

Too Good To Be True

by TibbieB

Chapter 9

Once he reached the back road that would lead to the cabin, Hutch turned off the siren and flashing mars light, knowing he couldn't risk losing the element of surprise. He figured if Starsky wasn't already dead, in all likelihood, Angelique would panic and kill him in a last desperate attempt to carry out her plan. Approaching a narrowing in the road, Hutch pulled over and parked the Torino, planning to go the rest of the way on foot. He knew the Striped Tomato would stick out like a sore thumb through the trees.

Hutch checked his Magnum, then began his trek through the woods toward the clearing. Within a few short moments, he came upon a graveled drive with a rental car parked at the entrance. At the other end was the cabin, backed up against a picturesque lake.

Hutch decided the best plan would be to skirt around the clearing, remaining hidden by the trees until he found a less conspicuous access to the house. As he reached the backside of the property, he saw Angelique come out the rear door, followed by Demetrius. Hutch dropped back, careful to stay out of sight until he could figure out what they were up to.

He watched as they headed straight toward the small boat dock, cropping out into the water. When they reached the end of the dock, Hutch could, for the first time, get a clear view of them. That's when he realized the giant had a large bundle, wrapped in dark green canvas, slung over his shoulder. The sunlight glinted off a link of heavy chain encircling the bundle. Hutch felt his heart pounding like a sledge hammer when it became plain to him that the bundle was about the size of a man.

Starsky?

Reason gave way to rage as Hutch stormed from the cover of the trees, gun drawn and held rigidly extended before him. At first, neither of them saw him.

“Hold it right there!”

Startled, Demetrius stumbled backward, closer to the edge of the dock. Realizing they'd been discovered, Angelique stepped in front of him, blocking Hutch's view.

“You're too late, Detective Hutchinson!” she screamed. “He died knowing it was for you.” The mad, ice-blue eyes glittered. “He begged me to forgive you, but I told him it had to be like this. I want you to feel the same sorrow and desperation I did when William died!”

Stunned and sickened by her words, Hutch could barely speak. The inanimate lump of canvas draped over the giant's shoulder had once been his friend. He was too late. The grief welled up inside, gagging him. Hutch struggled to stay in control, his voice, choked with raw emotion when he finally spoke.

“Step aside, Angelique. Demetrius, put him down...nice and easy.”

“He was a coward,” Angelique hissed. “He plead with me not to kill him. Did you know he whimpered like a frightened child? He wasn't so brave near the end. I told him he had to pay for your part in William's death.”

The words tore through Hutch like a rusty knife. Not only had Starsky been murdered, he'd been tortured and humiliated. Instinctively, his finger tightened on the Magnum's trigger.

“I said, put him down!” The muscles in Hutch's jaw flexed as he restrained the urge to blow them both away.

Angelique turned to Demetrius, an evil smile contorting her face. “Yes—by all means—put him down, Demetrius. You know what to do.” The hulking man removed the burden from his shoulder, and before Hutch realized his intention, Demetrius threw Starsky's body into the deep water.

“Noooooooooooo!”

Hutch lunged forward, knocking Angelique to the ground as he dashed toward the end of the dock.. When Demetrius turned back toward him, Hutch saw a revolver clutched in his beefy hand. As he raised it and took aim, Hutch pulled off two shots, quickly, one striking the other man in the arm, and one square in the chest. Hutch knew Demetrius was dead before he reached him. He barely noticed Angelique lying unconscious, her head having struck one of the pilings as she fell.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard the sirens heralding his back-up was on the way, but he couldn't afford to wait for them. *Water—Starsky hates water...* Without pause, he dove into the frigid water, determined to find Starsky before he was lost in the murky, depths of the lake. Until he saw it with his own eyes, Hutch would never accept his partner was dead.

Taking a deep breath, he filled his lungs before the icy water rushed over his head. Even near the surface, the darkness was closing in. Hutch almost panicked at the thought he could already be too late. Or, if his partner really was dead, the possibility that his body would disappear into the depths of the lake, ending any hope of seeing him one last time to say goodbye.

Spurred on by that almost debilitating fear, he kicked his legs and plunged deeper. Groping his way through the inky water, he eventually collided with the canvas bundle he

was searching for. Wrapping both arms around it, he lunged upward toward the light; but the canvas was weighted down by the heavy length of chain, and Hutch felt himself sinking downward into the abyss. Fighting back the panic, he kicked harder, with only adrenaline to propel his cold, cramping legs. He knew that if he didn't make it to the surface quickly, it would be the end of them both. Summoning his last ounce of energy, he focused on the light above, and forced his legs to propel them upward, praying for strength with each desperate lunge.

The first thing Hutch saw when he broke the surface was a hubbub of activity on the dock and along the lake shore. Uniformed cops were combing the edge of the woods as well, but no one seemed to notice him fighting to keep his head above water and not lose his hold on the slippery canvas. It dawned on Hutch that the canvas seemed lighter now. He hadn't realized that sometime during his last ditch effort to make it the surface, the chain and slipped off the bundle, enabling them to escape.

When he spotted Captain Dobey and two uniforms standing over Demetrius's corpse, and another small group surrounding Angelique, Hutch tried to call for help; but between the icy water's affect on his body and the sheer exertion of keeping them both afloat, he didn't have the strength to yell.

"There! Look, Captain!"

Dobey peered in Hutch's direction as one of the officers pointed out into the water. "You two—help him!" Dobey barked. "And be quick about it!" The two cops hastily shed their shoes and weapons, then dove into the cold water and swam the short distance to where Hutch was bobbing up and down.

They clumsily removed the heavy burden from Hutch's tired arms. "Can you make it back to shore?" one asked.

"Yeah, don't worry about me. Just hurry! Get Starsky back to shore!" The two officers exchanged a grim look before heading toward the dock as fast as they could swim. Hutch angrily realized they thought it was a lost cause.

When they reached the dock, Dobey was standing by with two paramedics, who wasted no time cutting away the ropes and unrolling the canvas from around Starsky's body. Before checking for a pulse, they quickly removed the wide strip of duct tape from across his mouth, and cut the tight rope that bound his hands behind his back.

Dobey waited at the end of the dock and reached down a helping hand as Hutch climbed out of the water. "Are you okay?"

Hutch barely paused long enough to answer before brushing past his boss, making a beeline to where Starsky lay prone at the other end of the dock. "Yeah, fine, Cap'n."

Satisfied at least one member of the duo was safe, Dobey followed Hutch to where the paramedics were trying to revive the other. To Dobey's surprise, Hutch stopped short of where Starsky lay—hesitant to face the reality that waited only a few feet away.

"I may've been too late," Hutch whispered.

"What?" Dobey stopped in his tracks.

"She told me he was dead before Demetrius threw him in." Hutch felt a cold lump of fear in his stomach. He wanted to see Starsky—needed to see him. Minutes earlier, he'd been driven by desperation to save his partner. But what if Angelique had told the truth? What if he was already dead?

Dobey looked at Hutch solemnly, then cleared his throat before quietly asking, "Did you actually see him die?"

Hutch closed his eyes, willing this nightmare to end, and felt Dobey's familiar, reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"No...but..."

"Well then, we don't know for sure, do we?" he said firmly. Together they approached the trio.

The two paramedics had already begun assessing Starsky's condition. Johnson, the older of the two men, placed one hand under Starsky's neck, tilting back his head. He quickly checked to make certain there were no obstructions in the victim's mouth and throat. He leaned down close to Starsky's mouth and nose, and listened, resting his hand gently on Starsky's chest, hoping to detect the rise and fall of normal breathing. As he did so, his partner, Farley, placed his fingers over the artery along Starsky's neck, checking for a pulse.

"He's not breathing," Johnson said.

"There's a weak pulse," the other paramedic responded.

Johnson kept his hand under Starsky's neck to assure his airway remained open. He quickly placed his other hand on Starsky's forehead, pinching his nostrils closed. The paramedic took a deep breath and lowered his mouth over Starsky's, forming a seal. Then he expelled two full breaths, forcing oxygen into the dying man. They all watched as Starsky's chest lurched up, slightly.

"He's clear. No blockage," Farley remarked.

Johnson lowered his mouth again, this time gave only one short breath, waited five seconds, then repeated the process.

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

Hutch watched helplessly, vacillating between hope and dread. Every time the paramedic breathed into Starsky, his chest rose, giving the false appearance that he was actually breathing on his own.

Farley looked up for a second, making eye contact with Hutch, while Johnson continued breathing into Starsky's mouth. "Do you know the victim?"

With that simple question, Hutch seemed to snap out of his reverie, anxious to help if he could. He knelt down beside Starsky, frightened by the blue pallor of his skin. Johnson repeated the breathing routine.

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

"He's my partner. His name is Starsky."

"How long was he under?" Johnson looked at Hutch expectantly.

"Oh...uh...no more...no more than three...maybe five minutes."

The paramedic nodded. "Cutting it close. But the cold water lowered his body temperature, slowed down his heartbeat. If we're lucky, there won't be any brain damage."

Still no response.

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

There was no sign of color or life in the cold, rigid features of Starsky's face. *If only I'd been there a few minutes earlier...* Overcome by unreasonable guilt, Angelique's words rang in Hutch's ears. *He died for you...*

Johnson looked at his partner, waiting for a signal.

"Keep at it," Farley told him.

Hutch felt a sob rise in his throat as he watched Johnson begin the mouth to mouth resuscitation again.

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

The whole scene seemed surreal to him. He and DobeY silently watched the paramedics work with precision and determination. For Hutch, all that existed was the drama playing out before him. He was even oblivious to Angelique's insane shrieking when she was lead away in handcuffs.

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

Hutch's anxiety escalated as the seconds ticked by. Finally unable to restrain himself any longer, he reached down and took Starsky's hand. "Come on Starsk, wake up...please... Don't do this, buddy. I need you here."

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

Still hanging onto Starsky's hand like an anchor, Hutch tenderly reached down and touched his bruised and swollen face. The lips that could smile and light up a room were now cold and blue—lifeless. *Ice cold. Too much time...he's been out too long... he's going to die...* Anxiety transformed into anger and a feeling of total impotence. Why couldn't they do something? Why couldn't he do something?

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

"Wake up, Starsky! Wake up, dammit! Don't you die on me!" Hutch's desperation surged. Warm tears mingled with frigid droplets of lake water and glided down his own cold cheeks.

Breathe...exhale...three, four, five...breathe...exhale...three, four, five...

With a sudden heave, water spewed from Starsky's mouth, making a strangled, gurgling sound as he gasped for that first breath of oxygen. Startled, Hutch could hardly believe his own eyes. Instantly, the paramedics turned Starsky onto his side to let the water finish draining from his lungs and throat.

"All right! That's it!" Farley snatched up the stethoscope and listened to Starsky's chest. "Heartbeat's stronger too." The paramedic smiled at Hutch encouragingly.

After Johnson was certain the water had drained from Starsky's mouth and throat, he placed an oxygen mask over his patient's face.

Starsky's skin was still cold and clammy, but Hutch could see the color slowly returning to his partner's face. "Is he...is he breathing on his own?" Hutch's eyes sought out the paramedic's. "Is he going to be okay?"

"It's too early for guarantees, but his heartbeat's stronger...still a little irregular..." Johnson answered, "but I'd say things are looking up." Behind him, DobeY took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his worried brow.

Still working quickly, one paramedic started an IV, while the other took Starsky's blood pressure and pulse, then fed information back to the hospital. With their patient stabilized for the moment, Johnson asked the doctor for permission to transport.

Hutch ran a tired hand over his face. It didn't seem possible a man could endure so much abuse, nearly drown, and still cling to life so tenaciously. Hutch smiled to himself. But then, this was Starsky he was talking about.

"Come on, partner," he whispered. Hutch held Starsky's left hand between his two, trying to rub some warmth back into him. "I can't do it by myself."

"I don't like the irregularity of his heartbeat," Farley quietly told his partner.

"Hospital just gave us the go ahead to transport. I don't think we should delay getting him there." Johnson kept his voice low as well.

"I agree." Farley turned to Hutch. "We're taking him on in, and you can ride with us if you want. Maybe you can give the hospital some of the information they'll need. Just understand he's not out of the woods yet, so if anything goes wrong, I'll need you stay out of the way. Understood?"

"Well...yeah...sure...whatever you say. You have my word."

Hutch looked over at Dobey, who nodded his agreement. "Go with them. I'll follow in Starsky's car."

"Thanks, Cap'n." Hutch tossed him the Torino keys.

The paramedics loaded Starsky into the ambulance and Hutch climbed in after them. He stationed himself on one side of the stretcher, within Starsky's line of vision. Farley drove, while Johnson rode in back with the two detectives. The ambulance siren wailed, as they sped toward the hospital.

Hutch gazed down at the battered face of his partner. The angry scrapes and bruises were even more disturbing up close. He gently smoothed the damp, dark curls back from his partner's forehead, and tried not to think about how the wounds got there, or the pain they must have caused. "Come on, Starsk. Can ya hear me, buddy?" Still, there was no response. Dark lashes lay like smudges against Starsky's ashen face. Hutch found himself taking deep breaths, as if doing so would force oxygen into Starsky's lungs. When the midnight blue eyes fluttered open a slit, Hutch was afraid to believe what he was seeing.

"Hutch?" The voice was weak, muffled by the oxygen mask; but there was no doubt, he'd said his partner's name.

Tears welled up in Hutch's eyes, blurring his vision. He squeezed Starsky's hand, trying to convey the reality of his presence. "Yeah, right here... How ya doing, buddy?"

Slowly, Starsky's lids closed again, leaving Hutch feeling like the rug had been yanked out from under him.

"Starsk? Can you hear me? Starsky?"

"He's unconscious again," Johnson told him. "He may drift in and out like that for awhile." He adjusted the oxygen mask on his patient's face again, and checked his pulse. "Still pretty erratic. I'll feel better when we can get it stabilized."

The interminable ride to the hospital finally ended, as the ambulance screeched to a halt outside the emergency room. The next several minutes were a blur to Hutch, watching the medical team whisk his partner through the swinging stainless steel doors. When he tried to follow, an orderly blocked his way, and instructed him to wait in the waiting room around the corner.

Hutch started to argue, but Captain Dobey arrived, and commandeered him down the hall, warning him to stay out of the way and let the medical team do their jobs. Too tired and defeated to argue, Hutch sat down next to the captain, closed his eyes, and tried to will away the tension in his neck and shoulders.

Still dressed in his dripping, wet clothes, Hutch was too distracted to realize he was shivering. So, when one of the hospital's housekeepers passed by with a cart of clean linens, Dobey discreetly lifted a dry blanket, and draped it around the wet man's shoulders. Looking up, Hutch gave him a ghost of a smile, appreciative for the warmth.

The two men sat silently waiting, as time seemed to stand still. It was an all too familiar scene. Finally, Dobey stood up, stretching his legs and back. "I'm going for coffee. Bring you a cup?"

Hutch nodded. "Yeah, thanks, Cap'n." He didn't bother looking up as Dobey hurried down the hall in search of a coffee machine. Before the captain was fully out of sight, a nurse appeared at the door of the waiting room.

"Mr. Hutchinson, you can come back now." She turned and led the way back down the hall toward the emergency room, Hutch following closely on her heels. "He's awake now," she told him before opening the door. Hutch felt a wave of relief course through his body.

Starsky lay snugly wrapped in two heavy thermal blankets, a pillow propping up his head. When he saw Hutch enter the room, tried to smile, but was just too weak.

"Hey, buddy, how ya doin'?" Hutch reached down and squeezed Starsky's hand.

“Terrific. Don’t I look terrific?” His voice was a little quivery, but he was completely lucid. Hutch was amazed at the improvement in his color, the blue pallor of his skin already beginning to recede.

“How’d I get here, anyway?” Starsky croaked. “My throat hurts like hell.”

“The ambulance brought us. You were out of it. I don’t suppose you remember much about what happened, but you’re going to be okay now. It’s over.” Hutch smiled and lowered his face down closer to Starsky’s. He could tell his partner’s breathing was still a little shallow, but seemed to be evening out. “The crazy lady’s gone and the good guys got there in time.”

A crooked shadow of a smile transformed Starsky’s face into the familiar countenance Hutch had been waiting for. “Took ya long enough, Blondie.” He spoke barely above a whisper, his voice graveled and raw.

“Now that’s gratitude for you,” Hutch joked back. “Here I was going nuts looking for you, and all the while you’re vacationing at the lake.” A tired, but happy smile lit his eyes.

This time, Starsky made a poor attempt at laughter, then grimaced from the pain caused by the ribs that Demetrius had cracked. Hutch protectively steadied him with a gentle hand on his shoulder, waiting for the discomfort to pass. Starsky’s hand closed over his, drawing strength from his presence.

Dobey bustled into the room, led by the same nurse who’d fetched Hutch minutes before. He leaned around Hutch, his round face wreathed in smiles. “Welcome back, Starsky.” He handed Hutch a cup of strong, black coffee, and moved up next to the bed, closer to Starsky.

“You had your partner here pretty worried,” he blustered, making a poor attempt at hiding his own concern. “And don’t worry about your car,” he added. “I drove it over here for Hutch. I knew you wouldn’t want it left up at the lake.” He beamed like a child reporting he’d done all his chores.

Starsky’s brows shot up slightly, causing him considerable discomfort in the process. “My car? How’d my car get there?” He looked accusingly at Hutch. “You been drivin’ my car? What? Did ya think I was dead and wouldn’t know the difference?”

Hutch pulled an indignant face. “Come on, Starsk. I just saved your life here. Now you’re going to make an issue out of me driving your car? Can I help it if you’ve got lousy taste in women?” Deciding a strong offense was the best defense, he hurried on, “I mean, is it my fault you got mixed up with another criminally insane woman?”

Starsky, a little more alert now, shot back, “Don’t try to change the subject here. We’re talkin’ about my car.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to go now,” the nurse interrupted. “You can visit more once we move him upstairs to his room.”

Not easily deterred when the Stripped Tomato was at risk, Starsky persisted. “You really got a lot’a nerve, ya know? Can’t a guy even get kidnapped and drowned without someone stealin’ his car?”



End of Chapter 8