

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Four

Hutch slammed the door behind him and jogged toward the Torino. Almost the instant the door shut, Sam let out a loud, mournful howl, piercing the quiet neighborhood. Hutch stopped in his tracks and went back inside to scold the puppy. Seconds later, Starsky looked up and saw him leave the house again. This time, Hutch didn't even succeed in locking the door before another nerve-wracking howl sounded from within, this one louder than the first.

Hutch threw his head back, gazing skyward in a display of agitation. He opened the door and went in for a second time, taking a little longer before coming out again. Starsky was getting a real kick out of watching his partner's yo-yo routine, but when Hutch disappeared back into the house a third time, Starsky was beginning to get a little impatient.

He was just getting out to go see what the hold-up was, when Hutch reappeared with Sam tagging behind him. The look on his partner's face warned Starsky he'd better not say a word. Wrenching open the passenger door, Hutch flipped the seat forward and guided Sam into the back seat.

"Whoa! Wait just a minute now! Whattaya think you're doin'?' You can't bring him with us," Starsky complained.

"And exactly what do *you* suggest we do? You heard him, Starsky. I can't leave him here, howling his damn head off! All it's gonna take is one neighbor calling Mrs. Frye, and I'm history here."

In a show of incredibly bad timing, Sam flew over the back seat, landing between the two detectives, then deposited his oversized body onto Starsky's lap. His big paws went up on Starsky's shoulders as he covered his new buddy's face with wet, slobbery kisses.

"Knock it off, ya big dummy!" Starsky was fighting a losing battle, as he tried to peel the big dog off his chest and face.

"Not so funny when you're on the receiving end, is it?"

"Aw, come on, get him off me!" Starsky fussed. Hutch finally tugged on the leash and brought Sam to his side of the seat.

"This isn't gonna work, Hutch. How are we supposed to get any work done with him followin' us around? Huh?"

“I don’t know! But I’ll tell you this…” Hutch pointed his finger emphatically at Starsky, showing he was in no mood to argue. “We’re in this together, and we’ll have to *deal* with it together. Unless *you* want to take him back to the Pound right now, I suggest you try and cooperate a little.”

Starsky sobered at the prospect of turning Sam back over to Animal Control. He realized Hutch was probably having a rough time coping with the changes the dog had caused in his morning schedule, and figured it was best not to antagonize him any further.

“Okay. All right, I’m sorry. I don’t wanna turn him in any more than you do. Maybe Huggy could help us out for a little while. I don’t think Cap’n Dobey’s gonna put out the welcome mat for him. Do you?”

“No, but I thought maybe we could go straight over to Bradley’s and let Sam sit in the car. That building has an underground parking area, so it’ll be cool enough for him to stay there a little while.”

Starsky tipped his head, acknowledging that that might work. He cranked up the car while Hutch made Sam return to the back seat.

“So, how’d it go last night?”

“Okay, I guess,” Hutch answered, his voice much calmer. “He slept on the bed. Got me up at four a.m. to take him out.” Hutch smiled, glancing back at the puppy who had resumed his favorite position—head and paws hanging over the seat between them. “I woke up and his head was on the pillow right next to mine.”

Starsky smiled, too, imagining the expression on Hutch’s face when he opened his eyes, nose-to-nose with Sam. “That’ll go a long way with the ladies,” he joked.

“Guess we’ll just have to have joint custody, Starsk. You can baby-sit when I have company, and vice versa.”

Starsky gave him a doubtful sideways glance. “Got it all figured out, don’cha? You know, I hear the ladies go crazy about a guy with a dog,” he said, flashing a grin at his partner. He almost told Hutch about the poodle and her good-looking owner, but decided he’d rather Hutch didn’t know how that episode had ended. “How about some coffee and a donut on the way?” he suggested, changing the subject.

Hutch rolled his eyes at the mention of the word ‘donut.’ “Just coffee for me. You know I don’t want all that sugar polluting my body this early in the morning. I had a power shake before I took Sam jogging.” In return, Starsky gave him a look of disgust. It was too early for a lecture in nutrition, but that didn’t slow down Hutch’s warning.

“You know, buddy, that stuff’s gonna kill you someday. But if you want to stop at the Krispy Kreme, be my guest. I’ll check in with the station and let them know where we’ll be.”

Hutch called in, while Starsky stopped at the drive-through for his calorie/ cholesterol/fat-laden breakfast. The dispatcher told Hutch that she was patching him through to Dobey, who wanted to speak with one of them right away.

“Cap’n, this is Hutch. Starsky and I are on our way over to see Bradley. We want to interview him before going any further with the investigation.”

“That’s fine. I expected he was at the top of your list. But I need you two back here by two this afternoon. The state fire marshal wants to sit down with you for a few minutes and compare notes. He was appointed only a few weeks ago. Name’s Jerry Hunter. I told him you’d be here, so don’t be late,” Dobey said in his usual gruff manner.

“Got it, Cap’n. We’ll be there.”

Starsky handed a cup of steaming hot coffee to his partner, careful not to allow Sam to get close enough to burn his nose. The curious puppy licked his chops when Starsky pulled out a fresh, warm donut, and was within inches of helping himself when it was yanked out of his range.

“Oh, no you don’t, Bozo. This *my* breakfast. You already had your. Besides, didn’t anybody ever tell you that dogs don’t like donuts?”

“He’s a lot like you, Starsk. If it’s food—he likes it.”

“Very funny,” Starsky shot back. “Just keep him outta my donuts.”

Starsky finished off the pastry in three bites and maneuvered the Ford back out into traffic, traveling toward 21st Century Towers. The highrise office complex housed, among other things, the corporate offices for Frank Bradley Enterprises.

“Did a little checking and it seems our boy Bradley’s a high-roller, worth several mill. He has his hands in more businesses than the mob,” Starsky said. “We already knew about the fur trade and jewelry, but I found out he also owns an import business for pricey, custom-built cars—from Jaguar to Rolls Royce. Add to that ‘dealer of rare original artwork’ and we got one filthy-rich dude.” Starsky glanced at his partner as he talked. “With his import/export business connections, there’s plenty of opportunity to smuggle drugs in and out of the country.”

“When did you find out all that?” Hutch asked, impressed that Starsky had done his homework.

“After I left your place last night, I went by the station and asked Minnie to run a check. I just lucked out; she’s working second shift this week.”

“Starsky, why is it that Minnie just can’t seem to say no where you’re concerned? Don’t you ever feel just the tiniest bit guilty about taking advantage of her affection for you?”

“Oh, come on, Hutch, she could be my mother.”

“You’ve heard what they say about older women and younger men,” Hutch teased.

“You know, Starsk, women don’t even reach their sexual peak until they’re in their forties.” Watching from the corner of his eye, Hutch could see the topic of conversation was beginning to make Starsky uncomfortable. Amused, he waited for a reaction.

“Oh, yeah? For real? And what about guys? I mean, when am I supposed to peak?”

“Hate to tell you this, partner, but it’s come and gone. Age nineteen.” Hutch could barely resist smiling at the expression on Starsky’s face.

“Nineteen? Are you kiddin’! That’s not true. You’re makin’ it up.”

“Absolutely serious. If you’d read something besides comic books and the funny papers, you’d’ve seen some of the more recent studies done by Masters & Johnson. Haven’t you read their new book, “The Joy of Sex?”

“Don’t need to read a book, partner,” Starsky boasted. He gave Hutch a wicked grin and waggled his eyebrows.

Starsky looked at the street sign, realized where he was, and made an abrupt turn into a strip shopping center on the right. The car behind him skidded and blared his horn. “What the hell?” Hutch hung onto the dashboard and braced Sam with his left elbow.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Starsky said when he realized the dog had nearly catapulted over the back seat. “Be right back.” He stomped down on the emergency brake and left the engine running while he dashed into the Junior Supermarket. A few short minutes later, he ran back out carrying a large brown paper bag, which he dropped on the front seat between them. Sam, inquisitive about the contents of the bag, quickly stuck his head into the open top and began snuffling and making loud snorting noises.

“What’s in the bag, Starsk?”

“Just somethin’ to keep him busy while we’re talkin’ to Bradley.”

Six blocks later, Starsky pulled the Torino into the underground parking lot of the 21st Century Towers office complex and located a fairly deserted, cool area to park the car. By now, Sam’s head was completely buried in the bag, and he was busy trying to retrieve the new toy.

Starsky smiled at Hutch with an “I told you so” look on his face. “So what’s in the bag?” Hutch asked again.

“One of those big rawhide chewy things. You know, the ones that look like giant bones. I figure he’ll be quiet if he has a toy to chew.”

Hutch thought Starsky was pretty clever, but to keep his buddy's smugness quotient at a tolerable level, he decided not to say so. Instead, he rolled his window down a couple of inches to give the dog some fresh air. Starsky did the same, and they both slipped quietly out of the car while Sam wrestled with the large brown bag and its hidden treasure.



Bradley Enterprises was located on the nineteenth floor, and it was apparent the higher the floor, the more affluent the tenants. As they stepped off the elevator onto Italian pink marble floors, Starsky and Hutch looked around in awe. Thick, richly colored, hand-woven, Persian rugs dotted the lobby area. Oversized, dark cherry chairs with matching sofas covered in intricately patterned brocade upholstery were placed just so, providing a place for visitors to wait in comfort. Tall, narrow windows spanned from ceiling to floor, their top panels fashioned of colorful, handcrafted, stained-glass pastoral scenes.

"This must be the place," Starsky said under his breath.

"Don't break anything," Hutch warned him jokingly.

An attractive blonde woman about twenty-five to thirty years old looked up from her desk over dark-framed bifocals, which were perched low on the bridge of her nose. She waited until the two detectives reached her desk before acknowledging them.

"May I help you, gentlemen?" she asked primly.

Both men pulled out their badges and held them up for her to see. "I'm Detective Hutchinson and this is my partner, Detective Starsky. We're here to see Mr. Bradley regarding a police matter."

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked coolly.

"Well, no," Hutch answered, "but I'm certain he'll see us, since this is regarding a crime investigation."

"Mr. Bradley is a very busy man." She opened a black suede calendar book and ran her finger down the page. "No, I'm afraid he has back-to-back appointments all day."

Starsky stepped up to the desk. "Look, this is official police business. I suggest you buzz your boss and tell him we're here. He's likely to be pretty upset if he finds out you turned us away without even checkin'," he said, irritation obvious in his tone. She reminded Starsky of a mother wolf guarding her pups, rather than a receptionist. And her high-handed attitude was starting to really grate on him.

The receptionist lifted her chin arrogantly. "Sir, I believe I know more about what would upset my boss than you do. And I *know* he doesn't have time to see you right now."

Hutch could see the tension building, and decided to try another approach. "Yes, I'm sure you do." Hoping to soften her up a little, Hutch gave her his most appealing smile, the one that *always*

worked with women. “So, when *can* he see us?” He quietly laid a hand on Starsky’s arm, signaling him to back off. The blonde flipped through several pages and finally located an opening in the appointment book.

“A week from Tuesday. We have an opening from eleven-fifteen to eleven-thirty a.m.” She looked up and smiled rather smugly.

“This is ridiculous!” Starsky blustered. “I’m outta here.

Pointing his finger at the woman, he went on. “Let *her* explain to Councilman Gibbons and Police Commissioner Thompson why two of their hand-picked detectives were denied an interview with their close, personal friend, Frank Bradley! Let somebody else catch the creeps that burned two of his businesses to the ground!” He turned on his heel and stormed toward the elevator.

“Good idea,” Hutch agreed, turning and following his partner. He recognized Starsky’s modified-for-the-circumstances ‘good cop/bad cop’ routine.

“Wait!” the receptionist called out. They both pretended to either not hear, or not care--leaving it open to her own interpretation. She rose from behind the desk and hurried after them. “Please?”

Hutch turned around first. Starsky was busy punching the elevator buttons.

“Please, gentlemen. Maybe I was a little hasty.” She was visibly shaken now and Hutch enjoyed seeing her squirm.

“Starsky, hold on a minute.” Starsky’s back was turned, but Hutch was certain there was a mischievous grin on his face. He knew *exactly* what he was doing.

“Perhaps I could interrupt Mr. Bradley. His barber and manicurist are with him right now, but maybe you can talk with him while they are finishing up.”

Both detectives followed her back to the desk, where she picked up the telephone and spoke in quiet tones with her boss. She then led them to a massive, ornate door and ushered them in.

A graying, trimly built man in his late fifties or early sixties was sitting in an overstuffed, dark green leather chair, while another man busily clipped his hair. Seated beside him on a stool, a young woman manicured his nails with quick, efficient strokes of the file.

“Welcome, Detectives. Marvin told me the commissioner was sending Bay City’s finest to handle my case. I trust I won’t be disappointed. I must say, you are prompt.” He smiled and motioned with his free hand for them to be seated.

They introduced themselves, but made no attempt to shake hands with the executive before taking a seat on the sofa. “We almost didn’t get past your pit bull,” Starsky said.

“Oh, you mean Francine? Yes, she guards me with an over-abundance of zeal, doesn’t she? Well, that’s what I pay her so well to do. I’m sure you can appreciate loyalty. I mean, being police officers and all. Now, what can I do to help with your investigation?”

Hutch began by asking him routine questions about any known enemies, recently fired employees, and individuals who would stand to gain from his losses. Starsky occasionally chimed in, but basically Hutch led the interview.

“I honestly can’t think of anyone who has a vendetta against me, but I’m sure you can understand that a man in my position most likely makes enemies every day without even realizing it. I can have my Human Resources person search the employee files and provide you with a list of terminated employees and those recently reprimanded or placed on probation.”

“That would be terrific,” Starsky said.

“What about in your personal life, Mr. Bradley? Are you married, any ex-wives, or maybe a scorned lover?” Hutch asked.

“I’m a happily married man, Detective,” Bradley replied lightly. “A scorned lover, indeed. My wife would have my head, after thirty-five years of wedded bliss. But you can eliminate her from your list of suspects. My wife loves beautiful, expensive things, gentlemen. She wouldn’t bite the hand that feeds her.”

Neither man was sure if he was serious, or just being facetious. Hutch stood up, signaling an end to the interview. “Well, if you think of anyone, or anything, please get in touch with us right away.” He produced a card with his name and the station number printed on it. “You can ask for either me or my partner, Detective Starsky.”

“I certainly will,” Bradley replied without rising. “I’ll have Francine call Personnel right now. They should have that list for you later today. Would you like to pick it up this afternoon?”

“Yes, that would be very helpful.” Starsky and Hutch walked to the door. “Thank you for your time,” Hutch said, politely.

As they walked past Francine to the elevator, the receptionist pretended to be very busy rearranging the articles on her desk. The two detectives stepped into the elevator, and as the door closed, Starsky said quietly, below his breath, “Man, what a bitch.”

“Aw, come on, Starsk. You’re just mad because she wasn’t impressed by the irresistible ‘Starsky charm’.” Hutch snickered at the indignant look on his partner’s face.

“Very funny, wise guy.”

When they were in sight of the Torino, Starsky could see Sam standing up in the front seat with his paws balancing on the dashboard. Once the dog recognized Starsky and Hutch, he began barking and eagerly wagging his tail like some sort of signaling device.

Starsky unlocked the car and saw dozens of tiny pieces of brown paper bag scattered over the seat and floorboard. The rawhide bone was halfway demolished.

“Aw, man, look at this mess,” Starsky grumbled.

“Well, what did you expect, Starsk? You gave him the bag. He’s a puppy. Puppies chew things; that just what they do. At least it was the bag and not the upholstery.”

A horror-stricken look flashed across Starsky’s face. The thought of the dog destroying part of his beloved car was no less than blasphemy! As they both got in, Sam jumped all over them, licking and playfully nipping at their faces. Starsky fought him off long enough to retrieve the car keys from the pocket of his jeans and insert them into the ignition.

“You better walk him a few minutes,” Hutch said before Starsky could turn the key. “He’s been locked up in this car for a while; he may need to be walked—you know, to relieve himself.”

“Why me?”

“Because I walked him last time,” Hutch answered logically. He knew he shouldn’t give Starsky a hard time, but it was so darn much fun.

“Aw, all right!” Starsky struggled with the enthusiastic, wiggling dog long enough to connect the leash, then got out and walked to the closest exit. Checking all directions, he spotted a small park next door to the complex that would serve the purpose very well. Hutch pulled the car out of the garage and was waiting at the curb when Starsky and Sam were ready to leave.

“Move over,” Starsky said, standing on the driver’s side of the car.

“Good grief, Starsk, just get in. I’ll drive.”

“Uh, uh. You know I don’t like anybody drivin’ my car.” Sam was straining at the leash, obviously anxious to get into the car where Hutch was. “Move over,” Starsky repeated.

Aggravated, Hutch muttered an obscenity, but climbed out of the car and went around to the passenger’s side. “I swear, you are so damned possessive of this—this—hunk of red metal. You act like it’s a living being, instead of...a...machine.” Sam jumped into the back seat and watched the two men with interest.

“You don’t even like my car. You’re always insultin’ it; so why do you wanna drive all of a sudden?” Starsky argued.

Hutch slammed the door and sulked. “Just forget it, okay? I don’t want to drive this...this striped tomato!” he snapped. Hutch knew that name always got under Starsky’s skin, and he was feeling particularly mischievous this morning. “Let’s just go to Huggy’s and drop off Sam. It’s already noon and we have that meeting with the fire marshal at two.”

Starsky put the car in gear and cautiously pulled away from the curb. They drove along for a while in silence, and the only sound was Sam panting loudly from the back seat, his eyes darting back and forth between them. After a few minutes, Starsky glanced sideways at Hutch. “Hey, Blondie...you mad?”

“No. Why should I be mad? Just because my partner, my supposed ‘best friend,’ my *buddy* doesn’t trust me to drive his car?” Hutch concentrated hard to maintain a sulky expression.

“Look,” Starsky said in his most conciliatory voice, “if you really wanna drive, I’ll let ya.”

“No thanks.” Hutch smiled at him now. “I just wanted to see if you’d let me.”

Starsky rolled his eyes at Hutch and shook his head in disbelief. Sometimes he had to wonder at Hutch’s warped sense of humor. Sam seemed to sense the tension had passed and was trying to climb over the seat just as Starsky pulled into his favorite parking space in the alley behind The Pits.

They hopped out of the car with Sam on lead, and entered the restaurant via the back door. Huggy was in the kitchen, giving instructions to his latest new cook when the threesome entered, but stopped mid-sentence when he spied the dog. “What the hell?”

“Hey, Hug,” Starsky said, grinning from ear to ear. “Want ya to meet our new partner, Officer Sam.” In spite of the dog’s wagging tail and friendly face, Huggy Bear took a step back.

“Hey, man, that’s a rottweiler. You know those dogs are killers, don’t you?”

Hutch squatted down and put his arm around Sam’s neck and hugged him affectionately. “Not this one, Huggy. Look at him. He’s a big marshmallow. Come over here and get acquainted.”

Despite Hutch’s reassurance, Huggy wasn’t convinced. “I don’t know, Hutch.”

“Hug, you know I don’t have much use for dogs, but this one’s really nice,” Starsky said encouragingly. “We rescued him from Slick Willie’s. Looks like he was pretty badly abused. He’s really fun when you get to know ‘em,”

When Huggy started showing signs softening up, Starsky went to stand beside him and called Sam. The dog immediately trotted over to Starsky and nuzzled his hand to have his head patted. Huggy smiled at the comical look on the dog’s face. “Go on and pet him, Hug,” Starsky urged. As if he understood the exchange, Sam turned and nuzzled against Huggy’s leg, winning the black man over then and there. Huggy stooped down and scratched the dog’s ears.

Hutch began telling Huggy about how they'd found the dog, his stint at Animal Control, and their decision to bail him out. "Oh, man," Huggy said when he spotted the raw burn marks on Sam's back. "What's this?"

"Cigarette burns. At least, that's what Mary Peterson thinks—she's the Animal Control officer who picked him up. We been puttin' ointment on them," Starsky answered.

"Some people will do anything, man. This dude's only a puppy. If I'd been treated the way he has, I don't think I'd be this cool." Huggy shook his head in disbelief. "But then, the world's full of weirdoes and freaks. I know, 'cause half of 'em come in here."

When Starsky and Hutch left for their meeting with the fire marshal, Sam was snarfing down a large bowl of meat scraps that Huggy had rustled up. They knew Sam was in good hands until their return.

End of Chapter Four