

Too Close To Home

By TibbieB

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.



End of Chapter Thirteen