

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Eleven

Francine noticed Hutch's face looked drawn and tired as he and Starsky approached her desk and asked to see Mr. Bradley. Although it was closing time, her boss was still in his office and agreed to meet with them.

"Twice in one day. You must be making progress," he greeted them.

"Yeah, I think we are. We'd like you to take a look at something and tell us if you've ever seen it before." Hutch dug into his pocket and produced the diamond earring. Frank Bradley's face turned deathly white, his knees nearly buckling under him.

Starsky grabbed Bradley's elbow and helped him to the nearest sofa.

"W-where did you get this?" Bradley took several deep breaths to regain his composure. Starsky looked over his head at Hutch and saw his partner was as baffled as he by the man's reaction.

"The cleanin' crew found it in Carol Parker's apartment," Starsky answered. "We thought maybe you gave 'em to her."

"No," was his only response. They waited for him to say more, but he didn't.

"Mr. Bradley, what do you know about this earring?" Hutch asked, as he came around and sat in a chair across from the man.

"I-I've never seen it before."

"If you know anything about this and refuse to tell us, you could be charged with obstruction of justice," Hutch warned gently. "It would be much better if you'd talk with us so we don't have to officially take you in for questioning."

"Isn't the fact that I didn't give it to Carol answer enough?"

"No, sir," Starsky replied. "You recognize this earring and it's evidence to a homicide—"

"You don't know that," Bradley interrupted. "You don't know that this earring has anything to do with Carol's death."

"But you do," Starsky said matter-of-factly.

Bradley stood up, a look of determination hardening his features. “Gentlemen, I have nothing further to say to you at this time. If you have any more questions regarding this earring, or Carol Parker’s death, I suggest you go through my attorney, Marcus Levitt. Francine can give you his telephone number and the address of his practice.” He walked toward the door as he spoke.

Starsky and Hutch were stunned at the unexpected change in attitude, and how quickly Bradley seemed to have recovered from the shock he’d obviously experienced only minutes earlier. When they didn’t immediately get up and follow him to the door, he turned and spoke again.

“You really must excuse me now. I have a dinner engagement at seven and will barely have time to pick up my wife and get there. Thank you for coming by.” With such an curt, direct dismissal, they had no choice but to leave. He promptly closed the door behind them, as they stood there bewildered at the turn of events.

Before either one could speak, Francine asked, “Already through?”

“I guess you could say that,” Hutch answered.



Starsky cranked up the Torino and turned to Hutch. “What the hell just happened in there?”

“I don’t know, partner. Your guess is as good as mine. But Bradley knows where that earring came from, and it’s gonna be the clue to solving this case.”

Hutch squeezed his eyes shut tightly, riding out the ensuing wave of pain. Starsky reached over and laid a hand on his arm. “Hey...you okay?”

“Yeah. I guess maybe you’re right, though. I need to go home.”

“When are you gonna learn to listen to me? Huh?” Starsky chided. “I’m gonna take you home first, then I’ll go pick up Big Dog. That is, if Huggy hasn’t already tossed him out on his ear.”

Hutch closed his eyes and tried to relax, but he was beyond doing that without the aid of the painkillers. Once they arrived home, Starsky followed him to the door. “Go lie down and I’ll bring your medicine,” he said, unlocking the door so Hutch wouldn’t have to struggle with the key one-handedly.

Two minutes later, Starsky came to the bedroom with a pill and a glass of cool water. “I’ll be back in a little while. I’m gonna go ahead and exercise Sam before I bring him back here to feed him. Okay?”

“Sure, Starsk. That sounds fine.” Hutch eased himself down on the bed and tried to find a comfortable position.

“Here, try this,” Starsky said, as he propped a soft pillow under Hutch’s injured shoulder to relieve the pressure.

“That’s better,” Hutch told him. “I’m fine. Go ahead and see to Sam. I’ll probably be asleep when you get back. Are you going on home tonight?”

“Thought I’d just crash here, if that’s okay,” Starsky answered, not liking the pale color of his partner’s face. It seemed wise to stick around while Hutch was taking the strong medication. Starsky waited only a couple of minutes then slipped out quietly, locking the door behind him.



When Starsky arrived at The Pits, he parked in the alley and came in through the kitchen. Huggy was working at his desk in the little office to the left of the cooking area. Sam was lounging at his feet, and neither of them heard Starsky come in.

“Hey, Hug. I’m here to pick up Big Dog.” The minute Sam heard Starsky’s voice he jumped to attention and ran to meet him, his tail wagging so hard it caused his whole backside to wave. “Hi there, fella!” The dog reared up, his paws landing on Starsky’s chest. “Do you always have to jump all over me like that?” Starsky scolded him half-heartedly.

“Starsky, my man. I was beginning to think I was gonna have to make this dude a permanent resident at Huggy Bear’s fine establishment. Where have you guys been? More important, where’s the other half of the home team?” Huggy asked when he realized Starsky was alone.

“Had to take him home and put him to bed. The Blond Blintz finally admitted a bullet in the shoulder tends to slow ya down a little.”

“This has to be a first,” Huggy laughed. “I hope you got it on tape.”

“And he calls *me* hard-headed.” Starsky snapped the leash to Sam’s collar then dug a five-dollar bill out of his jeans pocket and laid it on the desk

“Huggy, thanks for lookin’ after Sam.”

“What’s the bread for, man?”

“Forgot to bring his lunch,” Starsky told him. “We promised we would.”

“Put your money away, brother. Huggy can spring for a couple of burgers.”

“Nah, keep it. He can eat you outta house and home if you let him. Hope he didn’t give you hard time.”

“Not me. He’s cool. But you may want to work on refining his approach with the ladies. I tried to tell him a cold nose in the crotch may not be the fastest way to a woman’s heart,” Huggy said, completely straight-faced.

“You’re kiddin’?” Starsky tried to look shocked, but inside, he was about to lose it.

“One hundred percent serious, my brother. If you don’t believe it, you can check out the waitresses and a cute little brunette named Becky—that is, if she ever comes in here again. I mean you gotta admire the dude’s no-holds-barred approach to ‘winning friends and influencing people.’ Did he get that from the Starsky School of Charm?”

“Sorry, Hug, can’t take credit for it. I’ll ask Hutch when I get home if he’s responsible, though. Thanks again for lettin’ Sam hang out with ya.” Sam licked Huggy’s hand and was rewarded with one more ear scratch before he and Starsky left through the back entrance. Anxious for another car ride, the dog rushed ahead of Starsky, pulling and straining on the leash all the way.

Rather than return to Hutch’s right away, Starsky and the dog headed for the park. A new, bright red rubber ball from the pet store had been tucked under the seat of the car as a special treat to be introduced at some future date. The dog was so energetic and restless from having been cooped up most of the day that Starsky thought this would be the ideal time to bring out the new toy.

Being twilight, the park was almost deserted. The sky was beautiful, tinged with the pink and orange of the sunset, the wispy, gray-blue clouds drifting across the horizon. Starsky had that “all is well with the world” feeling as he parked the car and hooked up the dog’s leash.

The children had gone home to have dinner with their families, presenting a good opportunity to try Sam off-leash for the first time. Starsky hoped the dog wouldn’t take off for the great wide open, but Sam was becoming more responsive to both him and Hutch whenever they called him. In fact, Starsky was amazed at the animal’s intelligence—he seemed to learn so quickly. There’d been no further discussion about finding Sam a new home, but Starsky knew, when the time came, an obedient dog would be more adoptable and more likely to stay with his new family.

“Come on, boy. Let’s play ball.” Starsky took Sam to an open area where he’d have room to run. Deciding it would be safer to try him on leash first, Starsky showed the ball to the dog and teased him a little, holding it behind his back, then flashing it repeatedly to build up the dog’s interest. Sam watched intently, making quick little grabs in an effort to steal the prize away from Starsky. Within a few minutes, Sam was so excited, Starsky could barely keep the dog from snatching the ball from his hand.

Sam jumped up and down, wrought with anticipation. “Okay! Okay! You want the ball, Sam?” Sam gave a loud woof in response. Starsky tossed the ball only a short distance. Sam lunged forward and scooped it up in his huge jaws, tossed it into the air, then repeated the motion.

“Bring it here, Sam! Bring the ball!” But Sam wasn’t about to let it go that easily. Starsky reeled him in on the leash and tussled with him to get the ball back. Then, with trepidation and concern for the

wisdom of his actions, Starsky unhooked the leash and tossed the ball into the air once more. To his astonishment, the rottweiler jumped and caught it mid-air.

“Good boy! Bring me the ball, Sam!” This time, the dog loped to him immediately and presented the ball to be thrown again. Starsky threw it about twenty feet this time and silently prayed the dog wouldn’t take off. Sam dashed after it and swooped down on the ball, almost before it hit the ground.

Starsky called him, and without hesitation, Sam barreled toward him like a locomotive, moving so fast that by the time he reached his destination, he slammed into Starsky and knocked him flat on his back. Standing on Starsky’s chest with the red rubber ball clenched in his teeth and his big pink tongue lolled out the side of his mouth, he was a humorous sight.

Starsky threw both arms around the dog and wrestled him onto his back, further exciting the puppy. When released, Sam ran at lightning speed in tight little circles around him. Starsky sat on the ground just watching, letting the dog run out of steam. Finally, Sam collapsed in front of him and flopped his head onto Starsky’s knees, looking up with mischievous eyes.

“I don’t know about you, Big Dog, but I’m ready to call it a day.” The trusting face looked up with affection, hanging on every word Starsky uttered. “Besides, we need to go check on Hutch. He’s pretty helpless without us, you know. But don’t tell him I said so, or he’ll be really pissed.” Starsky started to attach the leash to Sam’s collar, but instead, got up and nonchalantly walked toward the car.

“Sam, come,” he said confidently, looking over his shoulder at the dog. The rottweiler immediately fell into step behind Starsky, then hopped into the car and they headed for home.



When Starsky and Sam reached Hutch’s, they found him sound asleep. Starsky quietly closed the door, to make sure Sam didn’t sneak in and wake him later. He’d just finished feeding the dog, and was making himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when the phone rang. “Hello,” he answered shortly, grabbing it after only one ring.

“Uh...are you Detective Hutchinson?” a man’s voice asked.

“No, I’m his partner, Detective Starsky. Hutch can’t come to the phone right now. Can I help you?”

Five seconds of silence followed, then the nervous voice said, “Yes...actually, I think you’re the one who gave me this card.” Silence again. “This is Timothy Parker, I...I’d like to talk with you about my sister’s death. But not like this, not on the phone.”

Starsky looked at his wristwatch. “I can be there in fifteen minutes.”

“No! I mean...don’t come to my house. I don’t want Mother to know. She won’t understand.”

“Okay, then...where do you want me to meet you? A restaurant? A bar? How about The Pits? It’s not far from where you live.”

“No...not so public. I’m...I’m afraid if we’re seen, I’ll be killed—just like Carol. I know a place only about five minutes from my house. It’s a warehouse that my model car club meets in. I have a key and no one will be there tonight. It’s totally private.”

Starsky hesitated. What if this was a trap? But Parker sounded scared out of his wits, so, most likely, he was telling the truth. Starsky suspected Parker had the goods on Frank Bradley. Anyone with a grain of sense would be afraid of a man as powerful as Bradley, he reasoned.

“Okay. Give me the address and time. We’ll come.”

“Thank you...thank you so much. I’ve wanted to level with you since the day you first came to my home, but I knew Mother couldn’t handle the truth. She has a bad heart. Anyway, the address is 2260 Clayburn Street. I’ll meet you there in fifteen minutes. I’ll unlock the door and wait inside, so you can just walk right in. I’d rather not hang around outside, since it’s not the greatest part of town. But the rent’s really low and that’s all our club can afford to lease.”

Starsky jotted down the address. “Got it. We’ll leave here in a couple of minutes. I’m not familiar with this address, so if it takes us more than fifteen minutes, just stay put, okay? It’s gonna be fine,” Starsky reassured him. “We’ll get whoever is responsible for your sister’s death, and if we need to, we’ll put you in protective custody ‘til they’re picked up.”

“Thank you, Detective Starsky. You don’t know what this means to me. Goodbye.”

Starsky placed the receiver back on the hook. He went to the bedroom, peeked in the door, and saw Hutch had not stirred. Starsky hesitated to disturb him, but knew Hutch wouldn’t like him going alone to meet Parker.

“Hutch?” he called softly. “You asleep?” When there was no response, he entered the bedroom, closing the door behind him to keep Sam from following. Leaning down close to Hutch’s face, he asked again, “Hutch, you asleep?” He could hear the even, relaxed breathing, confirming Hutch was out like a light. Looking at his friend’s peaceful face, Starsky couldn’t bring himself to wake him, knowing Hutch needed to rest—to let himself heal. His decision made, Starsky tiptoed back out and quietly closed the door.

Returning to the kitchen, he grabbed a notepad off the fridge and scribbled a message in case Hutch woke before he got back. “*Hutch—gone to meet Timothy Parker in Model Car Club building at 2260 Clayburn. Has info about Carol’s murder. Didn’t want to wake you. Be back soon—Starsk.*”

Starsky put his gun and holster back on before shrugging into his jacket. He heard a faint whining sound, and noticed the dog lying at Hutch’s bedroom door, his nose wedged in the crack. Grabbing Sam’s collar, Starsky led him away from the door.

“Come away from there, Sam. You’re gonna wake Hutch.” Sam whined louder. In a hurry to get to the rendezvous, Starsky didn’t have time to hassle with the dog. He made a snap decision to ensure Hutch wouldn’t be disturbed. “Come on, Big Dog. I guess I’ll have to take you with me.” He retrieved the note to Hutch and added “*P.S. Sam’s with me,*” before heading out the door with dog right.



The red Torino pulled up in front of the warehouse Timothy Parker had designated for their meeting. The area around it was completely deserted, with the exception of a lone rusty, white 1966 station wagon parked in the lot. The one and only street lamp flickered erratically, defeating its effort to light the entrance. Starsky felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle. He pulled out his gun and checked to make certain he had plenty of ammunition.

“I’ve got bad feelin’ about this, Sam,” he said, as much to himself as to the dog. “You wait here, boy. If I don’t come out soon, take the Torino and go back to Hutch’s. But be careful with the paint job.” Starsky made the tongue-in-cheek crack in a dead serious voice and Sam listened intently, looking as though he actually understood. Starsky laughed at his own joke and gave Sam a final pat on the head, then got out of the car and entered the building.

The door was unlocked, just as Parker had said it would be. As Starsky stepped through the door, he found the area dimly lit by only a single overhead bulb. He looked around but saw no sign of Parker. “Parker! Tim Parker, are you here?” he called out.

Met by only a spooky silence, Starsky ventured in a little farther. Looking down the corridor, he could see that lighting throughout the structure was minimal. The building had been partitioned into rooms, all different sizes and configurations. He glanced briefly into each of them as he went, and saw most had racing tracks for radio-control cars, assembled on platforms decked out impressively with elaborate scenery, little model buildings, and miniature trees. One room was dedicated to glassed-in display cases, filled with vintage radio-controlled automobiles, from Porsches to Volkswagen Beetles.

Starsky heard a shuffling sound coming from a room farther into the interior of the building. “Parker? That you?” When no one answered, he pulled the Smith & Wesson from its holster and proceeded cautiously, prepared for trouble.

The silence and dim lighting gave the warehouse an eerie atmosphere. The only sound disturbing the absolute quiet was that of his own footsteps. Starsky moved stealthily down the gloomy hallway, continuing to check each room quickly. Progressing deeper into the interior of the building, the lighting became increasingly sparse. Then without warning, a resounding bang pierced the silence, plunging the entire structure into darkness so all-encompassing that Starsky literally couldn’t see his hand before his face.

He fought the overwhelming urge to run blindly from the building. As the darkness became a heavy, suffocating blanket, Starsky tried to remain calm and picture in his mind’s eye the path he had taken to the interior. His sense of direction seemed all out of whack. Had there been windows? He couldn’t remember. All he knew was, he had to get out of here fast. He had to breathe fresh air again. To hell

with Parker! He was either dead—murdered by whomever he'd planned to expose, or Starsky had used incredibly poor judgment and allowed himself to be lured in to one hell of a trap. Either way, the detective knew he was in deep trouble.

Starsky stumbled forward, finally locating the wall. From there he began carefully groping his way back toward what he *hoped* was the front of the building, guided by only touch and instinct. It was slow going, but he had just begun to regain his sense of direction when a deafening explosion rocked the building, throwing him backwards. There was no time to consider what had happened before he slipped into the velvet-soft darkness of unconsciousness.

End of Chapter Eleven