

Too Close To Home

By *TibbieB*

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.



End of Chapter Three