

Too Close To Home

By TibbieB

Chapter Five

Starsky and Hutch stood at the front counter of the small newspaper office, waiting for the clerk to show them to Brian Goodwin's office. "Wonder what their circulation is," Starsky whispered.

"Probably a lot more than you'd expect. Think about it, Starsk, there's not a lot that goes on in a community this small, but anything that *does* happen, makes the headlines."

"Mr. Hutchinson?"

The two detectives looked up and saw Brian Goodwin for the first time. He was one of those familiar faces, the kind you're sure you've seen before but just can't place. A little on the heavy side, with a receding hairline, years ahead of his biological age, he wasn't exactly the type most women found attractive.

"That's right." Hutch extended his hand to shake Goodwin's. "And this is my partner, Dave Starsky."

"Partner?" Goodwin looked confused. He adjusted his dark-rimmed glasses, and peering over the bifocal line slashing across the thick lens, quickly looked Starsky over.

"I'm sorry, I should have explained on the phone," Hutch apologized. "We're police detectives."

Goodwin's brows shot up, surprise evident in his expression. "Perhaps we should go back to my office," he suggested, looking over at the clerk, who was openly staring at them now. "Lynn, hold my calls, please."

Once the three men were sitting, Hutch began explaining the reason for their visit.

"So you're Karen's brother? She told me you were a detective on the West Coast. I'm sorry I didn't make the connection."

"Are you friends with my sister?"

"Yes, I sure am. Craig and I were pretty close. We were in college together, did a little fishing. Karen got upset if he went hunting—you know how she is about animals. But I didn't know anything about her disappearing. Why has it been kept so quiet? What does the sheriff say?"

Starsky cleared his throat, hoping he could be diplomatic. “The local law enforcement officers haven’t shown much interest in checking into it. That’s why Hutch’s parents called us. What’s up with the cops here? Can you fill us in?”

“There’re only the sheriff and two deputies. Remember the ‘Andy Griffith Show’? Well, let’s just say these guys must have attended the same academy as Barney Fife.” Both detectives smiled at his description.

“We’re going to pay them a little visit when we’re done here,” Hutch told him. “But we found this number on a pad beside Karen’s phone, and thought maybe someone here may have spoken with her recently.”

Goodwin leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, as though the overhead tiles held the answer to Hutch’s question. “Hmmm...I know I haven’t talked to her lately. Maybe she was renewing her subscription, or placing a classified.”

“If either of those things was the reason she called, would you have a record of it?” Starsky asked.

“Sure. I’ll check with Lynn, the clerk out front, and see if she remembers Karen calling recently.”

“We’d appreciate that,” Hutch said, standing up to leave.

Following his lead, Starsky stood, too. “One more thing. Karen’s been widowed for nearly two years now. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but you said you’re friends. Have you been seeing her socially—you know, dating?”

“No,” he answered immediately. “Craig and I were good friends, and by virtue of Karen being his wife, I’m friends with her as well. But I haven’t seen her, except in passing, since the funeral. I don’t think I’d feel comfortable dating Craig’s widow.”

Starsky nodded. “Thanks, Mr. Goodwin. You’ve been very helpful.”

“We’re staying with my folks.” Hutch took out a business card, jotted the Hutchinsons’ number on the back, and handed it to Goodwin. “When you find out why Karen called, you can reach me at this number.”



The two detectives sat in the rental car outside the sheriff’s office, planning their approach. “You’d better let me do the talking, Starsk. Redwood Valley’s a small town, and the people who live here don’t trust strangers. In a situation like this, subtlety goes a long way.”

Incredulous, Starsky stared back at his partner. “You tryin’ to say I don’t have any tact? Huh? That I might offend somebody?”

“Look, don’t go getting bent out of shape. I’m not questioning your professionalism, but I know, and *you* know, that sometimes you come across pretty strong. I realize I’ve been gone awhile, but I still have the home team advantage. You know—I’m a ‘local boy’.”

Starsky removed the keys from the ignition and whispered beneath his breath, “Talk about the pot callin’ the kettle black,” but decided it wasn’t worth the effort necessary to argue. They hopped out of the car and went up the steps, entering the Sheriff’s Department. Sam watched from the back seat, disappointed he hadn’t been allowed to join them.

Deputy Mike Williams looked up from his “Spider Man” comic book and quickly slipped it into a manila folder labeled “Pending Cases.” “Yes, sir. What can I do for you fellows? Lost? Need directions to the hotel?” Apparently more accustomed to directing tourists than fighting criminals, the young deputy seemed, none the less, eager to impress them.

Hutch removed his sunglasses and stuffed them into his shirt pocket. “Actually, we’d like to talk to the sheriff about a missing person.”

“Uh...Sheriff Dotson’s eating his lunch right now. If you want to wait, I’ll go check and see when he’ll be free.” Deputy Williams stood up. “He’ll want to know why you’re here. He’s a very busy man, and I’ve got to tell him before he’ll talk to you.”

“Like I said,” Hutch answered, “we’re here about a missing person.”

“Who? I don’t know of anybody missing, and I pretty much have my finger on the pulse of this town,” the self-important young man said.

Beginning to lose patience, Hutch flipped out his badge and presented it to the deputy. “Tell him Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky are here to talk with him.”

Williams’ eyes bulged out and he seemed at a loss for words. “Okay, sure. Just wait here.” He retreated through the door behind him.

“Thought you were goin’ for subtle, Blondie.” An amused smile tugged at the corners of Starsky’s mouth.

“Yeah, well...I didn’t want to dance with him all afternoon either. We’ve got other places to go and people to see,” Hutch answered sharply.

The door opened again and Williams returned, the sheriff two steps behind him. The tall, medium-framed man looked about Hutch’s age, except for the graying temples and the silver sprinkled throughout his beard. In all likelihood, he hoped the beard would deflect

attention from his rather large, bulbous nose. When he entered the room, it was apparent by his recalcitrant stride and the arrogant tilt of his head, that interrupting his lunch was an unheard of event in Redwood Valley.

“I’m Sheriff Dotson. My deputy says you seem to think your business is more important than me finishing my lunch, so let’s just cut to the chase.”

Not to be deterred by rudeness, Hutch started to introduce himself. “I’m Detective Sergeant Ken Hutchinson—”

“I know who you are. Big shot detective from Bay City.”

Hutch felt his temper beginning to flare. This guy obviously had an attitude, and they didn’t have time to tip-toe around his oversized ego.

“We *do* work in Bay City, but I’m originally from here, and my family lives—”

The sheriff interrupted again. “Yeah, I know that, too. We went to the same high school, not that we ran in the same circles or anything. I remember you, Mr. All-American football player-track team-ladies’ man.”

Hutch’s face flamed red, and the muscles in his jaw tightened and flexed. Starsky knew he was about to blow. Stepping between Hutch and the sheriff, he coolly interrupted.

“I’m Detective Starsky, and I’m not real happy about how this conversation’s goin’, Sheriff. I mean, we’re here, what? Two minutes? And I find out you know more about my partner than I’ve learned in ten years. This is impressive, true, but not real helpful with our current investigation.”

Hutch tried to step forward, but Starsky laid a gentle, restraining hand on his chest before continuing. “So whattaya say we start over? Hmmm? It’s pretty obvious you’ve got a problem with my partner, so maybe you’d rather talk to me. ‘Cause one way or another, you *are* gonna talk to us.”

His anger mounting, the sheriff’s face turned a mottled purple. Starsky locked eyes with him, making it clear they wouldn’t leave until he told them what they wanted to know.

Dotson knew the dark-haired detective meant what he said. Ken Hutchinson had always been a tough guy, and this partner of his seemed hard as nails, too. The two of them together presented a formidable front. Despite his earlier bluster, the sheriff was fairly certain he didn’t want to tangle with them.

“So, what is it you want from me? What’s this about a missing person?”

“My sister, Karen Edwards, hasn’t been seen nor heard from in five days. My mother said they reported her disappearance, but you refused to investigate.”

“Well, she hasn’t been gone long enough to be considered ‘missing,’” he said defensively. “She may have taken a short trip somewhere. Everybody likes to get away once in a while.”

“Oh, come on, Sheriff,” Starsky interrupted. “You mean to tell me in a town this size, it’s not unusual for a woman from a prominent family to be missing for almost a week?”

“How do I know she hasn’t run off with some man?”

Starsky glanced at Hutch and saw the muscles in his jaw tense again. “What makes you think my sister would leave town with a man? My mother said she isn’t involved with anyone.”

The sheriff smirked, then mumbled sarcastically, “Well, her boyfriend’s going to be surprised to hear that.”

Hutch lunged for the bigger man, but Starsky grabbed his arm, pulling him up short. “He ain’t worth it, partner.” Hutch turned and glared at Starsky, then gradually relaxed.

Looking back at the leering sheriff, Starsky took over the questioning. “So, if she has a boyfriend, how about giving us his name?”

“I’m not giving you anything, punk. This is my jurisdiction, and if anyone is investigating this case—assuming there is a case—it’s me. *I’m* the law here! Do we understand each other?”

Starsky clenched his teeth, biting back the urge to knock that sneer right off Dotson’s face. Only common sense helped him keep his temper in check. All they needed was to be arrested and thrown in jail. That would only make things harder on Mrs. Hutchinson. And Hutch’s dad? He’d have one more criticism to fling in his son’s face.

Starsky stepped back, pulling a reluctant Hutch with him. “Fine. You’re a true servant of the people—a real jewel of a guy, Sheriff. Probably can’t investigate your way out of a brown paper bag,” he said snidely. Turning to Deputy White, he added, “You must be really proud, workin’ for Deputy Dawg.”

“Why you—”

“Uh-uh-uh,” Starsky said, wagging his finger at the sheriff. “Temper, temper.” Facing Hutch, he tugged on the blond’s sleeve. “Come on, partner. I think we could both use some fresh air.”



When the two detectives reached the car, they found Sam hanging out the window, taking in the local sights. The big dog was dying to get out and explore the town, and hadn’t given up on the possibility his humans would take him for a walk. As they approached,

his tail wagged frantically, until he got a glimpse of the uptight expressions on their faces. Something was wrong—they were walking too fast, their movements tense. He'd learned early on how to read their body language, and when to lay low. The big dog sat down on the back seat, no longer lobbying for a tour about town. He'd just wait and see what happened next.

Hutch got in first, slamming the door angrily. Starsky followed suit. Starting the car, he turned and looked at his partner. "Don't let him get to ya, Hutch. We'll find her."

Hutch ran a frustrated hand over his face. "Yeah. I know. I remember that jerk now. Abe Dotson. He always was a bully." Thinking back to high school, Hutch smiled broadly. "His first name is actually Abekenezer. We used to say he had to be a tough guy, if he was going to live with a name like that."

Starsky smiled, too. "You're kiddin'? Who'd name their kid Abekenezer?"

Hutch shook his head, wondering the same thing himself. Then his expression grew more serious. "I can't believe they elected him sheriff."

"Probably ran unopposed." Starsky backed up the car and pulled onto the street. "Let's go back to Karen's and see if we missed somethin'. If she really *is* seeing someone, maybe we'll find a clue to help us figure out who."

Having seen his humans smile, Sam decided it was okay to take part in the conversation. He cautiously moved forward and hung his head over the seat, resting it on Hutch's shoulder. The man reached up and absently scratched the dog under the chin, and Sam leaned in, lapping up the attention.

"Okay. Whatever you think. I'm sorry, Starsk, but I'm not thinking too clearly right now."

Starsky reached over and patted Hutch's knee. "It's okay. Let me do the thinking for a while."



End of Chapter Five