

## **GUARDIAN**

### ***Faithful till the End***

***By TibbieB***

#### ***Chapter Nine***

Francine Stewart looked up from her typewriter and saw Detective Starsky and Detective Hutchinson standing before her. She tried to hide her pleasure at seeing Dave Starsky again, but the smile on her face prevented her from doing so. She'd hoped he'd call after their meeting at Mick's, but when he didn't, she convinced herself it was because he thought it wouldn't safe for her to be seen with him socially.

“‘Mornin’, Fran,” he said, smiling at her. “How are you?”

“Good morning, Dave. I’m fine,” she said, coyly. “I hope you are, too.” She lowered her voice and looked around to make certain no one was listening.

“Have you found out anything?”

Hutch stood by, silently watching the interaction between the receptionist and his partner. It was pretty clear to him that the girl was scared to talk, but she trusted Starsky enough to give him any information she could.

“I talked with her mother and brother. Not much to go on there.”

“Her brother’s kind of creepy, don’t you think?” Francine whispered.

“Yeah, and her mother’s a real piece of work, too. I’m workin’ on it, though—so is Hutch.”

Francine looked over at Hutch and smiled. “Oh, goodness,” she said, just now noticing Hutch’s arm in the sling. “Were you in an accident?”

“I guess you could say that. I was on the wrong end of a Thirty-eight Special at Kwon Cho Market a couple of days ago.” Hutch smiled back innocently. He loved it when girls made a big deal about his being injured in the line of duty. It made him seem so darned vulnerable. He and Starsky had learned a long time ago, if you have to get shot, use it to your advantage!

“Oh, wow, I hope it doesn’t hurt too much,” she said sympathetically.

“Well,” Hutch answered pitifully, “it hurts pretty bad—but I still have a job to do.”

Starsky's eyes rolled back in his head, effecting his best "disgusted" look. He figured he'd better move ahead with the investigation, or Hutch was going to milk it for all it was worth. He knew this, because he'd played the same routine himself many times.

"Fran, we need to talk to your boss again. I wanna give him another chance to level with us about Carol."

"Oh, Dave, please don't tell him I said anything," she whispered anxiously.

"Don't worry, I have no intention of involvin' you. We've been on the case long enough now that he'll assume we uncovered it on our own. Don't get upset, or he'll suspect you know."

Francine took a deep breath and calmed herself. "You're right. Look, he's in a meeting right now, but it's due to break up in about..." She looked at the leaded crystal clock on her desk. "...ten more minutes. Why don't you both have a seat, and I'll get you a cup of coffee?"

"That sounds good," Hutch told her. She flashed him a bright smile, and the men went to the waiting area and sank down in two of the fancy leather chairs.

Soon, Francine brought their coffee. She smiled sweetly at Hutch when she handed him his cup. Starsky thought it was pretty amusing that Fran was flirting with Hutch now. She'd been so friendly to him at the bar the other evening, he thought she was really interested in seeing him again. He'd even planned to ask her out once the case was solved. It wasn't the first time, though, that he and Hutch had met a woman who was attracted to both of them.

"Can I do anything to make you more comfortable?" she asked Hutch.

"I don't think so, but thanks," he answered. "I have these pain pills, but I try not to take them unless it gets too bad."

"I admire a man who puts his duty ahead of his own well-being. But you really should take better care of yourself," Fran said solicitously. "I can't imagine working with a gunshot wound. I guess I never realized police officers did stuff like that."

Hutch smiled at her, basking in the attention.

"You call me if I can get you anything else, okay?" She then turned to Starsky, "I'll come get you when he's free, Dave." Francine returned to her desk and began typing again.

Starsky leaned toward Hutch and said in a high voice, mimicking his partner, "I have these pain pills, but I'm a big, strong, macho cop and don't want to take them. I'd rather you fall all over yourself waiting on me hand and foot."

Hutch looked back with a "Who *me*?" expression and said, "I have no idea what you're talking about, Starsk."

Twenty minutes later, Francine showed the two detectives into Mr. Bradley's office. "Gentlemen, I hope you've come with some good news. Have you found the person responsible for these fires yet?"

"No, sir," Hutch began, "but we've uncovered some details we need you to help clarify for us."

"Of course, whatever I can do. Please, sit down. I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

Starsky and Hutch both sat down across from him. "Mr. Bradley, I'm gonna come right to the point," Starsky said in his usual blunt, no-frills manner. "So far, the employees who may have had grievances with you have all checked out okay. There's only one we haven't been able to question."

"Well, who is this individual? Perhaps my security people can help you locate him."

"I don't think so," Hutch said. "We're talking about your former administrative assistant, Carol Parker."

Starsky watched closely to see Bradley's reaction. There was only a slight flinch in the muscle of his left jaw. *All those years keepin' a poker face in the board room really paid off*, Starsky thought to himself.

"I don't see how Ms. Parker could be involved. As I'm sure you've discovered, she took her own life weeks before any of this business started."

"It's not Carol we are curious about," Hutch pressed on. "We thought perhaps there's someone connected with her, a relative, ex-boyfriend, even an admirer who could be seeking revenge against you for the part you played in her death."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replied smoothly. "I have no idea why Ms. Parker did such a thing. She was a very emotional person—more so than I, or anyone else suspected. But I am not responsible for her actions."

Starsky looked Bradley directly in the eyes. "Are you sayin' you didn't have an affair with her and get her pregnant?" This time, the color drained from Bradley's face. Apparently, he believed only he and Carol had been aware of her condition.

"Where did you get this information, Detective?" His voice wavered almost imperceptibly.

"We have sources. We *are* the police, you know." Starsky didn't blink an eye. He decided to bluff and see just how good Bradley was at the game. "Autopsies give us all kinds of information. Once we have a lead, we can put the pieces together. It was you, all right. Do you wanna tell us your version?" He could see small beads of moisture forming on Bradley's upper lip. The quiet in the room was almost palpable.

"Mr. Bradley," Hutch finally said, "it would be much better if you came clean with us. We're going to find out the truth one way or another."

Bradley looked from one to the other. “All right, I’ll tell you all I know. But I was not responsible for Carol’s death. I could hardly believe it when I heard what she’d done.” He paused and took a deep breath.

“I was in love with her. I’m fifty-seven years old, and I was in love for the first time in my life. I was old enough to be Carol’s father, but she loved me just the same.” Bradley leaned back in the chair, and looked across the desk, but didn’t seem to see the two detectives. His gaze was focused on another time and place.

“I knew I was risking everything, loving her. You see, my wife could have ruined me, had she found out. She is a powerful woman and has control of a lion’s share of the stock here at Bradley Enterprises. Her family’s money was used to start up this corporation. She wouldn’t have cared that I built it from the ground up.”

“So when Carol told you she was pregnant, you had her killed,” Starsky suggested.

“Absolutely not!” Bradley practically shouted. “If anything, that endeared her to me even more. I admit, I was taken aback at the news, because she had assured me she was on the pill. And I guess I assumed at my age, and never having been able to conceive children with my wife, that I was incapable of fathering a child. When she came to me with the news, I didn’t berate her. On the contrary, I was ecstatic that I would have a son or a daughter to carry on the family line. I simply told her not to tell anyone until I could figure out what to do. She swore to me that it was our secret. I assured Carol that I loved her and that, somehow, she and I and the child would have a life together.”

Bradley paused and was silent for a few moments. “I confess, I didn’t know exactly what I was going to do, but I knew I wanted to make her a part of my life. I had considered confronting my wife and telling her the truth, try and negotiate a divorce settlement that would result in my retaining my fair share of this conglomerate. My wife’s family’s money may have started this company, but by God, *I* made it the success it is today,” he said emphatically.

“So, did you do it? Did you talk with your wife?” Starsky asked.

“No. I...I was trying to get up the courage. The last time I saw Carol alive, she stormed out of here angry because I hadn’t done so. I pleaded with her to be patient, to give me time to work out the business details. But she was so young, so headstrong, she couldn’t see past her nose. I wanted to provide her and my child with the kind of life they deserved. I didn’t want to throw thirty-five years of hard work out the window. I had already begun consulting with my personal attorney about liquidating some of my assets and formulating a plan to get my fair share of Bradley Enterprises if Margaret refused to be reasonable.”

“Mr. Bradley, do you think Carol killed herself because she didn’t believe you’d leave your wife and marry her?” Hutch asked.

He looked back at Hutch and was silent for a few seconds before answering. “I’ve asked myself that same question hundreds of times over the past few weeks, Detective Hutchinson. That possibility has tortured me night and day. Part of me believes that I *am* responsible, that my inability to confront Margaret drove that beautiful, vibrant, young woman to do something so desperate. Yet, I can’t accept that Carol would murder our child. She knew I wanted that baby. She knew I’d never had a son or daughter—that the absence of children in my marriage has been a source of unhappiness for me.” Unshed tears glistened in Frank Bradley’s eyes.

“I...I suppose someone who loved Carol may want to hurt me, if they knew this and believed I caused her suicide. But until moments ago, I didn’t think anyone else was aware of our relationship. I swear to you, Detectives, I would have taken care of Carol, and I would have married her. It was only a matter of time before I would’ve been a free man.”

Frank Bradley looked drained. The thought flitted through Starsky’s mind that the man looked as though he’d aged right before their eyes with his recounting of the events leading up to Carol Parker’s death. Hutch caught Starsky’s eye, silently signaling that he was ready to conclude the meeting.

“Well, I think that’s all we need to ask you right now, sir,” Hutch said, standing up. Starsky followed his lead. “You’ve been very helpful and we appreciate your honesty.”

“Detectives, unless it’s absolutely necessary...could you...I mean, does my relationship with Carol have to be public knowledge? The arson and Carol’s death are most likely not even related. I’d prefer to avoid a scandal if it serves no purpose.”

“We can’t promise you anything,” Starsky answered. “You must understand, that if it turns out to be pertinent to the investigation, it’ll become a matter of public record.”

“Fair enough,” Mr. Bradley said as he came around the desk and shook hands with them both. They walked to the door together. “Please let me know when you have anything.”

“We will,” Starsky assured him.

***End of Chapter Nine***