and shoved him past the kicked-in door, then down the hallway. When they reached the car, he would call for a black-and-white unit to transport the prisoner, and then he would drive Starsky and the little girl down to the precinct to take her statement and place her in protective services.

Starsky looked around at the meager furnishings of the apartment, as the girl packed what few belongings she had into a worn paper sack. She carefully pulled a tattered picture of a singer from her wall—a keepsake clipped from a teen magazine—and a drawing of a winged horse and its rider leaving the earth behind. Some ragged undergarments and a single t-shirt followed into the bag—her only possessions, and the only evidence of her existence in the filthy room.

Starsky cleared the emotion from his throat and forced his tone to brighten. “Got everything you need, Max?”

She quickly looked around the room and then nodded. There was nothing left for her there. She only wished she could leave behind the memories as easily as the few remaining belongings.

After picking up the paper bag, Starsky held out his hand. He was surprised when her thin hand dropped into his. He covered his reaction and smiled encouragingly.

The two had just cleared the shattered doorway when he felt her weight pull back against his, stopping him from going farther. Starsky looked back at her expectantly, afraid she had changed her mind and lost her resolve.

“Bethany,” she whispered. “My name is Bethany.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Bethany.” Starsky smiled sincerely and gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

This time, it was she who stepped out first, leaving behind the hell she’d been living. She didn’t know what that night or the next day would hold, but she trusted that it would be better than the one before.

They had promised.

