

Too Close To Home

By *TibbieB*



Note to the readers: *If you have not read my trilogy, "The Guardian Series," please allow me to introduce Sam, the rottweiler mix, Starsky and Hutch's search and rescue dog. Sam was adopted by the boys as a puppy, in "Guardian I," when they discovered him, frightened and abused, in the house where his drug-dealing owner had been shot and killed. If you enjoy his interaction with Starsky and Hutch in "Too Close to Home," you may also wish to catch him in "Guardian I," "Guardian II," "Guardian III," and "Smile for the Camera," which can be found on the websites listed at the front of this zine.*



Chapter One

"Kenny, it's Mom." Hutch sat up in bed and glanced at the clock. Seven a.m. "I'm sorry to call so early, but I wanted to catch you before you left for work. I never know what days you'll be on duty."

"Is everything okay, Mom?"

"Well, not exactly. Your dad thinks I'm overreacting, but I've been thinking about calling you all night. It's Karen."

Fully awake now, Hutch swung his legs over the side of the bed and planted his feet on the floor. "Has something happened to her? Is she okay?"

"Don't get too alarmed, honey. It's just...well, we haven't seen or heard from her in three days. You know how depressed your sister's been since Craig died. I mean, they were married six years and she's been absolutely lost without him."

Hutch rubbed his eyes, trying to clear his thoughts and ask the logical questions any cop would. But it wasn't all that clear-cut when a member of his family was involved.

"Have you been over to her place? Reported her disappearance to the police?"

"Yes, of course, we went over there. I have a key, and when she didn't answer the door, we went in. Everything looked normal. Nothing was disturbed, and it didn't appear the house had been broken into. We called the police right away, but they weren't very

helpful. They said she hasn't been gone long enough, and if the house didn't look like a crime scene—”

Mrs. Hutchinson's voice broke, her tenuous hold on self-control finally dissolving. “Mom...Mom...is Dad there with you?”

“Yes.”

“Put him on the phone, okay? And try not to worry. I'll be there as soon as I can make the arrangements.”

“Thank you, son,” she whispered through her tears.

Hutch could never bear to hear his mother cry. She was always such a strong woman. He knew if she was this distraught, there was a legitimate reason.

“Kenny...I love you.”

Hutch closed his eyes, his heart breaking at the desperation in her voice.

“I love you, too.”



Starsky dropped his newspaper back on the table and got up to answer the door. Who on earth would show up at a person's door at 7:30 in the morning? Sam sat up from his comfortable spot on the blanket near Starsky's feet, but didn't seem particularly interested in investigating.

“Some watchdog you are,” Starsky flung back over his shoulder, as he peeked through the glass panel and spied Hutch standing on the other side. He slid the deadbolt over and opened the door.

“What are you doing here so early? I thought we were gonna meet at the track at eight-thirty.”

Hutch brushed past him and headed directly for the kitchen, stopping only long enough to give Sam a cursory pat on the head. Tail wagging, the dog padded into the kitchen behind him, then watched Hutch pour himself a cup of coffee.

“Come in,” Starsky mumbled, as he closed the door and followed his partner. “Oh, and have a cup of coffee,” he added with an amused smirk.

Hutch looked up, already sipping the hot liquid from the cup, unfazed by Starsky's cheeky comments.

“Starsk, I’ve got to leave town tonight. I wanted to let you know before I contact Dobby.”

Instantly regretting his earlier sarcasm, the smile faded from Starsky’s face. “What’s goin’ on? Something happen?”

“My mother called this morning, upset and worried. It seems that Karen’s disappeared. Dad agreed with Mom that the local authorities aren’t doing anything to locate her, and they’re both scared out of their wits.” Hutch reached up and rubbed the back of his neck, absently attempting to relieve some of the tension centered there. “They need me. I have to go.”

Starsky could see by the worry lines in his partner’s face that he wasn’t going only for their sake. “Of course you do. When do we leave?”

Hutch looked surprised for only an instant. He should have known Starsky wasn’t one to stand by idly when he thought Hutch might need him. “I think Dobby will okay family emergency leave for me, but there’s no way he’ll approve it for you. That would be stretching it—even for us.”

Unperturbed, Starsky picked up his coffee cup and slugged down the remainder in two gulps. “Maybe not. But he’ll okay vacation. I’ve got ten days comin’ to me.”

Hutch smiled, moved by the loyal gesture. “I can’t let you use your vacation for this. I know you’ve been saving up those days to take that Cancun ‘singles’ cruise you’re always talking about. I can handle it.”

“Well, like it or not, looks like you’re gonna be stuck with me. If something’s happened to Karen, you may need me. Ya know I’m the smart one in this partnership, so don’t even *think* about leavin’ me behind.”

Hutch knew it was useless to argue, but gave it one more try. “What about Cancun?”

“Hey...you know I can’t afford that cruise. That’s just a pipe dream. Somethin’ to look forward to. If I take it too soon, I’ll just have to come up with another pipe dream.” Starsky flashed him a mischievous grin. “What say we call Dobby at home and see if he’s awake yet?”



Starsky looked at his watch for the hundredth time, beginning to think this flight would never end. Fidgeting in his seat, he turned to look at the clouds outside the cabin window. Anything to take his mind off Sam.

“He’s okay,” Hutch said.

Starsky looked back at him, wondering how the blond was able to read his mind so easily.

“He’s perfectly safe.”

“I bet he’s scared to death. He’s never been on a plane before, and I hear those baggage compartments are cold,” Starsky complained. “What if the plane goes down and nobody lets him out? Huh? Have you thought about that?”

“Starsky, if the plane goes down, we’re all in trouble, not just Sam. Now, we talked about this before we decided to bring him along. If we’re ever going to volunteer for search and rescue missions outside Bay City, he’ll have to fly. This is a good learning experience for him *and* us.”

“Yeah, but we’re together—and he’s all alone down there,” Starsky added, refusing to dismiss the crashing plane scenario.

“It’ll be fine. We’ll land in another thirty minutes.” Hoping to divert Starsky’s attention, he changed the subject. “I asked for a compact car. Cheaper. But they were all out, so we’re getting a mid-size for the same price. I’d say that’s a lucky break, wouldn’t you?”

“Terrific. As long as it runs,” Starsky replied distractedly.

“It’s a hundred and ten miles to Redwood Valley, but it’s mostly good highways, so the trip goes by fast.” Hutch studied Starsky’s profile and could see his face was taut with anxiety, worrying about the big dog in the baggage hold. Starsky had become more and more protective of Sam since the dog had come to live with him. Of course, there was good cause for his devotion. The animal had saved both their lives on more than one occasion. Hutch loved the dog a great deal, too, but having grown up with animals on his folks’ ranch, he was more accustomed to having them around. Sometimes it seemed to him that Sam was more like Starsky’s child than his dog.

“I thought you said there was an airport there. Why couldn’t we just fly in?”

“Because, it’s just a little municipal airstrip. The landing field is only big enough for small private planes. We’d have to hop a puddle jumper to get there, and that’s more expensive than renting the car. Besides, we’ll need transportation while we’re there.”

“Good point.” Starsky looked up just in time to smile at the stewardess walking toward them. As the attractive young woman passed, Starsky made a point of reading her nametag. “She’s really somethin’, huh?”

Pretending he hadn’t noticed the pretty, young stewardess, Hutch busily flipped through the pages of his Newsweek magazine and answered casually, “Who? Oh...oh, her. Yeah. Cute.” Hutch could see by the look on his face, Starsky was about to make his move.

The brunette walked back by, this time stopping in the aisle next to their seats. She smiled at Starsky and asked politely, “Is there something I can get for you, sir?”

Turning on the charm, Starsky answered brazenly, “As a matter of fact, there is, Donna. How about a cup of coffee and your phone number?” He flashed her what he considered his “sexy” smile and winked flirtatiously.

Embarrassed by Starsky’s lame attempt at panache, Hutch stared down at his magazine, wishing he could sink through the crack between their seats. He really didn’t want to witness his partner’s humiliation, even if he did bring it on himself!

“Would you like cream and sugar with that?” Donna smiled sweetly, blatantly ignoring his request for her phone number.

Starsky’s smile faded slightly, but he recovered quickly, pretending not to notice her dismissal. “Both, please.”

Passing up a prime opportunity to rib Starsky, Hutch studied the magazine article intently and let the moment slide. There were just some things a guy shouldn’t get grief over. Soon the stewardess returned with Starsky’s coffee, sans phone number and further conversation.

Before they knew it the jet touched down, making an effortless, smooth landing, and the passengers began to disembark. Donna waited at the front door of the airplane, saying goodbye to passengers and returning their coats to them from the coat compartment near the cockpit. Hutch thanked her and filed off the plane just ahead of his partner. Starsky stopped to retrieve his coat, and Donna handed it to him with a smile.

“I hope you enjoyed your flight, Mr. Starsky. And please be sure and check your coat pockets later.”

Puzzled, Starsky opened his mouth to ask what she meant, but the pretty brunette was already busy with the next passenger. The two detectives hurried to the area designated for pet pick-up and waited for Sam’s crate to be delivered. Starsky absently slipped his hand into the pocket of his coat and discovered a small piece of folded paper. Opening the tiny note, a smile lit up his face. The note read: “Donna Echols, 952-555-1289.”



Chapter Two

Eileen Hutchinson opened the door before her son had an opportunity to ring the bell.

“Mom.” Hutch reached down and drew her into a warm embrace. Her smile was bittersweet—filled with love for the son she hadn’t seen in far too long, and concern for her missing daughter. Starsky stood by silently, not wanting to intrude on their tender

reunion. Watching them hug made him long to see his own mother again. Sam sat beside him, well-behaved for a change, seeming to sense this wasn't a good time for his usual antics.

Eileen pulled away reluctantly, blinking quickly to conceal the tears that had begun to fill her eyes. "I'm sorry, David. I didn't mean to ignore you." She reached out and hugged him affectionately, before stepping back into the house. "Won't you come in?" She stepped aside and the two men and their dog entered. Before Starsky could thank her, Edward Hutchinson came in from the kitchen.

"Hello, Dad," Hutch said. Starsky immediately picked up on the cool restraint in his partner's voice. He knew Hutch and his father weren't close, but he'd never really been privy to the reasons. Hutch seemed reluctant to talk about it, and Starsky, reluctant to pry. The man and his son shook hands—no tearful reunions for them.

"Hello, David." Mr. Hutchinson nodded tersely and refrained from extending his hand in welcome.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson," Starsky returned. "Thanks for inviting me to stay here. Hope you don't mind that we brought Sam along." The dog immediately perked up at the sound of his name, wagging his tail as a friendly greeting. "If it's a problem, he and I can get a room in town."

Edward Hutchinson looked like he was about to suggest that was a very good idea, indeed, when Eileen interrupted, reaching out to wrap her hands around Starsky's arm and draw him near. She looked up at him, her eyes shining with gratitude. "Don't be silly, dear. You're family. You know that. And I've been dying to meet this 'wonder dog' you and Kenny have been talking about for so long."

Sam left Starsky's side and went to the petite woman, sensing that she'd be his friend if he just got the ball rolling by introducing himself. Eileen smiled at him, patting his head when he looked up at her, tongue lolling out one side of his face, creating a comical doggie grin. "We're going to get along just fine," she said cheerfully.

"Ken, I'm sorry we dragged you all the way out here," Edward said, gesturing for his son and Starsky to have a seat on the sofa. Eileen sat down next to Hutch. "But your mother's been extremely worried, and I have to agree with her that the sheriff here doesn't seem concerned."

"Do you have any theories on where Karen is, Dad?" Hutch's eyes searched his father's face, realizing that he seemed much older than he had a year and a half ago, when they last saw one another. "Did she say anything recently that would lead you to believe she planned to leave town?"

"No...no...but she hasn't been herself lately. I feel sure she's just gone away to be alone for a while. Sort things out. She'll be back, and she'll have an explanation for her lack of consideration."

Hutch couldn't tell if his father believed what he was saying, or if he was only trying to reassure his apprehensive wife.

"We thought maybe we'd search the house, ask around, you know—talk to Karen's friends," Starsky volunteered.

Edward shot him a resentful look. Starsky immediately regretted assuming his suggestions would be welcome. He knew Mr. Hutchinson didn't like him, the man had made it clear on several occasions. What he didn't understand was "why." Starsky had tried to talk to Hutch about it once, but he'd abruptly changed the subject, and Starsky never broached it again.

Seeing the look on his father's face, Hutch felt his temper flair. He didn't like it when anyone was unkind to Starsky—not even his father. Defensively, he agreed with Starsky.

"Right. Starsky's right. We'll treat this as an investigation. Mom..." Hutch turned to his mother and took her hands in his. "...that *doesn't* mean that we think something's happened to Karen. It's just a precaution, on the outside possibility there's been some sort of foul play. We wouldn't want to inadvertently destroy clues or evidence."

Starsky saw the fear in Eileen's eyes flicker, then die, with reassurances from her son. "I knew you'd know the right thing to do, Kenny. That's why I insisted on calling you."

Hutch smiled, then said in a tender but persuasive voice, "Mom, I wish you wouldn't call me Kenny. You know how much I hate that."

Eileen giggled self-consciously. "Okay, I'll try to remember. You know you'll always be Kenny to me. But I understand why you wouldn't particularly like it at your age. I'll try my darndest to call you Ken, but please don't be angry with me if I slip up once in a while."

Hutch wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close for an affectionate, forgiving hug. Starsky smiled, remembering the pained expression on Hutch's face when his mother had called him Kenny in the squadroom, in front of Dobey and at least ten other policemen. Hutch had taken a lot of ribbing for that one slip-up, finding a sign on his desk the next day, proclaiming: "This is the Desk of Kenny the Kop," and his name on the duty roster, posted for three consecutive days as "Detective Sergeant Kenny."

Before they could say more, the timer on the oven started dinging, telling Eileen that the roast was done. "There's dinner." She stood up and started toward the kitchen. "Kenny—I mean, Ken, you know where your room is, and you can show David to the guest room, next to yours. I made up the bed in that one. And Sam can sleep wherever you think he'll feel most comfortable."

She disappeared through the kitchen door, leaving the three men to stare at one another in uncomfortable silence. Finally, unable to stand the strain of trying to make civil

conversation with his father, Hutch stood up and motioned for Starsky to follow. “Come on, Starsk, let’s get our bags.” Edward stood as well, but didn’t offer to help.

Starsky fell into step next to Hutch, not saying a word until they reached the car and were out of earshot.

“Hutch, ya think your dad would be more at ease if I stayed in town? I mean, I don’t wanna make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

The muscles in Hutch’s jaw tensed, and he flung the trunk lid open a little harder than necessary. “It doesn’t matter where you stay, Starsk; he’s just like that. He’s a cold, hard-headed man, who doesn’t like anything that isn’t his idea.” Hutch jerked the bags out and dropped them to the ground before slamming the lid shut. He looked up at his friend and saw apprehension in the sapphire blue eyes staring back at him. “I want you here, buddy. Mom wants you here. That’s what counts.”

Starsky reached out and squeezed Hutch’s arm, hoping to reassure him that things would work out. “You got it, pal. Wild horses couldn’t drag me away. As long as you need me...”



Starsky lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. It wouldn’t be daylight for almost an hour, and he’d not heard any sounds of stirring downstairs. Not wanting to disturb the others, he remained in bed, Sam by his side. The big dog snored softly, his head resting on Starsky’s chest. He hadn’t chastised Sam, when the dog jumped on the bed during the night, sidling up close to him. He realized the new surroundings and unfamiliar people probably made him a little uneasy.

Lying awake for the past hour had given Starsky time to think about something that had lain buried in his mind and heart for a long time. Something he never discussed with anyone—not even Hutch. He hoped his partner wasn’t facing the pain he himself had experienced so long ago. But just in case he was, Starsky would be there. So what if Edward Hutchinson didn’t like him? This wasn’t about winning a popularity contest; it was about being there for his best friend, helping in any way he could. He realized that this whole thing may turn out to be a misunderstanding, but just in case...



Realizing he couldn’t detain Sam from his morning constitutional any longer, Starsky made his way downstairs quietly. The big dog tip-toed down the steps behind him, having been given the “quiet” command, and realizing if he wanted to go out, he’d better obey. Starsky snapped the leash to the dog’s collar and eased out the door, closing it softly behind them. Man and dog walked around back of the house, heading toward the area abutting the paddock where Edward Hutchinson’s thoroughbred horses grazed lazily on the dew-drenched grass. The chill of autumn was in the air, and the cooler

temperatures were invigorating to Starsky, having just left the warm climate of California behind the day before. As they neared the barn, he saw Hutch's blond hair glistening in the morning sun, as he stood at the fence, stroking the face of a regal chestnut mare.

Upon hearing Sam and Starsky, Hutch turned and smiled. "Morning," he greeted them.

"Didn't know you were up," Starsky said. Sam tugged at the leash, straining to run to Hutch, until Starsky released it and gave the dog his freedom. When Sam loped up to the blond, Hutch squatted down and petted him, scratching his ears in exactly the right spots.

"Couldn't sleep," Hutch answered. "I've been awake since about three."

Starsky looked at him thoughtfully, noticing the dark circles under his eyes, confirming that he'd had a restless night. "I woke up about four myself. Too bad we didn't know. We could've both gotten up and gone into town for some coffee and breakfast."

Hutch stood back up and laughed softly. "Mom would have a cow if she found out we went into town and actually 'bought' breakfast. The woman lives to cook. She'd've been fit to be tied."

"Well, if I don't get a cup of java soon, I'm the one who'll be fit to be tied."

Sam, who'd been content to sit at Hutch's feet and wait for more ear scratching, suddenly noticed the unusual critter watching him through the fence. Cautiously, he inched his way forward to get a better look. Accustomed to dogs, and not particularly fond of them, the Chestnut mare snorted at him indignantly. At this unexpected turn of events, Sam hightailed it back to Hutch and hid behind his legs, peeking around at the threatening animal who was still eyeing him warily. Both men laughed, realizing this was the first time Sam had seen a horse.

"Better watch out, Big Dog," Starsky warned. "He doesn't seem too thrilled with you being here." Tucking his tail between his legs, Sam decided he'd keep a healthy distance between himself and the menacing critter on the other side of the fence.

"She, Starsk," Hutch corrected him.

"Huh?"

"She—the horse is a she."

"Oh, yeah? How can ya tell?"

Hutch's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Good grief, Starsky, everyone knows mares have longer eyelashes," he answered, tongue-in-cheek.

"Oh." Starsky leaned in for a closer look, quietly digesting this newest tidbit of information, until he noticed Hutch's lips twitching with amusement. Realizing he'd

been had, Starsky shot him a warning look, but decided it wasn't worth getting mad about.

Hutch chuckled good-naturedly before turning back to look at the mare again. His voice became more serious, as he reached out and stroked her gently along the muzzle. "I miss being around the horses and dogs. I think that's why I've enjoyed having Sam around so much."

"Why'd you leave here? I mean, it's beautiful, and I'm sure your Dad could use some help here managing things."

Hutch snorted. "Do you really have to ask? You've seen what he's like. Everyone near him has to play by his rules. He's never approved of anything I decided on my own. He's the same with Karen. I couldn't believe it when she stayed here after high school. She went to the community college and lived here at home until she and Craig were married." Starsky saw Hutch's eyes soften when he spoke of his baby sister.

"She probably wanted to be near your mom," Starsky suggested. "Most girls do."

"Yeah...she and Mom are very close. I think Karen wants to be near in case Mom ever decides she's taken about all of Dad's crap she can."

Starsky saw the anger flare in Hutch's face at the mention of his father. It was difficult for him to fathom, having been so close to his own dad. Of course, he'd just been a kid when Michael Starsky was killed in the line of duty—not old enough to have reached the point of having his own ideas about how to live his life. Who knows? Maybe they would've eventually crossed swords, too.

Starsky clapped Hutch on the shoulder. "How about we go back to the house and make a little noise so your mom'll get up and fix us breakfast?"

"They're both usually up and around way before now," Hutch answered. "Maybe they didn't sleep well either. Let's go make a little racket. I think I need that coffee about as bad as you do."

The two men walked back to the house together, Sam tagging along behind, his forgotten leash dragging on the ground.



Chapter Three

Hutch drank the last sip of coffee from his cup, while watching Starsky from the corner of his eye. He'd not seen his partner consume this much food in one sitting for quite some time.

Eileen, always anxious for folks to enjoy her culinary efforts, delivered another stack of hot pancakes to his plate, before Starsky could protest. “Oh, no, Mrs. Hutchinson, I can’t eat another bite.” Starsky dabbed the maple syrup from his lips, while trying to politely refuse another Paul Bunyan serving. Looking a tad disappointed, but realizing she’d coerced him into his *last* helping, she backed off.

“That’s okay, David. I tend to get a little carried away when I have a table full of men to cook for.” Starsky looked up, seeing the merriment in her eyes.

From beneath hooded lids, Hutch watched his father look on disapprovingly at the exchange between his wife and the unwanted guest. Hutch felt his blood begin to boil. Why did his father dislike Starsky so much? The man had never done anything to Edward. On the contrary, he’d bent over backwards to avoid causing any dissension between them. Realizing his anger was about to get the best of him, Hutch abruptly changed the subject.

“Who was the last person to see Karen, Dad?”

Edward pulled his eyes away from Starsky and glanced over at his son. “As far as we can tell, it was Bobby. I sent him over there to work on her water pump the day before she disappeared.”

“So Bobby’s still here,” Hutch said, more a statement than a question.

“Where would he go?” Edward answered sharply. “You know no one else would hire him. He’s simple, Ken, you know that. I promised his father I’d give him a place here as long as he wanted to stay, though, and I’m a man of my word,” he added magnanimously.

“He’s such a sweet boy,” Eileen interjected. “It just wouldn’t be the same around here without him.”

Starsky watched the exchange with curiosity. This was someone Hutch had never mentioned. Obviously, Edward wasn’t thrilled about having the man around, but seemed to think he had no choice.

Hutch noticed the inquisitive look on Starsky’s face and explained, “Bobby works as a handyman for Dad. He’s slightly retarded, but seems to have a natural knack for mechanical things. Really a nice guy.”

“He grew up here,” Eileen added. “He’s two years older than Kenny—Ken—and he’s almost like another son to us.”

“Oh, please, Eileen,” Edward interrupted. “The boy is simple, there’s no getting around it. You know I wouldn’t have let him stay here if he could’ve moved on to something else. His father was the best horse trainer I ever had, so I owe him.” It seemed to Starsky, the subject was a sore spot with the elder Hutchinson.

“Well, he’s always done everything we’ve asked him to, and since Craig died, he’s become extremely protective of Karen,” Eileen told them. “He goes over there all the time, just to check on her, do chores, take care of her horses—anything she needs him to do.”

“We’ll start by talking to him,” Hutch said. He glanced over at Starsky again. “I think that’s as good a place as any to begin, don’t you?”

Starsky nodded his agreement.

Hutch turned back to his mother. “Mom, I need the keys to Karen’s house and any out buildings she has—storage units, bunkhouse, garden shed.”

“Of course.” She walked over to the small wooden horse plaque hanging next to the back door, the home for various and sundry keys. Plucking off three, she handed them to Hutch. “They’re all marked.”

Before he could think better of it, Starsky piped up, “What about her job? Does Karen work?”

Again, Edward shot him a glaring reproach. *What’s the deal here? Starsky thought to himself. Why can’t I ask a simple question without him getting his nose out of joint?*

“She does a lot of volunteer work at the animal shelter and the Center for Abused Children. Karen has such a soft heart; she can’t stand to see anyone mistreat a child or an animal. That’s another reason I can’t help but worry something’s happened to her.” Eileen’s voice began to quiver. “She left her cat, Tuffy, and her dog, Muffy, at the house, unattended. Bobby’s been taking care of them when he goes over to feed the horses.” Eileen turned toward the sink and became very busy rinsing the dishes and stacking them in the dishwasher.

“Try not to worry, Mom. There’s probably a reasonable explanation for everything.”

“Karen’s been very depressed since Craig died,” Edward offered. “They were inseparable. When that plane went down, her life came to a screeching halt.” For the first time since their arrival, Starsky saw pain and caring in the man’s eyes. Perhaps he loved his daughter after all. He certainly seemed to hold no affection for Hutch. “I know he’s been gone a year and a half, but she’s refused to get on with life,” Edward continued. “She has only a few close friends, and has resisted all attempts they’ve made to help her meet young men her own age and begin dating again.”

Hutch felt a twinge of guilt for not having visited his sister since the funeral. That had been his last trip home. Looking back, he realized one reason he’d stayed away so long was to avoid having to deal with Karen’s grief. Now, he felt selfish and petty. Maybe being here for her now would make up for it. Clearing his mind of these disturbing thoughts, Hutch looked down at the keys in his hand.

“I’m sorry to hear that it’s been so hard for her.”

“Well, we certainly would never know it, judging by the lack of interest you’ve shown in your sister’s well-being,” Edward accused.

Now it was Starsky’s anger that flared. He wanted to reach across the table and snatch the man up by his shirt collar. The flash of pain in Hutch’s eyes cut him to the quick.

Before the conversation could become more volatile, Eileen, the consummate peacemaker, with many years experience playing referee between her husband and children, interrupted. “Well, you boys better go ahead and get started. The sooner you do, the sooner we’ll find Karen.”

Starsky took a deep breath, bringing his temper in check. He glanced at Hutch, who was still looking down at the keys, then stood up from the table. “Mrs. H., that was the best breakfast I ever had.” He flashed her his most appreciative smile, which, in turn, brought a smile to Eileen’s face.

Once again, she’d managed to diffuse a showdown between Kenny and his father.



Sam sat at the back door, peering through the screen at his humans as they ate breakfast and talked. He’d already been fed, but the aroma of the frying bacon still made his mouth water. He hoped they were saving some for him. At home, if he was a good dog and didn’t beg while they were eating, Starsky rewarded him with some scrumptious tidbit from the table.

The dog could tell from the sound of their voices that things weren’t okay. The tall, thin man, who favored The Light One slightly, seemed angry at the world. Sam sensed he shouldn’t try to make friends with this one, and that his sheer presence here seemed to upset the man. Even more puzzling was his hostile attitude toward Starsky and Hutch.

Sam looked around as two blue tick hounds crossed the yard, watching him with wary eyes, but showing no signs of aggression. Realizing he was the guest here, the rottie decided not to pursue them. After all, this was *their* turf. When the screen door creaked open, Sam turned his attention back to his humans.

“Good boy, Sam,” The Dark One praised him. “Look what I brought you.” Starsky squatted down and fed the dog a strip of crisp bacon. Sam eagerly accepted the reward and smacked his lips with delight.

Hutch reached down and touched Starsky’s shoulder. “Want to come with me and meet Bobby?”

Starsky stood up. “Sure. After we talk to him, let’s go to Karen’s and check it out.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

The two men walked across the back yard toward the guest house where Bobby lived. Coming from the barn, carrying a pitchfork, the handyman spotted Hutch first and called out to him.

“Kenny? Kenny, is that you?”

Hutch looked up at his old acquaintance and waved in greeting. “I was just coming to see you, Bobby.”

As the man approached, Starsky took in every detail of his appearance. Mrs. Hutchinson had said he was older than Hutch, yet Starsky thought he looked considerably younger. A large man, broad chested with muscular arms, he looked like he could pull a plow as easily as any mule. Starsky suspected the man didn’t have a clue as to his own strength. He wore his carrot red hair slightly long and unevenly cut, leading Starsky to wonder if he was his own barber. Bobby reached out his huge hand and took Hutch’s, shaking it vigorously.

“Mrs. Hutchinson, she said you was coming. She said you was.”

“Good to see you again, Bobby,” Hutch told him sincerely. The big man kept shaking Hutch’s hand long after the greeting should have ended. Gently easing his hand from Bobby’s, he turned and gestured toward Starsky. “This is my partner, Dave Starsky.”

Starsky smiled, but refrained from engaging in a marathon handshake with him. “Pleased to meet ya, Bobby.”

“Hello. I’m Bobby. I’m Kenny’s friend, Bobby.”

Sam poked his big head around Starsky’s leg and looked up at Bobby, wagging his tail, somehow knowing this gentle soul loved animals. Not waiting for an invitation, he nudged his way past Starsky and introduced himself.

Smiling, Bobby looked down at the dog and patted him on the head. “Hey, there, boy. Oh, man, Kenny, is he your dog?” Sam responded to this with a soft “bwoof,” affirming he was indeed Hutch’s dog. “He’s really neat, Kenny. Yes, sir, he sure is.” Bobby scratched Sam’s ears, instantly endearing himself to the big dog.

“He actually belongs to both of us,” Starsky interjected, unreasonably feeling slighted. Sam “bwoofed” again, demanding another pat on the head before Hutch interrupted and steered the conversation to his sister’s disappearance.

Hutch smiled indulgently. “Listen, Bobby, I need your help. Starsky and I are trying to find out where Karen is. Do you know anything about that?”

Bobby averted his eyes to the ground and nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “No, sir. I don’t know where Miss Karen is. No, sir. I been feeding her animals. I been real good and been feeding her animals. Miss Karen sure loves her animals.”

“Yes, she’s always loved animals, that’s true,” Hutch agreed.

“Mrs. Hutchinson, she told me it was okay to bring Muffy and Tuffy home to stay with me for a while. That’s what I done. I brought ’em home to stay with me while Miss Karen’s gone. Yes, sir. I brought them home with me.”

Seeing the man was agitated, Hutch laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. “That’s fine, Bobby. You’re a good friend. Can you tell me about the last time you saw my sister?”

Bobby looked up swiftly, then averted his eyes again. “I was there working on her pump. I’m real good at fixing things. Yes, sir, I’m real good. Anyways, Miss Karen was outside talking to me when the phone rang. She went inside to answer the phone, and I kept working on the pump. I’m real good at fixing things.”

“I know you are, Bobby. You’ve always been very smart when it comes to mechanical things.”

Not used to being called “smart,” this brought a prideful smile to the handyman’s face. “But what about Karen?” Hutch gently directed him back to the subject.

“I heard her. I heard Miss Karen talking *real* loud. I kept working on her pump, but I could hear her just the same. She was talking real loud.”

“Could you tell who she was talking to?”

“No, sir, I couldn’t tell. She only talked a few minutes, but I could tell she was upset. I don’t like it when people upset Miss Karen. No, sir. I don’t like that at all.” The rocking from foot to foot became more pronounced, as Bobby recalled the last day he saw Hutch’s sister.

“What happened next, Bobby?” Starsky prompted.

“Well, sir, she come running out of the house, right past me and said she was going into town. Said for me to help myself to some lemonade in the refrigerator. Miss Karen knows how much I like lemonade. Yes, sir. Miss Karen makes lemonade for me when I help her out.”

“And she left?” Again, Hutch guided the man back to the subject of his missing sister.

“Yes, sir. She left. She left, all right. I finished up the pump, went and had my lemonade just like Miss Karen said, and I locked the door and come on home.” Once his story was told, Bobby seemed to relax somewhat, the rocking motion diminishing.

“So, she left in the car, and no one’s seen her since?” Starsky asked.

“I don’t know who saw her. The car was back in the driveway when I went over two days later. Yes, sir, the car was sitting right there. Right there, in front of the house. But no sign of Miss Karen.” Bobby’s voice took on a childlike quality. “Nobody better hurt Miss Karen. She makes me lemonade.” He looked up at Hutch. “Kenny, you gonna find Miss Karen? I want to help you. Tell me what to do, and I’ll do what you say. Yes, sir, I’ll do what you say.”

Hutch patted his shoulder reassuringly and smiled at his old childhood friend. “Bobby, you’ve been a lot of help already. Starsky and I are going to do our best to find her and bring her back home.”

“That’s good.” Bobby perked up noticeably, having faith Hutch could do exactly that.

“I have to go pitch some hay to the horses now. You’ll let me know when you find her, won’t you, Kenny? Yes, sir. I sure wanna know.”

“Of course I will,” Hutch reassured him. “I’ll be talking to you more later. ”

Bobby headed toward the ancient pick-up truck parked near the barn, its bed filled to the brim with bales of fresh hay. Cranking up the sputtering old engine, he drove it toward the back pasture.

Hutch turned to Starsky, a sad look in his eyes. “Poor Bobby. He really tries.”

“Seems like a nice guy,” Starsky observed. “I think he’d tell us if he knew anything, don’t you?”

“I’m sure of it.” Hutch watched the trail of dust following the beat-up old truck. “He loves Karen. Always has. When we were kids, he got into a terrible fistfight because one of the neighbor boys was teasing her about her new braces. Beat the kid half to death before we could pull him off.”

Starsky was surprised by that revelation. From the few minutes he’d just spent with Bobby, he wouldn’t have guessed the man was capable of violence.

“Karen’s always been very kind to him, stood up for him when the other kids made fun of him. And with someone like Bobby, that means everything.”

Starsky smiled. “Ya know, the more I hear about your sister, the more I think I’m gonna like her. Ready to go?”

Hutch had that same far-away look in his eyes that Starsky had seen several times over the past two days. Thinking of his youth, no doubt. The dark-haired detective thought back upon his own childhood, dredging up painful memories that had remained dormant for years.

“Yeah...sure. May as well,” Hutch answered distractedly.



Chapter Four

Starsky steered the rental car up the drive and parked in front of Karen’s house. He didn’t know exactly what he’d expected, but he wasn’t prepared for the beautiful sprawling home he saw before him.

“Your sister and her husband must have plenty of money,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Craig was an investment broker. One sharp guy. Knew all the right moves and had a considerable amount of family money to get him started. He left Karen well provided for, so I’m sure whatever problems she has, aren’t financial.” Hutch stepped out of the car and reluctantly walked up to the front door of the house, Starsky and Sam close behind.

Stepping over the stack of unclaimed newspapers lying on the porch, Hutch unlocked the front door and went in. The interior was decorated tastefully, but had a comfortable, lived-in look about it. Starsky began by checking all the windows and doors for signs of forced entry, but everything seemed to be in order. As he poked his head in and did a quick once-over of the rooms, he was struck by how neat and orderly everything was. No indications that Karen had been distraught, or that there’d been anyone else in the house.

Returning to the living room, he found Hutch standing beside the cherry sofa table, which was crowded with picture frames, displaying photos chronicling Karen’s life. There were several shots of two children. Hutch was holding a photo of a tow-headed little boy, wearing baggy shorts and a Davy Crockett shirt. His arm was slung haphazardly over the shoulders of a tiny little girl with silvery blond pigtails. Both were smiling happily as their beagle puppy sat at their feet.

“What ’cha got there?” Starsky asked, almost reluctant to intrude on Hutch’s private thoughts.

“Oh...uh...just a picture of Karen and me. I remember how excited we were that day.” A ghost of a smile played upon his lips. “Dad had finally allowed us to have a puppy. Not a hunting dog or a show dog...just a puppy. You know, all to ourselves.”

Starsky smiled at the warm images that sprang to mind—a little Hutch, all arms and legs, and missing front teeth. He wished he'd known him then.

“She’s a real cutie,” he said.

“She was a beagle.”

“What?”

“She was a real cute beagle. We called her Annie.”

“Your sister, dummy. Your *sister* was a cute little girl.”

Hutch looked up from the photo and stared at Starsky, as though he'd spoken in Swahili, or some other equally incomprehensible language. After a moment of glaring at one another in total confusion, they both burst into laughter.

“I-I thought—” Hutch gasped between peals of laughter, “I thought you were talking about the dog—”

Holding his sides, Starsky doubled over with laughter. “No joke, Sherlock! I was talkin’—I was talkin’ about Karen, you big lug!” Once they started, it was like a dam bursting—one of those incredibly silly moments that can dissolve a perfectly normal person into a fit of giggles over the most absurd thing.

Eventually, the moment passed, and Hutch was the first to speak. “I don’t know about you, partner, but I needed a good laugh. I didn’t realize just how tense I’ve been since we got here. It felt really good to laugh.”

Starsky smiled, understanding exactly what Hutch was trying to say. His anxiety and fear for Karen’s safety, coupled with the strained relationship with his father, were enough to make any man, even one as strong as Hutch, an emotional wreck.

Starsky sobered, knowing the hysterical fit of laughter had been a common reaction to the kind of stress Hutch was dealing with at the moment. “Look, we’re gonna get to the bottom of this. I’m sure there are some answers here. We just need to put our heads together and use our skills and training as cops to figure it out.”

“I know you’re right. It’s just...” Hutch rubbed his eyes, trying to find the right words to convey his feelings. “This is my *sister* we’re talking about, Starsk. And...and this is just a little too close to home, if you know what I mean.”

“I know. I do.” Starsky laid a firm hand on Hutch’s shoulder. “But we’re the best...hmmm? Aren’t we always tellin’ Dobey that? Huh? So let’s go through here and do our cop thing. Something’s here that’s gonna tell us where to find Karen.”

Reassured, Hutch nodded. “Thanks, Starsk.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Blintz. We haven’t even started.”

“No. I mean, thanks for insisting on coming along on this trip with me. I think it would be a hell of a lot worse if you weren’t here.”

A little self-conscious, Starsky made light of his actions. “You don’t fool me, Blintz. You brought me along ’cause ya knew how much your old man loves having me around.” He wagged his eyebrows, mimicking Groucho Marx.

Hutch shook his head at the absurdity of such a notion. “Come on, Starsk. I’m serious. You help me keep it all together.”

“Hey...that’s what partners do.”

“No,” Hutch countered, unwilling to let Starsky shrug him off, “that’s what *friends* do.”

Sam, who’d been exploring on his own, returned to the living room. He breezed in nonchalantly, obviously unaware that barging through a person’s home uninvited wasn’t acceptable canine behavior. Not knowing Muffy and Tuffy were no longer home, he was sniffing and snorting his way through the house, following their scent, making it his personal mission to check them out and introduce himself.

As the dog disappeared down the hall again, Starsky shouted a warning. “Lift your leg on anything, Big Dog, and you’re history!” Sam peeked around the door, searching The Dark One’s face to gauge the seriousness of the warning, then continued his investigation, virtually unfazed.

The two detectives began their search, zeroing in on anything that might produce a potential lead. Starsky hesitated only a moment before sorting through the stack of mail lying unopened on the kitchen counter. Aside from a few bills, it was mostly nondescript junk mail.

“Starsky,” Hutch called from the bedroom.

“Yeah?”

Hutch appeared at the bedroom door, holding an Agnier purse. “I don’t think she’d take a trip without her purse, do you?”

“No woman *I* know would. Did you check her closet?”

“Yeah, but she has so many clothes, how am I supposed to tell if anything’s missing? You find anything?”

Starsky picked up a note pad he’d found next to the telephone. “Just this,” he said, tossing it to Hutch. Hutch recognized his sister’s handwriting.

“Mean anything to you?”

“No. But I guess we could call and see who answers.”

Hutch stepped up to the phone and dialed the number. A man answered after the first ring.

“Editor’s desk.”

“Excuse me? What number have I reached, please?”

“This is the *Redwood Gazette*. Brian Goodwin, editor. How can I help you?”

“My name’s Ken Hutchinson. I’d like to make an appointment to come by and speak with you.”

“In regard to...?”

“I’m trying to locate a missing person.”

“Would you like to place a ‘personals’ ad?” the editor asked.

“No. Not at this point.”

Starsky was bewildered by the one side of the conversation he was privy to. He tapped Hutch’s shoulder and mouthed the words, “Who is it?” Hutch put up his hand, signaling him to wait.

“Well, Mr. Hutchinson, I don’t know what I can do to help you. The personals, in our classified section of the paper, would be your best bet.”

“Look, Mr. Goodwin, I’d really appreciate a few moments of your time. I promise I’ll be brief.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line, but finally Goodwin spoke. “Okay. Sure. How about, say...eleven-fifteen?”

“That’s good. Thank you. I’ll be there.”

“Do you know where we’re located?”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the *Gazette*. See you at eleven-fifteen.”

“The *Gazette*?” Starsky asked, curiously, as Hutch dropped the receiver back into its cradle. “It’s a newspaper office?”

“Apparently,” Hutch answered. “That name, Brian Goodwin, sounds familiar.”

“Probably an old school pal,” Starsky suggested.

“I don’t think so. Can’t quite place him.”

“Think there’s any connection?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But we have to start somewhere,” Hutch answered. “I’m going to go through her purse and see if I come up with anything. You wanna check the garage?”

“Yeah, sure,” Starsky agreed.

While Starsky and Sam went to the garage, Hutch emptied the contents of his sister’s purse. When her wallet and car keys clattered to the kitchen counter, his suspicions were confirmed. Wherever Karen was, she must not have gone alone. The wallet contained \$82.53, her driver’s license, and at least a dozen different credit cards. Unexpectedly, Hutch’s hands began to tremble. Had his sister been abducted?

“Nothin’ outta the ordinary in the garage.” Starsky stopped mid-stride, concerned by the lack of color in Hutch’s face. “Find somethin’?”

“No. Except, everything seems to be here. Money, license, credit cards.” He lifted his eyes and met Starsky’s. “Something’s happened to her, Starsk. She would’ve needed these things.”

“Come on, buddy. Don’t get too far ahead of yourself here. Let’s go into town and meet with that newspaper dude. We haven’t even talked to any of her friends yet.”

Hutch took a deep breath and began putting the items back into the purse. “You’re right. Let’s go.”



Chapter Five

Starsky and Hutch stood at the front counter of the small newspaper office, waiting for the clerk to show them to Brian Goodwin’s office. “Wonder what their circulation is,” Starsky whispered.

“Probably a lot more than you’d expect. Think about it, Starsk, there’s not a lot that goes on in a community this small, but anything that *does* happen, makes the headlines.”

“Mr. Hutchinson?”

The two detectives looked up and saw Brian Goodwin for the first time. He was one of those familiar faces, the kind you're sure you've seen before but just can't place. A little on the heavy side, with a receding hairline, years ahead of his biological age, he wasn't exactly the type most women found attractive.

"That's right." Hutch extended his hand to shake Goodwin's. "And this is my partner, Dave Starsky."

"Partner?" Goodwin looked confused. He adjusted his dark-rimmed glasses, and peering over the bifocal line slashing across the thick lens, quickly looked Starsky over.

"I'm sorry, I should have explained on the phone," Hutch apologized. "We're police detectives."

Goodwin's brows shot up, surprise evident in his expression. "Perhaps we should go back to my office," he suggested, looking over at the clerk, who was openly staring at them now. "Lynn, hold my calls, please."

Once the three men were sitting, Hutch began explaining the reason for their visit.

"So you're Karen's brother? She told me you were a detective on the West Coast. I'm sorry I didn't make the connection."

"Are you friends with my sister?"

"Yes, I sure am. Craig and I were pretty close. We were in college together, did a little fishing. Karen got upset if he went hunting—you know how she is about animals. But I didn't know anything about her disappearing. Why has it been kept so quiet? What does the sheriff say?"

Starsky cleared his throat, hoping he could be diplomatic. "The local law enforcement officers haven't shown much interest in checking into it. That's why Hutch's parents called us. What's up with the cops here? Can you fill us in?"

"There're only the sheriff and two deputies. Remember the 'Andy Griffith Show'? Well, let's just say these guys must have attended the same academy as Barney Fife." Both detectives smiled at his description.

"We're going to pay them a little visit when we're done here," Hutch told him. "But we found this number on a pad beside Karen's phone, and thought maybe someone here may have spoken with her recently."

Goodwin leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, as though the overhead tiles held the answer to Hutch's question. "Hmmm...I know I haven't talked to her lately. Maybe she was renewing her subscription, or placing a classified."

“If either of those things was the reason she called, would you have a record of it?” Starsky asked.

“Sure. I’ll check with Lynn, the clerk out front, and see if she remembers Karen calling recently.”

“We’d appreciate that,” Hutch said, standing up to leave.

Following his lead, Starsky stood, too. “One more thing. Karen’s been widowed for nearly two years now. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but you said you’re friends. Have you been seeing her socially—you know, dating?”

“No,” he answered immediately. “Craig and I were good friends, and by virtue of Karen being his wife, I’m friends with her as well. But I haven’t seen her, except in passing, since the funeral. I don’t think I’d feel comfortable dating Craig’s widow.

Starsky nodded. “Thanks, Mr. Goodwin. You’ve been very helpful.”

“We’re staying with my folks.” Hutch took out a business card, jotted the Hutchinsons’ number on the back, and handed it to Goodwin. “When you find out why Karen called, you can reach me at this number.”



The two detectives sat in the rental car outside the sheriff’s office, planning their approach. “You’d better let me do the talking, Starsk. Redwood Valley’s a small town, and the people who live here don’t trust strangers. In a situation like this, subtlety goes a long way.”

Incredulous, Starsky stared back at his partner. “You tryin’ to say I don’t have any tact? Huh? That I might offend somebody?”

“Look, don’t go getting bent out of shape. I’m not questioning your professionalism, but I know, and *you* know, that sometimes you come across pretty strong. I realize I’ve been gone awhile, but I still have the home team advantage. You know—I’m a ‘local boy’.”

Starsky removed the keys from the ignition and whispered beneath his breath, “Talk about the pot callin’ the kettle black,” but decided it wasn’t worth the effort necessary to argue. They hopped out of the car and went up the steps, entering the Sheriff’s Department. Sam watched from the back seat, disappointed he hadn’t been allowed to join them.

Deputy Mike Williams looked up from his “Spider Man” comic book and quickly slipped it into a manila folder labeled “Pending Cases.” “Yes, sir. What can I do for you fellows? Lost? Need directions to the hotel?” Apparently more accustomed to directing

tourists than fighting criminals, the young deputy seemed, none the less, eager to impress them.

Hutch removed his sunglasses and stuffed them into his shirt pocket. “Actually, we’d like to talk to the sheriff about a missing person.”

“Uh...Sheriff Dotson’s eating his lunch right now. If you want to wait, I’ll go check and see when he’ll be free.” Deputy Williams stood up. “He’ll want to know why you’re here. He’s a very busy man, and I’ve got to tell him before he’ll talk to you.”

“Like I said,” Hutch answered, “we’re here about a missing person.”

“Who? I don’t know of anybody missing, and I pretty much have my finger on the pulse of this town,” the self-important young man said.

Beginning to lose patience, Hutch flipped out his badge and presented it to the deputy. “Tell him Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky are here to talk with him.”

Williams’ eyes bulged out and he seemed at a loss for words. “Okay, sure. Just wait here.” He retreated through the door behind him.

“Thought you were goin’ for subtle, Blondie.” An amused smile tugged at the corners of Starsky’s mouth.

“Yeah, well...I didn’t want to dance with him all afternoon either. We’ve got other places to go and people to see,” Hutch answered sharply.

The door opened again and Williams returned, the sheriff two steps behind him. The tall, medium-framed man looked about Hutch’s age, except for the graying temples and the silver sprinkled throughout his beard. In all likelihood, he hoped the beard would deflect attention from his rather large, bulbous nose. When he entered the room, it was apparent by his recalcitrant stride and the arrogant tilt of his head, that interrupting his lunch was an unheard of event in Redwood Valley.

“I’m Sheriff Dotson. My deputy says you seem to think your business is more important than me finishing my lunch, so let’s just cut to the chase.”

Not to be deterred by rudeness, Hutch started to introduce himself. “I’m Detective Sergeant Ken Hutchinson—”

“I know who you are. Big shot detective from Bay City.”

Hutch felt his temper beginning to flare. This guy obviously had an attitude, and they didn’t have time to tip-toe around his oversized ego.

“We *do* work in Bay City, but I’m originally from here, and my family lives—”

The sheriff interrupted again. “Yeah, I know that, too. We went to the same high school, not that we ran in the same circles or anything. I remember you, Mr. All-American football player-track team-ladies’ man.”

Hutch’s face flamed red, and the muscles in his jaw tightened and flexed. Starsky knew he was about to blow. Stepping between Hutch and the sheriff, he coolly interrupted.

“I’m Detective Starsky, and I’m not real happy about how this conversation’s goin’, Sheriff. I mean, we’re here, what? Two minutes? And I find out you know more about my partner than I’ve learned in ten years. This is impressive, true, but not real helpful with our current investigation.”

Hutch tried to step forward, but Starsky laid a gentle, restraining hand on his chest before continuing. “So whattaya say we start over? Hmmm? It’s pretty obvious you’ve got a problem with my partner, so maybe you’d rather talk to me. ’Cause one way or another, you *are* gonna talk to us.”

His anger mounting, the sheriff’s face turned a mottled purple. Starsky locked eyes with him, making it clear they wouldn’t leave until he told them what they wanted to know.

Dotson knew the dark-haired detective meant what he said. Ken Hutchinson had always been a tough guy, and this partner of his seemed hard as nails, too. The two of them together presented a formidable front. Despite his earlier bluster, the sheriff was fairly certain he didn’t want to tangle with them.

“So, what is it you want from me? What’s this about a missing person?”

“My sister, Karen Edwards, hasn’t been seen nor heard from in five days. My mother said they reported her disappearance, but you refused to investigate.”

“Well, she hasn’t been gone long enough to be considered ‘missing,’” he said defensively. “She may have taken a short trip somewhere. Everybody likes to get away once in a while.”

“Oh, come on, Sheriff,” Starsky interrupted. “You mean to tell me in a town this size, it’s not unusual for a woman from a prominent family to be missing for almost a week?”

“How do I know she hasn’t run off with some man?”

Starsky glanced at Hutch and saw the muscles in his jaw tense again. “What makes you think my sister would leave town with a man? My mother said she isn’t involved with anyone.”

The sheriff smirked, then mumbled sarcastically, “Well, her boyfriend’s going to be surprised to hear that.”

Hutch lunged for the bigger man, but Starsky grabbed his arm, pulling him up short. “He ain’t worth it, partner.” Hutch turned and glared at Starsky, then gradually relaxed. Looking back at the leering sheriff, Starsky took over the questioning. “So, if she has a boyfriend, how about giving us his name?”

“I’m not giving you anything, punk. This is my jurisdiction, and if anyone is investigating this case—assuming there is a case—it’s me. *I’m* the law here! Do we understand each other?”

Starsky clenched his teeth, biting back the urge to knock that sneer right off Dotson’s face. Only common sense helped him keep his temper in check. All they needed was to be arrested and thrown in jail. That would only make things harder on Mrs. Hutchinson. And Hutch’s dad? He’d have one more criticism to fling in his son’s face.

Starsky stepped back, pulling a reluctant Hutch with him. “Fine. You’re a true servant of the people—a real jewel of a guy, Sheriff. Probably can’t investigate your way out of a brown paper bag,” he said snidely. Turning to Deputy White, he added, “You must be really proud, workin’ for Deputy Dawg.”

“Why you—”

“Uh-uh-uh,” Starsky said, wagging his finger at the sheriff. “Temper, temper.” Facing Hutch, he tugged on the blond’s sleeve. “Come on, partner. I think we could both use some fresh air.”



When the two detectives reached the car, they found Sam hanging out the window, taking in the local sights. The big dog was dying to get out and explore the town, and hadn’t given up on the possibility his humans would take him for a walk. As they approached, his tail wagged frantically, until he got a glimpse of the uptight expressions on their faces. Something was wrong—they were walking too fast, their movements tense. He’d learned early on how to read their body language, and when to lay low. The big dog sat down on the back seat, no longer lobbying for a tour about town. He’d just wait and see what happened next.

Hutch got in first, slamming the door angrily. Starsky followed suit. Starting the car, he turned and looked at his partner. “Don’t let him get to ya, Hutch. We’ll find her.”

Hutch ran a frustrated hand over his face. “Yeah. I know. I remember that jerk now. Abe Dotson. He always was a bully.” Thinking back to high school, Hutch smiled broadly. “His first name is actually Abekenezer. We used to say he had to be a tough guy, if he was going to live with a name like that.”

Starsky smiled, too. “You’re kiddin’? Who’d name their kid Abekenezer?”

Hutch shook his head, wondering the same thing himself. Then his expression grew more serious. "I can't believe they elected him sheriff."

"Probably ran unopposed." Starsky backed up the car and pulled onto the street. "Let's go back to Karen's and see if we missed somethin'. If she really *is* seeing someone, maybe we'll find a clue to help us figure out who."

Having seen his humans smile, Sam decided it was okay to take part in the conversation. He cautiously moved forward and hung his head over the seat, resting it on Hutch's shoulder. The man reached up and absently scratched the dog under the chin, and Sam leaned in, lapping up the attention.

"Okay. Whatever you think. I'm sorry, Starsk, but I'm not thinking too clearly right now."

Starsky reached over and patted Hutch's knee. "It's okay. Let me do the thinking for a while."



Chapter Six

Starsky pulled into the driveway in front of Karen's house and cut off the engine. When he opened his car door, Sam bounded over the seat and scrambled past him. "Looks like he's ready for a little exercise."

Hutch got out also, and started up the drive. "I'm going to see if I can find an address book," he told Starsky. "Why don't you toss Sam a few balls and let him work off some of that energy?"

"Good idea." Starsky watched Hutch retreat up the driveway, before reaching into the car and retrieving Sam's ball. "Wanna play ball, Big Dog?" Starsky held up the ball where the dog could see it.

Sam woofed loudly, then ran out for a pass. About twenty feet out, he skidded to a stop and waited expectantly to catch the first throw. Starsky drew back and lobbed the ball out past the dog, forcing him to chase after it, before scooping it up near the edge of the clearing. Sam snapped it up and ran back to Starsky, dropping it at his feet for a repeat performance.



Hutch searched through the drawers of the huge mahogany desk that had served as Craig's "home office," but came up empty. He knew an address book would be their best bet to find out with whom his sister was spending time. He stopped and looked around

the room, trying to think like Karen. *Where would she keep her address book? Where are the telephone books?*

Hutch went back to the kitchen and yanked out the counter drawer located beneath the telephone. There he found the local phone book and a small red address book. Snatching it up, he began thumbing through, not exactly knowing what he was searching for, but hoping something would jump off the page. There were only five men's names in the book, and Hutch didn't recognize any of them, but he did recognize one name—Sabrina Clark—Karen's closest friend in high school. According to his mother, Sabrina and Karen had remained steadfast in their relationship over the years. If his sister was dating someone, perhaps Sabrina would know his name and how to reach him.



Starsky threw the ball again and watched the big dog lope after it, showing no signs of fatigue. They'd been at it about ten minutes, and, rather than slowing down, Sam seemed to be gaining momentum and energy from the exercise and brisk autumn air. Starsky could feel the muscles in his arm beginning to tire. The red ball scrunched in his big mouth, Sam ran back and deposited it at Starsky's feet again.

“Okay. One more time. Then I'm done for, okay?”

Sam looked up impatiently, and woofed loudly, urging Starsky to hurry. The man picked up the ball and pitched it as far as he could, putting his body weight behind it. He watched as the ball sailed over Sam's head, then cleared the far boundaries of the lawn and disappeared into the woods. Sam followed it and vanished into the cover of the trees, just as the ball had.

Starsky waited, but Sam didn't reappear. Scanning the treeline with his eyes, he called the dog, expecting him to come flying out of the woods any second. Finally, after the third shout from Starsky, Sam appeared at the edge of the woods, barked excitedly, then ran back amongst the trees.

“Sam! Come here, right now!” Sam reappeared, barked, and ran back into the woods again. Obviously, Starsky decided, the dog was trying to coax him into the woods, probably chasing a skunk or squirrel. Beginning to lose patience, Starsky stomped across the lawn and followed the agitated dog into the woods.

He hadn't gone far when, up ahead, he saw Sam sitting at attention. Once the rottie was sure he had his human's interest, he barked again, hoping to entice Starsky to come see his discovery.

“What d'ya think you're doin', you big goomba?” Starsky chastised half-heartedly. He realized the dog had been cooped up in the car most of the day and needed to work off a little energy. Still, the detective wasn't in the mood for games. As he approached, Sam barked again. Starsky was less than ten feet away when he realized what the dog was

trying to show him. He stopped dead still, reluctant to face what lay just beyond his reach.

Sam whined and lay down beside the form on the ground. Reluctantly, Starsky took another step closer. The sunlight filtering through the canopy of trees, glanced off the cloud of silvery, blond hair. Starsky's mind froze.... The next few steps were tortuous, but he had no choice. When he reached Sam and his discovery, Starsky dropped to his knees and carefully, almost reverently, brushed the spun silver tresses aside. Ice blue eyes gazed up toward the heavens, void of expression, frozen in death. Starsky was mesmerized by the familiar, yet different features. So much like Hutch, yet fragile and feminine. The pain shot through him like a bullet, knowing he'd have to be the one to tell his friend the truth about Sam's grizzly find in the woods. Poor Karen, she had been here all along...



Hutch stared out the window, drawn there by Sam's incessant barking—not the normal, playful yapping he was accustomed to, but an urgent, excited sound that made the detective uneasy. He reached the window just in time to see Sam summon Starsky into the woods. Seconds passed, then minutes, and neither his partner nor the dog returned. Hutch went out the back door at a clip, determined to find out where the two had disappeared to.

As he left the beautifully manicured lawn and entered the wooded area, he thought he saw movement straight ahead. Just a few feet farther, he spied Starsky and Sam. They were huddled together, looking at something on the ground. Hutch chided himself for his foolish concern. Obviously, Sam had been chasing squirrels again, and must have—for the first time—actually caught one.

“Starsk—”

Starsky bolted to his feet, turning a stricken face to Hutch. Crouched at Starsky's feet, Sam's ears lay flat against his head. Before Hutch could ask what they were up to, Starsky had covered the distance between them, bringing the two men face-to-face.

“Hutch...come on, let's get outta here.” With a firm grip on his partner's shoulders, Starsky tried to steer him back toward the house.

“What's wrong, Starsk? What's going on here? Did Sam kill something?”

Starsky's face was drawn and pale. “Hutch...Sam didn't do anything. It's...it's...let's go back to the house and talk.”

Suddenly, Hutch realized this wasn't about Sam killing some animal. *Starsky wouldn't be this upset unless he'd found—*

A cold wave of fear swept through Hutch, as he searched Starsky's face and saw both anguish and sympathy. Panicking, he pulled to the side, craning his neck to look past Starsky. That's when he realized what his partner had been shielding his view from seconds earlier. *Oh, no...please, God, no....* Slowly, his eyes met Starsky's. "Who?"

"Hutch...*please.*" Starsky's voice was thick with emotion. "Don't go over there—"

"Get out of my way!" Hutch wrenched free and shoved Starsky aside, knocking him to the ground with a thud.

Desperately, Starsky lunged out, grabbing his leg. "Hutch, wait!"

Hell bent and determined to see for himself, Hutch kicked free of his partner and stumbled toward the gruesome scene before him. As he drew closer, his worst fear became a reality. Lying in the grass like a broken, discarded doll, was the body of his sister. Devoid of life, she seemed unreal, bringing to mind the wax figures in a museum their father had once taken them to visit when they were children.

Sinking to his knees beside her, Hutch reached out a shaking hand and tenderly touched the cold, inanimate face, then gently closed the vacant, unseeing blue eyes. "Karen," he whispered, more a plea than a question. "Karen, no...." Hutch felt a sob rise in his throat, choking him, but he swallowed it back. His eyes stung, but he shed no tears. There was no room for grief. No time for pain. Only numb disbelief. This couldn't be happening...it was all a bad dream.

"Hutch?" Starsky knelt beside him, his own heart breaking. He laid a sympathetic hand on Hutch's shoulder, trying to comfort him. "I'm...I'm sorry, buddy," he said quietly. "I didn't want you to see her like this."

"How? How did she die?" His eyes met Starsky's, wanting answers that his partner didn't have. "Why? Who could do this? She was a good person. So gentle, so kind."

"I don't know...I don't know, partner. But no one else can hurt her now."

Hutch gazed at his sister's face, memories of their childhood rushing back in flashes, momentarily pushing aside the pain and remorse. Then, noticing that from the waist down, she was covered by Starsky's jacket, he asked the question he feared most. "Was she raped?"

Starsky stared at the ground, answering barely above a whisper. "I think so. Her clothing is...well, it looks like she was assaulted."

Hutch closed his eyes tightly, trying to block out the images that forced their way into his brain. The pain in his heart surged. He fought it, blocked it out, focusing on only one thing. He'd find out who was responsible and make them pay. Raising his eyes to meet Starsky's, he spoke calmly. "Go to the house and call the sheriff. I'll stay here with her."

“Hutch.” Starsky swallowed hard, struggling to keep his own emotions in check. “I don’t think that’s a good—”

“Go, damn it! Now!”

Starsky flinched, but tried again. “Let me stay. You call. You shouldn’t be here alone.”

“Starsky, get the hell out of here! She’s *my* sister! I’m staying with her!”

Slowly rising, Starsky reached down and gently touched Hutch’s hair. “Are ya sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Reluctantly, Starsky left him and returned to the house to make the necessary calls.

Sam whined, then inched closer and lay down beside Hutch to wait. As the eerie quiet of the forest surrounded them, Hutch gazed down at the body of his only sibling, knowing what he had to do. He and Starsky would find the person responsible—and God help him when they did.



Chapter Seven

Despite the steady stream of neighbors and friends coming and going, there was a quiet pall over the house. Hutch sat beside his mother, his arm draped protectively around her shoulders, quietly accepting the words of sympathy and love from their friends. His father had disappeared to the barn, seeking refuge amongst his thoroughbred horses. At first, Hutch was embarrassed that his dad chose to avoid the well-wishers, had even said so to his mother. In her wisdom and tolerance, Eileen reminded her son that Edward was dealing with their loss the only way he could. He’d never been a man who could show or share his emotions.

Starsky hung back, wanting to be near his partner, yet unwilling to intrude upon their grief. He knew what it meant to lose a loved one, and accepted that the bond between mother and son, at a time like this, had to take precedence over all else. He would stay within arm’s length—ready to step forth when Hutch needed him. His heart ached for his friend, but he knew the grieving process was a very personal thing.

“You must be Dave Starsky.” Starsky looked up and was met by beautiful, large brown eyes and a smile that lit up the room around them.

“That’s right.” Starsky straightened, puffing out his chest imperceptibly. “And you are?”

“Sabrina. Sabrina Clark.” Her smile faded slightly. “Karen was my best friend. I still can’t believe this has happened.”

Starsky nodded. “Yeah. It’s pretty tough on everybody. Hutch and I had no idea we’d be facing this when we came out here.”

“I heard you found her.”

“Yeah. Well, actually, our dog, Sam, did. He led me to her.” Starsky’s eyes met Sabrina’s. “I know if you were her best friend, this is really hard on you, too.”

“Yes, it is. I loved Karen.” Her eyes moistened and her voice thickened. “She was like a sister to me. And she was so unhappy after Craig died.”

Starsky smiled at her sadly. “Look, when you feel like talking, I’d like to ask you a few questions. I’m gonna find the turkey that did this and nail him to the wall.”

“Sure. As a matter of fact, I may be able to point you in the right direction,” she answered solemnly. “I want to talk to you, but not here.” She looked around the room furtively, then slipped a card into his hand. “Here’re my address and phone number. Could you stop by tonight, around eight?”

“Detective Starsky?”

Starsky looked up and saw the Hutchinsons’ next-door neighbor holding the telephone receiver. “You have a call.”

Starsky’s eyes sought Sabrina’s. “You got it. Eight o’clock.” He touched her elbow and smiled. “I’ll look forward to talking with you tonight. Excuse me, Id better take this call.” He reluctantly left her and went to the telephone in the kitchen.

“Starsky,” he spoke quietly into the receiver.

“Hi. This is Lynn Bradley...from the newspaper office.”

“Oh, yeah. Hi.”

“Listen, I heard about Karen. I’m so sorry. Please tell the Hutchinsons they’re in my prayers. Okay?”

“Sure. Thanks for calling.” Starsky had been taking such calls all day, trying to run interference for Hutch. He’d placed a notepad and pen next to the phone and jotted down names of the folks who called with condolences.

“Wait! Don’t hang up. I have some information for you.”

Starsky's ears perked up, hoping that at last, they may have a lead to pursue.

"Brian told me that you guys wanted to know if I'd talked to Karen recently. I did."

"That's great." Starsky flipped the tablet to a clean sheet of paper. "Why did she call?"

"She called about placing a classified ad. I gave her the information and she came in and filled out the form about three weeks ago."

"What was she listing?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Finally, Lynn answered, "It was a 'personals' ad. I remember it because we don't get many of them here."

Unsure what she meant by "personals," Starsky pressed for more information. "What kind of personals ad are you talking about?"

"It was the standard. You know—'Single white female wants to meet nice white male' et cetera..."

Astounded, Starsky's breath caught in his throat. This was the last thing he'd expected. How would Hutch take the news that his sister was advertising for a boyfriend?

"Listen," he said, dropping his voice. "Could you please pull the ad and let me come by and take a look?"

"Sure," she said, agreeably. Lynn really wanted to help with the investigation. Although they'd never been close friends, she'd known Karen in high school and thought she was a very nice person.

Starsky glanced at his watch. "Will you be there another hour?"

"Yes. We don't close 'til five."

"Thanks, Lynn. You're a sweetheart."

Starsky dropped the receiver back onto the cradle. Knowing Hutch would wonder what had happened, he decided against slipping away without saying anything. He waited for the friend who was talking to Hutch to walk away, then bent down and whispered to him, "Listen, buddy. I'm goin' into town to check on something. Will you be okay?"

Hutch's eyes flew to Starsky's face. "A lead?" he asked, hopefully.

"Maybe. Too soon to tell. You stay here with your mom; let me check it out."

Hutch started to rise and insist on going along.

Starsky pressed his shoulder lightly. “Please. Just stay here. I promise if it’s anything, you’ll be the first to know.”

Hutch didn’t protest, knowing Starsky would keep his promise. As he started to leave, Starsky stopped and came back. “Hey, I left Sam up in my room, asleep on the bed. Want me to take him with me?”

Hutch shook his head. “Nah, he’ll be okay,” he answered. “Actually, I kind of like having him around right now.”

“Yeah,” Starsky agreed, “I know what ya mean.”



Starsky pulled up in front of the newspaper office and shut off the ignition. Through the glass, he saw the attractive brunette and recognized her from their visit the day before.

“Hi,” Lynn greeted him, as the tinkling door bell announced his arrival.

“Hi.” Starsky rewarded her with a heart-stopping smile. “Thanks for callin’. I appreciate your help.”

“Well, I don’t know how helpful this is, but since you asked, here’s the ad.” She slid the form across the counter toward him. “This is what we give folks to fill out when we’re running a classified for them.”

“So, Karen actually came in and filled out this form herself?” Still amazed at this latest revelation, he picked up the sheet of paper and quickly scanned it.

“Single, white female, loves animals, long walks in the woods, and classical music, seeking serious relationship with white, thirty-something male. Please write and send photo to: Ad, P.O. Box 121, Redwood Valley, MN, 30031”

Even seeing it with his own eyes, Starsky found it hard to believe. This would devastate Hutch. Even more, it would devastate Karen’s parents.

“Yes, she did. I took it myself. Have to admit, I was a little surprised.”

“Do you know if anyone responded?”

“No. I’m sorry, but the responses never come back through us. Most people do what she did. They get an anonymous mail box at the post office and have the responses mailed to them. That way, if they don’t like what the person has to say, they aren’t risking being identified.”

Starsky let out a disappointed sigh.

“I feel sure she got a response,” Lynn offered. “I saw her at the movies a couple of weeks ago with this really good-looking guy.”

“You did?”

“Yes. I didn’t recognize him, though. Sorry I can’t give you a name or anything.” Not wanting to end their conversation, Lynn racked her brain for any information that may help him. “This is a small town, Detective. Someone was bound to have seen them together besides me, someone who may know him. All I remember is that he was very handsome, tall, blond, and had a great physique. You know, like he worked out with weights.”

Starsky listened, piecing the puzzle together in his mind. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this.”

Lynn beamed a smile at him. “If I think of anything else, or hear anything around town, I’ll call, okay?”

“That would be great. Thanks again.”

As he started out the door, Starsky turned back again. “Would it be too much trouble to get a Xerox copy of that ad?”

“Not at all.” Lynn took the form into the print shop area and made a copy.

“Did the sheriff ask about this?” he asked, as she handed it to him.

“No. I haven’t heard from him at all. Should I call him?”

Starsky weighed the wisdom of what he was about to say. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather keep this between us until I have a chance to talk to Karen’s family. I’m certain they don’t know about any of this. Of course, if the sheriff comes in and asks, you need to tell him the truth.”

Lynn smiled. “Don’t worry. It can be our secret for now.”



Chapter Eight

Starsky checked his watch and saw it was nearly 5:00 p.m. Pulling up in front of a phone booth, he searched through his pockets and dug out a dime. On the third ring, Hutch answered the phone.

“It’s me.”

“Where are you?”

Starsky craned his neck to read the street signs. “A phone booth at Tenth and...uh...Midview. How’re you doing?”

Hutch ran a tired hand over his face, drained by the emotional roller-coaster he’d been on since discovering Karen’s body. “Okay, I guess. Still a few people stopping by. Mom wants me to take her down to the funeral home. They called to say we can see Karen now.”

“Is your dad okay?”

“Who knows? He finally came in a few minutes ago. He’s going with us. Oh...uh...did the lead pan out?”

“Hard to say. But I’m workin’ on it.”

“Starsk.” Hutch’s voice sounded exhausted. “What are you *not* telling me?”

“Nothin’. I mean it.” Starsky smoothly changed the subject. “Look, I thought maybe I’d go by the coroner’s office and see if the autopsy’s back.”

“Good idea.”

“And then, I’m goin’ by and see Sabrina. She said she may have something for us.”

Surprised, Hutch pressed for more information. “What’s she talking about? Did you ask her who Karen was seeing?”

“Not yet. But she seems to know something that she thinks is important.”

“Yeah, okay.” Hutch was quiet for a moment.

“Hey...” Starsky hesitated.

“What?”

“How are you—really? Are you holdin’ up okay?”

“Yeah, I guess. It’s just so...so hard to accept.”

The silence stretched between them. “Starsk...”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks, buddy. I mean, thanks for being here. For taking care of some of the details, like the coroner.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, partner.”



After leaving the coroner’s office, Starsky followed the directions to Sabrina’s home and arrived about ten minutes before the appointed time. She greeted him cordially and invited him in.

“I feel like I’m intruding,” he apologized. “I know this must have you very upset and all.”

“Yes, it does. I can’t imagine what it’s going to be like without Karen. We’ve been more like sisters than childhood friends. We started first grade together and graduated in the same class.”

Starsky accepted the seat she gestured toward and waited politely for her to continue.

“And I’ve always looked up to Ken like he was *my* big brother, as much as he was Karen’s. Did Ken tell you how the three of us formed a little club, complete with a secret clubhouse and all? There was an old ramshackle, abandoned house on their parents’ property that should have been torn down years ago. Would you believe it’s still there?” She smiled, a long-forgotten childhood memory taking her back momentarily to when the three of them were inseparable.

“So Hutch, I mean Ken, was close to his sister?”

“Was. Yes, they were very close growing up. Of course, in recent years, they seemed to have drifted apart. I hated to see that happen. I think she could have used a strong shoulder after Craig died.” The sadness crept back into her brown eyes.

“Sabrina, do you have any idea who could’ve wanted to harm Karen? Did she tell you about anyone bothering her? Threatening her?”

“No, nothing like that. But, well, I didn’t want to be the one to bring this out. I mean, I know it’ll hurt Eileen and Ed. Karen made me swear not to tell them.”

Seeing the young woman struggle with her conscience over the promise she’d made to her dead friend, Starsky decided to help her along. “But she met a guy from a personals ad and was seeing him, right?”

Taken completely by surprise, Sabrina’s eyes went wide with amazement. “How did you know that?”

“Hey—I’m a big-city detective, remember?” he teased, giving her a lopsided grin.

Sabrina smiled back. “Oh, yeah, I forgot.” Both of them laughed, relieving the tension that had been hanging over them since the conversation began.

“I found out by talkin’ to the newspaper office,” Starsky explained. “But I don’t know who the guy is. That’s where I’m hoping you can help me out.”

“His name is Glen Willis. Karen went out with him a few times, but had decided not to see him anymore.”

“Do you know anything about him? Where he works, or maybe his address?”

“I have no idea where he lives, but I do know he works as a bartender at Smiley’s Tavern.”

“A bartender? Are you sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure, Dave. Karen knew her mom and dad wouldn’t approve. I mean, I realize she was thirty years old and widowed, but this is a small town, with small town hang-ups, and the Hutchinsons have always been pillars of the community. Karen regretted having acted on a whim, posting that ad. Can you imagine what Ed’s reaction would have been?”

Starsky shook his head in disbelief, picturing the senior Hutchinson blowing a gasket and disowning his daughter for having succumbed to loneliness.

“Did you meet Willis?”

“Once. Karen invited me to have dinner with them. A real jerk. I think he’s one of those professional gigolos, like you see in the movies. He was so smooth-talking, dressed to the nines, and very condescending toward women.”

“Capable of violence?”

“That’s hard to say from one dinner together. But I thought perhaps when Karen told him she didn’t want to see him anymore, maybe they got into an argument, and—who knows—he could have lost his temper.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Starsky reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small notebook, jotting down Willis’ name and the bar where he worked. “How about a physical description?”

“That’s easy. Gorgeous. Blond hair, blue eyes, and the build of a weight-lifter. Believe me, he’ll be easy to pick out of a line-up.”

Starsky busily scribbled in the notebook, then looked up at her again. “I stopped by the coroner’s,” he said quietly. “Karen’s neck was broken. You could be right about Willis. He’d be strong enough to do that.” He hesitated before making the decision to tell her the rest. “Sabrina...Karen was raped.”

The young woman’s hand flew to her mouth, stifling a sob, and Starsky instantly regretted sharing that detail. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you more, but it’s sure to be in the papers, and I didn’t want you to find out that way.”

Trying to keep from falling apart in front of the detective, she suddenly stood up. “Oh, where are my manners? I put on a pot of coffee just before you arrived. Would you like some?”

Recognizing the ploy to keep a tenuous hold on her emotions, Starsky stood up, too. “Thanks, but I think I better get home. Hutch and his folks were going to the funeral home, but I expect they’ll be back soon. I wanna be there when Hutch arrives.” He reached out and touched her elbow. “Are you gonna be all right?”

Her trembling voice belied the contrived smile she was struggling to maintain. “Yes...yes, of course.” She didn’t speak again until they reached the door. “Listen, I’m glad you came by. I’ve cried so much today, my head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton. It makes me feel better, knowing I may be able to help you find this psycho.”

“Well, you’ve sure given me something to start on here.” Before opening the front door, Starsky reached down and tipped her chin up so he could look into her eyes as he spoke. “I think Karen was lucky to have a friend like you,” he said, sincerely.

Tears pooled in her eyes again, and she looked away, dabbing them before they could fall. “Thanks, Dave. I’m glad you’re the one who’s breaking this news to Ken. From what Karen told me, you guys are as close as brothers.”

“Closer,” Starsky said solemnly. “I’m not lookin’ forward to tellin’ him, but I’d rather it came from me. Thanks again.” He stepped out into the cold night air and sprinted back to the car, hoping to beat Hutch home.



Chapter Nine

The car’s headlights flared across the driveway, illuminating the sheriff’s car and the two men standing beside it. “Damn,” Starsky cursed under his breath, when he recognized them as Sheriff Dotson and Hutch. It was pretty clear from the way Hutch was pointing his finger self-righteously at the sheriff’s nose, that they weren’t having a friendly little chat. Squealing to a stop, Starsky quickly hopped out of the car and strode purposely up to the two men.

“—and if I conducted my investigations half as shoddily as you’ve handled this one, Captain Dobey would yank my badge so fast my head would spin!”

“Now, you listen to me, you pompous ass—”

“Whoa! Hold it right there, Sheriff,” Starsky said, stepping between the two men. “My partner’s a little overwrought. I’m sure you can understand—”

“What the hell are you doing, Starsky? I can speak for myself!”
Starsky turned and laid a soothing hand on Hutch’s chest.

“I know, partner, but just step back a minute. Try and calm down. Okay?”

Breathing hard, his heart drumming, Hutch’s hand grabbed Starsky’s for a moment, as if to jerk it away, but then, instead, calmly dropped it to his side. Starsky gave him a sympathetic but grateful smile.

“Your *partner*, here, is trying to tell me how to conduct my investigation,” Dotson said, reaching up to straighten his tie. “I know you both think you know it all, and I’m some ‘rube’ that doesn’t have the slightest idea what he’s doing, but I’m warning you both right now, don’t get in my way!”

Starsky felt his own temper rising, fighting the urge to slam his fist into the arrogant bastard’s face. “Sheriff, with all due respect,” he said calmly, “if you’d acted when Mrs. Hutchinson first contacted you, Karen might be alive today. I’d think you could understand if Hutch is a little upset with you and your methods.”

Behind him, Starsky heard Hutch’s breath draw sharply, realizing he’d probably just stated the exact words Hutch was delivering when he drove up. It wouldn’t be the first time, or the last time, they would read each other’s thoughts.

“I’m not responsible for anything!”

Starsky gave him a derisive smile. “Well, yeah, I think that’s pretty apparent.” The insult went right over the sheriff’s head.

“If Karen Edwards hadn’t been running around with the wrong kind of men, she wouldn’t have been raped and murdered!” he spat.

“Why you—!”

Hutch charged past Starsky with the ferocity of a three-hundred-pound linebacker, but his partner knew in a split second that would be his reaction to the sheriff’s cruel accusation. Grabbing Hutch around the waist, Starsky brought him to the ground hard and straddled his chest.

“Let me up, Starsky, or so help me, I’ll take your head off!”

The sheriff backed away from the two men, counting his blessings that Starsky had intercepted when he did. Hutch, bucking like a wild stallion, was trying his best to throw Starsky off.

“Hutch!” Pinning Hutch’s arms above his head, Starsky held on for dear life. “Hutch! Listen to me, dammit!” Panting for air, he tried to talk his partner down, while giving every ounce he had just to subdue him. “Listen to me! I need you. I need you ‘out of jail’ to help me catch the creep that did this.”

Hutch’s struggling subsided only marginally. “I have a lead—a good one,” Starsky said, dropping his voice to keep the sheriff from overhearing. “It’s gonna take both of us, partner. Me *and* Thee.” Knowing he had Hutch’s attention, he continued in a soothing voice. “You’re playin’ right into his hands, buddy. Think about your mother—think about your dad—they don’t need this. They don’t deserve to see you thrown in jail for assaultin’ a police officer—even if he is *pond scum*.”

The fight drained from Hutch’s body, as Starsky’s words finally began to hit home. “Now, I’m gonna let you up, okay? But ya gotta promise you won’t hit him. Hmmm?”

Hutch nodded. Starsky grinned at him mischievously. “You can hit him later—deal?”

Realizing Starsky was right, Hutch smiled back, the burning anger in his ice blue eyes dissipating only slightly. Tipping his head to one side, he replied, “Well, since you put it that way....”

Starsky relaxed and released his hold, and, as the two men untangled and got to their feet, Sheriff Dotson backed away another foot. “I should run you in for assaulting an officer of the law, Hutchinson.”

“He didn’t lay a finger on you, Sheriff,” Starsky reminded him. “Now, if you don’t have any more ‘official’ police business to discuss, I suggest you get the hell outta here, before my partner forgets his manners again.”

Dotson opened the car door and got in. Once it was closed and he felt safely out of reach, he yelled out the window, “You’d both better stay out of my way, or I’ll throw your asses in jail! You’d be wise to remember this is my town and *I’m* in charge.”

The two men stood silently watching the car speed down the gravel drive, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake. Starsky turned and faced Hutch, laying his hand on the blond’s shoulder, offering comfort. “I’m sorry he beat me here, Hutch. I wanted to be the one to tell you about the autopsy.”

Hutch’s eyes were downcast, hiding the anguish Starsky knew they held.

“I know how you feel, but—”

“No, you don’t. Don’t even say that, Starsky. How could *you* know how *I* feel? Your sister wasn’t raped and murdered. Hell, you don’t even *have* a sister!”

When he saw the hurt in Starsky’s eyes, Hutch instantly regretted the thoughtless remark. “Listen, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I know about your dad, and I don’t mean to diminish what happened to him when I say this, but it’s not the same. Not worse, just different. It’s different from the way I felt when Gillian died. It’s different how I felt when my grandfather died. Unless you’ve been through losing a sister or a brother, you can’t possibly understand what I’m feeling right now.”

Starsky took a deep breath and contemplated whether this was the time or place. Glancing around, he spied a wooden glider under the giant oak tree a few feet away.

“Come on over here,” he said, taking Hutch’s arm and directing him to the swing. “I think it’s time we had a talk.”

When Hutch didn’t move, Starsky arched one eyebrow and asked stubbornly, “Are ya comin’ or not?”

Hutch reached up, rubbing the brow between his eyes. Too tired and drained to argue, he followed Starsky to the glider. They sat down, and for a few seconds Starsky was quiet. When he did speak, his voice was soft, like velvet on the night air.

“When I was five, Ma had a baby. Before Nicky...a little girl. They named her Katherine. Up until the time she arrived, my parents had spoiled me rotten.”

Hutch’s head snapped up, finding it puzzling Starsky had never told him about this before. “Starsk, you never mentioned a sister.”

Starsky’s eyes were downcast, and his voice trembled slightly. “Yeah, well, I guess outta self-preservation, I buried that hurt a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry, buddy,” Hutch offered softly. “I had no idea.”

Starsky lifted his head, stared straight ahead and continued his story.

“Katherine wasn’t a healthy baby,” he began. “Seemed like she was sick all the time, everything from colic to bronchitis. Since she was sickly, she cried constantly, and Ma had to spend every waking hour takin’ care of her. Poor Ma. I know she tried not to neglect me—and she didn’t, really. I mean, I was fed, my clothes were clean, and I didn’t do without. But up until then, Ma spent a lot of time with me...reading me books, playing games, takin’ me to the park. But from my perspective as a five-year-old, Ma

didn't have time for me...only for the new baby." Starsky was quiet for a few seconds, leading Hutch to wonder if that was all he was going to say. But then he continued.

"I think the worst part for me was, as soon Pop would get home from work, he'd walk straight to that crib and pick her up. Walk right by me. No time for horsy-rides on his shoulders, no time for teachin' me how to catch a ball. No time for anything but Katherine."

"Starsk, all kids go through feelings of sibling rivalry when a new baby arrives," Hutch told him.

"Yeah, I guess. But most kids get over it. Katherine was so tiny and so frail. By the time she was two, I think Ma and Pop knew she wasn't gonna get better. All *I* could see when I looked at her was this little person who had stolen my parents' affection from me." He looked up at the stars. "I'm ashamed to admit it, Hutch, but I'd stand there looking at her, thinkin' that I wished she'd never been born."

Hutch heard the pain in Starsky's voice and held his silence. "When she was two, she contracted polio and died. Ma nearly lost her mind, and Pop—well, I never saw my Pop in so much pain. And there I was, seven years old, thinkin' she died because I had wished she'd never been born. I couldn't talk to anyone about it 'cause I thought I was responsible. At that age, I didn't understand the difference between hate and jealousy. Of course, they poured all their attention and affection on me then, like before, and I was *certain* my terrible thoughts about my little sister were what caused her to die."

"You can't beat yourself up over that, Starsk. A lot of children died from polio when you and I were small. It wasn't all that uncommon."

Starsky turned his face and saw Hutch's eyes in the moonlight. They seemed to glisten, and Starsky wondered if they were filled with sympathetic tears for him and the little girl he never got to know. "Yeah, they did. But they weren't my little sister. Hutch, what I'm tryin' to say is, I *do* know how you feel. True, Karen's death is all the more tragic because of the way it happened; but still, I know the emptiness you're feelin' right now. When you lose a brother or a sister, it's like a little part of you dies, too. I can't make it up to Katherine, but I can help you find out who's responsible for Karen's death. And I'm givin' you my solemn oath that I will."

Moved by his friend's promise, Hutch reached out, laying his hand on Starsky's shoulder, hoping to express by touch what he couldn't seem to put into words. The cool air swirled around them, and a light dusting of delicate snowflakes began to fall. Starsky was the first to disturb the quiet. When he spoke, his voice was still tinged with sadness.

"Come on...partner. Let's go in and see if there's any coffee, and I'll fill you in on what I've found out so far."

As they stood up and walked toward the house, Hutch saw Sam's face pressed against the glass of the floor-to-ceiling window in the den, his tail wagging a warm welcome. Somehow, Hutch didn't feel quite so empty now.



Chapter Ten

The house was quiet, as Starsky slipped silently down the stairs, Sam close to his thigh. He knew he shouldn't have had those last three cups of coffee. He'd lain awake, staring at the ceiling until he thought he'd go nuts, finally deciding maybe a midnight snack would help him fall asleep. Swinging the kitchen door open, Starsky was surprised to find Hutch sitting at the table, indulging in a large slice of devil's food cake. "What's this? The blintz is eating cake? Take a good look, Sam. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event," he jibed.

"Shut up, Starsky, and cut yourself a piece," Hutch answered, pointing the tines of his fork at the cake.

"Don't mind if I do." Starsky retrieved a dish from the cupboard and helped himself.

Sam, whose big head was exactly level with the table top, salivated freely, graphically reminding both of his humans he was there. "Hang on, Big Dog." Starsky jumped up and grabbed Sam's biscuit box from the counter and fished out one of the treats, dropping it into Sam's waiting mouth, then sat back down and dug into the cake with enthusiasm.

"Starsk," Hutch said between bites, "something happened this afternoon that could be important. At the funeral home, Mom was upset because she noticed that Karen's locket was missing. I thought she was going to come right out and accuse the funeral director of stealing it."

"Locket? I don't follow you."

"Karen wore a heart-shaped locket all the time. Mom gave it to her on her sixteenth birthday. It belonged to my mother, and her mother before her. Family tradition, handing it down to the oldest daughter on her sixteenth birthday." He looked up at Starsky. "I couldn't remember if she was wearing it when we found her. Do you know?"

Starsky thought back, trying to visualize Karen's body in the woods, beginning to realize the significance of whether or not the locket was missing before she was taken away by the coroner. "I don't think she was wearing it. I wasn't really looking for anything like that, but the way the sun was coming through the trees, I think a locket would've picked up the light." Starsky closed his eyes. "No...I'm almost certain there was no locket."

Hutch nodded. "Me, too. You know, if we find that locket, we just may find the person responsible for this."



His head leaning back on the seat lethargically, Starsky dozed, hovering in the no-man's land between sleep and wakefulness. Too much caffeine and sugar the night before had resulted in too little sleep, and he was feeling the loss this morning. Beside him, Hutch's eyes kept vigil on the entrance to Smiley's Tavern. They'd spent the better part of the morning trying to track down a home address on Glen Willis, but had come up empty. The man was apparently a loner, except for his numerous female acquaintances, most of whom preferred to conceal their association with the unscrupulous ladies' man. So here they were, once again on stake-out—but fifteen hundred miles from their normal beat.

Behind them, Sam stirred from his slumber and stretched widely, before plopping his head and front paws over the seat onto Hutch's shoulder. Ordinarily, such a move would've guaranteed him a nice ear-scratching session, but Hutch was too focused on the task at hand. Not to be discouraged that easily, the big dog maneuvered into another tactic—licking Hutch's ear, demanding he not be ignored.

“Knock it off, Sam!” Hutch grumbled, irritably.

Starsky pried one eye open and assessed the scene with amusement. “My, my...I do believe Goldilocks woke up on the wrong side of the bed this mornin', Big Dog,” Starsky teased. Interpreting that as an invitation, the rottie quickly changed sides, and, homing in on his new victim, he slurped his big tongue up the left side of Starsky's face.

“I hope he shows soon. I need to get back to the house,” Hutch complained. “I promised Mom I'd go with them to the funeral home for the visitation hours.”

Wiping his face on his jacket, Starsky pushed Sam back enough to straighten up and pay attention. “I told you to go home. I'll stay here. I don't need a car.”

“Right. I suppose you're just going to loiter outside a bar, hoping a guy you've never seen before shows up and confesses.”

“No, I didn't say that. I mean I'll keep an eye out, and if he turns up, I'll have a friendly little question-and-answer session with him. The funeral home's only a few blocks from here. I'll walk over and meet—”

“Starsk,” Hutch interrupted. “What do you think? Could that be our man?”

Starsky looked toward the bar and watched the man in question swaggering up the sidewalk, exuding the self-confidence of one endowed with a colossal ego. About six feet tall, heavily muscled, and hair that would have looked more at home on a Malibu beach than in a small Minnesota town, Glen Willis crossed the street, not more than ten feet in front of their car. Not waiting for Starsky's response, Hutch flung the door open and stepped out.

“Glen Willis?”

“Who’s asking?” the man answered with a hint of hostility.

“Ken Hutchinson.” Starsky got out on the passenger’s side and circled around the back of the car, coming up next to Hutch.

“Am I supposed to know who that is?”

“I’m Karen Edwards’ brother.”

The blood instantly drained from Willis’ face. “Look, I didn’t have anything to do with that.”

Starsky, who’d been watching Hutch covertly from the corner of his eye, saw the color rise in his partner’s face. Stepping forward, he hoped to keep Hutch from losing his temper.

“Nobody said you did, Willis. We just wanna ask you a few questions.”

“You’re cops, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Hutch answered honestly.

“Are you arresting me? You have a warrant?”

Loath to admit he had no jurisdiction in Redwood Valley, Hutch answered surreptitiously with his own questions. “Do we need one? Is there something you don’t want us to know about?”

“No. I’ve got nothing to hide.” Willis pulled himself up defensively.

“Then you shouldn’t mind talkin’ to the man,” Starsky pointed out.

Looking around, Willis noticed several passersby, who’d witnessed the encounter, were stopping to watch. “Let’s, uh, let’s go inside.”

Starsky leaned his head in through the car window. “Sam, guard the car and be a good boy. I’ll give you a treat later.”

Appearing to understand the command, Sam wagged his tail, then sat down to wait, while Starsky and Hutch followed Willis into the tavern. Open for the lunch crowd, a modest number of patrons sat in the booths and at small tables, eating and drinking. A hubbub of activity, Smiley’s reminded Starsky of The Pits. Willis passed by the busy public area and led them to a small table in the back corner, near a swinging kitchen door. “We can

talk here.” Pulling out chairs, the three men sat down, and Willis reached into his jacket, took out a cigarette, and lit up.

“I don’t know anything about your sister, Hutchinson. We went out a few times, but just didn’t click.” His delivery was so casual, an eavesdropper would never have suspected he was talking about a brutally murdered young woman.

“That’s not what I’ve been hearing,” Starsky countered. “Word on the street says Karen decided you were playin’ outta your league, and she dumped you.” Hutch kept a passive face, knowing his partner was embellishing, hoping to make the man angry enough to blurt out something he’d wouldn’t have told them otherwise. “That true?”

“No—no, that’s all wrong.” Willis took a long drag on his Marlborough. “I answered that ad ’cause I wanted a few kicks. God knows, they’re hard to find in this two-bit town. Karen was a good kid—fun to be with—but she was looking for a ‘relationship.’ Little too heavy for me.” Willis fidgeted nervously with the lighter.

Hutch’s jaw tensed, the muscles working, as he subconsciously gritted his teeth. “Do you really expect us to believe you’re the one who did the dumping?” he asked incredulously.

“It’s the truth.” Willis flicked cigarette ashes into a small dish on the table. “Like I said, I wasn’t going to make a commitment. Just not my style, dude.”

Starsky watched the young man, unwillingly imagining, *this could be Nicky*. It was no secret that Starsky and his brother didn’t agree on much—and the way they viewed women and relationships was a clear-cut example. Starsky suspected Nicky used women, much like Willis had tried to use Karen. The question in the detective’s mind was, would this guy have the guts and the desire to kill a woman who rejected him? *Big egos bruise easily. Possibly...just possibly.*

“Karen would never have considered a relationship with a piece of garbage like you,” Hutch ground out between clenched teeth.

“Hey, believe whatever makes you feel best, bro,” Willis smirked.

Starsky laid a calming hand on Hutch’s arm and looked over at Willis. “When did you see her last?”

“Well, if what I read in the papers is true, it would have been two days before she died. I read what the coroner said...you know, about the time of death. I’d called her and set up a meet.”

“Why?” Hutch asked, hoping the answer wouldn’t make him regret asking.

“I told her we couldn’t see each other anymore. She took it real hard. But then, all my ladies do,” he bragged, reminding Hutch of the sleazeballs he’d seen hanging around discos, trying to pick up lonely women.

“I suppose you have a witness who can testify to your whereabouts on the day it happened?” Starsky questioned.

“Are you kidding?” Willis cocked his head arrogantly and leaned in, lowering his voice. “The lady I was with can’t give me an alibi. Her old man would blow us both away.” He winked, implying they could understand his need for discretion.

Angered by his arrogant, nonchalant attitude, Starsky leaned in even closer, bringing them eye-to-eye. “Yeah, well you better hope you can change her mind, slick, or you’re gonna be lookin’ at twenty-to-life in San Quentin.” Starsky’s eyes smoldered, daring him to argue.

Getting the message loud and clear, Willis quickly looked away. Swallowing hard, he turned to Hutch. Shaken to the core, he whispered, his voice no longer smug, “She’s...she’s married to the sheriff, man.” When he saw no compassion in the ice blue eyes, he nervously turned back to Starsky. “You’ve got to believe me. I was with Carla Dotson, but she’ll deny it. She’s scared of that crazy red-neck she’s married to.”

Starsky glanced at Hutch, then back again at the shaken man sitting before him. “Now, you listen to me, and you listen good, turkey. My partner wants the man who did this. And whatever my partner wants—he gets. I’m always around to see that it happens. So if we find out you’re responsible, I guarantee, there’s no place on this earth you can hide that we won’t find you. So make it easy on yourself. Did...you...kill...Karen...Edwards?”

Despite his muscles and initial bravado, it appeared Glen Willis was just another pretty boy who’d do almost anything to avoid damage to his handsome face. Starsky saw his opening and took it. His eyes never wavered as he glared at the gigolo. Again, Willis shifted his focus to Hutch, but found no smidgen of sympathy there.

Starsky’s hand shot out and grabbed Willis by the collar, dragging him off the chair and onto his feet. “Uh-uh. Don’t look at him. He ain’t gonna help you. He’s got a temper that could melt concrete, so you really don’t want to see him angry.”

“Is there a problem here?” Starsky turned and found himself staring at the broad chest of a giant. His eyes slowly traveled up, following the trail of a massive, ornate dragon tattoo, beginning on the hulk’s bulky arms and snaking its way right up to the base of his shaved, bald head. Clutched in his right hand was a billy club, tapping a steady rhythm on the palm of his left.

“Not at all,” Hutch answered, rising to his feet smoothly. “Just sharing our philosophy on life and death with our friend here.” He smiled angelically and looked at Starsky, who then did the same.

“We really must do this again sometime, Glen, old buddy,” Starsky said facetiously, while straightening the bartender’s shirt collar, then patting it down. “We’ll be in touch.”

“You can count on it,” Hutch added seriously.

Shoulder-to-shoulder, the two detectives sauntered out of the bar, grateful they hadn’t had to fight their way out. “A temper that could melt concrete?” Hutch asked. “I thought for a minute there we were gonna have to take on Andre the Giant.”



Chapter Eleven

Starsky sat on the small concrete bench, just outside the funeral home. Hutch had asked him to come to the visitation with him, and, despite his reluctance to be there, Starsky had consented. Hidden in the shadows, he was certain Edward Hutchinson had not noticed him sitting there. The man had bolted out the door, apparently feeling the need to distance himself from the crowd. When Starsky heard his sharp intake of breath and saw Edward clutch his chest, he sprung off the bench and went to the elder Hutchinson. “Are you okay, sir?”

Startled, Edward swung around, his face a mixture of hurt and anger. “What are you doing here skulking in the shadows, spying on people?”

“I-I wasn’t spying. I thought—” Starsky was relieved to see the man wasn’t having a heart attack, but realized he’d inadvertently interrupted Edward’s private moment of grief.

“Yes, you were!” Edward accused. “Everywhere Ken is, you’re always lurking in the background. Let’s get something straight, shall we?” Edward’s voice rose louder, as his anger mounted. “Despite your unbelievable audacity and your inexhaustible efforts to insinuate yourself into our lives, you *are not* part of my family, and I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your nose out of our family business!”

Reeling from Edward’s venomous words, Starsky was speechless. Before he could recover, he heard Hutch’s voice cut through the night air.

“Dammit, Dad, what are you screaming at Starsky about?” Hutch stepped off the portico and walked toward the two men.

“Stay out of this, Ken. He has no business being here!”

Hutch's face was a mask of anger as he stepped between his father and Starsky. "Yes, he does. He's here because I asked him to come. And I'm not going to stand here and let you insult him like that! Starsky's here because he's my friend, and to me, he *is* family."

"Hutch, this isn't the time to argue—" Starsky interrupted.

"What is it with you two?" Edward asked suspiciously. "Why are you always so quick to jump to his defense? I don't understand this...this... 'relationship' of yours."

"No, I don't suppose you do," Hutch said heatedly. "You've never let anyone get close enough to you, not even your own children! You're too busy controlling everyone around you to develop *any* kind of relationship." Hutch couldn't seem to stop the hurtful words from flowing. "How could you possibly understand something you've never experienced? You don't know what it means to have a friend, Dad, because you're too spiteful and self-centered—"

"Hutch, don't." Starsky pulled his partner back, hoping to stop them before they both said things they couldn't take back. "Let it go."

Breathing hard, Hutch's eyes flashed with anger. "He needs to hear this, Starsk!"

"Maybe," Starsky said. "But not now."

Hutch's breathing evened slightly, as he began to calm down. He knew this battle with his father had raged throughout his entire life, and nothing he could say would change their relationship. Starsky was right; Karen's memory deserved more respect.

Edward glared at them, waiting for the next volley. When there was none, he lashed out again, "What a poor excuse for a son you are. How dare you take his side against me? I'm your father, dammit!"

Hutch held up his hands, a silent plea for his father to stop. "I can't talk to you, Dad. I'm here for Mom and Karen. I have nothing more to say."

Edward's eyes bulged with anger, but he said nothing further; he simply turned on his heel and strode back into the funeral home.

Starsky laid his hand on Hutch's shoulder. "Listen, buddy, I think it's best if I go back to the house. My being here's just upsettin' your dad. I need to walk Sam for a while, anyway."

Hutch turned his eyes to Starsky, searching his face, trying to read his thoughts. Starsky smiled at him and, in a familiar gesture of reassurance, patted him on the stomach. "It's okay—really."

"Starsk, I'm sorry—"

“Hey, no big deal. He’s in a lotta pain right now; just cut him a little slack. Okay?”

Hutch sighed tiredly, the hours of sleeplessness catching up with him. “Okay...all right...I’ll see you back at the house then.”

Hutch went back inside, as Starsky headed for the car. Thinking of his own father, he felt sad that Hutch had never had the love and companionship he’d shared with *his* dad the few short years they had together.

“Detective Starsky?”

“Yeah?” Turning, he saw the funeral director walking toward him.

“There’s a young lady on the phone asking for you.”

“Thanks.” He followed the man back into the building, going through the employee entrance and into the office.

“Hello?”

“Detective Starsky? This is Lynn Bradley.”

“Oh, hey. How are you?”

“Fine. I’m sorry to call you at the funeral home like this, but I found something in my research that I think may be important to your investigation.”

With one short sentence, she had his full attention. “That’s terrific. What is it?”

“I...uh...I don’t really want to talk about it on the phone. Can you meet me at the newspaper office in about fifteen minutes?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll wait at the back door. I don’t want anyone to see us.”

“Right. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Thanks, Lynn.”

Starsky hung up the phone and hurried to the door of the sitting room where Hutch stood talking with a group of people. Trying not to be rude, Starsky discretely tapped him on the shoulder and whispered, “I’ve got another lead. I’m gonna check it out.”

“Wait a minute, I’ll come with you.”

“No, stay here with your folks. I can handle it. I’m gonna meet Lynn over at the newspaper office. Says she has some more information for us.”

“Starsk, can’t you wait a few minutes? I really wanna come along.”

Glancing over at Eileen Hutchinson’s tired face, eyes swollen from too much crying, Starsky shook his head. “I think you need to be here with your mother. If it’s legit, I promise I won’t do anything without you. Okay?”

Less than satisfied, but realizing it was the best compromise, Hutch agreed. “Just be careful.”

“Always.” Starsky made his way through the crowd and left the funeral home, optimistic that he may soon have something concrete with which to work.



Starsky parked the car in the alley behind the newspaper office, and cut off the engine. He sat back and tried to relax, waiting for the young woman to show. But when thirty minutes passed, he began to worry something was wrong. Thinking back on the conversation, he wondered if he’d misunderstood, and she was already waiting inside the office for him.

Retrieving a flashlight from the glove box, Starsky got out of the car and went to the back of the building. Not wanting to startle Lynn, he figured the best course of action was to knock on the door first. But after a third unanswered knock, he tried the knob, and to his amazement, the door swung open. Cautiously peering into the darkness, he called Lynn’s name, but there was no response. Starsky hoped there were no surprises lurking in the darkness, and belatedly wished he’d had time to go back to the house for his gun.

Using the flashlight to find his way, he crept through the dark building, systematically checking each room as he went. He found nothing out of the ordinary until reaching the editor’s area, where a tiny shaft of light splayed from beneath the door of Brian Goodwin’s office. Aiming the flashlight beam at the door, Starsky slowly opened it and peeked in. On the floor lay the desk lamp, its green glass banker’s shade shattered, the bulb still glowing. From the looks of things, there’d been a struggle. Sheets of paper were scattered haphazardly about the room, and newspapers strewn over the floor, along with several books and file folders.

Stepping into the room, Starsky reached down and picked up one of the newspapers, which was folded open to the classified ads. Karen’s ad had been circled in red. He knew then, whatever had happened here, was connected with the case. Stooping down, he righted the overturned lamp and quickly sorted through the scattered newspapers, hoping to find a clue as to what had happened here. Lynn’s life could be at stake, and that had to be his first priority now.

Most of the newspapers, he discovered, featured articles about the Hutchinsons, or about Craig and Karen—including the report of Craig’s death. One older paper pictured the smiling bride and groom, announcing their wedding. As Starsky stood up, he placed the papers on the corner of Goodwin’s ransacked desk and noticed all the drawers had been pulled out and dumped onto the floor.

As he stepped over the broken lamp, his eye caught a glint of gold, winking and sparkling beneath the glowing bulb. Bending down, he lifted it from the shards of shattered glass—a delicate, gold chain, and dangling from one end was a fragile, antique gold heart.



Chapter Twelve

“Thank you, Detective Starsky. You’ve saved me a great deal of trouble. I knew that stupid girl had it, but she refused to cooperate.”

Starsky felt the cold, hard steel of a gun barrel between his shoulder blades.

“Where’s Lynn? What’ve you done with her?”

“She’s alive—for the moment—bound and gagged in the trunk of my car. Don’t worry, you’ll be with her soon. Now, lay the locket on the desk and turn around slowly.”

His mind racing, Starsky did as he was told, then turned and came face-to-face with the man who’d murdered Hutch’s sister.

“Why? Why’d you kill her, Goodwin?”

“Because I was in love with her,” he answered casually, as though his reason should be obvious.

“You were in love with her? That makes no sense. If you loved her, how could you hurt her?”

“Because I gave her every opportunity to be with me—to love me like I loved her—and she rejected me. After all those years of waiting, when she was finally free, she refused to be mine.”

Starsky’s mind reeled, stunned by this revelation. The editor was one person the two detectives had never considered as a suspect.

Goodwin’s voice softened, as he recounted the past seven years of his life. “She was my student in a journalism class I was teaching at the community college. First time I laid eyes on Karen, I fell in love with her. She was so beautiful and gentle. I wanted to get to

know her better, but outside the classroom she barely gave me the time of day. I told myself I could make her love me, though—it would just take time.”

Starsky listened quietly, hoping to keep the man talking until he could make his move. Goodwin’s eyes glowed with madness, and his voice quivered as he recited the events that had led up to Karen’s death.

“Want to know something ironic? I’m the one who introduced her to Craig.” He chuckled, humorlessly. “He was supposed to be my best friend. And what’d he do? Stole her right out from under my nose. All those years they were married, I stood by and watched them together, and I wanted to kill him!” His lip curled back, evilly contorting his features. “So, I finally did.”

“You? But he died in a plane crash.”

“That’s right. And no one even suspected the truth. When we went through flight school together to get our private pilot licenses, Craig was satisfied with just learning to fly. But not me. I made it my business to learn about the airplanes—how to do my own repairs. I knew how to rig the plane, and it was much easier than you’d think. They called it pilot error, but it wasn’t.” A sadistic smile distorted his lips. “I know, because I rigged the altimeter to make sure he’d misjudge his altitude. Slammed that baby right into the side of the mountain.” Goodwin laughed, imagining the small plane disintegrating upon impact. “It was beautiful!”

Starsky now knew for certain that Goodwin was insane, and he’d have to play along if he and Lynn were going to make it out of this alive. “I still don’t understand,” he stalled, inching his way back against the cluttered desk top. “What was your plan?”

“I waited. It was hard, but I waited. Didn’t want the town to be suspicious. I knew there’d be a lot of raised eyebrows if I made a move on Craig’s widow too fast—being his best friend and all. So, I waited a respectable length of time to ask her out.”

Starsky watched the man’s features go rigid, his voice growing more virulent with each word. “I asked her to the movies and dinner, and do you know what she told me? ‘Sorry, Brian, I just don’t think I can stand to be with another man yet.’ And, being a gentleman, I honored her wishes and waited some more. I mean, I had waited seven years—what was another couple of weeks? Right?”

“That was the right thing to do,” Starsky offered, humoring him.

“This wasn’t going to be some insignificant fling, you see. I wanted her to be my wife. But while I was ‘waiting,’ the little slut ran an ad in the personals—in *my own newspaper*—advertising for a man!” he ground out between clenched teeth.

“That’s why you killed her?”

“I didn’t want to.” Goodwin’s face and voice morphed from angry, to pathetic and pleading. “She...she forced me to. Lynn took the order for the ad, so I didn’t know anything about it until I saw her having dinner with *him*. I couldn’t believe she’d refuse me, then gone out with a...a...man she met through the newspaper!” he spat, his anger flaring to the surface again.

“I called her the next day and threatened to tell her parents. I told her I’d keep my mouth shut if she’d just go out with me. When she came storming into my office an hour later and made a scene, I was thankful that the others had already gone home for the day. I...I still thought I could persuade her to see things my way.”

“But she didn’t,” Starsky surmised. “So you killed her here, then dumped her body in the woods.” Starsky gradually eased back another inch—his hand behind his back, searching for something to use as a weapon.

“No...no...it wasn’t like that. There was a struggle here, that’s true, and I guess that’s when the locket chain broke. I didn’t mean for her to fall and hit her head, but she was knocked unconscious. It was her own fault.” Goodwin’s pleading eyes locked with Starsky’s. “I...I didn’t know what to do. I thought she was dead. She looked so limp, and her face was so pale. I took her out through the back and drove to her place to leave her body in the woods, so everyone would think it was an accident. I even used her car and put her purse back in the house, then walked all the way back to town. I didn’t know she was still breathing—”

“Why didn’t you take her to the emergency room? They may’ve been able to do something!” Starsky’s heart was pounding at the prospect that Karen could have been saved, that she’d still been alive—and Goodwin had done nothing to help her.

“I told you—I thought she was dead!” Becoming more agitated as the story progressed, Goodwin’s voice grew louder.

“Take it easy,” Starsky coaxed, as his groping fingers finally closed around the hard, smooth glass of a paperweight. “I can get you some help you. They’ll understand why you did it.”

Goodwin’s eyes took on a haunted look, and he continued his dissertation as though Starsky had never spoken. “I...I carried her into the woods and laid her in a nice grassy area. She looked so beautiful, like an angel. But then, she began to come to, and...and when she did, she started screaming and trying to get away from me. She wouldn’t stop screaming!” Goodwin squeezed his eyes tightly shut, remembering the last desperate moments of Karen’s life.

A sob caught in his throat, as he continued, “I...I threw her back to the ground and held her there, trying to reason with her, I told her I loved her, that I wanted us to be together. She just kept crying and fighting me—screaming that she didn’t love me and she could never love a man like me. She...she made me so angry!” His voice climbed another

decibel as his story neared the end. “She wouldn’t shut up! I begged her to stop, but she just wouldn’t listen! Then, I wanted to hurt her, the way she’d hurt me, so I told her—I told her I’d killed Craig so we could be together.”

The look of madness quickly turned to uncontrollable rage. “She slapped me and called me ‘a perverted piece of garbage,’ and said she’d rather be dead than spend the rest of her life with me! Before I realized what I was doing, my hands were around her throat and I slammed her head to the ground!” He paused momentarily, then continued in a quieter voice, “I...I heard her neck snap, and I knew she was dead.”

“Brian,” Starsky said softly, preparing to make his move. “The coroner said she was raped.”

Closing his eyes, trying to blot out the images from his memory, Goodwin whispered, “That was after. She was so beautiful.” His eyes met Starsky’s, pleading for empathy. “You have to understand, that was my only chance. I didn’t want to hurt her, but she’d made me feel so worthless. I didn’t think it mattered anymore...” Goodwin seemed to wither, weighed down by guilt and remorse, his vulnerability almost tangible.

Starsky felt the bile rise in his throat, realizing the extent of the man’s depravity. He knew it was now or never. Either he made his move, or he and Lynn were history.

With lightning speed, Starsky slammed the paperweight through the air, striking the man straight in the chest. Goodwin stumbled back a step, and Starsky plunged headfirst into him, toppling them both to the floor. Still clinging to the gun, Goodwin fought back with the ferocity of a caged badger, spurred on by the superhuman strength that only the insane seem to possess. Starsky landed a hard right to the man’s jaw, causing him to reel. Recovering immediately, Goodwin brought his knee up to catch the detective in the pit of his stomach. The wind whooshing from his body, Starsky fell forward, pinning Goodwin beneath him, knocking the gun from the man’s grip. Starsky scrambled off the prone man and crawled toward the gun, clawing desperately for the prize that had skittered just out of reach. Realizing Starsky’s intent, Goodwin righted himself and seized the detective’s leg, preventing him from reaching his goal. As Starsky struggled to break free, Goodwin’s other hand closed around the handle of an ornate, brass letter opener, left behind from the earlier struggle with Lynn Bradley. Clutching the improvised weapon, Goodwin clambered after Starsky, pulling him up just short of the gun before raising the letter opener above his head and bringing it down in a deadly arc, burying it in the cop’s back.

The thunderous explosion of a .357 Magnum drowned out Starsky’s surprised howl of pain. He lurched forward, then collapsed face down on the floor. His eyes turned toward the door where Hutch stood, gun in hand—the last image he saw before sinking into the oblivious refuge of unconsciousness.



Chapter Thirteen

“Starsk!”

Hutch ran toward the two men, almost tripping over the anxious dog who seemed to be racing him to reach Starsky. Sam’s big head dipped down and nuzzled the unconscious Starsky, as Hutch stopped only long enough to drag Goodwin’s dead body out of the way.

Dropping to his knees, Hutch pulled the dog back and reached down to gently turn Starsky’s head toward him. “Starsk, can you hear me, buddy?” When there was no response, Hutch’s eyes were drawn to the handle of the letter opener, protruding from his partner’s back. Oozing blood had begun to pool around it, alarmingly fast. Hutch knew he had to act quickly. Snatching the telephone from the desk, he punched in zero, then barked out orders for the operator to send an ambulance and the sheriff to the newspaper office right away. Not content to stand by idly until they arrived, Hutch grabbed a small cushion from the sofa and carefully placed it under Starsky’s head. Peeling out of his jacket, he tucked it around the injured man, creating a snug cocoon to keep him warm until help could arrive.

Sam lay within a hair’s breath of Starsky’s face. Sensing his human was in grave danger, the dog lowered his big head to his paws and whined mournfully. He turned beseeching eyes to Hutch, but found little comfort in the fear he saw in the man’s taut, worried face.

Hutch plucked his handkerchief from his pocket and used it to dab away the perspiration now glistening on Starsky’s face. And when Starsky’s breathing grew more labored, Hutch tried again to rouse him. “Starsky, can you hear me? Come on, buddy, talk to me.” Not sure if he was getting through, Hutch kept up the encouraging pleas, until he saw Starsky’s eyelids flutter partially open.

“Hutch?” he whispered.

“Yeah, right here, partner.” When Starsky tried to turn over, Hutch laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Don’t move, Starsk. You’ll make the bleeding worse. Just lie on your stomach for a few minutes. How’re you feeling?”

“Terrific...except for this knife in my back,” he answered facetiously. He waited a heartbeat, then added more seriously, “It hurts, Hutch.” He squeezed his eyes tightly shut for a moment, the pain evinced by the subtle changes in his face, changes that may have gone undetected by anyone other than Hutch. “What happened? Huh? Where’s Goodwin?”

Still wiping Starsky’s face Hutch answered him quietly, “He’s dead; I shot him. I’m sorry I wasn’t here in time to keep him from doing this.”

Starsky forced a weak imitation of his usual smile, knowing Hutch had already begun to beat himself up over something he had no control over. “Hey, nobody’s perfect—not even you, Blondie.” He tried to laugh, but instantly regretted the effort, as a spasm of pain shot through his chest. When he grimaced and sucked in his breath sharply, Hutch reached down and took his hand.

“Hurts pretty bad, huh?”

“Nah...I’ve had heartburn worse than this, tryin’ to choke down one of your so-called ‘healthy’ concoctions,” he lied good-naturedly. Hutch smiled and chuckled softly, recognizing the familiar “tough guy” act Starsky usually invoked when trying to hide the truth from him.

“Yeah, well, you aren’t such a great cook yourself, buddy,” Hutch teased back.

Riding the next wave of pain, Starsky held his breath.

“Here, squeeze my hand when it hurts,” Hutch encouraged him. “They’ll be here any minute, just hold on, partner. You’re gonna be fine.”

“Yeah? I bet ya say that to all your dates,” Starsky bantered. Despite his resolve not to succumb to the pain, his hand closed tightly around Hutch’s, his grip contracting proportionately to the throbbing between his shoulder blades.

Hutch heard the police and ambulance sirens first. “You hear that? I told you they’d be here in a minute.”

Starsky struggled to keep his eyes open, but felt the cold slowly enveloping his body, robbing him of the warmth that was quickly becoming only a fading memory.

“Hutch,” he whispered, his speech beginning to slur. “...almost forgot...”

Hutch leaned down closer, unable to understand what he was trying to say. “Shhh...save your strength; they’ll have you at the hospital before you know—”

“No...listen...im-important...” Starsky labored to remain conscious, but was losing ground quickly. “Important...listen...” He squeezed Hutch’s hand, trying to impart the seriousness of what he had to say. Sam inched closer, unnerved by Starsky’s obvious distress.

“What’s important?” Hutch asked.

“Lynn....”

“Lynn?” For the first time since arriving on the scene, Hutch remembered Starsky’s appointment to meet the woman at the newspaper office. “Where is she?”

Starsky's eyelids were growing increasingly heavy, the strength ebbing from his body as the blood flowed more freely from the wound.

"What happened to Lynn?" Hutch prompted.

Concentrating with all his physical and mental capacity, Starsky struggled to get his message across before slipping back into a dreamless world of slumber. "Tr-tr-trunk...his car..."

Starsky gave over to the comfort of the darkness, but not before hearing the noise and confusion accompanying the arrival of the sheriff, two deputies and the ambulance team. His last conscious thought was Hutch's words to the sheriff, "Have someone check the trunk of the car in the alley. There's a woman locked in there."



Hutch sat beneath the bright fluorescent lights of the hospital waiting room, his head resting in his hands, tired and worried beyond words. Tomorrow morning was Karen's funeral, and he didn't even know if Starsky would make it through the night. How could things get any worse?

"Ken."

Hutch looked up to find his father standing before him. "Dad."

"Your...uh...your mother is in the car. She wants to come in and wait with you, but I think she needs her rest. I want you to go out there and tell her to go home."

It wasn't a request. Hutch recognized it for what it was—an order. He ran a tired hand over his face, too exhausted to take offense, he nodded, agreeing that it would serve no purpose to have his mother sit in the hospital—not with what she must face in the morning. "Okay...sure. Wait a minute. Let me tell the nurses where I'll be, just in case the doctor comes out to see me."

Edward looked as though he was going to object, but thought better of it. Hutch went to the nurses' station and told them he'd be back in ten minutes, before following his father to the elevator. The ride down was silent and tense, the elder Hutchinson making no mention of Starsky's condition. Had Hutch not been utterly exhausted, he may have cared, even been angry.

Eileen opened the door and was out of the car before he reached her. She opened her arms to her son, who was tall enough that he towered over her. He went into her welcoming embrace, comforted by the age-old instinctual knowledge that a mother will fix anything that's fixable, to make life right again for her child. Hutch breathed in her

fragrance and allowed himself the luxury of feeling as safe and coddled in her arms as he had when he was a little boy.

Pulling back, he looked into her tired face, realizing his father was right. This was no place for her right now. She was still walking around in a daze, not quite believing she would lay her only daughter in the ground tomorrow morning, and never see her again. Hutch's heart swelled with pity and love for his mother, who had unselfishly pushed her grief aside and come to his aid.

"Thank you for calling us, honey. I'm so sorry about David. What do the doctors say?"

"They haven't told me anything yet." He tried to smile encouragingly, as he continued. "But the paramedic said that the blade is small, and, unless it nicked his lung, there may have been no significant damage. It was on the opposite side from his heart."

Eileen smiled, genuinely pleased the prognosis was good. "When will they tell you something? I'd like to stay with you, if it's okay." The words were sincere, but her voice was laden with fatigue.

Hutch looked over her head at his father, whose disapproving glare would have withered a lesser man. "It's okay, Mom, I think he'll be fine. Please go home and get some rest."

"But what about you?" She looked up into his dear, blue eyes, missing their usual sparkle. He was pushing himself past the limits of common sense, and she knew it. "I'll be home as soon as they let me know something, okay?"

She studied him critically, trying to judge if he was telling the truth, or just paying her lip service so she'd go home with Edward.

"Are you sure? Will you promise to come home and rest before the funeral?"

Hutch looked over her head at his father, whose disapproving glare would have withered a lesser man. "It's okay, Mom. I'll be home as soon as they let me know he's going to be all right. I just want to be here when he wakes up."

Hutch looked away from her probing stare, knowing she could always tell if he was lying just by looking into his eyes. She'd been able to do it his entire life, convincing him, as a child, that she was either psychic or possessed some magical power. He smiled and looked directly into her clear, blue eyes, a perfect reflection of his own. "I promise, Mom. I...I just want to be here when he wakes up...let him know he's not alone. He almost died, finding out who was responsible for Karen's murder."

"Then, it's true—what Edward told me." She sighed and shook her head resignedly. "He was Craig's *friend*. I can hardly believe it. He must be insane."

“I don’t know much, just what Lynn Bradley was able to tell the sheriff. She was searching for some information regarding the ad—” Hutch realized what he’d almost blurted out, and knew his mother was in no condition to handle that news yet. “That is, information about an ad Karen had placed in the paper. Lynn accidentally stumbled upon a letter that Brian had written to Karen. She thought it curious that Karen had returned it unopened, so she began searching around the desk and found others. That’s when she happened upon Karen’s locket.”

Eileen’s hand flew to her face, her eyes filling with unshed tears. “*He* took it?”

“Actually, the chain broke during the struggle...” Hutch’s voice trailed off, uncomfortable with saying more. “Turns out that Brian didn’t realize the locket was missing until he interviewed the coroner for the newspaper story, and Jenkins mentioned how concerned you were that the locket was missing.”

“And he was going to kill the Bradley woman and David to cover up what he did to Karen?” Edward asked.

“That’s what I gather. I’ll know more after I talk with Starsky.”

“You shot the bastard, didn’t you?” Edward’s chiseled jaw clenched tightly, imagining what *he* would’ve done had he been given the opportunity to retaliate.

“Yes, he’s dead. Unfortunately, I wasn’t quick enough to keep him from stabbing Starsky.”

“Honey, please let me stay with you until David wakes up,” his mother coaxed. His arm draped protectively around his mother, as he walked her toward the waiting car.

“No, Mom, I want you to go home, take one of those pills the doctor gave you yesterday to help you rest, and get a good night’s sleep. I’m just fine here. Besides, I promised I’d come home, and I will.”

Standing next to the passenger side of the car, he opened the door, and she reluctantly climbed in. Hutch bent down and kissed her cheek through the open window. “I’ll see you back at the ranch.” The absurdity of the cliché struck a funny chord with Hutch, and he laughed out loud. Eileen caught the pun and giggled also, realizing they were both slaphappy with fatigue.

Hutch patted her shoulder and stepped back up onto the curb. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Yes,” she answered, then watched her son, forlorn and exhausted, standing on the sidewalk, as Edward steered the car toward home. How much more could Kenny take? She closed her eyes and asked God to spare David’s life and give her son the strength to cope with whatever he faced tomorrow.



Chapter Fourteen

“Mr. Hutchinson?”

Hutch looked up at the nurse walking toward him. Anxious for news, he sprang to his feet and met her halfway. “Right here. How is he?”

“Dr. Carson’s with your friend now, and he said you can come in. Mr. Starsky’s awake.” She was astonished at the transformation she saw in Hutch’s face. The worry lines seemed to smooth out some, and he actually smiled for the first time since crashing through the emergency doors earlier that evening.

Hutch hurried down the hall, following the nurse into a small room near the emergency entrance. Starsky was lying on the examining table, hooked up to two IVs—one pumping a unit of blood, the other, a clear liquid that Hutch presumed contained fluids and medications. Although his eyes were open, Starsky seemed groggy and hard pressed to focus on what the doctor was telling him.

“—the rest of tonight and tomorrow—” The doctor stopped mid-sentence, when Hutch entered the room.

Starsky’s face brightened noticeably, “There you are.” His speech was a little slurred, but his voice was stronger than Hutch had expected. “I just told the doc I’m fine, and I wanna go home now. I explained you’d be here any minute to pick me up,” Starsky rambled on, hoping to enlist Hutch in his scheme to escape the hospital as soon as possible. “Tell him I’m fine and I don’t need to stay here, okay?”

Hutch smiled at him sympathetically then looked over at the doctor, giving him an “I’ll see what I can do with him” look. Hutch laid his hand on Starsky’s shoulder, hoping to reason with him. “I’m glad you’re doing so well, pal, but I think the doctor’s right; you need to stay here. We haven’t even heard what he has to say yet. Besides, I mean—that’s a pretty serious wound you’ve got there.” Hutch turned his attention back to the physician. “Right, Doc?”

“As I was saying when you came in, the letter opener was very sharp and the blade very thin, so on the surface, it looks like nothing more than a small puncture wound. However, the depth is of some concern. Fortunately, it missed his lung and any other vital organs. The bleeding was significant enough to cause him to pass out, but your quick action prevented him from going into shock, Mr. Hutchinson. As you can see, he’s getting a unit of blood right now, and I’ve ordered one more.”

Hutch looked down at Starsky, who grinned back at him, now droopy-eyed and just a little out of it. “So, you’re saying he’s going to be all right?”

“I don’t see any reason why not. He’s a little disoriented right now, partly due to the blood loss, and partly due to the medication we’re administering through the IV. I’d like to keep him three days, just to be safe.”

“That’s great news, Doc,” Hutch patted Starsky’s shoulder again. “Did you hear that, buddy?”

“What’s great news? The part about I’m gonna live, or the part about me staying here three days? ’Cause it ain’t gonna happen.” Then, realizing maybe a nicer approach would probably work better, he added, in his most conciliatory voice, “Come on, Hutch, tell the doc you’re gonna take me home, and I’ll follow all his orders. Okay?”

“Mr. Starsky, I can’t in good conscience release you in your present condition. There’s the possibility that physical activity could cause further internal bleeding. You need to stay tonight and tomorrow night, then, barring any complications, we’ll release you the next morning.”

“Thanks, again, Dr. Carson.” Hutch smiled at the physician. “I could’ve told you the big dummy’s too ornery to die.”

Starsky gave him a reproachful look, and said with as much indignation as he could muster, “Hey! I heard that! You think just ’cause I got a knife in my back, it made me go deaf?”

Walking to the door, the doctor chuckled. “I’ll see you in the morning, Mr. Starsky. The orderlies will be in shortly to move you to a room. We’ve put a sedative in that IV to help you rest, so don’t fight it. Just get a good night’s sleep, and I’ll be by tomorrow to check on your progress.” The doctor hurried down the hall to the next examining room.

Hutch turned back to Starsky and gave his shoulder a light squeeze, more to reassure himself, than Starsky. “You had me worried there for a while.”

Starsky smiled lazily, his lids growing heavy from the drugs. “Yeah, well you had me worried, too. I was afraid you weren’t gonna show up in time.”

“I haven’t failed you yet, have I?”

Starsky yawned, and mumbled back. “No, but ya cut this one pretty close. Is Lynn okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. A little shaken and banged up, but she was too happy the two of you made it out alive to complain about a couple of bruises.”

“She really put her life on the line,” Starsky said. As an afterthought, he looked up at Hutch and asked, “Hey, where’s Sam? I could’a sworn his big, wet nose was snortin’ around my ear back at the newspaper office.”

“He was there, all right. I’d driven Mom and Dad home, grabbed my gun, and started back in town, planning to meet up with you and Lynn. Sam begged to come along, and I let him. I’m not sure why I brought my gun. I just had this gut feeling that I should.”

The narcotic beginning to take effect, Starsky found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. “Where’s he now?”

“I called Sabrina, and she came and picked him up. I was trying to save my folks a drive back into town, but they came anyway.”

Touched by their concern, Starsky gave him a crooked little smile. “Oh, yeah? Your dad, too?”

“I don’t wanna burst your bubble, partner, but I’m pretty sure Mom strong-armed him into coming. Don’t take it personally.”

Two young orderlies entered the room, pushing a gurney. “Next stop, our luxury suite overlooking the beautiful Redwood Valley Hospital parking garage. Are you ready, Mr. Starsky?” the younger of the two men asked.

“Yeah, right...I never miss an opportunity to rub elbows with the rich and famous,” Starsky mumbled back, the sedative really beginning to do its job. He yawned widely and looked up at Hutch. “Why don’cha go home and get some shut-eye? You look terrible.”

Hutch arched one brow. “You wouldn’t be saying that if you could see the sorry state *you’re* in.”

“But I’ve got an excuse. You, on the other hand, look like somethin’ Sam dragged out of the dumpster behind The Pits.”

“You really know how to hurt a guy.” Hutch feigned a bruised ego, while stepping back to let the two orderlies transfer Starsky to the gurney.

“You can go up to his room with us, if you like,” one of them said.

“Thanks. I think I will go along. He’s a terrible patient,” Hutch said, nodding toward Starsky.

“Me? What about you? I haven’t forgotten when you faked that amnesia, or the way you were makin’ time with Dr. Kaufman while I was out poundin’ the pavement tryin’ to find Callendar.”

Hutch shrugged at the orderly, implying that Starsky didn’t know what he was saying. “I don’t know where you come up with this stuff, Starsk.” Turning to the orderly, Hutch whispered, “Come on, let’s go. Maybe we’ll all get lucky and the sedative will hit him soon.”



Starsky woke to find Hutch sitting in the visitor's chair, sound asleep. It was almost dawn, and he'd expected Hutch to go home hours ago.

"Hey." He reached out and gently tapped Hutch's knee, waking him from his uncomfortable slumber.

"Hmmm? What?" Hutch woke with a start, then quickly glanced around the room.

"What're you still doin' here, Blintz? You should be in bed, asleep."

"I meant to go home, I guess I must have dozed off." Hutch rubbed his eyes, then stood up and stretched, before looking at his watch. "I guess I will go. I can still catch a few winks before the funeral."

Upon first waking, Starsky had forgotten today was the funeral. Hutch's words brought it all back with renewed clarity. "Listen, buddy, I'm sorry I won't be there."

Hutch sat back down. "Don't worry about it. All you need to do right now, is concentrate on getting well so we can go home. The sooner things get back to normal, the better."

Starsky studied his partner's face and realized Hutch hadn't shed a single tear, nor expressed his grief in any apparent fashion since they'd found Karen's body in the woods. That worried him. He knew Hutch pretty well and figured he was trying to keep his emotions under control for his parents' sake, but Starsky knew it would eventually take a toll. Reluctantly, he broached the subject. "You gonna be okay? I mean, it's all right to be upset..."

Uncomfortable with the turn their conversation was taking, Hutch rose from the chair again, walked to the window and gazed out at the parking deck below. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine...just a little tired."

"Hutch, this is me you're talkin' to here," Starsky persisted.

"Goodwin's dead," Hutch said, without turning around. "That's not going to bring my sister back, but at least we know some bleeding-heart judge isn't going to put him back on the streets in six months."

Starsky heard the bitterness seething just beneath the surface, but still Hutch held back. He turned from the window, but avoided Starsky's probing eyes. "I guess I better get going. Sure you're gonna be okay?"

Starsky chuckled softly and replied with just a touch of humor, “Are you kiddin’? Have you seen the nurses in this place? I’ll be *better* than okay.”

Hutch smiled back and headed for the door.

“Hutch,” Starsky called after him, “don’t try to come back here today. Honest, I’m fine, and you should be with your family. Okay?”

“Okay. If you need anything, though, have them call the house. See you later, buddy.”

Starsky lay back on the pillow and tried to imagine how he’d feel in Hutch’s place. It wasn’t a pleasant thought. He just hoped his friend would come to grips with his grief soon. It was painful to recall the anger and the feelings of helplessness he’d wrestled with after his dad died. If it hadn’t been for Aunt Rosie, he may never have been able to get through it. When Hutch needed him, he’d be there. That was all he could do.



Chapter Fifteen

Starsky sat in the chair in his hospital room, staring out the window at nothing in particular. Having slept well the night before, he felt remarkably better today. Granted, his shoulders and back were sore, but he found if he avoided making sudden moves, he was pretty mobile. Hutch still hadn’t come by, and he was beginning to worry. He’d not expected him after the funeral yesterday, in light of having given Hutch orders not to return; but it was almost 10:00 a.m., and still no Hutch—not even a phone call. Starsky was concerned something had happened to him, and considered calling the Hutchinsons’ home, but thought better of it. Remembering Edward’s admonishment, he didn’t want to be perceived as an intruder. He’d just wait for Hutch to come when he was ready.

Just as Starsky shuffled back to the bed and picked up the TV controller, the phone rang. Dropping the device, he reached over and picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“David?”

He instantly recognized Eileen Hutchinson’s voice. Easing down on the side of the bed, he greeted her warmly, “Oh, hi, Mrs. H. How’re you?”

“I’m fine. How are you feeling?”

“Terrific. Just a little sore. They took the IVs out early this morning and told me to stay up, out of bed, as much as I could. Then the doc came by and said he wants me to stay one more night. I don’t know why he thinks I need to stay. I’m ready to come home.” Starsky cleared his throat self-consciously before continuing. “Look, I’m sorry I wasn’t able to attend the funeral.”

“Oh, dear, don’t apologize. I think you had a perfectly legitimate reason to be absent. Thank you for all you’ve done, finding who was responsible for—for taking Karen from us.” Her voice almost cracked, but somehow, she regained her composure. “Is Kenny there?”

“No, ma’am, I haven’t seen him since he left here early yesterday morning. He’s not with you?”

For a couple of seconds, Eileen was silent on the other end of the line. When she did speak, her voice quivered slightly. “David, he left the cemetery yesterday, and no one’s seen him since.”

Starsky sat up abruptly, the jolt causing a pain to shoot between his shoulder blades. “What?”

“To tell you the truth, we figured he went back to the hospital to be with you. I know how close the two of you are, so it didn’t seem like something to worry about at the time. But his bed hasn’t been slept in. Sabrina brought Sam home last night, and Kenny didn’t even come home to feed and walk him.”

Starsky felt a cold chill of fear sweep through him. He should have known when Hutch didn’t at least call last night, that something was wrong. “I’ll be right there.”

“No—no, I won’t hear of it! I didn’t call to worry you, I just thought I’d better check there before calling the sheriff.”

“Did you check Karen’s place?”

“Yes, I sent Bobby over. Kenny wasn’t there, but Bobby thinks he may have been, earlier. He found the door ajar.”

“Don’t call the sheriff yet, Mrs. H. That bozo’ll probably just put you off anyway. Give me a chance to find him. I’ll talk to you later.” Starsky hung up the phone, then realized he had no transportation. Retrieving his pants from the closet, he dug through the pockets until he found the scrap of paper with Sabrina’s phone number scratched on it, then picked up the phone and hurriedly dialed the number. When she answered, Starsky asked if he could borrow her mini-van, saying it was important, and he didn’t have time to explain. Without questioning his reasons, she offered to bring it to him and have a friend pick her up at the hospital.

Starsky struggled into his shirt, ignoring the discomfort and the dried blood crusting the back, where Goodwin had plunged the letter opener.

“Mr. Starsky, what do you think you’re doing?”

Without pause, he looked up at the nurse standing in the doorway. “Checkin’ myself out,” he answered. “Could you give me a hand with my tennis shoes? I can’t seem to bend over that far.”

“You can’t do this. The doctor’s going to be really angry when he finds out.”

Starsky tucked his shirt into his jeans, then ran a hand through his tangled hair. “Look, are ya gonna help me, or do I have to walk outta here barefoot?”

Seeing the hard set of his jaw and the determined look in his eyes, she knew it was hopeless to try and dissuade him. “At least let me change your bandage.”

“Then you’ll help me with my shoes?”

Reluctantly, she agreed.



It was late and Starsky couldn’t remember ever having been so tired. He’d driven up and down the streets of Redwood Valley for hours, stopping frequently to ask the people he passed if they’d seen a man fitting Hutch’s description, but no one had. As a last resort, he went back to Karen’s house, but found the doors locked and the lights off—no sign of Hutch anywhere. Driving back into town, he sat in the van outside the hospital, eating a burger he’d gotten at the local greasy spoon, and waiting—hoping Hutch would come to see about him.

Unwilling to admit defeat, but with no other leads to check out, Starsky realized it would be dark soon, and he needed to return Sabrina’s van. He just hoped that Hutch had gone back to the Hutchinsons’ home on his own.

As he pulled into Sabrina’s driveway, he saw a tan Buick pull in right behind him. The passenger door opened and Sabrina stepped out, then bent down and said something to the driver, before waving goodbye and heading up the driveway toward Starsky.

He got out of the van and waited for her. “No luck?” she asked when they were within speaking distance.

“No. Zero. I don’t know what to think. It’s not like Hutch to pull a stunt like this. We always let each other know where we’ll be.” *Since the Jeanie/Forest episode*, he thought. Starsky reached up and unconsciously massaged his right arm, trying to work out the subtle pain that had nagged him all day.

“Come on in,” Sabrina said, removing her keys from her purse. “You look like you could use a cup of strong coffee.”

“Yeah, I guess I could, at that.”

“I know you’re worried about him,” she said matter-of-factly, tossing her purse on the sofa and kicking off her pumps as she walked toward the kitchen. “But you know, Dave, Ken grew up here, and knows this place like the back of his hand.”

“What’re you sayin’?”

“Just that he could ‘disappear’ for several days if he wanted to. Maybe he just needs some time alone. You know—to work through his grief.” She peeked around the kitchen door. “How about something to eat?”

“No, thanks,” he answered distractedly. “You mean, he’s *hiding* from me? That doesn’t make sense. He’s never done that before. Not even when Gillian died.”
“Who?”

Starsky realized she had no way of knowing about Gillian. As far as he knew, Hutch had never related the incident to his parents. Too many messy explanations would’ve been necessary, and Hutch couldn’t have dealt with his father’s criticism had Gillian’s checkered past been brought out. “Never mind. It’s not important now.”

Sabrina came back, carrying a tray with two mugs of steaming hot coffee, cream, and sugar, and set it down on the sofa table. “I’m not suggesting he’s purposely hiding from you, rather, he just wants to be alone.”

Starsky sipped his coffee, silently mulling over her words. Slowly, an idea began to take shape. “Wait a minute...” A smile curved his lips. “Where’s that place you were talking about?”

“What place?” Sabrina looked up at him, thoroughly confused.

Snapping his fingers several times in quick succession, he tried to delve into his memory of their recent conversation. “You know...the one where the three of you used to go...sorta like a secret hideout...clubhouse...whatever...” His eyes danced with excitement. For the first time since leaving the hospital, he could feel his detective instincts kicking in.

“Of course! I know what you’re talking about! The old shack on the Hutchinson property!” Sabrina smiled broadly. “Do you want me to show you where it is?”

“Do I? How fast can we get there?”

“Well, that depends on who’s driving. According to Ken, you only know one speed—fast.” Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

Starsky grinned mischievously and stated the obvious. “Well, since I’ve got the keys, I guess that means we go fast.”



Chapter Sixteen

Starsky pulled up behind the rental car Hutch had parked at the end of the dirt trail. “Just go another two hundred-or-so feet in that direction, and you’ll see it,” Sabrina told him.

“Look, thanks for bringing me out here. I would never have found it by myself.”

“How did you know?” she asked. When he looked back at her, a puzzled expression on his face, she added, “How did you know he’d be here?”

“I just know Hutch,” he answered. Starsky gave her a lopsided grin, considering why he’d been so certain he’d find Hutch here. “Sometimes, I think I know him better than I know my own self.” It was true. The enigmatic bond they shared—reading each other’s thoughts, anticipating one another’s actions—often surprised even him. Sabrina nodded, thinking about what he’d said. “Want me to wait?”

“No, thanks. We’ve got the car here. Go on home, and don’t worry about Hutch. I’ll look after him.” He opened the door and eased out of the vehicle, the pain between his shoulders quickening. Turning back, he leaned in through the window with one last request. “Give the Hutchinsons a call and let ’em know we found him, okay?”

“Sure,” Sabrina assured him. “Just don’t forget to take care of yourself, too.” He watched the mini-van back down the trail and turn around, before he struck out toward the old shack.

As he cleared the trees, Starsky spotted the ramshackle structure—weathered boards and a sagging porch—looking like it would collapse with one strong gust of wind. Hutch was sitting on the porch, leaning against one of the posts, his face a portrait of dejection. His chin was covered by a day-old growth of beard, and sprigs of silver-blond hair, denied a comb for over twenty-four hours, stood out wildly on his head. Both bore testament to the missing hours. He still wore the rumped, ill-fitting navy blue suit, hurriedly bought for the funeral. Hutch watched Starsky walk toward him, but didn’t speak or stand up to greet him.

“Hey,” Starsky said, gingerly sitting down next to him on the creaking slats of the porch. “Could ya use a little company?” Hutch ignored him and stared down at the photograph in his hands, the same one Starsky had seen days earlier in Karen’s home. “I’ve been lookin’ for you all day.”

Barely above a whisper Hutch asked, “What’re you doing out of the hospital?”

“Like I said, I’ve been lookin’ for you.”

“I didn’t think the doctor was releasing you until tomorrow. I was going to come pick you up then. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Terrific. But your mom’s pretty worried about you. She said you never came home after the funeral.”

“I...I just needed some time alone. I’m sorry I didn’t call you, or come by the hospital,” he answered softly. Starsky waited, but Hutch fell silent, his eyes never leaving the photograph.

“Did you sleep here?” Starsky prompted.

“Yeah. In the car.”

The dark smudges beneath Hutch’s eyes repudiated the half-truth. *You may have spent the night in the car, pal, but you didn’t get much sleep*, Starsky thought to himself.

Starsky stared down at the photo in Hutch’s hands as he spoke. “Wanna talk about it now?”

“What do you want me to say? It’s a little late to ‘talk about it,’ isn’t it?”

“Well, we could talk about how you’re feelin’ right now. It helps. Believe me...I know, it helps.”

“It won’t change things, so there’s really no point.” When he looked up, finally facing Starsky’s sympathetic scrutiny, unshed tears blurred his vision.

“No...you can’t bring her back, that’s true,” Starsky agreed. “But, sometimes, just talkin’ about the person we love, miss...ache to see one more time...well, it fills the void just a little.”

Hutch turned away, gazing out at the trees splashed with the warm afternoon sun. The chilled autumn sky was still blue, the birds still sang, but there was an emptiness that he couldn’t quite explain, gnawing at his insides. “Starsk, have you ever felt like something has happened that’s changed your life forever? That your world will never be quite the same as before? You know, something that you weren’t prepared for—never dreamed could happen.” His eyes implored Starsky to understand something he wasn’t even sure he understood himself.

“Sure.” Starsky’s voice was choked with emotion as he spoke. “Not so much with Katherine, ’cause I was too young. But I felt that way when my pop died. I knew I’d grow up to be a man, and I’d never get to share those important things with him like other dads and sons would. And Terry—I’d planned to spend the rest of my life with her—have a family. I think it’s particularly hard when someone’s taken so suddenly—especially a young person, whose life’s been cut short. Makes you wanna just beat the

ground with your fists and shout, ‘It ain’t fair!’ We *all* have regrets, Hutch. That’s part of bein’ human.”

“Starsk, Karen and I were so close as kids—closer than most brothers and sisters.” A sad smile teased his lips for a fleeting moment. “But when I got a little older and decided to leave Redwood Valley, our lives took totally different directions. She wanted to stay here, have a large family, and live the simple life. Me? I wanted college, an exciting career. I wanted to live in a big city. I couldn’t wait to get out of this one-horse town, and Karen saw that as my being critical of the life she’d chosen to live.”

“Hutch, that’s just growin’ up. Everyone changes, and we all have to choose our own path.”

Hutch stood up and began pacing back and forth as he talked. “But we became strangers. I was too busy to come home—or at least I told myself that’s what kept me away. Mostly, it was because it depressed me to come here and see Dad with his domineering, hard-nosed attitude, Mom growing older, her health failing. And Karen—always in the background, silently disapproving of my lifestyle, my line of work. My perspective was so different from hers. Hell, we couldn’t carry on a conversation for more than five minutes without being ill at ease and all awkward with one another.”

Starsky’s heart ached for him. He searched for words to offer solace, but realized in Hutch’s grief-stricken state of mind, anything he could offer would only sound trite.

“And now, it’s too late, Starsk. She’s gone and I’ll never be able to say ‘I’m sorry,’ or ‘I love you,’ or ‘I’m proud of the woman you’ve become, Sis’.” His voice trembled, his fragile hold on composure slipping. “Starsk, It’s like my childhood died with her, all the memories that only she and I shared.”

As his guilt and anger surged, grief transformed into rage. “Dammit, Starsky, I should have done *something*! I knew she was hurt and lonely after Craig died, but it was easier for me to look the other way, hide behind my own problems, and tell myself she didn’t need or *want* my help!”

He ran a tormented hand over his face, his pacing growing more frantic. “It was just a lousy cop-out because I didn’t have the courage to face up to the fact that we’d become strangers! Maybe if I hadn’t been so busy playing the big-shot detective, I could’ve prevented this from happening!”

“Listen to me, Hutch. Don’t blame yourself for this. You couldn’t have known what a sicko Goodwin was. Nobody did—not even the people he was with day in and day out.”

Rage and desperation coalesced, as Hutch turned and faced his friend, seeking absolution and understanding that only Karen could have given him. “Starsk, I should have been here for her—” A sob tore from his throat, the wall of self-control crumbling. Burying his face in his hands, the anguish flowed from him with such intensity his shoulders

began to shake. Starsky rose to his feet and went to him. He pulled Hutch into a sheltering embrace, offering his strength and compassion.

“It’s okay, buddy, let it out. It’s okay.” They stood there in the cool, quiet woods—two men...friends...partners...brothers. Together, they wept for a beautiful, tragic, young woman whose life had violently ended far too soon, for missed opportunities and unspoken words, and most of all, for the end of a precious relationship that could never be rekindled.



The front porch light blazed like a beacon, left on they presumed, in optimistic anticipation of their return. Tiredly, Hutch opened the front door, and they were met enthusiastically by Sam. The big dog did a four-footed jig in the foyer, ecstatic to finally have his humans home with him after what seemed to him like a lifetime separation.

Eileen rushed from the kitchen, and threw her arms around Hutch’s neck. “Oh, Kenny, are you okay? You had me worried sick!” she scolded.

“I’m fine. And I’m really sorry, Mom. I know it was thoughtless of me. I...I guess I just wasn’t thinking too clearly.”

“It’s okay, honey. I know what a strain this has been on you,” she said, soothingly. “I’m just glad David found you.”

Overwhelmed with fatigue, Starsky inconspicuously dropped into the nearest chair. From the corner of his eye, he saw Edward standing in the kitchen door, watching mother and son embrace. He seemed drawn to them, but unable to take the first step. Starsky furtively watched him battle with his emotions for several moments. Finally, the elder Hutchinson turned and went back into the kitchen. Starsky sighed, disappointed by Edward’s inability to put aside his pride and go to his family in their time of need.

Sam’s big head slipped under Starsky’s hand, demanding his attention. Touched by the dog’s warm greeting, he talked softly to him, patting him on the head. But when Sam tried to climb onto the chair, Starsky held him back at arm’s length, avoiding a painful encounter with the dog’s oversized paws on his sore chest.

“How ya doin’, fella? You miss me?” He allowed the canine’s massive head just close enough to receive a welcoming slurp from his giant wet tongue, but still managed to restrain the dog from climbing onto the chair and on top of him. Finally, getting the message, Sam reluctantly sat down and laid his head on Starsky’s knees, his big tail beating a tattoo on the carpet.

“Why don’t we just sit here awhile and rest, okay?” A yawn escaped Starsky before he could stifle it. “I don’t know about you, boy, but I’m pretty tired. I’m just gonna sit here a few minutes...then...I’ll go upstairs to...bed...”

Sam cocked his head to one side, studying Starsky's face, trying to understand. But The Dark One was already sound asleep.



Epilogue

“Starsky, you’re going the wrong way,” Hutch complained. Sam plopped his head and paws over the back of the seat, enjoying the familiarity of the Torino and the easy banter between his two humans. It was good to be home!

“I’m not goin’ the wrong way. We’re just takin’ a little detour,” Starsky argued back.

“A detour? Are you nuts? The Pits is in the opposite direction from here. How can this be a detour when you’re driving in the exact opposite direction of where we want to go?”

“We’re goin’ by the park first.” Starsky looked over at Hutch’s irritated face and grinned, almost bursting with the need to blurt out his surprise.

“What? The park? In the middle of the day? Don’t you think it’s a little early to take Sam for a run?”

Starsky wheeled the Torino into the parking area and shut off the engine. “Come on,” he said to Hutch.

“Come on where?”

“Just come with me, okay? Why do ya have to ask so many questions?” Starsky bailed out of the car, ran around to Hutch’s side, and opened the passenger door. Sam sailed out over Hutch and hit the pavement before the blond even realized the dog’s intent. When Hutch didn’t budge, Starsky tilted his head to one side and raised one brow expectantly. “So? Are ya getting out or not?”

Hutch exhaled a long-suffering sigh, before climbing out of the car. “Now what?”

“Come with me,” Starsky answered, slamming the door and locking the car. Barking with enthusiasm, Sam ran ahead, toward the path that his two humans jogged on a regular basis. Starsky talked incessantly as they walked, mostly about the weather and how autumn (such as it was, in Southern California) had finally arrived, how beautiful the few changing leaves were. Hutch tuned him out, his thoughts drifting back to Redwood Valley again, as they had so often over the past two weeks since their return home.

“Hey, there they are!” Starsky snagged Hutch by the elbow and hurried him toward the small group waiting up just ahead.

“Dobey? Huggy? Minnie? What are all these people doing here?”

“You’ll see,” Starsky answered smugly. As they neared the group, Hutch also spotted Edith Dobey, Kiko, and Hutch’s current girlfriend, Sue Johns. Everyone smiled and came forward to greet Hutch, hugging him or shaking his hand.

“Uh...it’s not that I’m not happy to see you all, but what’s going on here?” Hutch asked, his eyes going from face to face.

Starsky grinned, thoroughly pleased with himself for having managed to get Hutch there on time, without spoiling their surprise. Dobey stepped forward and cleared his throat self-consciously.

“Hutch, we’re all very sorry about your sister. Starsky told us that she was a real nature lover. We, well...we wanted to do something to show our respect.” The crowd parted and stepped away from the surprise they’d been hiding. A six-foot red maple sapling, adorned with splotches of orange and gold autumn foliage, stood before him, only a pale copy of the majestic Minnesota forests. Still, its message was clear to Hutch.

Edith came forward and took her husband’s arm, then added, “We got permission from the Department of Parks and Recreation to plant this maple beside the jogging trail as a memorial to Karen, Hutch. There’s a brass plate right down here, with her name and the date she was born and the date she...passed away.” She smiled at him, tears brimming in her eyes.

“We hope you like it,” Kiko said.

Stunned, Hutch turned back to Starsky, at a loss for words. “I-I-I just don’t know what to say,” he stuttered past the lump in his throat.

“Just say it’s okay with you, Blondie,” Starsky suggested.

“Everyone...it’s...it’s just...it’s just beautiful,” was all he could manage.

They all laughed and applauded. “Not much of a speech, Hutch,” Huggy quipped, “but it’ll do.”

“Now—” Minnie said, trying to get their attention. “Everyone, come over to pavilion four, right over there. Sue and I have put together a little picnic. Nothing fancy, mind you, but some good, wholesome junk food and sandwiches.” They all laughed at Minnie’s description of the menu.

Sue beamed at Hutch before following Minnie, “And I even made those watercress and alfalfa sandwiches you like so much.”

As the crowd moved toward the pavilion, Sam trailing behind them, Hutch hung back and knelt before the maple sapling to read the plaque. He felt, rather than heard Starsky's presence behind him. "Hey, you gonna be okay?"

Hutch stood up and turned to face his partner. A smile slowly came to his lips. "Yeah...yeah...I'm gonna be fine." He draped an arm around Starsky's shoulders and turned toward the group of friends already unpacking their picnic. "With friends like you, how else can a guy be?"



The End