

Too Close To Home

By TibbieB

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.



End of Chapter Two