

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Five

“Starsky, Hutchinson, this is Lieutenant Jerry Hunter, the new fire marshal for this district. I want you two to cooperate with him in any way possible on this investigation,” Captain Dobey said, motioning for the two cops to have a seat.

Both shook hands with Hunter before settling in their favorite chairs. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m looking forward to our working together,” the distinguished-looking man said as he sat back down. “I’ve only been in Bay City for two months, and this is the first big case I’ve tackled since arriving. You two have the reputation of being the best detectives in our district, so I’m sure if we combine our resources, we can solve this case fairly quickly. That’s why I asked that you be assigned.”

Starsky and Hutch exchanged a look of surprise. During the initial briefing that morning, Dobey hadn’t mentioned that Hunter had requested them specifically. At first impression, the new fire marshal seemed like a nice enough guy, one that they could enjoy working with. In his early forties, he wasn’t a handsome man, but had an air of dignity about him that compensated for his lack of good looks. He wore his ebony black hair swept back, smooth against his head, emphasizing dark eyes that looked more black than brown. His demeanor was all business, as he moved on quickly with the meeting.

Reaching into his briefcase, Hunter took out a large manila envelope and handed it to Starsky. “I think we need to share what information we already know before taking off in separate directions,” he said. “Captain Dobey just gave me a copy of everything BCPD has, including the autopsy report on the watchman.”

“That pretty much clinched it,” Dobey added. “This is now *officially* a murder investigation as well as arson.”

“Cap’n, we checked on the autopsy report and were told it wasn’t back,” Hutch said, directing his attention to Dobey.

“Just came in a few minutes ago,” he replied, handing a copy to Hutch. “It says the guard died from a blunt trauma wound to the head. There was very little evidence of smoke damage to the lungs.”

“That’s right,” Hunter confirmed. “Meaning he was dead before he could inhale much smoke. This narrows it down somewhat. We can eliminate the probability that this was an act of pure vandalism done by vagrants, or teenagers high on drugs or alcohol. This is an individual who means business.”

“We just came from interviewing Bradley,” Starsky told them. “Seemed more than willing to help with the investigation.”

“One thing we have to consider is that Bradley himself may be responsible. Don’t forget that arson has been dubbed ‘a white collar crime,’” Hunter interjected. “We find that it’s frequently the handiwork of the supposed victim.”

“We thought of that,” Hutch said, “and are checking out that angle.”

“There are several motives for arson,” Hunter continued. “To defraud an insurance company, to put the competition out of business, or to destroy records if the individual is involved in tax evasion or fraud—all common-place when a business burns down. But we also have to consider the more personal reasons, such as good, old fashioned revenge. Maybe a disgruntled employee, or a rejected lover or spouse.” Hunter turned and looked at Dobey. “I realize this is a political ‘hot potato,’ but we’ll have to discretely investigate all these possibilities.”

“Bradley’s already asked his personnel director to draw up a list of potential suspects for us,” Starsky said. “Hutch and I are supposed to pick it up after this meeting.”

“That’s probably where we’ll find the culprit,” Hunter replied. “But it’s still too early in the investigation to completely rule out the possibility the perpetrator may be doing this to fulfill a psychotic need. Pyromaniacs can’t suppress the impulse to start a blaze. Watching the flames and smoke gives them a rush. Nothing excites them more.”

“Is there anything you can tell us about how the fires are being started?” Hutch asked, while glancing over the autopsy report.

“Unfortunately, they’re being started with one of the most common accelerates available—gasoline. If a more unusual substance was involved, we’d have a better chance of tracing it back to the guilty party. But we’ve got your basic ‘Class-A fire’ here, and sometimes these are the hardest to solve. My best team is on-site now, searching for evidence of how he’s actually *igniting* the blazes.”

Hunter looked around the room inviting other questions. “In any case, I believe you guys are on the right track, starting with Bradley’s employees. A wealthy businessman like him has the opportunity to make plenty of enemies. That’s all I can tell you for now. Copies of our most current lab results and my investigation notes to date are in the file I just gave Detective Starsky.”

“Sounds like we all have our work cut out for us,” Dobey said as he leaned forward and massaged the back of his neck. Hutch figured the captain had probably gotten another call from Police Commissioner Thompson, turning up the pressure.

“We certainly do,” Hunter replied. “Here’s my card.” He stood up to leave. “Please call me if you come up with anything you’d like me to follow up on. I’m going to spend my time this afternoon in the lab. You may have run into my team, Gina Ashford and Bob Jernigan, over at the jewelry store this morning. They’re two of the best people we have. We’re still running some tests and will share the results with you as soon as we have them.”



Sam met Starsky and Hutch at the back door of The Pits. Huggy didn't seem anxious to be rid of him. "Did you behave yourself, fella?" Hutch asked, reaching down to affectionately scratch the pup's ear.

"He was cool—unless you want to count those two T-bones he lifted right off the counter for a little snack," Huggy answered for the dog. Sam swung his head around and looked up at Huggy, appearing to understand he'd been busted.

"Sam, you didn't?!" Hutch scolded.

Reaching for his wallet, Starsky apologized. "Look, we're sorry, Huggy. How much do we owe you? I'll pay for whatever he stole."

"No sweat, man. What's a couple of steaks among friends?"

"Thanks, Hug. We didn't think Dobby would exactly roll out the welcome mat for him," Hutch said, as he bent down and snapped on the leash.

"Well, don't let the word out on the streets that this is his home away from home or nothing, but if the little dude needs a temporary hangout, he can hang with Huggy Bear anytime. Uh...but...maybe he could bring his own lunch next time." Sam rubbed his head against Huggy's thigh, as if to apologize for the theft.

"Catch you later. Thanks again," Hutch said, as they went out the back door to the Torino.



The two detectives stepped off the elevator and walked toward the reception desk of Bradley Enterprises. "Miss Personality's still standin' guard," Starsky mumbled under his breath.

"Don't let your attitude show, partner," Hutch cautioned him.

The blonde looked up from her desk with a cordial smile. "Good afternoon, Detectives," she greeted, surprising them both with the complete turn-about from her behavior earlier in the day. "I have the information you requested." She held a file folder in her outstretched hand.

"Thanks," Hutch responded, taking the folder. But Francine was focusing her attention on Starsky.

"I hope there are no hard feelings from this morning," she said contritely. "I was just doing my job. Mr. Bradley becomes very angry if I let people in who don't have appointments."

Despite his earlier resolve, Starsky felt himself softening toward the receptionist. "Apology accepted," he said, smiling back at her. *She really has pretty blue eyes*, he thought, amazed he hadn't noticed earlier.

Hutch looked on amused, as Starsky's expression rapidly changed from restrained to surprised, then to pleased.'

"I'd like a chance to make it up to you. Would you care to meet later for a drink?"

"Um...sure...sure. When do you get off?"

"Five. Why don't we just meet at Mick's, the little bar and grill across the street?"

"Terrific."

Hutch cleared his throat, waiting for an invitation, but Francine ignored him. "Later then, Detective." She smiled sweetly and sat back down at the desk.

"Dave."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Dave. Dave Starsky. That's my name."

"Oh, yes. I'll see you at five, Dave."

Hutch tapped him on the shoulder with the file folder, signaling he was ready to leave. Neither spoke until they climbed back into the Torino and started out of the parking garage.

"What was that all about?"

"Whattaya mean?" Starsky answered Hutch's question with a question.

"What ever happened to 'Man, she's a bitch'?"

"She came to her senses." Starsky smirked. Sam flopped his big paw over Starsky's shoulder and licked his right ear as if to congratulate him. "Besides, maybe she knows somethin' about Bradley."

"Maybe. Good thinking, Starsk. I know this is a big sacrifice for you, but see what you can find out anyway. You're a real trooper," Hutch teased. "In the meantime, let's start checking out these possible suspects."



Starsky ran home in time for a quick shower before meeting Francine at the bar and grill. While getting ready, he thought about the forlorn look on Sam's face when he drove off and left the dog standing in the driveway beside Hutch. Who would ever have thought he'd be getting attached to a dog? Starsky was having trouble accepting it himself! The funny thing was, the dog seemed to like him just as much

as he liked Hutch. Starsky wouldn't admit it—not even to himself—but he kind of enjoyed it, knowing someone looked forward to seeing him...was eager to please him...cared about him. Yeah, it was pretty nice. He wondered if Hutch felt the same way. But it wasn't the kind of thing a guy wanted to tell anybody.



When Starsky arrived at the bar, the cute blonde was already there, seated at a private table in the corner. She spotted him and waved from across the room. Starsky smiled, then waved back and made his way through the crowd to where she was waiting.

“Hi, Dave. I’m glad you could make it.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Starsky said, looking around the room at the throng of people.

“You come here often?”

“Pretty often. Being right across the street here, a lot of the office workers from the complex gather here for happy hour. Convenient, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I didn’t even know this place was here,” Starsky replied, unable to think of anything else to say. An awkward silence followed for the next few seconds.

“I, uh, I guess you thought it was awfully forward of me to ask you out, especially after my rude behavior this morning,” Francine said, her face blushing bright pink as she spoke.

“No, not all. I mean, I was kinda rude right back,” Starsky answered, hoping to alleviate her embarrassment. “It’s the job, you know. We have to get answers and we have to get them quick. Somebody’s life can depend on it.”

“Oh, yes, I realize that. Mr. Bradley expects me to screen all visitors, especially those without appointments. I’m surprised he didn’t warn me to expect you. If he had, I would have let you in immediately.” She took a deep breath and paused, as a little frown puckered her brow. “My interest in getting to know you wasn’t my only motive for inviting you here tonight. I asked you because I...I...may be able to help you.”

Not expecting such a revelation without prompting, Starsky was caught off guard for a moment.

“I wanted to give you a name to check into.” Francine looked around the room to see if anyone was listening, then bent her head closer. Starsky obliged by moving closer as well. “I could lose my job if anyone knew I was discussing this matter with you. But she was my friend, she helped me get on at Bradley’s, and I feel I owe her something.”

“You can tell me,” Starsky reassured her. “I’ll be careful with the information and only involve you if it’s necessary.” Now Starsky looked around before speaking. “Francine, a man was murdered last night at the arson site. Whoever’s doin’ this, has no qualms about hurtin’ people.”

“Well, if you promise...”

“You have my word.” Starsky laid his hand over hers as he spoke. Looking into Francine’s eyes, he saw fear.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath before going on. “Her name was Carol Parker. She worked as an administrative assistant to Mr. Bradley. Carol had been with him about a year when she told me about the opening for a receptionist in her office. She said if I was interested, she’d put in a good word for me. She said there was one condition, though. I must never repeat anything that went on in the office—especially if it concerned her relationship with Mr. Bradley.”

Francine paused, looking up at Starsky to see if he was comprehending the implication of her words. “Carol told me that she wanted a close friend in the office because there were people who would like to see her lose her job. Worse yet, they would cause trouble for her and Mr. Bradley with his wife. At first, I thought she meant that she was being accused of things she didn’t do, you know? I mean—with Mr. Bradley.”

“But that wasn’t the case?” Starsky prompted.

“No. She and Mr. Bradley were having an affair. She was really in love with him and believed he felt the same. Carol thought it would be safer to have a friend working in the office, someone who wouldn’t want to cause her trouble.” Francine shrugged her shoulders. “She was right; I didn’t tell a soul. Haven’t—until just now. I don’t know how it got out, but there were whispers. Mostly speculation, I think.”

“Where is Carol now?” Starsky asked. His hand still laid casually over Francine’s. He felt her shiver in response to his question. She turned and looked him in the eyes, and he saw hers sparkled with unshed tears.

“She’s dead. They’re saying it was suicide—but I know it wasn’t.”

“How? How do you know?”

“Carol was pregnant. She would never have killed her baby. I know she wouldn’t. Carol was raised Catholic. Not only did she believe suicide was a mortal sin, killing her unborn child would have been, in her mind, an unforgivable sin.”

Starsky squeezed her hand, then reached into the back pocket of his jeans and produced a clean handkerchief. Francine gratefully accepted it and dabbed as inconspicuously as possible at the tears that were now threatening to overflow.

“Was there an investigation?”

“Not really. They said she jumped from a window in her apartment building. The police were told that she had a history of depression—which she did—and her mother confirmed that to be true. I don’t know why, but the fact that she was pregnant hasn’t been mentioned. I don’t think anyone knew except me and, of course, Mr. Bradley. Dave, I believe she was murdered to keep her from having that baby and causing a scandal for her boss.”

“Francine, if that’s true and Bradley had her killed, how do you think the fires are tied in?”

“That part I don’t know yet. But I feel sure the two things are connected somehow. Anyway, I feel better just having told you. Even if the arson isn’t connected to Carol’s death, maybe you can reopen her case and see that something’s done about it.”

“You feel absolutely sure that your friend didn’t kill herself? I mean, what if she told Bradley, he rejected her, and the whole idea of tryin’ to raise a kid without his help was just too much for her to deal with?”

“I thought about that. I just can’t see her committing suicide. I know there’s no apparent connection, but promise me you’ll at least check it out without bringing my name into it?”

“Hey, I gave you my word, didn’t I, hmmm?” Starsky smiled at her. “Now you gotta promise me somethin’. Don’t repeat any of this, okay? If you’re right about your suspicions, you could put yourself in danger by repeating what you know. So, will you promise to let me take it from here?”

Francine nodded in agreement, then smiled at Starsky. “Thank you, Dave. If I hear anything else, I’ll let you know right away. And one more thing—would you please call me Fran? All my friends do.”

“Okay, Fran.” Starsky gave her hand one final squeeze. “Now, how about we order somethin’ to eat. I’m starved. Whattaya recommend?”



After taking Francine home, Starsky checked his watch and saw it was only 10:30. He decided to go by Hutch’s and fill him in on this latest development. Hutch had planned to go over Hunter’s file anyway, so they could see how the fire marshal’s investigation was coinciding with what they already had on the case. When he pulled into Hutch’s driveway, the headlights of the Torino momentarily flashed on two people and two dogs standing about fifty feet from Hutch’s house.

Starsky turned off the ignition and hopped out of the car just in time to hear a woman’s light laughter. It sounded really familiar, but Starsky wasn’t sure where he’d heard it before. He crossed in front of the Torino and was about to let himself in through the front door of the house, when he caught a phrase of the nearby conversation. “I think Phoebe and Sam are becoming great friends, don’t you?”

Then he heard Hutch's familiar voice. "Well, Sam knows a beautiful girl when he sees one. I mean, he takes after me in that regard." More laughter...

Oh, brother, Starsky thought to himself. *Give me a break*. Then, the memory of Phoebe the poodle and her attractive owner came flooding back, bringing a flush of humiliation to him all over again. *Oh, God, don't let her tell Hutch about last night*. He quickly let himself into the house and closed the door, hoping she hadn't recognized him.

Starsky grabbed up the arson file and appeared to be completely absorbed in it, when Hutch and Sam came in a few minutes later. Hutch was grinning from ear to ear. Sam, always excited to see Starsky, didn't wait for Hutch to unhook his leash before breaking loose and pouncing on Starsky with all four feet. Under the onslaught, Starsky lost his grip on the file and the pages went flying in ten different directions. "Dammit, Sam! Ya big dummy! Get off me! Now see what'cha done!"

Sam quickly drew back as though Starsky had struck him. His ears flattened against his head, he slunk away, hiding behind a chair. Instantly, Starsky regretted yelling at the dog. Anticipating Hutch ribbing him about last night, he'd taken out his embarrassment and anxiety on Sam, when all the dog wanted was to show his affection.

"That's real good, Starsk," Hutch snapped angrily. "Make him think he's back at Slick Willie's."

Starsky felt like a real sleaze. "I didn't mean—"

"Yeah, well, tell him—not me."

Squatting down beside the chair Sam was hiding behind, Starsky spoke softly. "Sam, come on out, fella." The dog only whined and cringed a little farther back into the corner. Starsky reached out his hand tentatively and tried once again. "Come on, boy. I'm not gonna hurt you." No response. He sat down on the floor next to the chair and patted his lap, trying to coax the dog to him. "Come on now, and I'll scratch your ears. I know ya like that."

Sam looked up and cocked his head to one side, then laid it back down. Hutch eased over quietly, slipping Starsky a dog biscuit. "Try this, Starsk."

Starsky held the biscuit out in front of him, close to his knee. Always the chow hound, Sam tried to stretch his neck out far enough to take the treat without actually moving closer to the man. "Naw, you gotta come all the way over here," Starsky said gently. The dog looked up into Starsky's face and saw he was smiling. Slowly, he crept forward on his belly, reminding Starsky of a soldier in an old war movie, crawling from one foxhole to another, behind enemy lines. Then before he knew it, Sam snatched the biscuit and was happily chomped it into tiny bits. Starsky reached out and first patted the dog's head, before pulling him into his lap and hugging him. When Sam reached up and licked the man's chin, Starsky's heart melted.

Hutch watched his partner interacting with the dog and was reminded again that Starsky might be a little rough around the edges, but his compassion and gentle nature outweighed all else. Sam was all wags, as he sat in Starsky's lap being hugged and cuddled.

“So, does this mean you forgive him for hiking his leg on you in front of Phoebe and Janice last night?” Hutch asked, a mischievous smile tugging at his lips.

Starsky turned around, a sour expression marring his face. “You just couldn't let it slide, could ya, Blondie?” By now Hutch had broken down and was laughing out loud.

“Oh, man, Starsk, what I would have given to see that! Mr. Cool... I gotta hand it to you partner, you really know how to impress a lady.”

“Very funny, smart ass. Your turn's comin'! Just you wait....” Starsky tried not to laugh, but it seemed contagious. Sam ran back and forth between them, barking and wagging. He wasn't sure what all the fun was about, but was determined to be included.

End of Chapter Five