

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Eight

Hutch was much better by the time Starsky returned. Feeling pretty useless, wishing he could be actively pursuing the case, he decided to call the two possible suspects and set up appointments to meet with them later in the day. He figured by doing that, Starsky would have to cut out the mother-hen routine and let him go along on the interviews.

Sam had been good company all day, sleeping when Hutch slept, supervising when he went to the kitchen and made a sandwich, and barking to let him know when the mailman dropped mail through the drop slot. The dog, Hutch's self-appointed guardian, seemed content just to be near his human.

When he heard the Torino pull up in front of the house, Sam hurried to the front door and waited there for Starsky to come in. He was rewarded with a good petting from Starsky, and the secure feeling that he had "his humans" together and with him again.

"So, did you make contact with the Parkers?" Hutch asked.

"Yeah, pretty weird. Turns out that little Timmy is in his thirties. Also, Mom didn't care much for Carol. Probably why she didn't question if her daughter's death really was a suicide."

"Dead-end then?"

"Hope not. I think the brother knows something, but until I can get 'Norman Bates' away from his mother, he's not gonna tell me anything. I gave him a card; so I hope he'll want to get to the bottom of this bad enough to call."

"I made appointments for us to meet with Jim Harris and Joyce Mangrum around four o'clock over at Bradley's," Hutch told him. "And before you start lecturing me about staying here and resting—save it. I need to get out of here. My shoulder isn't bothering me too bad and I'm going stir crazy."

"You know, you're the most hardheaded person I've ever known. You heard what the doctor said. I don't want her chewin' me out if you tear out the stitches and end up back in the ER."

"My mind's made up, Starsk. We've only got twenty-five minutes to get over there, so there isn't time to sit here and argue with you."

When Hutch went into the bedroom for his jacket, Sam began dancing around anticipating an outing. He'd been waiting all day for his car ride. As far as he knew, this was just another part of his daily routine that he'd begun to look forward to. So what if he had to sit in the car alone for a little while?

There was always something interesting to watch through the windows. And sometimes, when his humans weren't close by to scold him, he enjoyed barking at and unnerving an unsuspecting passerby. Sam decided he'd better go sit in the doorway so they couldn't accidentally *forget* him.

"Uh, oh. Look who thinks he's comin' along," Starsky said when he noticed where the dog was sitting.

"So let him. He's been doing fine in the car. It's pretty cool out there; he should be okay." Starsky didn't protest. He was beginning to get used to having Sam around.



By the time the detectives had met with the two Bradley Enterprises employees, it was time to call it a day. Although he wouldn't admit it, Hutch's shoulder was beginning to ache again. Starsky could see it in his face, and Hutch had been much quieter the past half hour. Sam was in his glory, hanging his front paws and huge head over the back of the car seat. Starsky was getting used to the dog slobber much quicker than he would ever have believed possible. Sam was such an affectionate critter, and he seemed to be as attached to Starsky as he was Hutch. That made Starsky feel pretty good.

"I think we can cross those two off our list," Starsky said, picking up from where they'd left off while walking from the building to the parking lot.

"I agree. Mangrum is too much of an airhead to commit such well-thought-out arson jobs. And I don't think Harris is all that upset about the promotion issue."

"Yeah, he told me he left his last job 'cause he couldn't take the pressure. I don't think he *wants* to be a supervisor."

"You know, Starsk, not everyone wants a job where they have to make decisions and be held accountable for what others do. I think we should follow your instincts and see what we can uncover on Carol Parker."

Starsky hit the gas pedal to speed through the traffic signal a few feet ahead as it turned yellow. The sudden jolt caused Sam to shift, lose his footing, and slide across the seat, colliding with Hutch's left shoulder. Starsky saw it happening, but didn't have time to prevent it. Hutch winced and drew in his breath sharply, causing Starsky to regret his recklessness.

"Sorry, buddy. You okay?"

"Yeah, great," Hutch snapped. "Why do you have to drive this...this...striped tomato like a bat out of hell anyway, Starsky?" Sam inched his front paws back across the seat until he was practically breathing in Starsky's ear. He sensed somehow, that he was responsible for Hutch's anger.

Feeling pretty guilty, Starsky, for once, didn't come back with a sharp retort. "Sorry," he repeated. They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Starsky pulled up to the house, parking as close to the entrance as he could. He knew Hutch was worn out and the pain in his shoulder was most likely worse since the collision with Sam. Jumping out of the Torino, he flipped his seat forward and snapped Sam's leash on the collar before Hutch even had his seat belt off. "I'm gonna walk the dog, Hutch. You go on in. I'll be there in a minute."

Hutch didn't answer, but went into the house as Starsky had suggested. He knew he'd been a grouch and always regretted it when he jumped down Starsky's throat, but he was tired and his shoulder hurt like hell. All he could think about was taking one of those pain pills and lying down on his soft, comfortable bed. Before he could help himself to either, the phone rang. Hutch considered ignoring it, but after the fifth ring he answered shortly, "Yeah, Hutchinson."

"Hutch?" came the tentative response "This is Gina. Gina Ashford."

Hutch ran a hand over his face. "Oh, hi, Gina. What's up?"

"Is this a bad time? I've been trying to reach Starsky and you all afternoon. I heard you were shot yesterday. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'll live. Right now it hurts like hell, but I was just ready to pop a pain pill when the phone rang."

"Oh, sorry about the bad timing," she apologized.

"It's okay, Gina. Sorry I snapped at you. Seems like that's all I've been doing today. Do you need Starsk? He's walking the dog right now—"

"Dog?" she interrupted. "Starsky has a dog?"

"Actually, I...we...yeah...kind of. It's a long story, Gina. I'll fill you in another time."

"That's fine, Hutch. Well, I guess it doesn't matter which of you I talk to. I just have something about the arson cases that I think may interest you."

"Great. We could sure use a lead. So far, we're batting zero."

"Do you remember yesterday I told you the points of origin at these fires were so badly incinerated that I thought there was the possibility of explosive devices being used to trigger them?"

"Sure. You said you were just speculating, though. Do you have something more concrete now?"

"You bet I do. We found traces of the wiring and some fragments of the casing that contained the bomb. I think it was triggered remotely."

"That means this is no amateur."

“Well, he wouldn’t have to be a demolitions expert, but he would need at least a basic knowledge of explosives and have to be bright enough to put the thing together.”

“So, what sort of individual should we be looking for?” Hutch pulled the phone off the end table and lay back on the sofa, trying to find a more comfortable position while he talked.

“Maybe someone with a background in electronics, perhaps a computer technician, or better yet, an ex-military type who worked around, if not directly with, explosives.”

“How sophisticated is the device he’s using?”

“Hard to say, since we were able to recover so little of it. But I would put it on the level with those remote-control airplanes and boats that adult men seem to enjoy playing with so much. I mean, he would have to know how to *build* one, not just how to operate it.”

“This just gets more and more strange,” Hutch said.

“So, have you guys made any progress? Do you have suspects?”

“Well, we thought we did, but so far all we’ve managed to do is eliminate all of our possibilities. Starsky’s working on something though. You know...a hunch.”

Gina laughed softly. “Oh yeah, I know all about Starsky’s hunches. Last time I bought into one of his hunches, I lost a ten spot at Huggy’s, betting on a little brown and white pinto mouse that Starsky assured me was the Sea Biscuit of the rodent racing scene.”

Hutch smiled, easily visualizing Starsky on his knees above the “race track,” cheering his contender on, and practically working himself into a frenzy. “Sorry to hear that, Gina. He has a weakness for fast mice.” This elicited a giggle on the other end of the line. “Fortunately, though, Starsky’s hunches about our cases are usually a hell of a lot more reliable than his gambling savvy.”

“I’m glad to hear that!” she teased. “Well, I’ll let you go, Hutch. I need to clear up a few things here, then head for home. And, frankly, you sound pretty done in, too.”

“You could say that,” he answered, wincing as he tried to shift a little weight off his shoulder.

“Tell Baby Blue Eyes not to bother calling back, since I’ll be leaving here in a few minutes. I’ve given you all I have for now, anyway. But first thing tomorrow morning, I’m going back to the each of the crime scenes and search again for fragments of the triggering devices. Finding that kind of evidence would definitely tie all the fires together. As soon as I’m finished, I’ll give you guys a call, okay?”

“That’ll be fine, Gina.”

“Well, get some rest, Hutch,” she said.

“I will. Thanks for calling, and for your concern.”

“Oh, Hutch--one more thing...” Gina said hesitantly. “Would you mind, you know, letting Starsky know I called? I mean, I know you’ll tell him about the evidence and all, but...just kind of let him know I’m not seeing anyone right now and if, you know...” her voice trailed off, perhaps embarrassed she had started this line of conversation.”

“Be glad to,” Hutch cut in mercifully. He’d never known her to be tongue-tied or at a loss for words. But then, he’d never realized that she was so attracted to Starsky. “Thanks again for calling.”

“Okay, see ya, Hutch.”

“Goodnight, Gina.” The phone clicked softly as she broke the connection.

Before lying down across the bed to rest, Hutch slowly rose from the sofa and went to the bathroom and took the pain pill. Starsky had been right; he really shouldn’t have insisted on going today. Now he was paying for his pig-headedness. He must’ve fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, a cold wet nose nuzzled behind his left ear. He rolled over and was eye-to-eye with Sam. The dog licked out his long, pink tongue, almost scoring a hit on Hutch’s nose. But for once, Hutch was faster than Sam, and managed to bolt upright and dodge him. “Not this time, you don’t,” he said good-naturedly to the pup, then rolled off the bed and went to the kitchen.

Starsky was at the stove, tending two large pots, from which a heavenly aroma wafted throughout the house. “Good boy, Sam. Woke him right up, didn’t ya?” he said over his shoulder when he saw Hutch and Sam come in. “Finally up, huh? Thought I was gonna have to eat this fantastic spaghetti sauce all by myself. This is my grandmother’s recipe. She got it from the Italian family that ran the restaurant below her apartment. This is the real thing, not Spaghetti-o’s,” he bragged.

“Got to admit it smells pretty good.” Hutch breathed in the delicious mixture of herbs, spices, and cheeses. “I didn’t know you were still here.”

“Figured you’d be hungry when you woke up.” Starsky turned up the heat under the tall pot of water to bring it to a boil. “Just gotta cook the pasta and we can dig in.”

Hutch sat down at the table, feeling drained of energy. The pain in his shoulder was gone, though, and he was grateful for that.

Starsky looked up and saw Hutch’s pale face. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Just a little light-headed.”

“You want somethin’ cold to drink? Or maybe a wet cloth for your face?”

“I’m fine. Really. Just get that spaghetti ready. It’s making my mouth water.”

A grin lit Starsky's face when he heard that.

"Oh, Starsk—I almost forgot—Gina called."

"Oh, yeah? What'd she want?"

"Said they've found evidence that indicates our torch *is* using an incendiary device to start the fires."

"Terrific," Starsky said without much enthusiasm. "We got all these pieces to the puzzle, but none of 'em seem to fit together." He continued with the meal preparations while they talked.

"Let's see, what've we got so far? Four fires, two of them at businesses owned by Bradley Enterprises."

Hutch joined in. "One dead security guard—definitely murdered by a blow to the head during the commission of the crime."

Starsky continued, "Yeah, the creep doesn't only get his kicks setting fires, he doesn't seem care if he has to commit a murder or two along the way. Which leads us to one dead woman—possibly suicide, possibly murder. Hell, possibly not even related to the arson cases at all!"

"And let's not forget an assortment of disgruntled employees, none of whom seem to be all that determined to ruin Bradley. We also know for certain that our guy's using electronic devices—which means he's probably not an amateur," Hutch added. "I don't know about you, but I think it's about time to pay our buddy, Bradley, another visit."

"Just what I was thinkin'," Starsky said as he poured the cooked pasta into the strainer. "Hope you're hungry," he added, abruptly changing the subject.

"I think I can force down a little," Hutch answered back, tongue-in-cheek. Sam woofed loudly, signaling *he* was ready.

"Did you feed Sam?"

"Of course I did. You think that big lug would let me forget somethin' like that? He's just puttin' an act to con you out of your dinner."

Hutch reached down and patted Sam on the head, "I think he's onto you, boy." The dog laid his chin on Hutch's knee, trying his most pitiful look.

Starsky brought the piping hot bowls to the table just in time to witness the exchange. "And you're always tellin' me what a sucker I am," he chuckled.

End of Chapter Eight

