

Too Close To Home

By TibbieB

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.”



End of Chapter Ten