

Too Close To Home

By TibbieB

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’ Dobe 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 waggled 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.”



End of Chapter Four